

Dépêche AFP : Can Sarkozy steer Europe out of Irish vote crisis ? Paris, 29 juin 2008 (AFP)

by Emma Charlton

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President Nicolas Sarkozy has big plans for his country's stint at the European Union's helm, but can the French leader chart the way out of the crisis sparked by Ireland's referendum 'No' vote ?

For a president mired in unpopularity at home, France's six-month presidency of the European Union, which kicks off on July 1, looked like a golden chance to score points on the international stage.

« France is back in Europe, » Sarkozy proclaimed following his election last year, before going on to champion the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty, a charter intended to streamline the workings of the EU as the bloc expands.

Sarkozy has vowed to use the next six months to clinch deals on immigration, cutting global warming emissions, energy and defence, as well as launch a new Union for the Mediterranean at a high-profile July 13 summit in Paris.

But the French EU presidency has been hobbled before it even begins by Ireland's rejection of the treaty two weeks ago. Hugo Brady, research fellow at the London-based Centre for European Reform, now expects Sarkozy and his team to spend « 80 percent of their time » dealing with the fallout from the Irish 'No' vote.

« The presidency was always going to be difficult, because of reservations or outright opposition to the projects championed by France, » said Philippe Moreau Desfarges of the French Institute of International Relations (IFRI). « Now it is going to be extremely difficult. »

France says it will not try to steamroll through a solution, with Ireland to report back to the EU in time for a summit in October, but Sarkozy has vowed to keep the treaty ratification process on track.

He needs to convince seven remaining EU states to ratify the text — including the Czech Republic whose fiercely eurosceptic president Vaclav Klaus has declared it dead in the water.

« If Nicolas Sarkozy manages to get all 26 states to ratify the Lisbon treaty by the end of December, his presidency will have been a success, » said Moreau-Desfarges. So can the ebullient French leader, who flies to Ireland on July 11 to hear out the country's concerns, pull off the job ?

Sarkozy has patched up his at times fraught relations with German Chancellor Angela Merkel ahead of the French presidency and looks likely to be able to count on Berlin's support in dealing with the Irish conundrum.

France hammered out key compromises with Germany in recent months, on car emissions and the future Union for the Mediterranean, now to include northern as well as southern EU members, and the two leaders issued a joint call for ratification to continue.

But Sarkozy also raised hackles by warning the EU would not be able to enlarge without its troubled reform treaty, and by criticising the European Commission after the Irish vote. He also appeared to minimise the Irish result by calling it an « incident », which Brady said was « a silly signal to send ». Only 37 percent of French voters trust their president to resolve the crisis, according to a BVA poll. That said, Brady predicted Sarkozy's « optimism and energy will be important ».

"Everyone expects France to be slightly arrogant and bullish, throwing its weight around. If Sarkozy can use his charm, but resist the urge to shove ideas down people's throat, then it will be a successful presidency."

Treaty aside, Brady warned Paris may have set the bar too high even before the Irish 'No' threw a spanner in the works. And he predicted the launch summit for the Union for the Mediterranean was « going to be difficult ». « The EU doesn't look very united on this particular issue. It doesn't look very convincing right now. »

But on immigration and climate issues, « the French have the political clout to make a real impact, » he said.

Sylvie Goulard, who heads the French branch of the European Movement pressure group, agreed that « it's probably on energy-climate and migration that we will see results ».

« That's probably where we will be able to judge if the presidency is a success or not. »