

WORLD; BRIEFING: EUROPE

Sarkozy's plans tempered; French leader must navigate divergent views on bloc's future

Baptiste Etchegaray, THE WASHINGTON TIMES

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French President Nicolas Sarkozy begins a six-month term as leader of the European Union on Tuesday, providing a high-profile platform for a theme that helped him woo French voters just over a year ago - "France back in Europe."

He spoke those words just hours after winning the French presidency on May 6, 2007.

With France taking over as leader of the 27-nation European Union, Mr. Sarkozy first faces a problematic *deja vu* as Europe seeks to evolve into a political unit to rival its economic clout.

Earlier this month, Irish voters rejected the latest attempt at political unification by voting down the Lisbon Treaty, just as French and Dutch voters did with a proposed European constitution in 2005.

The Irish veto had not been anticipated when Mr. Sarkozy first spelled out his agenda for the EU presidency.

"By the end of the EU presidency, I would like the EU to have a united immigration policy, a defense policy, an energy policy and an environment policy," he said.

Instead, the next six months are more likely to involve negotiating and arbitrating delicate compromises than launching dramatic reforms, analysts say.

"There is less in the function [of the EU leader] than meets the eye," said Justin Vaisse, a senior fellow at Washington's Brookings Institution.

Holding the EU presidency is a task "consisting primarily in organizing and chairing some 4,000 meetings and summits of the 27 countries and tirelessly trying to persuade them to adopt bold common positions on sensitive issues," Mr. Vaisse recently wrote in a posting on the Brookings Web site, www.brookings.edu.

Sylvie Goulard, president of the pro-EU advocacy group European Movement, called Mr. Sarkozy's EU leadership a stage in a longer relay race.

The French presidency of the European Union is likely to be eventually evaluated on one main issue: the extent to which the Lisbon Treaty, which originally was to come into force on Jan. 1, 2009, can be saved, Ms. Goulard said.

"France has to move forward with caution to sort out the crisis triggered by the Irish 'no,'" she said. "We need to have constructive talks with Ireland."

France also has the duty of enforcing the ambitious "2020 plan" to stop climate change, which was adopted under the German presidency in March 2007.

The plan includes targets for the reduction of greenhouse-gas emissions to combat global warming, diversification of sources of energy and greater security in energy supplies across Europe.

Another issue that falls into Mr. Sarkozy's hands is agriculture. He will have to deal with the long-scheduled review of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) for the period running to 2013. French farmers are among the most highly subsidized in Europe.

"It is the occasion for France to launch a genuine debate on what the European agricultural blueprint should be," says Gaetane Ricard-Nihoul, leader of the French think tank Notre Europe.

"So far France has always braked CAP reforms. But this time, it has promised to act as more evenhanded around the table. European partners are eager to see this," Ms. Ricard-Nihoul said.

As a matter of fact, what is left to national initiatives looks rather tiny. "At most, France has a 20 percent margin for self-agenda-setting," she says.

A proposed European immigration and asylum pact that France would like to see adopted under its presidency appears far closer to achieving a consensus.

French Immigration Minister Brice Hortefeux has experienced a rather hearty welcome in European capitals where he has been touring to present his draft proposal to his counterparts.

France, like many EU nations, faces growing concerns about illegal immigration and poor integration of legal immigrants.

The proposed immigration pact includes a common asylum policy, in hopes of harmonizing practices in all 27 states, as well as a plan to increase cooperation to fight illegal immigration.

"Calls for more protection have been the actual rising theme across Europe, even in Britain," said French political analyst Dominique Reynie. "As small nation-states are ill-equipped to tackle globalization, citizens' demand shift towards the EU."

Mr. Sarkozy faces resistance to another idea - creating a political union of Mediterranean nations linked to the European Union.

Germany is resisting the effort, claiming that it is redundant with existing agreements and that it also risks excluding northern states of the European Union.

"The outcome is uncertain because of long-observed diplomatic quarrels at stake on the southern bank of the sea," says Ms. Ricard-Nihoul of the Notre Europe think tank. "But it might at least give the region a new political impulsion."

Among French voters, however, the EU presidency offers an occasion for French citizens and the European Union to reconcile.

"Public opinion [in France] is generally proud to be at the head of Europe. It is one of the rotating presidency's virtues," Ms. Ricard-Nihoul says.

At a time when Mr. Sarkozy suffers from low approval ratings at home, he could benefit from an improved international image by becoming known as "Sarkozy the European," she said.

French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who takes over the rotating six-month presidency of the European Union on Tuesday, faces the aftermath of Ireland's unexpected failed referendum of the Lisbon Treaty, which would have reformed EU institutions. [Photo by Bloomberg News]

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