



Conference of European Churches
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Konferenz Europäischer Kirchen

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CSC Guide on EU Presidencies

WHAT IS AN EU PRESIDENCY?

Out of the three institutions of the European Union¹, the President of the European Commission is elected for a five-year period. The President of the European Parliament is elected for a renewable term of two and a half years. Normally the five-year term of the Parliament is divided between the two major political parties. On the contrary, the Presidency of the Council of the European Union is a responsibility which rotates among EU Member States every six months. Since the last EU enlargement the interval between the Presidencies of a Member State is 14 years.

The country holding the Presidency has as its primary responsibility to organize and chair all meetings of the Council. It also chairs the European Council (also called the European Summit), a meeting of heads of states and governments held about four times per year in Brussels. The Presidency country leads the Council's work of moving forward the commonly agreed EU agenda but it also has the opportunity to further issues it considers a priority.

According to the current system, the head of state or government of the Presidency country chairs the European Council, and the Minister for Foreign Affairs (with some exceptions) the General Affairs and External Relations Council (GAERC). Other Council meetings (meetings between the respective ministers of the Member States) are chaired by the minister of the Presiding country. The Council meets in nine different configurations depending on the subjects under discussion. These are GAERC; Economic and Financial Affairs (ECOFIN); Justice and Home Affairs (JHA);

¹ For more information on the European institutions visit their websites.

European Parliament: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/>

Council of the European Union: <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/>

European Commission: <http://www.ec.europa.eu/>

Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs (EPSCO); Competitiveness; Transport, Telecommunications and Energy; Agriculture and Fisheries; Environment; Education, Youth and Culture.

In addition to the formal Council meetings, which are held in either Brussels or Luxembourg, a number of informal Council meetings take place in the Presidency country. These can involve alternative configurations.

The Presidency represents the Council in dealings with other institutions and bodies of the European Union. With regard to the European Parliament, the Presiding country presents the programme for the Presidency and a final report at a plenary session of the European Parliament. It also speaks in front of the European Parliament after European Summits. The ministers of the Presidency country are regularly heard by the parliamentary committees. The Presidency also represents the Council in negotiations with the Parliament in the legislative process. Besides other forms of cooperation, the Council meets with the Commission in the preparation of its six-month work programme.

The Presidency is also the face and voice of the European Union, speaking on behalf of all 27 EU Member States. When meeting with non-EU countries or regional groupings, the Presidency works in close cooperation with the European Commission and is supported by the High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy. Meetings with third countries are also organised in the form of Summits which are attended by the leaders of the EU Member States. The Presidency speaks on behalf of the European Union at major international conferences.

In order to guarantee the continuity of the Council's work, the three successive Presidencies work together in a "troika" (also called "trio") which adopts a common 18-month work programme. The triplets are arranged so that, in each of them, there are both new and old Member States, with the assumption that the co-Presidency new members will benefit from the experience of the older Member States. The last troika was formed by Germany, Portugal and Slovenia. The new one, which started at the beginning of July 2008, includes France, the Czech Republic and Sweden. The 18-month programme of the three countries was published on 30 June 2008. <http://register.consilium.europa.eu/pdf/en/08/st11/st11249.en08.pdf>

HOW WILL THE LISBON TREATY CHANGE THE EU PRESIDENCY?

The EU Member States signed a new legal basis for the European Union at the Lisbon Summit on 13 December 2007. The Reform Treaty "Treaty of Lisbon"² will have to be ratified by all 27 Member States. This ratification process, which was hoped to be concluded by the end of this year and thus allowing it to enter into force on 1 January 2009, faced a major setback when Ireland - as the only country holding a referendum on the Treaty - voted 'no' in June this year. At the June Summit, a few days after the Irish

² Read CSC Briefing on the Treaty of Lisbon at: <http://www.cec-kek.org/content/integration.shtml>

vote, the Member States decided to go on with the ratification process.³ However, it is now clear that the Treaty will not enter into force at the beginning of next year. EU leaders will re-examine the matter on 15 October 2008. Creative ideas are now being sought to find arguments which would convince the Irish population to agree on the Treaty when it is put to the vote a second time

The Lisbon Treaty would bring major changes to the current Presidency system. The reasons for the need to reform the EU Presidency are manifold. Over the years, the tasks of the Presidency have increased. The management of the Community of six Member States is incomparable with that of 27 Members. The continuous expansion of the Union's competencies has burdened the functioning of the Presidency. Also the Presidency's responsibilities with regard to the European Parliament (appearances and reports) have multiplied. In order to improve the efficiency of the work and the continuity of both representation and action, the Treaty of Lisbon foresees the creation of a stable European Council Presidency. The President of the European Council would have a mandate of two and half years, renewable once.

With the exception of the External Relations Council, which would be chaired by the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, the other Council meetings would be chaired by ministers from a group of three EU Member States in the eighteen-month Presidency Team. The treaty reform would also split the currently joint General Affairs and External Relations Council into two separate Councils. The Treaty of Lisbon stipulates that the President of the European Council will ensure the preparation and continuity of the work of the European Council in cooperation with the President of the Commission, and on the basis of the work of the General Affairs Council. It is yet to be specified who would chair the General Affairs Council (e.g. Foreign Minister of the country holding the Presidency).

Until 13 June when the Irish 'no' vote was confirmed, the French Presidency had intended to prepare the implementation of the Treaty, and the Czech Presidency was ready to work on the basis of the new rules. In the current situation France has a major task ahead in order to solve the impasse and the Czech Republic lives in excitement regarding whether or not it will need to switch to a new system in the middle of its Presidency or whether it will have to pursue the problem-solving mission. Besides the treaty reform process, whatever the situation might be, the Swedish EU Presidency in the autumn 2009 will also be affected by the results of the European elections in June 2009. The elections will not only mean a new European Parliament but it will also bring an end to the five-year term of the current European Commission. The autumn 2009 will mark the setting-up of new work plans for both institutions. All this means that Sweden will lead the Union at a moment when business is not run as usual, but at a time when both institutions and the European Union as a whole is in the midst of major change.

³ By 30 June 2008, the Treaty has been ratified by 19 Member States. CHECK

CHURCHES' INVOLVEMENT IN THE FORMER EU PRESIDENCIES

The churches' involvement during the EU Presidencies has varied greatly. The most active commitment of churches in recent history took place during the Austrian, Finnish and German EU Presidencies.

AUSTRIAN EU PRESIDENCY (Spring 2006)

In Austria, the Protestant and Catholic churches had a very close cooperation in order to follow the activities during the country's EU Presidency in the spring of 2006 and to launch their own initiatives. The themes included, amongst others, the EU treaty reform process, the reform of the Austrian Constitution, dialogue, and relations of churches with the Government. The traditional quadripartite meeting was held between the Church and Society Commission (CSC), the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Community (COMECE), the national churches - in this case the Austrian Episcopal Conference and the Protestant Church in Austria - and the Presidency Government. The Government was represented by the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mme Ursula Plassnik. The meeting was followed up regular contacts between two delegates nominated by the respective churches and the office of the Secretary General of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. Contacts have been maintained ever since. Other presidency related activities included a visit to Brussels. The delegation included members of both the Protestant and Catholic churches. A church representative took part in a presidency conference "Sounds of Europe", which looked at European cultures and values.

FINNISH EU PRESIDENCY (Autumn 2006)

In Finland, the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF) took the lead in the churches' involvement in the EU Presidency. ELCF cooperated with the Finnish Ecumenical Council and the Church and Society Commission. Furthermore, ELCF also worked with COMECE concerning the previous Presidency country (Austria), and the EKD Brussels office, representing the next Presidency country (Germany). The objective was to promote the "troika"-model also within the Churches.

ELCF, together with the Finnish Ecumenical Council, produced a document "Churches in Finland and the Finnish EU Presidency 2006", which set out the following priorities for the churches with regard to the Finnish Presidency:

- Meeting other religions, European identity and tolerance
- Strengthening the value dimension of the Union and the discussion about the future of Europe
- Social policy questions, a consequent and humane migration and refugee policy and a responsible environment policy

The document was widely distributed and well received. It was presented by ELCF to Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen on 27 June 2006.

The quadripartite meeting between CSC, COMECE, national churches and the representative of the Government of the Presiding country was held with Foreign Minister Erkki Tuomioja on 30 June 2006.

<http://www.cec-kek.org/content/pr-cq0626e.shtml>

ELCF representatives took part in several conferences and seminars organized by the Finnish Presidency, for instance, *'The Future of the European Union'* arranged in connection with the 100th Anniversary of the Finnish Parliament in Pori in July with Commission President Barroso as the keynote speaker, and in the EU Human Rights Forum held in Helsinki on 7-8 December. Heikki Hiilamo, Director of Diaconia and Social Responsibility, gave a speech about common social standards and minimum income in the 5th roundtable conference on poverty and social exclusion held in Tampere on 16-17 October. Heidi Martinussen, General Secretary of Eurodiaconia, gave a speech about the need for a new balance in an expert conference in Helsinki on 9-10 November about EU's evolving social policy and national models.

Besides various local events, the churches' own activities included the organization of a seminar on intercultural dialogue in Brussels together with the Lutheran Church of Estonia and the Church of Sweden. This seminar was followed by another held in Estonia in spring 2007.

One of the positive outcomes of the active participation of ELCF during the Presidency was that the contacts established with the Prime Minister's office have been followed up by regular meetings on European affairs.

GERMAN EU PRESIDENCY (Spring 2007)

On the eve of the German EU Presidency, in November 2006, the synod of the EKD issued a decision which called for a strengthening of the EU as a peace and reconciliation project. The synod was particularly asking the EU to enhance its activities concerning worldwide disarmament.

<http://www.ekd.de/synode2006/beschluesse/51220.html>

The EKD Council issued a statement concerning its wishes for the German Presidency on 29 December 2006. <http://www.ekd.de/aktuell/51859.html>

Besides their own efforts, Protestant and Catholic churches worked closely together according to a well-established tradition of cooperation. One of the joint initiatives was a letter to Chancellor Angela Merkel, calling for the Presidency to incorporate a reference to a Christian heritage in the Berlin Declaration, a declaration by the Presidents of the three European Institutions on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Treaties of Rome. On the day of the summit in Berlin an ecumenical worship was held in the Berlin Cathedral.

EKD also celebrated the EU's anniversary by organizing a concert with musicians from Dresden and a film documenting the reconstruction of the Dresden-Frauenkirche - itself a symbol of European reconciliation - at the Cathedral St. Michel et Gudule in Brussels.

The regular meeting between CSC, COMECE and the churches with the Presidency took place on 15 January. The church delegation was received by Foreign Minister Frank Walter Steinmeier. <http://www.cec-kek.org/content/pr-cq0703e.shtml>

A meeting between the Minister of Internal Affairs and the churches concerning the integration of migrants took place at the end of May.

Moreover, the German Evangelical Kirchentag in June 2007, which gathered up to one million people, provided an occasion to connect grassroots level with European issues. The "Europe" Hall served as a platform where, amongst many others, the President of the European Parliament, Hans-Gert Pöttering, discussed with the President of the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches, Rev. Thomas Wipf, about values and identity in Europe. The activities in the "Europe" Hall ended with a huge birthday party celebrating the 50th anniversary of the European Union.

SLOVENIAN EU PRESIDENCY (Spring 2008)

Press Release of the meeting between the church representatives and the Slovenian Prime Minister Janez Jansa on 15 February 2008

<http://www.cec-kek.org/content/pr-cq0804e.shtml>

CHURCHES AND FUTURE EU PRESIDENCIES

FRENCH EU PRESIDENCY (Autumn 2008)

Under the heading of "Europe taking action to meet today's challenges" the French EU Presidency wishes to address four key priorities: energy and the climate, migration issues, agriculture, and security and defence. Beyond these issues, the Presidency also seeks to make progress in all the major areas of EU action – economic, financial, social and cultural – and on the international stage.

Programme of the French EU Presidency:

http://www.eu2008.fr/webdav/site/PFUE/shared/ProgrammePFUE/Programme_EN.pdf

Due to the French tradition of laïcité, the relations of churches with regard to the French Presidency are of a particularly sensitive nature. It should, nevertheless, be possible to hold a quadripartite meeting between CSC, COMECE, the representatives of French churches and the Government representative. One Presidency related event has already taken place. The Conference of European Churches (CEC) facilitated the organisation of a meeting on 18 June between the All Africa Conference of Churches and Bruno Joubert, the advisor of President Nicolas Sarkozy on African affairs.

Press Release: http://www.defap.fr/article.php?id_article=704

CZECH EU PRESIDENCY (Spring 2009)

In the Czech Republic, the Government has grouped its priority issues under five headings. The key sphere is “competitive and open Europe”. The other headings are sustainable and secure energy, a budget for Europe’s future, EU as a global partner, and secure and free Europe. Other important topics connected with these areas are: further development of the area of freedom, security and justice; liberal trade policy; development of transatlantic relations; the Western Balkans, the European Neighbourhood Policy with specific emphasis on its Eastern dimension, and the institutional reform of the Union.

The churches in the Czech Republic have made impressive and ambitious plans, inspired by experiences in Austria, Finland and Germany, towards the country’s Presidency. The churches’ action is coordinated by a commission which includes representatives of the member churches of the Ecumenical Council (www.ekumenickarada.cz) as well as its associate member, the Roman Catholic Church. Until now that commission has held brainstorming meetings, a Study Day (with participation of a Government representative and three members of CSC staff) as well as (other) meetings with the Czech EU Ministry. The EU Presidencies seminar (see below) co-organised by CSC, the Church of Sweden and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland has also paved the way.

The churches’ programme will share the title of the Government programme “Europe without Barriers” but will address it from a different perspective. Whereas the Government wants to speak about liberalisation, four freedoms (goods, persons, services and capital) and legislation, the churches will raise social and environmental issues and provide good practises on civil action.

The churches’ programme will consist in two parts. The reactive part responds to two of the Government’s priorities. Churches will state that for them “a competitive and open Europe” is an issue which has a social dimension, relates to work and family life and to the demographic development. The theme of “sustainable and secure energy” should not be discussed without the environmental dimension. The active part of the churches’ programme will be the contribution of the churches to the open civil society, and it will tackle the social and environmental dimensions more in-depth. Under social dimension, the churches will look at ‘relations’ in the society with regard to family, education, diaconal work and marginalisation. Under environmental dimension, the churches will address environmental protection, sustainable use of energy and alternative resources, alternative ways of life and human rights. The churches’ views, examples of church involvement in different priority areas as well as background information on churches’ relations with the EU will be presented in a Czech-English brochure issued with a CD-ROM. Concrete activities during the Czech Presidency will include a seminar on reconciliation and the quadripartite meeting between CSC, COMECE, Czech churches and the Czech Government. The annual open-doors day of the churches will focus on European issues. Local level activities are planned (prayers, meetings) as well as meetings with Government representatives and non-governmental partners.

SWEDISH EU PRESIDENCY (Autumn 2009)

The priorities of the Swedish Government, as set out now, are Climate, Environment and Energy; Jobs, Growth and Competitiveness; safer and more open Europe; Baltic Sea Region and relations with neighbouring areas, and EU as a global actor and enlargement.

The churches in Sweden have begun to plan their activities in the framework of the Christian Council and in co-operation with the Ecumenical Office for EU-Relations in Sweden (Kyrkornas EU-Kontor). One starting point for reflection on what could be organised and where, is the already available information concerning the places of the 12 informal ministerial meetings. Churches are now investigating whether they could hold some/any of their events simultaneously with meetings on related themes.

With regard to themes, the first brainstorming meeting in February 2008 among the churches resulted in the following list: trafficking, climate change, EU enlargement and the EU membership of Turkey, EU as a global actor, peace and reconciliation. The Church of Sweden has thereafter specified as its core areas climate change, migration and asylum policy as well as inter-faith dialogue. The first two relate to the Government's priorities and the third one is a priority for the Church. Also the Northern dimension might be a question the Church wants to flag. In the Höör meeting (see the next chapter) an idea was also raised about a seminar on the Swedish welfare model and it was received with interest by the Czech churches. Which out of these first ideas will be implemented is still to be decided. There are also initial plans by the Church of Sweden to produce a general education programme on EU affairs intended for parishes.

COOPERATION BETWEEN THE CHURCHES OVER EU PRESIDENCIES

Representatives of churches in the Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, Sweden and the UK met with CSC in Höör, Sweden, on 26-27 May 2008 in order to discuss co-operation over EU Presidencies. The seminar served as a forum to share experiences of churches from countries which already held an EU Presidency with churches from the upcoming Presidency countries (see above). It identified crucial issues in relation to the EU for the years to come and discussed opportunities for cooperation, especially among the churches in Sweden and the Czech Republic as they belong to the next Presidency trio. Håkan Jonsson, Secretary of State from the Prime Minister's Office, presented the plans for the Swedish chairmanship in 2009.

IN SUMMARY: HOW CAN CHURCHES BE INVOLVED IN AN EU PRESIDENCY?

IDEAS FOR CHURCHES' ACTION: political, spiritual and cultural dimensions

- The traditional meeting with the Foreign Minister (or Prime Minister) of the presiding country organised in co-operation by CSC, COMECE and churches of the presiding country

- Preparatory meetings with the Government secretariat/representatives to discuss the priority areas
- Meetings with Government representatives (including ministers) throughout the Presidency
- Involvement in the events organised by the Presidency (speakers, participation).
- Publication/declaration on churches' priorities and views. In the past, churches highlighted, among other things, the following issues: future of Europe including treaty reform, environmental issues, social questions, value dimension of the EU, disarmament, migration and inter-religious dialogue.
- Ecumenical services
- Seminars and cultural events related to EU topics

GENERAL REMARKS

Co-operation with the Government may be something new both for the Government and the churches. During an extremely busy period as the Presidency, contacts with churches may not be the highest priority of the public and political authorities.

International context and developments have an impact on the EU agenda. The Presidency is rarely able to implement its presidency programme without changes.

LESSONS LEARNED AND OTHER TIPS

Know your strengths when selecting topics and deciding about possible actions. Select topics which are both relevant for the churches, high on the EU's agenda and where you can show good practises. Issues on which you seek to have a real political impact have to be at stake at the EU level.

It is vital to be familiar with the decision-making process and to have contacts with the right people. The clearer your message, the better it fits into the current political debate, and the higher the likelihood that you get it across. In short, ideally, you should deliver the right paper at the right time on the table of the right person.

Longstanding cooperation with partners, Governments and EU institutions is the secret for success.

When meeting with Government representatives, show that churches in Europe are standing together on EU issues. If possible, make a reference to the work and priorities of churches in other presidency countries. Trio countries share the work so that one country lays emphasis on one area of work and another one on another area (e.g. France focuses on Mediterranean co-operation, the Czech Republic on Eastern dimension and

Sweden on Northern dimension). This division of tasks could inspire you; churches could/should do the same within the troika model and beyond it.

Start the preparations well in advance!

THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH AND SOCIETY COMMISSION

The Church and Society Commission links CEC's 125 member churches with the European Union Institutions and supports and strengthens the common voice and witness of European churches in the society and vis-à-vis the Institutions. With regard to EU Presidencies, CSC seeks to encourage member churches to play an active role during the Presidency of their country and serves as a facilitator.

CSC follows all policy areas of churches' interest. This covers the majority of policy areas under the EU's remit. CSC is involved in the now traditional annual meeting between the Presidents of the European institutions and the representatives of the three monotheistic religions. Since the early 90's regular Dialogue Seminars have been held between the churches and the European Commission. Nowadays the Seminars are organised in co-operation between CSC, COMECE and the Commission, and take place once or twice per year. In addition, CSC organises every year a number of consultations on various topics. In all of these events, a special emphasis is put on inviting representatives of the churches of the presiding country.

Besides organising events on European themes, CSC monitors and takes part in the legislative work within the institutions, and consequently has intensive working relations at all levels with the Institutions, including the Permanent Representations of different Member States. The Presidencies structure and chair the EU policy debate and therefore good relations with the Presidency are important. Besides relations at the national level, CSC plays an important role in relations to the officials of the Presidency country based in Brussels. CSC monitors the priorities and calendar of each Presidency to assess where the churches' voice should be introduced. Important feature of this work are the high-level meetings with the presiding country. Since many years, CSC together with COMECE and the churches of the presiding country have organised meetings with either the Prime Minister (Chair of the European Council) or the Foreign Minister (Chair of the General and External Affairs Council) of the Presidency country. These meetings usually take place at the beginning of the Presidency and serve to identify common areas of interest and pave the way for the co-operation during the Presidency.

In order to support member churches in their EU work, CSC keeps its membership informed on European issues, for example, through the CSC Update on European Affairs (<http://www.cec-kek.org/content/EuropeUpdates.shtml>). CSC Briefings - sent as attachments to the Europe Update - provide more detailed information on particular topics (e.g. Treaty reform, climate change, intercultural dialogue).⁴

⁴ Note that the partner organisation of CSC, the Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe, monitors migration and asylum questions and informs churches on these issues. <http://www.ccme.be/>

The staff of CSC is willing to assist member churches in their European work. Do not hesitate to contact us for advice. CSC expertise on European issues is meant to be at the service of CEC membership. You might consider inviting members of CSC staff to events that you organise about European themes at the national level. The CSC offices in Brussels and Strasbourg also welcome you for a visit.

Last but not least, CSC is very keen on knowing about activities at the national level. Please keep your Brussels office informed about your work.

APPENDIX

LIST OF RECENT, PAST AND FUTURE PRESIDENCIES

2006	Austria Finland	www.eu2006.at www.eu2006.fi	2009	Czech Republic Sweden
2007	Germany Portugal	www.eu2007.de www.eu2007.pt	2010	Spain Belgium
2008	Slovenia France	www.eu2008.si www.eu2008.fr	2011	Hungary Poland

SOURCES include:

Slovenian Presidency website:

www.eu2008.si/en/The_Council_Presidency/What_is_the_Presidency/index.html

Website of the Swedish Government:

www.regeringen.se

The Treaty of Lisbon: Implementing the Institutional Innovations. Joint Study by the European Policy Centre, Egmont and the Centre for European Policy Studies, November 2007.

“The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland and the Finnish EU-Presidency 1.7-31.12.2006”. Evaluation report by Lena Kumlin.

Consolidated version of the Treaty of Lisbon:

http://consilium.europa.eu/cms3_fo/showPage.asp?id=1296&lang=en.

Thanks to all the speakers of the Höör EU presidencies seminar, COMECE which provided valuable information concerning the Austrian and German Presidencies and to the EKD Brussels Office which was helpful in sharing experience concerning the German Presidency.



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