

2009

The Swedish Presidency with the EU

Expectations for the Western Balkans



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On the 1st of July 2009, Sweden took over the Presidency of the EU for the next six months. As each member state of the European Union takes its turn in presiding with the European Council for a period of six months in accordance with a pre-established rotation schedule, the agenda of each presidency reflects the interests of the member state. It is a critical position as each presidency plays a central role in organizing the work of the Council and serves as the driving force in setting the agenda, as well as in directing the legislative and political decision-making process.

Generally, the countries of the Western Balkan (further in the text WB) are highly interested in the rotating presidency as the promotion of their interests depends on how favorable the country in charge is to EU Enlargement. If Enlargement is high on the agenda then the process of EU approximation can move forward at a faster pace. The Presidency can also help in mediating the regional or bilateral disputes that hold the accession process behind. Which way the government holding helm of the EU presidency will choose depends on its own interest in the region and its connections with the individual WB countries.

The biggest challenges that the Swedish EU Presidency has to face in the next six months are the Lisbon agreement and its further ratification, the global economic crisis, the climate changes and the implementation of the “Stockholm Programme”.¹ On the presentation of the Swedish agenda for this presidency, in front of the European Parliament, the Swedish Prime minister Fredrik Reinfeldt focused on climate change and the advantages of taking concrete action in this field, the economic crisis and the

¹ At the meeting of the European Council on 5 November 2004, a five-year action plan for cooperation on judicial matters and home affairs was adopted. The plan, known as the Hague Programme, includes police and customs cooperation, rescue services, criminal and civil law cooperation, asylum, migration, visas and checks at external borders, etc. The first strategic action plan in the area of justice and home affairs was adopted in Tampere in 1999. The current plan, the Hague Programme, which was adopted in November 2004, expires in December 2009. Producing guidelines for future work in the form of a new action plan, the Stockholm Programme, will be a major and important negotiating task for the Swedish Presidency. On 25 September 2008 the European Commission launched a public consultation on the scope of future cooperation directed at the Member States, national parliaments, the general public and other stakeholders. The Commission intends to produce a communication on the future programme in May 2009. (Communications are documents in which the Commission formally presents its view of the measures that need to be taken.) The programme will be discussed at the informal JHA Council in Stockholm in July 2009 and adopted at the Summit in December 2009. The issues will affect several ministries in the Government Offices, including the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Integration and Gender Equality (**Government Offices of Sweden** <http://www.sweden.gov.se/sb/d/11666/a/120682>)

control of the financial markets as well as the big budget deficits and the key point, the “Stockholm” Programme.

Since Sweden has always been a pioneer in new innovative environmentally sustainable solutions, with this presidency Sweden has the possibility to promote its own type of “eco” state in whole EU. The new agreement that will replace the Kyoto Protocol together with the plan for revitalization of the Baltic Sea are the highest priorities on Sweden’s agenda. However, other issues threaten to “steal” the spot light of the eco-plan such as the on-going ratification of the Lisbon treaty. The Swedish presidency could signify the end of an era if the Lisbon Treaty, designed to streamline and clarify the roles of the various EU institutions, were to be ratified by all the member states by the end of the year. A second referendum is scheduled in Ireland for October 2009, whose initial rejection of the Lisbon Treaty in June 2008 stalled the entire ratification process. Should this referendum pass, the Lisbon Treaty could be soon ratified by the rest of member states, while the institutional structures it provides for would open the door for further enlargement.

On the question of the credit crunch, Sweden’s standpoint is that the EU has to make a way out of it through a solid budgetary discipline and order in public finance. For overcoming this crisis and lowering the unemployment rate, Sweden will push forward the policy of opening the European markets and creating even greater mobility for workers instead of using the protectionist measures.

Connected to this is Sweden’s third priority for this Presidency, the implementation of the “Stockholm” programme for joint migration policy of the EU. With the measures proposed in it, a free flow of people would be provided and joint European asylum system will be created. Swedish position on this issue is that ‘fresh’ working force is required in Europe despite the current economic crisis and the high unemployment rate.

Other priority in the agenda is the role that EU has in the world. It follows the current stances of the EU on greater involvement and strengthening of the position on the war in Afghanistan, the Pakistan issue, the peace process in the Middle East and the crises in Africa.

The top Swedish priorities, as outlined above, suggest that the WB countries are not high on the Swedish agenda. Apart from proceeding with the Visa liberalization process, which started before, Sweden will not get involved deeper in the WB enlargement process. Not to be mistaken, Sweden is a strong supporter of the enlargement process as long as the candidate countries fulfill the conditions set by the EU and has

no reservations towards it like some other member states. In the Swedish presidency programme only Croatia is mentioned, for which it is stated that it might enter the last round of negotiations with the EU this autumn. For the rest of the countries, named only as Western Balkans, the presidency will work on their further progress in the EU accession process but this will depend greatly on the reforms done in each country individually. Sweden is also in favor of the Turkish accession and would like to make progress on its EU accession talks, which did not move forward in the first half of 2009 under the Czech EU presidency. France and Germany have revived calls to offer Turkey a “privileged partnership” rather than outright EU membership. Sweden must walk a fine line between seeking renewed momentum on Turkish accession talks and risking a political backlash that may subvert its other agenda priorities.

On the other side, what WB countries must also have in mind is that Sweden is strongly against intervention of EU in the bilateral problems in the region and for that reason cannot expect much help for their quick solution. In that manner Carl Bildt, the Swedish Minister for Foreign Affairs, stated that the EU will not get involved in the bilateral regional disputes between EU member states and aspirant countries (Greece and Macedonia, Slovenia and Croatia).² Other Swedish official representatives stated too, that the bilateral disagreements cannot be abused in the enlargement process.³

What can the individual Balkan countries expect from the Swedish presidency in the following six months?

Macedonia – The country got the green light for visa liberalization from the Commission at the beginning of July. The EC has twice assessed the progress of the five WB countries (one report in November 2008 and one on 18th of May 2009) and “these assessments conclude – based on the most thorough expert assessments ever undertaken in the fields of document security, border control, migration management and security – that Macedonia meets the conditions for visa-free travel”⁴ and recommended moving it to the White List. Before Macedonian citizens can enjoy visa-free travel to the Schengen countries, the Council needs to accept the Commission’s recommendation, which is likely to happen by the end of 2009.

² “Шведска го нема Западен Балкан на агендата” (Sweden does not have Western Balkans on its agenda), Tatjana Grncharoska, Utrinski vesnik

<http://utrinski.com.mk/?ItemID=5D1397CA78F7974EB429FAC73B8A715F>

³ Paul Beyer, Swedish ambassador in Sofia, Makfax, Independent News Agency

<http://makfax.com.mk/mk-mk/Details.aspx?itemID=6285>

⁴ Scorecard – Schengen White List Conditions, European Stability Initiative, 22nd of May 2009, page 2.

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The next step is the long-awaited “date” for the start of the accession negotiations. Macedonian authorities are positive that this autumn the country, after four years of waiting, will finally get the date for the start of the negotiations for full EU membership. In this context the Swedish ambassador in Macedonia, Mr. Lars Fredén, stated for the media that the chances for that to happen are very good. However whether that will happen does not depend on the Swedish presidency but on the EC⁵ and the Macedonian government who is responsible for fulfilling the rest of the benchmarks set by the EC in March 2008.

Croatia – it is expected that the negotiation will move forward this autumn. However, the bilateral dispute with Slovenia over the stretch of the Mediterranean border could hinder this process furthermore. In 2008, 26 EU countries (and the European Commission) wanted to open ten new ‘chapters’ in the negotiations with Croatia. However, Slovenia vetoed all but one. Since then, the tension in the relations between Ljubljana and Zagreb increased and the EU has called in Martti Ahtisaari to find a way out. Will Croatia continue the negotiations during the Swedish EU Presidency, knowing that the Swedes do not wish to get involved in the regional disputes (see above), remains to be seen.

Serbia – just like Macedonia, Serbia was included in the group that should get the visa liberalization by 1st of January 2010. The Commission’s report stated that Serbia meets most of the conditions for visa-free travel and the Commission decided to reward the impressive recent progress that it made (particularly in recent months), although Serbia will need to work further in order to fulfill the rest of the criteria by the end of the year. As for other developments, it is expected that Serbia will continue the reforms required by the EU in the process of approximation with one big obstacle in it, the Kosovo issue. No greater developments on this field are expected during the Swedish EU Presidency.

Montenegro – got the same remarks as Serbia on the visa liberalization process and together with Serbia and Macedonia was recommended for visa liberalization. Montenegro submitted application for EU membership on 15th of December 2008 and on 23rd of April 2009 the Council invited the Commission to submit its opinion on Montenegro's application. This fall is the earliest expected period for the Commission to give its opinion, if Montenegro answers the Commission’s Questionnaire by that time.

Bosnia and Herzegovina – is in the group of countries that did not fulfill the requirements for visa liberalization, as according to the EC does not (yet) meet the conditions for visa free travel. Bosnia was

⁵ Interview on A1 News Channel. <http://a1.com.mk/vesti/default.aspx?VestID=111661>

however encouraged to proceed with its efforts at fulfilling the visa roadmap criteria in the next year. Other major moving forward in the EU approximation is not expected in the next six months.

Albania – is in the same situation as Bosnia and Herzegovina regarding the visa liberalization. It has however submitted its application for membership on 28th of April 2009. The Council is still revising it and has not yet asked the EC to give its opinion on it. This issue probably will not be in the next EC report on Albania so no major changes are expected during the Swedish Presidency.

Kosovo – “The sixth Western Balkan state whose citizens are required to obtain a visa to travel to the EU, is not yet included in this process leading to visa liberalization and risks being left behind as an enclave in the region.”⁶ This is a very problematic aspect not only for Kosovo but also for Serbia, the WB region and the EU, which as it is known has a direct responsibility for Kosovo. “It is not clear why the EU would wish to forego such a powerful instrument to improve policing, border controls and the rule of law in Kosovo.”⁷ Since the WB is not high on the Swedish agenda and added to that the complicated situation Kosovo is in, some substantial changes in its relation with the EU are not expected in the next six months.

The Swedish EU Presidency brought one very positive thing for the Western Balkans: green light from the Commission for the visa liberalization for Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro. Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina were strongly encouraged to continue with the reforms in this area. Nevertheless, the analysis in this brief showed that the Swedish Presidency will not bring more substantial developments in the relations with the Western Balkan countries. The agenda is full with other priorities such as the economic crisis and the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty that push the problems and expectations of the WB further down the line. Sweden remains a strong supporter of the enlargement process but it will not get involved closely in the regional disputes that hinder this process. Sweden also expects that these countries will continue implementing the reforms and fulfill the benchmarks set by the Commission. The recommendation for the WB countries stays the same, hastening the reforms before the publishing of the EC Annual Reports in November and accepting these and other reforms and benchmarks not only as conditions for EU membership but also as part of their own policies for their countries’ development.

⁶ Scorecard – Schengen White List Conditions, page 2.

⁷ Ibid., page 2.

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