

Europa-Forum Wachau 2018
Working group 3:
“Austrian EU Presidency 2018: Chairing Europe at the crossroads”

Chair:

Andrä Rupprechter (AR)

Keynote Speeches:

Lilyana Pavlova

Carsten Pillath

Alexander Schallenberg

AR: What are the lessons learnt from the Bulgarian Presidency?

Minister Pavlova stated that the EU presidency was a challenge both on an organizational level as well as on a policy level. The main difficulty was to uphold national interests and to speak with the voice of 28 (27) member states at the same time. This is a challenge for each presidency. Bulgaria has managed to find unity and established a good system of coordination that included the national parliament as well. Many times, there is a thin line between national interest and EU interest. (Example: posting of workers and the mobility package). For the Minister, the presidency has to fulfill the role of an honest broker. She identified three important goals for a successful presidency:

- A country needs a clear goal for its presidency
- In the 21st century, in particular with its almost infinite digital communication possibilities, the presidency needs to be flexible and react very fast to diverse challenges
- The presidency needs braveness and readiness to propose compromises

AR: Since the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty we have had major changes regarding decision making (permanent President of the European Council and permanent President of the Foreign Affairs Council). How does this cooperation between permanent and rotating presidencies work in practice? How much room for maneuver does a presidency have?

According to Carsten Pillath, the term “steering” in regard to the presidency, both permanent and rotating, is not a suitable term. Moreover, the magic formula of a successful and respected presidency is: understanding and listening. The presidency should play the role of an honest broker that travels throughout Europe in preparation of the next meeting to listen to and talk to the national governments and then facilitates the discussion. There is an ambivalence of the post of the president. In general, a president is perceived as a leader, but in the context of the EU this does not hold true, since leadership in the European sense is defined differently.

AR: There is a tense political period ahead (EP election / Brexit / MFF). This means a big work load and huge expectations. How did Austria prepare for that? What are your expectations? What is next to the *Pflicht* and what is the *Kür*?

Alexander Schallenberg stated that the Austrian government is very much looking forward to its presidency. However, Austria is aware that it is a challenging task and that the expectations are very high. The context, in which Austria takes over the presidency of the Council of the European Union, is very volatile (conflict in Syria, tensions with Russia, re-orientation regarding transatlantic relationship, etc.). The “Brexit”-negotiations as well as the negotiations concerning the MFF are big topics on the European agenda.

Furthermore, Austria will focus on three priorities during its presidency:

- Security and the fight against illegal migration
- Stability in the neighbourhood, especially the Western Balkans/South Eastern Europe
- Securing prosperity and competitiveness through digitalization

Schallenberg stated that it would be very important to keep the EU-27 united, in order to make the Austrian presidency a success. It is the Austrian endeavor to build bridges, to focus on what unites us and to foster European projects, such as the digital single market and security related projects.

Austria intends to continue the efforts undertaken by the Bulgarian presidency by strengthening the political, economic and social ties between the EU and the countries of the Western Balkans/South Eastern Europe, as they are very important partners for us.

In this context, Minister Pavlova added from the Bulgarian experience that the number of trilogues that they had planned during their presidency had almost tripled. Austria would have to take this into account. For Pavlova, it is very important that a government communicates clearly what to expect from an EU presidency, since most of the time it is unclear what the expectations of other partners are (locally, nationally and on the EU level).

AR: The work loads have changed a lot since the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty. How have they changed? What are unknown unknowns?

According to Carsten Pillath, each presidency has its own characteristics and only because one country has had the presidency before, this does not mean that the next one will be successful. Usually, the Ministers and civil servants of the country having the presidency are rather new to the job and were not in office during the previous presidency. Pillath pointed out that smaller countries often have more successful presidencies than bigger ones. One reason for this is that smaller member states have a lean and smart decision making process which is crucial. Furthermore, the national governments have to trust their own permanent representations in Brussels and equip them accordingly with sufficient resources and a wide scope of action.

Pillath added that there are always unknown unknowns, which one is not able to prepare for. One major challenge for the Austrian presidency would be the risk of the collapse of multilateralism. Centrifugal forces are increasing all over Europe and to keep the 27 together will be the biggest task for the Austrian presidency. He recommended to keep on talking and listening and try to understand the counter parts.

Schallenberg underlined that this was a very important topic and the growing tension within the Union is the biggest threat to European integration.

Pillath and Schallenberg agreed that the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) is both, a window of opportunity and a huge challenge. However, during the Austrian presidency it is unlikely that the negotiations will be concluded and hence close coordination with the next presidency is necessary. The MFF is unanimously agreed by member states with the consent of the EP, whereas in annual budget negotiations the EP as co-legislator is on an equal footing with the Council. The EP will use its power regarding the annual budget to try to shape the MFF. Pillath added that the formula “quality before speed” should be guiding the MFF negotiations.

The last questions discussed were about the “Future of Europe” as outlined in the respective white paper of the European Commission.

Minister Pavlova made clear that the EU will not follow any of those scenarios and it will have to create a new one. She concluded her remarks arguing that “we have to stop dividing if we want to have peace, stability and security in Europe. We need to keep unity. And Europe needs to grow.”

According to Carsten Pillath, the white paper was only a contribution to a discussion but not more: “Europe is not created by design anymore and we grow in different directions. We do not need a new design but a methodology to grow.”

Alexander Schallenberg added that all scenarios offer valuable ideas. Austria’s goal is the implementation of Scenario 4 “doing less more efficiently” where the EU should be big on big issues and small on small issues. Furthermore, we have to bring the EU closer to its citizens and not to explain Europe only in technical ways.

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