

'The Fifteen settle their accounts in Brussels' from La Libre Belgique (24 October 2002)

Caption: Under Declaration No 22 on the venue for European Councils, annexed to the Treaty of Nice, 'As from 2002, one European Council meeting per Presidency will be held in Brussels. When the Union comprises 18 members, all European Council meetings will be held in Brussels.' On 24 and 25 October 2002, the Danish Presidency organises, for the first time, one of the Council's twice-yearly meetings in the Belgian capital.

Source: La Libre Belgique. 24.10.2002, n° 297; 119e année. Bruxelles: Edition de la Libre Belgique S.A. "Les Quinze règlent leurs comptes à Bruxelles", auteur:Verhest, Sabine , p. 2.

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Last updated: 05/07/2016

The Fifteen settle their accounts in Brussels

All European summits will soon be held in Brussels.

This decision was taken at the end of a December night in Nice.

The huge and cumbersome machine could regain some semblance of normality.

European summits are gradually setting up home in Brussels. You will remember that, at the end of a gruelling night of negotiations almost two years ago in Nice, the people who run the Union agreed — though some of them did not remember afterwards — that, with effect from 2002, ‘half of the European Council meetings and at least one a year’ would be held in Brussels.

Well, it is now about to happen. The first meeting of this kind will be held on 24 and 25 October under the Presidency of the Danish Prime Minister, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, on Thursday evening at the Bibliothèque Solvay, and on Friday at the neo-Stalinist pile known as the Justus Lipsius Building. ‘A logistical challenge’ is how one of the Council’s European organisers described it. This is not the first time that this building on rue de la Loi has been the venue for a summit, the last one having been held in September 2001, a few days after the terrorist attacks in the United States. Even so, further investment was necessary, especially in order to accommodate the media, and this amounted to EUR 4.8 million paid for by the Council’s General Secretariat and EUR 1 million paid for by the Danish Presidency, not to mention what the Belgians must have spent on security.

This meeting, which will be followed by another in March 2003, will constitute a full-scale trial run in the period leading up to the time when all European summits will be held in the Belgian capital, because, at the Nice meeting, the Fifteen also decided that ‘when the Union comprises 18 members, all European Council meetings will be held in Brussels.’ This means that, in 2004, the year when 10 new Member States are expected to accede, the Belgian capital will have to host all European summits, together with their accompanying hordes of leaders, delegates, diplomats, journalists and demonstrators. That being the case, the Italians, who will take over the Presidency of the Union in the second half of 2003, have chosen to anticipate the implementation of that decision and have already announced that they will be organising both their summits in Brussels. They also hope, incidentally, that it will be possible to sign a new European Treaty, or even a Constitution, in Rome, over 46 years after the establishment of the EEC was first signed and sealed in the Italian capital.

Mr Chirac’s surprise

The idea of organising meetings of the European Council in Brussels had been doing the rounds before Nice, but its appearance at that Summit was still a surprise for many people, a rabbit which Jacques Chirac pulled out of his hat before having it officially announced several hours later in total confusion. Amazingly, therefore, this proposal, which strengthens the status of Brussels as the European capital, came from a Frenchman, an impassioned defender of keeping the plenary sessions of the European Parliament in Strasbourg.

Whatever the circumstances, giving these meetings a permanent home in Brussels should make it possible to stabilise the European Council, to rationalise the organisation of its meetings and to reduce costs. The summits of today really bear very little resemblance to the first Summit held in Dublin in 1975. The machine has become enormous and expensive, a burden which some of the future Member States from Eastern Europe are unlikely to be able to afford.

In a spirit of rationalisation, therefore, the Fifteen decided, in Seville in June, to review the way in which these huge media extravaganzas are organised, starting with the Brussels Summit. They decided to reduce the timetable for their work to a single day and to prepare for it more thoroughly, to hold meetings with foreign leaders only in exceptional circumstances, to reduce the size of their national delegations to about 20, and to adopt conclusions which are as concise as possible. We shall be able to judge the results of their efforts on the basis of Thursday evening’s evidence.

[...]

Sabine Verhest