

Interview with Jacques F. Poos: the European Union Troika (Sanem, 16 April 2004)

Source: Interview de Jacques F. Poos / JACQUES F. POOS, Étienne Deschamps, prise de vue : Alexandre Germain.- Sanem: CVCE [Prod.], 16.04.2004. CVCE, Sanem. - VIDEO (00:06:09, Couleur, Son original).

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URL:

http://www.cvce.eu/obj/interview_with_jacques_f_poos_the_european_union_troika_sanem_16_april_2004-en-751c2284-5fd9-4084-bba3-573b70bfd420.html



Last updated: 05/07/2016

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[Étienne Deschamps] The question of the rotating Presidency inevitably raises the question of the Troika, which is not strictly speaking an institution, nor is it well known publicly. Could you tell us something about this Troika: what it is, how it works and what it can achieve?

[Jacques F. Poos] First of all, I need to explain what the Troika is. In the past the Council Presidency was assisted by the outgoing and the subsequent Presidencies. The Troika was often used, and I took part in a lot of missions myself in many parts of the world in that capacity and many in the Near East as well, to set out a joint position that had been established beforehand. I recall the Troika mission made to ex-Yugoslavia in order to explain our policy. We visited all the Republics, which are independent now but which were federal parts of ex-Yugoslavia at the time, in order to tell them: 'Look here. Your emancipation will lead to independence, but you should work towards it whilst observing the rules, through negotiation, by easy stages. We shall help you politically, financially and economically.' We arrived there in a Yugoslav Federation that was in full decline, but they would not see it that way. They were inveterate nationalists who wanted to carve their own part out of the former Yugoslav empire. So that is one example. The Troika goes to a country to explain a joint position and to try to avoid a conflict. And that worked. I have not had any bad experiences associated with the Troika. I was also often the deputy for another Minister, as incoming or outgoing President. We were in the Near East and we explained our position clearly; it is a well established position that dates back to when Gaston Thorn was still the Luxembourg Minister for Foreign Affairs. The Venice position, that of the recognition of Israel by all the Arab countries, the establishment of a Palestinian State and a return to the 1967 borders, was the European position and it remains so to this day. So it cannot be said that we set our sails according to the winds or tides of the moment. No, we hold a position that is consistent and that has its basis in international law and United Nations resolutions.

[Étienne Deschamps] I imagine that there too the success or possible failure of a Troika depends also on personal relations, on contacts between the Ministries of the three countries concerned. How did things take place from day to day between the partners in question?

[Jacques F. Poos] A Troika is always thoroughly prepared at the administrative level by the political leadership of the countries that make up the Troika and by the Commission, which takes part in all the Troikas anyway. You come to an agreement in advance on what is to be announced, on a document that you are going to issue and on what you are going to say to this or that person. This may be different. It was different in ex-Yugoslavia, when we spoke either to Milosevic, to Tudjman or to Izetbegovic. It was basically the same, but to one we said: 'Listen, you had better be careful or you will have sanctions imposed on you.' To another we said: 'Calm down, we have the same aims as you, but you cannot have everything at once.' You had to vary what you were saying somewhat.

[Étienne Deschamps] And did things function well there between the three members of the Troika? Had everything been well prepared beforehand?

[Jacques F. Poos] Yes, we shared out the work. We would say: 'You raise this subject, and then you...' This Troika process ran very smoothly.

[Étienne Deschamps] Was nothing left to chance?

[Jacques F. Poos] There is always an element of improvisation. It depends on the reaction of the person you are addressing. I remember that we had really caught Milosevic out with his dream of a greater Serbia. We told him: 'Look here, this is just not on.'

[Étienne Deschamps] And in circumstances like these, did you have the impression that your interlocutors really took the Troika seriously?

[Jacques F. Poos] They treated us most courteously — even Milosevic, whom I mentioned just now. They always listened politely, but the next day, once we had left, they returned to their former routine. Perhaps not

one hundred per cent so, but they had not changed their fundamental philosophy.