

Interview with Norbert Schwaiger: access to Council documents (Brussels, 22 November 2006)

Source: Interview de Norbert Schwaiger / NORBERT SCHWAIGER, Raquel Valls.- Bruxelles: CVCE [Prod.], 22.11.2006. CVCE, Sanem. - VIDEO (00:03:32, Couleur, Son original).

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Last updated: 05/07/2016

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[Raquel Valls] Regarding this open approach, has the arrival of Scandinavian States had an effect on the policy of transparency?

[Norbert Schwaiger] Yes, of course. It is quite clear ... The catalyst was the risk associated with the ratification of the Treaty on European Union. It is clear, however, that with the arrival notably of the Scandinavian States — for the Austrians were less interested in this — and Sweden in particular, which possessed internal rules that gave, for example, right of access to all official documents, not only to the press, but to every citizen the movement towards transparency was reinforced. An example is what the Swedish delegation, the Government, or the Swedish administration did in their country with Council documents: they considered them as official Swedish documents and submitted them, with a few exceptions, to the same regulations as their internal documents.

At first it was rather shocking for the traditionalists in Brussels, but once transparency was observed, that led to considering access to documents as well. If you look at the results now, in the beginning they wanted to enforce very strict codes and procedures before releasing documents that were quite complicated and quite bureaucratic, but one also has to consider the development of information technology, networks on computers and on the information network.

The first thing, something that helped the public to know what they could ask for where documents are concerned, was to make an inventory of all the documents appearing on the website of the Council and therefore made up the basic information. What exists in one domain? Then, what can I ask for? After that, the procedures could be allowed to take their course. But at the start, people did not know, since the documents had not been published — not even their titles.

So that was absolutely essential; one must therefore take this technological development into account, for it certainly favoured the establishment of transparency by means of information technology. Denmark, which had set up an information policy that was quite open where its own press was concerned — but which was hardly noticed, given that it was conducted in Danish, of course — allied itself somewhat, even very closely, to the Swedish initiatives, which were also shared in large part by Finland.