

Interview with Norbert Schwaiger: transparency in the Council, the media and EU citizens (Brussels, 22 November 2006)

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[Raquel Valls] Do you think that the message that the Council is a central decision-making authority has been understood, or do difficulties still persist?

[Norbert Schwaiger] This is a point that we need to clarify. I think that where the Brussels journalists are concerned, there has never been a problem. The problem lay in the presentation of its achievements, as I have already described. The journalists knew that the decisions were taken there. As for the journalists based in other capital cities, this was perhaps a little less clear. But as for those who came here regularly, they quickly understood that the Council, and the European Council even more so, were the main decision-making bodies of the Community. Thus the problem lies more with the reception and the use of transparency by the average citizen, or with what happens to this transparency where the average citizen is concerned. That is where there exist the same barriers that I have already mentioned: the Member States are the main sources of information for their public, which sometimes means that it is not the Council decision that is given priority, so much as the advantages or the success that a delegation has wrested from Brussels. In other words, these reports, which are aimed at the national audience, do not give priority to the fact of the joint decision, or of the joint legislation, but just to what it means for the country. Even things that have been supported at Brussels are often presented at home with some gnashing of teeth, because they say: 'But what will this involve in terms of work for the administration or national legislature? It is going to change our customs, our procedures, our laws, and so forth.'

So it is certainly a task that is going to take a long time to get finished, if indeed it will ever be. We see, for example, all that has been done on the way for transparency's sake: the access to documents, the public sittings of the Council, the announcement of the voting — however often a vote is taken, and this happens more and more — the publication of statements often made by Member States or by the Commission, the minutes, that is to say the subtle interpretations of the main decision, those too are in the public domain. Each Member State has the right to record its statements, and also to have them published.

All this is used by the journalists, by the lobbyists and by interested parties, but it is not used, or in any case not enough for it to have an effect on public opinion in the Member States or on the average citizen. It may be used by students, but only those who are following a specific course of study. We can say that, up to a point, we have taken the lid off confidentiality, but, where the public is concerned at any rate, transparency has not achieved the success or the results that we had hoped for. But one should not lose hope; one has to go on. Perhaps if certain elements that are still lying dormant in the constitution are activated, this will lead to greater visibility for the Council as a whole, or for its actors — for instance the Presidency, for there too ideas need to change because the current method of a six-monthly rota is not workable with 25 or 27 or more members.

So there is still a long way to go.

[Raquel Valls] Have the journalists that are present in Brussels and work in cooperation with the Council's Press Service still got a role to play in the national media?

[Norbert Schwaiger] Yes, but they are faced with a dilemma. Of course a journalist often has a wealth of information on which he cannot draw, either for lack of space or because he wants to arouse the interest of his reader or of his radio or television audience. With the printed press, it is much easier, if one wishes, to include material that explains the context and scope of a decision for other people, for the community as a whole. It is a lot more difficult — on the radio it is still all right, at any rate with certain information-based broadcasters — but it is a lot more difficult on television. In a two or three minute-long clip you have to limit yourself to what is essential, and this is usually the national interest and how it has been dealt with, and what the correct response to it might be. There are limits at present which, under existing conditions, are difficult to overcome.

In certain Member States one even has the impression that the discussion is increasingly centred on national problems, and that the opening towards Europe, seen as a complement to the national scene, is gradually narrowing.