

Interview with Norbert Schwaiger: the European Council as a media event (Brussels, 22 November 2006)

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[Raquel Valls] The European Council was often described as the media's principal rendez-vous with the European Union. How would you describe the atmosphere prevailing in the press service during the European Councils?

[Norbert Schwaiger] Just a word or two first of all about why it was so attractive, and why it was always growing in number. This was certainly, in large part, the result of the subjects and the role — that I have just described — of the European Council, in drawing towards itself what was essential and, as a result, becoming more and more involved in the dynamics of the Union.

As the European Council moved from one country to another, on each occasion the national press, of course, came along — it was often held in the capital or in attractive locations within the country — so that was one of the reasons that an influx could be counted upon.

The other reason was that the press corps that followed JHA and CFSP Community matters regularly became larger, because the areas with which the Union had started to concern itself affected the lives of individual citizens more and more. One might think that this would have an impact on public opinion. We have already spoken of that.

This also occurred at European Council level. Information was largely nationalised, along the lines that I have described. What is more, there was the media aspect: the growth in interest affected above all the television companies; there were photos, beautiful buildings... For a while it was thought that holding the European Council in the capitals or cities of the Member States would interest the public.

This worked up to a point, because it ensured that the cities were talked about. Their citizens, generally speaking, were pleased that their towns were in the news. Up to the point where it became noticeable that the European Councils were also a forum for demonstrations, not pro-European ones, but rather those against; because there were more and more areas, and this was to some extent the effect of the information policy, where the European Council, or Community action generally, was going against the interests of some at least of the social classes within the Member States, and this was orchestrated.

Things reached the point where, after bad experiences in countries like Sweden, for example, which had been disrupted by these anti-European demonstrations that believed that events in Gothenburg or in Stockholm would be good publicity for them, doubts began to set in. The same thing happened in France, in particular at Nice, where the towns chosen as meeting places became towns caught up in controversy, with demonstrations, tear gas in the streets and so forth.

As a result, at Nice, one of the gimmicks that the President of the European Council offered the Belgians to make up for the gap between the number of their votes and those of the Dutch, was henceforth to hold European Councils mainly, or exclusively, in Brussels. It was supposedly a gift, but it was also certainly one influenced by the experiences accumulated during the preceding two or three years.