

'An end to EU mystery-mongering' from Die Presse (11 October 2006)

Caption: In its edition of 11 October 2006, the Austrian daily newspaper Die Presse reports that, as of November, the majority of the Council of the European Union's meetings may be followed live on the Internet, particularly its deliberations on legislative acts adopted under the codecision procedure.

Source: Die Presse. 11.10.2006. Wien. "Das Ende der EU-Geheimniskrämerei", auteur:Böhm, Wolfgang.

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An end to EU mystery-mongering

By Wolfgang Böhm

Brussels/Vienna. The disputed practice of secret EU meetings is on the way out. When, in the future, the representatives of the 25 EU Member States meet in Brussels to take decisions, they will do so in the public gaze. As from November, the opportunity will be available to all EU citizens to follow most meetings of the EU Council of Ministers live on the Internet.

The new rules in the matter arise out of an initiative from the Austrian EU Presidency. For the EU, this is a way of combating its familiar image as an opaque organisation.

Admittedly, the occasional public session has been held in the past, but, whenever things got exciting, the cameras were switched off. Now, TV crews will be able to film even the most fraught exchanges. And once the session is over, the EU Council homepage will, perhaps uncomfortably, show how each Minister voted. So, for example, a Finance Minister who votes in Brussels for higher duties on tobacco will no longer be able to claim in Vienna that he had nothing to do with it.

Hans Brunmayr, the Council's Director-General for the Media, Communication and Protocol, welcomes this 'major step' towards greater transparency. In this way, the Council, so often berated for its opacity, has at last 'caught up with the European Parliament and its policy of public proceedings'. Brunmayr aims to complete all the technical work over the next three weeks.

What is happening at the moment is simply a practice run. But, as from 1 November, every meeting of the Council convened under the codecision procedure is to be relayed in 20 languages. This is a procedure in which the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament deliberate jointly on new Community legislation. The bulk of EU decisions are covered by this procedure. Where the Council acts alone, without the involvement of Parliament, for example, in matters of external and internal security, there will still be provision for closed sessions. In exchanges with the press, Brunmayr has, however, expressed confidence that, in the future, most debates of this kind will also be held in open session. For any meeting may be broadcast live at the proposal of the Presidency. Such meetings would then remain secret only if a majority of the Ministers voted against the proposal.

Summit meetings stay behind closed doors

In the future, only the discussions of the EU Ambassadors — who prepare many of the ministerial decisions — and of the Union's Heads of Government will be held in closed session. While it is true that measures of a legal nature are not determined at EU summit meetings, issues of principle are nevertheless addressed, and these would also be of interest to the public.

Austria and the Nordic Member States have long been pressing for most ministerial sessions to go public, while the United Kingdom has consistently resisted this degree of transparency. London's worry was that it would no longer be possible to strike political deals. One diplomat put it this way: 'As soon as the cameras are running, the Ministers will think only of their viewers back home.'