

‘Lord of the Rounds’ from the Süddeutsche Zeitung (21 December 2006)

Caption: Published in the German newspaper Süddeutsche Zeitung on 21 December 2006, shortly before the beginning of the German Presidency of the Council of the European Union, this article outlines the daily work of Ambassador Wilhelm Schönfelder and the other officials of the German Permanent Representation to the European Union in the Council’s preparatory bodies, particularly in Coreper.

Source: Süddeutsche Zeitung. 21.12.2006. München. "Der Herr der Runden", auteur:Eckardt, Ann-Kathrin , p. 18.

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Last updated: 02/08/2016

Lord of the Rounds

Turkey, the Constitution, enlargement — what finds its way into the public eye in the EU is only a fraction of the political output from Brussels. Most decisions are taken behind the scenes. An important role in all of this is played by the Permanent Representation of Germany in Brussels and, at its heart, Ambassador Wilhelm Schönfelder. He is Merkel's and Steinmeier's man in Europe. They cannot and will not do without him during the German Presidency. For this reason, he has even had to postpone his retirement.

By Ann-Kathrin Eckardt

For a few months, Wilhelm Schönfelder has been putting in some early-morning physical exercise. Half an hour every day. Consistently. Even after his numerous late nights. It is a must. It is not as if he had put on weight — no, that is not the reason. The real bugbear for the 66-year-old Ambassador is the constant sitting. He used to be a keen sailor, rider and boxer, but, today, he sometimes feels as if he is 'locked up in jail'.

Wilhelm Schönfelder is the German Ambassador in Brussels or, to be more precise, Permanent Representative of the Federal Republic of Germany to the European Union. Unlike the 144 German Embassies, the Permanent Representation in the capital of Europe is a mirror image of the whole Federal Government, a kind of Berlin in miniature. Via the Foreign Office, every government ministry sends civil servants to Brussels. A total of 240 people currently work in the massive sandstone building in rue Jacques de Lalaing. This makes the Permanent Representation in Brussels far and away the largest mission of the Federal Republic in a foreign country.

It is also the most important, for Schönfelder is the only ambassador with the right to play an active part in the legislative process. Every Wednesday, at 10 a.m., he attends a meeting with his 24 EU counterparts in the Council building directly opposite the seat of the European Commission. In the unadorned setting of Room 50.6 on the fifth floor, the Committee of Permanent Representatives, or Coreper, holds its meetings. Ambassadors, specialist advisers and representatives of the Commission and of the Council Secretariat sit at tables arranged in a rectangle, the size of which is about that of a handball court. A second row of green upholstered seats is provided for the *Antici* Group, the members of the Ambassadors' personal staff.

Gone are the days when the top diplomats gathered in intimate surroundings and were served with whisky and cigars after 6 p.m. As membership of the committee has grown, so has the length of its agendas. Since the 1992 Treaty of Maastricht added the common foreign and security policy as well as cooperation in the fields of justice and home affairs to their catalogue of responsibilities, if not before, the Ambassadors' work has come to resemble a veritable discussion marathon. 'We have just had another one of those weeks', Ambassador Schönfelder recounts. 'On Monday, there was the Council of Justice Ministers, on Tuesday, the Ministers of Home Affairs, on Wednesday, Coreper, then Coreper again on Thursday and Friday' — a week spent sitting down.

The Ambassador does, however, share his work with his deputy, Peter Witt. While Witt and his counterparts deal with the Council in six of its nine configurations as Coreper I, in Coreper II Schönfelder and the other EU Ambassadors prepare the monthly meetings of the Foreign Ministers, the Finance Ministers and the Ministers of Justice and Home Affairs. The latest round of meetings produced an all-time record of 104 agenda items.

For all the mammoth rounds of meetings and lack of exercise, Schönfelder's enthusiasm has not waned after seven years in Brussels. 'In the great grey area between officialdom and politics', he says, 'I can be politically very active and prepare many things on my own responsibility. That is extremely interesting.' Nor has this diplomat lost his sense of humour, and even the Austrian and Swiss journalists make sure that they do not miss his press briefings on the eve of Council meetings.

Coreper, which critics often like to describe as a 'secret conclave', is the real hub of the EU. It is part of the complex system of the European Council, which is structured rather like a pyramid: at the base, the experts

from the national representations initially deal with an issue in some 140 Council committees and working parties. They are in constant contact with the Heads of Division in the government ministries in their own countries, which helps to account for the fact that the Permanent Representation is responsible for more than 60 % of the electronic data traffic of the entire diplomatic service in Germany. Matters that cannot be settled by the working parties are passed up to Coreper, which is the next level of the pyramid. Coreper makes most decisions adoptable; in other words, they normally need only be rubber-stamped by the Ministers without debate, whether or not they pertain to the Ministers' own portfolio.

Like all the other Ambassadors, Wilhelm Schönfelder is bound by the instructions of his government, of which he receives about 12 000 from Berlin in the course of a year. They are actually supposed to be with the Ambassador by Tuesday evening, but the final papers often straggle in on Wednesday morning, sometimes even after the start of the meeting. The government's ideas do not always coincide with the Ambassador's views. 'It happens time and again that an Ambassador receives instructions from his capital which are not entirely to his liking', says Schönfelder, and that applies to him, too. 'If someone begins with the words "My instructions are as follows", and goes on to read from a piece of paper, the others know the score. Many a demand from back home is simply impossible to push through here in Brussels.'

Nowhere, in fact, do so many conflicting traditions collide as in the EU. One example is the Working Time Directive: what borders on Communism from a British perspective has been normal practice for many years in France. To date, five attempts to adopt the Working Time Directive have come to grief.

In about 90 % of all issues, however, there is, ultimately, a compromise. 'Our work is a constant exercise in tolerance. It takes a great deal of experience to do the job half-decently', says Schönfelder, who is the doyen of the Permanent Representatives. 'Moreover, tact and sensitivity are needed. It is particularly important for the German representative not to be perceived as the big bully, but he must not let the others take him for a ride, either.' If the Ambassadors cannot reach agreement, the specialist Ministers from the Member States address the issue at their meeting. If they cannot come up with a solution either, the Heads of State or Government have to take a decision at one of their Summits.

Four times a year, Merkel, Chirac, Blair & Co. have the opportunity to do so in Brussels. The Heads of State or Government are always flanked at these meetings by their Permanent Representatives to the EU. Wilhelm Schönfelder and Angela Merkel are already a well-established team, even though Schönfelder is actually regarded as an SPD man. Even when she was still Leader of the Opposition, Mrs Merkel would often call in at the Brussels Representation and spend several hours discussing the major European political issues with him. In response to a request from Mrs Merkel and Frank Walter Steinmeier, the father of two and grandfather of seven has even agreed to postpone his retirement. Berlin had no wish to do without his services during the forthcoming German Council presidency, for Schönfelder, who holds a doctorate in economics and has served in diplomatic posts in such places as Paris, Kabul and Washington, has the greatest and longest European experience of anyone in the German Government. Back in 1988, he was already providing the Foreign Minister of the time, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, with material for his historic Memorandum of 1988.

In the coming six months, Schönfelder will again be the source of fresh political impetus in the EU. Three years ago, he began making preparations for the Presidency with his staff. The Presidency will begin for him on the stroke of midnight at the turn of the year. That is when his Finnish counterpart will hand over the EU crisis-hotline phone, which he must carry with him at all times throughout the next six months. As Schönfelder puts it, 'We have agreed to celebrate New Year's Eve together.'

A more worrying prospect for the Ambassador than the crisis hotline is the calendar of meetings. Schönfelder breaks out in a cold sweat whenever he contemplates the 393 EU gatherings of politicians or senior civil servants that have to be successfully organised during the next six months, for he knows what this means: a lot of sitting.