

spotlight europe

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The Sarkozy Mystery

Joachim Fritz-Vannahme

Bertelsmann Stiftung, joachim.vannahme@bertelsmann.de

The French communal elections in March will be the first test for President Nicolas Sarkozy. The opinion polls show that, despite his initial popularity, Sarkozy's approval ratings are now at their lowest ebb. At the same time the French are preparing the French EU-Presidency of the Council in the second half of 2008. Will France become more European, or will EU policymaking become more French?

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The French presidents of the Fifth Republic have all been actors playing a part on an immense stage. This is especially true of the present incumbent, for Nicolas Sarkozy, more than any of his five predecessors, tries hard to be in the limelight as much as he can. However, the international reviews of his acting career have been devastating. They all give him the thumbs-down, from the British *The Economist* ("The unpopular president"), the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung ("No style and no sense of direction") to *Der Stern* ("Egomaniac in the Elysée") and the harsh Parisian irony of *Le Nouvel Observateur* ("Le Président introuvable" - "The President you just can't find"). And the spectators are not going to be outdone. Whereas an impressive 63 per cent of French interviewees said they trusted him

in June 2007, in February 2008 the TNS Sofres-Le Figaro barometer showed that his approval ratings had plummeted to 41 per cent. Prior to this only Jacques Chirac, who just happened to be rather unpopular, had ratings which were as bad as this.

The president himself may not have been particularly surprised, since at the height of "Sarkomania" last year he had predicted that his popularity would peter out at the latest at the beginning of 2008. And yet the steep decline in his approval ratings is something he needs to think about, especially since the reasons for his predictions back then and for the current situation are not the same.

Sarkozy has lost the support of the French on account of his headline-grabbing pri-

vate life, and not because of his hard-hitting policies. From the time of his separation from his wife, Cécilia, and his wedding with chanson singer and model Carla Bruni in the Elysée Palace, the colourful images of the yellow press (which soon also began to appear elsewhere) supplanted the announcement and introduction of long-overdue reforms. The French like to say (and others like to say it about the French), “le style, c’est l’homme.” The fact is that policymakers in Brussels and in Berlin-Mitte, the centre of German power, do not like Sarkozy’s style. For example, in February *Die Zeit* commented, “The French president likes to go it alone, and for this reason the Germans find him rather irksome.”

There can be no doubt about the fact that Sarkozy’s actions are spectacular and at times rather trying. But does that mean that they are of no importance? After nine months in power the sum total of what he has achieved is actually not that bad, at least in the area of foreign and European



policy, which is the main subject of the present spotlight. However, his achievement becomes debatable as soon as the subject turns to Europe, for Sarkozy has said that he wishes to reconcile France and Europe. It will become apparent below that a price has had to be paid for this.

I

Sarko l’Américain

We will begin with [foreign policy](#). Within a short space of time Nicolas Sarkozy has managed to normalize the strained relationship with George W. Bush and indeed with American policymaking in general. The United States and France “remain true, first and foremost, to the same ideal, the same principles, the same values that have always united them,” Sarkozy declared on 7 November 2007 in a [speech](#) before the U.S. Congress.

It is of course true that each of his predecessors, at least at the beginning of his term in office, said ingratiating things of this kind to his American friends. However, Sarkozy’s emotional appeal came after years of friction between Washington and Paris, and was greeted in Congress with more than respectful applause. Afterwards people called him “Sarkozy l’Américain,” and even if it is a case of in-

termingled stylization and self-stylization, the way in which this particular Frenchman interacts with America is totally different to the approach adopted by his predecessor, Chirac.

Washington also welcomed Sarkozy’s announcement that, after a lapse of forty years, his country would be returning to the military command structure of NATO (it never withdrew from the political activities of the alliance). In the course of the year its contribution in Afghanistan

will increase as a result of the deployment of Rafale warplanes and Leclerc tanks, and in the coming months the aircraft carrier “Charles de Gaulle” will be sent to the Indian Ocean. In the Gulf France intends to establish a new military base manned by 400 servicemen. In Europe the gesture was greeted with a certain amount of derision, though it was welcomed in Washington and in the region itself, where tensions have increased since the Iraq war and as a result of the aggressive policies pursued by Iran and its president, Ahmadinejad. What is primarily a strategic gesture (after all, there are only 400 soldiers), is nonetheless construed in the region as a sign of greater French interest.

At the same time Sarkozy has proposed the establishment of an EU intervention force with 10,000 troops, the participants of which, in addition to France, would be Germany, the United Kingdom, Spain, Italy and Poland. Participation would be linked to a commitment to spend two per cent of GDP on defence, and to join a common defence equipment market. It remains to be seen whether the proposals are feasible, and how they relate to the agreements reached in the Treaty of Lisbon. However, with this move Sarkozy has positioned himself at the spearhead of a common European defence policy—and for the time being this is the whole point and indeed the importance of his announcement.

Nowhere has Sarkozy sought to close ranks with the Americans more than in his policy on Iran. “No nuclear weapon for Iran, an arsenal of sanctions to convince them, negotiations, discussions, firmness. For my part, I don’t use the word war,” the president told the New York Times on 24 September 2007. However, in an interview the French foreign minister, Bernard Kouchner, did in fact allude to the possibility of a war.

Sarkozy’s policies on Iran and Lebanon show that he is edging towards the American and Israeli positions, and that he has shifted away quite noticeably from the

Europeans and their sceptical attitude towards sanctions. At the same time he has pursued a policy of active diplomacy, and has travelled to Arab countries from Algeria to Saudi Arabia, which, for example, he praised in January for lending its support to an “open Islam”.

Sarkozy’s proposals for a Mediterranean Union have not been greeted with a great deal of enthusiasm. He had already mooted the idea during the election campaign, and would like to do something memorable in this area during the French Presidency of the Council. However, there is scepticism about the project among policymakers in Berlin and on the southern rim of the Mediterranean. During the Bertelsmann Stiftung’s Middle East conference in Kronberg, there were frequent comments to the effect that the initiative was “une fausse bonne idée,” a good idea, but wrong. From Morocco to Lebanon it raises suspicions that in this central geopolitical area the EU’s protracted and not particularly successful Mediterranean policy will be subjected to some kind of face-lifting.

“No enthusiasm for a Mediterranean Union in the EU.”

The suggestion was rejected out of hand in Turkey, since at least in the election campaign Sarkozy suggested that he would prefer Ankara to be a member of this Union instead of being given a seat and a vote in Brussels. And initially his German partners were very lukewarm about the idea, since it was construed as a Parisian move designed to play off the south against the east and the Mediterranean against the Black Sea and the Caucasus. Still, the wrong right idea, if it is modified in the right way, may turn out to be a really good idea. Yet everything continues to be in a state of flux. The Paris-based conference on the Mediterranean Union, which is being held shortly before the French national holiday (14 July), may well make an important contribution in this area.

II

Europe – no more than a Union of national interests ?

With regard to European policymaking Nicolas Sarkozy has described quite clearly and indeed in an emphatic manner what he believes needs to be done. “There is no doubt that the French president believes in his idea of Europe, which is above an alliance of national interests,” says Le Monde editorial writer Patrick Jarreau in his book “La droite contre l’exception française.” Published in January 2008, this is to date the most comprehensive and thorough analysis of the current president’s policies. “When he calls on the Europeans to define a fresh identity for their common project, then he does so in order to bury the federal dream which was in evidence at the end of the last century.” Patrick Jarreau believes that this “discontinuity, which was cautiously introduced and has gone virtually unnoticed, is the most radical that Nicolas Sarkozy has yet embarked upon.”

defence policy, an energy policy, an environmental policy.” The Brussels correspondent of Le Monde, Thomas Ferenczi, was taken aback by so much French “presumption.” “Does he really believe that a couple of pro-active speeches, even though they may be very inspired, will suffice to wrap up the negotiations in the nick of time, especially in view of the fact that their great complexity is becoming more apparent to leading European politicians as the months pass by?”

This commentary shows quite clearly how much the forthcoming President of the EU Council is already being viewed with suspicion, not only in Brussels, but also in Berlin and other capitals. It is impossible to ignore his repeated attacks on the strong euro and the interest rate policies of the European Central Bank. It is difficult not to hear him voicing his displeasure about having to adhere to the Maastricht criteria when the French economy is faltering and growth is negligible, and about having to keep public borrowing beneath the 60 per cent GDP mark. In an unforgettable [speech](#) given in Berlin in February 2006, when he was still his country’s

INITIATIVES OF PRESIDENT SARKOZY		
Home Affairs	European Policy	Foreign Policy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Labour Market: prolong working hours, soften job protection, disconnect minimum wage from price index ▪ Pension System: raise statutory retirement age, abolish privileges for employees of rail and state-owned energy companies ▪ Health Care Reform: raise patient’s share of health costs ▪ Slim down public service 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Rejection of Turkey’s accession to the EU ▪ Strengthening of ESDP ▪ Founding of Mediterranean Union ▪ Creation of an EU intervention force with 10.000 soldiers (from the six largest member states) ▪ Common European immigration policy ▪ Protection of „European Champions“ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Normalisation of US-French relationship ▪ Re-entry into military structure of NATO ▪ Strengthening of military engagement in the Gulf and in Afghanistan. ▪ Intensification of Africa Policy

Of course, the way Sarkozy put it at the beginning of January made it sound completely different. “At the end of the French Presidency of the Council I hope that Europe will have an immigration policy, a

Minister of the Interior, Sarkozy praised the way Charles de Gaulle and Konrad Adenauer had worked together. “It was a time when policymaking and action were more important than European theology.

That is why I call upon the Europeans to take action.” Is it possible to construe the phrase “European theology” as an allusion to the philosophy of integration that prevails in Brussels?

Finally, scepticism abounds with regard to Sarkozy’s attitude to the agricultural issue. In fact, during the French Presidency of the EU Council it is here in particular that he will have to show a willingness to compromise if he actually wishes to reform the EU budget in the immediate future. Since France is a net recipient within the agricultural budget, it is legitimate to ask whether it is really going to be prepared to make the necessary sacrifices.

“Scepticism about the French Willingness to deliver an Agricultural Reform.”

Last September, in a speech at a Breton agricultural show, Sarkozy stated that food independence was the top priority of EU agricultural reform. Does that mean protecting the European market by excluding (cheaper) products from the rest of the world? “Within forty years the prices of agricultural products have been halved, but the price of food has sunk by only about 14 per cent,” Sarkozy declared on this occasion. “That is not acceptable, that is an area where the state will have to intervene.” Promoting market forces in the agricultural sector is neither what is uppermost in Sarkozy’s mind, nor is it his guiding principle. Does this mean that the limits of the forthcoming agricultural reform have already been defined?

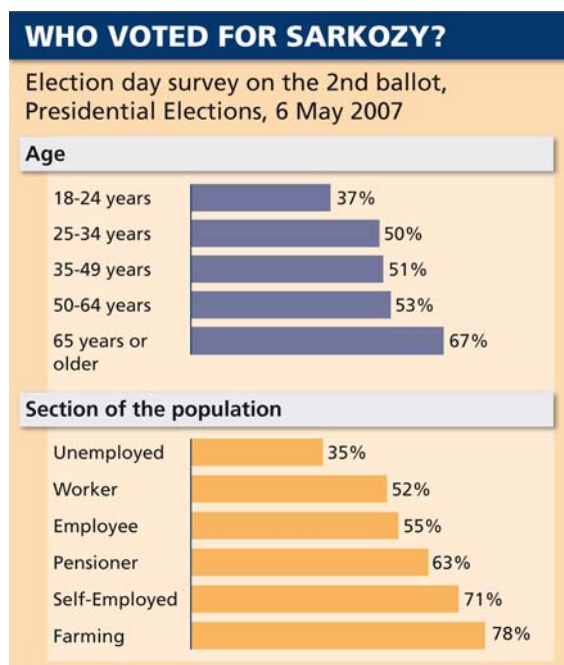


French schizophrenia

France’s partners would certainly like to reach a better understanding of what motivates this particular president. Looking unceasingly at the images of his private life that are being bandied about in public

is not especially helpful in this respect. In 2005 France not only said “non” to the EU constitutional treaty. It also rejected what was deemed to be a liberal or, to use the French jargon, a neo-liberal kind of Europe. In 2007 Sarkozy was elected by voters who think he will pursue liberal economic policies capable of meeting the challenges of globalization, and also by voters who dreamt and continue to dream of a European bulwark against globalization. Taken together, these preferences do not constitute a political philosophy, and in fact merely perpetuate a kind of schizophrenia which French society has displayed from time to time since the very beginnings of the EEC. People live and prosper in and from a free trade zone, but have profound reservations about a market economy.

Before the referendum the opponents of the constitution based their arguments mainly on Part III of the treaty, which to a large extent was a summary of basic texts that had accumulated since the Treaties of



Rome. Last year, in order to ingratiate himself with these critics, the newly elected President proceeded to sacrifice the principle of “free and undistorted competition,” which in the Treaty of Lisbon has been removed from the main text and relegated to a lowly protocol.

As a candidate and after the election Sarkozy repeatedly promised to “bring France back to Europe.” However, to date it has not been a free ride. And as far as Sarkozy is concerned, France has been back in Europe since February, since, as a result of a constitutional amendment, there is now nothing which can prevent the ratification of the Treaty of Lisbon. “Now that Europe can decide, the problem is to know what it wants,” he declared on 10 February in a [television address](#).

France’s EU partners quickly recovered from the shock of seeing the principle of competition banished to the footnotes. It was at most a formality, for in the final analysis the Brussels procedures and the Treaty of Lisbon itself are permeated with the spirit of free and undistorted competition. That of course is not the crux of the matter. Is Sarkozy, who must surely have noticed this alteration, trying to reconcile the French with Europe by giving them small favours of this kind? Or is he really trying to “reconcile” Europe with the French “non”?

If the first happens to be true, then France’s partners and Berlin in particular should exercise restraint, and, despite the various irritations, should in fact try to

help and support the social therapist in the Elysée.

On the other hand, if the second happens to be true, there will not only be a danger of “French presumption.” It may well lead to a reordering and rearrangement of the whole balance of power within the EU, and would make it very difficult for the experienced Franco-German duo to reach agreement, since France would be moving towards British, Dutch, Czech or even Swedish positions. Nicolas Sarkozy’s France would become a leading eurosceptical power.

By the end of the year at the latest, after the conclusion of the French Presidency of the Council, Europe will know what the answer is. Many people will not find it easy to deal with this president, his plethora of ideas, his linguistic agility, and his carefully stage-managed speeches.

However, Sarkozy’s contradictions may also be a reason for hope. As the European debate continues, the Colbertist could once again become a liberal, the protectionist a proponent of free trade, and France’s social therapist a respected leading politician in the EU.

For Further Reading:

Patrick Jarreau: La droite contre l'exception française, Verlag Plon, Paris 2008

Dorothee Schmid: Die Mittelmeerunion – ein neuer französischer Motor für die europäische Mittelmeer-Politik?, DGAPanalyse Frankreich?, Februar 1/2008, Berlin

Alfred Grosser: Sarkozys Außenpolitik - Über Widersprüche und Irritationen, Die Politische Meinung Nr. 456, 01.11.2007

Responsible

Bertelsmann Stiftung
Carl Bertelsmann Straße 256
D-33311 Gütersloh
www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/spotlight

Dr. Dominik Hierlemann
dominik.hierlemann@bertelsmann.de
Telefon +49 5241 81 81537

Joachim Fritz-Vannahme
joachim.vannahme@bertelsmann.de
Telefon +49 5241 81 8142

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