

EuropeanVoice

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More than two cheers for Slovenia

Slovenia was courageous in taking on the presidency of the Council of Ministers. There was a lot riding on its performance, even in terms of EU institutional history. It was the first of the 21st century newcomers to take up the challenge. This was the first time in more than a decade that a new member state has held the presidency. Slovenia was the first post-communist country in the role and the first ever Slavic country. It was also - after a string of large and medium-sized countries - another proving ground for a small member state (and for the new breed of small member states that the EU acquired in 2004).

There was also, as it turned out, more than a fair share of big issues for any EU presidency, marked as it was by collapsing financial markets, spiralling energy and food prices, growing tensions in the western Balkans and with Russia, to say nothing of the hopes - then fears - for the Lisbon treaty.

On the whole, Slovenia deserves congratulation for what it has done. It has had some successes. Its errors have been minor. And it has kept the show on the road. In today's difficult EU climate, that is not a bad record.

Among the successes for which Slovenia can take credit, its ambitious response to the international financial turbulence is one that stands out. The March European Council and an expertly-managed informal meeting of finance ministers in April produced timetables for valuable new measures in cross-border financial market regulation, supervision and co-operation, while the finance minister staunchly defended European Central Bank independence in the face of French attempts to meddle.

It presided over the achievement of an agreement on energy market liberalisation that reconciled EU big-hitters France and Germany. Although Slovenia benefited from much discreet European Commission assistance (not, in any case, an uncommon service to EU presidencies on the most difficult disputes), the deal was done on Slovenia's watch.

In a minor key, the same could be said for the agreements on working time and temporary agency workers, or on the return directive, all of them measures which had for years remained on the table without resolution through successive EU presidencies. They are compromises, and not universally applauded compromises, but they are agreements - and winning agreements is much of what EU presidencies are tasked with.

In foreign affairs the touch was not so sure. A mandate was agreed for negotiations on a new EU-Russia agreement and missions were dispatched to Chad and the Central African Republic, but not directly as a consequence of Slovenian diplomacy. In the grey area of enlargement, accession negotiations crept ahead with Croatia and Turkey while the EU presidency focused intensely on the trouble-spots in the western Balkans. Perhaps counting too much on Slovenia's authority in the region, its bids to win co-operation by concessions have not shown much effect in Serbia, Bosnia or Kosovo.

The weakness of smaller or inexperienced states was perhaps most evident in internal EU power struggles, such as over the visa-waiver negotiations with the US. Slovenia (whose citizens already benefit from the current agreement with the US) did not handle this well on behalf of the other new member states (which do not). And when the Czech Republic went it alone in bilateral negotiations with Washington, Slovenia did not - or could not - rein it in sufficiently, thus diluting EU competence in this area.

As always, the EU remains work in progress. But Slovenia's spell at the head of the table has worked out well in showing - yet again - that the 'big-bang' enlargement was not a terrible mistake and did not leave Europe exposed to mismanagement by incompetent outsiders or a plethora of tiny new member states. That is worth a seven out of ten for any presidency.