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Austria Assumes EU Presidency Service and Working-Time Directives Pose Challenges

For the Red-and-White Striped EU Presidency

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On January 1, 2006, Austria succeeded Britain as President of the European Council, with the Finns set to take the helm when the six-month term expires. During the Presidency, Austrian ministers and civil servants will lead roughly 2,000 meetings both at home and in Brussels. Federal Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel, his Foreign Minister, Ursula Plassnik, and other ministerial colleagues will become the public face of the EU in International Affairs. In conjunction with the Commission, the Parliament and the other 24 Member States, Austria must try to find compromise solutions to outstanding issues.

Despite these challenges, the Presidency will have fewer tasks to master than initially anticipated due to the success of the British Presidency in hammering out a financial framework for the period from 2007 to 2013 and a forged agreement on the chemicals directive known as "Reach", a source of long-standing controversy. Notwithstanding these positive developments, Austria will have to lead some negotiations on the details of the financial framework. The Presidency must also address the outstanding issue of the draft Constitution for Europe. Other major obstacles include the working time directive and the proposed directive on the provision of cross-border services. Solving the ongoing dispute about the working time directive should prove difficult. Under the directive, which dates back to 1993, weekly working times, when averaged out over a four-month period may not exceed 48 hours. The European Parliament and several Member States are now pressing for the removal of a series of derogations which have been in place since the directive's introduction. In return, it is expected that the four-month calculation period will be extended to 12 months. Although opposition to the proposal is led by Britain and the new Member States, it also includes Austria.

Health Policy Goals

The proposed services directive is likely to present an even greater challenge. The main bone of contention as regards this directive, which proposes to regulate cross-border competition in services, is the country of origin principle. Under the proposal, it is envisaged that companies offering their services across the European Union would be subject to the laws operating in their country of origin. Many critics, including a significant number of Member States and MEPs, reject this principle on the grounds that it will increase competition from low-wage economies and intensify the practice of social dumping.

In the area of health policy Austria's priorities will be women's health and the fight against type-2 diabetes. The dramatic increase in the incidence of diabetes, specifically type-2, has pushed the issue to the top of the medical and health policy agendas. A conference on diabetes in Vienna will declare war on the disease. The priorities in the area of women's health are to improve public awareness of endometriosis and to focus on the issue of osteoporosis. In addition, the Austrian Presidency has made a commitment to draw up a comprehensive EU alcohol strategy and adopt the WHO framework convention on tobacco control. More information on the Austrian EU Presidency is available at:

<http://www.eu2006.at/en/>

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