

[Comment] How do you solve a problem like Radio Maria

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EUOBSERVER / BRUSSELS - The European Council meeting later this week is one for the connoisseur. Not only do we have a big issue at stake – the future of the constitutional treaty – we also have major uncertainty about the possibility of agreement among the member states.

The French position is clarified now that Nicolas Sarkozy has been elected president, but the British continue their tradition of turning up at the summit to defend their "red lines". (This from a country that accused others of exercising an "unreasonable veto"!)

Better still, from the bystanders' point of view, is the Polish government. They have truly taken over from the British as Europe's awkward partner. While they will not turn up at the summit with a long list of things to complain about, the single issue they have chosen is one that divides them from all the other member states.

The government of President Lech Kaczynski and his twin brother, and prime minister, Jaroslaw, rejects the "double majority" system for voting in the Council of Ministers, as proposed in the constitutional treaty itself, in favour of a square root system instead.

The first problem with this square root proposal is that it is complicated. The idea behind the constitutional treaty was to make things simpler and easier to understand, not the reverse. The double majority system is simple: for a vote to be passed in the Council, it would require the support of at least 55 per cent of member states representing at least 65 per cent of the Union's population.

It's not easy striking a balance between the different member states when some are very large and others are so small, but double majority does just that. States are represented equally, regardless of size, and citizens are represented equally, regardless of the size of the state they live in. For a union of states and citizens, this is the right approach.

It is much more straightforward than the current system, which was agreed at the Nice summit in 2000. The Nice system has not two ways of counting the votes but three: the states each having one vote; the states having weighted votes, with the larger states having more votes than the smaller ones (but not proportionately so); and a population-based counting as well. Each time a new state joins, there would have to be an intensive negotiation about how many weighted votes it should get. The double majority system removes this problem from the enlargement process.

The Polish proposal would replace the population-based element in the double majority system with a more complicated alternative: the vote for each country is weighted according to the square root of its population rather than the whole population. This would favour smaller states rather than larger ones, in that a member state with twice the population would have only 40 per cent more votes. Germany has twice the population of Poland, which is possibly not an irrelevant point.

But, not only is the square root rule complicated, it is also unnecessary. There are theorists who argue that the square root rule is fairer in that it balances out the interests of the larger and smaller states more evenly, but that calculation neglects the fact that the EU uses a double majority voting system rather than the simple allocation of voting weights. Double majority voting also gives each state one vote, regardless of its size. The additional impact that the square root rule might already taken into account.

The third problem is the behaviour of the Polish government itself. It has gone into this summit declaring "the square root or death". Now, this is not the language of a government in advance of a summit, it is more the language of football fans on the terraces (imagine Lech Kaczynski singing "I'm Legia Warsaw till I die!"). It will make any kind of European agreement that much harder. Why are they doing this?

The answer lies not in European politics but in domestic politics. For example, a substantial amount of influence in Polish politics is wielded by the conservative radio station, Radio Maria. It broadcasts a rather blinkered and nationalist political line, rather than thinking about the impact of these views on other countries. It is entirely unaccountable for the consequences of its proposals for the rest of Europe. Polish politics is following this kind of attitude, rather than leading it towards something different.

The result will be a weakened position at the summit. The whole point of the European Union is that its member states try to find ways of working together in the common interest. It will not work if one member state turns up consciously refusing to work with all the others. That way lies isolation and rejection, which is surely not why Poland joined the European Union in the first place.

Polish politics needs to pander less to entrenched and narrow-minded attitudes and instead engage with the rest of Europe. That is the best way to make the most of EU membership. The British have made this mistake too often in the past themselves: it is sad to see Poland repeating the error.

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