

**COPENHAGEN**

## Danish presidency risks being hoist on its referendum petard

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The 2012 Danish EU Presidency is proving different from its previous presidencies; this time the Presidency's aim is to make Europe more popular at home.

The government in Copenhagen is preparing the Danes for a referendum immediately after the presidency ends in mid-year. Because of the dramatic Danish "No" to the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, Denmark is not only outside the euro but has also opted out of defence co-operation and justice and home affairs. Denmark is a champion at opting out, even though it's an outsider position that doesn't sit well with the pro-European majority of Danish politicians. In 2008, the then prime minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen announced that he would hold a referendum on the opt-outs, but had to cancel all plans when the Irish voted in a referendum against the EU's Constitutional Treaty. The current government of Helle Thorning-Schmidt heads an even more pro-EU coalition of Social Democrats, Social Liberals and Red-Green Socialists that stands ready to give up the country's controversial opt-outs.

A referendum on the euro is still out of the question, with a shrinking minority of only a fifth of Danish voters saying they would vote in favour. But opinion polls show that over 40% of Danes are in favour of giving up the country's reservations on defence and justice and home affairs. The working hypothesis is that the presidency can be used to tell the story of the substantial benefits to be gained from closer integration together with a demonstration of the negative consequences of the opt-outs. The aim, of course, is to make it possible for the governing coalition to win an almost impossible referendum.

But as the economic crisis deepens, the Danish referendum plans may prove difficult to carry through. To win, the government needs success stories from Brussels.

It's a well-known rule of thumb that the country taking on the rotating presidency inherits 85% of the agenda from the previous presidency, with a further 10% decided by crises. This leaves just 5% for policymakers wanting to leave national fingerprints on European legislation. And today the economic crisis is overshadowing all other priorities for Europe, which is particularly unfortunate for the Danish presidency. It takes the attention away from Danish priorities like further development of the internal market. Danish calls for a more ambitious EU climate and energy policy, more focus on research and better environmental protection also do not sit well with Europe's need to make dramatic cuts in public spending. And the crisis isn't exactly appeasing eurosceptics either.

So if the government can't show any major Danish "victories" to its reluctant voters, and if the economic crisis forces a postponement of the referendum, Denmark is likely to remain a quasi-outsider far from the heart of Europe.