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Spain and Poland should stand firm on voting rights

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At Monday's meeting of European Union foreign ministers, Spain and Poland finally accepted the principle of the "double majority" voting system proposed in the new EU constitution. Under this system, proposals before the Council of Ministers, the EU's main legislative body, would pass only if backed by more than half the states comprising 60 per cent of the EU's population. In 2009 this would replace the "Nice formula", which gives the four largest states 29 votes each and Poland and Spain 27 each.

Despite backing the double majority principle, both Spain and Poland want higher thresholds for passing proposals to lessen the resulting weakening of their voting power. The pressure on them to compromise in coming weeks is likely to be intense, as the EU's Irish presidency strives to finalise a constitutional text in time for the June 17-18 Brussels summit. They should stand their ground.

When failure to agree the new voting system led to the constitution not being adopted at last December's Brussels summit, the Poles in particular were accused of selfishness, a failure to understand how the European Union works and intransigence. These charges do not stand up.

The charge of selfishness flowed from the claim that the enlarged Union would suffer decision-making paralysis. The standard way of measuring decision-making efficiency in the Union is the proportion of "winning coalitions" that can pass a measure in the Council. Much is made of calculations that their number has fallen from 7.8 per cent of possible coalitions before enlargement to 2.3 per cent now. Yet there are still 2.7m winning coalitions. And we would not really expect a coalition of just Slovenia and Luxembourg to be able to pass EU laws - but it is by counting combinations such as these that we come up with the alarming statistic just cited.

One possible compromise, mooted by Jack Straw, the British foreign secretary, would have been for member states to reconsider the matter at a "rendezvous" in 2009. If Poland's hesitations over the proposed new system are indeed due to a lack of understanding of how the EU works, it should have remedied that deficit by 2009. Yet this compromise was rejected out of hand by France and Germany, the main proponents of the new system.

In fact Poland's main reason for rejecting the 50/60 double majority is the fear that it will significantly strengthen France and Germany within the Union. With 30 per cent of the EU's population, they will need only to co-opt one large country, or Spain or Poland plus a small country or two to block any measure. Poland views the US as the only serious guarantor of its independence in the face of a resurgent and increasingly autocratic Russia, and fears that Paris and Berlin may try to use the additional power the new system would give them to squeeze the US out of Europe.

The irresponsible way in which Chancellor Gerhard Schroder put electoral considerations before Germany's strategic interest in having the US committed to Europe came as a shock to Warsaw. These worries have been increased by recent Franco-German attempts to pressure new member states into not competing with western Europe on corporate tax, and their apparent commitment to build-up selected companies as Franco-German "European champions".

Another reason for Polish ministers' resistance to Franco-German pressure is their acute sensitivity to political manipulation and bullying. The convention that drafted the proposed constitution and the inter-governmental conference that was supposed to approve it were clearly timed so that accession countries would feel too insecure - out of fear that their accession treaties might not be ratified - to oppose the will of incumbent members. Then came the re-drafting of the European Central Bank's voting system. Here weighting by population - which would have favoured the new members - was excluded in favour of weighting by GDP. The final straw was the ostentatious refusal by France and Germany to abide by the rules of the stability and growth pact just a week before the Brussels summit.

Far from not understanding how Europe works, Poland's post-communist politicians feel they are in a strikingly familiar environment, where the big decide and the small are supposed to shut up. Many living on the periphery of the EU may be forgiven for feeling that Europe needs a change in political culture before introducing a voting system that would give even more power to the two "core" states, especially as France and Germany seem bent on using their power within the Union to protect themselves from change.

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