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Germany: Westerwelle initiates a meeting of the 'group for the future of the European Union'

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Nine European ministers of foreign affairs met on 20 March in Berlin upon invitation from their German counterpart, Guido Westerwelle. The aim of the meeting was to discuss 'the future of the European Union', a more efficient operation of EU institutions, granting them greater democratic legitimacy, coordination of the foreign, security, economic and financial policies of the member states, and also increasing the role of the European Parliament. The German ministry of foreign affairs assured the participants that the meeting was informal and private. The criterion for the selection of the participants is not known. The meeting was attended by the ministers of foreign affairs of Poland, Belgium, Luxembourg, Holland, Italy, Spain, Portugal and Austria. The French foreign minister, Alain Juppé, was absent. He said he could not attend due to the campaign preceding the presidential election. In turn, the Danish foreign minister, Villy Søvndal, whose country now holds the presidency of the European Union, stated that "high priority duties" had prevented him from attending the meeting. The next meeting of this group is to be held in April in Brussels on the occasion of the North Atlantic Council. In turn Michael Spindelegger, the Austrian minister of foreign affairs, made an invitation to Vienna for a further meeting (in May).

Commentary

- This meeting is primarily another element of the communication strategy adopted by the German ministry of foreign affairs to counteract 'increasing Euroscepticism'. At the meeting on 29 February, Guido Westerwelle presented the plan of a campaign aimed at reassuring many Europeans who fear German domination in the EU and to convince them of the benefits resulting from EU membership. This campaign is intended as a response to the accusations that the German government is arrogant, dictates its own ideas for overcoming the crisis and is unwilling to assume a greater responsibility for the future of the common currency. The comprehensive communication strategy was not only to help neutralise Eurosceptic sentiments, which have intensified as the eurozone crisis has deepened in both Germany and other EU member states, but also to raise the awareness of the present and potential benefits of the existence of the EU and to motivate thought about the future of the European Union 'after the crisis'. The meeting in Berlin was intended to prove that Germany feels responsible for the future of the EU and does not want to decide about it by itself.

- The reaction from representatives of the countries which were not invited to the meeting and from the media, and even from some of the ministers who were invited, suggests that these goals have not been met. The Irish and Swedish representatives stated that meetings of this kind did not contribute to building European unity. The behaviour of the French foreign minister was noteworthy, and that of the of Danish especially so. The foreign minister of Luxembourg has also expressed the need to expand the group of the participants of the next meetings. The German ministry of foreign affairs even before the meeting denied suggestions that Germany was trying to build the foundations of a future coalition which would start work on the amendment of the Treaty of Lisbon in order to extend integration, which in fact means creating a political union (which Guido Westerwelle announced during the meeting of the EU foreign ministers in Copenhagen in March).

- Guido Westerwelle's engagement in German European policy issues, which belong to the Chancellor's prerogatives, is proof of his ambition and struggle to regain his position in the FDP and the German government, which has been undermined due to his loss of the party leadership.