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Horsing around in the European Union

By Keith Spicer

PARIS. What have white horses got to do with the future of Europe? In 2008, plenty. For the first six months of this year, Slovenia -- whose town of Lipica is stud-farm home of those dancing Lippizaner steeds of Vienna's Spanish Riding School -- holds the rotating European presidency. In the second half, presidency falls to France, home of cowboy-favoured Camargue stallions that gallop wildly through waves on Mediterranean beaches.

Two white horses, two styles. And each horse portrays perfectly its homeland's diplomatic approach. Tiny Slovenia, with barely two million people and a delightful, unspellable capital (Ljubljana), has launched its presidency with elegant restraint. It hopes to go with the flow of events -- the scariest being, for this fellow-remnant of disintegrated Yugoslavia, Kosovo.

Likely within the current half-year, the 90-percent Albanian majority of this Serbian province will declare its independence. This will enrage Serbs and raise tensions between Russia and the West. Cautiously, Europe will join the U.S. in recognizing Kosovo's sovereignty. Russia, eager to oppose Washington and fearing its own dissident republics, will back its fellow-Slav Serb allies. Slovenia, an EU member only since 2004, will have to coordinate Europe's rag-tag reaction. Low-key, it watches and waits.

Slovenia's presidency inherits three EU mandates. First, it must guide implementation of the Lisbon Treaty recently signed by the EU's 27 members. "Lisbon" simplifies EU voting, and replaces six-month presidency rotations with a two-and-a-half-year presidency. Ljubljana's light hand should execute this vital housekeeping maneuver faultlessly.

Second, Slovenia must implement the "Lisbon Strategy." This, by contrast, is an unwieldy, indeed fanciful, grab-bag of EU goals "making growth and jobs the immediate target... hand in hand with promoting social or environmental objectives." This is Brussels EU fluff so vague that nobody will notice what, if anything, Slovenia does. Just a Lippizaner prance or two, and no more needed for applause.

Finally, in-the-trenches work where Slovenia can shine: "police and judicial cooperation in criminal matters." This is part of the concerted EU "trio" of successive presidencies: Germany, Portugal, Slovenia. Ljubljana need only coast on its predecessors' priorities, discreetly highlighting its own taste for common foreign policy and intercultural dialogue.

After Ljubljana's stately Lippizaners race the wild-charging ponies of the Camargue. Typically, France's astonishing "hyper-president," Nicolas Sarkozy, mounted one of these small horses to draw cameras during his spring 2007 election campaign. The second six months of 2008 will see Sarkozy mark his EU presidency with a mad mini-Valkyrie ride.

France is furiously working even now to prepare its race through the lapping waves. If you watched Sarkozy's dazzling, over-two-hour press conference last Tuesday, you know that "Sarko" will cover the European waterfront. Unavoidable issues: EU institutions, Balkan enlargement and energy-climate issues. But expect him also to stir debate on investment, trade, currency, immigration, terrorism, education, defence, research, his pet idea of a Mediterranean Union, transatlantic relations.

Insiders say Sarkozy includes Canada in his Atlantic vision. This year France will participate whole-heartedly in celebrations for the 400th anniversary of the founding of Quebec City. While accepting Quebec's special place as a French-speaking province, Sarkozy is known to support strongly the unity of Canada.

Sarkozy will of course visit Quebec City. Canada should also try to entice him to Toronto. He could salute English-speaking Canada's bilingual partnership with Quebec, and its economic and cultural dynamism. He could highlight France's rich trade and investments in Canada outside Quebec. Indeed, as Sarkozy delights, he might even bring back a few contracts for France.

But Sarkozy's EU semester will not find all Europe swooning at his feet. His idea-a-minute, damn-the-torpedoes approach frightens stodgier Europeans – as it does many status-quo-loving French. His personal relations with crucial allies German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Britain's Prime Minister Gordon Brown often suggest a Tasmanian Devil dancing with turtles.

Sarko's touchy-feely style and mike-grabbing egotism have deeply offended Frau Merkel. And Brown, the dour (or is it sour?) Scot, sees him as a wayward child who keeps stealing the presbytery's collection-plate. (Still, Brown and Sarkozy will jointly back Tony Blair as Lisbon-era EU president.) Many other Europeans find Sarkozy's mingling of politics, show-biz and soap-opera personal life (*bye-bye* Cécilia, *bonjour* Carla Bruni!) unnerving. Labels like the "bling-bling president," "flashy" and "vulgar" harm Sarkozy's image as a statesman.

This is a huge pity. For this man, with all his colourful faults, is a master politician who not only confounds his enemies – left, right and centre. He is attacking a multitude of problems (he cited 12 key dossiers last week) long mired in French *immobilisme*. His strategic vision, tactical adroitness, imagination, energy, media savvy and shrewd reading of public opinion make his opponents seem dilettantes or dinosaurs. Probably only he can prevent France's decline.

If "Sarko" can shake up Europe as much as he already has France, watch for a memorable year. From Lipica to Port Camargue.