

Face to face

Interview by Zsófia Gyevi

Former Green MEP Frank Schwilke-Hoch works as an independent political analyst and strategist. He recently published the *Stakeholder Directory* – a 900 page print and online directory of who's who and what's where in Brussels

It all started with a midlife crisis in my mid-twenties. The German political landscape at the time was incredibly dull as there were no major differences between the main political parties. As a result, I became one of the founding members of the German Green Party. After becoming a member of a regional parliament, in 1984 I was elected as one of the first Greens in the European Parliament. And since my very first day, I have been fascinated by the cosmopolitan atmosphere in Brussels. I like to think of it as an alchemist's laboratory, where different chemical substances mingle and create something wonderful and new.

As a result of the Greens' rotating system, I left the Parliament and went on to work for the EU office of Greenpeace as its regional director. In the early 1990s, I was put in charge of the European Commission's Environmental Awareness Raising project with Members of Parliament. I travelled throughout the former Soviet Union and Mongolia in order to bring these countries into European environmental structures, and I convinced many an MP to ratify the 1998 Aarhus Convention on access to environmental information, even before any of the EU countries did.

Afterwards, I set up a consultancy with Silvana Koch-Mehrin who is now Vice-President of the Parliament, but I soon got fed up with hierarchical structures, and decided that from then on, I would only do the things I could do alone and the things I really like to do. Today, as an independent political analyst and strategist, I work as a guest lecturer at universities, advise governments, NGOs and companies, organise events, and meet those who need guidance in their professional lives. I love that people have such confidence in me, and I'm always happy to use my experience to help.

The same idea triggered the *Stakeholder Directory*. I knew a lot of people in Brussels, and it makes my life so much easier. But then I started thinking: "Why should I be the only one benefiting from this knowledge?" and so I



compiled the *Stakeholder Directory* which is enormously useful for anybody working in the city.

And there is something else I've been doing to help professionals. Some twenty years ago, I discovered that Brussels is full of nice, intelligent and innovative people, but somehow they are too polite to approach one another – even in the elevator they don't speak to each other. So I set up mostly networking dinners called International Soirées. As for whom to invite, I'm like a cook looking for the right ingredients. I balance the number of men and women, politicians and artists until I achieve the right composition. There are a few conditions though. First of all, guests have to come alone because if they know someone, then they tend to gravitate towards that person, which isn't the idea here. Another rule is that guests have to swap tables every thirty minutes. And finally, each guest is expected to pay according to their financial means: sobankers pay more than interns. Professional cooperation, friendships, and even love affairs are said to have started at my Soirées.

How do I know all these people? I simply want to replicate the feeling I had on Christmas

Even when I was twelve. I was so happy because not only did I receive a lot of gifts, but because of my pocket money, I was also able to give presents to others. And today, it feels like meeting people everyday is like Christmas, because for me, every human contact is like an exchange of gifts. And like with all gifts, not all of them are 'top gifts', but the idea is to appreciate them, and then you are free to do whatever you want. No strings attached. You can love them, you can forget them, you can throw them away, or you can pass them on to somebody else. But every morning, I feel as if I am leaving my house with a big bag full of gifts on my shoulder, and every evening I return home with a bag of gifts that I got in return. This is my notion of human contact.

For more information on the *Stakeholder Directory*, or to buy a copy, visit www.stakeholder.eu

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