

EU-27 WATCH



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On the project

Due to the new treaty provisions of the Lisbon Treaty and the economic crises the enlarged EU of 27 member states is on the search for a new modus operandi while also continuing membership talks with candidate countries. The EU-27 Watch project is mapping out discourses on these and more issues in European policies all over Europe. Research institutes from all 27 member states and the four candidate countries give overviews on the discourses in their respective countries.

The reports focus on a **reporting period from December 2009 until May 2010**. This survey was conducted on the basis of a questionnaire that has been elaborated in March and April 2010. Most of the 31 reports were delivered in May 2010. This issue and all previous issues are available on the EU-27 Watch website: www.EU-27Watch.org.

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Austria**New institutions and instruments introduced by the Lisbon Treaty and the view from Austria**

Hakan Akbulut*

When Herman Van Rompuy and Catherine Ashton were respectively nominated as the President of the European Council and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Chancellor Werner Faymann seemed to be content with the staffing while the press generally described the nominations as the least common denominator. Herman Van Rompuy's role in Belgian politics as a conciliator was the only positive aspect to be mentioned. Overall, Van Rompuy's nomination was understood to constitute a safeguard installed by the member states against Brussels playing a greater role or usurping the competences of the nation states. Reflecting this point of view, Die Presse columnist Oliver Grimm, for instance, maintained that Van Rompuy had "secretly, calmly and quietly"¹ taken decisions in his first 100 days in office which would result in the Commission being down-graded into a form of a secretariat-general while real power is transferred to the heads of state and government. As for his performance in the face of the economic crisis, Van Rompuy was criticised by leading figures. During a debate on TV, the President of the Austrian Federal Economic Chamber, Christoph Leitl, claimed that one did not hear anything from Van Rompuy despite the crisis.² In a similar fashion, former Foreign Minister Ursula Plassnik also maintained Van Rompuy should have played a more prominent and visible role. With regard to the role to be played by the rotating council presidency, there are apparently no major changes expected, as Van Rompuy's role is conceived to be limited to acting as a chairperson and conciliator during summit meetings at best. Against this background, it is worth mentioning that Foreign Minister Spindelegger sharply criticised the decision to exclude the foreign ministers from summit meetings.³

As for Catherine Ashton, except for Chancellor Faymann's positive remarks, she was widely described as an inexperienced no-name.⁴ Ashton was criticised by Foreign Minister Spindelegger after the Cordoba meeting of the foreign ministers in March 2010. The Minister argued there was no visible foreign policy line and that no respective coordination on a common policy existed.⁵ Spindelegger confirmed that there was dissatisfaction with the performance of Ashton so far and that the foreign ministers were frustrated about not being included in the process of setting up the European External Action Service (EEAS). He did not seem to be content with Ashton being the Vice-President of the Commission either, raising the question as to how this would affect her workload and stating that members of the Commission might be tempted to prevent competences from being transferred to the EEAS. Media reports also indicated that Ashton's unpopularity was partly due to the impression that she was being excessively influenced by Barroso instead of pursuing independent policies.⁶ Ashton's performance was also severely criticised by the Member of the European Parliament (MEP) Andreas Mølzer from the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ).⁷ Due to Ashton, the EU had said farewell to world politics, Mølzer claimed. He simply described Ashton as the wrong choice.

As mentioned above, Foreign Minister Spindelegger stated, after the Cordoba meeting, that the foreign ministers were frustrated about not being included in the process of setting up the EEAS.⁸ The day before the proposal on the EEAS was presented, during a parliamentary committee meeting, Spindelegger maintained that he fully supported the idea of the EEAS. He also supported the structure proposed in the draft put forward by Ashton. Nevertheless, there existed a number of questions that had to be solved, he added.⁹ In his view, the EEAS could only be successful if the personnel from the member states were represented at all levels in due proportion and could participate on equal footing. He added that, in cooperation with other member states, progress had been made on the question of a geographically balanced staffing as well as on the training of the diplomats. Moreover, having German as an official and working language was also significant (a demand also supported by Austrian MEPs such as Strasser and Mølzer). When the foreign ministers achieved an agreement on the structure and the responsibilities of the EEAS in April 2010, former Foreign Minister Ursula Plassnik asserted that all Austrian demands had been met.¹⁰ She praised the adoption of German as an official language and the acceptance of consular protection as one of the responsibilities of the EEAS offices.¹¹ Spindelegger also praised the EEAS and referred to crisis management and consular protection as major issues that should be of concern to the EEAS.¹²

* Austrian Institute for International Affairs.

Questionnaire for EU-27 Watch, No. 9

Reporting period December 2009 until May 2010 – Deadline for country reports 21 May

All questions refer to the position/assessment of your country's government, opposition, political parties, civil society organisations, pressure groups, press/media, and public opinion. Please name sources wherever possible!

1. Implementation of the Lisbon Treaty

On the 1 December 2009 the EU-reform ended with the entering into force of the Lisbon Treaty. However, the new treaty provisions still have to be implemented. Some procedures and conditions have to be determined. In other cases, procedures, power relations, and decision-making mechanisms will change due to the new provisions.

- How is the work of the new President of the European Council, Herman Van Rompuy, assessed in your country? Which changes to the role of the rotating council presidency are expected?
- How is the work of the new High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Catherine Ashton, assessed in your country? Please take into particular consideration both her role within the European Commission and her relationship to the Council of the European Union.
- On 25 March 2010 a "Proposal for a Council Decision establishing the organisation and functioning of the European External Action Service" was presented. How is this concept perceived in your country? Which alternatives are discussed?
- On 31 March 2010 the European Commission presented a proposal defining the rules and procedures for the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI). What are the expectations for the ECI in your country? What are the various positions concerning the rules and procedures?

2. Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy

The European Commission has given its opinion on Iceland's application for EU-membership and a decision from the Council is expected before the end of June. Croatia seems to have settled its border dispute with Slovenia. Against this background:

- Which countries does your country expect to become members of the European Union in the next enlargement round? What are the opinions in your country on the membership of these countries?
- How are the membership perspectives of those countries discussed, which are not expected to become a member in the next enlargement round?

The Eastern Partnership and the Union for the Mediterranean were the last major projects dealing with the European neighbourhood:

- How are these projects assessed in your country?

3. European economic policy and the financial and economic crisis

The European Council agreed on 25/26 March on the key elements of the Europe 2020 strategy, the successor of the Lisbon strategy. While not being on the formal agenda the economic and financial situation in Greece was discussed. The European Council agreed on a finance package combining bilateral loans from the eurozone and financing through the International Monetary Fund.

- How is the finance package for Greece assessed in your country? Are there any opinions on the process, how the agreement on the package was reached?
- Which lessons should be drawn from the Greek case for a reform of the Stability and Growth Pact?
- How is the idea of "a strong coordination of economic policies in Europe" perceived in your country? What concepts of an European economic governance are discussed in your country and which role do they assign to the Euro group?
- How is the Europe 2020 strategy discussed in your country? What are the priorities for the Europe 2020 strategy from your country's perspective?

4. Climate and energy policy

The climate conference in Copenhagen took note of the Copenhagen Accord but did not reach a binding agreement. The next conference of the parties (COP 16 & CMP 6) will take place at the end of November 2010.

- How is the Copenhagen conference assessed in your country? Please take into consideration the negotiation strategy of European Union and the results of the conference.
- Does the European Union need to change its own energy and climate policy in order to give a new impulse to the international negotiations?
- Is a global agreement within the UNFCCC the best strategy to fight climate change? If not, which alternative strategy should the European Union follow?
- What is your country's position on financing mitigation and adaptation efforts in developing countries?

5. Current issues and discourses in your country

Which other topics and discourses are highly salient in your country but not covered by this questionnaire?