

# EU-27 WATCH



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# 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](http://www.EU-27Watch.org).

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**Belgium**
**Herman Van Rompuy: a threat for Belgium but an opportunity for Europe**

 Nathalie Brack and Régis Dandoy\*
 

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The nomination of Herman Van Rompuy had a direct impact on the Belgian federal government: Van Rompuy was Belgian Prime Minister at the time of his appointment. This event occurred in a politically sensitive environment, as the country's federal level witnessed a recent cabinet instability (Van Rompuy was the third Prime Minister in less than two years), and focused on the never-ending community conflict between Flemish- and French-speaking parties. This nomination opened a new period of political uncertainty in Belgium with consultations and negotiations between the King and the main parties. An agreement was reached after a few days and Yves Leterme replaced Van Rompuy at the head of government on 25 November 2009. Nonetheless, the government was discharged of the recurrent Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde (BHV) issue,<sup>1</sup> and a royal negotiator, the former Prime Minister Jean-Luc Dehaene, was appointed. This BHV issue and the failure of Dehaene would finally lead to the complete fall of the federal cabinet in April 2010.<sup>2</sup> As a result, the nomination of Van Rompuy, which managed to put the linguistic divide in Belgium on hold during his term as Prime Minister, was unanimously assessed as "a bad thing for Belgium but a good thing for Europe."<sup>3</sup> Van Rompuy himself sees, in his nomination, recognition for Belgium that, as a founding nation, was incessantly dedicated to the building of Europe.<sup>4</sup> He is a respected actor in the Belgian political arena, even by his political opponents. But the main criticism against Van Rompuy came from abroad, as in the case of the British Member of European Parliament (MEP) Nigel Farage, who publicly criticised his lack of charisma and even his "look".<sup>5</sup>

Regarding the political role attributed to Van Rompuy within the EU institutional framework, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Steven Vanackere, declared that Belgium will act in perfect conformity with the new reality issued by the entering into force of the Lisbon Treaty, and that the country will assist Herman Van Rompuy and Catherine Ashton as much as possible.<sup>6</sup> In addition, the focus will be put on the European Parliament. Considering its increased role since the Lisbon Treaty, a continuous dialogue will be initiated, and it will become a direct interlocutor of Belgium during its Presidency. Nonetheless, the State Secretary for European Affairs, Olivier Chastel, stresses the fact that rotating presidencies will not be much affected by the Lisbon Treaty as, compared to the last Belgian Presidency in 2001, the EU now counts 27 member states, and new competences have been attributed to the European level, which complicate the decision-making process.<sup>7</sup> In the framework of the Belgian Presidency starting on 1 July 2010, the situation of a combination of the President of the European Council and the rotating presidency belonging to the same country (and, in some cases, to the same political parties, among which that of current Prime Minister, Yves Leterme) may either lead to a more effective and coherent presidency or to the domination of one presidency over the other.

*Catherine Ashton: some doubts about her ability to strike a balance between her two institutional functions*

The function currently occupied by Catherine Ashton was strongly defended by Belgium during the negotiations of the Lisbon Treaty, as its primary purpose is to bring more coherence and visibility to EU external action.<sup>8</sup> However, the first months of Catherine Ashton's term were seen as rather disappointing in the opinion of Belgian politicians, as she was not yet able to make the EU an important player in world politics, especially during the Haiti crisis.<sup>9</sup>

Catherine Ashton received much attention during the period between her nomination and her audition in the European Parliament. Several elements were stressed in that respect, by the media as well as by Belgian politicians. On the positive side, the fact that she is a woman was considered an encouraging development in EU politics, which are mainly dominated by males. It was also said that the strategy of the United Kingdom, through its achievement in making Ashton High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, was positive: it would reinforce the role of the country within Europe and would hopefully build a bridge between the United Kingdom and continental Europe.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, the fact that she was never elected and has no major political achievement on her CV was frequently put forward. Her lack of charisma was considered both as a positive and a negative element: although some other candidates, such as David Milliband, would

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have been preferred in Belgium, at least her personality would not overshadow the action of the President of the Commission, which is an important point for EU federalists in Belgium.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, her audition in the European Parliament was widely considered disappointing: she was described as lacking vision and clear objectives. The Belgian MEPs weren't satisfied with her audition and thought that, although her general presentation was good, she did not show enough knowledge on precise, concrete and key issues in international politics, but rather the way she would manage her double institutional role as part of both the Council and the Commission.<sup>12</sup>

#### *The European External Action Service: between intergovernmentalism and community method*

In general, the establishment of the European External Action Service (EEAS) was positively perceived in Belgium, as it should allow Europe to speak with one voice in the world. Nevertheless, some worries were expressed. First of all, it was highlighted that the new system is neither simpler nor more transparent. Contrary to expectations, the institutions are still very complicated, and the whole structure resembles a marble cake.<sup>13</sup> Some Belgian Members of Parliament (MPs) criticised the numerous EU spokespersons at the international level, but the Belgian Minister for Foreign Affairs, Steven Vanackere, argued that it is of the utmost importance that the EU speaks with one voice in international politics, no matter how many spokespersons it has.<sup>14</sup>

Second, with the new structure from the Lisbon Treaty, there were some doubts and concerns about the role of national foreign ministers. Indeed, with the new institutional framework, it seems that they will be in the shadow of the EEAS and are currently looking for a new role to play and a new place in that framework.<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, the concerns expressed on the balance Catherine Ashton has to strike between the Commission and the Council in the management of EU foreign policy were further reinforced by the doubts concerning the plans on the setting up of the EEAS. Indeed, this service was mainly presented as burdensome, composed of up to 8,000 people, diplomats from the member states, and European agents from the Commission and could experience tensions between the intergovernmental and the supranational sides of the European project. According to the media, potential conflicts could arise between national diplomats, who tend to think that European agents lack political spirit, and EU "fonctionnaires", who tend to see diplomats as too "national-oriented". Journalists also pointed out the tensions between EU institutions and member states concerning the EEAS. The first round was won by the member states, as they seemed to be the driving force behind the nominations of the chiefs of EU delegations, but they tend to compete among themselves for the jobs within the EEAS. The common divide between small and large member states reappeared: the latter wanting to have the most important posts and the former fearing having nothing left.<sup>16</sup>

As far as the Belgian political elite are concerned, the Minister for Foreign Affairs insisted on the rapid establishment of the EEAS, declared to be in favour of single representation of the EU and, therefore, accepted to assign the entire external affairs responsibilities to the EU delegations.<sup>17</sup> Belgium will thus send "good diplomats" and "good Europeans" to the EEAS, i.e., people who will be loyal to their new function in Europe.<sup>18</sup> However, he remains cautious of the recent decisions of the Commission and, more particularly, of Catherine Ashton concerning the EEAS. He insisted on the importance of the community method, by which he means that EU foreign affairs should be based on mutual trust and understanding between the EU institutions and the member states. Therefore, he argues that Catherine Ashton should be seconded by vice-secretaries, similar to the US model, and that there should be an exchange of reports and information between the EEAS and the member states' administrations. Finally, he insisted on the necessary cooperation with the European Parliament, as this institution received new powers in Common Foreign and Security Policy.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, the establishment of the EEAS will have an impact on Belgian diplomacy: both the Prime Minister, Yves Leterme, and the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Steven Vanackere, stressed the fact that Belgium, as a small country, should express the common European point of view in international politics and therefore asked the Belgian diplomats all over the world to focus on economic issues as the political themes, which will be dealt with by the new EU service.<sup>20</sup>

#### *European Citizens' Initiative*

This initiative did not get much attention in the Belgian political scene. The Minister for Foreign Affairs Steven Vanackere and the State Secretary for European Affairs Olivier Chastel declared that Belgium

will cooperate “in a constructive way” in order to shape the European Citizens’ Initiative.<sup>21</sup> This issue has also been the topic of the bilateral discussions between Olivier Chastel and his European affairs colleagues on 10 May 2010 (among whom are the state secretaries of Portugal and Slovenia).<sup>22</sup> He confirmed that the Belgian Presidency, starting on 1 July 2010, will pay particular attention to the final establishment of the European Citizens’ Initiative.

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<sup>1</sup> The Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde issue deals with the definition borders of an electoral district around Brussels. This issue that is mostly symbolic strongly divides Flemish and French-speaking parties as the former want the split of the district in a unilingual Flemish district (Halle-Vilvoorde) and a bilingual one (Brussels) while the latter prefer the status quo, i.e., a common district for both Brussels and peripheral Flemish cities.

<sup>2</sup> See the Belgian chapter on current issues and discourses.

<sup>3</sup> VRT Radio, Interview of Marianne Thyssen (Party president of Herman Van Rompuy), 3 November 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Herman Van Rompuy: Een eer en een erkenning voor België, speech, De Morgen, 20 November 2009.

<sup>5</sup> De Morgen: Britse eurohater scheldt Van Rompuy de huid vol, 24 February 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Meeting between Steven Vanackere and Olivier Chastel with a delegation of the AFCO (Committee on Constitutional Affairs) of the European Parliament, 11 May 2010; Meeting between Olivier Chastel with the European Affairs ministers, press release, 10 May 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Parliamentary discussion on the 2010 Federal state budget, doc. 52 2222/05, 19 December 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Report on the priorities of the Belgian EU Presidency, Senate and House of Representatives, 9 February 2010, doc. n° 4-1606/3 (Sénat).

<sup>9</sup> Report on the priorities of the Belgian EU Presidency, Senate and House of Representatives, 17 March 2010, doc. n° 4-1606/6 (Sénat).

<sup>10</sup> Le Soir, 20 November 2009, available at: [www.lesoir.be](http://www.lesoir.be) (last access: 8 May 2010).

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Jean-Luc Dehaene, Knack, 25 November 2009, available at: [www.knack.be](http://www.knack.be) (last access: 7 May 2010).

<sup>12</sup> La Libre Belgique, 9 March 2010; La Libre Belgique, 1 January 2010, both available at: [www.lalibre.be](http://www.lalibre.be) (last access: 9 May 2010); Le Soir, 12 January 2010, available at: [www.lesoir.be](http://www.lesoir.be) (last access: 8 May 2010); De Morgen, 11 January 2010, available at: [www.demorgen.be](http://www.demorgen.be) (last access: 8 May 2010).

<sup>13</sup> Le Soir, 27 December 2009, available at: [www.lesoir.be](http://www.lesoir.be) (last access: 8 May 2010).

<sup>14</sup> Report on the priorities of the Belgian EU Presidency, Senate and House of Representatives, 17 March 2010, doc. n° 4-1606/6 (Sénat).

<sup>15</sup> Le Soir, 6 March 2010; Le Soir, 14 March 2010, both available at: [www.lesoir.be](http://www.lesoir.be) (last access: 8 May 2010).

<sup>16</sup> Le Soir, 27 April 2010, available at: [www.lesoir.be](http://www.lesoir.be) (last access: 8 May 2010).

<sup>17</sup> Declaration of Steven Vanackere, La Libre Belgique, 5 March 2010, available at: [www.lalibre.be](http://www.lalibre.be) (last access: 9 May 2010).

<sup>18</sup> Declaration of the Belgian Minister for Foreign Affairs, 6 March 2010.

<sup>19</sup> Le Soir, 8 March 2010; Le Soir, 27 April 2010, both available at: [www.lesoir.be](http://www.lesoir.be) (last access: 8 May 2010); La Libre Belgique, 5 March 2010, available at: [www.lalibre.be](http://www.lalibre.be) (last access: 9 May 2010).

<sup>20</sup> De Standaard, 8 April 2010, available at: [www.standaard.be](http://www.standaard.be) (last access: 6 May 2010).

<sup>21</sup> Meeting of Steven Vanackere and Olivier Chastel with a delegation of the AFCO (Committee on Constitutional Affairs) of the European Parliament, press release, 11 May 2010.

<sup>22</sup> Meeting of Olivier Chastel with the European Affairs ministers, press release, 10 May 2010.

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## Belgium

### A priority of low salience

Nathalie Brack\*

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Although enlargement is one of the five priorities of the Belgian Presidency, it was not much discussed during the reporting period. During its Presidency, Belgium intends to be an “honest broker”, i.e., by trying to find a consensus on enlargement and by trying to accelerate the rhythm of domestic reforms within candidate countries in matters such as democracy and peace.<sup>1</sup>

In general, the position of Belgium is that each candidate should respect the EU criteria and all should be treated equitably on the basis of their own merits by the EU institutions.

The next enlargement round is expected to be composed of Croatia and Iceland. The former is considered as having made good progress in terms of implementing the *acquis communautaire* and the latter already respects all the political criteria, but faces an economic crisis.<sup>2</sup>

Concerning the other candidate countries, the Belgian Prime Minister declared that the Balkans' future resides in the European Union and that all those countries should, in the long run, enter the EU. He argued that for Serbia it would be a long run process, especially because it first has to solve the issue of Kosovo's recognition. He promised that Belgium would try to find a consensus by the end of 2010 to grant Montenegro the status of candidate country, but stressed that it is very important, for Montenegro but also for Albania, to implement important reforms and respect the conditions for EU adhesion. He also insisted on the importance, for the stability and integration of the Balkans, that Kosovo one day become a member of the EU, although, for the above-mentioned countries, it would take time and no timeline was set.<sup>3</sup>

Belgium will encourage the pursuit of the reforms in Turkey but all candidates should meet the required criteria in terms of *acquis communautaire*, good governance and human rights. If this proves to be impossible, a *sui generis* form of collaboration will be necessary.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, as far as the Eastern Partnership is concerned, Belgium stressed its importance in the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy. The Secretary of State for European Affairs, Olivier Chastel, highlighted the large potential of this partnership both for the European Union and the partner countries (Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia), and declared that Belgium is ready to envisage offering help or expertise in specific domains in order to ensure a successful implementation of the Eastern Partnership.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Report on the priorities of the Belgian EU Presidency, Senate and House of Representatives, 17 March 2010, doc. n° 4-1606/6 (Sénat).

<sup>2</sup> De Morgen, 24 February 2010, available at: [www.demorgen.be](http://www.demorgen.be) (last access: 8 May 2010).

<sup>3</sup> De Standaard, 17 February 2010, available at: [www.standaard.be](http://www.standaard.be) (last access: 6 May 2010); De Morgen, 21 December 2009; De Morgen, 16 February 2010; De Morgen, 9 March 2010, all available at: [www.demorgen.be](http://www.demorgen.be) (last access: 8 May 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Report on the priorities of the Belgian EU Presidency, Senate and House of Representatives, 17 March 2010, doc. n° 4-1606/6 (Sénat); De Morgen, 21 December 2009, available at: [www.demorgen.be](http://www.demorgen.be) (last access: 8 May 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Olivier Chastel réaffirme la position de la Belgique à propos du partenariat oriental, press release, 2 March 2010, available at: <http://diplomatie.belgium.be> (last access: 20 May 2010).

**Belgium****Economic policy: more coordination, more solidarity**

Régis Dandoy\*

*Greek crisis: an almost unconditional solidarity*

Belgium largely agreed to contribute to the European effort to financially sustain Greece, and very few political parties expressed their opposition. The Belgian aid will take the form of coordinated bilateral loans and will constitute 3.58 percent of the global effort. The Minister of Finances, Didier Reynders, assessed the Belgian contribution to 1,074 billion Euros.<sup>1</sup> But although Belgium's solidarity with the Greek people and government was not much discussed,<sup>2</sup> there is a concern that this contribution would have a significant impact on the Belgian public debt (which is estimated to be about 109 percent of Gross Domestic Product in 2013). The fear, shared by many political parties, is that Belgium itself would be in the same situation as Greece, because of the important public debt and the current political and institutional crisis. The federal government and particularly the Minister of Budget, Guy Vanhengel, restored confidence claiming that the Greek and Belgian public debts and economies are very different, as economic growth is larger in Belgium and its unemployment rate is smaller than Greece's.<sup>3</sup>

Much criticism was voiced in Belgium against the decision-making process at the EU level. For example, the former Prime Minister and current Member European Parliament, Guy Verhofstadt, criticised the slow decision-making process and European cacophony, as well as the overly long discussions on the way to solving this problem.<sup>4</sup> This position is shared by many other actors, who complained about the delayed reaction from EU institutions that deteriorated the situation in Greece, and many Members of Parliament, among others from the majority, Hendrik Bogaert (Christian Democratic and Flemish – CD&V) and Jean-Jacques Flahaux (Reformist Movement – MR), accused Germany for being responsible for this delay.<sup>5</sup> Belgium is, in fact, divided towards the German position in this regard. Many politicians criticised the doubts expressed by Angela Merkel – among them the Prime Minister, Yves Leterme, who publicly denounced the lack of responsibility displayed by Germany.<sup>6</sup>

*A reinforced economic governance*

There has not been much discussion on the eventual reform of the EU's economic policies and institutions, partly because the main political actors focused their attention on the political and institutional crisis at the federal level. Nonetheless, some political actors drew conclusions from the Greek case and stressed the need to review some of the processes. Even without making any substantive proposal, the Minister of Finance, Didier Reynders, thinks that the monetary pillar (that is linked to the policy of the European Central Bank) and the budgetary and economic pillar (still based on intergovernmental coordination) should both be better integrated. He is also in favour of the installation of a new subsidiary of the European Investment Bank, which could intervene in matters regarding the financial problems of member states.<sup>7</sup> According to Guy Verhofstadt, a new mechanism is needed at the European level, combining three elements: the creation of a European Monetary Fund, which would be controlled by the European Commission, the creation of a Euro Bond Market, and the development of a real economic pillar and strategy in the Eurozone. In addition, the European Commission should be given a real leadership and orientation capacity regarding the economic governance.<sup>8</sup>

*Europe 2020: the lack of a social Europe*

The main criticism that was addressed to the Europe 2020 Strategy is the lack of a real social pillar. Poverty should indeed become one of the main targets, but a social Europe should encompass other dimensions, such as strong social security, an inclusive labour market, a decent minimum salary and access to quality services.<sup>9</sup> In addition, the current poverty indicator should be completely revised and enlarged. As Belgium will hold the rotating presidency of the EU starting on 1 July 2010, poverty will be one of its transversal priorities by creating an authentic partnership with the field actors. Guy Verhofstadt also criticises the Europe 2020 Strategy that, in his eyes, is merely a new packaging of

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the “old” Lisbon Strategy. He predicts that this initiative of open coordination, based on good practices and peer pressure, will not lead to more success than previous initiatives.<sup>10</sup>

In the framework of the Europe 2020 Strategy, a Belgian version of this strategy was set up: the so-called BE 2020. An agreement was reached by the federal, regional and community governments on the priorities that Belgium will put forward as its contribution to the European ambitions: a competitive industrial policy; an innovative digital society; climate, energy and mobility; employment and formation; social cohesion; and the fight against poverty.<sup>11</sup> A support committee of the Lisbon Strategy was set up for the monitoring and execution of these priorities in the framework of the Europe 2020 and BE 2020 strategies. More accurate objectives will be jointly defined by the different governments by the end of June 2010.

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<sup>1</sup> De Morgen: België bereid bij te dragen aan Europese lening Griekenland, 16 March 2010.

<sup>2</sup> The eurosceptic movements “No Euro for the Greeks” that appeared in several countries were denounced by all Belgian parties.

<sup>3</sup> Finance and Budget Committee, Federal Parliament, doc. CRABV 52 COM 794, 23 February 2010; De Standaard: De Gucht waarschuwt voor loze beloftes, 16 May 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Guy Verhostadt: Is de crisis rond de euro voorbij?, De Standaard, 9 April 2010; De Standaard: Verhostadt wil dat Europese leiders stoppen met kakelen, 16 May 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Finance and Budget Committee: Parliamentary discussion on the law project allowing Belgium to make loans to Greece, doc. 52 2576/002, 5 May 2010; Plenary Session, doc. CRABV 52 PLEN 153, 5 May 2010.

<sup>6</sup> De Standaard: Leterme maant Merkel tot discretie over euro aan, 16 May 2010.

<sup>7</sup> De Morgen: België bereid bij te dragen aan Europese lening Griekenland, 16 March 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Guy Verhostadt: Is de crisis rond de euro voorbij?, De Standaard, 9 April 2010.

<sup>9</sup> Committee on health, environment and social affairs: Les priorités de la présidence belge de l'Union européenne, report, doc. 52 2378/012.

<sup>10</sup> Guy Verhostadt: Is de crisi rond de euro voorbij?, De Standaard, 9 April 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Prime Minister office: BE2020 – Un agenda commun: de la crise à la croissance, press release, 19 March 2010.

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**Belgium****European leadership needs to avoid disappointing results in the future**

Nathalie Brack\*

*The climate conference in Copenhagen: a disappointment for all actors*

All actors in Belgium were deeply disappointed by the results of the climate conference in Copenhagen. After so much work, high expectations and intense negotiations, both the climate organisations and the political parties hoped to have a binding agreement at the end of the conference.<sup>1</sup> The main Belgian climate movement claimed that the agreed text is weak and vague, without any commitment, due to the uncooperative attitude of China and the USA, but also to a lack of leadership from Europe.<sup>2</sup> For the main political parties in Belgium, the conference was a missed opportunity. They all declared to be deeply disappointed. The French-speaking Greens and the Christian-Democrats insisted on the importance of staying mobilised, whereas the Socialists stressed the lack of solidarity between the North and the South and between industrialised and developing countries.<sup>3</sup> For the Prime Minister, Yves Leterme, and the Minister for Climate and Energy Policy, Paul Magnette, these weak results are mainly due to the attitude of China, which did not want to negotiate or help finance anything. But the USA is also to blame: the Belgian Prime Minister declared being deceived by the US propositions to reduce their CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by only 4 percent by 2020. The strategy of the EU, on the other hand, was completely supported by Belgium. Indeed, the country fully agreed with the unilateral commitment of the EU to reduce its emissions by 20 percent by 2020 and supports the position that the EU cannot be the only actor to set such an ambitious target.<sup>4</sup>

*A crucial leadership role for the EU in future negotiations within the UNFCCC*

Although disappointed, all actors stressed the crucial role of the EU, both internally and at the international level. Indeed, they all argued that the EU should continue to be ambitious in its own targets, and that climate change should remain a top priority on the agenda for the coming years. The national climate movements would even like the EU to commit itself to decreasing its CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by 40 percent by 2020. But, at the political level, the actors claimed that the EU should keep its commitment of 20 percent and could eventually decrease its emissions by 30 percent, if other international actors also commit themselves to more efforts in terms of climate policy.<sup>5</sup>

At the international level, Belgian actors and, more specifically, the Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats (Open Vld) declared that the EU should play a leading role, give a new impulse to the international negotiations and make sure a binding agreement is reached during the next climate conference at the end of 2010. Belgian actors are confident that a global agreement with the Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) is the best strategy to fight climate change, but some complementary measures could also be taken. The Belgian Minister for Climate and Energy Policy declared, in that respect, that the EU should maybe consider levying CO<sub>2</sub> taxes on countries that are not willing to cooperate in fighting climate change.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> La Libre Belgique, 14 December 2009, available at: [www.lalibre.be](http://www.lalibre.be) (last access: 9 May 2010); De Standaard, 16 December 2009, available at: [www.standaard.be](http://www.standaard.be) (last access: 6 May 2010).

<sup>2</sup> La Libre Belgique, 19 December 2009, available at: [www.lalibre.be](http://www.lalibre.be) (last access: 9 May 2010); De Morgen, 19 December 2009, available at: [www.demorgen.be](http://www.demorgen.be) (last access: 8 May 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Le Soir, 19 December 2009, available at: [www.lesoir.be](http://www.lesoir.be) (last access: 8 May 2010); La Libre Belgique, 19 December 2009, available at: [www.lalibre.be](http://www.lalibre.be) (last access: 9 May 2010); Ecolo press release, 19 December 2009; cdH (centre démocrate humaniste, i.e. French Speaking Christian Democrats), press release, 19 December 2009.

<sup>4</sup> La Libre Belgique, 16 December 2009, available at: [www.lalibre.be](http://www.lalibre.be) (last access: 9 May 2010); Le Soir, 10 December 2009, available at: [www.lesoir.be](http://www.lesoir.be) (last access: 8 May 2010); De Standaard, 10 December 2009, available at: [www.standaard.be](http://www.standaard.be) (last access: 6 May 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Le Soir, 18 December 2009, available at: [www.lesoir.be](http://www.lesoir.be) (last access: 8 May 2010).

<sup>6</sup> De Morgen, 19 December 2009, available at: [www.demorgen.be](http://www.demorgen.be) (last access: 8 May 2010).

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**Belgium**
**Government en affaires courantes to prepare the council presidency**

 Régis Dandoy\*
 

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*Government's fall and new federal elections*

The first semester of 2010 was almost completely dedicated to the Belgian political crisis that occurred after the failure of the royal mission of former Prime Minister, Jean-Luc Dehaene. Dehaene was appointed by the King in November 2009 with the objective of resolving a question, on which Flemish and French-speaking parties were opposed, but did not manage to reach an agreement with both linguistic communities. The federal cabinet took over this so-called Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde issue<sup>1</sup> but, as no advancement could be made in the negotiations, the Flemish liberal party Open VLD decided to leave the federal government. The Prime Minister had no other option than to present the resignation of the entire cabinet to the King. As the majority of the parties agreed on calling for new elections, both federal chambers were dissolved and the Belgian citizens will vote on 13 June 2010, less than three weeks before the start of the Belgian Presidency of the EU. This resignation and the early dissolution of the chambers have, among others, practical consequences on the transposition of the EU directives. The State Secretary for European Affairs, Olivier Chastel, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Steven Vanackere, urged for a continued transposition of the directives even if the government is in *affaires courantes*, i.e., not allowed to take any policy initiative individually or collectively, and the federal parliament has been dissolved. Yet, no less than 36 directives (among which 26 belonging directly to the federal level) have to be transposed before November 2010.<sup>2</sup>

*Belgian Presidency of the EU: priorities and challenges*

The system of rotating presidencies attributes to Belgium the leadership of the EU between 1 July and 31 December 2010. Even if the details of the Presidency are not yet known, the programme will be mainly based on the one adopted by the "trio presidency" (Spain, Belgium and Hungary).<sup>3</sup> In addition to the formal and informal political meetings, about 70 cultural and 150 non-cultural projects will be organised by the civil society, associations, etc. An agreement has been reached between the federal, regional and community cabinets regarding the budget of this Presidency: the federal level will dedicate 74 million Euros, while contributions of 14.5 millions, 8 million and 6 million will be made by respectively the Flemish, the Walloon (jointly with the French-speaking community) and the Brussels region.<sup>4</sup> Key moments of the Presidency are already identified, among which are the UN General Assembly on the Millennium Development Goals, the third EU-Africa Summit and the revision of the Cotonou Agreement between the EU and ACP countries. The main themes of the Presidency will be the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty; the launch of the post-Lisbon Strategy (mainly regarding the challenges of the economic and financial crisis and of globalisation); the management of the negative impact of globalisation on social affairs; the resumption of international negotiations on climate and energy; the implementation of the Stockholm Programme in the field of justice, asylum and migration; and the pursuing of the negotiations related to the enlargement of the Union. The final programme of the Presidency is to be approved on the occasion of a conciliation meeting grouping the federal, regional and community cabinets on 16 June 2010 (a first meeting occurred on 19 May 2010). The official launch of the Presidency will take place on 2 July 2010 and the programme will be presented by the Prime Minister in the European Parliament on 7 July 2010.

Usually, thanks to the serious, conscientious and pro-European reputation of Belgium, Belgian Presidencies are widely anticipated. There is no concern globally about the state of preparation of Belgium for its Presidency<sup>5</sup> and, according to the two ministers in charge (the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Steven Vanackere, and the State Secretary for European Affairs, Olivier Chastel), the preparation is almost over.<sup>6</sup> High expectations regarding the quality of the Belgian Presidency can also be noticed in various countries, especially the UK, in particular for the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty and the supposedly positive relations of Belgium with Herman Van Rompuy and Catherine Ashton.<sup>7</sup> But the fall of the federal government questions the capacity of Belgium to exert a fully-fledged presidency as the resigning cabinet and the ministers are in *affaires courantes*. For the opposition parties (mainly the Greens, but also the Populists, the List DeDecker (LDD) and the extreme right), this cabinet problem occurs at the wrong moment, as the EU needs strong leadership

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in order to face the financial crisis and budget problems. But even Olivier Chastel stresses the fact that this situation poses a problem of legitimacy, credibility and capacity for the government's ability to weigh in on the debate.<sup>8</sup> Many actors, including members of the federal cabinet, fear that Belgium could follow the Czech scenario of 2009, where internal political problems and a cabinet's fall somehow paralysed the EU presidency.<sup>9</sup> But globally, there is more concern about the image and prestige of Belgium than about the EU, as Olivier Chastel, but also Member of Parliament Patrick Moriau, considered that the Presidency was highly expected to restore a positive image of Belgium after the recent years characterised by continuous political crises and a divide between linguistic communities.<sup>10</sup>

But, contrary to former Prime Minister Jean-Luc Dehaene, who claimed that this situation is negative and even dramatic,<sup>11</sup> the main Belgian political actors are not alarmed. Several reasons are mentioned, among which the fact that the federal government does not have an important role to play in the Presidency. First, there is now a President of the European Council (Herman Van Rompuy) and a High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (Catherine Ashton) that take over some of the tasks and responsibilities usually assigned to the rotating presidency, mainly the major economic and political issues as well as foreign policy. But the "day-to-day" business remains in the hands of Belgium, i.e., to prepare and preside over ministerial councils and obtain compromises. Second, the preparation work is almost over, as this Presidency was already one of the priorities of the federal cabinet since its start in 2007. The Belgian ministers will be assisted by a well-organised diplomatic service and civil servants who are used to the exercise. Third, the programme of the Presidency is bound to the one adopted by the "trio presidency" (Spain, Belgium and Hungary) for the period January 2010 - June 2011. There is little room for manoeuvre for Belgium in this regard, especially because there has never been a huge debate between political parties on how the Presidency will be organised and on which priorities, as there usually exists a consensus on European affairs in Belgium. Fourth, the crisis does not affect (unless a major cabinet reshuffle at different levels occurs) the work of the regions and communities. Since the cooperation agreement of 1994, Belgian regions and communities may lead and prepare meetings of the Council of Ministers. The Walloon region will be in charge of the meetings on industry, competition and regional policies, the French-speaking community will deal with culture and audiovisual, the Brussels region with research and development, while the Flemish region will be responsible of fishery, education, youth policy, sport and environment. The other policy domains remain in the hands of the federal ministers. Fifth, and regarding the comparison with the Czech Republic in 2009, Italy in 1996 and Denmark in 1993, Christian Franck asserts that, in Belgian political history, the Presidency generates the completion of agreements between the Flemish and French-speaking community.<sup>12</sup> Some of the most important steps leading to state reforms and transformations occurred around presidencies. In this regard, the current Presidency should be seen as an opportunity for Belgium rather than a threat. Finally, as the six-month presidency includes two months of "holidays", during which few policy initiatives will be taken, Belgium should manage only four months of presidency, and many actors predict that a fully-fledged federal cabinet will be in place by September 2010.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde issue deals with the definition borders of an electoral district around Brussels. This issue that is mostly symbolic strongly divides Flemish- and French-speaking parties, as the former want the split of the district in a unilingual Flemish district (Halle-Vilvoorde) and a bilingual one (Brussels) while the latter prefer the status quo, i.e., a common district for both Brussels and peripheral Flemish cities.

<sup>2</sup> Federal Council of Ministers, press release, 19 May 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Council of the European Union: Projet de programme de dix-huit mois du Conseil, doc. 16771/09, 19 November 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Meeting between the federal, regional and community cabinets on the Belgian Presidency of the EU, press release, 26 March 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Maroun Labaki: Europe. Pas d'effet dramatique en vue, *Le Soir*, 23 April 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Olivier le Bussy: L'UE n'attendra pas la Belgique, *La Libre Belgique*, 28 April 2010; Meeting of Steven Vanackere and Olivier Chastel with a delegation of the AFCO (Committee on Constitutional Affairs) of the European Parliament, press release, 11 May 2010.

<sup>7</sup> *De Morgen*: Britten verwachten veel van België als EU-voorzitterschap, 3 March 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Olivier le Bussy: L'UE n'attendra pas la Belgique, *La Libre Belgique*, 28 April 2010.

<sup>9</sup> *La Dernière Heure*: Présidence belge de l'UE: Javaux craint un scénario à la Tchèque, 15 March 2010; Maroun Labaki: Europe. Pas d'effet dramatique en vue *Le Soir*, 23 April 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Parliamentary discussion on the 2010 Federal state budget, doc. 52 2222/05, 19 December 2009.

<sup>11</sup> Jeroen Verelst: Oud-premier Martens: "Val van regering zou ronduit dramatisch zijn", *De Morgen*, 22 April 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Christian Franck: Quel impact sur la présidence belge de l'UE?, *La Libre Belgique*, 28 April 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Pascal Martin: L'Europe ne s'inquiète pas, *Le Soir*, 28 April 2010.

## 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?