

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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United Kingdom**New post and institutions: building-blocks for a European Superstate?**

Brendan Donnelly*

European institutional questions are usually discussed in the United Kingdom primarily in ideological rather than practical terms. The ratification of the Lisbon Treaty led at the end of 2009 to a certain amount of polemical discussion in this country concerning the new posts and institutions set up by the Treaty. The almost exclusive focus of this discussion was however the question of how far these posts and institutions should or should not be seen as building-blocks for a European superstate. This polemical discussion has now largely disappeared. The day to day workings of the posts and institutions set up by the Lisbon Treaty, on which the questionnaire concentrates, have proved to be of limited interest in the United Kingdom, except to specialists. British political discussion over the past six months has moreover been largely monopolised by the general election, in the campaign for which European questions played only a subordinate role. These circumstances militating against detailed discussion of European institutional questions in the United Kingdom will inevitably be reflected in the following answers, which may well be unsatisfactory, but are not on that account inaccurate.

Presidency of the European Council

There is nothing in the United Kingdom which could remotely be described as an “assessment” of Van Rompuy’s work. A widely-reported speech of personal criticism against Van Rompuy by the British Member of the European Parliament Nigel Farage earlier this year aroused a certain amount of public comment at the time, but led to no serious general discussion of Van Rompuy’s performance of his functions. At most, Farage was censured for his impoliteness towards Van Rompuy.¹ British journalists who have followed closely the evolution of the Greek crisis know and have reported that Van Rompuy has attempted over the past six months to coordinate the European Council’s reaction to this crisis. They are also aware and have also reported that he has had limited success in doing so. These same specialists await with interest Van Rompuy’s proposals for improving the governance of the Eurozone, to be presented in outline at the European Council of June 2010 and adopted formally in October 2010. If he is able to produce substantial reforms which the European Council is willing to adopt, then his personal prestige and that of his office will certainly be enhanced. Any increase in such prestige, or indeed in the prestige of Catherine Ashton, will reinforce the growing perception of those few who follow these matters in the United Kingdom that the rotating presidency of the European Union is now primarily a technical rather than political function. If Van Rompuy deals with the single currency and Catherine Ashton deals with the Union’s external relations, there is little of high European policy left for the rotating presidency to administer.

The High Representative

In her new office, Catherine Ashton has made little impact on British public or political opinion. The widespread belief that she obtained her post only because her colleague David Miliband was unwilling to accept it has undoubtedly served to harm her credibility in British political circles.² Occasional newspaper articles have referred to the low esteem in which she is supposedly held by certain national governments, but the incoming coalition government has undertaken to work constructively with her, despite her membership of the Labour Party.³ Much suspicion nevertheless remains of Catherine Ashton and her post from the radical Eurosceptic wing of the Conservative Party, which sees her new functions simply as undermining the independence of British foreign policy.⁴ To analyse critically Catherine Ashton’s role in terms of her dealings on the one hand with the Commission and on the other with the Council would be an effort beyond the capacity of British public and political opinion. In the general British debate on European issues, little or no distinction is made between the various institutions of the Union, a confusion which is probably more marked in the United Kingdom than elsewhere, but certainly not confined to this country.

European External Action Service

At the level of public discussion in the United Kingdom, the European External Action Service (EEAS) retains something of the image attributed to it by critics of the Lisbon Treaty, namely as a feared

* Federal Trust for Education and Research.

replacement for national diplomatic services in the context of a general movement towards a European “superstate”.⁵ Against this alarmist analysis, pragmatic economic or administrative arguments about the desirability of the new institution have made little popular headway. In so far as the precise workings of the EEAS exist in the collective British political perception, it is exclusively seen as a representative, not a coordinating body. This perception is reflected in the phrase usually used to refer to the new body, the “European diplomatic service.” Within British governmental, or more precisely official circles, there is however considerable hope and expectation that the United Kingdom will be able to play a leading, even dominant role within the new service. British officials are encouraged in that view by the predominantly intergovernmental nature of the structures for European external policy envisaged by the Lisbon Treaty.

European Citizens’ Initiative

The European Citizens’ Initiative plays no role in the current British debate on the European Union. It has emphatically not yet fulfilled the hope of some among the drafters of the European Convention and the Lisbon Treaty that the initiative would act as a bridge of democratic consultation between the European institutions and the European citizens.

¹ M. White: Farage was rude but right about Van Rompuy, Guardian blog, 25 February 2010.

² The Economist: Why did Lady Ashton take the EU’s foreign policy job?, 25 January 2010.

³ G. Meade: Baroness Ashton’s EU role “gives Britain a powerful voice”, The Independent, 9 November 2009.

⁴ A. Pierce: How Cathy Ashton became the laughing stock of the EU, Daily Mail online, 9 March 2010.

⁵ Waterfield, Daily Telegraph, 29 March 2009; B. Waterfield: More than 50 EU embassies open across the world, Daily Telegraph, 22 January 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?