

# **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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## Editorial Team

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Layout: Matthias Jäger

Contact: [info@EU-27watch.org](mailto:info@EU-27watch.org)  
[www.EU-27watch.org](http://www.EU-27watch.org)

**iep** Institut für  
Europäische Politik  
Bundesallee 23  
D-10717 Berlin  
Tel.: +49/30/88.91.34-0  
Fax: +49/30/88.91.34-99  
E-mail: [info@iep-berlin.de](mailto:info@iep-berlin.de)  
Internet: [www.iep-berlin.de](http://www.iep-berlin.de)

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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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\* Centre d'étude de la vie politique, Université libre de Bruxelles.

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?