


# **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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**France**
**Delicate balance of power leads to institutional caution**
 Beatrix Boonekamp\*
 

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The Lisbon Treaty came into force on 1 December 2009. Its institutional innovations have been largely debated in France, but more so the appointment of Catherine Ashton as the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy than the appointment of Herman Van Rompuy as the first President of the European Council. Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, former French President and former President of the Convention on the Future of Europe, was among the first to announce his scepticism, arguing that the nominations to the new top jobs do not inspire much confidence, and do not help clarify a confused institutional situation. He argued that there is the impression that the role assigned to Van Rompuy is that of a mediator within the European Council, whereas nobody expects Ashton to provide the EU with charismatic leadership in the international arena.<sup>1</sup> The same criticism was voiced in the weekly news magazine *l'Express*, with an article entitled "Duet for a Discount European Union", underlining that the choice of the two new executives could undermine all collective ambition on the international scene, and breaks all hope for a communitarian dynamic.<sup>2</sup> Michel Rocard, former Socialist Prime Minister, also considered that "the political Europe was dead" – but that the responsibility is to be found in the nomination procedure: the lack of transparency and/or contradictory debate has allowed the "big states" to negotiate their arrangements.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, other analysts underline the fact that the nomination of two unknown individuals to the leadership of the EU seems to be the inevitable consequence of the complexity of the new institutional architecture as set out in the Lisbon Treaty. It was inevitable that the 27 should opt for institutional caution at the nomination phase, given the delicacy of the balance of power that needs to be maintained in order for the new institutional mechanism to function smoothly. "And it is not necessarily a bad thing", concludes centre-left daily *Le Monde*.<sup>4</sup>

*European Union: too many presidents?*

The coexistence of the rotating presidency with the new President of the European Council has generated some incomprehension and criticism. The Green Member of European Parliament (MEP) Daniel Cohn-Bendit has argued that the continuation of the rotating presidency is the "great weakness of the treaty".<sup>5</sup> *l'Express* also stresses the fact that there are now "too many presidents", adding ironically that "the Union's presidency is permanent, but it rotates at the same time." For others, the innovations of the Lisbon Treaty are considered relevant, but their concrete application will be complicated. In this regard, the attitude of the Spanish Head of Government José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero is considered crucial. His minimalist lecture of the Lisbon Treaty – announcing, for example, that he will accompany Van Rompuy in all the bilateral summits held between the EU and third party countries, as well as in the international summits, is seen as a risk of slowing the progress of the EU and making its new institutions even more indecipherable.<sup>6</sup> This is why *Le Monde* underlined the fact that the new President of the European Council needed to control and "override" the rotating presidency, and improve cohesion among the 27 heads of state and government.<sup>7</sup> So far, Van Rompuy seems to be succeeding, as stressed by economics daily *Les Echos*: "His skills in mediation and consensus-building among the 27 could strengthen his authority to the point of allowing him to compete with Barroso and Ashton, competition which could encourage activism. What if the Union, almost by accident, ended up with a 'real president'?"<sup>8</sup>

*Catherine Ashton, "scapegoat for all the problems in and around Brussels"*

The new High Representative, Catherine Ashton, has been quite harshly criticised for several "mistakes" she has made since the beginning of her mandate: for her bad management of the Haitian crisis or for choosing to take part in the investiture of the new Ukrainian president rather than attending a ministerial meeting on European defence. In France, it is the nomination of João Vale de Almeida to the post of EU ambassador in Washington without a consensus from the member states that generated the greatest disapproval. "European interests are becoming increasingly conflicting and Ashton appears to be unable to find the key to defuse tension between capitals", says left-wing daily *Libération*.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, some observers stress the fact that she is nothing but a victim of the institutional confusion between the rotating council presidency, the President of the European Council,

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and the Commission President. The division of roles is very delicate, and she is paying the heaviest price for the confusion. “Her main role appears to be that of scapegoat for all the problems in and around Brussels”, concludes right-wing daily *Le Figaro*. “Aside from her own direct responsibilities, the storm which has erupted around Ashton probably offers the clearest confirmation of the fact that the Lisbon Treaty will not solve all of Europe’s problems”.<sup>10</sup>

#### *The European External Action Service, generating covetousness and rivalries*

As far as the European External Action Service (EEAS) is concerned, French authorities have underlined the fact that this new diplomatic tool is strongly needed to allow the Union to act in a more efficient, understandable, and coordinated way, and have therefore repeatedly underlined their willingness to act quickly in favour of its definitive adoption.<sup>11</sup> They have been strongly advocating for a powerful Secretary General, “façon Quai d’Orsay”, and it appears that a Frenchman is likely to be part of the EEAS triumvirate – with the name of Pierre Vimont, French ambassador to the USA, coming out repeatedly. This apparent consensus has not been easy to reach though, and the French media have repeatedly underlined the fact that this new diplomatic tool has generated covetousness, rivalries and fights for domination, mostly concerning the nominations of the top positions.<sup>12</sup> This new service has also been criticised, mostly because of the lack of certitudes, concerning both its exact competences and its composition. The euro-sceptic leftist leader Jean Pierre Chevenement considers that the multiplication of structures that it implies (EEAS, the Commission and the council services) will lead to very time-consuming consultations, and that so many different authorities can only generate paralysis. He therefore advocates for a minimalist service, both in its ambitions as in its format.<sup>13</sup>

#### *The European Citizens’ Initiative: overcoming the EU’s democratic deficit*

The European Citizens’ Initiative (ECI) has generated high expectations in France. Catholic daily *La Croix* welcomed this breach opened in the Commission’s legislative initiative, stressing the fact that the era of the “areopagus of technocrats, stateless and irresponsible”, once denounced by General de Gaulle, is now over.<sup>14</sup> The Permanent Conference of Associative Coordination considers that the ECI will consolidate the participative aspect of the European democratic model, without any doubts.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, a few associations and civil society organisations stress the fact that some rules and procedures could have been less constraining, so as to allow the citizen participation to be easier. The Human Rights League believes that the ECI should only require the participation of 0.1 percent of the EU population (instead of 0.2 percent in the actual project), coming from one quarter of the EU member states (instead of one third), and that the legal age to participate should be 16 years old (instead of 18).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Giscard d’Estaing, V.: *Traite de Lisbonne: un Jour dans l’Histoire Européenne*, *Le Figaro*, 01/12/2009.

<sup>2</sup> *L’Express: Duo pour une Union européenne au rabais*, 24/11/2009.

<sup>3</sup> Rocard, M.: Interview to *France Inter*, 20/11/2009.

<sup>4</sup> Mangelot, M.: *Les fausses illusions de la Présidence Française de L’union*, *Le Monde*, 03/12/2009.

<sup>5</sup> *L’Express: Trop de présidents pour l’Union européenne?*, 03/01/2010.

<sup>6</sup> Quetramer, J.: *Lisbonne: grincements de dents et tentative de sabotage*, *Libération*, 11/12/2009.

<sup>7</sup> Ricard, P.: *Trois défis attendent le président du Conseil européen*, Herman Van Rompuy, *Le Monde*, 05/12/2010.

<sup>8</sup> Moisi, D.: *Si l’Europe avait un vrai président*, *Les Echos*, 18/01/2010.

<sup>9</sup> Quatremer, J.: *Halte au feu entre Catherine Ashton et les Etats Membres*, *Libération*, 05/03/2010.

<sup>10</sup> Roussein, P.: *Lady Ashton, Bouc émissaire de l’Europe*, *Le Figaro*, 03/03/2010.

<sup>11</sup> *Déclaration de B. Kouchner*, 26/04/2010.

<sup>12</sup> *La Croix: Le Service Européen d’Action Extérieure se constitue*, 22/03/2010.

<sup>13</sup> Chevenement, J. P.: *Le mille-feuilles européen: l’exemple du Service européen d’action extérieure*, intervention lors du débat au Sénat sur le Conseil européen des 29 et 30 octobre 2009, 27/10/2009.

<sup>14</sup> *La Croix: L’Europe définit les règles du droit d’initiative citoyenne*, 31/03/2010.

<sup>15</sup> *Conférence permanente des coordinations associatives*, 23/03/2010, available at: [www.cpa.asso.fr](http://www.cpa.asso.fr) (last access: 04/06/2010).

<sup>16</sup> *Ligue des Droits de l’Homme: Sur l’initiative citoyenne*, 24/02/2010, available at: [www.ldh-france.org](http://www.ldh-france.org) (last access: 04/06/2010).

## 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?