

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.

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Latvia**Implementation of the Lisbon Treaty as seen from Latvia****Dzintra Bungs***

From the ample media coverage and the numerous informative discussions organised under the auspices of universities, government institutions, and non-governmental organisations in recent years, it would seem that every citizen of Latvia has heard of the Lisbon Treaty. However, even if Latvians tend to recognise the term and acknowledge that the Treaty affects everyone in every EU member state, relatively few are sufficiently familiar with the Treaty's content to make an informed comment about it and even fewer have actually read the entire document.

This situation may be explained in part by the fact that Latvians are among the most eurosceptic members of the EU family of nations. According to a Eurobarometer standard survey of public opinion taken in autumn 2009, 55 percent of the respondents in Latvia believe that their country has not benefited from its membership in the European Union and 43 percent of the respondents state that they do not trust this organisation. Improbable as the poll results might seem at first glance, they demonstrate that multiple factors, even those that have little or no relation with the EU, play a significant role in the assessment of the EU; these include an individual's personal perceptions and preferences, a nation's historical experience, and the state of the national and international economy. The survey results suggest that a particular factor in Latvia was its historical experience – more precisely, the conclusions drawn from the five decades of Soviet and Nazi German occupations during and after World War II. They have not been forgotten and they still tend to influence, rightly or wrongly, people's perceptions of Latvia's current situation, despite the fact that two decades have passed since Latvia regained its independence and that Latvia joined the European Union in 2004 of its own free will. In a nutshell, Latvians tend to question the obligations and responsibilities that come with membership in an international organisation, especially if membership means relinquishing a part of their country's sovereignty; in other words, many Latvians still hold on to the belief that it is wiser be independent and unaffiliated.

In the spring of 2010, the hardships emanating from Latvia's economic recession and the jostling for power and influence by politicians have been much more relevant and interesting to the average Latvian than the events and developments, however important and far-reaching, abroad. This phenomenon in the context of the European Union is described quite diplomatically by the Latvian political scientist Toms Rostoks: "Brussels is a place, where important decisions for Latvia are adopted and where Latvian representatives participate in the decision-making process; and yet, Brussels remains more like the truth, which one perceives as being somewhere on the outside and with which it is difficult to identify."¹

Thus, had it not been for the fact that Latvia's former President, Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga, was among the persons named as a possible candidate for the office of the new President of the European Council, fewer people in Latvia would have taken note of the recent changes in the top leadership positions of the European Union. As in many EU member states, when Herman Van Rompuy was selected as the President of the European Council and Catherine Ashton as the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, the most frequently heard comments in Latvia were questions, such as: Who is he/she? How is he/she better qualified than the other candidates? Should not the process of selecting the new European Council President and the High Representative have been more transparent and more open? Very quickly, the discussions and speculations about these questions were replaced by a spate of matter-of-fact reports about the activities of the new EU officials. At the same time, their performance so far has elicited hardly any political commentaries in the Latvian media. From the many brief reports, the salient trait that has gradually emerged of Van Rompuy is professionalism, clearly a quality that will serve the new president well in establishing his authority and the authority of his office in the new EU leadership and power structure. At this point in time, Latvian officials do not anticipate any change in the role of the rotating council presidency.

Concerning Ashton, it would be foolhardy to attempt to evaluate the work of the new High Representative using the Latvian media, because her professional activities have not been reported as widely as those of Van Rompuy, and the reports themselves have avoided any interpretative

* Latvian Institute of International Affairs.

comments of her performance in office. However, well-versed Latvian observers of EU affairs stress that the position of the High Representative is very challenging in that it covers a daunting array of issues and duties. At the same time, the specifics of the functioning of the position and its actual role vis-à-vis the Commission and the Council remain to be defined.

The Latvian observers also point out several factors that clearly have bearing on the current public image of both Ashton and Van Rompuy:

- Owing to the recentness of the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty, both the EU and its officials find themselves going through a period of transition and adjustment.
- Moreover, much remains to be worked out “on location” and “in practice” because the Lisbon Treaty provides an outline of the functions of the leading offices and office-holders.
- The Lisbon Treaty stipulates the creation of the European External Action Service (EEAS) to assist the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy; because the first High Representative is directly involved in organising the service and appointing the personnel, she will not have the assistance of the service until it is functioning.
- Under these circumstances, it is premature to attempt a considered evaluation of the work of the new President and the new High Representative.

Concerning the EEAS, the Latvian government endorses its formation and fully supports the concept envisaged in the 25 March 2010 “Proposal for a Council Decision establishing the organisation and functioning of the European External Action Service”. In Riga, no alternatives are being considered to that concept. At the same time, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Māris Riekstiņš,² urged repeatedly that attention be paid to two aspects of the EEAS:

- In selecting members of the EEAS from among the candidates from the member states, the notion of geographical balance should be adhered to so that all regions are equitably represented.
- The EEAS should ensure, if an emergency arises, the availability of consular services for all EU citizens in countries where only some EU member states have embassies and consulates.³

As for the European Citizens’ Initiative (ECI), those Latvians who regularly follow the European Union developments welcomed this initiative from its inception, believing that it would bring the Union closer to the people that it represents and serves. This view also prevailed in the seminar which took place on 11 December 2009. It was jointly organised by the Latvian parliament, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Centre for Public Policy Providus to discuss the ECI and its implementation. Welcoming the representatives of non-governmental organisations, Members of Parliament, and government officials, the Speaker of the parliament, Gundars Daudze, underlined the new opportunities provided by the Lisbon Treaty for the people and parliaments of EU member states to influence the Union’s policies, and added: “Whether or not we take advantage of these opportunities depends on us – on how actively we participate in the processes. It is, therefore, essential that the people of Latvia are well informed about their possibilities.”⁴ Deputy speaker, Solvita Ābolīņa observed: “In Latvia we often forget that European matters are not issues of our foreign policy, but are part of our domestic policy. Moreover, once an EU decision comes into force, it affects all our daily lives very directly.”⁵ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs held a follow-up seminar on 7 July 2010 and more such seminars are planned in the future.⁶

The spirit of the ECI was evident during the lively discussions which took place on 11 February 2010, when Minister of Foreign Affairs, Māris Riekstiņš, signed a protocol with seven non-governmental organisations to cooperate in informing the Latvian public about EU issues. Referring to the ECI, Riekstiņš invited the participating organisations to take full advantage of the new opportunities provided in the Lisbon Treaty for people to influence the EU. The Minister expressed his satisfaction with the dialogues and the cooperation in the past between the Ministry and the NGO’s. He explained that, as of January 2010, the Ministry had taken over the task, heretofore performed by the State Chancery, of disseminating information about EU developments to the public and pointed out, “It is completely unacceptable to me that the support of the people for Latvia’s membership of the European Union is one of the lowest among the EU member states; consequently, informing the public about EU issues is all the more important.”⁷

Subsequently, apart from brief media reports about the European Commission's proposal of 31 March 2010 outlining the ECI rules and procedures, there has been very little commentary in the public realm about the details of the proposal. In Latvia, it is possible for citizens to launch a referendum, and this requires determination and hard work on the part of the initiators. Considered in this context, the Commission's proposed rules and procedures for the ECI seem to be quite cumbersome. Consequently, the question arises if the rules and procedures empowering the citizens to participate in the EU legislative process might not serve to undermine the intent of the ECI and thus serve to widen, rather than reduce, the so-called democracy gap between the EU institutions and the people. To this comment, a well-informed Latvian official observed that if the ECI is to become embedded in the minds of Europeans as their tool, it is very important that the first initiative that is launched proves to be successful.

¹ Toms Rostoks: *Garlaicīgā piecgade* (The boring five years), Politika.lv, available at: http://www.politika.lv/temas/fwd_eiropa/17266/ (last access: 14 July 2010).

² Because the Tautas partija (People's Party) decided to leave the coalition of parties forming the government on 22 March 2010, Māris Riekstiņš, a member of Tautas partija, also stepped down from his office. On 29 April 2010, the parliament endorsed Aivis Ronis as the new Minister of Foreign Affairs. He is a seasoned diplomat and is not affiliated with any political party.

³ See, for example, Māris Riekstiņš: Statement to the press, 27 April 2010, available at: <http://www.mfa.gov.lv/lv/Jaunumi/PazinojumiPresei/2010/aprilis/27-01/> (last access: 14 July 2010).

⁴ Latvian parliament: Press Release, 11 December 2009, available at: <http://www.saeima.lv/kastors/aktualitates.jsp?page=saeimas-zinas&id=15762&p=19> (last access: 14 July 2010).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Press Release, 7 July 2010, available at <http://www.mfa.gov.lv/lv/Jaunumi/PazinojumiPresei/2010/julijis/07-03/> (last access: 14 July 2010).

⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Press Release, 11 February 2010, available at: <http://www.mfa.gov.lv/lv/Jaunumi/PazinojumiPresei/2010/februaris/11-04/> (last access: 14 July 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?