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

 Nathalie Brack and Régis Dandoy*

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,¹ 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 2010.² 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."³ Van Rompuy himself sees, in his nomination, recognition for Belgium that, as a founding nation, was incessantly dedicated to the building of Europe.⁴ 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".⁵

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.⁶ 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.⁷ 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.⁸ 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.⁹

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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹

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.¹²

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.¹³ 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.¹⁴

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.¹⁵

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.¹⁶

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.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹

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.²⁰

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.²¹ 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).²² He confirmed that the Belgian Presidency, starting on 1 July 2010, will pay particular attention to the final establishment of the European Citizens’ Initiative.

¹ 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.

² See the Belgian chapter on current issues and discourses.

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

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

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

⁶ 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.

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

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

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

¹⁰ Le Soir, 20 November 2009, available at: www.lesoir.be (last access: 8 May 2010).

¹¹ Interview with Jean-Luc Dehaene, Knack, 25 November 2009, available at: www.knack.be (last access: 7 May 2010).

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

¹³ Le Soir, 27 December 2009, available at: www.lesoir.be (last access: 8 May 2010).

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

¹⁵ Le Soir, 6 March 2010; Le Soir, 14 March 2010, both available at: www.lesoir.be (last access: 8 May 2010).

¹⁶ Le Soir, 27 April 2010, available at: www.lesoir.be (last access: 8 May 2010).

¹⁷ Declaration of Steven Vanackere, La Libre Belgique, 5 March 2010, available at: www.lalibre.be (last access: 9 May 2010).

¹⁸ Declaration of the Belgian Minister for Foreign Affairs, 6 March 2010.

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

²⁰ De Standaard, 8 April 2010, available at: www.standaard.be (last access: 6 May 2010).

²¹ 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.

²² Meeting of Olivier Chastel with the European Affairs ministers, press release, 10 May 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?