



A NEW TEAM AT THE EU TOP

Habemus new leaders, at last. The procedure to appoint the two new institutional figures created by the Lisbon Treaty was quite tortuous and cumbersome, probably also because it was completely untested. The decision, taken at an extraordinary EU summit on 19 November, was received with a mix of surprise and disappointment, probably also because contrasting and exaggerated expectations had been raised in advance. But the choice of the serving Belgian Prime Minister Herman van Rompuy as the first President of the European Council was fully in line with the profile drawn – albeit vaguely – in the treaty, which is more that of a “chairman” of European summits than a “President of Europe” (the official German version of the new treaty speaks of a “Vorsitzender”, not a “Praesident”).

Catherine Ashton’s choice as the first High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy as well as Vice-President of the European Commission (HR/VP) was even more unexpected. It also raised concerns about her preparedness for a job that combines in one and the same person the responsibilities held so far by Javier Solana, Benita Ferrero-Waldner and Carl Bildt (as rotating president of the External Relations Council). In fact, there were better qualified candidates for the position she was eventually appointed to. It was mainly the political logic that drove the final deal among the EU-27 - and put another centre-right leader at the head of the European Council, and a centre-left one as HR/VP - which catapulted her into the post.

Other personalities propelled into the roster of possible candidates – mostly by the media, as there never was any formal application process – were better known but also much more controversial. Tony Blair, Carl Bildt, Massimo D’Alema were all legitimate and suitable names, but consensus at 27 over any of them would have been problematic – and virtually nobody, in the end, wanted a dramatic split inside the Union just days after the big collective sigh of relief following the final ratification of the new treaty. On top of that, it is arguable that both the EU-27 elected political leaders and their foreign ministers preferred to appoint personalities that would not steal the scene and outshine them on the European and international stage.

Whether relatively unknown and unexperienced leaders are a liability or an asset for the EU at this stage is a moot point. Herman van Rompuy had been leading the Belgian government for little more than a year, but he had already proved to be a valuable troubleshooter and an effective mediator. For her part, Cathy Ashton had quickly become familiar – in the year spent as Commissioner for Trade - with the way in which the Commission works and defends European interests worldwide: and this may partially compensate – along with the determination and resolve she has immediately shown – for her lack of senior ministerial and diplomatic experience.

Never again

In retrospect, however, it is fair to say that the choice of the new EU leadership has been made in a piecemeal and somewhat improvised fashion: José Manuel Barroso first, after the June elections and on the basis of the Nice Treaty; then, after the Irish Yes to the Lisbon Treaty, the other two - but without a preliminary agreement on the institutional profiles, the political rationale, and the procedure.

Next time, in 2014, all this *will* be different. The legal basis will be clear from the outset and for all. Five years of treaty implementation will have given the new figures a better defined scope, and the Rules of Procedure to be drafted (or adapted) for each institution will probably contribute to laying the ground for the relevant decisions. Last but not least, the performance of today's appointees will influence the selection of their successors.

Next time, all this *should* also be different. The EU Heads of State and Government will probably still look around the table to identify who can be the best "chairperson" among them. If the role and powers were those of a "President of Europe", of course, the procedure *should* be another one - but this is not and will not, in all likelihood, be the case.

For the other two top jobs – President of the Commission and VP/HR - the selection process should definitely become much more open and transparent. Personalities matter, and Europe's public opinion has indeed shown great interest in the way in which names have been canvassed – and a degree of disappointment for the way in which the winners have been picked in the end.

At the start of the 2014 campaign for the European Parliament, for instance, the main "Europarties" could nominate their candidates for President

of the Commission and HR/VP. Their names and profiles would thus become part of the wider political debate across Europe and be adequately scrutinised.

The political balance resulting from the elections would then determine who should get which job – without any backdoor bickering, manoeuvring or horse-trading. By doing so, the overall legitimacy of the EU and its top representatives will be enormously enhanced also in the eyes of the citizens, thus strengthening their hand both internally and externally.

Barroso's virtuoso act

Meanwhile, Commission President Barroso has also come up with his new team. The set-up of the new college is a virtuoso act of balancing in political, geographic, personal and even gender terms. The distribution of portfolios and competencies, the allocation of Vice-Presidencies, the treatment of incumbent Commissioners vis-à-vis newcomers – all display a profound knowledge of the rules of European politics as well as familiarity with “selling” EU policy.

Barroso cleverly shared out jobs among the three main political families, between bigger and smaller countries, old and new members and, in the end, even between men and women. He also highlighted new policy priorities by assigning them dedicated portfolios and administrative resources (climate action, energy, the “digital agenda”). He finally split the Justice, Liberty and Security portfolio by giving primacy to fundamental rights and citizenship. He also emphasised the need for improving inter-institutional links by appointing an ad hoc Vice-President supported by the Commission’s Secretariat-General.

Last but not least, Barroso created a dedicated sub-group of Commissioners set to work “in coordination with” (but Council sources prefer to say “under the political guidance of”) Catherine Ashton: one for humanitarian aid and crisis response, one for development, and one bringing together two policy areas which are considered functionally close but also politically separate, namely enlargement and neighbourhood policy. This bodes well for the construction, over the next months, of a new foreign policy “compound” encompassing also the new European External Action Service (EEAS) foreseen by the Lisbon Treaty.

Calling Europe

This new Commission has a good chance to pass the hearings planned for January in the European Parliament relatively unscathed. The overall “package” seems convincing and, above all, consensus-oriented. It is also set to strengthen Barroso’s leadership and the increasingly “presidential” nature of his Commission, making him a pivotal figure in the new EU system

Does all this mean that “Europe” now has – to quote Henry Kissinger’s (in)famous joke – a single telephone number? Probably not. What the Lisbon Treaty may provide is a single Brussels-based switchboard and a directory encompassing the new threesome leadership (Barroso, Van Rompuy, Ashton) and, arguably, also the rotating EU presidency, which remains alive and kicking in a number of areas – and possibly even the European Parliament, boosted by new powers and increasingly similar to the US House of Representatives in terms of role and modus operandi. Still, while the main players are in place now and starting their work, the new Lisbon system may need some time to take root and shape.

Antonio Missiroli (Director of Studies, EPC)