



BULLETIN

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COMMENTARY

Editors: Jacek Foks (Editor-in-Chief), Łukasz Adamski, Beata Górka-Winter, Leszek Jesień,
Łukasz Kulesa, Marek Madej, Beata Wojna, Ernest Wyciszkievicz

Permanent President of the European Council for Six Months in Office: a Balance Sheet

by Paweł Tokarski

The recent European Council (EC) summit on 17 July evidenced the growing role of the EC permanent President Herman Van Rompuy. Despite many critical comments which his election was first greeted with, after six months in office he already has a strong position and is highly spoken of by commentators and politicians. The assumption by Belgium of the presidency of the European Council on 1 July 2010 will be conducive to strengthening his function further.

Under the Treaty of Lisbon, the permanent President of the European Council is elected by the EU heads of state or government for a two-and-a-half year term, renewable. Herman Van Rompuy was designated permanent President on 17 November 2009 and took office on 1 December, immediately after the Treaty of Lisbon had come into force. The first six months of his presidency have now passed.

Assessment. Initially, most analysts were disappointed with the election of Herman Van Rompuy for the permanent President of the EC, on the grounds that he had a low public profile and lacked the charisma befitting a future “Mr. Europe.” Others, however, emphasized his experience in multilateral negotiations acquired in Belgian politics, also as the head of a five-party coalition government. Yet in his first months in office Herman Van Rompuy has shown himself to be an effective politician and a skillful negotiator. He has strengthened his position vis-à-vis the Parliament, the Commission and the Member States. EC meetings proceed very efficiently and politicians and officials attending them have emphasized, speaking off the record, that they are well organized: brief, but focused on concrete issues and largely dealing with current affairs. Van Rompuy prepares all meetings meticulously and, as he often asks his partners detailed questions, the attending politicians find it necessary to be thoroughly briefed before departing for a European Council summit. Moreover, President Van Rompuy has cut down the number of persons per delegation—a step facilitating the organization of meetings.

Van Rompuy is making a push for having one-day thematic EC meetings convened perhaps as often as on a monthly basis. He has already chaired two formal and one informal EC summits and two informal meetings of the eurozone leaders—five meetings in six months, all told. Obviously, the frequency of EC meetings is increasing.

Also, this permanent President adroitly solves problems arising from current policy. It was he rather than the European Commission that prepared, in connection with Greece's financial situation, the EC's position for the February 2010 summit of the European Council. This was due to him having carefully listened to proposals from the different states and having drawn up a detailed final position reflecting the interests of the main players in this matter: Germany, France and Greece. This shows a significant strengthening of the role of the permanent President of the European Council, who has been skillfully applying the provisions of the Treaty of Lisbon to build up his position.

Prospects. The growing importance of the position of the EC permanent President could lead to a dispute with the European Commission chief. José Manuel Barroso might find disturbing, for instance, the proposal that the economic coordination center be situated at the level of the EC rather than the European Commission. According to his announcement, the European Commission is due to prepare recommendations on this issue one month before Van Rompuy's special task force—a body charged with the task of publishing proposals on economic coordination in October 2010—finishes work. This could mean there is a rivalry, as the two teams are working independently.

The next six months can be expected to see a further strengthening of the position of the permanent President of the EC. Most likely, Van Rompuy will want to use to this end the Belgian presidency of the Council of the European Union (CEU). In connection with the approaching Polish presidency of the CEU, it should be noted that by then the function of the permanent President of the EC will have been strengthened enough for Van Rompuy to aspire to playing a role more important than has been customary. Also, he will be preparing for a possible re-election for the next two and a half years.