

Peter Lescouhier's Ambassadorial Lecture

LAURA CSEKE

Commercial Relations

There has been a lot of change that started with the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty in connection with external relations as well. However, although Lady Ashton is now responsible for external relations, external commercial relations are one of the few fields that remained in the course of competence of the rotating presidency. Of course, with the considerable increase in the role of the European Parliament the rotating presidency now functions mainly as a coordinator, finding a consensus between the Council and the European Parliament. Besides, the presidency can also act on the proposition of the European Commission. The constant involvement of the European Parliament also means that there is a growing tension in all questions that are out of the narrow scope of the commercial role. It means that decision-making has become more politicised. Before the Lisbon Treaty it was more the domain of experts but now there is a real debate with more elements to be taken into account. It also makes the process more difficult and that is why it is a huge achievement that the Belgian presidency managed the free trade agreement with South Korea, which is the most important free trade agreement the EU has made so far with a third country. It also serves as the model for free trade agreements that are likely to be made with other countries as well. During the negotiations there has been more problems within the Council than with the EP but finally a consensus was reached.

When it comes to multilateral trade agreements, the EU is still committed to the Doha Round but as the tendency shows that it cannot be seen when it ends, the EU has to work on bilateral trade agreements as well. Recently, negotiations started with the MERCOSUR, Malaysia and Singapore. As long as multilateral negotiations are not completed, the EU has to find other means to promote its interest so these bilateral and regional negotiations will continue and there will be new ones as well.

Political Leadership and the Hungarian presidency

It is a challenge for the new Hungarian government to build all the contacts needed for an efficient presidency and to oversee the complexity of the issues but it mostly depends on the quality of the people working on it. The preparations are going quite smoothly and although there are some new issues on the table from the new Hungarian government they can work hand in hand with the Trio of the rotating presidency and they maintain very good relations. It was the first Trio ever to submit a common, ready-made framework for the whole 18 months of the three presidencies and it shows excellent cooperation among the Trio members. It is also very positive that the Hungarian government declared that they will not put the national interest before the European agenda. The administration is convinced that the role of the European presidency is to bring the EU agenda forward and Belgium is willing to give all assistance needed to achieve the common goals. During the preparatory negotiations this trio was a very effective one with three countries having the same line of ideas. Also, there was a continuity in cooperation with the new Hungarian government. There is a very delicate balance in the cooperation within the leadership. As not everything is written in the Lisbon Treaty it is the question of personal contact between the people to reach workable solutions. The new system requires shaping the roles of the leaders of the EU. Working out all the details to decide what is the competence of the actors in the EU leadership requires a lot of energy but it is very useful because once a common agreement is reached, that practice will be used in the forecoming presidencies as well. The rotating presidency is now trying to establish a kind of modus vivendi in the leadership and this is the Trio that tests the new regulations.

Energy supply and the relationship with Russia

There are differences in the situation regarding energy supply among the member states. For example Belgium doesn't have any problems as far as the diversity of supplies are concerned but this is not the case in Central and Eastern Europe where the countries are extremely dependent on Russia. This difference does not matter during the negotiations with Russia and it is very important to speak with one voice and not by bilateral contacts. Besides, there has been an improvement in a way that it is a positive signal that President Medvedev agreed to join the cooperation on security issues and to participate the negotiations in Lisbon.

The rise of extremism

It is a very difficult political situation also in Belgium, in the Netherlands, in Hungary and in other EU countries as well. Belgium has no specific position on the issue so far but they are very concerned about the phenomenon.

Cyprus

The rotating presidency has already arranged discussion on the highest level. The Belgian presidency is trying to implement steps to encourage both parties to come up with confidence-bulding measures. It is crucially important to clear the situation as the accession status of Turkey is not in progress as long as the issue is not solved. It is the hope of the Belgian presidency to open one chapter during its presidency and it is a chance for the Hungarian presidency to open another. It makes the situation more complicated that UN is the main mediator in the case but the EU can help by providing support, for example through the Green Line Regulation.

The recognition of countries

It is clearly the decision of each country whether to recognise a country and it will probably remain a sovereign national decision for a long time to be. In case of Kosovo, five members haven't recognised the country in spite of the pressure of the majority. Although, it is mainly because of internal reasons and these countries are physically participating in several programs and projects in Kosovo. Finally, it is about legislation. It would be easier to make agreements if all the states recognised it but the EU functions based on law and it is not part of the *acquis communautaire*.

The answers written above were provided to student's questions during the Q&A session following the lecture entitled 'Ambassadorial Lecture Series - 'Belgium - President of the EU Council' by Pierre LABOUFFERIE, the Ambassador for Belgium in Budapest, Peter LESCOUHIER, the Counselor and Liaison Diplomat for the Trio Presidency for Belgium, and Péter BALÁZS, professor at CEU, Former Minister of External Affairs on 22 Oct 2010 at the Central-European University, Budapest.

*

www.southeast-europe.org
see@southeast-europe.org

© DKE 2010.