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New faces in top EU ranks and implications for Turkey

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The Lisbon Treaty, meant to introduce the much-needed reform to improve the institutions, structuring and functioning of the European Union, came into effect on December 1, 2009. A detailed overview of the Treaty, the changes it introduces and the implications for the future of the Union are published by TEPAV simultaneously with this note¹. Among other issues, a significant feature of the Treaty, which was an attempt to recover certain tenets of a stillborn EU Constitution, was devising and manning (sic) two new posts: a president of the European Council and a high representative for EU's foreign affairs and security policy, i.e. a quasi-foreign minister of the Union. The implications of the Lisbon Treaty for Turkey and the Turkish accession may likely go beyond the institutional and the formal changes involved. Hence, a glimpse of the new posts created by the Treaty and the figures who occupy them, as well as the change of the Enlargement Commissioner is warranted.

The ratification of the Lisbon Treaty in member states was followed by a political process where the Union was embroiled in weeks of scuffles in order to come up with names to fill the posts. As the Treaty had failed to specify the precise job descriptions for the posts, and the member countries were far from any consensus regarding the issue, the negotiations proved quite thorny, even by European standards. The debates were on the one hand indicative of the way countries perceive the EU and its identity, and on the other hand produced some intriguing outcomes: Major countries known for their federalist tendencies resisted the idea of a strong president whereas a notoriously Eurosceptic / Transatlanticist country like Britain pushed for a major name, albeit one of its own. Ultimately, the outcome proved that the EU national leaders, however federalist their aspirations may be, were neither ready nor willing to face rivalry on world stage.

A prominent candidate for the presidency seat was former British PM Tony Blair, whose nomination sparked great opposition among the leading member countries of the Union that eventually turned out to be aspiring to see less influential and impressive figures on the job: not a president par excellence, but rather a chairman; not a spearhead, but rather a figurehead, in fact, whose presence would symbolize coherence and continuity, and not much more. To be truthful, the role itself is probably designed to be symbolic anyway, considering the fact that it hardly has any bureaucratic mechanism underneath or any substantial budget.

The selection of Herman Van Rompuy, The Belgian Prime Minister, as the "President of Europe" has indeed signaled the reluctance of the top member countries to "let go" of their powers to set the

¹ See Nilgün Arisan Eralp, Lisbon Treaty and Turkey at a First Glance

agenda and to make the decisions. A low-key figure, Van Rompuy is known to be a witty politician and a man of arbitration and reconciliation, and has won credit for keeping Belgium intact at a time of crisis when the cries for the division of the country abounded. The controversial points about him are few, if not insignificant: his lack of star quality, and his views over the membership Turkey.

Mr. Van Rompuy's name had been on the agenda for more than a few weeks now, but Turkey had typically failed to figure out the persona and the implications of his candidacy until after he won the seat. Only then has he stirred some sentiments within Turkey, anxiety and fury, as typical, due to former remarks on the Belgian Parliament floor: "Turkey is not a part of Europe and will never be part of Europe... The universal values which are in force in Europe, and which are also fundamental values of Christianity, will lose vigour with the entry of a large Islamic country such as Turkey."

The words were, in fact, hardly surprising coming from a right-wing politician, particularly one in the opposition seat. Aides and consultants were quick to point the latter fact out, trying to assure the Turks and pro-Turkish circles that "the head that wears a crown gets smarter," as the old Turkish saying goes. Past evidence confirms that few leaders prove persistent on issues as intricate as this once they assume their post in power; and even fewer ones can afford to be obstinate when they take a position among ranks of the EU institutions apart from the Parliament. Van Rompuy's personal views on Turkey's membership, should he still maintain them, will probably see much less sunlight and have much less resonance in terms of the way relationships unfold, compared to, say Mr. Sarkozy.

The other post that the Lisbon Treaty enacted, the high representative for foreign affairs and security policy, was filled by Baroness Catherine Ashton, former Trade Commissioner. She lacked experience in foreign affairs and had never assumed an elected post. Commentators maintain that Lady Ashton, was chosen for three qualities of hers: for being a woman – in order to place a female official in a top-level office; for being left-wing – in order to balance both the choice of Herman Van Rompuy and his stance in his office; and for being a Briton – in order to appease or pay back the British after having turned Tony Blair down, and to win hitherto problematic British support in foreign affairs matters. Contrary to the position of Mr. Van Rompuy, Lady Ashton's office comes with a generous budget and some 3,000 staff. Supporters name her a negotiator and a deal-maker, while opponents name her ineffective and obscure.

The fact that both figures were virtually anonymous a few weeks ago raises skepticism over their capacity to fulfill the requirements of their posts and commentators voice curiosity whether all the arduous effort for the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty was in vain. Many are tempted to see the attitude of the member states as one of tokenism and deferral of the reform potential of the Lisbon Treaty to an indefinite date to come. One should still give Mr. Van Rompuy and Lady Ashton the benefit of the doubt, however. After all, a 27-member bloc is likely to reap more benefits out of consensus builders and gap fillers than leader-minded spokespeople who may be tempted to have their own way. Furthermore, as

the expectations are low from such low-profile figures, any success counts, whereas a political star would raise expectations and would probably fail to fulfill them.

Finally, a couple of words are warranted on Mr. Štefan Füle, the new Enlargement Commissioner who replaced Olli Rehn, a figure whose name had become a daily item for Turks. Mr. Füle has also assumed the responsibility for the neighbourhood policy of the Union. The twin facts that he comes from the Czech Republic and he has a background as the EU minister of his country imply that he will have both a solid understanding about the workings of the EU and a reasonably favourable approach to Turkey. After all, Czech Republic is known to be among the more Turcophile camp, and endorses the “pacta sunt servanda” attitude concerning Turkish membership. To do that, however, Füle will need to face the challenge of overcoming the current impasse in EU-Turkey relations and revive the stalled negotiations.

These features add to the usual fair-handed approach of the Commission as opposed to the other institutions, implying that Turkey will not have a particularly difficult time with Füle. Nevertheless, the same cannot be argued for the relationship reversed: Difficult times await Füle as the Cypriot question comes to a crossroads, having immediate and possibly severe bearings on the Turkish accession process. If the Cypriot reconciliation fails and Turkey’s negotiations come to a moment of rupture, Füle will probably face the greatest test of his post. Even if that is not the case, though, not much can be expected from Füle’s term in office in terms of progress in Turkey’s accession talks considering the lack of political will on both sides.

All in all, the initial indications are that neither the posts themselves nor the figures that occupy them are likely to have any major immediate implications for Turkey or its accession process. However, there is a possibility that the performance of both the Treaty itself and the new faces among the European top brass will have a moulding impact on the future of the EU, thereby fundamentally altering the course of Turkey-EU relations. Whether the change will be for better or for worse, we will have to wait and see.