

## VIEWS FROM THE CAPITALS - BRUSSELS

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Belgian Prime Minister Herman Van Rompuy 's appointment as the first president of the European Council, coupled with Belgium's forthcoming turn in the second half of 2010 in the rotating EU Presidency might suggest that Belgium and the EU are closely intertwined. Yet in truth Europe is hardly an issue in the Belgian political debate. Belgian politics are very inward-looking and chiefly characterised by a permanent search for balance between the country's divergent ideological groups and language communities. Following the last federal elections in June 2007, the political battle between the two language communities has intensified. In Flanders, the Christian Democrats led by the current Belgian premier Yves Leterme delivered a convincing electoral victory, for Leterme promised far-reaching institutional reforms that included devolving more power to the regions and dividing the electoral district around Brussels to reduce the influence of Francophone politicians.

During negotiations on a new federal government, the differences between the Flemish and the francophone Walloons were such that took nine months before a coalition of Dutch-speaking and French-speaking Christian Democrats and Liberals, supplemented with francophone Socialists could be formed. Headed by Leterme, the government stumbled from one deadlock to another and after only a few months Leterme submitted his resignation to King Albert II, but it was not accepted. The autumn 2008 financial crisis moved institutional issues more into the background, not least because Belgium's largest banks got into such serious financial trouble. The sale of Fortis to France's giant BNP Paribas, following which dissatisfied shareholders took Fortis to court, saw allegations of illegal contacts between some judges and politicians and led to Leterme's resignation at the end of 2008 when he was succeeded by Herman Van Rompuy.

Van Rompuy calmed tempers by putting less emphasis on institutional issues, and in any case the deepening economic crisis, especially the future of Antwerp's large Opel plant, deflected attention from such contentious issues as the federal budget and diverging positions over Belgian asylum and migration policies.

Van Rompuy's surprise appointment as "European President" saw Leterme return to office as Prime Minister, and in the coming months Belgian politics are once again likely to centre around institutional issues, with the attention given to European politics triggered by Van Rompuy's more likely to be short-lived. The fact that one of the most pro-European countries shows only scant interest in the EU is remarkable paradox. It is a lack of interest that exists not only among the general public but also among politicians. Last year the European Court of Justice ruled that Belgium had failed on 16 different occasions to transpose European directives. Seldom has a country been reprimanded so often in the course of a single year. The Commission's latest overview shows Belgium to be currently facing 88 infringement procedures at the court on the grounds of non- or poor transposition of European directives, with only Spain and Italy the objects of a greater number of cases. In the last three years, the number of cases against Belgium has risen by 50%.

What of the Belgian Presidency? In years past the politicians used the country's turn in the EU Presidency to speed-up clearing the transposition backlog. But today there

are few indications that this will happen and it looks as if the presidency programme will chiefly be organised by senior officials and diplomats, as neither government ministries nor parliamentarians appear particularly interested. It's a strange contrast with Belgium's higher profile in the ranks of EU leaders.

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