

REFLECTIONS ON THE LISBON TREATY ONE YEAR ON: WHILE THE 'TRAFFIC JAM' PERSISTS

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A year has already elapsed since the Treaty of Lisbon came into effect on December 1st, 2009. It was a day that marked a crucial climax after eight years of strenuous efforts – on the part of EU policy makers – to strike some kind of agreement, not only on the new treaty structure, but on the structure of the 'new' Europe that the 'cream of the crop' was trying to build.

The whole process formed part of a highly ambitious project, which began from Laeken in 2001 with the European Convention on the 'Future of Europe'. Its proceedings ultimately led to the drawing up of the 'Draft Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe'. Yet by 2005 things went astray when a French "non" and a Dutch "nee" essentially buried the ratification process and of course the Constitutional Treaty itself. This was topped with a self-styled 'period of reflection' that led to the adoption of the new Reform Treaty – a process that culminated with two referendum rounds in Ireland, in the midst of a set of concessions given to the Irish people; and all these in the background of firm Polish resistance to ratifying the document, a Czech 'parody', and intense criticism of the new Treaty throughout the EU.

December 1st, 2009 was nevertheless a day of celebrations in Brussels that was naturally brightened with countless 'kodak' moments outside the headquarters of the organisation, all capturing the two 'colossal' figures that featured in the newly-tailored EU top posts – former Belgian Prime Minister, Herman Van Rompuy, and former Trade Commissioner, Baroness of Upholland, Catherine Ashton – two personalities that almost naturally came to blend in, just before the end of the eight-year long 'charade'. A set of new hopes and expectations came with these new appointees, as it was with great faith that many spoke of a new EU that would now have the ability to "stop the traffic in Beijing and Moscow"; of an EU that would be more efficient and coherent and would bring its citizens closer to the institutional design by enhancing its democratic legitimacy.

A year on and we can only still but wonder just how elusive a picture the EU has attempted to project. Has the democratic deficit even been remotely bridged? Has the EU come closer to its people – its alleged 'demos'? How much more effective has the executive arm of this organisation become when the main treaty provision that aimed at enhancing the Commission's efficiency was aborted following the disaster of the first Irish referendum? The irony in this was the very fact that the original treaty provision, concerning the reduction of the Commission's size, was being projected as an indispensable step in the direction of installing the lacking institutional solutions, against the

threat of engulfing the procedural mechanisms both of the EU's bureaucratic engine and its institutional structure as a whole.

What about the application of provisions concerning subsidiarity? How has the role of national parliaments in effect been reinforced through the theoretically appealing concept of 'orange cards', which seemed to magically address the democratic deficit question? What of the practical significance of the 'European Citizens' Initiative' – the intentionally vague provision giving the right to one million citizens, from a significant number of member states (!), to take the initiative of inviting the European Commission to submit appropriate proposal on matters where citizens consider that a legal act of the Union is required?

It is amidst such blurry questions and in the forefront of ambivalent Franco-German proposals for Treaty amendments that euroscepticism continues to haunt an elite-dominant structure. On top of that, today's ever-deepening economic crisis is not filling Europe's citizens with any optimism, both in the PIIGS economies of the Union and beyond. And where is the forceful EU leadership that the Treaty had promised? Not only do we suffer today from a serious lack of vigorous European state leaders, bearing the prestige of past statesmen such as Köhl or Mitterrand, but on top of that we can only but question the aptitude of the new 'messiahs'. Is indeed the successful coalition-builder of the Belgian communities the person that can provide this ambitious structure with effective leadership? Or is a Baroness that can hardly "stop the traffic" in Upholland, the person to "stop the traffic in Beijing and Moscow"?