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Background vocals

The role of the rotating Presidency in the EU's external relations post-Lisbon

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Abstract

The Lisbon Treaty implemented crucial changes among the institutions of the European Union appointing new actors with new tasks in the field of external relations. These changes affected and re-structured the role of the rotating Presidency to a great extent therefore it is relevant to analyse the roles of the post-Lisbon rotating Presidency. This research aims to answer the question to what extent the rotating Presidency still plays a role in the EU's external relations. In order to understand the diverse functions of the rotating Presidency the thesis applies different levels of analysis (member state, EU, international) linking these levels to various role definitions (agenda-shaper, consensus-builder, external representative) deriving from former Treaty interpretations and practice. Evaluating the main changes of the Lisbon Treaty according to the competences shows the expectations about the multiple roles of the rotating Presidency in external relations.

Whereas theory and practice do not always correspond to each other and therefore, the 'transitional' rotating Presidencies have the possibility to set the stage in the institutional structure the thesis focuses on the practice of the Belgian (2010 second half) and the Hungarian (2011 first half) Presidencies and highlights cases during their terms. The cases prove that the transitional period of the Lisbon system is full of uncertain institutional affairs that often result in controversial issues, especially concerning EU level arrangements. The cases respectively are the EU-Korea Free Trade Agreement; the UNEP Mercury, the Cancún Conference and the UNFF Forestry case; and the Libyan crisis.

Besides the competences, there are other features (flexibility, attitude, internal and external environment) which have to be taken into account while speaking about role expectations. The thesis concludes that the role and influence of the rotating Presidency remain, however, a shift towards the EU's internal level taking the important role of a consensus-builder can be observed. Flexibility and collaborative attitude towards the still pre-mature institutional arrangements seem to be both welcomed to create an appropriate 'code of conduct' among the main actors of the EU's external relations.

Concerning the methodology and resources the thesis relies on EU documents, interviews and publications about ongoing events. With regards to limitations, at the time of writing the Hungarian Presidency was still ongoing therefore academic literature about its role was difficult to find. The interviews however, were very useful during the research.