

Current political changes in the European institutions: How do you get ready?

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Important political changes are taking place in the European institutions: European citizens just elected the new Members of European Parliament (one of the two legislative bodies of the EU) and a new College of Commissioners of the European Commission (the executive body of the EU) will be appointed during the autumn 2009. Both Parliament and Commission renewals are proving to be more cumbersome than ever and uncertainty under the rules that will govern the EU institutions risks creating some confusion on how to approach the EU institutions.

Knowing how the European institutions will look like in the coming months and getting prepared to effectively influence them constitutes a key information for any interest group.

The European Parliament

375 million of European citizens from 27 Member States elected on 4/7 June their representatives at the European Parliament. With no surprise the EPP-ED (Group of the European People's Party and European Democrats) has been reconfirmed as the biggest political group followed by the PSE (Socialist Group) and the ALDE (Group of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe). Some negotiations for the formation of new minor political groups are under going and will be known only in the coming weeks.

In the course of June and July the new European Parliament will be in place and ready for a new 5-years legislature but with one caveat: the number of its deputies will depend on the approval of the Lisbon Treaty by the Irish population. In autumn Irish people will be voting for the second time on the Lisbon Treaty via a referendum (the first time was on June 2008 when they rejected it). If the Irish referendum approves Lisbon Treaty the Parliament will have to increase its members from 736 to 751 in the course of 2010.

The European Commission

The outcome of the referendum will affect also the Commission's appointment. Indeed under the current Nice Treaty the Commission will have to reduce its dimension and this implies that one or more countries will lose its Commissioner. On the contrary if the Lisbon Treaty is approved and will then govern the EU replacing the Nice Treaty, the European Commission will not be reduced. Another important implication of the Lisbon Treaty is the creation of new EU senior positions such as a permanent president of the European Council and a high representative for foreign and security policy (who will also be vice-president of the Commission).

It is then obvious in which extent the vote on the Lisbon Treaty is linked to the future of EU institutions. At the moment is not clear whether EU leaders will decide to wait for the outcome of the Irish referendum to renovate the Commission or if they will decide to nominate a new Commission under the Nice Treaty rules that could risk falling already in autumn if the Lisbon Treaty is approved. The only certainty seems to be on the appointment of the new President of the Commission that will have to be nominated with no delay at the first plenary session of the newly elected Parliament in July.

How do you get ready?

This uncertainty on the institutions' future is producing an inescapable delay on the legislative agenda which is affecting, among others, associations and interest groups. So what can an association do to adapt itself to this situation and to the upcoming changes within the institutions?

§ With regards to the European Parliament it is of paramount importance to keep an active dialogue with the representatives of the main political groups: at this stage Political Groups secretariats can play a very important role in ensuring continuity and in providing intelligence on positioning once the new Parliament is in place. Once the Parliament is formed you should make sure to map key Members of European Parliament (MEPs) in relation to your area of interest. You may want to present your association to new MEPs. In order to do so you shall make sure that you are prepared with all the necessary documentation in the key languages of the European Union (at least English and French) where you list your priorities (maximum

five) to present the short term goals of your association. The documents addressed to the newly elected MEPs should be clear and short (one page document). You should think out of the box on how to get the MEPs' attention: there will be a lot of competition in getting their attention and an original communication tool might be the best solution. A very important step once the Parliament is in place is to hold courtesy meetings with the MEPs that will or might cross your association in the course of the next legislature. This should be done as soon as possible in order to ensure visibility to your association.

- § On the Commission side, since cabinets' members only will change in autumn 2009 leaving unchanged most of the commission officials of the different Directorates General the best thing to do is to continue dialogues with those officials because they are the ones handling dossiers and they will stay. In this uncertain situation it is also advisable to ensure that members of your association are aware of the almost definite delays that will take place regarding any upcoming issues/dossiers of importance: an outgoing College of Commissioners will be reluctant to make important decisions that would tie the hands of the next administration.