

The European Commission 2004-09: A politically weakened institution? Views from the National Capitals

Published at: 11-09-2009

Source: [Portal Europe](#)



Selected from the EPIN Working Papers: No. 23: The European Commission 2004-09: A politically weakened institution? Views from the National Capitals by Piotr Maciej Kaczyński et al., May 2009.

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The Barroso Commission is coming to an end. At this stage it is impossible to foresee when the end will be or if the new (old) Commission President will be (re)elected in July 2009 by the new European Parliament. Nevertheless, based on the survey results of experts in 25 EU member states¹, the following picture of the European Commission emerges:

First, the Commission remains at the centre of European decision-making process. At the same time however, its political position seems to have weakened since 2004. The national capitals' perception is that it has lost out vis-a-vis other institutions, especially the Council of Ministers.

Within the Council the Commission is perceived as being largely dependent on bigger member states. This view is shared by both the bigger (especially France and Germany) and smaller nations.

Second, the Commission seems to be losing political leadership in the Union. It is more and more perceived as serving the interests of the larger member states, sometimes even at the expense of smaller ones. The dominant perception is that among the European institutions the lowest common denominator is no longer determined as it was by the Council, because the Commission is increasingly anticipating national positions at an earlier stage and taking them into account at the preparatory level. Hence, it is no longer the institution that seeks the higher standards of 'Community interest' – this may well be the role for the new European Parliament.

Even if not all countries share these perceptions, there was not a single member country claiming that the Commission is gaining (rather than losing) ground vis-a-vis the other institutions; that it has improved its independence record against the larger nations or that it seeks higher standards rather than the lowest common denominator. At the same time the Commission's greatest success –

and also uncontested – is the adoption of the Climate and Energy Package. The activities in these policy areas are the most appreciated across the EU.

The single most important failure was the inability to foresee and respond to the financial and economic crisis. The Commission’s actions were largely viewed as “too little too late”.

It is not the purpose of this report to determine whether these perceptions are true or false. But the very debate about and perception of the European Commission by national political elites and the general public alike has some impact on its proceedings.

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