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In November the EU elected a Chairman of the European Council and a High Representative of the EU for Foreign Policy and Security. These are the new top-positions established through the Lisbon Treaty. Mass media have chosen to call them "President" and "Foreign Minister" of the EU. The first holders of these top-positions are Belgian Herman Van Rompuy and British Baroness Catherine Ashton. The subject of today's edition from the series ["Interacting with the EP"](#) is about the two new figures heading the EU and the expectations, tasks and perspectives for their work. This feature is jointly put through by Radio Bulgaria, the European Institute, Portal EUROPE and the Center for Modernizing Policies.

Let us remind that the nominations for the new top jobs in the EU - Herman Van Rompuy for President and Baroness Catherine Ashton for Foreign Minister met with ambiguous response. Being relatively less known outside Brussels both politicians are viewed rather as consensus figures. We have turned for comments to **Rebecca Harms, co-chair of the group of Greens / European Free Alliance at the EP.**

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"Both nominees or chosen, elected persons from the last special summit for being president of the European Council and high representative of the European Union, are not well-known, not famous in a European context. Herman Van Rompuy has been for some time Belgian prime minister. He is seen as

someone who could solve the problems in Belgium, but so far he has only announced ways to deal with the deep, deep problems there – between the people from Wallonia and from Flanders. Lady Ashton is not very well known outside Brussels either. In Brussels she is very well known, because she was a very successful commissioner for foreign trade after Peter Mandelson. She managed to clean up the mess he left, so she is seen for her work so far as competent, efficient and very professional. In the European Parliament she is known as a person who has fought in the UK in favor of the Lisbon Treaty.”

Wasn’t it better for European citizens to elect the EU President through direct voting the way we elect the members of the European parliament?

“This is not the state of European integration that we have so far. It is quite clear that he also represents the governments of the member states. He is someone who should be loyal to the governments and to national parliaments. I think that national parliaments in the coming years should take much more seriously their role to control the European Council, and to be the ones who control the work of the president of the council in Brussels.”

Herman Van Rompuy belongs to the European Right while Catherine Ashton is the nomination of European Socialists. “Does the appointment of European President and Foreign Minister satisfy your feeling of balance between Left and Right?” The question is put to **Ivailo Kalfin, MEP from the group of Socialists and Democrats** and former Bulgarian foreign minister.

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“Generally leftist governments are a lot less in the EU so that would have a positive effect on the overall composition of the Commission. It is a nice principle and that is the way the EC functions – never to leave all positions to a single political force. Among the three most important posts – EC President, President of the EU and High Representative for foreign policy and security, two are given to the left and the third one – on foreign policy – to the second largest floor at the European Parliament, the group of the Socialists. I think this is a good decision.”

What is the role of MEPs in the control over the President and the Foreign Minister?

“The President of the EU is not subject to control on the part of the European Parliament, Kalfin goes on to say. If you ask me, and I think this is the opinion of many other people, since there is a president, the best thing would be for him to be directly elected by the people. Also, he should be a strong figure truly symbolizing the European Union. The President of the EU is appointed, negotiated by the 27 member-states. So Mr. Van Rompuy is not a widely known and charismatic leader. But he has the biography of a very efficient politician in Belgium. So this is what the Lisbon Treaty gives an opportunity to be done. On the other hand the high representative for foreign policy is a European Commissioner – the second most important figure in the EP, Deputy Chair of the Commission and as each commissioner he is subjected to a procedure of approval in Parliament and then would be subjected to control in his work.”

What is the function of the President as defined by the Lisbon Treaty? We have turned to the analysis of **David Kral, director of the EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy.**

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“Well the functions of the Presidents in the Lisbon Treaty, the European Council President, which is sometimes referred to as the European President are not very clearly defined. Basically if we are looking at the wording of the Treaty, the competences are described in quite vague a way and I think it must be underlined that at the moment there is not much clarity about what we actually expect from the President. I think that what is going to be particularly important in the first phase is that the President would be the internal broker among the different groups and groupings among the member states in the European Council – let’s say between the big and the small member states, between the poor and the richer for instance; on the budget issues between pro-American or less pro-American member states on the foreign policy and so on and so on. I think this would be the most important thing after the function is established – as the agenda setter, I mean providing longer term strategic vision of the European Union. I have my doubts and I think very much would depend on the practice we will see emerging in the first a few, let’s say years of the existence of this function. But I think that the agenda will continue being set by the European Commission on one side and on the other hand – by the big member states; as well as the external factors as we have seen in the case of the economic crisis. There is also a third important function or competence so to say and that is to represent the

European Union at the highest international level. Here as in the second case of the agenda-setter I also have my doubts, that Mr. Van Rompuy would be actually a kind of strong personality that would be able to talk as a pair to President Obama or Prime Minister Putin. And I think also the choice shows a lot – especially the big states like France and Germany are at the moment not able to or rather not willing to have such a strong personality in the ham of the European Union.”

Should European citizens have confidence in the new top figures and why?

“I think there is a fundamental problem regarding the citizens’ confidence in these new top figures. And that comes from the way they have been elected or rather appointed. I am very hesitant to say that these figures have been actually elected because the election is always a kind of competitive race, which comes through in the elections and that is not the case that we have seen. It’s been said many times that this is basically on the agreement of the member states which is made behind closed doors. I think a lot of people, including senior political analysts across Europe are very much surprised with the outcome of the European Council summit last Thursday. So it’s clearly missing – this link between these top jobs as we have got to call them and the citizens. And from that perspective I think we cannot have high expectations because citizens always tend to link more to the persons they kind of have a say over selecting or electing.”

The next topic in our series will be the composition of the new European Commission.

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