

Swedish Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt holds a Rubik's Cube depicting EU President Herman Van Rompuy, left, European Commission President José Manuel Barroso, center, and European Commission Vice President Catherine Ashton.



EU with One Voice

New president will boost union's world affairs role

Photos by Agence France-Presse

The European Union now has a new president, which gives the union one voice. Belgian Prime Minister Herman Van Rompuy became the first EU president. He took office Dec. 1, 2009, and will serve a 2 1/2-year term. Catherine Ashton, Britain's EU trade commissioner, is the union's new high representative for foreign affairs and security policy. She is also vice president of the European Commission.

Creation of the two posts took place after the Czech Republic completed and registered its national ratification in November 2009. As these key leaders take on their roles and responsibilities, the transition has reportedly gone more smoothly than originally anticipated.

Van Rompuy will be responsible for chairing council meetings and representing the EU on the global stage. He will also represent the council in relations with other EU institutions. His goals include helping Europe recover from the financial crisis and addressing climate change. He believes the Copenhagen climate talks failed to meet expectations but were a good foundation for further work.

"It's very important to show that everyone has a say, that this is the Europe of 27, that everyone was actually in on this decision," Swedish Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt said on Germany's Deutsche Welle

international broadcasting service online. He chaired the selection committee.

With the two new posts, the Lisbon Treaty — which also took effect Dec. 1, 2009 — aims to enhance the EU's role in world affairs and streamline its decision making, the EU reported on its Web site.

The treaty redistributes voting weights between member countries, removing national vetoes in a number of areas. It expands the commission's powers and greatly increases Parliament's involvement in the legislative process. A new petition process will give citizens the opportunity to directly influence EU policy. The human rights charter becomes legally binding.

Van Rompuy has been president of the Belgian coalition government. His tenure has seen a calming of the often turmoil-stricken Belgian government, and he is a consensus builder, the Deutsche Welle article added.

During the late 1990s, Van Rompuy was Belgium's budget minister. Some consider him a budgetary hardliner, and he has been critical of governments spending their way out of recession. Before entering politics, he was with the Belgian central bank. He has authored six books on economics and politics.

Van Rompuy accepted the post with "enthusiasm and conviction" and promised a two-track approach, prizing unity as the EU's strength but also promoting diversity as its wealth, he said in a report by Britain's *The Guardian* newspaper in November 2009.

Once in office, Van Rompuy immediately started a European tour, highlighting the great effort countries will have to make to achieve a lasting recovery from the economic crisis. "One thing is already clear: We need economic growth which is sustainable and which is at least 2 percent instead of the projected structural growth of 1 percent in order to preserve our social model as well as to keep up with the other major economies in the world," Van Rompuy said in a statement reported by EurActiv, an independent media Web site for EU affairs. He added that he would not implement his political agenda without agreement from London, Rome, Paris, Warsaw and Berlin.

Ashton's post merges two existing positions: high representative for common foreign and security policy and commissioner for external relations, the European Commission Web site states. She has authority to propose defense and security measures. She must also set up a network of diplomats around the world to support the new office.

"She will be the first permanent chair of the European Union foreign affairs council; she will represent Europe on the world stage in negotiations with the United States, China, India, Russia and other countries," British Prime Minister Gordon Brown told Britain's *The Independent* newspaper in November 2009. "And she will be a vice president of the European Commission, giving her a leading voice on all the commission's proposals."

The foreign policy chief will have a budget worth billions of euros and a new diplomatic service of up to 5,000 people, the BBC reported in November 2009.

Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair requested that Ashton receive baroness status in 1999, enabling her to work in the House of Lords, where she served as undersecretary of state for several departments, including the Department for Education and Skills and the Ministry of Justice. She was leader of the House of Lords and lord president of the council, where she oversaw the approval of the Lisbon Treaty.

"Ashton replaced Lord [Peter] Mandelson as the European trade commissioner last October and has impressed her peers in Brussels ever since through quiet diligence on a difficult brief," *The Guardian* reported in November 2009. Ashton has never held elected office, but insists that will not be

a disadvantage. The EU's 27 elected heads of state all had a say in the appointment, "and they all decided on me."

Van Rompuy and Ashton have new duties and must lead while addressing new issues. They will also assume some of the duties of the EU's rotating presidency, now held by Spain, to make the union more efficient and cost effective. Some of those general duties include justice and home affairs, economic policies, the environment, agriculture and fisheries.

Deutsche Welle reported in January that the EU's rotating presidency still exists because national governments are unwilling to give up the position. EU member states want to maintain their influence in Brussels. Even so, Spanish Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos insists he will not try to dominate.

"The Lisbon Treaty is the beginning of a new Europe. This Europe will be led by the president of the permanent council, Mr. Van Rompuy, and by the high representative and vice president of the European Commission [Ashton]," Moratinos said. "Therefore, it will be up to them, to these two people, to manage, to boost, to represent the EU in the first half of 2010."

Van Rompuy and Ashton have assumed their posts at the beginning of a new stage of European politics. They will influence the new institutions by how well they manage the short term and how the rest of Europe perceives their management of European affairs.

"I intend to develop ongoing work on some thematic issues: nonproliferation, counterterrorism, human rights, energy and climate change," Ashton told the European Parliament in January 2010. "These are not 'stand alone issues,' but part of our broader agenda. And our strategies for dealing with them need to be joined up and comprehensive." □

EU President Herman Van Rompuy and Catherine Ashton, high representative for foreign affairs and security policy, are seen in Brussels.

