



The Current Column
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**Holiday time is reading time –
Today *The Current Column* asks,
“What may the President of the
European Commission be reading?”**

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Holiday time is reading time – Today *The Current Column* asks, “What may the President of the European Commission be reading?”

Bonn, 27 July 2009. August is well on its way, and the usually hectic course of day-to-day political business in Brussels, not to forget the other European capitals, is gradually giving way to a certain midsummer calm. With the second half of the year just getting underway, the Czech Council presidency concluded without any major rows, and the Swedes have been at the helm of the EU tanker since the month of July. Now, however – as ever in the month of August – Brussels is making ready for the summer holidays.

Be it St. Tropez, Scheveningen, Samos, or these islets off the Scandinavian coast: Europe will soon be on its way to the shores or mountains, taking advantage – often without giving it so much as even a thought – of the improvements in our quality of life achieved through the EU, including, to name just a few, visa-free travel, holidays spent without the need for bothersome currency calculations thanks to the Euro, cheaper roaming rates for our mobile phones (to keep us in touch with our loved ones at home), improved water quality on the Mediterranean, the Baltic Sea, or the pond just down the road. In Brussels' European Quarter, to the left and right of the rue de la Loi, the numbers of formally clad persons are visibly on the wane. Indeed, in the month of August this Belgian region is set to fall, as it invariably does, back into the hands of the Bruxellois, and their tourists. What, now, may a President of the European Commission be assumed to be reading in his holidays?

We are unlikely to find José Manuel Barroso at the seaside, letting his thoughts wander over one of those easy summer readings. The President of the European Commission is less than likely to unwind this much. Yes, the EU heads of state and government have nominated him unanimously to be his own successor – no small achievement when we consider that he needed the backing of a total of 27 decision-makers. But still, days of uninterrupted dreaming on the strands of Portugal are unlikely to be his part, for José Manuel Barroso has yet to be confirmed by the European Parliament.

The new, still youthfully impetuous, parliament in Strasbourg, with its Green faction recently strengthened and the Social Democrats sensitively weakened, is not about to make the Commission president's life any easier. Indeed, the MEPs are more likely to take advantage of the hearings set for the coming autumn to exact from him a list of commitments that may serve, at the end of the legislative term at the latest, to measure the performance of José Manuel Barroso. Should the European Parliament refuse to confirm him, or if the heads of state and government should have second thoughts on the matter, Senhor Barroso may find himself, in the autumn, with more leisure time on his hands than he had counted on: namely, as a political early retiree. The designated Commission president's working holiday agenda will, in any case, include the EU Commission's new personnel tableau. What we will continue to have is a total of 27 persons seated around the Commission table in Brussels, with each member state retaining its seat. That much is certain. But how, exactly, are the responsibilities of each portfolio to be configured? Javier Solana is retiring, but who is to succeed him? And come to think of it, in what office? And what does all this imply for Europe's partners in the rest of the world?

But to get back to our question, what will the President of the European Commission be reading in his holidays? Perhaps a classic like John Maynard Keynes' *General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*? That would be commendable, a good way to ensure that the Commission



president has plenty to talk about with his colleagues Gordon Brown and Nicolas Sarkozy, or even with Frau Merkel, when the holidays come to an end – for they, too, are likely to have taken the opportunity to cast the one or other glance into Keynes' book. On this point, though, our nominee is quite unlikely to be the right person to talk to for Brown or Sarkozy. Despite – or perhaps precisely on account of – the urgency and public attention the ongoing financial crisis has acquired, the EU Commission has thus far played a more or less subordinate role, with marked preference being shown for more national fares. So perhaps something else to while away the summer days.

Perhaps, say, something with a global policy twist: Parag Khanna, in his *The Second World: Empires and Influence in the New Global Order*, may oversimplify matters somewhat. Yet, his thesis on the three remaining world powers (the US, China, and Europe) does, at first glance, seem temptingly plausible. And there may be comfort in the thought that Europe is (still) counted among the world's great powers. For his part at least, Khanna seems not to be haunted by doubts when it comes to what is often considered the lowlands of European political life – like protocols on a second Irish referendum on the Treaty of Lisbon. This second referendum, set to be held on the emerald isle on the second of October, is likely to prove considerably more worrisome for the President of the European Commission than for an author like Khanna. And in view of a mounting set of global challenges, no one is likely to see a triumph in the fact that this or that writer continues to see Europe among the circle of the mighty.

The dossier on the European External Action Service (EEAS) is certainly no easy summer reading. And yet it will inevitably have its place on Barroso's holiday reading table. What, exactly, is this common diplomatic service supposed to deal with? And just how 'diplomatic' is it supposed to be? Development policy-makers are asking questions on the tasks the EEAS is to have, questions that need to be gauged in terms of what Europe has already promised its partners. Is development to be involved? Is, alongside the EEAS, the hand of development policy to be strengthened as well, and strengthened in a situation in which global crises increasingly call for collective responses, as European politician never tire of stressing? But how, exactly, is that supposed to function? What administrative capacities, what concrete financial resources are to go to the EEAS? And how, then, do you get 27 board members – pardon: members of the European Council – to agree? The President of the European Commission does not have an enviable job.

Dear José Manuel Barroso, perhaps it would be more advisable for you to opt – at least when you are done reading your dossier – for a whiff of escapism, to immerse yourself in the amusing adventures of Goscinny's "Petit Nicolas." Or to pull "Flash Gordon" out of your briefcase, to dream the dream of the hero intent on rescuing, if not the whole world, at least a fair damsel in distress, today's Europe, let us say. That will be the best way to put up with – a smile on your face – the national vagaries you are forced to witness in Paris, in London, and in many another European capital – at least in your holidays. The dreary everyday world of politics is bound to be back come September. An election campaign in Germany is unlikely to be much fun for a Commission president. And, sorry to say, global crises do not simply resolve themselves over the summer months: they, more persistent than that, call instead for a cooperation geared to coming up with concrete solutions.