



EU Facts Update: developments in the EU (August 2009)

Georgia-Russia Conflict

Long-term tension over two regions in Georgia, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, resulted in violence. Russia, which shares a border with Georgia, has supported the two separatist regions gaining independence.

Following increasing tension, on 7th August Georgian troops entered South Ossetia to regain control, but Russia reacted by sending troops “to force peace”. There were casualties on all sides and a disputed number of civilians killed. Russia’s response has been widely condemned as being “disproportionate” and, despite significant differences of opinion towards Russia, EU member states were urged to present a unified response to the crisis.

EU negotiators were sent to help the peace process and the EU endorsed the resulting ceasefire. The EU also sent aid to Georgia - €1m was pledged on 10th August and later increased to €6m. MEPs called for EU peacekeepers to be deployed in Georgia itself, but instead the EU agreed to send non-military “monitors”, on conditions demanded by Russia that they were approved by the UN. In order to preserve the unified EU position member states were encouraged not to assign blame for causing the conflict and the Council of Ministers delayed discussing potential diplomatic sanctions against Russia until September.

Despite the truce called on 13th August, Russian troops remained in Georgia and violence continued to be reported, leading to controversy over whether Russia had agreed to “withdraw” entirely from or merely “pull back” within Georgia. There was also criticism that the agreement French President Nicholas Sarkozy had helped negotiate included a loophole which allowed Russia “to implement additional security measures”, that is, to continue aggression against Georgia. The agreement also failed to set a deadline for Russia to cease its military action. Sarkozy commented that the Lisbon Treaty would have helped in the Russia-Georgia crisis, although he did not explain how it would have done so. Sarkozy later announced he would call an EU Council meeting to discuss France and Germany’s requests for EU sanctions against Russia if it did not fully pull out of Georgia. However, Russian President Medvedev formally recognised South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent regions. The EU condemned the highly aggressive diplomatic move and criticised it for being illegal under international law.

An emergency EU Council summit will be held on 1st September to discuss the repercussions of the conflict for EU-Russia relations, specifically with regards to new bilateral pact negotiations and development aid, which sees UK funds sent to Russia.

Lisbon Treaty

Ireland’s government insisted it will not hold a second referendum on the Lisbon Treaty “in the short term”, which may open the door for the issue of ratification to become a key factor in the 2009 European Parliament elections, in both Ireland and the UK.

There was a standing ovation in the Italian parliament when it ratified the Lisbon Treaty.

If it is successfully ratified, the Treaty will reduce the size of the EU Commission. Suggestions for how to decide which member states should lose their Commissioner included a proposal for the UK and Ireland to share a Commissioner.

Doha Trade talks fall-out

There were various attempts to attribute blame for last month’s breakdown of World Trade Organisation talks, where attempts to agree conditions and rules for international free trade failed, even amongst EU member states, which negotiate trade issues as a single body. For example it was suggested that the UK and Sweden wanted to accept the terms agreed by other WTO members but France, Italy and Hungary had refused. This raised the question of whether member states should be allowed to negotiate favourable trade relations individually when the EU as a whole cannot agree.

Beijing Olympics

The President of the EU Parliament Hans-Gert Pöttering called on athletes to protest at the 2008 Beijing Olympics and a majority of EU leaders boycotted the opening ceremony in Beijing, as a protest against China’s Human Rights record. The games were hailed as a success for the EU. Despite the fact that member states compete individually, as a whole the EU “won” the medals tally after gaining 87 gold medals, compared to China’s 51 and the USA’s 36 gold medals.

Member states

Denmark will not hold a referendum on its four opt-outs from the Lisbon Treaty. According to Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen, this is because of the uncertainty caused by Ireland's rejection of the Lisbon Treaty at a referendum earlier this year. Critics say Rasmussen's made the decision because he knows he won't win the referendum.

Finland's Aland Islands, which have some autonomy from Finland, threatened to reject the Lisbon Treaty. They are demanding representation in the EU Parliament and Council in return for signing the Treaty. Finland does not technically need the islands' consent, but the islands could jeopardise Finland's ratification of the Treaty, for example in 1995 the Aland Islands delayed Finland's EU membership.

Greece A Dutch court criticised Greece's treatment of asylum seekers and refused to send Somali asylum seekers back to Greece.

Sweden A controversial new law allowing the Swedish government to record cross-border Internet and telephone communications was criticised because it might violate EU law.

Slovakia The first Slovakian euro coins were produced to prepare for Slovakia joining the Eurozone in 2009.

UK London Mayor, Boris Johnson, was warned that the UK will face EU fines if London's air pollution doesn't improve. There were renewed calls for reforming the Common Fisheries Policy after UK fishermen dumped 5 tonnes of dead fish originally taken from Norwegian waters. This was illegal under Norwegian law, but EU rules forced fishermen to discard the fish. In 2007, 40-60% fish caught in the North Sea was discarded.

Bulgaria Protests have escalated since the EU stopped providing funds to Bulgaria last month as a punishment for corruption and organized crime. Milk producers, who have lost EU subsidies, set up a roadblock.

External States

Chad The EU's peacekeeping mission in Chad may be extended for 3 months.

Turkey In a high profile court case Turkey's AK Party, which currently forms the government, narrowly avoided being banned. It had been accused of 'anti-secular activities' but there had been concern that banning the party could jeopardise Turkey's attempt to join the EU.

Iran As a sign of improved relations, the EU announced it would hold talks with Iran. However, when Iran declared it would not stop its nuclear programme the EU reversed the decision and chose instead to increase sanctions against the state.

Kosovo The UN officially handed over responsibility for policing Kosovo to the EU. However the authority of "EULEX" (the police and civilian administration team) was challenged by Serbia and Russia, which claim that it is illegitimate because Kosovo's recent declaration of independence from Serbia was illegal. Serbia began a court case demanding the UN challenge Kosovo's independence.

Palestinian Authority The EU pledged to give the Palestinian Authority an extra €40m in aid. However MEP Dan Hannan criticised the move, claiming that the aid is actually fuelling the intense conflict in the area.

Other Events

EU Parliament ceiling collapse

Part of the ceiling of the EU Parliament building in Strasbourg collapsed. However the roof was fixed and the building will be ready when MEP's return from the summer holiday. The European Parliament's monthly relocation from Brussels to Strasbourg continues to be controversial because of the expense and environmental implications.

Police join forces in Paris

The concept of joint EU policing, as suggested in the EU's Prüm Treaty, was tested in Paris. French President, and also currently EU President, Nicholas Sarkozy endorsed the scheme whereby police from member states including Germany, Belgium, Netherlands, Spain and Poland patrolled together.

Rising phone bills

There was concern that rising mobile phone bills have been caused by the recent implementation of EU price controls. For example Vodaphone released a statement declaring it had increased its prices to cover "EU related losses".

Cigarettes sold within the EU must be "fire-safe" by 2011. The new variety of cigarette goes out after 1minute if it is not smoked. This reduces the risk of fires caused by forgotten cigarettes, but will also make cigarettes more expensive.

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