



EU Facts Update: developments in the EU (March 2008)

LISBON TREATY

- **Ireland:** On 3rd March, despite the Irish government's campaign a poll announced that less than 50% of the public in Ireland are in favour of the Lisbon Treaty. German Chancellor Angela Merkel announced she will visit Ireland (the only member state which has promised to hold a referendum on the EU Lisbon Treaty) in April.
- **UK:** On 11th March the House of Commons passed the Bill to ratify the Lisbon Treaty. Mp's voted against holding a nation-wide referendum on the Treaty. The Bill was passed on to be debated in the House of Lords, where its ratification will be finalised.
- **Poland:** On 17th March Poland's opposition Party, led by former Prime Minister Jaroslaw Kaczynski, threaten to reject the 'Lisbon Treaty'. The opposition were concerned that the new Treaty could "imposed" same-sex marriage on the country. They wanted confirmation that Poland's constitution would remain the highest law. Without the opposition's support Prime Minister Donald Tusk could have been forced to hold a referendum. However, a compromise was reached on 31st March.
- **Bulgaria:** An overwhelmingly majority ratified the Lisbon Treaty in Bulgaria on 25th March, bringing the total number of countries that had ratified the Treaty to 6.

FUTURE EU ENLARGEMENT:

- **Macedonia:** On 7th March Greece rejected Macedonia's application to join Nato. The two countries are having an on-going row over Macedonia's name. A region of Greece shares the same name.
- **Turkey:** On 17th March the EU backed the Turkish Prime Minister's opposition to a courts attempt to ban the ruling AK Party for "anti-secular activities".
- **Norway:** It was announced that Norway is unlikely to seek EU membership but it will encourage increased cooperation with the EU on energy, climate change and a closer alignment with its currency.
- **Croatia:** 2009 has been set as the deadline for concluding talks on Croatia's membership to the EU. On 13th March Croatia abandoned a fishing zone off its coast-line to further its bid for EU membership and shortly after, on 17th March, it announced it was likely to enter the EU in 2010.
- **Ukraine:** Ukraine's Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko asserted the country will become a member of EU.

EU MEMBER STATES:

- **Bulgaria:** EU Commission Barroso criticised the level of corruption in Bulgaria.
- **Italy:** On 12th March, the EU's Justice Commissioner Franco Frattini went on leave to campaign for former Italian President Berlusconi in the Italian elections. If Berlusconi wins, Frattini will become a member of the Cabinet. Also, on 29th March the EU ordered Italy to recall batches of buffalo mozzarella because of fears it had been contaminated with dioxin.
- **Cyprus:** Southern Cyprus' Greek leader, President Demetris Christofias, and North Cyprus' Turkish leader, Mehmet Ali Talat, announced they would meet within three months to discuss the possible unification of the country which has been divided for more than 30 years.
- **Belgium:** The election crisis finally ended 9 months after the country's general election. The new Government is a coalition of 5 parties led by Yves Leterme of the Flemish Christian Democrat (CD&V). The coalition has agreed on common political programme.
- **France:** President Sarkozy visited the UK on a state visit on 27th March. He met with the British Royal family and gave a speech to the UK Parliament in which he focused on the new role of EU President established by the Lisbon Treaty. He also asserted that France would seek "better ties with UK" and he called on the UK to "play a greater role in Europe". Sarkozy was accompanied by his new wife, former model, Carla Bruni who received a lot of attention from the media.
- **Spain:** Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero of the Socialist party was re-elected as Spain's Prime Minister in the 10th March general election. However he did not win an overall majority. Troubles shortly before the election causing huge differences of opinion between the Spanish people included a terrorist incident in which an ex-councillor was murdered, and economic troubles.

INTERNATION RELATIONS:

- **Beijing Olympics 2008:**

A crisis erupted in the run-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics. There were *protests in Tibet* on 10th March against Chinese rule and breaches of Human Rights, which escalated to violence and looting on 17th March. However, following widespread protest and violence in Tibet throughout March there was disagreement within the EU about China's harsh reaction towards the protestors in Tibet. Critics argued that this confusion "exposed the EU's lack of coordination on foreign policy". For example, the EU Commission has declared China its "strategic partners" and suspended Chinese charity 'ApTibet' because it had links to the Dalai Lama, Tibet's spiritual leader. However, in contrast, some member state *governments called for an EU wide boycott* of the Beijing Olympics, for example on 25th March EU Parliament President Hans Pöttering asserted that an Olympics boycott was 'justified'. Others argued for the need to keep sport and politics separate. EU foreign ministers met to discuss the Chinese government's severe handling of protestors in Tibet. However, on 31st March China announced that it was "strongly dissatisfied" that the EU had held such a meeting.

- **Cuba:** On 10th March EU development commissioner, Louis Michel asserted that the EU should drop trade sanctions against Cuba to start a "new era".

- **Russia:** Dmitry Medvedev was elected president of Russia on 2nd March. His victory did not surprise many people because he had been selected and backed throughout the election by the out-going President Vladimir Putin. As a result, many criticised the election as undemocratic. Europe's relations with Russia were tested again this month because of an on-going row about the gas supplied by Russia to the Ukraine. Also, on 25th March the President Medvedev announced that Russia does not want Ukraine and Georgia to join NATO. In response a number of western European states attempted to block Georgia and Ukraine from joining the alliance because they feared antagonising Russia.

EU SECURITY POLICY

Disagreements within the EU led to criticism that the EU's Security Policy is 'weak'. When the Netherlands raised its terror alert level following the release of an anti-Islam film in early March, Justice commissioner Franco Frattini asserted that Europe should not fear Muslim immigration. On 20th March Osama Bin Laden released an audio message threatening the EU over cartoons that were offensive to Islam.

CAP

On 18th March agricultural *ministers debated the CAP*. The main areas of contention were whether to cut payments for farmers. It was announced that member states will have to publicise the recipients of agricultural subsidies from next year. However, on 19th March Agriculture ministers rejected a Commission proposal to cap subsidies and shift money to rural development.

INTERNATIONAL FRANCOPHONY DAY: Thursday 20th March 2008

French President Sarkozy asserted that French should be used more within the EU. However, opinions differed as Catherine Suard of the French Institute in Sofia argued that using a multiplicity of languages in EU is the best way.

UNION FOR THE MEDITERRANEAN

On 14th March an EU Summit approved a '*Union for the Mediterranean*' to improve the EU's relations with North Africa and the Middle East. A compromise was struck by French President Nicholas Sarkozy and German Chancellor Angela Merkel, which saw a more softened approach compared to Sarkozy's original plan.

ENVIRONMENT

On 17th March the EU Commission conceded that the increased use of biofuels is resulting in higher food prices.

KOSOVO

There were continuing tensions following Kosovo's declaration of Independence from Serbia in February 2008. Serbia's recently re-elected pro-Western President Boris Tadic announced an early parliamentary election because the coalition government couldn't agree on Kosovo. On 1st March 150 *Kosovo Serb police were suspended* because they refused to take orders from the Albanian authorities. On 17th UN police stormed a UN courthouse in the town of Mitrovica to the North of the country which had been seized by Kosovo Serbs two days earlier. In further *violence*, on 19th March a Ukrainian UN policeman was killed following riots. There was criticism that the violence had been 'orchestrated' by Serbia.

OTHER NEWS

- **EU Parliament** turned 50 years old on 12th March.
- **Euro:** On 6th March the euro rose to its highest level yet because of ongoing pressures from rising energy and food price rises. The rise means that the UK pound sterling is worth less against the euro than in previous months.
- Pressure mounted for MEP's to publicise details of how they spend their **allowances** after Dutch MEP Paul van Buitenen's published a confidential report about abuses of the current system. As a result, on 17th March it was agreed that for the short-term MEPs would account for how they spend their 17,000 euro monthly office allowance. However, Parliament President Hans Gert Poettering countered the criticism by blaming "different political cultures across the EU".
- On 9th March an **EU Space freighter** was launched to resupply the space station.
- Following suggestions that a **tax evasion scandal** was spreading across Europe, Germany called for improved EU tax rules.