

## Hunt continues for women to fill top EU posts

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European Commission President José Manuel Barroso this week called for EU leaders to nominate more women to his next EU executive, as one of the main female candidates for the new Lisbon Treaty top jobs, Mary Robinson, said she was unavailable for consideration.

### **Background:**

Alongside nationality, geography (North-South, East-West), the size of the country and political affiliation, gender can also be seen as a criterion when European leaders horse-trade over top EU jobs.

According to the European Commission's roadmap for equality between women and men, "women continue to be under-represented in political and economic decision-making".

Historically, this has been reflected in the positions of power in the European institutions. The Commission has never had a female president, while just two of 13 European Parliament presidents have been female since direct elections were introduced in 1979. These were both Frenchwomen, Simone Veil (1979-1982) and Nicole Fontaine (1999-2002).

Currently, only two of the 27 EU heads of state and government are women: Angela Merkel in Germany and Dalia Grybauskaite in Lithuania.

Women currently represent 35% of all MEPs in the European Parliament, higher than the European average (24%) but lower than the trio of Sweden, the Netherlands and Finland - the only EU countries with more than 40% women in parliament.

In a letter to EU leaders, Barroso - who in 2007 asked the two EU newcomers Bulgaria and Romania to propose female commissioners when they joined - emphasised the importance of gender balance in his new college of commissioners.

"To allow me to propose a properly balanced team [...] I urge you to see gender balance as a common goal and a shared responsibility," he said, calling on heads of state and government to "pay particular attention to the presence of women in the college as our discussions continue towards conclusion".

Myria Vassiliadou, secretary-general of the European Women's Lobby (EWL), told EurActiv that while she was "very happy" Barroso had taken this initiative, "he could have been more committed".

Had Barroso asked each member state to nominate both a man and a woman, the impact would have been greater, she said, adding that "simply recommending is not necessarily going to help – it might achieve more goodwill, but I don't think that's enough".

"It does matter how you ask these questions," Vassiliadou argued, concluding that if the number of female commissioners is not greater than last time, no progress will have been made.

### **Thanks but no thanks, says Robinson**

Meanwhile, campaigns in EU circles to have at least one woman in the two new positions of power to be created by the Lisbon Treaty – the permanent president of the EU Council and the foreign policy chief – suffered a blow when one of the most hotly-tipped candidates, former Irish President Mary Robinson, told EurActiv she was not in the running.

Robinson's name had cropped up repeatedly in the media in recent weeks as a possible outside contender for the job of Council president ([EurActiv 14/10/09](#)), and her potential candidacy benefited from the swift backing of civil society, with over 6,000 people joining a Facebook group supporting her in just two weeks.

Robinson told EurActiv that "it is humbling and gratifying to be mentioned as a possibility for the position of president of the EU - particularly when it appears that the campaign is being led by civil society and those interested in issues I very much wish to address and progress".

She went on to note that "during recent times I have become increasingly focussed on the challenge of climate change and its severe impacts on the developing world - i.e. on the issue of climate justice. It is a topic of extreme urgency and is proving very time-consuming and demanding".

Consequently, "with this focus I could not commit myself to considering accepting the challenge of the EU presidency," she concluded, adding: "I share the aspiration that a woman candidate will become apparent, and indeed successful, for one (or more!) of the senior posts in the EU but that person will not be me."

Responding to this news, the EWL's Myria Vassiliadou said that "the top jobs are a big worry".

While the EWL hopes that at least one of the two Lisbon top jobs will go to women, "at present, we haven't heard any names apart from Robinson," she said, admitting that while such an outcome would be very disappointing, "I don't see how these jobs will end up with a woman".

It seems likely, however, that at least one Irish woman will feature in a prominent EU position. Irish sources told EurActiv that speculation is rife at this week's European Parliament plenary session in Strasbourg that the next Irish commissioner will be Maire Geoghegan-Quinn, a former minister who currently sits on the European Court of Auditors.

## Positions:

In his letter to EU leaders, **European Commission President José Manuel Barroso** said: "Following my election as president-designate of the next Commission, most of you have been contacting me regarding nominations to the next Commission."

"Although this process of nomination cannot be formally conducted before a European Council decision to launch it, in line with the June European Council conclusions, I would like already at this stage to underline the importance of a balanced composition of the college, and in particular its gender balance," Barroso continued.

"A number of members of the existing college will stay on for the next mandate and new choices will need to be made to complete the team. To allow me to propose a properly balanced team to the Council and European Parliament, I would therefore ask you all to see gender balance as a common goal and a shared responsibility. I would therefore urge you to pay particular attention to the presence of women in the college as our discussions continue towards conclusion," he concluded.

During a European Parliament plenary discussion on the topic of the EU's External Action Service, **Hungarian Socialist MEP Zita Gurmai** said on Wednesday (21 October) that she was asking for the new post of the double-hatted High Representative for Foreign Policy, who will also be a vice-president of the Commission, to be given to a woman from the centre-left.

## Next steps:

- **29-30 Oct.:** EU leaders expected to discuss nomination timelines and procedures for next Commission and Lisbon Treaty top jobs at Brussels summit.
- **1 Jan. 2010:** Expected entry into force of new Commission.

## Links

NGOs and Think-Tanks

- European Women's Lobby (EWL): [Position Paper on the Future of Europe](#)  

European Women's Lobby (EWL): [European Women's Lobby 50/50 Campaign for Democracy](#) 