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EU 2020 consultation marks Brussels' return to policy and substance

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After a prolonged period of institutional naval-gazing and job jockeying brought about by the Lisbon Treaty, it is now high time to get back to business, and to focus on the things that really matter to citizens and voters, writes Ann Mettler from the Lisbon Council think-tank in a commentary posted on Blogactiv.

"Today, the European Commission is launching a consultation on the EU 2020 strategy, the successor to the Lisbon Agenda. With Lisbon's deadline in the year 2010 quickly approaching, there is now a unique opportunity to review and improve this vital policy programme and lay a strong foundation for the new EU 2020 strategy.

To be sure, there is some urgency given that Europe finds itself in the midst of the deepest recession since the 1930s. If we ever needed a sound exit strategy and long-term policy blueprint, it's now. And we have no time to waste.

On substance, there is likely to be some continuity with the first ten years, as the key issues Europe is grappling with have been the same for some time and are unlikely to change in the future: a rapidly ageing continent, profoundly impacting fiscal sustainability and social security systems; the need for a more educated, inclusive and diverse workforce, equipped with the latest skills and know-how; and a more innovative, entrepreneurial and productive economy, ready to face the challenges of climate change and global competition.

But as we learned from the current Lisbon Strategy, aspiring to laudable goals is far from enough. That is why the EU 2020 agenda needs a much improved governance and ownership structure, as well as a new *modus operandi* that will credibly embody the innovation and renewal that is the very foundation of this strategy.

For starters, we must prevent another glaring discrepancy between announcing goals that only member states can ultimately deliver on while providing the European Commission with woefully inadequate tools for enforcement. The currently applied Open Method of Coordination is little more than a comparative tool without the possibility to threaten sanctions, and there appears to be no appetite to return the "naming and shaming" that caused so much consternation in member states in the early years of the Lisbon Strategy.

Against this backdrop, the European Commission must devise a realistic, yet smart and compelling strategy. On the one hand, it should rest firmly in the areas where it has competences and adds inherent value, such as competition policy, the single market, external trade, the enforcement of the Stability and Growth Pact, as well as the European coordination of key policy areas, such as the response to climate change and the financial crisis, facilitating research collaboration, promoting 'Digital Europe' and extending the smart grid, to name but a few areas that need urgent action from

Brussels. Another key priority should of course be to finally shift the EU budget from subsidising the past to making a strategic investment in the future.

On the other hand – and in areas where the Commission has no or few competencies – it needs to count on smart tactics and persuasion, mostly by being ahead of the curve and bringing issues to the surface long before they become mainstream. It should use the power of its bully pulpit to highlight key issues at an early stage and facilitate a race to the top by "naming and faming" good practices in member states.

This will not be radically different from today's Open Method of Coordination, but it should be more inspiring, more visible, and more accessible to a larger number of people, rather than the closed shop bureaucratic exchange it currently is. This means that a superior information and communication strategy is not a tiresome afterthought beneath the professional dignity of a senior civil but a vital cornerstone of a new strategy; a strategy that should seek to occupy the moral high ground where the battle for citizens' hearts and minds are won. After all, if it's true that political leaders cannot be re-elected after enacting reforms, as some pundits have alleged, then the electorate is as much the problem as it is the solution.

One area where our leaders should be particularly careful going forward is in formulating new targets. Nothing has discredited the current Lisbon Strategy more than the poor performance in achieving its key targets, a 70% employment rate and the goal to spend 3% of GDP on research and development. While both lie squarely in the hands of member states, the European Commission has taken the brunt of the criticism, including bizarrely from the member states themselves.

The solution, however, cannot be to enact less ambitious goals or do away with targets altogether. To the contrary, if anything, we need more ambitious targets going forward, not only comparing our performance with each other but with the best in the world.

What is imperative, however, is a new understanding of – and more respect for – targets in the first place. A target is not an end in itself but a goalpost, a desirable policy objective to strive towards where progress can be made even if the target is ultimately not reached. No-one has derided the Kyoto Protocol as being a stunning failure on a par with the Lisbon Agenda, despite the fact that the vast majority of signatories have not achieved their targets and key polluters opted out completely. Instead of laughing it off or drowning in cynicism and defeatism, as is so often the case with the Lisbon Strategy, there is a global movement to go into the 2010 Copenhagen and 2011 Mexico City UNFCCC to get more – more binding, more ambitious, more comprehensive targets. Why should the Lisbon Agenda / EU 2020 strategy be any different, especially now that green growth and eco-innovation is one of its hallmarks?

To be sure, the window of opportunity that is opening now will be short-lived. The consultation that is starting today is a good start and long overdue, and the current Swedish EU Presidency is uniquely suited to act as a catalyst and honest broker for a more innovative, sustainable and inclusive vision of Lisbon.

By the time the Spanish EU Presidency concludes its tenure in June 2010, there has to be a noticeably different strategy in place – not necessarily in content but in method, in management and mood. It needs more visible buy-in and commitment from the member states, a smarter, invigorated and more communicative European Commission, and a motivated, engaged and credible set of stakeholders.

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