

‘Just when the post has taken real shape’ from the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (17 October 2006)

Caption: Published on 17 October 2006 in the German daily newspaper Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, this article pays tribute to the work of Javier Solana as High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and comments on speculation on his successor.

Source: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. 17.10.2006. Frankfurt/Main. "Das Amt erst richtig geschaffen", auteur:Bacia, Horst , p. 12.

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Last updated: 08/08/2016

Just when the post has taken real shape ...

First suggestions of Solana burnout bring prospective successors out of the woodwork / By Horst Bacia

BRUSSELS, 16 October. For seven years now, Javier Solana has been the chief diplomat of the European Union. During that period, the man and his office have become so closely intertwined as to make it almost impossible to imagine anyone else in this demanding role. On 18 October 1999, when the affable Spaniard moved from NATO headquarters on the outskirts of Brussels to the seat of the EU Council on Place Robert Schuman, the post of High Representative for the common foreign and security policy of the Union existed only in embryonic form. Today, Dr Solana is a much-sought-after interlocutor and mediator. With his charm and his untiring efforts to give a face and a voice to European foreign policy, he has essentially created the important post that he now fills. The thought that a successor will have to be appointed at some time needs to be digested slowly.

Yet seven years is a long time, especially in a stressful occupation. Those years have left their mark on his furrowed features, and his stiff posture is indicative of a back problem. In July, Javier Solana turned 64. Since the age of 39, the former professor of physics has been in the forefront of political life. He was Secretary-General of NATO for four years from 1995, at the time of the Balkan crises. His membership of the Spanish Government began in 1982, culminating in his tenure of the foreign-affairs portfolio. Given his daunting appointments diary, it is no wonder that he occasionally looks somewhat jaded.

Is he really suffering from job fatigue? This question has been the subject of speculation in Brussels for a number of weeks. It seems that Dr Solana himself is the only one who can provide a reliable answer. 'The post is not available', says Cristina Gallach, who has been his spokeswoman for many years. Other members of staff, however, have been heard to say that it is not certain how long their boss will keep going. Perhaps a year? Until the end of this year or of next year? Rumours and predictions do not paint a clear picture. Solana's mandate ends in 2009. In the summer of 2004, the European Heads of State or Government named him as the first Foreign Minister-designate of the EU. The rejection of the Constitution in the referendums held in France and the Netherlands, however, has closed this door. The plans to create a European Foreign Minister have been put on ice until 2009 at the earliest.

It is no secret that Solana was already struggling with job fatigue more than a year ago, when he had to come to terms with the fact that the rules of the Constitutional Treaty designed to make the common foreign policy more effective would not apply to him and his second term of office. Even the expectation that at least some provisions could be enacted in advance by the Heads of State and Government was not to be fulfilled. Unlike the European Foreign Minister, the High Representative does not have a right of initiative in the realm of foreign and security policy; he has to wait until he receives a mandate from the Member States. Moreover, he must always give precedence to the Foreign Minister of the country holding the rotating presidency of the Council for the current half year. And the competing powers of the Council and the European Commission in the field of external relations which are inherent in the current institutional structure are set to remain in place for the time being — under the Constitutional Treaty the Foreign Minister would also be Vice-President of the Commission, thereby resolving this antithesis. Solana has not simply resigned himself to this fate; on the contrary, he has managed time and again to push his powers to their limits and drive the common foreign policy forward.

If the EU is now taken seriously, even by Israel, as a partner in the efforts being made — albeit unsuccessfully as yet — to resolve the Middle East conflict, this is not least Solana's achievement. The Middle East road map is essentially a product of the EU, and the Middle East Quartet, in which the representatives of the Union are now acting together with the United States, Russia and the Secretary-General of the United Nations, is the fruit of a suggestion made by Javier Solana. Convinced that joint missions are the primary source of the development and legitimacy of the common foreign and security policy, he has repeatedly canvassed the Member States for support for EU operations, initially in the Balkans but now more and more frequently in places outside Europe, such as the crisis-torn province of Aceh in Indonesia, the Rafah border crossing in the Gaza Strip and, most recently, the Democratic Republic

of the Congo, where a military operation provided support during the election process.

The latest speculations about a premature end to Dr Solana's term of office were apparently triggered at the beginning of August by the Prime Minister of Spain, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, when he suggested Solana as a possible candidate for the post of Mayor of Madrid. Four years ago, such an offer might perhaps have appealed to Solana, a native *madrileño*, for the Socialist Party was still in opposition at the time, and success in the mayoral election might have been the first step back into Spanish domestic politics. This time, however, the proposal met with a prompt response, as Solana let it be known that the office of Mayor of Madrid did not feature in his career plans. It remains a little-known fact, on the other hand, that France spent some time probing whether, as a European candidate for the office of Secretary-General of the UN, he would have stood any chance against Ban Ki-moon of Korea. The Germans, however, according to Brussels insiders, were not interested, and reliance on British support was not an option. So is Solana perhaps about to jump ship after all? If so, where is he bound?

Whatever may be behind the rumours, the names of prospective successors are already being bandied about — that of European Commissioner Günter Verheugen, for example. He is, of course, denying any aspiration to a post other than his own. However, even if he, as a vastly experienced specialist in foreign and security policy who is still well known in the new Member States from his time as Commissioner responsible for enlargement, had fancied his chances, they would now seem to have been dashed by the latest controversy generated by his provocative criticism of the Commission's administrative apparatus. Another figure regarded as a potential future candidate is the former Swedish Prime Minister, Carl Bildt, who has returned from a lengthy period on the political sidelines to become Minister of Foreign Affairs in the new Centre-Right government. The fact is, however, that no serious candidate will throw his or her hat into the ring as long as no one has any idea when the present incumbent intends to move over. The word from Berlin is that the Federal Government fully expects to be able to call on the services of Javier Solana as High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy during the German Presidency. Not even a statement such as this is enough to put an end to all the speculation.