

The new EU chiefs: Rompuy-pumpy and Cathy Who?

By Jill Lawless

Catherine Ashton: International woman of mystery.

Ashton is Europe's new foreign policy chief, the international representative of half a billion people, with a euro7 billion (\$10.5 billion) budget and a salary of more than \$300,000 a year — but in her homeland, it's hard to find many who have heard of her.

The former anti-nuclear activist turned career Eurocrat is the European Union's new high representative for foreign affairs — and it's almost as much of a surprise to her as it is to her fellow Britons.

Ashton told the BBC Friday that she only found out she was a front-runner for the post in the last few days. She acknowledged her low profile, but promised that "over the next few months and years I aim to show that I am the best person for the job."

Critics slammed the EU for a lack of ambition in choosing her and Belgium's technocratic premier, Herman van Rompuy, who becomes the first EU president. Ashton's new job combines two existing ones, giving her more powers than current foreign policy chief Javier Solana.

"The EU member states have talked themselves into choosing two very competent, able, and — frankly — rather boring choices for these two new roles," said Richard Whitman, a Europe expert at London's Chatham House think tank.

The 27-nation EU created the new posts of president and foreign minister as part of a reform treaty that takes effect Dec. 1.

For weeks rumors swirled that the jobs would go to high-profile candidates like former British Prime Minister Tony Blair and current Foreign Secretary David Miliband, politicians who could give the EU greater diplomatic clout on issues such as climate change, terrorism and trade.

Instead, European leaders on Thursday



Newly-appointed EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton.

(AFP/Georges Gobet)

chose Ashton and van Rompuy, an unassuming man nicknamed "Rompuy-pumpy" by British tabloids. He is best known for penning Flemish-language haikus, which he publishes on a blog.

"Three waves. Roll into port together. The trio is home," ran one effort on the subject of Belgian-Spanish-Hungarian cooperation, which van Rompuy read out at a press conference last month.

The EU presidency was initially seen as the bigger job of the two — especially when Blair was being promoted as a candidate — but that view has shifted.

The treaty is vague on what the president is supposed to do, other than encourage more European integration. Van Rompuy, 62, did little to raise expectations, pledging to be "discreet" in his new job.

As foreign minister, Ashton gets a say over the EU's annual euro7 billion (\$10.5 billion) foreign aid budget, will head a new 5,000-strong EU diplomatic corps and travel the globe to represent the EU's interests.

On the streets of London, only one in 10 people stopped at random recognized a picture of the 53-year-old bureaucrat, who has never been elected to public office.

"I've absolutely never heard of her before I watched the news this morning," said London businessman Leonard Finch, 40. But, he added, "I think we should give her a chance to prove herself."

Trained as an economist, Ashton worked in the 1970s for the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.

A longtime member of Britain's governing Labor Party, she worked for several chari-

ties dealing with equality issues and for a local health authority in England before she was anointed Baroness Ashton of Upholland and made a member of the House of Lords in 1999. She served as a junior government minister and Labor's leader in the Lords.

She has spent the past year as EU Trade Commissioner, a role in which she has barely caused a ripple. She signed a trade pact with South Korea, worked to revive the stalled global negotiations at the World Trade Organization and defrost trade relations with the United States after President George W. Bush left office.

Ashton insisted she was not restricted by her lack of a popular mandate.

"Twenty-seven elected representative heads of state have had a say, and they all decided on me," she told the BBC.

Prime Minister Gordon Brown said she was a good choice, and U.S. Trade Representative Ron Kirk, her Washington counterpart while she was trade commissioner, said Ashton was a woman of "formidable intelligence, vision, compassion, and charm."

But Euroskeptics said it was wrong to give an unelected bureaucrat so much power.

"Everything about this process rubs our noses in how undemocratic the EU is," said Conservative European lawmaker Daniel Hannan.

"For 300 years, Europeans fought to establish the principle that their leaders should be answerable to everyone else. Now, they are reversing that principle."

However, many politicians opposed to a stronger role for Europe privately prefer obscure Brussels bureaucrats to Blair, whose charisma and international reputation would have given the EU a big boost. Blair's candidacy was doomed when France and Germany, the EU's biggest powers, did not support him.

An official close to Blair, who was not authorized to publicly discuss the former British leader's reaction, said the ex-prime minister had suspected for some time that Europe wanted to keep the post low-profile.

Thursday's decision was "hardly a surprise; the direction of travel has been clear for some time," the official said. European leaders were clear they wanted a "chair, not president."

(Source: AP)

In Ukraine, H1N1 pandemic sets off panic and politicking

KIEV (Washington Post) — One night at the height of the panic over what people here call the California flu, as 24-hour news stations tracked a rising death toll and politicians speculated about a mystery lung plague, Ukraine's prime minister rushed to the airport to greet a shipment of Tamiflu as if it were a foreign dignitary. Not to be outdone, the president, a bitter political foe, dispatched a top aide to meet the plane, too.

In neighboring Belarus, the government took an opposite tack, accusing drug companies of fanning hysteria over swine flu to boost profit. In Poland, the health minister is under fire for refusing to stock up on a vaccine, while doctors in Hungary are resisting orders to administer the shot. In Turkmenistan, the authorities have been accused of covering up an epidemic, with infectious-disease wards reportedly full and people being turned away.

As the pandemic H1N1 influenza surges with the onset of winter, the nations of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union appear particularly vulnerable to the deadly virus. Burdened with weak health-care systems, relatively inexperienced news media outlets and shaky governments that have little public trust, the region also seems ripe for panic and political strife over the flu.

The potential for trouble is already on display in Ukraine, where 1.5 million of its 46 million people have had diagnoses of flu and respiratory illnesses since the start of the outbreak and 356 have died, according to the government. The World Health Organization (WHO) suspects that most of the cases are swine flu, making Ukraine among the hardest-hit countries in Europe, including Russia, Bulgaria, Moldova and Poland.

More telling than the numbers, however, has been the widespread fear the virus has caused in Ukraine, and the outside impact it has had on the nation's political landscape.

In the weeks since Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko announced measures against the spread of the flu — shutting the nation's schools and banning public gatherings — anxious residents have overwhelmed hospitals and pharmacies, buying up supplies of medicine, gauze masks and home remedies such as lemons and garlic. Rumors have proliferated that people are dying of a new, more lethal strain of the virus.

Semyon Gluzman, a psychiatrist and Soviet-era dissident in Kiev, said the fear was a rational response in a nation with a dysfunctional health-care system and a corrupt, ineffective government. Hopes soared in Ukraine after the mass pro-democracy demonstrations known as the Orange Revolution, he said, but the five years of political infighting since have undermined the public's faith in the nation's leaders and political institutions.

"What we're seeing is a normal, psychological reaction to the complete incompetence of the state authorities," he said. "People are scared, and they don't know who to trust anymore."

Ukraine's news media — which gained new freedoms after the Orange Revolution — have provided round-the-clock, often sensational coverage of the outbreak. The nation's leading politicians, meanwhile, are jockeying for advantage ahead of the January presidential election, accusing one another of exploiting the crisis by doing too much or endangering lives by doing too little.

President Viktor Yushchenko, running far behind in his reelection bid, accused the prime minister of failing to prepare for the outbreak, saying that she left the national flu center staffed with only one employee, put doctors in danger and allowed the H1N1

virus to mutate into a "more aggressive" strain. Aides floated the idea of postponing the election because of the outbreak.

Tymoshenko, who was a Yushchenko ally in the Orange Revolution, fought back, criticizing him this week for blocking \$125 million in emergency spending to fight the flu and saying he would be "responsible for every person who is ill today or dies."

Tymoshenko, shown by the media touring hospitals, issuing instructions and delivering daily updates on the outbreak, has enjoyed a dramatic boost in the presidential race. One poll conducted last week put her within three percentage points of Viktor Yanukovich, the opposition leader and front-runner, after lagging far behind for months.

Ukraine has one of the weakest health-care systems in Europe, being a Soviet relic that has barely changed despite 18 years of independence. Medical care is supposed to be free, but quality is poor, with underpaid state doctors surviving by taking bribes and selling unnecessary drugs. Life expectancy is a decade lower than in the European Union.

The WHO says the beleaguered system has held up fairly well, because advanced equipment or training isn't needed to fight swine flu. But the organization also identified problems here that could arise throughout Eastern Europe.

Doctors have been reluctant to treat patients with oxygen because medical schools in the region emphasize the risk of oxygen poisoning, for example. Ukrainian hospitals also lack devices to measure blood oxygen levels precisely, making it dangerous to put patients on ventilators, said Simon Mardel, a member of the WHO team sent to help Ukraine.

More broadly, people often waited too long to see a doctor because they tried home remedies first, and hospitals have struggled to care for the severely ill because they admit too many mild cases, said David Mercer, head of the communicable-disease unit in the WHO's Europe office.

Conveying accurate information to the public is another challenge in the region, he said. In some countries, especially the authoritarian states of Central Asia, officials are accustomed to concealing disease outbreaks, while in others, the free press is a relatively new institution and media outlets dwell on conspiracy theories. "It's like dealing with English tabloids all the time," Mercer said.

Yevgeny Komarovskiy, a pediatrician and popular author in Ukraine, said the media here so sensationalized the outbreak that "we should also be counting casualties from heart attacks and high blood pressure due to the panic." He recalled a five-hour television special in which a series of ill-informed politicians were interviewed instead of medical experts, calling it "a concentration of stupidity."

"I felt ashamed for my country," he said, noting that one presidential candidate complained about shortages of an ointment with no proven effect and another suggested that the plague had hit Ukraine.

One result of the mistrust in government is deep skepticism about immunization in general and the swine flu vaccine in particular. The sentiment is common in Eastern Europe and Russia, where people express doubts about the safety of state supplies and suspicions of corrupt deals with drug firms. But it is particularly intense in Ukraine, with parents often paying doctors to falsify their children's immunization records.



Colombia's Uribe seeks to ease Venezuela tensions

CUCUTA (Reuters) — Colombian President Alvaro Uribe on Saturday ruled out any military retaliation against Venezuela after Venezuelan troops dynamited two cross-border footbridges.

"The fellow republic of Venezuela will never hear any aggression from the people or the government of Colombia," Uribe said at an event in the border town of Cucuta. "We will never restrict our frontier to our Venezuelan brothers."

Venezuela says its troops this week blew up two illegal footbridges that cross over the border because they had been used by drug traffickers and smugglers.

Colombia criticized the action as an aggression and said it would denounce it before the United Nations and the Organization of American States.

Ties between the two countries have soured over a Colombian plan to allow U.S. troops more access to its bases. Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez said it sets the stage for a possible attack against his OPEC nation.

Tensions run high on the 1,375-mile (2,200-km) border, an area rife with Colombian FARC rebels still fighting a four-decade-old war and other groups engaged in smuggling cocaine, guns and other contraband.

The leftist Chavez has ordered his military leaders to prepare for war, a move he says is just a response to the base plan. Uribe, a conservative, counters that the base deal is an extension of current military cooperation with Washington.

The two leaders have in the past managed to work out their differences with handshakes and backslaps. But the current crisis triggered by the U.S.-Colombia plan has curbed their \$7 billion per year in bilateral trade, making it harder to resolve swiftly.

Albania opposition protests to demand vote recount

TIRANA (Reuters) — Tens of thousands of Albanian opposition Socialist Party supporters launched their latest protest Friday to demand the government either recount the vote in a controversial June 28 election or hold another.

Socialist Party leader Edi Rama accused Prime Minister Sali Berisha of the Democratic Party of rigging the parliamentary elections to "steal Albania's wealth."

The Socialists lost to Berisha in the tightest race since Albania abandoned communism, but have not accepted the result and refuse to enter parliament unless a number of ballot boxes, ruled "irregular" by election authorities, are opened.

They say the votes inside would give them victory overall. Berisha's Democrats have just 70 seats in the 140-seat parliament, and the Socialists 66. The Democrats rule with support from the four Socialist Integration Movement seats.

Holding banners saying "I want to see my vote" and "Where is my vote?," supporters of the Socialists, their allies and two center-right parties marched down Tirana's main boulevard to gather in front of Berisha's offices.

Russia's Medvedev raps ruling party over elections

ST PETERSBURG (Reuters) — President Dmitry Medvedev scolded leaders of Russia's ruling party on Saturday for "bad political habits" and ordered them to win future elections fairly.

In his sharpest criticism so far of United Russia, which dominates Russian political life, Medvedev told the party's annual congress in St Petersburg that some regional branches had failed to allow voters to express their will.

"Elections which are intended to be ... a competition of ideas and programs, are sometimes turned into affairs in which democratic procedures are confused with administrative ones," the president said in a brief opening speech.

"We need to learn to win — all of us, in fact — we need to learn to win in open contests," Medvedev told more than 600 party delegates in a session broadcast live on state television. His remarks were greeted with polite applause.

But outside the congress hall, police detained 13 members of the National Bolsheviks, a small, banned opposition political movement, as they attempted to deliver an appeal to Medvedev to dismiss Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's government.

"In our petition to Medvedev we promised support for his course of modernization and as a first step we suggested he fire Putin from the post of prime minister and stop working with United Russia," St Petersburg National Bolshevik leader Andrei Dmitriyev told Reuters by telephone from a police station.

Police told the protesters they were being detained for crossing a pedestrian crossing illegally at a red light, a charge they denied.

United Russia, headed by Medvedev's mentor and Kremlin predecessor Vladimir Putin, crushed opposition parties in regional elections held across much of Russia in October.

Critics said the poll was marred by reports of multiple voting, dubious counts, slanted campaigning and obstruction of opposition candidates but election officials dismissed complaints and Medvedev initially congratulated the victors.

Watched by Putin, who is now prime minister, from the audience, Medvedev said United Russia had to change. Critics compare it to the Soviet-era Communist Party in its dominance of political and public life.

"The party ... is only an instrument," Medvedev told delegates. "Yes, a very important, absolutely necessary instrument but just an instrument, a means but not an end."

As he spoke, Putin sat among delegates looking through his papers, making notes and periodically chatting with United Russia leader Boris Gryzlov.

Putin spoke to delegates straight after Medvedev, giving a detailed exposition on how Russia's economy would recover from the financial crisis and resume growth.