

Günther Oettinger: The Next European Commissioner for Competition?

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It is widely rumored that Günther Oettinger the Minister-President of the German state of Baden-Württemberg, whom German Chancellor Angela Merkel designated last week as the German member of the new European Commission that will take office in January 2010, may well be the next European Commissioner for Competition. The current commissioner, Neelie Kroes, will be replaced when her term concludes at the end of this year.

Although the official selections for Commission posts will not become known until next week at the earliest, knowledgeable sources indicate that the competition post will likely be held by a German. There was some surprise at Chancellor Merkel's decision to nominate the 56-year-old Oettinger (a member of Merkel's Christian Democratic Union, or CDU) to be the new German commissioner. Although Mr. Oettinger has been active in local politics for decades, he does not have significant experience in European Union-wide politics and is virtually unknown on the international stage, and he was thus not an obvious candidate for the post.

Despite having little experience in European and international politics, Mr. Oettinger could prove to be an effective Competition Commissioner. He has a background in law and economics, having studied at the University of Tübingen. He started his career as an assessor at an auditing and tax law firm and spent years as a practicing lawyer. Even amongst his critics, Mr. Oettinger has a reputation for grasping technical details and analyzing complex issues, which he demonstrated for years as the chairman of the CDU's Federal Advisory Committee on Media Policy and, more recently, as the chairman of the Commission on Modernizing the Federal Government-Länder Financial Relationship in Germany.

Given his general absence from the European spotlight, it is too early to predict what direction Mr. Oettinger will take competition policy in the European Union. He comes from a region of Germany with a strong industrial base, including the manufacturing of automobiles, metals and electronics, and one in which medium-sized firms play a particularly important role. However, whatever his personal predilections, Mr. Oettinger's activity as commissioner will be heavily influenced by the Commission's overall work program and the direction it is given by Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso. Moreover, one only need look back to 2004, when critics pointed to Ms. Kroes' close ties with business as a sign that she would not be an active competition enforcer, to see how widely off the mark predictions about a commissioner's likely enforcement efforts can be.

The European Union executive branch commences its new term at the beginning of 2010. Each commissioner must be approved for his or her post by the European Parliament.