



Search Business

New s, Stocks, Funds, Companies

Financial Tools

Select a Financial Tool

More in Business »

- [Global Business](#)
- [Markets](#)
- [Economy](#)
- [DealBook](#)
- [Media & Advertising](#)
- [Small Business](#)
- [Your Money](#)
- [Energy & Environment](#)

Advertise your small business on nytimes.com

Introducing Self-Service Advertising on NYTimes.com. An easy and affordable way to create your own online ads.

[Get Started »](#)

GOFOREX

Commencez maintenant!
Cliquez ici!

Advertise on NYTimes.com

Past Clouds Future of Europe's New Antitrust Enforcer

By [JAMES KANTER](#)

Published: February 18, 2010

BRUSSELS — When the financial crisis erupted more than a year ago, Joaquín Almunia, as the [European Union's](#) economics and monetary affairs commissioner, projected an air of competence and seriousness, helping to calm markets.

[Enlarge This Image](#)



Olivier Hoslet/European Pressphoto Agency
Joaquín Almunia, the new European Union antitrust chief, and Catherine Ashton, foreign affairs chief, in Brussels on Tuesday.

But criticism was swift when he did not sound louder alarms while in charge of enforcing rules governing the [European monetary union](#), particularly with the problems plaguing Greece.

As he takes on the job of the antitrust chief for the European Union this month, his inauspicious history is clouding his new role, in which he must keep companies and countries from breaching rules on market-rigging and government subsidies.

Mr. Almunia's predecessor as antitrust commissioner, [Neelie Kroes](#) of the Netherlands, had a reputation for bargaining long and hard with powerful people like [Steven A. Ballmer](#), chief executive of [Microsoft](#).

At the height of the financial crisis, she insisted that rules on competition be respected as governments bailed out banks, auto companies and other businesses. Giants like the Dutch bank [ING](#) and the [Royal Bank of Scotland](#) were required to make significant divestitures.

Now, the question is whether Mr. Almunia will be up to his new job's challenges, including the [protectionist](#) tendencies rising in conjunction with unemployment in many European countries and the potential for trans-Atlantic tensions, especially as companies like [Google](#) continue to expand globally.

His spokeswoman, Amelia Torres, said Mr. Almunia would not grant interviews so early in his nearly five-year term as competition commissioner.

Last Monday, in his first public appearance in the role, Mr. Almunia brushed aside questions about whether he could have done more before the Greek situation became a crisis.

But Kevin Featherstone, a professor at the London School of Economics and a specialist on European Union affairs and Greek politics, said Mr. Almunia could have done more to prevent the current fiasco by investigating the situation in Greece more aggressively.

[Next Article in Business \(12 of 43\) »](#)

Latest Business Headlines

[What's This?](#)

FROM NYTIMES.COM

- [Two Chinese Schools Said to Be Tied to Online Attacks](#)
- [Fed Rate Move Rattles Stocks and Sends Dollar Higher](#)
- [Asia Leads the Global End to Cheap Money](#)
- [Fed Move May Signal End to Easy Bank Profits](#)
- [Coded to Obey Law, Marlboro Lights Become Marlboro Gold](#)

Powered by [LinkedIn](#)

Politics E-Mail



Keep up with the latest news from Washington with the daily Politics e-mail newsletter.

Le Dollar est en hausse, l' Euro est en baisse - Vous pouvez aussi faire du Profit !

Apprenez a Trader sur le marché du Forex

Tout simplement depuis votre ordinateur, sans commissions, sans Brokers, sans Banques...



Commencez aujourd' hui a Trader

European governments were openly flouting deficit limits before the [credit crisis](#) and the explosion of public debt, and the government in Athens had a long record of misleading Brussels about its financial data.

“A key question is whether Mr. Almunia could have lifted up the carpet and done some prying into the Greek situation, or whether he was too worried to do so out of fear of unleashing a Pandora’s box of problems,” Mr. Featherstone said. “The opportunity was there to do more as economics commissioner, but he did not seize it.”

Ms. Torres insisted that the [European Commission](#) had “wasted no time” in tackling problems with the troublesome statistics that arose in Greece in 2004. She added that during his term, Mr. Almunia had sought greater powers to monitor wayward member states, but the governments would not grant them.

Advertise on NYTimes.com

As competition commissioner, Mr. Almunia, 61, has the authority to make decisions without having to always answer to national capitals — which makes the job one of the most powerful in Brussels.

Ms. Kroes appeared to relish imposing huge fines on Microsoft and other technology companies, including [Intel](#), accusing them of bullying competitors, despite protests from the American government.

Mr. Almunia is more low-key. He grew up in Bilbao, Spain, and studied law and economics in the Basque country. He did further study at L’École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris and at the [John F. Kennedy School of Government](#) at Harvard.

In Spain he is regarded as a moderate left-winger who sought to push the Socialists to the political center. But he lacked the charisma to direct those efforts himself. In 2000, as the party’s candidate for prime minister, he led it to its worst performance in a general election in nearly two decades, then resigned as party leader.

Antitrust specialists predicted that Mr. Almunia would contrast sharply with Ms. Kroes, who seemed to regard confrontation as part of her job description, but was often left tongue-tied by legal questions.

They also expect Mr. Almunia to try to make fewer headlines. Ms. Kroes was criticized for appearing to prejudge the outcome of investigations, as when she said something was “rotten” in the pharmaceutical sector before gathering evidence of actual wrongdoing. “It’s the end of show business competition policy,” said Nicolas Petit, a lecturer in competition law and economics at the University of Liege in Belgium.

It seems almost certain that Mr. Almunia’s upbeat nature will be tested by differences with the United States.

Christine Varney, the head of the antitrust division at the [United States Justice Department](#), warned European regulators in a speech on Monday to restrict imposing obligations to the European Union on American companies that are doing business globally.

Regulators in Europe are under pressure from governments, media companies and technology developers to blunt the market power that Google has amassed by running the world’s most popular Internet search tools.

Perhaps the toughest cases to land on Mr. Almunia’s desk will require him to decide whether to rein in the huge scale of state support provided to some of the European region’s largest banks. In his previous role, Mr. Almunia sometimes favored giving the banking sector a freer hand to manage the crisis to maintain financial stability, in contrast to Ms. Kroes’s call for a stricter approach.

Mr. Almunia must soon decide whether to allow the new alliance between [British Airways](#) and [American Airlines](#). Authorities in the United States approved the deal last week, with conditions.

Mr. Almunia also will need to resolve whether to give greater freedom to online merchants like [eBay](#) and [Amazon](#) which, like Google, are based in the United States. Some specialty goods and luxury goods brands, in particular LVMH of France, have lobbied hard to require that merchants have traditional shops as a precondition for selling goods over the Internet.

Today's Headlines Daily E-Mail



Sign up for a roundup of the day's top stories, sent every morning.

Sign Up

[See Sample](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)

MOST POPULAR - BUSINESS

E-MAILED BLOGGED

1. U.S. Cracks Down on ‘Contractors’ as a Tax Dodge
2. R.B.S.’s Shining Star in Connecticut
3. Broker? Adviser? And What’s the Difference?
4. In Surprise Move, Fed Signals Pivot to Normal Policy
5. Small-Business Guide: How to Create an Advisory Board
6. Agreement Is Near on New Overseer of Banking Risks
7. Fraud in Wine Sent to U.S. From France
8. Payback Time: Party Gridlock in Washington Feeds Fear of a Debt Crisis
9. Economic Scene: Judging Stimulus by Job Data Reveals Success
10. Eight States Have Shortchanged Pensions, Pew Study Finds

[Go to Complete List »](#)



Japan Calls Hummer H3 Fuel-Efficient

ALSO IN GLOBAL BUSINESS »

[Demand for Oil Set to Rise Anew](#)
[Lack of Direction on Climate Change Hobbles Carbon Trading](#)

The New York Times International Herald Tribune

ADVERTISEMENTS

Up to 65% off IHT home delivery



Order a low-cost subscription today.



At his speech Monday, Mr. Almunia acknowledged that it would be difficult to attain the right balance between protecting the European economy and opening up to trade and competition.

It is necessary to start "looking inwards at the European internal market that needs to be protected and needs to be developed and deepened," he said. At the same time, he said, Europe's ability to be a major player in the global economy would not come from public subsidies or "from artificial schemes."

[Sign in to Recommend](#)

A version of this article appeared in print on February 19, 2010, on page B6 of the New York edition.

[Next Article in Business \(12 of 43\) »](#)

SIGN IN TO E-MAIL
PRINT
REPRINTS



[Try the IHT home delivery service .](#)

Past Coverage






- [E.U. Will Maintain Strict Policy on Antitrust Behavior, Official Says \(February 16, 2010\)](#)
- [European Debt Issues Top Agenda For Meeting \(February 10, 2010\)](#)
- [European Union Prepares for Economic Crisis Meeting \(February 9, 2010\)](#)
- [E.U. Slow to React to Toyota Safety Problems \(February 9, 2010\)](#)

Related Searches

- [European Union](#) [Get E-Mail Alerts](#)
- [European Commission](#) [Get E-Mail Alerts](#)
- [Antitrust Actions and Laws](#) [Get E-Mail Alerts](#)
- [Kroes, Neelie](#) [Get E-Mail Alerts](#)

INSIDE NYTIMES.COM



<p>U.S. »</p>  <p>A Sight All Too Familiar in Poor Neighborhoods</p>	<p>N.Y. / REGION »</p>  <p>Judge Keeps His Word to Immigrant Who Kept His</p>	<p>OPINION »</p> <h3>A Diploma in 10th Grade?</h3> <p>A Room for Debate forum on the costs and benefits of starting college early.</p>	<p>ESCAPES »</p>  <p>Relaxations for Turtles and Humans Alike</p>	<p>ARTS AND DESIGN »</p>  <p>History Lesson in Geometric Abstraction</p>	<p>OPINION »</p>  <p>Letters: A Senator and 'a Dysfunctional System'</p>
--	--	--	---	---	---