

**15. March 2016, 18:53 Close up**

**L'EPO, c'est moi**

**The European Patent Office is facing a major crisis, and Benoît Battistelli is to blame. Critics accuse him of dictating and not discussing.**

*By Katja Riedel*

Views are widely divided as to what significance the next few days will have for Benoît Battistelli. While those around him are keen to maintain the appearance of normality, his opponents are insisting that the President of the European Patent Office (EPO) is stuck in the middle of a deep diplomatic crisis – indeed, the deepest of his six-year period in office, which has not exactly been lacking in conflicts.

Patents and their economic value ceased being an issue a long time ago. The spotlight is on the divisions between the Frenchman and those loyal to him on the one hand, and sections of the workforce on the other – a conflict in which neither side is pulling any punches. Battistelli's opponents are now hoping for a showdown at the meeting of the Administrative Council, which can potentially overrule him, scheduled for Wednesday in Munich. The EPO boss has already recently been at odds with the Council in a dispute over the external investigation into a number of spectacular sackings. The Office, however, is taking a low-key approach: "We are not expecting anything to happen", says the PR chief executive. No major upsets, no cutting of the Gordian knot – and certainly no resignation.

The strife at the EPO is not only about the reforms which, at the behest of the 38 Member States, Battistelli has been pushing through since 2010, but rather about the boss man himself, and the world which he comes from. The 68-year-old is said to be a person who dictates, not discusses, according to people who have known him for a long time. A man who can quickly be riled if he encounters resistance. He is reputed to be deeply imbued with the centralized French system. What is meant by this is the self-assurance that he acquired at the Ena, that elite Strasbourg college which is seen as the gateway to the key positions in French politics and administration. Perhaps this is why Battistelli has for so long allowed so much to accumulate around him apparently undisturbed. He does not meet his critics face to face, but looks down on them from above, from the top floor of his Munich headquarters, from where he determines the fate of the Office.

It appears that Battistelli has long believed that everything could be turned off, like a dripping tap: The placards demanding his withdrawal as boss of the EPO, placards which lampoon him as the "Sun King". And the allegedly incriminating documents from his office, and the rumours leaked and spread via Internet forums.

One does not need to be a friend of the Frenchman to appreciate that Battistelli would not be prepared to put up with these attacks for much longer. With a stroke of his pen he wanted to get rid of powerful opponents – but this time he may have gone too far. In January Battistelli kicked out the lady chief executive of the union Suepo, together with two of her colleagues, and slashed their pensions. The allegation was that they had threatened other staff representatives, according to Battistelli and an investigation report. The attorney representing the union executive rejects all the accusations, and the dismissal triggered new protests. The Administrative Council

then proposed that the controversial disciplinary procedures be investigated by an outside body. For the power-conscious Battistelli, this was an affront. He is supposed to have stormed out of a meeting in a rage, slamming the door behind him. And the Administrative Council has now issued a sharply worded ultimatum, which rapidly circulated on Internet forums and gave opponents the opportunity to hope for a showdown.

The Battistelli circle are insisting that this is by no means the case. The letter was only a draft, a diplomatic tussle, and the demands long passé. Battistelli himself is said to be in the best of moods. But whether that is a poker face or real confidence, the next few days will tell.