

Patent office wants investigation into president's management style

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- Eppo König

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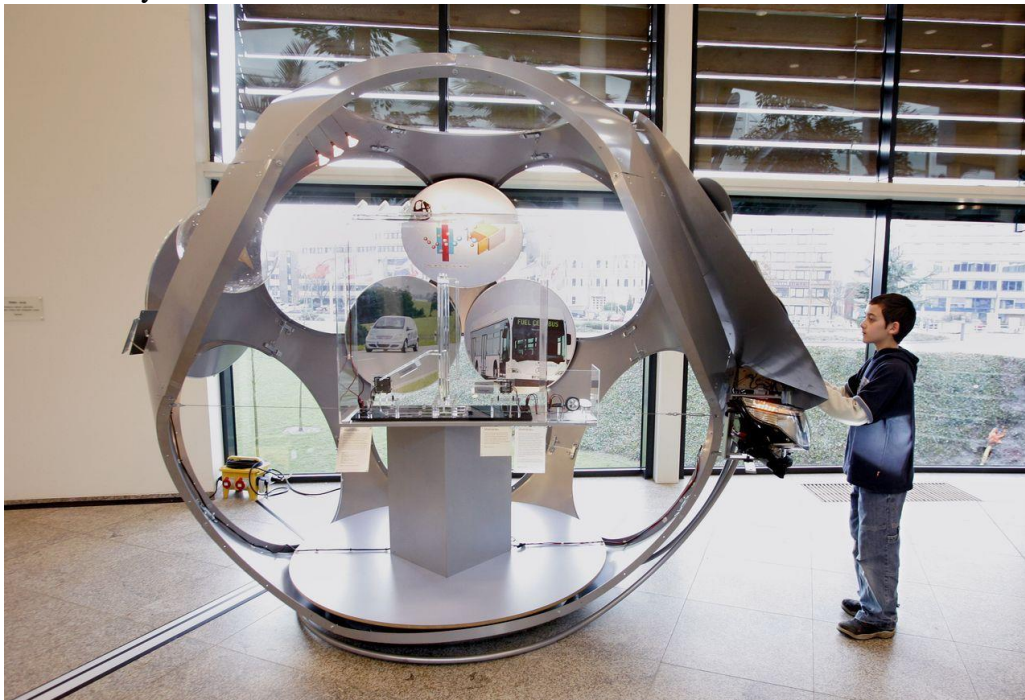


Photo: Gerrit de Heus

The ongoing crisis at the European Patent Office (EPO) seems to be turning against the criticised president, Frenchman Benoît Battistelli. The highest body at the office, the Administrative Council, which represents the 38 member states, wants an external investigation into the punitive measures taken by Battistelli (65).

This is a surprising twist in the conflict between the office, which grants European patents and is based in Rijswijk among other locations, and the unions. Battistelli's 'authoritarian' management style and the work pressure have led to tensions and even a number of suicides among employees, according to the unions.

In turn, Battistelli does not recognise the unions, as the office is an international organisation that is not subject to national law. But, according to the president, the unions are attempting to sabotage his reforms. Some prominent union members have been suspended and may be dismissed, including the chair of the Dutch branch, Elizabeth Hardon.

Serious concerns about functioning

The disciplinary measures have led to "very serious concerns" about the "good functioning" of the office, Danish Jesper Kongstad, chair of the Administrative Council, now writes in a letter. The regulators have unfortunately not been able to conduct any kind of "meaningful dialogue" with Battistelli about this.

Despite the president's protests, the council wants to investigate and suspend the punitive measures. Next month the member states will be voting on the proposal. The letter is remarkable, as last year the Administrative Council reappointed Battistelli until 2018.

Yesterday, Battistelli invited the unions for a discussion on "any topic" in relation to working conditions. The Supreme Court also ordered mediation between the office and unions last month.