



BULLETIN

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Spanish Presidency in the European Union

by Beata Wojna

The implementation of the Lisbon Treaty's institutional provisions is the biggest challenge for the Spanish presidency, during which precedents will be set, to be cited later by successive presidencies. The development of a political practice, which along with the applicable regulations will define the functioning of the permanent and rotating presidencies, will lengthen and continue into at least the Belgian, and perhaps also the Hungarian, presidency. In addition to closely watching the treaty implementation process, Poland should take note of the economic aspects of the Spanish presidency, including the early discussion about the EU's new financial perspective.

Spain is the EU's first member state to run a presidency under the Lisbon Treaty rules. Beginning on 1 January, this presidency is profoundly influenced by the ongoing economic crisis, which has hit Spain painfully and which still remains a centerpiece of the European agenda. Lisbon Treaty implementation and improvement of the economic situation are the Spanish presidency's key objectives.

Institutional Challenges. It is the intention of the Spanish presidency to implement as soon as possible the Lisbon Treaty's institutional provisions, including on the permanent Council presidency. Coordination of the related effort is in the hands of a special working group established last year at the initiative of the Spanish prime minister and the Council president, and comprising representatives of Spain's Foreign Ministry, heads of cabinets of the Council president and the Commission president, and delegates from the Council's Secretariat-General.

Given the massive support attracted by the EU's institutional reform, which eventually took the shape of the Lisbon Treaty, Spain can be expected to readily follow a wide interpretation of the competences assigned to the permanent president of the European Council, Herman Van Rompuy, and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Catherine Ashton, and also to look kindly at an expansion of their activities. The biggest challenge for Prime Minister José Luis Zapatero will no doubt be finding a place for himself in the EU's new institutional line-up, which strips the rotating presidency and its PM of an important political role in the European Council and which curtails his international clout.

It is too early to judge how the cohabitation of the Spanish rotating presidency and the permanent presidency will play out. Both Mr. Van Rompuy and Lady Ashton will need time to develop their own manner of functioning within the EU's institutional structure, which puts Mr. Zapatero in a privileged position, at least in the initial weeks of the presidency. It looks like an assessment of the emerging pattern of institutional relations between the two presidencies will only be possible once a related political practice unfolds in the course of the European Council's gatherings next February and March and the EU's summits with third countries.

Economic Affairs. For recession-ridden Spain, with the unemployment rate approaching 20%, the fight against the crisis is unquestionably the principal objective, and a field where the Zapatero government is determined to deliver results. In this situation, the fears that Spain's disastrous economic plight might render the presidency incapable of coordinating the Union's anti-crisis drive are unwarranted—especially so, given that the political decisions on many items of the Spanish presidency's agenda, such as the reform of the financial system, were already taken under the Swedish presidency. The job for Spain is now to complete the legislative process.

The Spanish presidency's effectiveness will be tested at this spring's European Council, expected to adopt the EU2020 ten-year economic strategy, which succeeds the Lisbon Strategy that expires this year. The Spanish proposals to increase economic policy coordination among member states, or impose mechanisms to check and enforce target implementation, have provoked reservations among many member states, wary of imparting to EU2020 a more binding character as compared with the Lisbon Strategy. In these circumstances, Spain will likely have to resign itself to a document more resembling the Lisbon Strategy, whose implementation hinged on just the good will of member states.

On the economic front, an important event will be the budget review, which, initially scheduled for 2008–2009, was shifted to the Spanish presidency as a result of delays in Lisbon Treaty adoption. The task for Spain will be to coordinate the discussion that will most likely start in spring with the European Commission's communication on the subject. This will also mark a *de facto* commencement of a debate on the new financial perspective, a debate which should be wrapped up no later than 2012 with the adoption of the 2014–2020 financial framework.

Other Goals. Apart from institutional and economic challenges, the Spanish presidency's agenda includes a host of foreign policy-related goals. By tradition, Spain plays up relations with Latin America and the Caribbean as well as the Mediterranean. But despite plans for top-level talks, no spectacular results should be expected and no major changes in the EU's relations with any of these regions. Rather it seems that as far as external relations go, Mr. Zapatero will avoid taking up issues that might spark new tensions among member states. This is illustrated by his distancing himself from an earlier proposal to base EU–Cuba relations on a bilateral agreement whose adoption would translate in practice into abandoning the EU's criticism of the Castro regime for human rights violations. Such a change would not get approval from many member states.

With a view to the domestic audience, the Spanish prime minister will seek to push through several initiatives related to integration's civic dimension, in the broad sense of the notion. Some of these initiatives, dealing with Lisbon Treaty implementation and the EU's current agenda, are unlikely to cause any major controversy. This is the case with the citizens' initiative allowing one million citizens of the EU to present the European Commission with a motion proposing legislation on a certain issue. Spain's task is to work out the implementing regulations. Within the broadly sketched civic dimension of integration, emphasis has been placed on fighting violence against women. Given Spanish society's sensitivity to this issue, the presidency will no doubt give it prominent attention.

Conclusions. In institutional terms, the Spanish presidency will be of a transitional nature. It is unlikely that during its course a final shape could be assumed by an emerging political practice, which (in addition to applicable regulations) will influence the functioning of the permanent and rotating presidencies. But the Spanish presidency will let a number of precedents be set, to be later quoted by successive rotating presidencies. Important decisions will have to be made on questions such as the operation of both presidencies during a European Council (including at the final press conference), the rotating presidency's participation in meetings with third countries, or involvement in crisis resolution.

From the perspective of Polish presidency preparations, worthy of attention right now is the Spain–EU working group to coordinate the rotating and permanent presidency operations to improve cooperation between the two. Also, summits with those third countries which place high on Spain's foreign policy agenda (Latin America, the Mediterranean, the U.S.) are going to be held in Spain—a practice which is worth emulating by Poland. It seems that the presence and visibility of the rotating presidency's prime minister as a co-host of meetings may increase that country's room to influence relations with partners it finds to be of special importance.