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**Leading Europe During Challenging Times:
The Spanish Presidency of the Council of
the European Union**

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Leading Europe During Challenging Times: The Spanish Presidency of the Council of the European Union

Gaye Gungor*

Abstract

Spain assumed the Presidency of the Council of the European Union on January 1, 2010 with a clear and ambitious set of priorities, with the economic recovery being the most pressing one ahead. Spain's Presidency comes at challenging times for the country, the European Union (EU) and the world. European economies have been hit hard by the worst financial and economic crisis since the Great Depression. Spain's presidency also coincides with the beginning of the new Treaty of Lisbon rules. A period of institutional change lies ahead for the EU, and Madrid is committed to steer the Union through the institutional chaos that might be associated with the Lisbon Treaty. Spain's key ambition and greatest challenge is, however, to get the Union out of the crisis. Now that Europe's largest economies are growing again, a sense of optimism is taking hold in European capitals.

Introduction

On January 8, 2010 Spain was formally inaugurated to the EU Presidency under the new legal framework of the Treaty of Lisbon. Madrid is facing a list of challenges with the immediate task of major importance for the country and the Union: "Fast and full enforcement of the Treaty of Lisbon" (Spanish Presidency Website). That is number one on the Presidency Programme, but the most pressing challenge is the economy.

In his address before the EP, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, Spain's Prime Minister, organized his country's priorities under four headings: 1) economic recovery and job creation, 2) overseeing the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty, 3) increasing the image of the EU as a global actor in the world arena, and 4) bringing Europe closer to citizens. Although stated as Spanish priorities, this expansive programme is obviously not limited to Spain's six-month tenure. In fact, the Presidency programme is a joint one prepared together with the Belgian and Hungarian presidencies (as a *Trio of Presidency*) to maintain consistency and continuity in the handling of the Union's affairs.

Setting priorities is one of the main functions of the EU Council Presidents. Others include carrying out administrative and managerial tasks, mediation between EU Member States and representing the EU externally (Thomson 2008). Now that the Treaty of Lisbon is in force, a new division of duties is in place. The Treaty created a new post-permanent president of the European Council- along with the rotating presidency. The division of labor between the permanent and rotating presidencies seems clear yet Spain and the president of the European Council, Herman

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van Rompuy, have created a working group to coordinate their work over the next six months to avoid any confusion. The working group will ensure maximum cooperation between the rotating and permanent Presidencies.

Now that the new President in town, outsiders were quick to dismiss the role of the rotating presidency. Despite the best efforts of both Mr. Zapatero and Mr. van Rompuy, turf wars might break out. With its very ambitious programme entitled *Innovating Europe*, Spain is determined to make its mark on Europe's agenda and ensure that its tenure is a success. Holding the Presidency of the European Council requires a considerable amount of time, energy, coordination and effort. The dreary task of organizing the meetings has been carried out, with about 300 meetings scheduled in different parts of the country, Spain signals the Union that it is fully equipped to lead the Union at these tough times.

Economic Recovery and Job Creation

This is Spain's fourth and Mr. Zapatero's first time to preside the Council of the European Union. First time in the EU driver's seat yet a skilled politician at home, Mr. Zapatero is aware of the magnitude and potential benefits of the EU's current economic situation, and with the support of his European partners and the EU governing institutions, he is looking to capitalize on it.

In his effort to jump start economic growth, Mr. Zapatero is suggesting to work in three complementary ways: "to promote greater economic coordination between EU member states and with the Union itself, to lay the foundations for a new, more sustainable model for economic growth and to improve the supervision of the financial sector". In an interview on December 8, 2009 Diego Lopez Garrido, Spain's Minister for European Affairs commented on Madrid's priority during its six-month tenure: "to work to obtain a recovery of the European economy."

The European Commission will present a proposal for a 10-year strategy "New Growth and Employment Strategy" (or "Europe 2020") to bring the EU 27 to 2020, on which it hopes to reach a preliminary agreement by March before the European Council meeting scheduled to take place on March 25-26, 2010. Spain's main goal is to get the EU's new 10-year economic strategy agreed on during its six-month term. The current strategy, the "Lisbon Strategy" (or more commonly called "Lisbon Agenda"), has failed to meet its overarching objective of making the Union the world's most competitive economy by 2010.

During his speech at the Plenary Session of the Conference with the President of the European Parliament and the Presidents of the European Parliamentary Groups on December 3, 2009, Mr. Zapatero emphasized the urgent need for financial supervision:

The economic recovery also makes it essential to improve financial supervision in Europe. The excesses of the financial sector were largely responsible for the crisis, revealing a clear lack of supervision. The Union must make definite progress in this area, and to achieve this, our Presidency will give impetus to the necessary measures to guarantee the full functioning of the two new institutions created for this purpose, the European Systemic Risk Council and the European System of Financial Supervisors.

At the December (December 2, 2009) Meeting of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council, EU's finance ministers reached agreement on proposals to establish three new European authorities for the supervision of financial services: the European Banking Authority, the European Insurance and Occupational Pensions Authority, and a European Securities and Markets Authority. Spain showed its unwavering support for the new regulatory and supervisory authorities, and declared its commitment to get these supervision laws approved before its sixth month term ends. In this context, Spain also called for sanctions, or "corrective actions," against EU Member States that fail to comply. Spain also demands more powers and greater authority for the European Commission in policing the proposed new regime (Guardian, 8 January 2010).

Europe's role as a global player

One of Madrid's four priorities is to enhance the image of the European Union as a global player. And now is the opportune time for Europe to shine. With its transatlantic partner unable to lead, Europeans can seize the opportunity and establish their credibility. With a series of high profile EU summits (EU-China, EU-Latin America and Caribbean, EU-USA, EU-Canada, EU-Balkans, EU-Morocco, EU-Egypt, a EuroMed meeting, and possibly a Middle East conference) Spain is mounting an impressive effort to boost the EU's shattered image at Copenhagen.

In the foreign policy domain, Spain attaches particular importance to Europe-Latin American and Caribbean relations. Mr. Zapatero pledged to take advantage of his presidency to promote the signing of the European Union Association Agreement with Central America and Multipartite Commercial Agreements with countries such as Colombia and Peru, though without renouncing the reactivation of negotiations between the European Union and Mercosur.

Relations with Mediterranean countries, another longstanding Spanish priority, will also receive special attention during the Spanish presidency. The stability and prosperity of the Mediterranean is a priority for Europe as well. Madrid's aspiration during its six month tenure is to configure the structure of the Union for the Mediterranean and to set up its General Secretariat in Barcelona. There are also bilateral summits scheduled with Egypt and Morocco in the agenda.

Spain's mediation abilities and skills will be tested in getting an agreement on the creation of a Palestinian state alongside Israel. Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, Miguel Ángel Moratinos recently spoke about his vision of a Palestinian state: "My idea, and my dream, and my engagement, is to work for having in 2010, finally, a Palestinian state that could live in peace and security with Israel" (*EUObserver*, 21 December 2009). With the deadlock in the region, to persuade Israelis and Palestinians to resume peace talks and get them back to the negotiating table would be the biggest success Spain could claim during its Presidency.

Bringing Europe closer to People: A Europe of rights and freedoms, a Europe for all citizens

Bringing the Union closer to European citizens, Spain's fourth priority area, requires action on a number of different levels. The first one is the Popular Legislative Initiative, Europe's experiment in direct democracy. The Treaty of Lisbon, designed to make the EU more democratic and transparent, included a popular legislative initiative provision that gives the EU citizens the right to ask the European Commission to put forward new draft laws. And Spain pledges to make this instrument of direct democracy a reality during the course of its term. This new channel for EU citizens to have a say in Europe's affairs is long expected to cure the Union's democratic deficit problem.

In this context, the Spanish Presidency will also work towards promoting initiatives that will strengthen and guarantee the exercise of rights contained in the EU's new Charter of Fundamental Rights, included in the Treaty of Lisbon. The European Union's accession to the Convention on Human Rights and the approval of the Stockholm Programme Action Plan for the European Area of Freedom, Security and Justice are also on Spain's excessive agenda.

And finally, fighting against gender-based violence, a true Spanish priority will be carried to the European level. Here, Spain is expected to lead by example. Spain's prime minister has long made women's rights a top priority domestically, and now he wishes to prioritize this issue at the European level with the creation of an EU monitoring centre for violence against women. Mr. Zapatero also asserted his country's commitment to the preparation of a Plan for Equal Opportunities for Men and Women for the 2011-2015 period, with a special emphasis on labor issues.

Conclusion

With the legacy of the successful Presidencies of 1989, 1995 (the first Euro-Mediterranean Conference in Barcelona), and 2002 (the euro was being circulated for the first time in 2002), Spain seeks to make a deeper and more lasting policy impact on Europe. Spain's success in delivering on its agenda will create a strong precedent that will be a template for how future rotating presidencies should function under the Lisbon Treaty.

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