

THE SPANISH PRESIDENCY OF THE EU IN 2010 – WHAT CAN WE EXPECT FROM THE FIRST EU PRESIDENCY UNDER THE TERMS OF THE LISBON TREATY?

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Wounded by the most serious economic crisis since joining the European Union in 1986 and beset by the lowest approval ratings of any Spanish head of government since 1994, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero takes up the reins of Spain's EU presidency on January 1, 2010. What he wants from the six months before the tenure passes over to Belgium is above all to restore his reputation and regain respect from the voters at home. The label of "historic" in respect of his period of office as EU president is already assured, even if he should personally do nothing to deserve it: Spain is to assume the first rotating presidency under the terms of the Lisbon Treaty.

In any case, if Prime Minister Zapatero is to be believed, the Spanish are "full of ambition and objectives" both for their presidency and for the eighteen months in which they want to shape the course of things as part of a trio with Belgium and Hungary.

Critics of the three governments, however, take the view that they have taken on too much, defined their objectives too vaguely and failed to liaise effectively with the remaining EU member states in respect of planning and implementation.

On January 18, 2010, Prime Minister Zapatero plans to present the program for his presidency to the European Parliament. Looking at preliminary Spanish plans combined with the proposals the trio has made and announcements made in speeches and newspaper articles, a program with a large number of bullet points certainly emerges. These include ways out of the economic and financial crisis, the introduction of a post-Lisbon strategy and an EU External Action Service, an effective strategy to combat illegal immigration and the strengthening of civil rights in the EU. Zapatero also intends to fly the flag for the global abolition of capital punishment.

It is worth taking a closer look at some of the principal points: whereas they reveal the trio's collective perspectives on important questions of economic and social policy, it simultaneously becomes clear how much these diverge from the views held by the other member states.

This applies to the "Post-Lisbon Strategy 2020", which is to be discussed and launched at the spring summit of EU heads of government. The aim of the strategy is to "confront economic, employment and social policy challenges, with the inclusion of environmental and climate protection aspects, and to

set realistic common targets focusing on growth and employment". Responding to criticisms voiced in the wake of implementation of the previous Lisbon strategy, the trio does not want to stop at recommendations and resolutions: they are also keen into the bargain to address the question of implementation. To this end, the circle of participation is to be expanded right from the outset to include regional and local decision-makers along with other, non-governmental stakeholders. The strategy is also to take most recent experience into account in the form of the respective national responses (e.g. economic packages) to the economic and financial crisis.

The trio is intent on delivering the full implementation of the common market with guarantees of a complete range of freedoms for individual citizens and the economy. This comes with the added extra of a single, harmonized market for copyrights and financial services. Consumer protection also needs to be harmonized throughout the union. Research and development in Europe and the creation of a "unified European research area" is another focal point. Lastly, joint EU policy is to be used to afford small and medium-sized enterprises a true recognition of their key role. As a response to the increased significance of the "external dimension", the post-Lisbon strategy should, according to the trio's provisional paper, also address the external aspects of EU competitiveness, highlight the importance of "open markets in Europe and throughout the world" and underline the "recognition of competition as the motor of efficiency, innovation and growth". Undoubtedly controversial is the question of whether, when, and indeed how individual member states' national economic policies should be coordinated in Brussels. In Spain the basic attitude to this is a favorable one.

The trio concludes by issuing a reminder that focusing on a European economy which needs to be "competitive, low-carbon, resource-efficient and sustainable" should not drive social problems within the EU off the agenda. Social tensions and concepts for dealing with them should therefore be included in the new strategy.

In cooperation with the Commission and the other member states, Spain, Hungary and Belgium want to press on with work on a new European "social agenda". This will initially take the form of an analysis of the implementation of the "Renewed Social Agenda: Opportunities, Access and Solidarity in 21st-Century Europe", with its focus on the years 2008-2010. The European Youth Pact, European Pact for Gender Equality and European Pact for the Family will all be incorporated. Another joint endeavor will be to tackle poverty: in 2010 the trio aims organize a European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion.

As far as EU expansion is concerned, the council resolutions of December 2006 are to remain in force. Preparations are being made for the admission

of Iceland and Croatia, and negotiations on Turkey's entry into the union should make "lasting and visible progress" in tandem with calls on that country to make "early reforms". At a meeting between the foreign ministers of Spain and Turkey in November 2009 in Cordoba, Spain restated her sympathy for Turkey's membership aspirations. With an eye to later admission, particular attention needs to be paid to the development and stabilization of the western Balkans and to the "Thessaloniki program".

Work needs to be done on implementing the "Eastern Partnership" concept and that of the Mediterranean Union. In this regard, the institution of the secretariat of the Mediterranean Union and initial agenda setting will see Spain landed with a particular role. The idea of activating and expanding regional committees is one of those under consideration for the active organization of cooperation in the Mediterranean area.

In the foreign and defense policy fields, Spain sees its contribution as being the implementation of jurisdictions and responsibilities in line with the Lisbon Treaty. In this context, the presidency has committed itself to bringing about improvements in the "effectiveness, conclusiveness and visibility" of the EU's external relations as a contribution to improving the communication of Europe's values and interests within a system of multilateral relationships. To this end, civil and military capabilities are also to be further developed. The intention is to allow the EU to contribute to international crisis management as well as to efforts toward stabilization and conflict resolution. Close cooperation and consultation with the United Nations, NATO and the OSCE will continue. Protection and promotion of human rights and their consideration in all EU decision-making will remain one of the top priorities.

The final point on the agenda for the presidency is preparations for the EU budget for 2014-2020. The Spanish government has already assessed its costs for the period of the presidency and has calculated a budget of 55 million euros for the six-month period. This leaves Spain with quite a lot to do in the first half of 2010.