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## A WANING ROTATING PRESIDENCY: The Difficult Role of Spain

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### Introduction

The best conclusion of any assessment of the external action of the last Spanish presidency of the European Union in 2010 is that no assessment is possible. In other words, the governmental army that was preparing an EU international relations agenda for the half-yearly presidency along with the academic analysis evaluating its progress each six months has become obsolete. The foreign policy of the European Union is no longer constructed on a six-monthly basis. It makes no sense any more to assess it at this tempo. The assessment should be longer-term and probably in keeping with the five-year legislatures of the Commission and the Parliament. Moreover, the Lisbon Treaty has not resolved the matter of a single external representation. The European Union remains immersed in internal debate on the new hierarchy of powers and, in this context, the new half-yearly presidencies, obliged to “take the back seat”, in the words of a Belgian diplomat, are bereft of the visibility and political leadership they formerly enjoyed.

For Spain, occupying the half-yearly presidency had represented, on the three prior occasions, the zenith of its Europeanist expression, besides providing the occasion for giving impetus to Spanish priorities on the European agenda. This same

goal was present in the preparations for the fourth Spanish presidency. José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero announced that the Spanish six-month term was not going to be a mere formality but that it was being approached as something transformative and with a very ambitious agenda. Maybe it was too much for a country already debilitated in the eyes of its European partners because of its economic indicators, and one that was faced with an as-yet untried European institutional machinery working in slow motion during the first months.

The Spanish presidency of the EU has not had it easy. Adjusting to the new institutional system and the difficulties intrinsic to the European Union, which has not yet found a foothold in the new international setting, have also had their influence in the last European half-year period.

It is time, now, to learn from a six-month term marked by pressing and unresolved challenges: the limitations of the European Union on the global scene, the process of adaptation to the new institutional system and the need for Spain to revise its objectives in the European Union. These are three challenges for a period of transition that has changed the role and visibility of the EU rotating presidencies, making it necessary to rework their agendas and goals within the new institutional and political scheme.

## Finding Europe's Place in a Multipolar World

The mark of the European Union on the international scene is fading, perhaps because of its own nature but in particular because of the dynamism of the newly emergent players. Twenty-five years ago, when Spain joined what was then the European Communities, neither Brazil nor India played the role of world leadership that they do today, while China was a long way from any comparison, not only with the United States but even with the Soviet Union. The international system has undergone changes that oblige each and every one of its components to adapt continuously to a new reality in which power of every kind – economic, political, cultural, et cetera – is clearly being redistributed towards the emerging powers.

In a relatively short period of time the European Union has seen how its international influence has been depleted in two fields of play in which, *a priori*, Europe has big stakes: negotiations on climate change and the meetings of the G-20, an emerging pillar of a renewed global economic government. In both cases, the EU has clearly shown that it cannot take for

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granted its capacity for determining major decisions on the global scale.

The Copenhagen Climate Summit of December 2009 marked the European awakening to a new geopolitical reality. Excluded from the agreement on climate change by the United States and China, the European Union saw how it was being removed from its great sphere of world leadership. Copenhagen bore witness to the predominance of the G-2, the new trans-Pacific axis underpinned by the economic dependence of the Americans on the Asian giant.

In the economic domain, the G-20 has been consolidated as a new governing body in the economic sphere, eclipsing a G-8 in which the influence of the EU is much greater. That the six bilateral meetings that Barack Obama held during the G-20 Toronto Summit took place with only one European head of state, David Cameron, and that he did this because of issues that were of interest to the internal politics of the United States, is something that invites reflection. Months earlier, the European Union-United States bilateral summit – scheduled for the month of May and eventually postponed until autumn – had been left in the lurch by Barack Obama, a circumstance that had already set the alarm bells ringing with the warning that the Europeans had lost their status as privileged partners of the United States.

Slowly and impelled by events, Europe is beginning to take in the fact that, in this multipolar world, it is one of the poles but not the most influential and, naturally, not the

most united. We have here a European Union that is waking up to see how the present financial crisis has come to threaten its single currency which, along with its expansion, is its greatest success in terms of political and economic integration during the last fifteen years. Over the past six months it has covered the tortuous ground of the rescue plans for Greece and the debate on the imperative need for better coordination of European economic policy. With this, it has become evident that the difficult political, economic and institutional linking-up among the 27 EU members goes beyond the new distribution of powers designed by the Lisbon Treaty. The debate on the limits of solidarity among the European partners has opened up wounds, the consequences of which remain to be seen.

Can a Europe that is not yet adapted to this new global order still take leadership in foreign policy? How might genuine interests be reconciled with more limited capacities? Are the 27 ready to lead in the Mediterranean, to contribute towards changing the situation in Africa or Latin America, or to make a qualitative leap forward in their relations with Russia? The European Union continues to present itself as a global actor in its objectives but both the new reality of the world and its own institutional definition have limited the results to date. From Haiti to Afghanistan voices are heard, asking for greater European involvement, which is a sign that a European project, fully in force, has much to contribute to global development and stability. In other words, it is not the project that has failed but the instruments and means placed at its service.

### Who Said Lisbon Would Sort It All Out?

Occupying this rotating presidency, the last one prepared with the traditional machinery and the first carried out with the instruments of the Lisbon Treaty, involved a certain organisational complexity. When Spain took over from the Swedish presidency, it was only a month since Herman Van Rompuy had occupied the recently created position of permanent President of the European Council and Catherine Ashton had been named High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. Nevertheless, the new institutional machinery of the European Union, which relegates the rotating presidencies to the background, would still need some months more before it was functioning normally. Hence Spain was slowly transferring its functions to these new actors and establishing through practice the new model of coordination between institutions.

The Spanish government declared even before the six-month presidency, that it would discreetly and modestly support the work of the permanent President, thereby highlighting that the Lisbon Treaty placed this post above the functions of the rotating presidencies. One example of this was the letter jointly signed by Luis Rodríguez Zapatero and Herman Van Rompuy in which they attempted to counter the idea of possible rivalry between them.

In practice, and given that the European machinery has not yet reached cruising speed, temporary mechanisms were negotiated for the presidency, guaranteeing that the day-to-day running of foreign relations would be duly covered by a combination of roles among European institutions, in particular the new EU posts and the Spanish diplomatic machinery. At the same time, with these agreements and over the six months, Spain managed to keep for itself some of the limelight in several foreign policy matters that were deemed crucial. Although from Moncloa and the Palacio de Santa Cruz<sup>1</sup> it was reiterated that the Spanish presidency would play a secondary role in the domain of foreign affairs – and this has certainly been the general tendency – it was agreed to go ahead with some of the summits with other regions or third countries which, it was envisaged, would be organised in Spanish territory. As happens with any other country, hosting a multilateral summit affords certain prestige in the international arena and provides a unique opportunity to bring the EU closer to the citizens. Hence, the idea was that Zapatero would share the limelight but would not co-preside since Van Rompuy had already taken on the role of representation in the three summits that were planned: that of the European Union with Latin America and the Caribbean (as well as the associated bilateral meetings), the eventually postponed Union for the Mediterranean Summit, and the much yearned-for summit with the United States. Things did not turn out as expected.

While foreign policy was once a traditional sphere of influence for the rotating presidencies, now that the Lisbon Treaty is fully underway the functions of foreign initiative and representation of the EU have been taken on by the permanent President of the European Council and the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. Perhaps this is the moment to highlight the importance of the internal dimension of the work of the half-yearly presidencies since their ministries will continue presiding over all formations of the Council of Ministers, excepting Foreign Affairs, just as the President of the Government of the member state concerned will continue to appear before the European Parliament at the start and finish of the six month term. This is an event that each country could take advantage of to mark out political leadership in the process of European integration. The new role of the rotating presidency determines new six-monthly goals that will be less and less relevant in the spheres of EU international relations, with some exceptions such as institutional developments (in particular with regard to defence) and several matters pertaining to enlargement policy.

One of the novelties with regard to previous Spanish presidencies has been the joint work of the so-called trio of presidencies. Spain, along with Belgium and Holland, presented

a common work programme and established mechanisms of coordination. Although Spain wished to give visibility to this new methodology, the trio itself took on a secondary role that was self-imposed by dint of occupation of the rotating presidency, thus producing technical work that is invisible although useful for the continuity of European management. All in all, certain doubts have emerged as to the utility of this new instrument for coordination *à trois* just at the time when other institutions like the new nominal posts are taking charge of their functions as agenda-setters. It would not be surprising if, in the end, it were another trio, consisting of the President of the Council, that of the Commission and the rotating Presidency, that consolidated in the eyes of public opinion the image of a threesome EU director, and especially in matters of external action where continuity is an exceptionally important value.

Institutional reform of the scope of the Lisbon Treaty needs time to lay solid foundations. In their first months of work both the High Representative and the President of the European Council have been harshly criticised, the former for giving priority to designing the new European External Action Service and the latter for not knowing how to lead the

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debates on the economic crisis. It has certainly not been easy for them. The Lisbon Treaty fixed general lines of orientation for these new posts but left for the practical running-in phase of their new responsibilities the *modus operandi* and adjustments made with the rotating presidency. As we shall continue to see with the coming six-monthly mandates, the rotating presidencies have lost the political status and high-profile media presence that they used to enjoy in their function of external representation – all of this without cutting back, and even increasing, the administrative burden of organising the multiple meetings of all the formations of the Council for which they are still responsible. The costs are too high for so little visibility.

### The Limits of a Presidency in Times of Crisis

Beyond the structural problems of the European Union itself, whether with regard to specific weight in the global scene or in institutional labyrinths and transitions, Spain has come up against a series of specific difficulties. Without a doubt, the first is what we might describe as an overwhelmed Spain in a self-engrossed Europe. This is a Spain – with unemployment and deficit figures that are higher than the European average, with an economy that has suffered like very few others from the slump in the construction sector and with a political scene marked by permanent confrontation between the leading political groupings – that has had to articulate a European response to counter speculative movements on the euro and sovereign debt. It was clear from the start that

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1. The Palacio de la Moncloa is the official residence in Madrid of the Spanish Prime Minister while the Palacio de Santa Cruz is the headquarters of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs [translator].

the state of the economy and how to find a way out of the crisis were to come together as one of the key themes of the Presidency. What did not come into the plans of the Spanish Government was that it would have to confront systemic threats and that it would be so difficult and would take so long to establish consensus among the 27 on how to mitigate the effects of the financial turbulence. Hence, although the Spanish Presidency Programme identified as one of its four lines of work that of making Europe a responsible and solidary global actor, the virulence of the economic scenario has relegated to the background the remaining priorities and, in particular, foreign policy.

Nevertheless, Spain did not renounce the international agenda that it had articulated starting out from a number of conventional goals for a Europe and for a world that, as already

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emphasised, have substantially changed. All of this makes one ask where foreign policy might be projected, with whom, in what form and with what results. If we begin with the first point, it is useful to recall that the Foreign Minister Miguel Ángel Moratinos, when he was outlining the mainstays of the Presidency in the Parliament, stated that it was going to have a marked Euro-Mediterranean and Euro-American accent. However, over these six months it has been possible to confirm that the articulation of a foreign policy agenda inspired in the traditional triangle of Spanish foreign policy (Europe, the Mediterranean, and Latin America) no longer fits into a much more multi-faceted global scenario wherein the influence of Asia is fast increasing.

Furthermore, it has become patent that Spain's traditional priorities have acquired their own dynamics, which are less dependent on the thrust of the rotating presidency. The case of Latin America is particularly conspicuous. Spain, before the start of the six-month period, began once again to approach the Presidency as an occasion to bring national priorities up to European level but paid only scant attention to the new institutional framework. The summit or, better said, the series of summits with Latin-American and Caribbean countries held last May in Madrid represented one of the high points of this Presidency's foreign policy. These summits managed to come up with results like giving a boost to infrastructure construction or the contribution of civil society through the Euro-Latin American Assembly (EUROLAT) and the creation of the Euro-Latin American Foundation. Some credit must be given to the work of the Presidency. Yet the successes also reveal the capacity for initiative of the countries of Latin America. One example is the creation of the Central American Free Trade Zone, a request from the Central American countries to which the EU response was initially reticent, but the Cen-

tral American countries have managed to go ahead with the project anyway, despite serious differences of opinion over such issues as the democratic legitimacy of the government of Honduras.

This reality contrasts with the Mediterranean setting in which the Union for the Mediterranean Summit (UpM), which was originally scheduled in Barcelona for June, was postponed. Given the degree of tensions and disputes in which the region is immersed and the inflexibility of some members when it comes to advancing solutions to regional conflicts, the Presidency could do little to foster dialogue and multi-lateral cooperation. Hence, just as the Spanish EU Presidency could not take all the credit for the progress made in relations with Latin America, neither should it be held wholly responsible for all the blocking of the Mediterranean agenda.

The temptation to evaluate the successes and failures of a presidency in terms of the number and status of summits held, the photos taken and the venues clinched is one that frequently arises. This trend is intensified when speaking of Spain, a country that has seen the summits as a chance to acquire centrality at the European and global levels. The UpM Summit and the aim of getting the photo with Barack Obama in Madrid pointed in this direction. The postponing of these events testifies to something more: the fact that a Europe that is very given to highly ceremonial summits of low production in terms of resolutions needs to change its strategy. In other words, it must come up with political rather than institutional responses to the serious challenges it faces from its members. These stumbling blocks should prompt Europeans to clarify their external representation and adapt their expectations to the new scene and new global challenges, bearing in mind that the United States, China, India and the Arab world will only respect a strong Europe, one that is able to contribute effective solutions and to speak with its own voice on the global level so as to restore the balance in this new power game.

Neither the EU nor, much less, Spain can effectively promote a foreign policy agenda without counting on solid alliances with the key actors in each regional scenario. Brazil and Turkey, for example, are inevitably taking over as regional leaders. Here, perhaps, Spain was not able to use the bilateral relations ably wrought in previous years with these two countries so as to design joint strategies at the regional level. Had this been achieved, Brazil would probably not have threatened, as it did, not to come to the Madrid Summit if it were attended by Porfirio Lobo, the Honduran president, or in the case of the Middle East, perhaps, it might have been possible to concert with Ankara a joint position regarding Iran or Gaza.

The promotion of the foreign agenda over these six months has also revealed the limits of the present-day policy governing Spain's alliances with other EU member states. The

intensity of the consensus with Paris does not necessarily tally with the results obtained, for example within the framework of the UpM Summit. Coordination with Berlin on international questions has not been up to the specific weight of Germany. The countries of the East, for their part, have not found in Spain a country that is sufficiently receptive to their concerns. The non-decision over Cuba in the Foreign Affairs Council, in which Spain was clearly in the minority in arguing for a review of the joint position, provides a clear example of the limits of the strategy upheld to this very day.

The results of this six-month period will be judged, as could not be otherwise, in the light of the expectations that were engendered in the preparatory phase. Spain opted for the rhetoric of a medium-level power of global presence, able to lead the European Union and, through that, to allay the sapping of its government on the domestic front. As so often happens in European foreign policy, this option opened up a breach between declared aspirations and achievements, yet another example of what is known as the capability-expectations gap, which has bedevilled EU foreign policy since its inception.

### Lessons Learned

Spain has concluded a transitional rotating presidency. It has been transitional in its role of supporting the deployment of the new Lisbon Treaty. Also transitional is its evaluation according to the parameters of the now-outdated goals for the six-month period, in particular because leadership of the European agenda is no longer effectuated from capitals that temporarily take on the technical coordination of the European machinery, but from Brussels, especially with regard to foreign policy. The relationship of Spain and its citizenry with the European Union, too, is undergoing its own transition. Spain's vocational Europeanism that was so resorted to in the first twenty years within the European Union falls short of what is needed for adulthood. The role of Europe in this changing world is also undergoing a process of re-definition. Again, the crisis and the difficulty in achieving consensus among the 27 member states in order to struggle against financial speculation and to approve new measures of economic coordination have not helped, either, to clarify the new hierarchies in the European Union.

It is easy to blame the Spanish presidency for many of the ills that beset the international role of the EU over the six-month period, while also criticising it for continuing to occupy spaces that, in the new order, pertain to the permanent institutions. Despite a number of obvious dysfunctions in the engendering of expectations about summits with the United States and the Union for the Mediterranean and, in specific

cases, the attempts to speak in the name of the European Union by the Foreign Minister Miguel Ángel Moratinos (regarding Cuba and the Middle East) and the Spanish ambassador in Peking, it would be an unfair simplification to blame the Spanish Government for all the shortcomings, ignoring both the imbalances of the new system and the EU's problems in defining its role in a changing international setting.

Many of the positive results that the half-yearly presidencies might present henceforth as their own would, in fact, be the product of the work of the rest of the European institutions, mainly the European Commission, but also the European Parliament, the President of the European Council and the machinery of the High Representative. The member states must begin to understand that their capacity for influence, especially with regard to foreign affairs, has ceased to come

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from the rotating presidencies and that they must find more permanent ways of working with the Commission and with groups of member states with compatible ideas in order to give some impetus to the agenda of each party. Any revision of the goals of the international agenda should not eclipse, however, the importance that these rotating presidencies still have in coordinating the projects of the Council of Ministers with a view to the good functioning of the European machinery. This is work deserving of recognition and visibility that, for the moment, does not seem to be well resolved or duly accepted by the European institutions.

The Spanish experience could be useful for the coming presidencies. As we have argued, foreign policy can no longer be one of the priorities on the half-yearly agenda of the presidencies. Yet European policy must certainly continue to be their central concern. The rotating presidencies have already ceded their part of representation abroad. Now it is a matter of taking one further step. The voice of José Luis Zapatero as rotating president was barely heard during the last six months in the EU's international action. This is something which should be taken note of, not only by the heads of state of the coming rotating presidencies but also by the duet consisting of Herman Van Rompuy and José Manuel Durão Barroso. As Pascal Lamy noted just a few months ago, it is no longer a matter of speaking before the world with one voice but "speaking through one mouth with one voice".