



TWO MONTHS IN THE BALANCE

Matters were left hanging in the balance in the last two months of 2009. But this time it was not due only to the media hyping the calendar when there were no special dates or anniversaries to talk about. No, this time it is a consequence of being caught between a pitiless review of an internal economic situation that is hard to digest, disappointment at the low-key new start for the European Union in the aftermath of the Irish vote and the success in overcoming of the Czech Republic's antics, and the inevitable expectations attendant upon the Spanish presidency-by-turn.

1. Spain's economy

The starting point for and key filter through which the Spanish press has been covering the European project has been, as mentioned above, the internal predicament of the economy. It is well known that the impact of the crisis has been harder on Spain than on other EU countries. Its economy will take longer to recover. The situation of the economy was the starting point for the traditional Christmas speech by King Juan Carlos on Christmas Eve. Yet, perhaps, nothing better than the facts themselves, which, extrapolated from the latest data released by the official statistics agencies, Joaquín Estefanía listed at the beginning of his article on 27 December, could capture the seriousness of the situation. Following on from the noun *hecho* (fact), which gets repeated at the beginning of each sentence, we read: "between the second quarter of 2007 and the second semester of 2009, 2.28 million jobs have been lost; unemployment among the under-25s has reached 42.9%, 15 points up from last year; the number of families in which all members are unemployed has reached 1.13 million, and continues to grow; half of the population of Spain earns less than 15,760 euros per annum, and is thus *mileurista*; 30% of the unemployed population have been unemployed for over a year, and in the last year alone the number of unemployed has risen by 600,000." (1)

2. Disappointment at the EU's new start

The palpable sense of relief at the outcome of the Irish referendum and the success in overcoming the resistance put up by the Czech Republic until the

very end quickly gave way to speculation and theorising about the nominations for the new official posts. In the build-up to the nominations that the 27 would later decide upon, the press not only detailed the responsibilities of the two new posts, President and High Representative of Foreign Affairs, but also considered the unprecedented possibilities offered by a common foreign policy. The EU's international standing is too fragile and its actions to date too weak, for the emphasis not to be placed on the opportunity provided by the Lisbon Treaty for the EU to make its voice heard by means of the effective coordination of diplomatic services, or, according to what is written, by means of the fusion of the external action services of the Commission and the European Council, and the simultaneous incorporation of state diplomatic services under the leadership of the High Representative for Foreign Affairs (2).

There was widespread concern that low-profile figures, such as former prime ministers or ministers no longer operating in the right circles, would be chosen (3), while the need to elect authoritative individuals capable of influencing the course set in US foreign policy by Obama was insisted upon (4).

Once the nominations were announced, there was bemusement at the choices made by the 27 due to the low-profiles of the nominees. Reflecting each other's opinions, the editorials in *El País* and *ABC* are a case in point.

The former said of the outcome of the 27's behind-doors deliberations that it was "sad for pro-Europeans", and described the Union's two new leaders as "grey, obscure individuals" whose nomination could only deepen the gulf between the citizens and the institutions. The editorial maintains that the Belgian Christian democrat Herman Van Rompuy had on his side the fact that he belongs to a small, fully integrated founding member of the EU, and his brilliant management of Belgium's complex internal situation. It admits that his discretion and lack of protagonism may help Van Rompuy build consensus, but also says that a powerful international presence and strong leadership cannot be expected of him. As for the election of Labour's Catherine Ashton, the editorial attributes it to Gordon Brown (and those who worked to ensure that at least one of the two posts was given to a woman, but without mentioning Zapatero), criticising a choice that in fact rewards a country that is part neither of the eurozone, nor the Schengen Area, while on the other hand expressing the hope that Great Britain play a bigger role in security and defence policy, as well as in maintaining close trans-Atlantic ties (5).

The *ABC* editorial, on the other hand, points to the universal disappointment at the election of the President and High Representative, saying that the process of institutional reform, which started ten years ago and ended with the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty, had failed to reach its objective as a result of the low profile of the people elected. It goes on to say that with Van Rompuy and Catherine Ashton, the 27 opted to avoid electing someone who might overshadow them. Hence, the distance between community institutions and European citizens runs the risk of becoming even wider, given the artificial establishment of a geographical and ideological equilibrium underlying the nominations, which is particularly evident in the case of Ashton, who was nominated on the grounds that she was female, British and a socialist, rather than on personal merit (6).

With hindsight, it was *ABC* that got its forecasts right when its Brussels correspondent tipped the Franco-German axis to win with the candidature of Belgium's Van Rompuy, and the decision to leave the post of High Representative to London and David Miliband. A Christian democrat from a small country and a socialist from a big country complete the picture, alongside Jerzy Buzek at the Parliament representing the East and Barroso at the Commission the South (7). But still *ABC* championed the home side, saying that the personality of the EU's first President sent two clear messages for the future of Europe, about its roots and geography. A fervent Catholic who regularly retires to the Benedictine Abbey of Affligem in order to cultivate his faith, Van Rompuy was opposed to the admission of Turkey to the EU on the grounds that Europe's roots were Christian, of which he is a strong advocate (8).

With the issue of the nominations for the new posts, it was inevitable that some mention should be made of the Zapatero's role, considered crucial by the press, which also underscored the importance attributed by the socialist leader from the outset of negotiations to the confirmation and consolidation of Almunia's position in the Commission. A result which was subsequently achieved (9).

The former *Le Monde* editor, writing in *El País*, expresses a partly countercurrent opinion. Colombani's view is that the practically universal disappointment expressed in the international press with regard to the nominations made by the 27 was the result of the expectations raised by such names as Felipe González and David Miliband, which had been circulating in previous months. But also the result of a misunderstanding: the belief that the post was that of President of Europe rather than President of the European Council, a "facilitator" who chairs

the meetings of heads of state and government four times a year. Colombani underscores the fact that real power remains with the Commission, and that the truly important role was that of High Representative of Foreign Affairs, a post which brings together the previously separate prerogatives of the President of the Council of Foreign Ministers, the Foreign Affairs Commissioner and the Commission's Vice President. Colombani, too, criticises Ashton's nomination, saying that such an important role would have deserved a stronger figure capable of asserting authority over the twenty-seven foreign ministers. Colombani also invites his readers to remember that Europe is coming out of the Blair-Schroeder-Chirac years, which were disastrous for Europe, and during which the three presidents devoted themselves to weakening the Commission and encouraging the revival of nationalism, which culminated in the Nice Treaty. Having credited Sarkozy's six-month presidency with getting Europe back on track, Colombani concludes by saying that Obama's recent trip to Asia highlighted Europe's weakness at a global level, and appealing to the role played by the French and Germans within the Council to help Europe get out of it (10).

3. The new EU tested at the climate change summit in Copenhagen

With its new start after the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty and the election of its new leaders, the EU was put to test for the first time at the world summit in Copenhagen on the measures to be adopted to combat climate change. In this department, too, expectations regarding the impact of Europe's new direction, as expressed by an authoritative socialist representative in the Europarliament, were frustrated. Where López Garrido saw an EU leading on the struggle against climate change (11) and the Brussels correspondent for *El País* made triumphalist statements about the moral high-ground occupied by Europe with its allocation of funds and a commitment to slash greenhouse gas emissions by 30% (12), at the conclusion of the Copenhagen summit, it was the United States and China, the biggest polluters, who were hailed as victors (13).

4. On the eve of the Spanish president's semester

In view of profound institutional and decision-making changes, one *El País* editorial focused on the fact that the Spanish presidency-by-turn was to have orchestrated many of those changes, setting their profile not as president-by-turn, but as the first country to be called upon to preside after the

implementation of the Lisbon Treaty (14). This also defines the differences compared to the previous Spanish presidencies (1989, 1995 and 2002) resulting from Europe's transformations, Spain's changing position with regard the Union's enlargement and the seriousness of an economic crisis which has to be faced, starting from a new strategic agenda for the EU for 2020 to replace the failed Lisbon Agenda, defining the long-term reforms required by the Union to recover its lost competitiveness (15). One sign of a positive start is Zapatero's declared intention of giving as much leeway as possible to the new EU president, Van Rompuy, allowing him to chair all the meetings of heads of state and government that will be held during the semester. That means, therefore, not only the European Councils in Brussels, but also all scheduled bilateral meetings. The Spanish head of government was not required to make such a decision, which has been seen as a way of consolidating the role of the new EU president and setting a precedent for the presidencies-by-turn that will follow (16).

(1) J. Estefanía, *¿La normalidad? recuperación sin empleo*, El País, 27-12-2009.

(2) F. Aldecoa, *Diplomacia común europea*, El País, 02-11-2009.

(3) R. Pérez-Maura, *Poner Lisboa en práctica*, ABC, 04-11-2009.

(4) N. Birnbaum, *La elección del nuevo presidente europeo*, El País, 04-11-2009; *Europa busca líderes*, El País, 19-11-2009.

(5) *Una UE demasiado gris*, El País, 20-11-2009.

(6) *Perfil bajo para Europa*, ABC, 21-11-2009.

(7) E. Serbeto, *La venganza de la "nueva Europa"*, ABC, 12-11-2009.

(8) J. P. Quiñonero, *Europa, raíces y valores*, ABC, 21-11-2009.

(9) E. Serbeto, *La UE salva la crisis con dos políticos de perfil bajo para los nuevos puestos claves*, ABC, 20-11-2009; A. Missé, *Almunia, nuevo hombre fuerte en la UE*, El País, 29-11-2009.

(10) J.-M. Colombani, *Expectación y decepción*, El País, 24-11-2009.

(11) D. López Garrido, *Europa cambia hoy*, El País, 01-12-2009.

(12) R. M. De Rituerto, *La Unión Europea se pone al frente de la lucha contra el cambio climático*, El País, 12-12-2009.

(13) V. Puig, *Nueva China frente a la Europa unida*, ABC, 22-12-2009.

(14) *Vista al exterior*, El País, 11-11-2009.

(15) X. Vidal-Folch, *España para Europa*, El País, 03-12-2009; M. González, *La economía, eje de la presidencia española*, El País, 12-12-2009.

(16) M. González, *Zapatero cede protagonismo a Rompuy*, El País, 16-12-2009.