



PLUS AND MINUS IN SPAIN'S PRESIDENCY-BY-TURN

Spain recently ended a semester as EU president-by-turn which can be summed as follows: huge expectations, a triumphal beginning, some trouble mid-way, a slightly better finish.

Zapatero and his administration invested heavily in this opportunity, hoping to boost their image and divert attention away from internal problems (primarily economic, but also relating to a loss of trust in his leadership). Hence the ambitiousness of the programme, the priorities of which were defined in agreement with the populist opposition: coordinating European economic and fiscal policies, tackling unemployment, implementing the Lisbon Treaty, initiating the debate on the EU 2020 strategy. In addition, there was a heavy emphasis on the delicate task of shaping a model for future cohabitation with the new EU leaders created by the Lisbon Treaty.

Inovar Europa – as the motto for Spain's presidency goes – institutionally, economically, and in foreign policy. In addition, there is a plan to establish community policies for European citizenship rights, gender equality and combating violence against women.

As mentioned above, navigation in international waters proved problematic from the outset, what with the immense tragedy in Haiti to deal with, Obama's postponement at the beginning of February of the US-EU summit initially planned for the beginning of May and the cancelled Mediterranean Union summit. But the going was particularly rough in domestic waters with Spain's situation being equated to that of Greece, the distrust of the markets, the country's demotion by the rating agencies, which had Zapatero, caught in the crossfire, quaking in his boots. On the one hand, Spain's economy was groaning under the strain and drastic measures were needed to lead the country into calmer waters, on the other there was the immediate task of taking steps within the EU to avert Eurozone bankruptcy and the risk of a collapse and the domino effect it would have. Half way through its presidency, Spain ran the risk of running aground both internationally and internally.

Things picked up slightly in recent weeks, with the tough measures adopted by the Zapatero government (public sector wage cuts, a pension freeze

and public investment cuts) aimed at lowering the deficit by 8 points of GDP in four years. In addition, there were the late but important decisions made by ECOFIN on 9-10 May relating to financial transactions, the toughest coordination programme for budgetary policies yet, support for the austerity plans adopted by Mediterranean countries, the publication of stress tests for banks (of which Spain was a strong advocate) and the launch of the EU 2020 Agenda. It ended with the support given by the 27, Sarkozy and Merkel in particular, to the Spanish austerity plan and praise for the running of the presidency at the European Council on June 17.

A balanced assessment of the presidency must take into account the difficulties the Spanish presidency found itself facing. With the scale of the international economic crisis, the waves of euroscepticism, the storms surrounding the question of identity, the European project came closer than ever before to running aground. A two-month delay in the establishment of the new Barroso Commission slowed progress, and the vessel was both undermanned and under-supplied, as the Spanish presidency had no more than 40 officials (Sweden in 2009 had more than double) and a budget of 55 million euros (one third of what France had in 2008). Given the scale of the difficulties and the conditions Spain found itself in at the moment of taking up the presidency, it has to be acknowledged that, overall, cohabitation with Europe's new leaders worked, despite some contradictions; that despite a late response from the community to the Greek crisis, a solution was found; that some positive progress was made in the EU-Morocco summit in the first half of March and above all in the Santander and Madrid summits between the EU and Latin American and Caribbean countries in May, as well as with the revival of the EU-Mercosur talks. The process that should lead to the citizens of Europe being able to propose legislative reforms in the European Commission was initiated. A European Observatory to tackle violence against women was also set up. On the other hand, the failure to establish a shared foreign policy was not compensated by the agreement reached on 21 June in Madrid concerning the European External Action Service (EEAS), which the European Parliament is set to ratify in July and should be implemented by the end of the year. Furthermore, nobody has failed to notice to minimalism of the new Europe 2020 agenda.

A note about Cuba. Zapatero and his foreign minister Moratinos were resolved to exert pressure on Europe's institutions to modify the shared position

adopted in 1996 with regard to the Caribbean island. This irritated the Populist Party and the press, almost as if the socialists wanted to bring the Castro regime in from the cold. Pressure from the Cuban church, with Moratinos acting as intermediary, leading to the release of some political prisoners, followed by a softer approach towards the Cuban regime from the US, strongly advocated by Obama, are all comforting signs for Spain's foreign policy. The problem, which is entirely political, is the implementation of the best strategy for supporting human rights and Cuba's transition to democracy. In this respect, it cannot be ruled out that Spanish diplomacy will make full use of experience acquired when democrats and leftist circles sought to discourage tourism with the aim of putting pressure on the Franco regime, as everyone now recognises that the flow of tourism was one of the defining factors that led to the rejuvenation of the mentality of the Spanish people and determined the support most of them gave to the democratic transition.

To conclude, a balanced assessment of the presidency shows both light and shadows. This is reflected also in the Spain's public opinion, which is divided between a monochromatic *ABC*, which viewed the Spanish presidency as "grey" from the moment the programme was presented in Brussels and saw it as Zapatero's political tomb, and the verdict given by *El País*, which, after defining Spain's presidential progress until mid-way as a "Calvary", concluded by giving it a pass-mark, an average between a fail in view of the expectations and a good pass given in consideration of the internal situation in the EU and Spain at the beginning of the presidency. More dark than light, however, in the view of the citizens. The CIS barometer in June found that only 17.7% of Spain's citizens are satisfied with how the Spanish presidency was conducted, against 31.5% who said they are unhappy, whereas in a second poll carried out by DYM for *ABC*, 48% of those interviewed disapproved of the work of the president-by-turn, with 13% abstaining from giving a verdict.

Brown has gone. Sarkozy is in treacherous waters. Merkel has lost the regional elections in North Rhine-Westphalia and is visibly struggling. The fact that Zapatero is not doing so well is no mystery. But he won't be leaving the European Union in a worse state in which he found it and Spain's condition is no worse now than it was before.

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