

Euro-Mediterranean Cooperation: From the Spanish to Hungarian Presidency

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With the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty on 1st December 2009, the role of the rotating presidency has been limited. These constraints especially affect the political impact in the field of external policies that the Prime Minister of the country holding the presidency (now replaced in the European Council by the Permanent President) and the Minister for Foreign Affairs (now replaced in the Foreign Affairs Council by the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy) used to exert. Although the EU institutions are still in the transition period, the status of the rotating presidency was clearly reduced. The Spanish Presidency, the first one to work under the new regime, was often accused of acting against the spirit of the treaty, while Prime Minister Zapatero and Foreign Affairs Minister Moratinos remained key EU representatives. However, this tendency also stemmed from the fact that Spain had to plan its presidency foreseeing all eventualities, including non-ratification of the new treaty. Belgium in turn, conscious of its internal political crisis, decided to keep a low profile and focus on day-to-day institutional management, while making more room for President of the European Council Herman van Rompuy, former Belgian Prime Minister. The task of further institutionalising the practices related to the new format of rotating presidency has now been handed to Hungary and will also be carried out by Poland as from July 2011.

Another factor shaping the role and agenda of a rotating presidency is the trio arrangement aimed at coordination of priorities and work of three consecutive presidencies. Hungary is to finalise the first trio programme operating under the new treaty regime. The programme reflects the political priorities of each of the Member States involved in its preparation, but constitutes above all the manifestation of the key challenges Europe is facing, as well as a list of initiatives and policies resulting from the EU calendar. The rotating presidency is not expected to launch brand new policy initiatives, but rather to continue, revitalise and update policies and projects that are already on the EU agenda. Simultaneously, a successful presidency should focus on facilitating compromise, rather than on furthering its particularistic objectives.

Moreover, as a result of the economic crisis the EU is suffering from and of the necessity to build up a post-Lisbon institutional framework, the priorities of Spain, Belgium and Hungary have been rather inward-looking. The political will and attention of EU leaders have been clearly focused on coordination of economic policies to promote recovery and sustainable growth in Europe, while launching the Europe

2020 strategy, fostering a Europe of rights and freedoms at the service of citizens, implementing the Lisbon Treaty (Spanish Presidency), as well as on growth and employment for preserving the European social model, including the economic policy coordination cycle, re-launch of the single market and the future of cohesion and agriculture policies, especially in view of negotiating the new financial perspective for the years 2014-2020 (Hungarian Presidency).

At the same time, however, the trio attempted the reinforcement of the two external action priorities: enlargement and neighbourhood policies. Although the EU is determined to enhance the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) as a single and coherent policy framework, paying equal attention to its eastern and southern dimensions, a clear division of work emerged between Spain and Hungary. Each of them was supposed to give new impulses to the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) and Eastern Partnership (EaP) respectively, just as France and Poland (together with Sweden and the Czech Republic) launched these projects in 2008 and 2009.

In this respect, setting up the UfM Secretariat in Barcelona and appointing the first Secretary-General was a crucial objective of the Spanish Presidency. The Secretariat, employing 25 people and having successfully prepared in 2010 its programme, staff regulations, as well as procedures for choice of projects, is now operational, but faces severe difficulties, resulting from huge budgetary cuts and lack of commitment from the UfM Member States. The 2nd UfM summit (initially planned for June 2010) was postponed indefinitely due to a blockage resulting from the unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict. With ministerial meetings being postponed, cancelled or ending up in a deadlock, the UfM political process has been utterly paralysed. Does it mean that together with the expected shift of EU attention towards the East under the Hungarian and Polish Presidencies, the Mediterranean agenda will be abandoned? This seems highly unlikely, as the region has powerful advocates within the European Union. The ENP will remain a common framework and certain funding opportunities might re-open with the negotiations of the new multi-annual financial framework. It seems, however, that high politicisation of the Euro-Mediterranean cooperation advocated by French President Sarkozy proved to be counterproductive. Unless the Middle East peace process delivers tangible results, a political union does not seem to be an option for the region. Thus, according to UfM Secretary-General Ahmad Masa'deh, a modest and incremental approach should be adopted, while aiming at isolating the UfM from high politics and concentrating on technical and sectoral project cooperation, notably in the fields of renewable energy or education and students' mobility.

A gradual and depoliticised approach was from the very beginning part and parcel of the Eastern Partnership initiative. This results from the ambiguity and visible strain in relations between some EU Member States, EaP partner states and Russia. The priority of the Hungarian Presidency would be to aim at accelerating reforms, legislative approximation and further economic integration, while working towards the negotiation of deep and comprehensive free trade agreements and visa facilitation and liberalisation

on a case by case basis. Hungary will also host in Budapest the second Eastern Partnership Summit in May 2011. However, with regard to Euro-Mediterranean cooperation, Hungary is a policy-taker: it will rather join the already existing regional projects than initiate new policy solutions. Moreover, in the Hungarian view, the southern dimension is largely privileged under the current ENP financial scheme receiving 70% of the total funding, to the disadvantage of the countries of eastern dimension. Consequently, Hungary together with Poland might advocate the re-balance of funding for the post-2013 period.

To sum up, the division of work and shifts in attention within the trio are a natural and desirable process allowing for equilibrium between strategic interests of EU Member States. The latter possess varying levels of resources and political leverage to drive the EU agenda forward with respect to different areas of EU external action. At the same time, a reduced role of rotating presidencies and enhanced position of supranational actors and institutions dealing with EU foreign policy might help to consolidate the main lines of European action in the entire neighbourhood, both in the medium and long term. An incremental project-based approach in sectors of vivid interest to UfM countries appears to be a viable solution under the unfavourable political circumstances. It is crucial to secure adequate financial resources, while advocating an increase in funding of EU external action in general and neighbourhood policy in particular. The southern and eastern dimensions of the ENP should not be perceived as rivals in the quest for EU attention and commitment, but rather as two equally important parts (although with dissimilar needs and goals) of the broad single policy paradigm.