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The Spanish Presidency and its influence on EU-Latin American Relations

New constitutional agreement meets new focus of foreign policy

In the last years the EU has been focusing primarily on internal affairs, such as the quarrel over a new treaty. Foreign affairs have been dominated mostly by the European Neighborhood Policy and political and economic relationships with the immediate neighbors by land and sea have been strengthened. The Spanish takeover of the Presidency of the Council of the European Union on January 1st, 2010, however, might herald changes in this respect. First of all, the introduction of the Lisbon Treaty, whose implementation the Spanish presidency has strongly committed itself to, will end years of struggling for an appropriate political and institutional setting and hopefully bring about various improvements. Secondly, the Spanish presidency has also announced it will pay more attention to other regions, first and foremost the region with which Spain has close economic, cultural and linguistic ties, i.e. Latin America.

Latin America is so important to Spain that, when joining the European Union in 1986, it insisted on a stipulation in its accession treaty stating the close connections to this specific region. By serving a bridging role between Europe and its former colonies, Spain could at the same time end its previous tacking back and forth between an orientation towards Europe or towards its former colonies. Thus, it comes as no surprise that Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero announced that the Spanish Presidency would be a "Euro-Atlantic" one, paying special attention to the relations between the EU and the Latin American and Caribbean countries.

Foreign politics under the Lisbon Treaty

The Lisbon Treaty seeks to increase the efficiency, democracy, transparency and the say of citizens and the European Parliament in the EU, as well as to promote European values and to strengthen the Union's international role.

To achieve these ends, two new offices have been created: the President of the European Council and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. The latter combines the former positions of the High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy and the Commissioner for External Relations and will be equipped with a diplomatic service. After hearings in the European Parliament and some additional deferments, the candidates have finally taken up office and are just starting their official functions.

The upcoming presidency will be the fourth held by Spain since becoming a member of the European Union (previous presidencies took place in 1989, 1995, and 2002). Besides implementing the Lisbon Treaty and strengthening connections to

Latin America, the other top priorities of the Spanish Presidency vary widely, from addressing the repercussions of the financial crisis, to combating climate change, promoting judicial and police cooperation, and enabling Europe to speak with one voice on the international scene, as anchored in the Lisbon Treaty.

Ironically, due to these same foreign policy objectives, the Spanish agenda for its presidency, though formally within the wording with the Lisbon Treaty, might create tensions with the new institutional settings. In the first place, the creation of two new posts with strong competences has taken away the international role from the rotating presidency. Under the Treaty of Lisbon, foreign policy can at the best be formulated in the quadrangle of the presidency, High Representative, President of the European Council and President of the Commission. It is a coincidence that this first happens while Spain holds the presidency of the council, as for the last ten years, the post of the High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy was held by a Spanish compatriot, Javier Solana. Secondly, as pointed out before, Spain has its own national interests in its former colonies. Using its public position presiding over the council of the European Union to strengthen its foreign trade ties might, especially under the new institutional settings, provoke resentments.

Thus, Spain is required to carefully weigh its own interests against the Union's larger interests.

Under no circumstances should a unilateral Spanish attempt on any issue (for example, economic involvement in South America) harm the strategic priorities the Union has given itself, i.e. to be recognized internationally as a serious and respected actor. In order to be recognized as a unified external actor that speaks with one voice, open disagreement between the four EU-internal actors on foreign policy priorities should preferably be avoided.

An easy solution would be to advise the country holding the rotating presidency to cede its foreign policy making role to the two new positions. After all, coping with the economic crisis and fighting climate change offer enough challenges for the Spanish presidency. However, changing the agenda and clearing the "international field" for the President of the European Council and the High Representative would, at least in this specific case, not be advisable.

One has to recognize the fact that for one whole month the Spanish presidency will take place without both a President of the European Council and a High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, as both Herman Van Rompuy and Catherine Ashton have only recently taken office and are at the moment occupied with finding their roles and establishing administrative structures, such as the European External Action Service. During this time, the Union needs a foreign policy and who else should shape this if not the rotating presidency?

However, these are exceptional circumstances that again require careful balancing: on the one hand, Spain has to fill in until the new institutional setting is fully functioning, on the other hand, it has to keep in mind that this is a temporary role and that downgrading the new leading personnel to representative offices would harm the Union's aim to be recognized as a serious actor in the international arena.

Luckily, there is little fear that Spain might take advantage of its position and override the President of the Commission and the Foreign Representative. Rather,

Spanish Secretary of State Diego Lopez Garrido has announced that the Spanish presidency intends to strengthen the leading personnel.

In fact, sabotaging the newcomers would not only prevent the EU from playing a more coherent international role and thus seriously damage its reputation, but would also contradict the stated Spanish priority of supporting the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty.

Latin America as a region of strategic interest

The special focus Spain puts on Latin America is in accordance with the European Union's interests in this region. The first EU-Latin America and Caribbean-summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1999 started a partnership based on a common cultural heritage and common values and involves close cooperation in political, economic, cultural and scientific areas. This bi-regional partnership includes manifold relationships, activities and cooperation mechanisms at the executive government level (alternating summits and meetings of the foreign ministers every two years and regular meetings of senior officials) and at the levels of civil society, parliaments and entrepreneurs.

In economic terms, the EU is the second biggest trading partner for Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) states (after the USA). LAC countries make up five percent of the EU's external trade and the trade volume more than doubled from 1990 to 2006. Exporting for the main part agricultural products and natural resources, the LAC countries are an expanding market for European technology and chemical products. The EU already holds the biggest share of foreign direct investment in Latin America and the Caribbean (68 billion US\$ in 2005) and is also the biggest donor for development cooperation (2.69 billion from 2007-2013).

Since the 1999 Rio-summit, several bi- and multi-lateral meetings have contributed to strengthening the partnership. Europe's interest in the region continues to be high and the EU can strongly benefit from the Spanish announcement to use its presidency to strengthen ties with Latin America and the Caribbean, which will first and foremost be shown in the importance Spain attaches the EuLac-Summit.

Spanish presidency as "Honest Broker"

In political respects, Latin America is characterized by a gap between the rather "conventional" political camp in most of the countries on the one side and the left-wing populist or left-wing nationalist camp, exemplified by the Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez, on the other side. While moderate states are a large majority, the year of 2009 has also seen the first coup in Latin America for almost three decades. During the constitutional crisis following the dismissal of the Honduran President Manuel Zelaya, Spain made its mark as a calm mediator. Together with the Ibero-American summit, Spain advised consideration between parties and insisted on adherence to the constitution by demanding reinstatement of the toppled president. This shows that most of Latin America (except maybe for Chavez, whose rebuke by Juan Carlos at the Ibero-American summit in 2007 is unforgettable) accepts Spain as an honest broker.

This privileged role might also pay off with regards to a country that is about to experience dramatic institutional changes. Already opening, albeit carefully, socialist

Cuba will sooner or later have to face the question of how to handle the post-Castro era. The Obama administration's easing of the embargo has already facilitated a lot, and the participation of Cuba in the 2009 EU-LAC foreign minister meeting has been a further step to normalizing relations. Traditionally in favor of opening and rapprochement towards Cuba, Spain has had an important role in this process and already held out the prospect of a bilateral agreement. Within the EU, Spain, with its mainly economic interests in Cuba, has stood against Eastern European member states and the Netherlands, who have emphasized the importance of human rights over economic rapprochement. Considering that Cuba is about to undergo dramatic changes, though nobody can yet say to where they will lead, it will be important for Europe to have one actor that is considered trustworthy by Cuba. This might be a potential window of opportunity for promoting European values and for preventing another repressive regime, or even a failing state, from following this one. With the Spanish government, against some domestic opposition, acting as a spokesperson for a different approach than the blockade (the Spanish Foreign Minister recently pointed out that the 50 years of isolation, confrontation, embargo and blockade have led nowhere), the European Union could support a Cuban transition process through economic aid and political reforms while also emphasizing the importance of human rights. Whether this strategy will be fruitful in the end, however, depends last but not least on the Cuban attitude: if the civil rights situation does not noticeably improve soon the Spanish government will find itself in a difficult position for promoting a change towards Cuba against the wishes of its own domestic opposition and parts of the European Union.

For multiple reasons, the Spanish experience in Latin America, i.e. its advantages resulting from a common culture and language; historical experiences such as colonization, liberation, exile (in both directions, from fascist Spain to the former colonies and later from Latin American military dictatorships to the former motherland); its respected role in the Ibero-American community; and its experience and recognition as a honest broker are of vital importance to the European Union if it wants to further strengthen economic ties, promote European values and to catch up with the advances less democratic actors, such as Russia and China, have achieved through their "strategic alliances" with this region. It is for these purposes that the EU, both economically and normatively, stand to benefit if Spain uses its presidency to pursue closer relationships with LAC countries.

Conclusion

Ten years ago, the European Union acknowledged the strategic importance of Latin America and since then it has sought to deepen the relationship with that region. The traditional Spanish interest in this region has contributed to this process. As there is further economic and political deepening ahead, the EU can profit from Spain's "bridge function". The announced Madrid summit will be an important step in deepening the EuLac relationship. Spain can act as a broker on various issues, from immigration laws to agricultural duties. This is especially important given the involvement of semi-autocratic states in parts of Latin America. If Europe misses the chance to intervene and to hold up its own values, it might fall behind competing actors in the international scene.

In large parts of Latin America Spain enjoys trust and respect in international affairs. This reputation could be helpful for the European Union in critical political situations, such as the Honduras coup or the Cuban transition. At the same time, when

acting according to economic or political interests the EU, and with it Spain, should never ignore European values in international negotiations. This might especially apply in the case of Cuba: the position of presidency should not be used to put individual domestic economic interests over common European values. Rather, Spain should use its respected position to point out that civil rights are non-negotiable.

At the same time, it is important that the incumbent Presidency respects the fact that the new constitutional situation, i.e. the Lisbon Treaty, has changed the institutional setting. One important goal of the new Treaty is to strengthen the Union's international role. While there might be reasonable doubts about whether the institutional balance of power is optimal or whether the personnel decisions were the best, the new institutional settings should be respected and given a chance to prove itself in foreign policy. However, foreign policy should be carried out in close cooperation with the other institutional partners. In the specific case examined here, Spain enjoys so much trust and experience in Latin America that the Union is well-advised to support the "Euro-Atlantic" presidency.

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