



## COUNCIL : DOUBLE PRESIDENCY HITS FIRST SNAG

By Célia Sampol      January 6, 2010

The first steps in the rotating Presidency of the EU Council and the stable president of the European Council have already revealed clashes with regard to the division of tasks, despite the facade of consensus that leaders are attempting to display.

It is not easy being the first Presidency in exercise to have to take on the implementation of the institutional provisions of the Lisbon Treaty. Because, while they bristle with good intentions on paper, they are likely to be difficult to administer in practice. Spain, which took over the reins of the EU Council on 1 January for six months, will in particular test the concept of double presidency' and, in this regard, learn to keep a low profile. Behind his unassuming and even austere appearance, the new President of the European Council, Herman Van Rompuy (Belgium), should, in fact, attempt to establish himself.

As of his first official day at work, on 4 January, he did not waste any time. Whereas the former prime minister intended to keep a low profile in the media, he finally decided to mark the event by planning audiovisual coverage and by making a rather memorable declaration. He therefore announced, without waiting for his meeting, on 8 January in Madrid, with Spanish Prime Minister José Luis Zapatero and European Commission President José Manuel Barroso, that he was already working on preparation for an extraordinary European Council, which will be dedicated to the revival of the Union's economic growth and which, he confirmed, will be held on 11 February.

The holding of this summit and even its date are entirely his own initiative. While member states mentioned the subject during the last European Council, they never really took a decision on it. Van Rompuy, who had already made known in December that he intended to become more involved in certain subjects, such as the economy, is thus marking his territory and his prerogatives from the outset. He is also showing that his schedule will not be dictated by the Spanish EU Presidency. But in order to maintain an image of bon accord and consensus, he co-signed on the same day with Zapatero a column in several European newspapers in which the two promise to "consolidate the new institutional order in a spirit of cooperation and loyalty". Their text remains somewhat trivial, but the gesture is significant.

Spain appears to be aware that its margins for manoeuvre will be reduced. Nevertheless, Zapatero has not stopped insisting over the last few days on the "number one priority" of his mandate, namely employment in the context of exiting the economic crisis. The unemployment rate in Spain is, in fact, one of the highest in Europe and reached 19.3% in December. The head of the government even asked three politicians to assist him in this dossier: the former French President of the Commission, Jacques Delors, the former Spanish Prime Minister Felipe Gonzalez (also chairman of the Reflection Group on the Future of Europe) and the former Minister of the Economy and European Commissioner Pedro Solbes. This trio of wise men', which was due to meet on 5 January at the Moncloa Palace in Madrid, is supposed to help Zapatero "strengthen the economic governance" of Europe. Meanwhile, the economy is also the number one priority of Herman Van Rompuy

Consensus in art

Whereas the Swedish EU Presidency had exercised discretion, Spain has decided to display an artistic exhibition in the atrium of the Council building in Brussels during the six months of its mandate. The artist is photographer Daniel Canogar and his work, Travesías' (crossings), was unveiled on 5 January. It is a video installation displaying a constant mass of politicians, civil servants and visitors and symbolising "the achievements and obstacles of the European project," according to the artist. It is thus a highly consensual work, against any reference to national symbols and contrary to the Entropa' exhibition by Czech artist David Cerny in the first half of 2009.