

Hydra-headed leadership takes over the EU

A new-look leadership structure designed to streamline the European Union begins in earnest on Friday when Spain assumes the rotating presidency alongside the bloc's first president, Herman Van Rompuy.

Analysis by an AFP writer in Brussels

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But as Spain's prime minister, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, Van Rompuy and the head of the EU commission José Manuel Barroso jostle for position at the bloc's top table, critics say that the situation risks becoming more hydra than hybrid.

"In fact, the new system is no less complex and multi-layered than the previous one," said Antonio Missiroli, an analyst at the European Policy Centre, warning of a "hybrid situation."

"Making it work will not be an easy task."

Van Rompuy's position was created under the terms of the EU's Lisbon Treaty, which also creates the role of a foreign policy and security supremo, a post that the 27 EU member states bestowed upon Catherine Ashton, a British peer.

While the much-vaunted treaty was supposed in part to answer Henry Kissinger's famous question "who do I call if I want to call Europe," he may find that in fact the EU phone book has just got bigger.

The pre-existing system, whereby an EU nation assumed the rotating presidency for a six-month period, is retained, but not for EU summits and foreign ministers' meetings, when the EU Council president, Van Rompuy, and the foreign policy High Representative, Ashton, will be in the chair.

That still leaves meetings of environment ministers, finance ministers, interior ministers etc.

"The great weakness of the Lisbon Treaty is that it maintains the rotating EU presidency," said Daniel Cohn-Bendit, leader of the Green group in the European Parliament.

Since taking up his post at the start of the month, the former Belgian premier, Van Rompuy, has been careful not to tread on the Swedish EU presidency's toes thanks to a gentleman's agreement.

Stockholm will hand over the reins to Madrid in the new year but already it seems that Van Rompuy has agreed to grant Spain more elbow-room.

Zapatero has managed to secure several EU summits for his home turf, notably an EU-US summit with Barack Obama as well as meetings with Latin-American nations, the Mediterranean Union and an EU-Morocco summit.

"We have made a gentleman's agreement," said the Spanish foreign minister, Miguel Angel Moratinos.

"Mr Van Rompuy will preside at the meetings, but Mr Zapatero will be beside him playing a key role.

"There will be no competition between the Spanish presidency, the council president and the high representative, but a complementarity," he added.

Spain will be offering foreign policy supremo Ashton its expertise over a broad swathe of her remit: the Middle East, Latin America, north Africa and the Mediterranean.

Barroso, the head of the EU executive arm, will be seeking a large slice of influence for himself, bolstered by the recent decision of EU nations to grant him a second five-year term.

Indeed Barroso, a former Portuguese prime minister, can be seen as the "the big winner" in the new game of EU musical chairs, according to at least one diplomat.

Barosso certainly has built a higher international profile than Van Rompuy and Ashton put together, thanks to five years of gladhanding world leaders at the commission's headquarters in central Brussels and abroad.

"It will take some time for the new institutional architecture to be put into place fully and even longer to reach a new equilibrium," said Missiroli.

On top of all this there is also the European parliament, the only elected body in the whole EU set up.

In an on-line end-of-year message EU parliament head Jerzy Buzek hailed the introduction of the Lisbon Treaty which gets rid of several national vetoes on European policy and hands more power to the MEPs.

"We have a new institutional tool," he declared.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/expat/expatnews/6905270/Hydra-headed-leadership-takes-over-the-EU.html>