



Spain takes over revamped EU Presidency

As Spain takes over the new post-Lisbon Council Presidency it has identified economic issues, supervision of financial markets and energy policy as its key priorities. Under revamped EU rules Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero will no longer chair European Summits and the foreign Minister won't chair foreign affairs meetings, although Spanish ministers will head other meetings in the Council of Ministers.

Herman Van Rompuy is now the President of the European Council, and Catherine Ashton is the High Representative for foreign affairs and so will chair foreign ministers' meetings.

On Wednesday January Mr Zapatero will unveil his programme for the coming six months to MEPs in Strasbourg. He will also talk about the coordinated action that they have agreed with the two presidencies that will follow, those of Belgium and Hungary.

Among of the priorities of the Spanish Presidency will be ensuring the EU works well under the new Lisbon rules, progressing on the "Stockholm" programme for justice and citizenship and combating violence against women.

In addition Madrid will help coordinate the setting up of the EU's new External Action Service, a diplomatic corps under the aegis of Ms Ashton.

Presence in Plenary

The head of state or government returns to Parliament at the end of the six months for a "taking stock" speech and a debate. Depending on events - the second meeting can often be more highly charged than the first.

A minister from the country holding the presidency attends all plenary meetings during the six months to make statements and answer questions from MEPs.

EU leaders meet twice a year in the European Council to set the political agenda for the EU. Ahead of each meeting Parliament's President tells leaders where MEPs would like the EU to concentrate its efforts.

Informal meetings have a role

As well as attending Parliament's committee twice, Spanish Ministers and MPs have many formal and informal contacts with MEPs.

The co-decision legislative procedure means frequent meetings with Parliament's rapporteurs and the political groups. As the Presidency chairs all the meetings in the Council of Ministers, its role as a seeker of compromise on legislation is vital.

The next country to hold the Presidency will be Belgium, which takes over in July.