

The Spanish, with an unemployment rate hovering just under 20 per cent are keen to ensure that economic recovery is linked to strategies that will make the EU's economies less vulnerable to future economic downturns, while underpinning jobs, growth and social protection. Implementation of the European recovery plan will be a key focus for the Spanish. Madrid will also pick up, and have to deliver, on reform and supervision of the financial system. Defining the EU's new growth and employment strategy, on the back of a review of the widely discredited Lisbon agenda be an early focus in the Spanish presidency, with EU leaders expected to agree to the new "Europe 2020" strategy during the spring summit. The Spanish want the new strategy to be based less on targets and more on how it is governed and implemented.

From Nice to Lisbon

From the so-called 'citizens' initiative' to the role and responsibility of the EU's external action service, the Spanish EU presidency will have a strong influence on how the institutional changes of the Lisbon treaty are implemented. "The Lisbon treaty gives us the instruments, but we have to decide what we use them to create. If we want a strong external policy, it's up to us," declared Garrido.

Citizenship

"The EU in the 21st century should be based on tight complicity with its citizens," said Garrido, adding that the Spain would look to "close the gap between the EU and the people." Madrid will, announced Garrido, shortly approve an action plan on implementing the Stockholm programme on freedom, security and justice. Madrid will also press member states for quick adoption of the controversial non-discrimination directive, to tackle what Garrido called "the worst sin of our societies, violence against women". EU citizenship should be based on equality especially between men and women.

Foreign affairs

Spain will, according to Garrido, use its six month term to transform the EU into a real global player. "We are not today; we don't have a real foreign policy in the EU." The creation of the new post of high representative and the setting up of the European external action service (EEAS) are "the most important challenges coming out of the Lisbon treaty," said the Spanish official, adding that the presidency will look to approve the organisation and structure of the EEAS "before April". Spain will also aim to develop the new service in an open and transparent way.

"There is no reason for the EEAS to be established behind closed doors. We will seek approval from the council and European commission in consultation with the European

Reacting to Spanish EU presidency plans aimed at adopting a new EU law aimed at tackling gender violence, European Women's Lobby secretary general Myria Vassiliadou told the Parliament Magazine that the Brussels-based organisation was "very supportive of the Spanish presidency and what they are trying to do".

However Vassiliadou said that, as outlined in the European parliament's recent resolution on combating violence against women, the Spanish presidency must tackle the issue of establishing a clear legal basis for combating all forms of violence against women. "Currently, there is no legal basis for dealing with male violence against women; we need the Spanish to take a good look at this, I'm convinced they can move forward on establishing a legal basis."

The council of Europe estimated the annual economic cost of violence against women across the institution's 47 member states at €34bn per year. "That's just the economic costs, and doesn't take into account the social costs," said Vassiliadou.

She also raised concerns over the scope of the anti-discrimination directive, warning that the Spanish will have a difficult time placating member state's fears that the controversial proposals will pave the way for EU interference in national social policies. "We know the Spanish are behind the directive however we also know that there is strong opposition."

Earlier this year, Business Europe called for the anti-discrimination proposals to be withdrawn on the grounds that it could create an extra burden for businesses. "BusinessEurope have been against the directive because they think it will cost too much, while Germany, we know openly opposes the proposals. The Spanish will have their work cut out to reach a deal that doesn't end up diluting the directive too much. Otherwise we will end up with nothing in the end."

parliament. The Spanish have also indicated that they don't see the two new top EU posts as a threat to their presidency ambitions. However Herman Van Rompuy and José Luis Zapatero are very different characters and Europe's media will be watching the dual presidency closely for any hint of clashes between the two. Garrido said Madrid was aiming for an "ambitious presidency" and to do that it would work closely with the "new figures" created by Lisbon. "If we are going to be ambitious, we need to respect the ambitions of the EU people, fix the important goals and strengthen EU responsibilities."

A presidency of summits

The Spanish are aiming for a "Guinness world record of summits" with nine or 10 during the next six months. Already scheduled are negotiations between the EU and Morocco, Pakistan, Russia, Canada, Mexico, the US, the Mediterranean and Latin America before the end of June 2010. The Spanish are keen to upgrade relations with Latin America, and the US. "We will have a very external presidency, said Garrido, and Madrid will use its time at the EU's helm "as an opportunity to improve the EU's presence on the international stage".

"In our set of circumstances after the COP15 in Copenhagen", Garrido said energy will also be a key issue. The bloc's continued enlargement will also feature on the Spaniard's agenda, with Garrido saying "enlargement is part of the essence of the EU, part of the European soul". ★