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Spain's firm Europeanism in an age of uncertainty

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Despite the profound effects of the economic crisis, Spain's period as a member of the EU has been the most stable, dynamic and successful in its modern history. Spain's people still value heavily how the EU has helped Spain consolidate as an advanced democracy and they still consider that the European project has further room to grow and become deeper. The current European context provides the country with an opportunity to translate its pro-European attitude (in both its elites and public opinion in general) into a more influential role in the EU.

These days it is a commonplace that the European project is at risk. The economic crisis that started in 2008 was the beginning of a period of turmoil that included the refugee crisis, increased terrorist attacks, the questioning of the rule of law in certain European states and the absence of a single and clear external European voice. These are among the questions that have never been effectively resolved over the past few years. But, even more importantly, these issues have been the driving force underlying an extended crisis of legitimacy of the European project due to a sense of anger

and disengagement among the Union's citizens. The growth (and entry into the government) of Eurosceptic populist parties throughout the continent (including Italy, Austria and Poland) is the most visible example.

Spain is an outlier in this trend. Despite the huge impact of the economic crisis in the country, with unemployment levels still at 16% (from a peak of 26% in 2013), the country has not yielded to the temptation of playing a blame-game with Brussels. The main reason has to do with history: after a forty-year dictatorship, the entry into the EU was associated with positive ideas such as democracy, openness, modernisation, the rule of law and economic progress. Thirty years of membership have not changed that perception. The European project is also widely considered a guarantee to avoid pitfalls in domestic governance, since trust in Spanish institutions is very low. Furthermore, Europeanism has even become one of the central elements in the country's national

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narrative: in 1910 the philosopher José Ortega y Gasset argued that Spain itself was a problem and “Europe its solution”.

Contrary to many European countries, the EU is not a divisive issue in Spain. Strictly speaking, there are no Eurosceptic parties in the Spanish Parliament. Even Podemos, a populist left-wing party, is not too far removed from the pro-European consensus, although it is critical of certain EU decisions. The goal of an “ever-closer union” currently remains in the programmes of the three parties leading the polls: the traditional centre-right Partido Popular (PP) and centre-left Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE) and the liberal Ciudadanos. The peripheral nationalists in the Basque Country and Catalonia are also favourable to European integration, although in the latter case the enthusiasm is now much less evident as a result of the EU's firm institutional support for Spanish territorial integrity and refusal to take any negotiating position following the backfired attempt to declare unilateral independence in the Catalan regional parliament in late 2017.

But Europeanism is not only a trait among Spain's elites. The man and woman in the street shows consistent levels of support for the European project poll after poll, although the old permissive consensus has changed substantially. People want better results from the EU, although not in the sense of repatriating competences (as public opinions in other member states are demanding), but rather in the sense of deepening and consolidating policies in fields such as energy, the digital

market and Eurozone governance. Thus, the most recent Eurobarometer (June 2018) shows that Spaniards still share a European commitment and that the vast majority (82%) feel they are “citizens of the EU”. Some of the core results of the barometer include support for the free movement of EU citizens (90%), a common defence and security policy among EU member states (82%), a common energy policy (81%), an EU trade policy (80%), a common European policy on migration (82%), a common foreign policy (78%), a digital single market (71%), the Euro (76%) and even the enlargement of the EU to include other countries in future years (with 67% in favour, while only 44% of EU citizens in general are in agreement). The data are absolutely unparalleled in the EU as a whole.

Such a determined level of support should translate into Spain playing a far more effective role in the construction of the European project. The country has been punching well below its weight in the EU for too long, and its conduct has been far removed from the active role it played during the 1990s, when it was clearly a “policy shaper” and not a “policy taker” (instances range from the establishment of cohesion funds to the creation of EU citizenship, to name but two). The economic crisis hit Spain hard, but that is not the only explanation for the current inactivity. A period of self-introspection began when Spain adopted the Euro. Neither centre-right nor centre-left governments proved capable of exerting more influence. The EU's Eastern enlargement was probably not of much help either, as the European project's

governance became unavoidably more complex with 28 than with 15 members.

Spain recently tried to seize the moment generated by the Brexit vote, showing its interest in filling the space that would be opening up following Britain's departure. Its Europeanist credentials and strong economic recovery boded well for a chance to play its cards to effect. Despite this, not all that much has been achieved (other than several summits with the "Versailles Group", which includes Germany, France, Italy and Spain among its participants) for two main reasons: (1) the increasing uncertainty in the EU in 2017 and 2018 as a result of the elections in several countries, including the Netherlands, Germany and Italy; and (2) the enormous impact of the Catalan crisis that broke out in October 2017.

However, only weeks ago a no-confidence vote in Parliament led to the Socialist Party replacing the Popular Party in government, coinciding with a new government coming into office in Italy. Pedro Sánchez, the Socialist Party leader and new Prime Minister, has tried from the start to differentiate himself from Italy, strongly emphasising Spain's pro-EU credentials, cleverly setting himself far apart from Italy's now confrontational attitude. He designated Nadia Calviño, the former Budgetary Director-General at the European Commission, Minister of the Economy, and Luis Planas, former Secretary-General of the European Economic and Social Committee, Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. He also appointed Josep Borrell, a former President of the European Parliament,

his new Minister of Foreign Affairs, the European Union and Cooperation (a title that, for the first time in the Ministry's history, makes reference to the EU). Borrell's first interview with the international media was marked by his comment that "his government was seeking to play a more intense role in Europe, pushing for deeper political and financial integration".

It is still too early to evaluate if Spain will really be able to play a "more intense role" in the European project in the years to come. However, the fourth-largest economy in the Eurozone (and soon the fourth-largest in the EU itself), with one of the most resilient pro-European public opinions, should – at the very least – attempt to have an authoritative voice in shaping the future of the common European project. At times of uncertainty, with so many member states mired in doubts about whether to go make progress in deepening the Union, Spain should be firmly committed to forging ahead. But its EU credentials can only be enhanced if it shows a far more proactive attitude than in the recent past.

Conclusion

Despite the wave of discontent on the continent with the European project, caused by the various crises assailing it, the negative circumstances have led to neither the consolidation of a Eurosceptic party in Spain nor to an increase in anti-European feeling among the people. Spain's Europeanism has proved to be resilient. Nevertheless, the Spanish public opinion considers the European project still

incomplete and requiring deepening in quite a number of aspects, from energy to the digital market and enlargement, not to mention improvements in Eurozone governance and the adoption of a common migration policy. In all of these areas the new Spanish government certainly has significant elbow room to adopt a far more proactive attitude and not only fall back on some well-intentioned but hollow rhetoric. That proactiveness, clearly favoured by Spanish public opinion, would also help advance Spain's interest in having a greater influence in all that matters concerning the EU.

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