



Spain: A new opportunity to play a more central role in the EU

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After almost a year and two inconclusive general elections, Spain finally has a Government, led again by Mariano Rajoy, the President of the centre-right Popular Party. Unlike the situation in the previous term, his Government lacks an absolute majority. Therefore, a more important role for the Parliament is envisaged. The new situation raises at least three questions: Will this ‘lost’ year be a huge burden for Spain? How will Spain now play its cards in the international arena, especially in the EU post-Brexit? Will the new role of the Parliament be useful for Spanish foreign policy?

As underlined in a recent ‘non-paper’ prepared by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, having a caretaker government has had negative consequences regarding the international and European projection of Spain, including a decrease in its influence. A caretaker government, by definition, does not have the capacity to fully exercise power, which has meant a loss of pro-activeness and thus the ability to present new initiatives and to respond forcefully to the various challenges facing the country. It has also not been able to ratify political agreements or even renew the mandates of the country’s ambassadors abroad and been obliged to cancel several State visits and summits.

In this situation, Spain had to face the negotiations with David Cameron for the “February Agreement”, which aimed to avoid a Brexit. Obviously, the role played by the Government was very limited. And since the UK’s vote to withdraw from the EU, the absence of Spain in the subsequent debate has been even more evident, as it hasn’t been invited to be part of the new ‘hard core’ of the EU, which is currently under construction. This new core includes Italy, aside from –obviously – Germany and France. Thus, Spain has not benefited so far from the opportunity that the Brexit vote presents to fill the space left by the UK in the European integration process.

The absence of a Government therefore has proven very damaging for the country. But in reality, Spain has been punching below its weight (especially in Europe) for at least the last decade. One can point to several explanations for this under-performance: the end of the success story in the EU with Spain’s entry into the euro club and Aznar’s Atlantic adventure in league with Tony Blair, following Bush and abandoning Spain’s traditional alignment with the Franco-German European core; the failure of the European Constitution in 2005 and the lack of a successive clear European perspective and leadership in Zapatero’s years; the continuous enlargements of the EU; and an economic crisis that has hit Spain especially hard.

However, not all is lost for a country such as Spain. In the complicated period in which the EU is currently living, with some member states even calling into question basic values and policies of the European project, including the Schengen Agreement, Spain remains the country where the most pro-European attitudes are to

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be found, even if they are not as strong as they once were.¹ Spain has not challenged Schengen, the euro, European External Action, a common migration and asylum policy or more economic integration. On the contrary, it is pushing towards more of these policies, which is well reflected by a political system that has no Eurosceptic parties in the Parliament. Moreover, the country's economic recovery seems a reality as foreign direct investment is on the rise and projections of growth estimate a 3.2% increase for this year (among the 'big countries' in the eurozone, it is growing the most despite the long situation with a caretaker Government). At the same time, and despite continued high levels of unemployment (19.3%), the rate has decreased 7% in only three years (at the beginning of 2013, it had reached a maximum of 26.3%).

In addition to these arguments and statistics, there is one change of symbolic importance for Spanish foreign policy in the new Cabinet: the appointment of Alfonso Dastis as the new Minister of Foreign Affairs replacing the very pro-European José Manuel García Margallo. Dastis is an interesting choice for these times of uncertainty in the EU, as he is the former Permanent Representative of Spain to the European Union and a career diplomat who has worked almost his entire career on EU affairs and relations between Spain and the Union. While it is true that he is not a politician and will therefore have to work to gain his colleagues' trust, and that he lacks experience in other traditional areas of importance for Spain, such as Latin America and the Mediterranean, his new position should mean a renewed impulse in Spain's attitude towards the European Union.

In the future, all policies (including foreign policy) will be more closely monitored by a Parliament that will likely have more power than before. For that reason, Rajoy's Government (including the MFA-led by Dastis) needs to change its approach in this new term (which could be either short or long – it is yet to be seen) towards that institution. The new situation does not necessarily mean that the Parliament will act by systematically blocking the initiatives of the Government, but rather that there will be a strong requirement of more consensus between the parties. This, in turn, could eventually also result in a stronger position in various fora, including negotiations at the European Council level.

The best news of the last few days is that Spain finally has a new Government. This whole year has been a lost opportunity for the country, especially as regards the reconfiguration of power in the EU after the UK voted to leave the club. Nevertheless, and bearing in mind the difficult situation in the continent (2017 promises to be a tumultuous year with contested elections in three of the founding member states – the Netherlands, France and Germany), the still-solid foundations of Spanish Europeanism both across the political spectrum and throughout Spanish society, the country's strong economic recovery, the fresh leadership in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the potentially constructive role the Parliament can play, give hope to a country that faces a new opportunity to regain centrality in the European project.

¹ S. Llaudes and I. Molina, "Spain: a traditional pro-European attitude can no longer be ensured", Clingendael, The Hague, 23 June (<https://www.clingendael.nl/publication/spain-traditional-pro-european-attitude-can-no-longer-be-ensured>).