

Soler i Lecha, Eduard and Mestres, Laia (2017) “Spanien” in Werner Weidenfeld and Wolfgang Wessels (Hrsg.) *Jahrbuch der Europäischen Integration 2017*, Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlag, pp. 571-574.

Uncertainty and opportunity are two words encapsulating Spain positioning in European affairs in 2016 and 2017. The country had a caretaker government for ten months, no solution was found to the secessionist claims in Catalonia and the main opposition party faced one of the worst crises in its recent history. Mariano Rajoy finally managed to obtain enough support in the Parliament in October 2016 but corruption scandals continued to challenge its leadership. The economy started to recover but indicators such as the public deficit and unemployment rates were still too high. In such a turbulent scenario one could have expected Spain to be inward looking. Paradoxically, Europe became more present than ever in Spanish politics as all political parties were positioning themselves in relation to European counterparts or rivals. Additionally, in the post-Brexit scenario, Spain aspired to become again an influential partner in the EU and the international arena.

Spanish politics in the European mirror

Spanish politicians were looking for reference points in European politics, especially in their border neighbours, France and Portugal. They tried to associate themselves with successful political projects and, even more important, to disqualify their rivals by depicting them as the “Spanish version” of political movements or personalities that were often seen as dangerous, disruptive or failing.

The ruling Popular Party (PP), for instance, defined itself as an anchor of stability and centrist policies. Rajoy’s strategy consisted in limiting Spain’s options to two: his government or chaos. In that vein, it saluted the victories of Mark Rutte in the Netherlands and Emmanuel Macron in France as its own and as a sign that Dutch and French voters also opted for stability. It did not matter that none of those politicians belonged to the European Popular Party or that their main rivals were far-right politicians.

Ciudadanos, which had become the kingmaker of Spanish politics in the last year and one of the rising stars of Europe’s liberal family, also exploited the idea of stability and even more so, the fact that liberal options were on the rise. Moreover, Macron’s victory was perceived as a sign that there was a need to rejuvenate mainstream politics and that there was room for new political forces.¹

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¹ “Albert Rivera y Emmanuel Macron, tan parecidos, tan distintos”, *ABC*, 30.4.2017.

In the case of the Socialist Party (PSOE), European referents were used in the intra-party disputes. 2017 was an extremely tense year as the Secretary General Pedro Sánchez was forced to resign and then was able to come back by winning the extraordinary primaries. For the pro-Sánchez camp, often perceived as more prone to dialogue with Podemos and other left-leaning forces, Portugal was a source of inspiration. The Portuguese socialists came second in the elections but gathered enough support from leftist parties to form a government. The unexpected good performance of the Portuguese economy reinforced the appeal of the Portuguese referent. In contrast, Sánchez's critics tried to disqualify him by comparing him to Benoît Hammon, the leader of the French Socialists who came fifth in the Presidential elections.

Finally, Podemos and its leader Pablo Iglesias cheered Jean-Luc Melenchon and his France Insoumise. Yet the fact that this movement decided not to ask its supporters to vote for Macron in the second round against defeated Marine Le Pen was quickly used by Podemos' rivals to qualify them as a populist movement.

Brexit, Gibraltar and Scotland

Brexit was seen, since the very first moment, through the lenses of domestic politics. Only three days came between the Brexit vote held on 23 June and the Spanish second General Elections on 26 June. No opinion polls can prove whether Brexit impacted on Spanish voters' intentions, mainly because Spaniards are not used to follow international or European agenda, and even less to change their vote based on it. However, Britain's vote to leave the EU severely hit Spanish stock market, which fell more than 12% in one single day.² The confusion sweeping through Europe also spread to Spain and some argue that the fear to (domestic and European) instability made Spaniards vote in a more conservative way than six months before.

Gibraltar and Scotland were two other examples of the links between Brexit and Spanish politics. On the one hand, just the day after the Brexit vote, the Spanish Foreign Minister, José Manuel García-Margallo recalled his proposal of sharing sovereignty over Gibraltar as a transitional step towards the restitution of this territory to Spanish sovereignty (within the EU). The tension between Spain and Britain even flared when Theresa May sent the Brexit letter to Brussels without any reference to Gibraltar but, at the same time, Rajoy got to include the Clause 24 to the European Council guidelines for Brexit negotiations: "After the United Kingdom leaves the Union, no agreement between the EU and the United Kingdom may apply to the territory of Gibraltar without the agreement between the Kingdom of Spain and the United Kingdom".³ As tensions escalated, some figures in the United Kingdom started to speculate with the possibility of a war between the two countries, comparing Gibraltar with the 1982 Falklands war.

On the other hand, the Scottish question was also closely monitored in Madrid. The government stated that "if the United Kingdom leaves the EU, so does Scotland". This was a clear message to Edinburgh but even more so to Catalan pro-secessionist parties.⁴ However, when Alfonso Dastis, a career diplomat and Brussels expert, replaced García-Margallo as minister in November there was a quick change in tone admitting the two

² "Will Brexit influence the Spanish election?", *Euractiv.com*, 24.06.2016.

³ "European Council (Art. 50) guidelines for Brexit negotiations", *European Council*, Press Release 220/17, 29.04.2017.

⁴ "Rajoy dashes Scottish hopes of EU membership", *Financial Times*, 29.6.2016.

cases were not comparable on constitutional grounds and Spain would not block an eventual Scottish application for EU membership.⁵

Finally, a government internal report leaked to *El País* predicted “negative consequences” of the Brexit for, not only in economic terms but also for other key sectors such as agriculture, fishing, the automotive industry and tourism.⁶ In this sense the conservative government defended a soft Brexit. A hard one would mean punishing the millions of British tourists visiting Spain annually, the hundreds of thousands of British nationals resident in Spain as well as the other hundreds of thousands of Spaniards living in the United Kingdom. One of the few positive consequences of Brexit for Spain appeared to be the possibility of relocating the European Medicines Agency from London to Barcelona.

Spain is Back

Since at least 2010, Spanish academics, think tanks experts and even politicians have discussed, time and again, why Spain’s foreign policy is underperforming or why Madrid punches below its weight in Europe.⁷ In the period analyzed, two sides of the same coin explained the different behavior developed by Mariano Rajoy before and after his reelection.

As a caretaker government, until late October 2016, Spain was almost completely absent from all the EU debates. Rajoy was not invited to the informal summit on the Italian island of Ventotene in August with the Italian, French and German leaders and in September, he refused to attend a summit of Mediterranean EU countries in Athens; two summits in which the post-Brexit EU was discussed.

With Rajoy’s re-election confirmed, Madrid started to voice a firm Europeanist discourse, trying to return to the front lines of the EU leadership. Once reelected, Rajoy took part in two critical summits. In Berlin in November, the five EU largest member states received Barack Obama in his last presidential visit to Europe. And in Versailles in March, François Hollande invited Angela Merkel, Paolo Gentiloni and Mariano Rajoy to discuss, without Theresa May, the future of the EU in its 60th anniversary. In that gathering Rajoy defended the need for the EU to be more effective in dealing with citizen concerns, especially in economy, immigration policies, internal security and the fight against terrorism, and strengthening the Common Security and Defense Policy.⁸

Until that moment Spain had been the good pupil to Germany, following all its proposals, mainly in economic issues but also in other fields such as the European Defence. However, in May 2017, just after Macron won the Presidential elections, Rajoy moved closer to French economic proposals, relating to a complete overhaul of the Eurozone. In order to consolidate the Spanish economic recovery, Madrid defended the necessity to push for a shared anti-crisis budget, a common unemployment

⁵ “Spain drops plan to impose veto if Scotland tries to join EU”, *The Guardian*, 2.4.2017.

⁶ “Madrid warns of ‘negative consequences’ of Brexit on Spain”, *El País*, 10.3.2017.

⁷ Judy Dempsey’s Strategic Europe, “Judy Asks: Is Spain’s Foreign Policy Underperforming?”, 26.10.2016.

⁸ Prime Minister Office, “The future of EU consists of ‘offering response to challenges and uncertainties’ it faces, states Mariano Rajoy”, 6.3.2017, <http://www.lamoncloa.gob.es/lang/en/presidente/news/Paginas/2017/20170306-versailles.aspx>.

insurance system, the establishment of euro-bonds and the completion of the banking union.⁹

Troubling allies and contentious issues in foreign and security policy

The election of Donald Trump shook the EU and global politics. Some in Spain perceived the new US President as an opportunity. Spain could become more attractive for Washington, particularly in a moment in which the US traditional ally, the United Kingdom, was leaving the EU. Bilateral contacts intensified but Spain's greatest challenge would be to meet the US demand to meet the NATO's 2% defence-spending target, as it was less than 1% in 2016¹⁰.

Spain also tried to preserve good relations with another troubling partner for the EU: Turkey. Madrid opted for a low profile or even silence regarding Erdogan's controversial post-coup measures and, contrary to other EU governments, did not take sides in the Dutch-Turkish crisis of March 2017. Yet not everyone in Spain thought alike. Opposition parties were far more critical towards Erdogan's policies and towards Europe's way of dealing with Turkey. The deal to control migration flows signed in March 2016 was portrayed by opposition leaders as immoral and illegal. In fact, the refugee crisis became one of the few foreign policy issues mobilising the Spanish population, as evidenced in the pro-refugees demonstration in Barcelona gathering 160.000 people.¹¹

Regarding the Mediterranean and Latin America, the traditional areas of interest for Spanish foreign policy, the priority was to preserve good neighbouring relations and adapt to unfolding political events. Of all Southern neighbours, Morocco has always been the most important one as this country's cooperation is perceived as essential to contain migration and fight against organised crime and terrorism. Spain's concern was to suffer the effects of an eventual deterioration of relations between Morocco and the EU, mainly as a result of a European Court of Justice ruling that Western Sahara could not be treated as a part of Morocco. Spain actively tried to cool down those tensions by multiplying contacts with its Moroccan counterparts.

In Latin America, Spain tried to adapt to the new political cycle in which the so-called Bolivarian camp is losing ground. Relations with Venezuela's government were tense because of the repression of demonstrators, the arrest of opposition figures and the collapse of the economy. Meanwhile, the former Spanish President, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, was nominated EU envoy for Venezuela but failed to reach a compromise between Nicolas Maduro and the opposition. Additionally, Venezuela was often used to criticise Podemos for their direct or indirect support to Maduro's government. In contrast, Rajoy's government welcomed the victory of Mauricio Macri in Argentina as he was perceived as an easier interlocutor than his predecessor. His state visit to Spain in February 2017 was the opportunity to reinforce this friendship.

In conclusion, time will tell whether Spain's return to European politics will translate into sustained alliances and policy entrepreneurship. For the moment, Spain tried to fill the vacuum left by the United Kingdom and also by itself. In the last years, Spain had a

⁹ "Spain wants new rules for a complete overhaul of the euro zone", *El País*, 15.5.2017.

¹⁰ "España doblará su gasto en defensa en siete años", *El Mundo*, 23.3.2017.

¹¹ "Multitudinaria manifestación en Barcelona para pedir la acogida de refugiados", *La Vanguardia*, 18.2.2017.

low profile, mainly absorbed in dealing with domestic crisis. Playing big in Europe was in 2017 part of Rajoy's strategy to portray his government as Spain's sole alternative to political instability. Will playing big in Europe be a tactical move or a strategic choice?

Further reading

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