

WILL SPAIN REMAIN A SMALL COUNTRY?

By Charles Grant

There is a strange paradox about Spain's role in the EU. Although one of the most pro-EU member-states, it is the least influential of the six larger ones (the others being Britain, France, Germany, Italy and Poland). It was not always thus. From the time it joined the EU in 1986 until the early years of the current decade, Spain was part of the EU's leadership group. Felipe Gonzalez, the prime minister who took Spain into the EU, invented the concept of European citizenship, which means that people from one EU country who live in another can vote in its local and European elections; the EU's cohesion funds, which have been generous to Spain; and the 'Barcelona process', through which the EU assists the countries on the other side of the Mediterranean. Gonzalez managed the feat of forging close relationships with Helmut Kohl and François Mitterrand, who then dominated the EU, while at the same time getting on well with Margaret Thatcher (as well as Ronald Reagan and George Bush senior).

The right-wing José Maria Aznar, who replaced Gonzalez in 1996, was less committed to European integration. But he was still a figure to be reckoned with: he helped to launch the 'Lisbon agenda' of economic reform in 2000, and then blocked agreement on the EU's constitutional treaty in a bid to maintain a bigger voting weight for Spain than its population merited. He forged strong alliances with Tony Blair, Silvio Berlusconi and George W Bush, culminating in their joint support for the invasion of Iraq. The Iraq war was extremely unpopular in Spain, which helped the socialists to return to power in 2004.

During the five years of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero's premiership, Spanish influence in European councils has dwindled. Italy and Poland, as well as some smaller countries such as the Netherlands and Sweden, often have more say in EU policy-making. Nor has Zapatero been particularly visible on global economic or diplomatic questions. He did invent the 'alliance of civilisations', designed to build bridges between the Muslim world and the West, and he persuaded the UN to sponsor the alliance's conferences and programmes on education, youth, the media and immigration. Zapatero had another success when he insisted that Spain – though not a member of the G20 – be allowed to attend the recent meetings of the G20 heads of government in Washington and London. However, he did not contribute a great deal to the G20 discussions. On many of the key policy issues confronting the EU today – such as Russia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, financial regulation, eurozone governance and climate change – the Spanish voice is muted.

On a recent visit to Madrid I could not find a Spanish diplomat who disagreed with the statement that Spain punches below its weight in the EU. Spain's modesty extends beyond policy-making. Spain supplies few senior figures to international organisations. When Javier Solana, currently the EU's foreign policy chief, retires, no top international job will be held by a Spaniard.

I see two reasons for Spain's diminished weight. One is the personality of the prime minister. He does not speak any foreign language, and in the 18 years that he spent in parliament before becoming prime minister, seldom travelled. He has made no serious effort to build alliances with other leaders or countries. Zapatero's interests are principally domestic. And he has been in many respects a successful politician, maintaining the fairly liberal economic policy of previous governments, pursuing a modernising social agenda and wrong-footing his political opponents. Zapatero won a second term of office in the March 2008 general election. However, the recent rise in unemployment – by some measures over 17 per cent, twice the EU average – has highlighted the weakness of the government's economic record. Zapatero has held back from undertaking the painful reforms that would tackle the structural weaknesses of the Spanish economy – particularly its exceptionally low productivity.

Zapatero's foreign policies – particularly those that set Spain against George Bush junior – have been popular at home, especially among socialist voters. But those policies have contributed to the second factor that has hampered Spanish influence within the EU: on many important issues, Spain is an outlier, at one end of the spectrum of the member-states. This is not to argue that Spain's various policies are necessarily wrong. My point is that the most influential countries in the EU tend to be those at the centre of the debate, at least some of the time.

On Russia, Spain blames the West for many of the recent difficulties in the EU-Russia relationship, and it often argues (together with Germany and Italy) that the EU should not criticise the Russians. When it comes to China, as a recent European Council on Foreign Relations report points out, Spain is the least critical of the member-states on human rights – Spanish leaders refuse to meet the Dalai Lama – but the most supportive of protectionist measures against Chinese goods. On Iran, Spain – along with Austria, Greece and Cyprus – has argued against tougher sanctions, should Obama's new initiative of engaging Tehran fail to persuade the Iranians to change their nuclear policy. On the Middle East peace process, Spain usually refuses to criticise the Palestinians. It takes a softer line on Cuba than most other member-states.

On all these issues, Spain is at odds not only with most of its EU partners, but also the US. This pattern was repeated in February 2008, when Spain resisted American, British, French and German pressure to recognise the independence of Kosovo. It is possible that without Spanish opposition, the others reluctant to recognise the territory – Cyprus, Greece, Romania and Slovakia – would not have dared to break EU unity. A lot of Spaniards worry about the possible secession of the Basque country or Catalonia, so care about the principle that regions should not be allowed to secede. But electoral politics also influenced Spanish behaviour: the US pushed for recognition just before the Spanish general election.

If Zapatero had recognised Kosovo, he would have faced heavy criticism in the election campaign. However, Spain's partners would have postponed recognition until after the Spanish election, if Zapatero had promised them that he would recognise Kosovo then; but he did not. Subsequently Spain and the other non-recognisers have agreed to let the EU deploy the mission that is helping to administer Kosovo. Nevertheless the fact that the EU was so publicly divided over Kosovo attracted derision in many parts of the world, notably in Russia.

In all European countries, domestic politics influences foreign policy, but in Spain the link is particularly strong. On the issues mentioned in the previous paragraphs, the stance of the Spanish government tends to reflect public opinion. Spaniards are among the most anti-American of Europeans, and the ruling Socialist Workers Party is more anti-American than the right-wing Popular Party. Since the election of Obama, the government has made a big effort to forge partnerships with the US on issues like renewable energy and Latin America. But Zapatero is generally reluctant to take views on foreign policy that would upset socialist activists. Inevitably, this leads to tensions between professional diplomats and the party. The party exercises control of the foreign ministry through politically-appointed state secretaries and ministerial advisers. The foreign minister, Miguel Ángel Moratinos, is a former diplomat and an expert on the Middle East and the Balkans. But his instincts – for example on Palestine, Kosovo and the US – are close to those of the Socialist Workers Party.

At the top levels of the Spanish foreign ministry there are some first class diplomats. But the relative marginalisation of Spain's diplomats from the centres of power is symbolised by their geographic location. A couple of years ago the foreign ministry was moved to an obscure suburb to the north of Madrid (a place that is, as I discovered, unknown to many taxi drivers).

Spanish officials told me that Zapatero's government is planning to play a more assertive role in the EU. Like a lot of second-term leaders, apparently, he is developing a taste for foreign policy. His successful effort to gain a seat at the G20 summits has given him more confidence, they say. And in the first half of 2010, Spain will hold the EU presidency: it will either have to cope with the consequences of the Irish killing the Lisbon treaty in their referendum this autumn, or, if they vote yes, start to implement the treaty. Spanish officials also claim that the Obama presidency will make it easier for Spain to play a bigger role in the EU. They say that US policy has come round to the Spanish point of view on issues like Russia, Iran, the Middle East and Cuba, so that Spanish positions will now be more mainstream.

I hope those Spanish officials are right but I have my doubts that Spain will start to behave like a large EU member-state any time soon. It is true that Obama's more moderate approach to foreign policy is less likely to sew divisions among Europeans than did George W Bush's policies. And the Obama administration is unlikely to mete out punishments to Spain, as Bush did when he blocked the sale of Spanish transport planes to Venezuela by withholding a licence for the transfer of US technology on the aircraft.

But I think the arrival of Obama is not such good news for Spain as many Spanish diplomats imagine. For although Obama has shifted US policy on the four issues just mentioned, American and Spanish positions are still far apart. Spain is much less critical than the US of Russia, Iran, Cuba and the Palestinians. And the arrival of Obama has not prevented serious tensions between Washington and Madrid re-emerging. In March the Spanish defence minister announced that Spain was withdrawing its troops from the NATO mission in Kosovo. Neither the Obama administration nor the Spanish foreign ministry was warned in advance. This did not go down well in Washington, where officials recalled Zapatero's unilateral and hasty withdrawal of Spanish soldiers from Iraq in 2004.

Another reason to be sceptical is that the personality of the prime minister will not change. His principal interests will remain domestic. And in the Spanish system, the prime minister dominates foreign policy. Moreover, even if the Popular Party were to return to power – and elections are not due for three years – Spain's role might not alter much. Mariano Rajoy, the leader of the Popular Party, also speaks no foreign languages and is mainly interested in domestic policy.

I hope that I am wrong in predicting that Spain will remain, in EU terms, a small country. The EU needs member-states whose focus extends beyond their own immediate interests, and it needs leaders who can think globally. Spain's politicians should not sit back and feel relaxed about the fact that Britain, France, Germany and a few others usually shape the EU's agenda.



*Charles Grant is director of the Centre for European Reform.
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