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Spain: 30 Years in the European Union

On 12 June 1985 Spain signed the Accession Treaty to the European Communities and on 1 January 1986 its membership became official. Thirty years after, the perception of EU membership in Spain has changed, which is reflected in an increase of negative attitudes towards the European Union.

If thirty years ago I had asked a Spaniard what the European project means to him or her, the answer would probably have been ‘progress’. The perception of EC membership meant progress for Spain in terms of economic, social and political development. This is not surprising considering the context: democracy had just been restored and the Spanish people wanted a period of political development and consolidation of democracy after Franco’s dictatorship. In addition, Spaniards were aspiring economic development and social modernisation – the European Communities were the ideal setting in which to realise this. Moreover, during Franco’s dictatorship the country had undergone a period of isolation and Spain’s entry into the European Union meant its return to the world. For all these reasons, the support for the EC and later the EU has been constant from both elites and citizens alike and for a long time Spain was considered one of the most pro-European countries.

Nevertheless, if I ask Spaniards today about the European project, the answer would probably include terms like ‘bureaucracy’, ‘distance to the citizens’, ‘crisis’ or …‘Germany’. There is no doubt that the financial crisis has eroded the traditionally positive image of the EU, leading to an increasing discontent with it. Moreover, the austerity measures implemented in order to improve the Spanish situation have been perceived as imposed by the EU and Germany. In this context, most Spaniards link Europe with Germany and Merkel and, as you can image, this has no positive connotations. Germany – and especially Angela Merkel – is considered responsible for the harsh terms set to overcome the crisis. And the resurgent narrative about the crisis – based on stereotypes about southern Europe and northern Europe – does not help. These stereotypes are problematic since they open up divisions between Member States and emphasise the concept of ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ in the integration project.

In addition, it looks like the financial crisis has served as an opportunity to catalyse some latent negative ideas about the European project. One of those ideas relates to the distance between EU and citizens. In people’s minds the EU remains a distant and abstract organisation with an excessive bureaucracy. Here the low level of knowledge about the European Union and its institutions is a key factor: According to Eurobarometer data in 2014 half of the Spanish interviewees declared not to know their rights as citizens of the EU whereas 70 percent would like to know more about them. Maybe we should think about how to improve this knowledge.

However, there is not only bad news, since other words associated with the EU would be ‘opportunity’, ‘alternative’, ‘future’. Even though most Spaniards believe that the EU is responsible for the crisis, they also think of it as the provider of opportunities to overcome its consequences. Due to the financial crisis, the unemployment rate in Spain is dramatically high, affecting particularly young people. These youngsters look to the EU for the future that they do not have in their home country.
In this respect we can observe a generational change in what Spaniards think about the EU. If the pre-transition generations consider(ed) the EU the path to democracy and progress in an emotional way, the perception of generations after the transition to democracy is more pragmatic. They have been socialised in a European context and many of them have enjoyed at some point the benefits of being European citizens such as educational and job mobility, freedom of movement or meeting simply other Europeans. They have experienced EU membership in everyday life and use it as an opportunity to improve their lives.

**Reconnecting Spain and the EU**

Now we have identified the main weaknesses of the EU as seen by the Spanish people, what can be done to reconnect them to the European Union? In my following blog posts I will try to explore the ways to improve, on the one hand, the connection between Spanish citizens and European institutions and, on the other hand, the connection of Spanish people with the other Europeans. Both dimensions are very important for the strengthening of the European integration process in Spain.

Although the economic aspects of the European project are crucial, even more so in the context of the current financial crisis, it is necessary to pay attention to the political dimension of the EU. Spaniards demand a closer and more political EU with institutions that are more democratic and transparent. They want to know how the EU works and they want to play an active role in it. Another dimension to work on is solidarity. It is necessary to overcome stereotypes and to show the positive aspects each Member State adds to the EU.

As if the situation concerning the European Union wasn't challenging enough, the difficult internal political situation in Spain cannot be ignored either. Catalonia is in a crucial moment of its history with pro-independence parties in government and a great division within Catalan society regarding the possible independence from Spain. In the national arena, politicians are in negotiations to find a way to govern the country, since Spain is undergoing a political change that started with the parliamentary election in December. What is interesting is the fact that not a single Eurosceptic party made it into what can rightly be called the most diverse Congress of Deputies (parliament) of all times. On the other hand, the rejection of the austerity measures or the opposition to TTIP by Podemos or the United Left (IU) seems to have broken the positive consensus of the elite on the EU, at least on some issues. So, will this affect the Spanish public opinion? Let’s see what will happen in these interesting and challenging times and what can be done to reconnect Spain and the European Union.