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SPAIN AND EU'S POST-BREXIT REALIGNMENTS: a new core role for Spain*

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In March 2017, Jean Claude Juncker, President of the European Commission, presented his five possible future scenarios for a fragile European Union in search of a renewed compromise and probably a more flexible construction. Right after Juncker's announcement, the four large Eurozone countries -Germany, France, Italy and Spain- met in Versailles to discuss their next moves towards greater integration and to draw a future Union at various speeds. The presence of the Spanish Prime Minister, Mariano Rajoy, at that meeting in the outskirts of Paris, after a long period of absence in the directory commanding the ship of a European Union in crisis, was a turning point, from Madrid's perspective. Spain was smoothly overcoming the deteriorated image of a deep economic and political crisis, in order to take a new role.

EU's hard core is as flexible as this future Union they are imagining, and the Spanish government found a split through which to sneak into the leading four. The British decision to leave the European Union and Poland returning to a Eurosceptic government and moving away from the central position gained during the worst years of the crisis - as central Europe's good pupil - brought a new scenario for Spain.

However, Brexit is a double-edged sword for Spain. Even if Rajoy's government could envisage it as a great opportunity to fill in the void left by the UK among the EU's big ones, it is also in Spain's interest to defend the softest Brexit possible. Spain-UK bilateral relations have become increasingly significant in terms of trade, direct investment, tourism, fisheries and a large number of Britons live in Spain, and represent, by far, the largest group of British expats in any European country. Brexit means that Spain would climb a step up and stand just behind Germany, France and Italy; it would also mean more influence capacity at the EU Council level, through the double majority voting; but it will also bring more financing responsibilities, since it is quite possible that Spain would become a net contributor to the European budget.

An internal report from the Spanish government, [leaked in the press](#), alerted that the impact of Brexit could cost between two and four point of Spanish GDP growth (between 2 and 4 billion euros) and an extra contribution to the EU budget of

more than 880 million euros, according to the first estimates. The text, elaborated with the collaboration of several embassies and Ministries, emphasized the need for taking into account the Spanish demands in the negotiations driven by the European Commission, taking positions similar to those of Ireland, Poland or Italy, in matters of Social Security, free circulation or tourism.

However, even if Spain is a very important country in the negotiation of Brexit because, bilaterally, it is risking a lot, its political profile in the negotiations, has, so far, been low. After de Brexit referendum the Spanish government presented unsuccessfully to the United Kingdom a proposal of negotiation for Gibraltar -under the idea of a joint sovereignty. Despite the future of this disputed territory seemed to be at stake in a Brexit compromise, **Madrid allayed fears reassuring that** Spain would not “jeopardise” a future deal demanding a change in Gibraltar’s status.

In the meantime, this post-Brexit realignment in progress is already bringing new cooperation opportunities for Spain, especially the increased collaboration in the framework of the EU’s Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) - a priority for the Spanish government. In fact, London and Madrid **would be already working in a bid** to secure military ties after Brexit such as exchanges, manouvres or sharing best practices, to identify new opportunities for collaboration on terrorism and cybersecurity risks. Yet, Spain is a ‘border country’ in the sense that it plays an important role, from an EU perspective, in the protection and defense of the Union’s Southern borders, beyond the so-called migration crisis. Madrid draws attention to the challenges posed by the Southern flank, and, at the same time, it has shown support for progress towards a reinforced Defense policy, an aspect on which Spain works together with France and Germany.

After the Brexit shocks, the EU has proved that keeping up cohesion among member states - even in the context of a new momentum, triggered by Macron’s ideas to reform the Eurozone and the expressed political will to enhance military cooperation – is essential. Nevertheless, the EU-UK negotiations still act as a factor of unity from the continent’s perspective. Unity and stability are the two new magical words in Brussels. They have also been key to the EU’s approach towards the latest Spanish constitutional crisis. A Union chastened with referendums and challenged in every electoral process stood steadfastly in the showed backing of the Spanish government, following the Catalonia independence defiance.

No Southern alliance

Beyond political priorities and the slowly positive economic performance, Spain has still a visibility problem among EU’s decision-making powers and its foreign policy ambitions have been very limited during the last years, mainly because of the urgency of the financial and social crisis but also because of the difficulties on finding allies.

The economic crisis brought a new perception of EU’s power among the Spanish public opinion, a new Europeanization of the media and of the political space, but failed to bring - among the countries most affected by this crisis - a sense of common destiny. The peripheral countries of Southern Europe were blamed in block but, in fact, their governments were unable to weave a common front to face the imposed harmful austerity policies. They fled desperately from each other trying to avoid being assimilated to the patient next door. The official discourse was differentiation. Italy was not Spain, Spain was not Greece and each and every one of them sought to please German demands in their own ways.

There was a North-South divide in the European Union but there was no Southern block as far as negotiation positions in Brussels were concerned. However, the success of new political forces in the South (Podemos in Spain, Syriza in Greece or 5 Stelle Movement in Italy), challenging the traditional European discourse, from different perspectives, proves the existence of a certain shared trend.

Even if a new mood has come now to the Brussels' bubble, all the overlapping crises - inequality, security and terrorism, and migration - that have trapped a European Union unable to mend internal fractures, are still very present. The electoral victory of president Emmanuel Macron in France has sought to revive the Franco-German engine. After closing a painful but not so disastrous electoral cycle in the European Union, with the populist forces confirmed but less strengthened than many feared, the urgent debate about the future of the European Union can be opened and, with it, a new search for allies and shared visions.

But, for the moment, the Mediterranean flank – understood as a block with common interests - still does not exist. Not even the migratory pressure of recent times has succeeded in making the Mediterranean Europe act honestly united and formulate common demands: Greece and Italy manage their own urgent problems and Spain is unable to show solidarity and comply with the minimum reallocation of refugees assigned by the European Commission.

So far, the new political winds blowing from Berlin and Paris draw a two-speed Union with the risk of creating a new dividing line between first class and second class EU member- states. As in the worst moments of the economic and financial crisis, the South may find itself in a new rivalry between governments of countries of Mediterranean Europe, differentiating itself from its neighbours, and trying to secure a position for their own in the future, more integrated core of a divided Union. This time around, Spain would be already fighting from a central position.

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