

## The Impact of Spain's Economic and Political Crisis on the European Elections

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Since 2009, Spain has been confronted with a severe political and economic crisis, which has resulted in a record-high rate of unemployment (a quarter of the population is currently out of work), a weakening of the already fragile welfare state and a string of corruption scandals affecting all main political institutions, from local authorities to government members and even the royal family. The combination of these factors has seriously undermined Spanish citizens' trust in politics and public institutions, both at national and European levels. There is a widespread perception that Brussels and Berlin are the driving forces behind the austerity measures imposed by the current conservative government, and that these have contributed to the overall feeling of uncertainty, erosion of the middle classes and growing income inequality in Spain. A recent study by Fundación Alternativas indicates that the percentage of extremely poor people has increased in Spain in just five years from 3.7% to 8%, while the poor have increased from 16.6% to 18.4%, meaning that a quarter of Spaniards live below the poverty line. At the same time, the percentage of the population in the upper-income class has also grown somewhat, from 8.4% to 8.9%, which reinforces the sensation of polarisation of the Spanish society. According to recent Eurostat statistics, the gap between the rich and the poor has widened more in Spain than in any other EU member state in the period 2008-12.<sup>1</sup>

One of the most significant recent changes in the Spanish political system is its fragmentation. As a consequence of the crisis, new bottom-up movements, a strand of smaller parties, protest forces, and citizens' platforms have emerged. These groups position themselves against the two big traditional political parties – Partido Popular (PP), the centre-right party that holds the majority of seats in Spain's congress, and Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE) on the centre-left, both of which have dominated the political scene since the end of the Franco dictatorship. As the crisis has deepened, both PP and PSOE have been losing voters to a range of smaller parties led by ex-communists, ecologists and regional nationalists, as well as to centre/centre-right parties such as Unión Progreso y

<sup>1</sup> Inequality of income distribution (income quintile share ratio), Eurostat (date of extraction: 1 April 2014).

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Democracia (UPyD) at the national level and Ciutadans at the regional level. Polls show that if national elections were held today, less than 50% of Spaniards would cast their vote for one of the two traditional centrist parties. The UPyD in particular has been gaining support both from the PSOE and the PP's traditional voters with a pro-transparency and democratic regeneration discourse.

Furthermore, another important factor in the re-shaping of the Spanish political landscape is the aggravation of the existing regional tensions as a consequence of the crisis. This year's European Parliament elections will not only be fought on the ideological level but also around the issues of the constitutional reform and the unity of Spain. The change in the balance of power between traditional political parties at national and regional levels, and the economic pressures aggravated by the austerity cuts in social policies have strengthened the movement in Catalonia demanding either a new fiscal agreement with the government or, increasingly, secession from the Spanish state. It is likely that the European electoral campaign in Catalonia will be virtually monopolised by this Madrid-Barcelona confrontation, in particular because the EU membership of a hypothetical Catalan state is one of the key issues in the present political debate over secessionism. However, the Spanish electoral law for EP elections prevents the regional parties from achieving substantial representation on the European level, thus limiting any regional results. European elections are organised in a single electoral constituency in Spain, which diminishes the regional representation in the European Parliament compared to the nationalists' presence in the Spanish congress. This means that even if this matter becomes a central issue in the Catalan EP election campaign and the nationalist parties manage to coordinate among themselves and mobilise their voters – this does not necessarily translate into a substantial number of seats for these parties. In any case, however, the Catalan nationalist parties are expected to do well, but so is UPyD, which is promoting the recentralisation of the state and is opposed to regional nationalism.

The end to unconditional support for European integration will be another important factor in the upcoming elections. Although the majority of Spaniards continue to support Spain's membership in the EU and see the European Union as a way out of the crisis, most of the population also thinks that the EU has not lived up to their expectations and is not applying the right economic policies. In 2008, 58% of Spanish citizens said that they trusted the EU, whereas by autumn 2013 this trust had plummeted to 21%. Some 38% of the Spaniards reported having a predominantly negative image of the European Union, compared to the 20% who have a positive one.<sup>2</sup> This disillusionment represents an important change in the general perception of the EU, since the EU membership has been perceived not only as an economic advantage but also as a crucial factor of social modernisation and a sign of political approval for the young Spanish democracy. That said, there is still more trust in the EU than in national institutions, and Spanish people do not want to leave the EU or the eurozone.

Historically, there has been a silent acceptance of the EU in the absence of any debate in Spain. European elections have until now been seen as a harmless opportunity to punish or reward national governments, but no political force has ever questioned Spanish membership or the idea of EU integration. The present economic crisis has changed Spaniards' perceptions of the EU and a wider public debate on the EU and the effects of its membership has emerged. Also for the first time an EU-critical (if not anti-European) discourse has surfaced. That said, in contrast to many other EU countries, even the EU-critical discourse remains a minority in Spain and there is no political representation for euro-scepticism or extreme-right populism in the Spanish Parliament or among their representatives in the European chamber. Recent forecasts suggest that the Left coalition could make significant gains in the next European elections, with a critical discourse against austerity measures. And it's still to be seen how strong the arrival of the new political parties UPyD and VOX will be on the European scene. It must be noted, however, that the latter two position themselves as pro-European, even if they are very critical of the Spanish federal arrangements.

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<sup>2</sup> Source: Eurobarometer 2013, spring and autumn waves.

## Conclusions

Despite the emergence of a critical debate against the EU-imposed austerity measures both at the level of the political elites and on the streets, there is no sign that these elections will have a more European focus than any of the previous ones. No anti-European discourse exists among the Spanish mainstream political parties, but public trust in the European institutions is plummeting. Spanish turnout in European elections has been dropping in the last few years, and it is very unlikely that it will substantially pick up in the short-term. Almost 60% of the Spaniards voted in the European Parliament elections in 1994, but ten years later, the turnout was only 45% and the abstention rate is expected to increase in 2014. The main reason for this is the low level of awareness of the functioning of the European Parliament but some responsibility also lies with the Spanish political parties and the way they deal with the electoral campaign to mobilise the discontented voters, who consider unemployment and the economic situation as the two most important issues that the country is facing at the moment.

The emergence of a deep political and social discontent within Spanish society – caused by the financial crisis and the deterioration of future expectations – is very unlikely to substantially affect the results of the European elections. However, a new idea of ‘alter Europeanism’ is growing among social and political actors to bring EU politics closer to people, searching for more and better accountability at national and European level. This new idea is most likely not going to be translated into the election results this time round, but observers might discern the turning point in Spain’s political landscape in the course of the subsequent 2015 national elections.