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A European Affair – The Role Played by the EC in the Spanish Transition to Democracy

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Abstract

This paper assesses the importance of the European Community in the Spanish transition to democracy during the years 1975-1977. In order to do so it focuses on the European Socialists (who mainly operated through the European Parliament and the Socialist International) and their transnational activities aimed at promoting democratization in Spain. This analysis will show that the Socialist parties of the EC were more committed to democracy in Spain than any of the Communitarian institutions, and that if the role played by the EC in Spain was extraordinarily important, this was due to the Spanish political culture in which the EC was considered the goal of political, economic and cultural aspirations.

Key words: European Community, Socialists, democratization, political culture, Spain.

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to analyze the interaction of the domestic and international political actors during the Spanish transition to democracy between 1975 and 1977. It focuses on the role played by the European Community in the process of democratization in Spain, especially through the transnational activities of the European Socialist¹ parties in the European Parliament. The underlying theses are that the EC was successful in promoting democracy in Spain due to its symbolic power for all the Spanish political forces, and that within the Community the most active group directly promoting democracy was the Socialist Group of the EP, which promoted a moderate transition by supporting the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) and at the same time exerting pressure on the Spanish government. Furthermore, the European Socialists also pressured the Commission and the Council of Ministers in order to avoid their relaxation with Spain until democracy was established.

This paper is based on my ongoing doctoral research at the European University Institute. It deals with the role of the European Socialists in the transformation of the Spanish and Portuguese Socialist parties during the transition to democracy in Spain and Portugal. In my thesis I use a theoretical approach based on an eclectic understanding of the concept “political culture” (drawing from its definition in cultural history with some characteristics of the way the concept is used in political history).

Applying the concept of political culture on the topic of this paper could be useful for explaining the success of the EC in promoting democracy in Spain. It implies taking into consideration the values, prejudices, emotions, ideas, symbols, languages, visions of the past and expectations on the future that the Spanish political actors had at the time. However, since my investigation is still in its first steps, I will use in this paper a mixture between my original approach and a more traditional political history approach, which is based on the choices made by the political elites. With this approach I will try to put forward some tentative hypotheses that suggest that the influence of the EC on the Spanish transition has to be explained taking into account the political cultures in Spain.

2. Historical context

At the beginning of the 1970s the international arena underwent significant changes. The process of détente between the Eastern and the Western Bloc, the oil crisis, the appearance of the countries of the Third World, the increasing importance of an enlarged European Community and the relative decline of the US, left some room to new actors that acquired importance in international relations. This is the case of the Western European Socialist parties. Through transnational party activity they influenced the process of democratization in Spain and amplified the already increasing international relevance of the EC as a political actor. The Socialist parties acted together through several organizations, the most important ones being the Socialist International and the European Parliament. Besides, during

the years that I am studying (1975-1977) there were Socialists in power in six of the nine countries of the Community, which gave them an extra weight in the Council of Ministers of the EC.

In Spain, the EC found a fertile ground that made it especially influential. At the beginning of the Spanish transition there was a consensus among all the political forces (legal and illegal) on the desirability of the integration of Spain in the European Community, although this shared Europeanist feeling had a different origin and a different meaning for each of them. From the 1960sⁱⁱ the EC acquired a symbolic value for the opposition to Franco's regime, for whom Europe was synonymous with modernity, freedom and democracy. Even the most leftist groups in the opposition recognized that the future of Spain had to be conceived in the frame of the EC, in the words of Gorkin (a former Communist who in 1970 joined the PSOE), "[Europe] could stimulate a transformation without revolution and modernization without disorder".ⁱⁱⁱ This idealized vision of the EC played a great role among the Spanish opposition, which considered incompatible Spain's European vocation with Francoism. Hence, any step taken towards Europe was considered a step away from the dictatorship. On the other hand, the Spanish regime also showed its interest, based on economic reasons, in joining the EC from the 1960s. After the first Spanish application in 1962, which did not get any answer, in 1964 Spain and the EC started negotiations culminating in the signature of the Preferential Trade Agreement in 1970. From that year onwards it was very clear for the regime, especially for the young and reformist technocrats, that the economic modernization and development of Spain was linked to the greater integration in the EC. Therefore, immediately after Franco's death, Europe became a meeting point between the regime and the opposition, a factor able to stimulate a pacific transition to democracy.^{iv}

3. The Socialists lead the way

In this context, in 1975 the European Community and the main European Socialist parties started to pay special attention to the political situation in Spain. It was after the radicalization of the Portuguese revolution when the Europeans intensified their contacts with the Spanish opposition and with some reformist personalities of the regime. The foreseeable end of the regime and the instability in Portugal made Western Europe fear that after the death of Franco the Iberian Peninsula could become a focus of international conflict. Thus, the main Socialist parties of the European Community developed an intense policy in support of the Spanish Socialist party (PSOE). Their aim was to make the PSOE a moderate party that would be the strongest in the left in Spain, minimizing thus the Communist threat.

The most important organization through which the European Socialists channelled their support to the PSOE, and thus to democracy in Spain, was the Socialist International (which had created for this objective the Spain Committee in 1974) and the Socialist Group of the European Parliament. Since the Mozer report in 1973, the group had tried to coordinate the policies of the Socialist parties inside and outside of the EP, coordinating also the policies of the Socialist members of the Commission, the Socialist International and the national parties.^v

The European Socialists followed a strategy in Spain based on three points: first, the international condemnation of Franco's regime until it was clear that the country was moving towards democracy; second, providing with economic, material, moral and propagandistic support to the PSOE; third, exerting pressure on the European Community in order to avoid any kind of rapprochement between Spain and the EC until the former became a democracy.

In 1975 the Spain Committee of the SI met twice before Franco's death, in January and in July, and, following the strategy outlined above, it was decided that the Socialists should give economic and financial support to the PSOE and to maintain the international isolation of the Francoist regime, especially inhibiting any evolution in its relations with the EC and NATO. It was also proposed that a delegation composed of representatives of the member parties should visit Spain to evaluate the situation and the strength of the Socialists in every region.^{vi}

Some months later, on the 28th of August and on the 11th of September 1975, eleven members of the terrorists groups ETA and FRAP were sentenced to death in Spain, five of the sentences being executed on the 27th of September, which provoked the international condemnation of Spain. The Bureau of the SI convened in October and decided to protest massively against the Spanish regime and its repression. In addition, it established the Socialist International Spanish Solidarity Fund.^{vii} At the same time, on the 25th of September, the European Parliament condemned the decision of the Spanish authorities and invited the Commission and the Council of Ministers "to freeze the existing relations [with Spain] until such time as freedom and democracy"^{viii} arrived. However, the European Community responded on the 6th of October by suspending the ongoing negotiations between the EC and Spain on the renewal of the trade treatment signed in 1970. This decision was not very punitive because it only stopped the negotiations without cancelling the already existing agreement, but shows that among the Communitarian institutions the European Parliament, often led by the Socialist group, was the most intransigent in its opposition to the Spanish regime within the EC. These European reactions did not have a direct impact in eroding Franco's regime, however they provided encouraging future perspectives to the Spanish opposition.

A month and a half after the suspension of the negotiations, on the 20th of November, Franco died and King Juan Carlos de Borbón became the new head of State. In his inaugural speech he talked about the historical and current European vocation of Spain,^x something that got a good reception in Europe as a sign of the future aperture of the regime. He formed a new and heterogeneous government in which he included people loyal to Franco's legacy, such as the President Arias Navarro, and also reformist and more open-minded politicians, such as José María de Areilza, the Minister of Foreign Affairs. During the first months of the government Arias Navarro talked about political evolution and reform but did not do anything to democratize the country. The first decision in foreign policy was that José María de Areilza would travel in January 1976 to the capitals of the nine countries of the EC to explain to them what was the situation in Spain and to present the program of the new government. Areilza was supposed to explain that the regime had a well-defined program to transform the political system so that it would be homologous with the ones existing in Western Europe. He was also meant to express that as soon as this programme was completed Spain would apply for the membership of the EC. Meanwhile the preferential agreement signed in 1970 would regulate the commercial relations between Spain and the EC.^x

Although it was not an easy task, considering that nothing had changed in Spain, Areilza was quite successful in his trip and received encouraging words from most of these countries. In January 1976 Spanish diplomacy scored another success. An agreement was signed between Spain and the US extending the military pact existing between the two countries for another five years. Furthermore, the EC Council of Ministers declared also in January that the suspension of the negotiations of an EEC–Spain preferential trade agreement imposed before Franco's death could not be justified anymore, which seems to be a relaxation of the pressure that Spain had been suffering since the last days of Franco.

This statement was very much criticized by the Socialist Group in the European Parliament. In the debate held on the 11th of February 1976,^{xi} some parliamentarians questioned the statements of M. Thorn, at that moment president of the Council of Ministers. The Socialist group asked him to reinforce the pressure over Spain because otherwise the Spanish government could think that the EC was satisfied with the rhythm of the changes, which was not the case. It is difficult to say if this general relaxation with the Spanish regime, still not democratic, responded to a strategy that aimed to stimulate reforms through concessions. However, since there is no evidence of it, I would argue that the Commission and especially the Council of the EC were more interested in commercial and geo-strategic factors than democratization *per se*. Even though democracy could be favourable to these interests, there was also the risk that by opening up the political spectrum the internal situation of Spain would go towards the extremes (either left or right). This was dangerous for two reasons: first, because a leftist revolutionary regime could take hold in the country (similarly to what had happened in Portugal), and second, because a radicalized internal situation could cause a new civil war. The Socialists, however, were highly committed to democracy. Although they were also aware of the potential risks that democracy could bring about, they developed a sophisticated strategy in order to safely promote democracy in Spain, being thus the engine of the EC in supporting the political change. In the aforementioned case, the Socialist Group expressed this commitment by warning the Council and the Commission. According to the Socialists, it was clearly desirable to exert more pressure to accelerate the reforms (until that moment inexistent) in Spain.

Throughout these years, the Socialist Group of the EP also tried to indirectly promote democracy by educating young Spanish Socialists, following a long-term strategy. Between 1974 and 1976, in the confines of the scholarship "Francis Vals", the Socialist Group gave grants to young Spanish and Portuguese Socialists with the aim to introduce them to the functioning and the activities of the European Parliament, and in general to the process of European integration. In the context of regime change these grants to young members of the PSOE had an important formative function, but also political importance. One of the beneficiaries of these scholarships, Juan Manuel López Nadal, wrote in his report of activities that he helped to organize the visit of the Commissioner Maurice Faure to Spain in July 1976. During the visit, Faure had interviews with the main political forces and with the trade unions of Spain, especially the PSOE and the UGT.^{xii} López Nadal also emphasized the importance of getting in touch and establishing a network with the Socialist and Social Democrat parliamentarians of the EP.

These indirect activities were implemented with a more direct involvement in the Spanish political situation. On the 30th of April 1976, a delegation of the Socialist Group visited Spain where they contacted with Felipe González, leader of the PSOE, and the International Secretary of the party, Luis Yañez, with the purpose of preparing an interview with the Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs. After meeting the minister, the representatives met with the leaders of the PSOE again in order to let them know what had been talked about. Furthermore, the delegation had an audience with the leader of the Socialist trade union UGT, Nicolás Redondo, as well as with all the representatives of *coordinación democrática*.^{xiii} Finally they had a press conference. The value of meetings such as this was very high. Firstly, because the Spanish Socialists felt morally supported by their European counterparts, to which they granted high moral values. Secondly, because through the Europeans the Iberian Socialists could have a stronger position in their negotiations with the Spanish government. Thirdly, because the meetings made it clear to the Spanish Socialists, and even to the Communists, that the future of Spain was in Europe. This made it compulsory to develop a kind of

Western democracy (forgetting about revolutionary experiments) that would allow the country to join the EC in the near future. Finally, these meetings were always followed by a press conference, which conceded a great amount of publicity to the Spanish opposition at internal as well as external level, and in this way the Socialists became the visible representatives of the coming democracy.

4. Change of government and first democratic elections

As a response to the growing internal and external pressure, Arias Navarro announced his limited reform program on the 28th of February. He was aware of the necessity to make reforms in the regime, but he was also receiving pressures from the most pro-Francoist wing of the regime, the so-called *Bunker*. In this situation Navarro announced the following changes: freedom of press, right of assembly and association, and a kind of pseudo-democracy, in Navarro's words *Democracia a la española*, consisting in a limited democracy controlled by the regime.

In the beginning of July King Juan Carlos, aware of the stagnation of Arias' government, nominated Adolfo Suárez as President in Arias Navarro's place. Suárez was a relatively unknown politician who had been the Minister Secretary General of the National Movement. The Europeans interpreted his election as a sign of the continuity of the regime. However, Suárez started a program of reforms almost immediately. On the 15th of July he approved the reform of the Criminal Code, granting freedom of speech and freedom of assembly and political association. Regarding Europe, the new government stated that they would follow the same line as their predecessors and that their main objective was the integration in the EC.^{xiv} Through this message Suárez was indirectly suggesting that Spain would evolve towards democracy, because at that point Europe had become a synonymous with democracy for all the Spanish political forces.

In August 1976, a delegation of the Council of Europe visited Spain and had talks with members of the government and of the opposition. After this visit the delegation was convinced that the process of democratization was real, and that the government was working for it. The European Parliament also changed its hostile stance towards the Spanish Government, especially after the aforementioned visit of the Christian Democrat Maurice Faure, who had the responsibility to inform the EP on the internal situation in Spain.

However, the political struggle went on. The PSOE announced its plans to hold its 27th Congress in Madrid in the month of November. It would be the first Congress of the party in Spain since the Civil War, but the government, fearing the reaction of the extreme right in a crucial moment of reforms, prohibited the Congress in October. European Socialists took an active part on the side of the opposition by exerting pressure on the regime to further its political commitment to democracy and to guarantee the legalisation of all political forces without exception. In October 1976 the SI demanded the Spanish Government to authorise the PSOE to hold its 27th Congress in Madrid. The SI made it clear to the Spanish Government that a refusal to satisfy PSOE's request would mean an attempt against the freedom of expression and assembly. The banning of the Congress went against the declaration of liberalisation of the Spanish government and represented a discriminatory attitude regarding the PSOE. The SI also issued the following statement:

“The Bureau express their total solidarity with the PSOE and hopes that the Spanish government, which on numerous occasions has affirmed its interest in gaining admission to European institutions and its intention to make their political system similar to those of Western Europe, should reconsider its attitude and should recognize the legitimate right of the PSOE to celebrate its 27th Congress in Spain”.^{xv}

As it is noticeable, the SI did not doubt to threaten the Spanish government with a possible international isolation. This was one of the strengths of the Socialists. By working through the SI or through the EP they could be disproportionately influential because their member parties were in power in several countries in Europe and because they had a capability to influence within important international organizations, such as the EC and NATO. Besides, the Socialists showed a consistency in their opposition to any kind of continuity of Franco's regime that was superior to other international actors involved in the process of democratization in Spain.

Finally, the Spanish government authorised the PSOE to celebrate the congress in Madrid in December 1976. The most important Socialist leaders of Europe were in attendance. Among those present were Willy Brandt, who had just been elected chairman of the SI, François Mitterrand, Olof Palme, Michael Foot, Pietro Nenni and Mario Soares. They all expressed their support to PSOE and emphasized the need to move further towards democracy. The Congress consecrated the organisational domination of the moderate wing of the PSOE. However, the rhetoric used in the speeches was quite radical, and the final resolution was a mixture between radical words and moderate objectives,^{xvi} something that could be explained by the necessity of the PSOE to fight a place in the left with the PCE on the one hand, and by the acknowledgement that in order to preserve the European support they had to move towards democracy with moderation.

A few days later, on the 15th of December, the regime organized a referendum on constitutional reform, and the so-called *Ley para la Reforma Política* was overwhelmingly supported by the Spanish people. A period followed in which the government took successive steps to prepare the ground for elections. In February 1977 all the political parties were legalized in Spain except for the Communist Party. On the 9th of April, during Easter holidays, the PCE was legalized, and on the 15th of April general elections were convened for the 15th of June 1977.

5. Conclusions

In the above chapters I have sketched an outline of the involvement of the European Socialists in the Spanish transition. I have tried to show that they, working through the EP (and the SI), were a major force in the EC. They propelled the Community towards a firm pro-democratic stance on Spanish regime change, for example by exerting pressure on the Commission and the Council in the first stages of the process. The European Socialists also supported the democratization of Spain by providing aid for the PSOE and condemning the Francoist regime until it was dismantled. On the other hand, the political culture of Spain contributed to the key role of the EC in the process of transition. In other words, the strong Europeanism both in the government and in the opposition amplified the effects of any activity of the EC, since joining the EC was seen as the most desirable perspective of future for the country. However, it must be noted that these conclusions are not definitive. They could perhaps be described as hypothesis, which I will further explore in my thesis.

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ⁱ Using the term Socialist I include the Socialist and Social Democrat parties of the countries of the European Community.

ⁱⁱ Especially from 1962 when Willy Birkelbach presented in the European Parliament the Birkelbach Report, in which it was established that being a democratic country was requirement *sine qua non* to join the European Community.

ⁱⁱⁱ María Elena Cavallaro, “El europeísmo y la oposición desde el franquismo hasta la Transición democrática” in Rafarl Quirosa-Cheyrouze y Muñoz (ed.), *Historia de la Transición en España. Los inicios del proceso democratizador* (Madrid: Biblioteca Nueva, 2007), 388.

^{iv} Cavallaro, “El europeísmo y la oposición,” 393.

^v Juliet Antunes Sablosky, “A actividade partidária transnacional e as relações de Portugal com a Comunidade Europeia”, *Análise Social*, vol. XXXI, (138), 1996 (4.º). 1007-1020.

^{vi} IISH, Socialist International Archives, 812, Recommendations to the Bureau meeting, 13th January 1975.

^{vii} IISH, Socialist International Archives, 812, Spain-Decisions and Recommendations by Bureau of Socialist International. Establishment of Spanish Solidarity Fund, 10/10/1975.

^{viii} “Résolution sur la situation en Espagne” of September 1975, *Journal officiel des Communautés (JOCE)*, N° C 239 of 20 October 1975. Published in Fernando Guirao, “The European Community’s Role in Promoting Democracy in Franco’s Spain, 1970-1975” in Jan Van Der Harst (ed.), *Beyond the Customs Union: The European Community’s Quest for Deepening, Widening and Completion, 1969-1975* (Bruxelles: Nomos, 2007), 163-193.

^{ix} Julio Crespo MacLennan, *España en Europa, 1945-2000. Del ostracismo a la modernidad* (Madrid: Marcial Pons, 2004), 159.

^x José María Areilza, *Diario de un ministro de la monarquía* (Barcelona: Planeta, 1977).

^{xi} Historical Archives of the European Union, PE0 QP/QH H-0237/75, Relations entre la Communauté européenne et l’Espagne.

^{xii} Historical Archives of the European Union, PE/GS/33/76, Rapport de stage de Monsieur Juan Manuel Lopez Nadal.

^{xiii} It was a unitary organization of all the political parties in opposition to the Francoist regime which consisted in the fusion of two different platforms, *Junta Democrática de España* led by the PCE and *Plataforma de Convergencia Democrática* led by the PSOE in March 1976.

^{xiv} Crespo MacLennan, *España en Europa*, 183.

^{xv} IISH, Socialist International Archives, 813, Bureau of the Socialist International, Statement on Spain, 23/10/1976.

^{xvi} Fundación Pablo Iglesias, FA 1282, 1283, 1284 and 1285, XXVII Congreso del PSOE.