



Spain: Normalizing the Foreign Relations of the State of the Autonomies

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For decades the foreign dimension of the widely celebrated Spanish transition to democracy was unspectacular, with nothing dramatic enough to attract international public attention and global headlines. But in March 2004, the tragic train bombings in Madrid three days before the Spanish elections drew the alarmed attention of the world. The immediate and very controversial withdrawal of the Spanish troops from Iraq, decided by the newly elected Prime Minister Zapatero, gave unexpected international visibility to Spanish foreign policy.

Continuity more than rupture has characterized Spain's rapid adaptation to the foreign policy standards of Western democracies. Surprisingly enough, most of the international priorities of the newly democratic Spain were almost the same as the Franco dictatorship. Both sought greater participation in the European integration process and demonstrated a commitment to western security schemes under a certain leadership of the United States while maintaining particular attention to economic and political developments in Latin America and to a lesser degree in the Arab

States. The newly democratic Spain fulfilled its basic international ambitions by the early 1990s, in less than two decades, with full membership in the European Union and North Atlantic Treaty Organization, a major peace conference on the Middle East in Madrid, and the institutionalization of regular Iberoamerican Summits between representatives of Latin American countries, Spain and Portugal. In this context, only the signing and ratification of legal international conventions on Human Rights and the establishment of diplomatic relations with both the Soviet Union and Israel marked a clear and long-awaited departure from the past. In the long term, however, the most influential source of renewal for Spanish foreign policy has been the integration process of the European Union (EU).

While it has been characterized by continuity, the advent of democracy has had interesting but subtle implications with regard to the country's foreign relations. The Spanish constitution, adopted in 1978, indicates that "international relations" are the exclusive domain of the central government. But from the beginning, regional governments have tried to develop a certain presence abroad. Later, as a result of the inevitable political and administrative learning process, autonomous governments in Spain also began to press for the establishment of intergovernmental mechanisms which would allow them to participate more or less directly in foreign policy issues, particularly in those areas which involved their own powers. This increasing interest resulted mostly from a combination of functional and symbolic concerns.

For Catalonia and the Basque Country, governed by moderate nationalists for a prolonged period, developing a certain presence abroad has always been very important. The appeal to these autonomous communities was symbolic, as it enabled them to present themselves as political entities distinct from the rest of Spain. Certainly, the central government has been reluctant to allow this differentiation, but for the most part these initiatives have been discreet and have not directly confronted Spanish foreign policy designs. Sometimes, as in the case of the 1992 Olympic Games in Barcelona, close collaboration between the central and autonomous governments has resulted in success for all the parties involved. Conversely, among the very few exceptions was the failed attempt of the Basque parliament to host a meeting of the Kurdish Assembly in Exile. This planned meeting caused serious political concern in Madrid and irritated the Turkish Ambassador in Spain. However, some of the central government's most conspicuous efforts to neutralize autonomous governments' international activism completely failed. For instance, in

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1994, a Constitutional Court decision ruled that the Basque Government Delegation in Brussels can be considered official, since dealings with the EU are no longer considered "foreign affairs." Controversy remains, however, regarding overseas offices established beyond the European polity. Nonetheless, in a country as diverse as Spain, symbolic dimensions have also been important for other regions not necessarily governed by nationalist parties, such as Galicia, Canary Islands, or Aragon. The autonomous region of Extremadura, for instance, was harshly criticized by the Portuguese media in 1999 when the autonomous government included the Alentejo region of Portugal in its official tourist maps.

In addition to the symbolic dimensions, economic issues have also encouraged the international activism of the Autonomous Communities. The communities are interested in increasing foreign trade, participating in international fairs, prompting local tourism, and offering incentives for foreign investments. Participation in the EU has been particularly influential in defining the strategy of the Autonomous Communities with regard to their role in foreign relations. As one of the most important recipients of European funds, the Spanish State of the Autonomies has been very sensitive to the political and institutional implications of the integration process. European funds have been crucial for the creation of new technological and transportation infrastructures and for elevating social protection standards. They have also been the most powerful dynamic behind the mobilization of subnational governments both at the domestic and international level. Moreover, as a result of the serious impact of the EU on diverse policy domains such as environment, industry, agriculture, fisheries, energy or education, among others, regional governments are increasingly adopting a certain European dimension to the whole policy agenda. Even the erosion of subnational competences as a result of the European integration process, which sparked complaints from the subnational units, has contributed to a more thorough recognition of the political relevance of Autonomous Communities.

Presently, the political system established by the Spanish Constitution of 1978 is being widely questioned. As a result of the new political climate since the election of Zapatero, the new Catalan Statute of Autonomy is now a reality. The Catalan Statute has set the pace for many other reforms, creating expectations for the normalization of the foreign role of the State of Autonomies after years of Byzantine disputes. Normalization can be defined as the widely accepted recognition of the international activism of regional powers within their own powers as a normal feature of the Spanish political system. A sign of this trend could be the current reform of the Spanish Foreign Service, which for the first time, at least in its initial drafts, recognizes for the first time a certain role for the Autonomous Governments in this field.