

Is Spain punching below her weight in Europe?

A few days ago Charles Grant, Director of the Centre for European Reform in London, published an article in which he stated that Spain has little authority in Europe and that Spain's influence in the EU has diminished considerably. It would appear that Spain is suffering from something akin to a crisis of being too lightweight within European politics. The modus operandi of a government is always open to assessment and value judgements, but I believe that these should be based on facts, concrete information and rigorous analysis, not on fanciful perceptions and information from anonymous sources.

Spain is a country that since its entry into the EU has been, and still is, a political, economic and social protagonist of the first order. It is a country that has been in the vanguard of innumerable European policies and initiatives –some remembered by Grant himself- such as the creation of the concept of European citizenship; cohesion funds; the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, better known as the Barcelona Process; the so-called Transatlantic Agenda; increased political dialogue and closer commercial and economic links with Latin America; the long list does not finish there. Spain is a fully fledged member state that has reached the final stage of EU integration and as such its interests lie increasingly with those of the European mainstream. Needless to say, each government has invested differing levels of time and energy in one policy or another, depending on its own ideology and level of ambition, but invariably this has been done with the mutual interests of Spain and the other EU partners born in mind. Spain has always been faithful to the idea that what is good for Spain is good for the EU and vice versa, thus leaving no room for confusion. Spain has established itself as a “middle-order power”, an essential player in Europe as well as in other important regions such as the Mediterranean, Africa and obviously Latin America.

In today's EU, a member state's authority and capacity to influence is measured at times of crisis. This has been particularly the case since José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero became head of the Spanish government. Since 2004 Spain has returned to the heart of the EU to lead and to help build new relations in the expanded membership of twenty seven states. A complex and pluralistic Union in which super-leadership has given way to other means of cooperation, more complicated forms of reaching consensus and decision making; more detailed and less visible forms of working in which authority is

measured less in terms of battles won in defence of self interest at the expense of others than in benefits gained by the whole Union. In this regard, Spain can be reasonably satisfied. Zapatero's government supported the views of 90% of its citizens against the war in Iraq –which in hindsight has been proved to have been a grave error- agreeing fully with the then senator Obama, and at the time running the political risk of losing the opportunity of keeping a close dialogue open with the Bush administration, which is in fact what occurred. So it cannot be said that the president lacks intuition and clear vision in questions of global international politics. In fact, the opposite is true. He has shown that he has the political courage to defend the wishes of the majority of citizens both in Spain and in the rest of Europe.

Furthermore, over the past few years Spain has proposed and has helped to create a series of European initiatives that have been appreciated and supported by our European partners. It is worth recalling that it was president Zapatero himself who lifted the veto of his predecessor regarding the Treaty on the Constitution, and who called the first referendum to ratify it. This led to huge support from the majority of Spanish citizens and to congratulations that were received from all his European colleagues. Later, after the failure of the Treaty on the Constitution, Zapatero's government played a very important role in supporting the Treaty of Lisbon and in helping to gather the support of a large majority of member states on its behalf during the recent German presidency of the EU.

Over the past few years Spain has taken the lead on other important European policies and initiatives that have been implemented successfully, such as the 'global approach to immigration', adopted under the British presidency in the European Councils of October and December 2005, which has subsequently become strategically important for the EU. This initiative has been applauded both by the countries targeted as final destinations by the immigrants and the African countries of origin and transit; this is due to its innovative approach that covers legal and illegal immigration and focuses specifically on an effective integration policy for immigrants while strengthening developmental cooperation in these countries in order to remove the root causes of the problem. This whole process came to fruition when the European Pact on Immigration and Asylum (EPIA) was adopted in the European Council of 2008 under the French presidency, which had worked hand in hand with Spain in successfully fleshing out the

agreement. President Zapatero has also displayed his leadership ability and negotiating skills when defending the legitimate interests of Spain at decisive moments in what could be described as the 'mother of all European negotiations' that took place from the dark perspective of the current crisis. At these negotiations, Spain adjusted the reduction in its net balance in line with the Commission's original proposal resulting in the country finally taking its place at the heart of the EU.

Spain also plays an important role in the area of initiatives within the ESDP (European Security and Defence Policy), such as the deployment of the Atalanta mission in Somali waters, or the international successes that have taken place in the last few months; the naming of Barcelona as the permanent seat of the Union for the Mediterranean Secretariat; the acceptance of the Alliance of Civilizations initiative as an important and positive contribution to intercultural dialogue on the world stage. And at a time of worldwide financial and economic crisis like the one we are experiencing in Europe, allow me to recall that it was the Spanish government that proposed to the EU French presidency a meeting of the Eurogroup government heads of state on October 12 prior to the European Council meeting on October 15 and 16. It was at this meeting that the EU contributed towards a change of direction in the burgeoning international financial crisis that helped to calm the financial markets. Furthermore, Spain participates actively in the meetings of the G-20 that discuss the creation of a new global economic governance, empowered by its political influence in Europe and throughout the world, as well as by its proven ability to help in the supervision of the banking system.

In short, Spain is pleased with its track record, influence and potential at the heart of the EU. However, we are more interested in looking forward to the future than looking back at the past and on the immediate horizon we have important challenges. During the first six months of 2010, Spain will have the presidency of the EU Council at a difficult but fascinating time. The Spanish presidency of the EU will be perhaps the most important instrument with which to influence the course of both European and international events. Spain and its partners must respond to the problems of European citizens in order to strengthen the EU and to project to the outside world the image and capability of Spain as state, society and European culture. This will be done working as a team in both an official and hands-on capacity, representing the whole EU throughout the world. Spain is a pro-European country that has always fulfilled its obligations within

the EU and it has nothing to prove in order to show its true worth. However, we are expected to add new impetus, in order to have a lasting impact in the building of a modern Europe and to take the lead positively at this new and crucial stage in its development. The crisis has shown how decisive national leadership is but even how more effective the united action of the EU can be. This is precisely where Spain can show her true weight.

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