

Spanish Foreign Policy in the Balkans: Wasted Potential

Sofía Sebastián

>>> Spanish foreign policy in the Balkans dates back almost exclusively to the 1990s with the break-up of the former Yugoslavia. The Bosnian War in 1992 also sparked off a new stage in Spanish cooperation, which until then had centred on North Africa, the Middle East and Latin America. Spain's participation in the Balkans has been guided by the interest in maintaining peace and stability in the region, within the general framework of the international community's intervention. This has been carried out through three main channels: a general foreign policy framework defined according to international community directives (until 2008); the deployment of troops in the area; and cooperation assistance aimed at physically rebuilding and pacifying the region.

Foreign policy in the Balkans has generally been positive, though it did not particularly stand out until recently. Broadly speaking, since the Yugoslav wars, Spanish diplomacy has been influenced by the directives set by the international community, and more specifically by the European Union, especially with regard to the stabilisation and partnership process (the framework for the Balkans' accession to the EU). This policy remained constant until 2008, when the unilateral declaration of Kosovo's independence was opposed by Spain in spite of the strong support of other EU member states. As a result of this situation, Spain has taken an unexpected turn in its foreign policy in the Balkans, adopting a more unilateral line and hurriedly looking for a viable exit from the region. Unfortunately, the exit strategy has not been compensated for by plans for a long-term foreign policy strategy in the region.

Spain's participation in the Balkans has been more notable in terms of its deployment of troops and cooperation for reconstruction and development, though both these instruments are currently being with-

HIGHLIGHTS

- Spanish participation in the Balkans has been guided by its interest in maintaining peace and stability in the region.
- Spanish diplomacy has been influenced by the directives set by the international community, in particular the European Union.
- In spite of all the human and economic resources invested in the last decade, it is very possible that Spain will withdraw from the region without leaving a solid legacy.

»»»»» drawn. The deployment of troops was particularly important during the Bosnian War. More than 8000 Spanish military personnel carried out humanitarian aid and armed escort tasks under the authority of the United Nations, for which they obtained numerous distinctions, including the building of the Spanish square in Mostar in appreciation of the work carried out by Spanish blue helmets to achieve stability and rebuild the city. Spain has also participated actively in peace operations in Kosovo. More than 22,000 military personnel were deployed in ten years, until September 2009. Spanish troops were mainly deployed in the Kosovan province of Istok; a detachment was also set up in Osojane Valley to protect the Serbian returnees. As well as forms of humanitarian invention, Spain has been actively involved since 2004 in the European force EUFOR ALTHEA in Bosnia, to which it currently contributes a contingent of 304 military personnel (of a total of 2000). Spain heads the Multinational Maneuver Battalion, which has provided the basic structure of EUFOR since 2007 in conjunction with the Integrated Police Unit, which is also under Spanish control.

In terms of development aid, Spanish cooperation policy has made a very significant quantitative contribution to Bosnia. In fact, Bosnia has been the biggest recipient of aid within Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans, receiving more than 350 million dollars in bilateral official development aid (ODA). This financial contribution has made Spain one of the biggest European donors in the country in recent years. Aid to Bosnia has been fundamentally dictated by the post-war circumstances, though it has evolved over the years. With the beginnings of the European integration process and the transformation of the Balkans region, the Spanish development cooperation agency has focused most on state consolidation within the framework of the European integration process. At regional level, Spanish assistance in the Balkans has been centred on increasing institutional and economic capacities, as well as the capacity for conflict prevention and peacebuilding, in recognition of the close relationship between security and development. The assis-

tance has been concentrated mostly in Bosnia, Albania, Serbia and Montenegro, although under the new strategic plan for Spanish cooperation, which was made public at the start of 2009, the Balkans will cease to be beneficiaries. The cooperation office opened in 2001 in Sarajevo will close as soon as its current projects are finished.

WASTED POTENTIAL

One of the most surprising elements of Spanish foreign policy in the Balkans is the distance between the significant deployment of troops and assistance, especially in Bosnia, and the Spanish government's capacity to formulate a more influential strategy with greater political content within the framework of the EU. For example, it is striking that Spain has been one of the biggest European donors in Bosnia and yet, paradoxically, its influence on the drafting of European foreign policy on the same country has been minimal. In fact, in accordance with bilateral ODA, Spain spent almost 50 million dollars in 2008 on development cooperation in Bosnia, second only to Germany, and well in advance of the United States, which spent little more than 20 million in the same year, and the United Kingdom, which spent approximately 5 million (these two countries lead international policy in Bosnia). Although the United States and the United Kingdom form part of the Steering Board of the Peace Implementation Council (PIC), created in 1996 to provide executive support to the High Representative (HR), the absence of a coherent European policy in Bosnia in recent years has opened up an opportunity to exercise influence which several European countries – including Spain – have failed to utilise.

Various reasons explain why Spanish policy in the Balkans has lacked dynamism. The first is the absence of a strategic vision going beyond the traditional areas of Spanish influence, such as Latin America. This is reflected in the withdrawal of Spanish troops and bilateral assistance, without these being compensated for by other instruments of foreign action, or a foreign policy strategy with greater scope. As a result, and in spite of all the

human and economic resources invested in the last decade, it is very possible that Spain will withdraw from the region without leaving a solid legacy on which to build economic and political links that could serve as a bridge to launch mid- and long-term investment projects.

The lack of means of operation has also significantly limited Spanish foreign policy in the region. While the deployment of troops and bilateral aid has been sizeable in countries such as Bosnia, the absence of embassies in countries including Albania and Macedonia until barely three years ago (and their continued absence in Montenegro) has been striking. So too has the lack of a framework for development cooperation in Macedonia. This has made it difficult to draw up a regional policy to face the sources of instability still prevalent in the region, such as organised crime, discrimination against ethnic minorities and the failure to consolidate state capacities.

Spain should draw up a roadmap for EU accession for the Balkans

tion in Macedonia. This has made it difficult to draw up a regional policy to face the sources of instability still prevalent in the region, such as organised crime, discrimination against ethnic minorities and the failure to consolidate state capacities.

Finally, the lack of coordination (especially among the defence ministry and the foreign affairs ministry) and the recourse to a strategy of bilateral relations with other countries in the region in recent years (such as Serbia) have not only restricted Spanish foreign policy in the region, but also damaged its image. In this sense, the announcement of the withdrawal of troops from Kosovo made by the defence minister in March 2009, apparently without previously consulting and seeking approval from the foreign affairs ministry, caused outrage within and outside Spain. In spite of the fact that other European countries had already announced a progressive withdrawal of troops, the decision was taken without first consulting international partners and it significantly damaged Spain's foreign policy image. The increase in bilateral contact between Spain and Serbia in recent months, characterised by a

significant rise in visits of important civil servants from the two countries, could also damage Spain's relations with other countries in the region and delimit its capacity to draft a policy of greater regional importance.

FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES AND PROSPECTS

The Balkans region presents various challenges and opportunities that Spain ought to channel during its EU presidency. First of all, the absence of a clear strategy at European level offers a valuable opportunity for Spain not only to define its position more coherently, but also to help draw up the European policy in the post-Lisbon period, based on a firm commitment to the European integration process and the challenges that the region currently faces. In this sense, Spain must present a road map to EU accession (with clear dates and challenges) during the meetings scheduled with the leaders of the Balkans, heading a renewed impetus and European commitment to the region. Consolidating the visa exemption programme in the Balkans, which was extended in 2009 to Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia, presents a clear opportunity to promote this European commitment and provide immediate benefits to countries such as Bosnia and Albania, provided that the guidelines set by the European Commission are fulfilled. Progress with the European integration process in Croatia is also a clear objective (given the expectations that this country will join the European club in 2012), as well as with the rest of the region.

The individual countries in the region pose significant challenges, and Spain should bear these in mind when defining its agenda for the Balkans during its European presidency. Bosnia, for example, faces various challenges, such as the decision to close the Office of the High Representative, and it constitutes one of the clear priorities in the region. The results of the constitutional reform that Sweden and the United States began in October 2009 have not been as expected, and Spain has inherited a complex process that may



4

»»»»» become politicised in what is an electoral year. There is also a risk that this process will follow in the footsteps of the 'April package' (the process of constitutional reform that failed categorically in similar circumstances four years ago). Spain must take care not to repeat the same errors made back then, including a decline in political dialogue as a result of the electoral campaign, the danger of imposing hurried time scales and the exclusion of key actors from the negotiation process. It would be difficult for the constitutional hurdle to be resolved during the Spanish presidency (given the progressive deterioration in the country's political climate), but a limited agreement could be obtained that might serve as a basis of consensus for future negotiations and enable the process of reform defined by the EU to be continued. The priority aim must be to keep Bosnia within the European framework for reform and avoid at all costs any deterioration in the political climate as the electoral campaign progresses.

The challenges (and risks) with respect to Serbia and Kosovo are also considerable, in two ways in particular. Firstly, the International Court of Justice will give its verdict on Kosovo's independence during the Spanish presidency. The result of the ruling could put Spain in a difficult position, especially if it is not sufficiently clear. Spain must maintain the most neutral stance possible and seek a consensus within the EU. Secondly, Spain must work hard to maintain a reasonable balance in the region and ensure that its support to Serbia regarding the debate over Kosovo does not become detrimental to its regional priorities and bilateral relations. In this sense, Spain cannot lose sight of the European integration process in Albania and Macedonia, especially given the risks posed in these two countries in the coming months. Furthermore, although the EU has announced that the decision to start accession negotiations with Macedonia will be made during the Spanish presidency, Greece could use its veto to block the process. In addition, the political situation in Albania, where the opposition refuses to go to parliament in protest against the election results, could seriously damage the country's possibilities of being

accepted as an official candidate. Spain must therefore act as a mediator and make sure that the mechanisms of the European integration process continue, provided that the conditions set out by the EU are fulfilled.

*Sofia Sebastián is research associate
at FRIDE*

**e-mail: fride@fride.org
www.fride.org**
