

Does Spain have an Ostpolitik?

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»» Spain has never had a particularly strong interest in Eastern Europe. In recent years Spain has rushed to engage with Russia, due to Moscow's importance for European security. But there is little long-term thinking behind this engagement, and Spain still neglects the rest of the EU's eastern dimension. The reason for this is that Spain still sees the region in terms of an area to trade-off against gains in Mediterranean policy rather than as intrinsically important in its own right for Spanish national interests.

RUSSIA FIRST

Bilateral relations between Spain and Russia were revived when José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero's socialist government came to power in 2004. Steering away from the Atlanticist foreign policy of José María Aznar, Spain became more receptive to Russia's interests in Europe. At the Bucharest NATO summit in 2008 Spain joined France and Germany in blocking the accession of Ukraine and Georgia to NATO Membership Action Plans. Madrid argued that their accession could have led to an undesirable increase of tension with Russia.

Since Zapatero's government came to power, high level political contacts between Madrid and Moscow have increased. Zapatero has made an official visit to Russia every year of his tenure except one. King Juan Carlos has visited Russia; three times during the last five years.

Following terrorist attacks in Spain and other European countries, the bilateral agenda with Russia has been dominated by counter-terrorism. However, it has gradually extended to other areas such as trade and

HIGHLIGHTS

- Spain neglects the European Union's eastern dimension.
- Bilateral relations between Spain and Russia have been revived during Zapatero's administration.
- Madrid is among the strong advocates of a new agreement between the EU and Russia and has pioneered EU-Russia free trade.

»»»»» investment, energy, tourism and cultural cooperation. A bilateral Commission on Economic and Industrial Cooperation has been established as well as a Civil Society Forum, led by former high level diplomats from the two countries. Supported by the Spanish ministry for foreign affairs, a Spain-Russia Advisory Foundation was set up in 2008 to develop cultural links, civil society and business contacts.

In March 2009, during the Russian president Dmitri Medvedev's first visit to Madrid, Spain and Russia signed a strategic partnership based on 'shared democratic values' and a number of agreements, including a memorandum on energy cooperation. The countries have a mutual interest in the energy sector. Spain is keen to invest in Russian energy exploration and infrastructure, while Russia has expressed a growing desire to acquire a share in Spanish giant Repsol. In establishing this strategic partnership Madrid and Moscow agreed to make high level bilateral contacts a permanent fixture by holding annual Spain-Russia summits and semi-annual consultations between foreign ministers.

Although economic interdependence between Russia and Spain is not as significant as with other EU states, volumes of bilateral trade and Spanish investment in Russia have grown substantially. By 2008 Russia had become Spain's ninth largest source of imports, and eleventh largest export destination. In the aftermath of the 2008 Russia-Georgia war, Spain was among those EU countries opposing sanctions against Russia.

Spain is among the few EU member states which do not consume Russian gas and it is not highly dependent on Russian oil. Madrid is among the strong advocates of a new agreement between the EU and Russia and has pioneered EU-Russia free trade. Zapatero has supported Medvedev's proposal for a new European security pact that emphasises growing Russia's role in the continent. By promoting EU-Russia relations, Spain hopes to increase not only economic and security benefits for Europe, but also its own weight in the EU. While Spain has paid growing attention to Russia

it has sought to downplay any tension over human rights or Russia's drift towards authoritarianism. Spain's approach has been one of unconditional engagement.

It is not surprising that one of Spain's foreign affairs priorities during its EU presidency is the holding of a semi-annual EU-Russia summit. According to Zapatero, Spain hopes the EU-Russia summit will 'launch a new stage' in the EU-Russia relationship, 'with deeper understanding, cooperation and confidence'. Madrid aims at 'the renewal of a strategic agreement with Russia'. By aiming for an upgrade of EU-US relations, Zapatero also aspires to promote a 'more stable and closer relationship' between the US and Russia. Spain hopes to 'advance substantially the four common spaces between the EU and Russia' and to 'achieve significant progress during the summit on key issues such as energy, security and facilitating mobility'. Furthermore, on his last visit to Russia, Zapatero promised to explore new proposals on energy and the establishment of a Euro-Atlantic security area.

UNDISCOVERED EUROPE

Although prime minister Zapatero has declared 'full support' for the EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP), Spain's foreign policy has lacked significant interest and involvement in the EU's Eastern neighbourhood. Spain still considers the EaP as competing with the EU's Mediterranean policy. Zapatero did not even attend the summit in Prague in May 2009 that launched the Eastern Partnership, and Spain has been reluctant to agree to new EU funding for the Partnership. A declared priority of the Spanish EU presidency is to 're-establish balance' in an EU that, in Madrid's view, is 'tilting too far towards the East'. This is exactly the opposite view of the new member states and the eastern partners who point to the fact that much more EU funding goes southwards to the Mediterranean.

Nonetheless, both Zapatero and his minister for foreign affairs Miguel Ángel Moratinos have

promised that the Spanish Presidency will 'develop' and 'consolidate' the EaP. Moratinos has reacted strongly against claims that Spain only defends the Mediterranean. But so far this looks like pure rhetoric.

Spain still sees the eastern dimension as a means to an end rather than a goal in itself. Spain wants to ensure greater intra-EU solidarity for its foreign policy priorities such as EU Mediterranean policy and relations with Latin America. Investing in the Eastern Partnership is seen primarily as a way of gaining progress in these

other areas. For all the tension between the government and the People's Party opposition, this has been a core feature of Spanish foreign policy for the last three decades.

The EU presidency must trigger greater

Spanish involvement in the region. Involvement to date has been minimal: there are few formal economic agreements with the region, political ties are very weak and little cultural diplomacy is employed. The region is not covered by Spanish development aid, with the exception of humanitarian and post-war reconstruction aid to Georgia. Of the six EaP countries only Ukraine has a Spanish embassy. Although Spain promised embassies for Baku and Chisinau in 2006, these have yet to be opened.

Ministerial visits to the Southern Caucasus took place nearly exclusively as a result of Spain's OSCE chairmanship in 2007. The first ministerial visit to Belarus took place in March 2009 under Spain's Council of Europe chairmanship. Ukraine figures a little more prominently in Spain's foreign policy. The Ukrainian labour migrant community in Spain is numerous – the ninth largest non-EU national group. But even here the balance of bilateral relations is not impressive. The levels of trade and of Spanish investment to Ukraine in particular are

extremely low. Moratinos visited Ukraine only twice as the OSCE chair and in November 2009 he made his first official visit. He is the highest level Spanish official to visit Ukraine to date.

During his last visit to Ukraine, Moratinos promised to support the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement and a free trade accord (both currently being negotiated); Ukraine's accession to the European Energy Community (which occurred in December 2009); further facilitation of the visa regime between the EU and Ukraine; increased bilateral investments and improved Ukrainian migrants' rights. However, Spain is among the few countries that take a harsh stance against EU visa-free travel for Ukraine. It does not support a roadmap similar to those which abolished the visa regime with three Balkan states in 2009. And, of course, Spain has not supported Ukrainian accession to the Union. Its image in Ukraine is not positive.

Spain became modestly involved in Georgia after the August 2008 war. Immediately after the onset of the conflict, Spain contributed EUR 0.5 million of humanitarian aid to the Georgian population and another EUR 1 million was promised for Georgia's post-war reconstruction at the international donor conference. In addition, Spain has contributed 10 people to the 200-strong EU Monitoring Mission to Georgia. But Spain has had little to say about faltering democracy in Georgia, Armenia and Moldova, declining to criticise regimes' political machinations in these countries.

The EU's Eastern Neighbourhood and Russia rarely appear in Spanish public debate. Russia's image in the Spanish mass media is rather negative, while other post-soviet countries are covered only in the case of a crisis or conflict, mainly with Russia, or when top level US officials travel to the region.

CONCLUSION

If Spain aspires to influence the common EU policy towards Russia, it must be genuinely engaged in neighbourhood, otherwise its efforts will not be credible to other EU member states. In pushing for



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»»»»» a new agreement between the EU and Russia, Spain should not forget that Russia's policy towards its neighbours – including unfulfilled obligations regarding the peace agreement with Georgia – means that many EU member states mistrust Russia. The summit with Russia, which has 'enormous importance' for the Spanish presidency, will take place in Rostov-on-Don, a Russian city situated just between Ukraine and the Caucasus. Symbolically, Spain will have a great opportunity to put its stamp on the EU's policies towards the wider Europe. But its reluctance to confront Russia on anything – either internal human rights concerns or external actions – is extremely worrying for the future.

During Spain's EU presidency there will be a number of opportunities from which EU Eastern policies can benefit. First, by demonstrating genuine support and involvement in the Eastern Partnership, the Spanish EU Presidency can provide an example of an emerging EU single foreign policy where different member states with their national priorities and interests are united, presenting the EU as a world power with one voice and global interests. Second, as the institutional issues have been set by the Lisbon Treaty, Spain is in an excellent position to renew the debate on enlargement, still the most successful example of EU influence abroad. This would do more than anything to raise EU global power; one of the four main declared priorities of the Spanish presidency.

But so far the prospects do not appear bright. The Zapatero government has given little sign that it really believes that it needs a comprehensive and fully committed Ostpolitik. This is an unduly narrow perspective that undermines Madrid's pretensions to play an enhanced global role. It reflects, still, the mindset of a small state that believes it does not need to engage systematically in some parts of the world, outside its traditional areas of interest.

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