

Spain: An inward-looking and dispirited (but still pro-European) campaign

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Introduction

The European Parliament elections of 2014 will be held in Spain on May 25th. With 54 MEP seats at play, the Spanish delegation is the fifth largest among the 28 EU member states. However, the stability and strength of its two main parties – the conservative People’s Party (PP) and the Socialist Party (PSOE) – have traditionally given the country an extra influence on the big two groups that dominate the parliamentary activity in Brussels/Strasbourg: the centre-right EPP and the Social Democrats. After all, considering the divisions and the eccentric behaviour or irregular electoral results of their French, British and Italian counterparts during the last few years, the PP and PSOE have almost become the second most-solid members of their respective groups, only behind the German CDU/CSU and SPD.²³⁹

Actually, what is at stake in these elections in Spain is the extent to which these two big parties are able to resist the erosion of their joint hegemony as a result of the economic crisis and the successive social unrest.²⁴⁰ And, in contrast to other European countries in which the long-established parties have been challenged and in some cases surpassed by new parties – often eurosceptic or europhobe varieties – it seems that the Spanish party system will not collapse. To be sure, the polls predict that PP and PSOE will lose support compared to five years ago but not to the point of putting at risk their control of the national political arena.

Therefore, if these EP elections incite some expectation vis-à-vis the Spanish voters, it is primarily connected to the curiosity about just how strong this punishment will be. And, despite the attempts by EU affairs pundits to highlight the importance of voting from a supranational perspective (making the case for a truly European campaign with the well-known argument that it is the first elections after the crisis and the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty),²⁴¹ the truth is that national media, candidates and citizens in general do not seem to be particularly interested in the growing legislative powers of the EP. Moreover, they only remotely take into

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²³⁹ During the 7th European Parliament (2009-2014), the PP has been nearly tied with its Polish and French centre-right partners as the second largest member of the EPP while the PSOE has also been the second-largest delegation in the Party of European Socialists (PES). Similarly, both the PP and the PSOE were the second biggest national delegations of their respective European parties in the previous 6th EP (2004-2009), and they two occupied the third place within the EPP and the PES in the 5th (1999-2004). This stable influence has helped the two big Spanish parties to achieve amendment capacity or office goals in committees, rapporteurships and leadership positions somewhat above the objective weight of Spain. For example, three Spaniards (and four Germans) have been appointed as Presidents of the EP over the last 25 years, as compared with only one Frenchman and no Italian or Briton at all.

²⁴⁰ The PSOE was in office from 2004-11 (and, thus, it suffered the impact of the first recession following the global financial crisis of 2007-08). The PP won elections in late 2011 when Spain was seriously hit by a second recession produced by the debt crisis in the eurozone. Both parties had to implement unpopular austerity measures and structural reforms.

²⁴¹ Daniel Ruiz de Garibay (2014), “The 2014 elections to the European Parliament: Towards truly European elections?”, ARI paper 17/2014, Elcano Royal Institute, Madrid.

account the theoretical indirect election of the President of the Commission – a development with huge potential for the future politicisation of the EU institutions, but that remains distant and uncertain, as the European Council will yet have to agree on this matter.

Several EU member states will host other elections (national, regional or local) on the same day of the EP voting, but this is not the case for Spain. This fact, along with the tough crisis experienced by Spain during the last six years as a debtor member of the eurozone, should supposedly transport us to a scenario in which the debate is fundamentally about EU issues. However, and in a disturbingly similar way to previous European campaigns in Spain, the debate so far has focused on domestic issues. This is a common feature of all 28 member states but it is perhaps more intense in Spain for two reasons. On the one hand, there is a general consensus that membership of the EU and the eurozone confers certain advantages, with consequent little incentive for national parties to mobilise voters to debate the pros and cons of Europe. On the other hand, and somewhat contradictory to this pro-European consensus, Spanish public opinion is distinguished by its remarkable lack of knowledge or interest in EU affairs.²⁴²

As a result of this, all parties prefer to deal with issues on the domestic agenda as the best strategy to reach a good result. The most important cleavage, therefore, will continue to be the traditional division between national left and right, with some space reserved for the always lively centre-periphery debate. Elections will be inward-looking, even dispirited, but without any chance for anti-EU discourse to flourish. Spaniards are certainly no longer naïvely enthusiastic about Brussels or Frankfurt, although they are still consistently in favour of the integration process. The trust on EU institutions has fallen even dramatically but trust in national politicians is still inferior. In contrast to what is happening in Greece, not even the North-South or creditor-debtor gap has become truly important, although some parties (including the Socialist Party) have included a little anti-Merkel narrative in the debate.

The low profile of the campaign also serves to explain the expected turnout, which may well be the lowest in the history of Spanish democracy (around 40%). This trend follows the path of the most recent European elections, in which participation plummeted, not only in Spain, but also in the rest of the EU.²⁴³ It is still to be seen what will finally happen, but what it is already clear is that the so-called ‘historical’ elections will not witness any increase in voter turnout.

The candidates and lists of the Spanish political parties

Five years ago, in 2009, the Popular Party won the EP elections in Spain, with more than 42% of the votes and 24 seats. The PSOE came in second place, receiving 39% of the vote and 23 seats, only one less than the PP. Both parties together achieved 81% of the votes. As said and shown in Table 7, it is sure that neither PP nor PSOE is going to see the same good results as in 2009, but that does not mean that they will not draw an important share of the total (60%-65%).

²⁴² According to Eurobarometer, around 81% of Spaniards say that they are poorly informed about EU affairs (http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb80/eb80_es_es_nat.pdf).

²⁴³ In Spain, turnout has fallen from 63.05% in 1999 to 44.9% in 2009, compared to an average participation of 43% in 2009 in the EU as a whole. See Sonia Piedrafita and Vilde Renman (2014), “The ‘Personalisation’ of the European Elections: A half-hearted attempt to increase turnout and democratic legitimacy?”, EPIN Paper No. 37, European Policy Institutes Network, Brussels, April (www.epin.org).

Table 7. Spanish parties in the 2014 EP elections

Name of the party or coalition	Predicted vote share ^a	Predicted seats	Current seats	European affiliation
People's Party -PP	30.4%-34.9%	19-22	24	European People's Party
Spanish Socialist Workers' Party – PSOE (in Catalonia PSC)	28.4%-31.0%	17-19	23	Party of European Socialists
The Plural Left ^b (Leftist coalition)	8.8%-11.9%	4-7 1	1 1	Party of the European Left European Green Party
Union, Progress and Democracy – UPyD	5.6%-6.3%	3-4	1	To be decided (Non-attached during 2009-2014)
Coalition for Europe ^c (Moderate peripheral nationalists)	4.1%-5.6%	1 1 0-1	1 1 1	Liberals and Democrats (ALDE) European Democratic Party European People's Party
“Left for the Right to Decide” ^d (Catalan independentist coalition)	2.5%-4.4%	1-2	0-1	European Free Alliance
“Peoples Decide” Coalition (Left-wing peripheral nationalists)	1.6%-2.0%	0-1	0-1	European Free Alliance
Others		0-4	0	To be decided

^a The predicted results show all polls published in the first few days of May.

^b The Plural Left coalition includes the “United Left” IU party (which belongs to the Party of the European Left and it may get from four to seven seats according to the polls) and the Catalan junior partner ICV (which belongs to the European Green Party and it would get one seat).

^c The Coalition for Europe includes the Catalan CDC (member of ALDE party and expected to get one seat), Basque PNV party (member of European Democratic Party, one seat) and Catalan UDC (member of the EPP, which would get 0-zero seats).

^d In 2009, most parties now members of the “Left for the Right to Decide” and “Peoples Decide” coalitions were together in a same coalition which got 1 seat.

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

The governing PP has initially paid less attention to the elections than its main rival, although its leader, the Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy, has said that it needs to campaign hard and attract the attention of the public. The head of the PP list enjoys long experience and big expertise on EU affairs (Miguel Arias Cañete has been Minister of Agriculture twice, 2000-04 and 2011-14; MEP during nearly 15 years, from 1986 to 1999 and chair of the EU Affairs Committee in the national parliament from 2008 to 2011). However, he was chosen in the very last minute, following Rajoy's traditional tactic of waiting and waiting until he decides. Mr. Arias Cañete is also constantly mentioned as the most feasible candidate for the post of Spanish Commissioner after autumn 2014, so he will probably not be the leader of the PP delegation in Brussels, leaving that position to his deputy, Esteban González Pons. The rest of the list²⁴⁴ is composed of 52 candidates, 23 of whom have already participated in the previous elections, demonstrating a combination of continuity and renewal. Some of the new candidates in the list also enjoy expertise in European affairs, such as Ramón Luis Valcárcel, former President of the Committee of the Regions.

²⁴⁴ See the PP's list to the European Parliament: www.pp.es/actualidad-noticia/candidatura-pp-las-elecciones-al-parlamento-europeo

The PSOE, the main opposition party, is suffering from both an internal crisis and a crisis of confidence from the electorate. Thus, the Socialists approach these elections as an opportunity to change course and approach the European Parliament in view of the upcoming general elections next year, as reflected in one of the mottos of the campaign: “The change starts from Europe.” The party has chosen Elena Valenciano, a former MEP and currently number two in the party, as its leader in the elections. Given the party’s commitment to gender balance, 27 women and 27 men make up its lists with a balance between young and more experienced candidates. The combination between candidates with a more national or European profile and between new candidates and those who are already MEPs is quite similar in the PP.

Two other significant parties are expected to increase exponentially their share of the vote: the left-wing Plural Left (IU-ICV) and the centrist Union, Progress and Democracy (UPyD). Both share the ambition to break the hegemony of the PP and PSOE, with leaders of their lists having already acquired experience in the European Parliament: Willy Meyer (IU)²⁴⁵ and Francisco Sosa Wagner (UPyD).²⁴⁶ Their ideologies differ, however, as Plural Left MEPs will adhere to the Party of the European Left (the Catalan MEP of ICV will join the European Green Party), while UPyD will try to enter the ALDE liberal group.

Peripheral nationalist parties are also very important in Spain and, according to the polls, the Catalan nationalists may get 2-4 seats and the Basque 1-2. However, since the electoral system for EP elections treats the whole country as a single constituency, their ability to win seats is weaker. The latest polls indicate that the moderate nationalist Coalition for Europe (whose leader is the active MEP Ramón Tremosa²⁴⁷) may secure two to three seats. Two more radical nationalist coalitions whose candidates lack previous political experience on Europe will participate in the elections. Both of them are favoured to obtain some representation: the Catalan “L’Esquerra pel Dret a Decidir”, which ironically translates into English as: “Left for the Right to Decide”) is basically supported by the “Esquerra Republicana” party (ERC)²⁴⁸ and the “The People decide” coalition is led by the Basque EH-Bildu, with the Galician BNG as junior partner.

Finally, another four small candidacies may obtain one seat each: i) the centrist and anti-nationalist “Citizens” party, ii) the green and regionalist coalition “European Spring”, iii) the left-wing movement “We Can” and iv) the conservative VOX, created by dissidents of the PP.

Trying, unsuccessfully and without commitment, to have a truly European campaign

As said, the traditional cleavages in Spain are left-right and centre-periphery, without space for a pro- or anti-EU division, even now after the eurozone crisis. There is no real questioning of the European identity for a country that until the late 1970s suffered a prolonged and isolationist dictatorship. As a consequence of that experience, and also because of the majoritarian features of the Spanish democracy, populism does not enjoy much support.

However, this does not mean that a truly supranational vision exists in Spanish politics. On the contrary, even if some interesting steps have been taken to promote a real European debate and more participation in the elections (also from the civil society²⁴⁹), the campaign has lacked a

²⁴⁵ The complete list of the Plural Left can be found at www.izquierda-unida.es/europeas2014/listacompleta

²⁴⁶ The list of the UPyD list can be found at www.upyd.es/contenidos/ficheros/111741

²⁴⁷ <http://tremosa.cat/>

²⁴⁸ www.esquerra.cat/documents/eu2014-proposta-llistes-barcelona.pdf

²⁴⁹ Initiatives such as CC/Europa (<http://cceuropa.net/>) and Sexy Europe (<http://www.sexyeurope.eu/es/>) can be mentioned in the context of the European elections.

real impulse on EU issues in Spain. The strategies of the parties have responded to the (correct) idea that citizens in Spain usually vote on the basis of national issues.²⁵⁰ Therefore, candidates tend to frame the debates on the EP elections in terms of domestic politics. One example is the little follow-up by the national parties and media of the debates between the top European candidates, Jean-Claude Juncker (EPP candidate for the president the European Commission) and Martin Schulz (PES candidate) on April 9th. Nor was much attention paid to the debates among the candidates of the five main families (EPP, PES, ALDE, Greens and the European Left), which took place on April 28th and May 15th.

Nevertheless, some parties are talking even less about Europe than others. The smallest ones such as VOX, “We can”, or “Citizens” are absolutely focused on national issues and are simply using these elections in order to become better known before the national elections are held next year. Something similar can be said of the peripheral nationalist parties (in Catalonia, Basque Country and Galicia), which take advantage of the elections as a tool for their sub-national ambitions and causes which they intend to internationalise. Notwithstanding this, the moderate Coalition for Europe is formed by three parties with deep roots in pan-European parties (Catalan CDC in ALDE party, Basque PNV in European Democratic Party and Catalan UDC in the EPP).

The centrist Union, Progress and Democracy (UPyD) is more relevant because it is predicted in the polls to obtain at least three seats and it has realised that joining a EP political group is necessary to be more influential (despite its pro-European narrative, the only MEP of UPyD from 2009 to 2014 was not attached to any EP political group). The party has a supranational federal platform²⁵¹ and highlights the necessity of delegating more competences from the member states to Brussels in order to advance towards a real political union. This discourse mirrors its federalist anti-nationalist position in Spain, but this is paradoxically a reason why it is going to be difficult to upgrade its EU position within the European centrist family. Its goal now is to join the liberal and democrat ALDE alliance but this may be obstructed by the fact that Catalan and Basque nationalists, hostile to UPyD, also belong to that group.

Regarding United Left, the main partner of the Plural Left coalition (with the Catalan ICV, which is part of the European Greens), it must be said that it is expected to become the third party on the ballot. This candidature is undoubtedly the more critical towards the current EU, but it is still not widely considered to be eurosceptic or europhobe. Although it is a member of the European Left Party and supports Alexis Tsipras as candidate for the European Commission, it is also more inclined to talk about national issues than European matters.

The two mainstream parties tend to think more in European terms, but they do not always communicate that to the public. A debate between the heads of their lists (Arias Cañete and Elena Valenciano) took place on May 15th but domestic issues dominated the discussion. In the case of the Popular Party, it may be worth mentioning the practical non-existence of its European candidate to become President of the Commission in the campaign: Jean Claude Juncker will spend only one day in Spain, as compared to two in Portugal and six in Germany.²⁵² The PP is much more focused on underlining the idea of the economic recovery, claiming that Spain is now better than when they arrived to office in late 2011, highlighting their triumph and waving the flag of fear in case the Socialists return to power. Actually, given that all polls predict a tight result between the PP and the Socialists, it seems more interested in attacking the PSOE than in making European proposals.

²⁵⁰ As a matter of fact, in the last four elections to the EP, between 45 and 60% of the voters have decided their vote taking into account issues related to Spain rather than the EU: <http://politikon.es/2014/03/20/politizar-europa-buena-suerte/>

²⁵¹ See their programme for the elections: [www.upyd.es/contenidos/noticias/508/112233-Programa de UPyD para las Elecciones al Parlamento Europeo 2014](http://www.upyd.es/contenidos/noticias/508/112233-Programa-de-UPyD-para-las-Elecciones-al-Parlamento-Europeo-2014)

²⁵² www.elboletin.com/internacional/97331/juncker-ignora-rajoy-espana.html

Last but not least, the PSOE is paradoxically alternating both a national discourse and a European one. The leader of the party in these elections, Elena Valenciano, does not hesitate to reply or attack her PP opponent, and she insists on bringing national issues such as abortion to a European level. The party considers these elections as the first step to a change in the national government in the elections of 2015. On the other hand, the Socialists are making a noteworthy effort to communicate the importance of the elections and to talk openly about EU issues such as immigration, social rights, a European minimum wage or the need to fight against unemployment and poverty.

The electoral programmes and the closeness of Spanish parties to their EU affiliation

Although there is a shared view in all Spanish parties that the country's economic policy should shift from austerity to stimulus measures, there is a difference between the PP, which considers that sacrifice was necessary, and the left-wing parties, which reject this past. That is the reason why the PP is underlining that what is now at stake is the future (see slogans at Table 8). Before presenting the electoral programme,²⁵³ the party opened an initiative to encourage its voters to participate in its drafting.²⁵⁴ Nevertheless, and similar to the political manifesto of the EPP at European level,²⁵⁵ the programme is short and vague. The PP is now campaigning with two main axes: i) The EU is a safe place right now because of the austerity measures taken in all these years (the best evidence of support for these measures was the election of Mr Juncker, former President of the Eurogroup, as the candidate of the EPP to be President of the European Commission), and ii) Spain is much better now than before and the crisis is starting to come to an end, so voters should not allow the Socialists to return to power and ruin it.

For its part, the Spanish Social Democrat Party, the PSOE, finds itself very comfortable not only with the manifesto²⁵⁶ of its political alliance, the Party of European Socialists (or PES), but also with Martin Schulz as the candidate for President of the European Commission. Mr. Schulz has proved to be an energetic President of the European Parliament and now tries to convince voters of the necessity of a change in the Commission. Schulz was already in Spain last March 30th for the campaign launch of PSOE²⁵⁷ and will be again on May 11th and May 21st.²⁵⁸ The party has launched a website²⁵⁹ with detailed information about the PES manifesto and the political statement²⁶⁰ of the party, in line with all 10 proposals of the manifesto: 1) Jobs first; 2) Relaunch the economy; 3) Putting the financial sector at the service of the citizens and real economy; 4) Social Europe; 5) Union of equality and women's rights; 6) Union of diversity; 7) A safe and healthy life for all; 8) More democratisation and participation; 9) Green Europe; and 10) Promoting Europe's influence in the world.

²⁵³ www.pp.es/sites/default/files/documentos/programa_electoral_europeas_2014.pdf

²⁵⁴ www.pp.es/en140

²⁵⁵ www.epin.org/new/files/EPP-Manifesto.pdf

²⁵⁶ www.epin.org/new/files/pes_manifesto-adopted_by_the_pes_election_congress_en.pdf

²⁵⁷ www.martin-schulz.eu/en/#campaign

²⁵⁸ www.lavanguardia.com/politica/20140418/54405922342/martin-schulz-apoyara-al-psc-en-barcelona-cuatro-dias-antes-de-las-europeas.html

²⁵⁹ <http://europeas2014.psoe.es/inicio>

²⁶⁰ <http://europeas2014.psoe.es/doc/DeclaracionPolitica.pdf>

Table 8. Political slogans

Spanish party or coalition	Political slogan
People's Party –PP	<i>“What is at stake is the future”</i>
Socialist Party – PSOE	<i>“You move Europe”</i> <i>(“Let's change Europe, let's stop Rajoy” in Catalonia)</i>
Plural Left	<i>“Power of the People”</i> <i>(“Our rights, our dignity” in Catalonia)</i>
Union, Progress and Democracy – UPyD	<i>“Union makes strength”</i>

As for the third most important group in the European Parliament, the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe²⁶¹ (or ALDE) is so far only formed in Spain by nationalists: Catalan (CDC, within the ALDE party) and Basque (PNV, within the European Democratic Party). While CDC is a more centrist and liberal party, PNV is more conservative and more inclined to social issues. Nevertheless, both parties aspire to the statehood of Catalonia and the Basque Country.

The Greens have also a common manifesto for all its members,²⁶² whose most important actions are the creation of a more democratic and green European Union, a different role in the world for the EU and the necessity of promoting health and sustainability. ICV (the junior partner of Plural Left) and the green-regionalist “European Spring” coalition are the Spanish members of the alliance and fully subscribe to the manifesto. The Greens will probably form a political group in the EP with the regionalist and nationalist European Free Alliance, which claims in its manifesto²⁶³ that “it's time for self-determination for all the peoples of Europe”, and whose strongest Spanish party is the Republican Left of Catalonia (the main partner of the “Left for the Right to Decide” coalition).

The Party of the European Left, which has chosen the Greek opposition leader Alexis Tsipras as its candidate for European Commission President, is polling between the third and fourth position at European level. If it finally reaches the third position, it will probably have an important meaning for the upcoming period, pushing for their basic political priorities: a democratic reorganisation of Europe, the end to austerity, to set in motion the ecological transformation of production and to reform the European immigration framework.²⁶⁴ The United Left, the representative party in Spain of the Party of the European Left, claims “the crisis is the result of the policies applied in the last years”, notably neoliberal. Its programme²⁶⁵ is very critical of both the EPP and the PES, which are considered by United Left as the two sides of the same coin. The Spanish version of that manifesto keeps the same priorities, but seen from a more national perspective.

And finally, no Spanish parties are members of the Alliance of European Conservatives and Reformists. As said before, the eurosceptic movement has no roots in Spain.

²⁶¹ See manifesto at www.aldeparty.eu/sites/eldr/files/news/10204/2014_alde_party_manifesto.pdf

²⁶² <http://europeangreens.eu/content/egp-manifesto>

²⁶³ See www.e-f-a.org/fileadmin/user_upload/documents/EFA_3263_manifesto_ENG_230114.pdf

²⁶⁴ <http://european-left.org/positions/news-archive/programatic-declaration-alexis-tsipras-my-candidacy-mandate-hope-and-change>

²⁶⁵ www.izquierda-unida.es/sites/default/files/doc/Programa_Europeas2014.pdf

Forecast for the elections

One of the main problems in strengthening the future legitimacy of the European Parliament is the increasingly low turnout in the elections. For that reason, even if the EP can state that it represents the interests of all European citizens as the only directly elected EU institution, it may be in a weak position vis-à-vis the EU Council. The member states can claim that national elections, from which they derive their political legitimacy, attract a much higher rate of participation. It does not seem that the results will improve this time round either, and polls on the likely turnout in Spain are worrying. According to the latest poll for Metroscopia, the turnout in Spain will reach only 43%,²⁶⁶ which is below the 45% in 2009, a poor figure but still above the average of the European Union.

Table 9. The evolution of turnout in the Spanish EP elections

1989	1994	1999	2004	2009	Predicted 2014
54.7%	59.1%	63.1%	45.1%	44.9%	40%-43%

Regarding the general results, a close race is expected between the governing PP (which also won the previous EP elections in 2009) and the PSOE. In any event, the average polls shown in Table 1 and the latest predictions by Pollwatch²⁶⁷ indicate a scenario with a small victory for PP, winning 19 seats for the EP (PSOE 17) and 32% of the share (PSOE almost 30%). With this result, the PP would be the second-largest party in the future EPP group (after the German CDU/CSU and ahead of French, Polish and Italian mainstream centre-right parties), while the PSOE would be the fourth in the Social Democrat S&D group if the PES joins again with the Italian democrats (the fourth after the German Social Democrats, the Italian democrats and the British Labour but well ahead of the governing French “Parti socialiste”). The EPP and the Socialists are nearly tied with a prediction of 210-220 MEPs each.

Pollwatch also foresees a very good result for the leftists of the European United Left - Nordic Green Left all around Europe, which may increase their number of seats from 35 to 51. Latest polls suggest that the Spanish party of the coalition, United Left, would be –with 6 MEPs – the third most important in the group, only behind the Germans of “Die Linke” and Greeks of “Syriza”.

As noted above, the centrist Union, Progress and Democracy (UPyD) is also slated to make substantial gains, from one MEP seat to three or four, gaining some of the seats lost by the PP and PSOE. UPyD would like to join a political group in the EP and is looking to ALDE (the future third political group according to Pollwatch) as the logical choice. However, as already noted, there are some difficulties in joining that group. ALDE group hosts Catalan and Basque nationalist parties, while UPyD is known for its fierce opposition to peripheral nationalism and, therefore, it is complicated to think of a scenario in which the three parties would co-habitate.

The other parties that are likely to reach representation in the EP are probably the European Free Alliance (the Catalan Republican Left or the Basque EH-Bildu), which operates together with the European Green Party (where Catalan ICV, the junior partner of United Left in the same coalition, will have one seat). The last parties that may reach representation are “Citizens”, the coalition “European Spring”, “We can” party and “Vox”.

The “Citizens” party has its roots in Catalonia (where some polls give them third place at the moment, even better than PP and PSOE), but it is now growing faster in the rest of the country.

²⁶⁶ http://politica.elpais.com/politica/2014/04/25/actualidad/1398454628_995709.html

²⁶⁷ www.electio2014.eu/pollsandscenarios/polls

They have a clear position against the independence of Catalonia from Spain and call themselves progressives, but far from the traditional left-right cleavage. They still haven't decided whether they are going to be part of one political group or another, but they claim that they will work for the creation of the United States of Europe, increased transparency of the institutions and positioning the citizen at the centre of the European project.²⁶⁸

The “European Spring” coalition is currently polling about 3% of the votes and may reach thus one MEP. This coalition wants to “rescue people and not banks” and end with the “austericide”. At the same time, they stand for²⁶⁹ fostering democracy and sustainability. In case they win the seat, they would join the Green party. The other options such as VOX (rightist party, led by Alejo Vidal Quadras, former PP member and still Vice President of the EP) or “We Can” (a leftist party, led by Pablo Iglesias, a lecturer in the Spanish University and current TV star) may have enough support to enter the European Parliament as well, but they do not have any European links.

To sum up, support for the two main Spanish parties is losing ground. Despite that fact that both major parties are going to be the first and second in the elections, they are surely going to gain much less support than in 2009, with a joint share of around 60-65%, whereas five years ago it was more than 80%. Nevertheless, the Spanish party system seems quite resilient since both PP and PSOE are still far away from their competitors. Furthermore, it cannot be argued this time that the result will be artificially favouring a two-party system as a result of the majoritarian bias of the Spanish electoral law. Ultimately, in elections to the EP there is only a single constituency (compared to 52 in the general elections) and no legal threshold, which increases the proportionality of the system favouring smaller parties.

Conclusions

The imminent elections to the EP have been characterised as being significantly different from previous rounds. Some analysts have even called them “historical”. They are the first to be held after the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, which empowers the Parliament vis-à-vis not only legislation but also the appointment of the President of the Commission after the most important parliamentary groups have nominated their candidates to the position. Nevertheless, it seems highly unlikely that this innovation will result in increased participation by the citizens or spawn a campaign that focuses on truly European rather than domestic issues.

The last Eurobarometer highlighted the deep lack of knowledge about and interest on the part of EU citizens in what the European Union does and how it affects people's daily lives. In Spain, the results are even worse than in the EU as a whole. That is reflected in the European campaign of the parties, which promote a debate in domestic terms, and not in European ones. First, the ruling PP has envisaged the elections as a kind of plebiscite to endorse the attempts of Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy to show that macroeconomic improvement will soon be reflected in the day-to-day lives of Spain's citizens. Secondly, the PSOE has opposed the austerity policies of the last two-and-a-half years and, thus, looks on the elections, in fact, as an opportunity to obtain a first ballot before the national elections to be held in 2015. For their part, the smaller parties (especially the left-wing coalition IU-ICV and the centrist UPyD, but also other minor candidatures) have primarily adopted an approach of assigning shared responsibility to PSOE and the PP for the gloomy economic and political situation of Spain. Also at the regional level, and most notably in Catalonia where centrifugal tensions run high owing to the crisis, the peripheral nationalists regard these elections as a test for their own efforts to revisit profoundly

²⁶⁸ <http://europa-cs.org/>

²⁶⁹ <http://primaveraeuropea.eu/manifesto>

the current relationship with the centre and even to call for an independence referendum in the near future.

After May, the levels of support for the major parties will decrease and it will be more difficult to consider Spain as an example of the two-party system. But even if the worst-case scenario of the opinion polls materialises, PP and PSOE will retain at least 60% of the votes (and the most accurate projections suggest up to 65%). Thus, we will not witness a dramatic shift towards a new multi-party system. It is true that several smaller parties will significantly improve their share of the vote and the number of seats but much less than other third countries, such as Le Pen's National Front in France or Nigel Farage's UKIP in the United Kingdom, which might even snatch victory from the mainstream parties. In notable contrast with the likely outcome in other EU member states, eurosceptic or europhobe parties will not gain any seats in the Spanish delegation to the EP. In short, Spain will not experience dramatic changes in its political landscape this time round.