

Between National Interests and Ideology – Spain’s Latin American Policy from Aznar to Zapatero

When Venezuela’s president, Hugo Chávez, paid an official visit to Madrid in November 2004, he declared that he had ‘never before been welcomed like this in Spain’. And the left-wing populist’s joy is not the only sign of the radical change which is taking place in Spain’s policy vis-à-vis Latin America. Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero interprets his term of office as a mandate to do everything in a way much different from that of his predecessor, José María Aznar. This applies especially to relations with Latin America. The 17th Ibero-American summit which will take place in Santiago de Chile in November 2007 will revolve around a shift to the left – both in Latin America and in Spain’s foreign policy.

The term *Ibero-America* the Spanish like to use points towards an identity shared between the countries of the Iberian peninsula and the Spanish and Portuguese-speaking countries in Central and South America, an identity grown through varied (colonial) historical, cultural, economic, political, and personal bonds. Even Francisco Franco tried to escape from the international isolation of his dictatorship the Ibero-American way, endeavouring to ascribe to his ‘national catholic’ Spain the role of a natural bridge between Latin America and Europe. During the years of its democratisation process, the so-called ‘transición’, Spain turned towards Europe with all its might. And with its accession to the European Community in 1986, the country no longer hovered between Europe and Latin America but had entirely become part of the latter. Yet Spain continued to hold on to its Ibero-American identity.

However, it was not before José María Aznar took over the government in 1996 that a Spanish Latin American policy began to emerge that was actually characterised by political interaction between these identities. During Mr Aznar’s term of office, Spain’s and Europe’s relations with Latin America were deepened and amplified, and a European policy vis-à-vis Latin America developed. One of Mr Aznar’s greatest successes in this respect was that shortly after his assumption of office in 1996, he largely succeeded in raising the position of Spain’s new government towards Fidel Castro’s dictatorship in Cuba to the European level. The ‘common stand’ of the EU with its special emphasis on democracy and human rights from then on became the core of Europe’s common policy vis-à-vis Cuba. Moreover, economic relations between Spain and Latin America intensified enormously, and Ibero-American policy was institutionalised. The most visible sign of the latter is the formation of the Ibero-American Secretariat General which took up its work in Madrid in 2005.

The other face of Mr Aznar’s Latin American policy is the close transatlantic alliance he made the crown jewel of his foreign policy, especially after September 9, 2001. It was then that another variable was added to Spain’s Latin American policy: promoting relations between Madrid and Washington. Thus, Mr Aznar vainly attempted to prompt Chile and Mexico to agree to a UN resolution in the UN Security Council which justified the war in Iraq. The fact that Spain supported Washington considerably impaired Spain’s image as Latin America’s potential partner and advocate in the international community of states, thus driving a wedge into Ibero-American relations.

Elected in the face of the terrorist attacks in Madrid on March 11, 2004, the socialist government of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero is trying to implement an approach to Latin America which is guided by a less narrow and realistic interpretation of the national interest, offsetting it with an idealistic concept of ‘global solidarity’. Instead of trying to distinguish itself as an Ibero-American hegemon, Mr Zapatero’s Spain sees itself as an equal partner with a genuine interest in the well-being and the problems of the region. In this context, the new government turns its attention especially to social subjects such as poverty alleviation or the promotion of women.

What is much more controversial than this increased social orientation of Spain's Latin American policy is the ideological component that has found its way into it. This ideological component becomes apparent in, among other things, a questionable and uncritical rapprochement with regimes such as Venezuela or Bolivia, whose democratic quality appears more and more questionable.

What is especially controversial, however, is Mr Zapatero's 180-degree turn in his policy vis-à-vis Cuba. Contrary to the EU directive, foreign minister Miguel Ángel Moratinos travelled to Cuba in April 2007 without including the democratic opposition in his visiting schedule. Moreover, he arranged a bilateral dialogue on human rights with the Castro dictatorship without any prior international consultation, and he did not protest when Cuba's foreign minister denied in his presence that people were imprisoned in Cuba because of their political views. And when a bilateral cooperation treaty was signed in September 2007, Cuba even regained its status as an official partner of Spain's development cooperation after a lapse of four years.

The debate about Cuba also affects Spain's domestic policy. Spain's rapprochement with the Castro state meets a classical demand of the left and might mollify them towards the rather liberal economic and political course of the PSOE government. For this purpose, the head of government even takes fierce criticism from the conservative national party and strained bilateral relations with the USA in his stride.

Just as Mr Aznar contributed towards a crisis in the EU's common foreign and security policy by showing his unwillingness to support a pan-European attitude in the question of the war in Iraq, Mr Zapatero's and Mr Moratino's political capers in Latin America alienate many international partners. In some of the questions regarding Ibero-America, Mr Zapatero has clearly moved away from a position with majority appeal in the EU, now and then jeopardising Spain's role as a European point of reference for Latin America.