

[Print Web Page](#)

The Aznar government and the debate on the future of the European Union

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What are the factors that determine the attitude of the Spanish authorities towards the debate on the future of the European Union? What type of EU would the Aznar government like to see emerging from the European Convention some time in 2003 and from the subsequent Intergovernmental Conference a year later? Surprisingly, these questions are rarely addressed in the public domain, which may explain why they are not easily answered.

The difficulty in identifying the priorities of the current Spanish government with regard to the future of the EU is partly due to the fact that Aznar has never been prone to idle speculation about the future. As leader of the opposition, he often expressed irritation and concern at the seemingly unbridgeable gap between EU rhetoric and practice, arguing forcefully that this could only result in popular disaffection. What is more, in the early 1990s he frequently berated his predecessor, Felipe González, for paying far more attention to developments in the EU than to growing economic and political difficulties at home, an accusation he has been careful to avoid once in office. In addition, conservative politicians are perhaps generally reluctant to indulge in abstract theoretical debate, and Aznar greatly admires the pragmatic, empirical approach to political life that is often associated with certain British traditions, as he recently admitted in a lecture delivered at St. Antony's College, Oxford. This attitude is clearly reflected in the section of the official Spanish presidency programme dedicated to the Convention, which boldly states that "abstract theoretical debates taken up with the definition of artificial archetypes must be avoided, and the need to meet citizens' concerns must constantly be borne in mind".

If the Aznar government has not been more involved in the debate about the future of Europe, it is also partly due to the widely held view that Spain has done very well in the EU in recent years, and is therefore reluctant to countenance major changes to the status quo. From an official Spanish government perspective, defence of the status quo is above all synonymous with the need to guarantee Madrid's ability to play a significant role in EU affairs, and hence to uphold the institutional settlement secured by González at Ioannina in 1994 and confirmed by Aznar at Nice in 2000. The fact that in an enlarged EU Spain, with a population of only 40 million, will have 27 weighted votes in Council, only two short of the 29 votes allocated to France, Italy and the United Kingdom, which have populations of 57-59 million, goes a long way to explaining Aznar's satisfaction with the outcome of the Nice Council, even if the settlement reached also entailed sacrificing more MEPs (fourteen) than any other member state. At the risk of over-simplification, it is possible to argue that in the eyes of the current Spanish government the EU is essentially about four things: i) the single market and its natural corollary, the single currency; ii) the principle of social and economic cohesion; iii) an area for freedom, security and justice; iv) and the possibility of playing a significant role in the world. Although the importance attributed to each of these spheres has varied somewhat over time, it has remained essentially unchanged since Spain's accession to the EC in 1985. The Spanish presidency slogan, "más Europa" (more Europe) should thus be understood primarily in terms of the EU's ability to make significant progress in these four areas.

As far as the first sphere is concerned, Madrid governments have always been enthusiastic supporters of both the single market and the single currency. Under González, these twin goals were a catalyst for domestic socioeconomic reform and modernization; under Aznar, they have become key instruments in the on-going struggle to achieve greater competitiveness, credibility and self-discipline. Admittedly, the emphasis on the liberalization of the Spanish economy, which has made Aznar a leading champion of the Lisbon programme, could be construed as being an ideologically-motivated departure, but is perhaps best attributed to a widely-felt need to respond to the challenges of globalization and to close the ever-widening innovation gap with the United States.

Secondly, Spain has always held the view that cohesion is an integral part of the *acquis communautaire*. From a Spanish perspective, cohesion is more than just the name of an important fund, it is a principle –a philosophy, even-which should inform all EU policies to take into account the chasm that continues to exist between wealthier and poorer member states. Although the Spanish economy has been radically transformed since the country's accession to the EU in 1986, in 2001 its GDP was still only 83% of the EU-15 average. The Aznar government acknowledges that nothing will be the same after enlargement, but refuses to accept that it be undertaken at the expense of current cohesion policies. From Madrid's perspective, it is unrealistic to expect the next enlargement to result in no additional cost, and it is only fitting that the wealthier member states (some of which were the most enthusiastic proponents of enlargement in the first place, and whose economies will benefit from it most) should bear their full share of the extra burden.

In private, government officials acknowledge that, since they are not in a position to block enlargement, there is no point in opposing it in public. This might in any case prompt certain net contributors to the EU budget to blame the cohesion countries for lack of progress on this front, while at the same time antagonising candidate countries who might otherwise become valuable allies in the not too distant future. This partly explains why these same officials never tire of pointing out that enlargement is a popular cause in Spain; indeed according to Eurobarometer number 56, published in April 2002, 61% of those polled are in favour, while only 18% are against. However, they conveniently forget to add that this may be because, according to the same source, of all EU citizens, Spaniards feel amongst the most ill informed about enlargement.

The Aznar government also attaches special importance to the development of the EU as an area of freedom,

security and justice. In the 1990s, this concern was largely an expression of the growing need to Europeanize the on-going struggle against the terrorist organisation ETA. In more recent years, the desire to equip the EU with new instruments, policies and decision-making procedures in this field has also been fuelled by the need to respond to the new challenges posed by massive immigration flows, most notably (but not exclusively) across the Straights of Gibraltar. In the wake of the recent elections in France and the Netherlands, the Madrid government has become increasingly determined to be seen to be taking action on this front, and has spoken in favour of the EU policing its external frontiers and of making development aid conditional on a commitment to curbing illegal emigration from recipient countries. Most recently, Aznar has suggested that court sentences passed in one member state should be enforceable in others, adding that this type of measure might do more to convince citizens of the relevance of the EU to their daily lives than would apparently more spectacular decisions such as the inclusion of the Charter of Fundamental Rights in a future constitutional treaty, a goal which his government also supports.

Finally, Spain has also traditionally been a keen supporter of the Common Foreign and Security Policy, and in recent years, it has been strongly in favour of developing a European Security and Defence Policy. (According to recent polls, maintaining peace and security in Europe tops Spaniards' list of priorities for EU action). As far as CFSP is concerned, Madrid's position has generally been prudent, advocating the establishment of a permanent organ for planning and analysis, its centralisation in the figure of the secretary general of the Council, and the maintenance of unanimity for decision-making while allowing for the introduction of constructive abstention. Although Aznar probably attaches even greater importance to the transatlantic relationship than his predecessor did, he is nevertheless convinced of the need to upgrade Europe's defence capabilities, even if this has unpalatable budgetary implications. Indeed Spain's support for the ESDP could be seen as an acknowledgement of the fact that an increase in defence expenditure would only be politically viable if couched in terms of Spain's European commitment.

How do these attitudes and concerns condition the government's attitude to the debate currently unfolding in the European Convention? In private Aznar has often expressed the view that it is intellectually and politically dishonest to talk about a federal Europe unless one is seriously thinking of increasing the EU's budget well beyond the current ceiling of 1.27% of member states' GDP, which would not appear to be the case. In keeping with this attitude, he has claimed on several occasions that it is immaterial how we label the outcome of the Convention's labours, given that the existing treaties already have constitutional implications for member states. (According to the latest Eurobarometer, 64% of Spaniards are in favour and 9% are against a European Constitution, a level of support that is somewhat below the EU-15 average).

Aznar has made no secret of the fact that in his view the EU is, and should remain, a Union of nation states. Some critics have argued that since he came to office in 1996 the Madrid view of European integration has become more intergovernmentalist and less supranationalist, a shift that supposedly explains an alleged loss of influence in Brussels. Whether or not this is actually the case, it is interesting to note that, according to the latest Eurobarometer, 41% of Spaniards are in favour of the enlarged EU adopting decisions by unanimity (as opposed to an EU-15 average of 39%), while 42% favour majority voting (somewhat lower than the EU-15 average of 46%).

Admittedly, the prime minister has been very assertive in his defence of national interest, but this is by no means new to Spanish policy and a systematic comparison of Madrid's tactics at the Edinburgh (1992) and Berlin (1999) councils would no doubt reveal a remarkable degree of continuity. More controversially, perhaps, some critics have claimed that Aznar is more of a Spanish nationalist than González, an instinct that is supposedly reflected in his attitude towards European integration. This is a highly complex issue, which cannot be explored fully here. Nevertheless, it is probably true to say that while González and his party tended to see Spain as a 'Nation of nations', Aznar and his followers are happier with the concept of a single yet plural (in other words, multilingual and culturally diverse) Spanish Nation, though they have recently been paying lip-service to the notion of 'constitutional patriotism'. (Interestingly, according to the latest Eurobarometer there has been a sharp increase in the proportion of Spaniards who only identify with their own nationality over the past two years, which currently stands at 38%, though 56% still see themselves as both Spanish and European. According to this source, 91% of Spaniards are proud of their national identity, and 72% also express pride in being European). Be this as it may, in practice González and Aznar have been similarly reluctant to allow Spain's regions to play a significant role in the formulation of their European policy, even though they both paid lip service to this cause (in 1993 and 1996, respectively) when they needed the parliamentary support of certain parties from the regions in order to remain in office.

Inevitably, centre-periphery relations have had a major impact on Aznar's thinking about the Laeken mandate to the Convention with regard to the clarification of competences, and in particular, the role of the regions. The Madrid government was one of the first to speak out against a rigid catalogue of competences, arguing that it would not be in tune with the more 'flexible' spirit of the Spanish constitution, and was also adamant that national legislation be respected at all cost. In any case, in recent weeks the Convention has moved away from the debate over a possible catalogue of responsibilities, which has been replaced by a discussion of how best to enforce the subsidiarity principle, a trend which clearly favours the official Spanish position.

Another major reason for the Madrid government's cautious approach to the debate on the future of the EU is that it is reasonably content with the existing institutional balance. (Curiously, according to the latest Eurobarometer Spain is the only EU member state in which the European Parliament, the Commission and the Council of Ministers –in that order– elicit similar levels of trust from citizens). To this one must add the by-now traditional tendency of Spanish governments to see themselves as champions of the Community method. Nonetheless, in his Oxford speech Aznar was unusually critical of the current rotating presidency of the Council, and joined Chirac and Blair in advocating the election of a 'President of the Union' from the ranks of former heads of state and government, who would hold office for a longer period, be it two and a half or five years. (Just in case, he quickly added that he did not have a particular candidate in mind, not even his friend Blair). A rotating presidential team consisting of five or six serving heads of government, who would chair the various Council formations, would in turn assist this 'President of the Union'. In theory, the problems posed by the twice-yearly rotation would thus be resolved not only for EU summits but also for all Council formations. More daringly, perhaps, he also suggested that the President should be

able to dissolve the European Parliament at the initiative of the Commission, though without elaborating any further. Some critics have seen the Chirac-Blair-Aznar proposal as a barely-disguised attempt to transform the latter into a Council secretariat, but in Spain, at least, there is still a very broad consensus in favour of a strong, credible Commission, which the prime minister does not intend to question. As far as the European Parliament is concerned, in his Oxford speech Aznar recalled the low turnouts generally recorded in European elections, and urged the Convention to recognise that citizens identify more readily with national representatives. This is fully in keeping with the Spanish prime minister's long-standing concern about the undermining of national parliaments, which he would like to see addressed by introducing a Charter of National Parliaments and a Code of Conduct that would guarantee their full participation in the European political process.

Traditionally, Madrid governments did not have to worry unduly about public opinion when it came to formulating their European policy, a situation that was probably due to a combination of the non-controversial nature of EU membership and consistently low levels of perceived knowledge about the European project. Nevertheless, the current government believes it has been successful in bringing its policies more in line with the electorate's preferences. It is therefore interesting to observe that, while remaining strongly in favour of EU membership, the latest polls detect that Spaniards are now less likely to want the EU to play a more important role in their daily lives in future than they were two years ago, and much more likely to wish things to remain as they are. This is yet another reason, and hardly the least important, why it is safe to assume the Aznar government will continue to support a prudent, pragmatic approach to European integration in the months and years to come.

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[Top▲](#)