



The Social Situation in Spain and the Spanish Protest Movement

The EU Needs Dialogue and Immediate Corrective Action

By Ruth Simsa
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Policy Recommendations

1. Immediate measures on national and EU-level for an improvement of the social situation in Spain which is not in accordance with fundamental EU values;
2. Setting out a European strategy for strengthening civil society aimed at protecting civil rights, inclusion of young people and countering extremist tendencies;
3. Develop and implement European standards concerning evictions.

Abstract

The severe economic crisis in Spain and other southern EU-countries is caused – amongst other factors – by the neoliberal economic and social politics of the EU and its Member States. Insufficient financial market regulations as well as general trends of privatisation and the reduction of public engagement for education, health and social services in connection with the short-sighted austerity politics have led to poverty and exclusion, affecting especially young people. Thus, there are tendencies of rejection of the EU, of anger towards EU-institutions and politicians and of disinterest in political institutions in many southern

EU-countries. At the same time, the Spanish civil society has been strengthened massively since the beginning of the protest movement in 2011. Besides increased civil society activism and the formation of new institutions, new parties are emerging in connection with the movement both at national and at municipal level. Both developments can be a chance for the EU: To avoid losing support from young Europeans, besides immediate measures for improvement of the social situation especially of young people, Europe has to guarantee civil and social rights in Spain and start intensive dialogue with civil society actors.



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The Social Situation in Spain: Poverty, Unemployment and Exclusion

The financial crisis and liquidity crunch hit Spain in 2007 after a decade of a building boom, which was fuelled by both foreign and Spanish speculation. The real estate bubble burst led to insolvencies, stagnated economic growth, a rise in unemployment and substantial public payments for banks and savings banks. Apart from the latter, due to the pressure of austerity-politics, governments have generally downsized spending in the public sector which results in cuts in the social, welfare and education systems. This policy has led to a widespread social and political crisis, affecting individual citizens, political accountability, and the general stability of society (Banyuls & Recio, 2012; Fioramonti & Thümler, 2013).

The social situation is dramatic. The general unemployment rate stands at 26,38 percent¹, youth unemployment at 53,8 percent, the second highest in Europe². Well educated young adults are leaving the country, since 2012 more than 1 million had to emigrate. „We do not go voluntarily, they throw us out“, is their slogan. Those who have a job are often confronted with precarious working conditions which do not allow them to build up their own existence. Thus, already in 2011, almost 70 percent of people between the ages of 18 and 34 were living with their parents or grandparents (Rodríguez San Julián, 2012).

1) 2013, <http://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/17327/umfrage/arbeitslosenquote-in-spanien/>

2) July 2014, <http://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/74795/umfrage/jugendarbeitslosigkeit-in-europa/>

About 25 percent of Spanish people live at or below the poverty line³. This poverty often affects the most basic needs: People suffer from hunger, cannot pay for heating or energy. Poverty of children has risen significantly. 37 percent of all families with children live in precarious situations (González-Bueno, Bello, & Arias, 2013) about 2 million children suffer from malnutrition⁴.

Another pressing topic is evictions. Since 2007 there were 570.000 evictions, with the number increasing over time⁵. Two aspects intensify problems of housing. First, Spain lacks any significant social housing and comparatively few people live in rented flats, so people depend to a high degree on housing property. Second, different to other European countries, according to Spanish law bank repossession is not automatically considered as discharging the secured debt. Thus, due to the price decline of real estate, most evicted people are still not debt-free. (Hughes, 2011)

3) That means the percentage of persons living with less than 50 percent of median equivalised household income, that was 11.123.- per year in 2013. http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=ilc_di08&lang=de

4) http://www.lasexta.com/programas/mas-vale-tarde/noticias/cerca-dos-millones-ninos-pasan-hambre-espana_2013080700305.html

5) <http://afectadosporlahipototeca.com/2014/10/10/los-datos-del-cgpj-confirman-que-siguen-aumentando-los-desahucios-en-espana/>



The Social Movement in Spain: The Indignados of 15M

The Spanish movement was born with a big and internationally widely perceived demonstration on 15th of May 2011 in Madrid and other Spanish cities, it is thus called 15M, likewise it is called the movement of the Indignados, the outraged. It was established first through demonstrations and city square occupations, later by other forms of political expression, like blocking evictions for mortgage foreclosures, citizen-based legislative initiatives, social centres in occupied houses or privately organized handing out food rations to malnourished people. The movement aimed at changes in the national political agenda, such as more transparency and participation, fights against corruption as well as denouncing those responsible for the economic and political crisis (Feenstra & Keane, 2014). The movement is still very active, all over Spain we find a very dense net of regionally or thematically formed initiatives, working- or protest-groups. Many of them – including a considerable number of only recently founded ones - experienced strong growth over the last year. Besides groups that had been politically active before, it consists of young people who in many cases have mobilised themselves for the first time in an act of protest. (Taibo, 2013, p. 156).

Europe might loose it's Youth: Distance, Frustration and Anger

Since the rise of 15M, the economic crisis, social problems, cuts, and corruption are daily items on the political agenda. Further, the movement has led to changes of attitudes: Whereas before 15M poverty and unemployment were mostly seen as individual failure and thus caused shame, communitarisation-processes that followed emphasized the structural problems behind

individual fates. Many people were politicized and informed of economic and political developments. This had a very negative effect on the way citizens view the core representative institutions (Castañeda, 2012) – „they do not represent us“ was one of the main slogans. Quantitative data show a steady discrediting of the political class and major parties since 2009⁶, our own qualitative data show massive frustration and anger, both with national and EU-institutions. Concerning EU-institutions, there is much disappointment because many people have the impression, that “Europe” is dominated by the interests of powerful memberstates – mainly Germany – and private business companies, and that there is not much attention given to the social situation in Spain. When talking about Europe, people do often not distinguish specific European institutions but express their general anger of being “betrayed”, “left alone” or “sold to business interests”. Especially young people discharge national and European political institutions as „mafia“, as „criminals without weapons“ or as „cast, which just is maintaining personal advantages“.

The response of the Spanish authorities to the new wave of mobilisation has been to strengthen public order and introduce various forms of punishments for activists (García, 2013) which were sharpened in December 2014 by the “Protection of Public Safety-Bill”. EU institutions so far have widely neglected activism and its goals as well as restrictions of civil rights. This fuelled tendencies of rejection of the EU and further loss of confidence in its institutions.

Nevertheless, contrary to other EU-countries this disaffection and rejection of traditional institutions has yet not lead to right wing populism or political inactivity of young people but to a strengthening of civil society engagement and the formation of new parties.

6) CIS (2014): Barómetro de Octubre 2014. Avance de Resultados. Estudio n° 3041. 33S



Emergence of New Parties in the Context of the Social Movement

A recent phenomenon is the appearance of new political parties, founded on the ground of the social movement. On the national level “podemos” (“we can”) managed to win 7.98 percent of the votes at the 2014 European parliamentary elections. According to election polls in November 2014⁷ it has good chances to be the strongest party in the next general elections in 2015. These successes have strengthened the on-going process of the foundation of parties at the municipal and regional level. Although there is no uniform programme of the parties founded in the context of the movement, they generally show certain similarities: They are grass root initiatives founded by citizens and aim at participatory democracy. They advocate, amongst other topics, fundamental redistribution of wealth, the end of austerity-politics and cancellation of debts, a determined expansion of public welfare and education systems, strict control of financial markets or a basic income.

Conclusion

Disengagement and sentiments of distance from political institutions and the wide absence of opportunities for young people so far has led to a high level of civil society engagement in Spain. Different to other crisis countries, there are hardly any signs for declining solidarity and rising popularity of right wing and nationalist parties. Social movement organizations opt in nonviolent ways for inclusive, sustainable and socially balanced development.

Nevertheless, similar to many other countries, strong feelings of disaffection towards the EU endanger the European integration. Democratic

and social deficits of the EU – currently often related to austerity-politics – are dominating discussions and confidence in the EU is at a historically low level (Commission, 2013). A more legitimate European project has to be based on open and dialogic participation and communication practices (Bee & Guerrina, 2014). Article 11 in the Lisbon Treaty proposes to establish a wider basis for the participation and engagement of civil society actors like stakeholders’ networks and NGOs. The active citizenship, suggested in the Treaty, does exist in Spain on a very high level and presents a chance for integration strategies. But, to avoid losing its youth, Europe needs convincing and clear actions.

Instead of ignoring social problems and social movement actors and tolerating restrictions of civil rights, a European strategy for strengthening civil society aimed at protecting civil rights, inclusion of young people and countering extremist tendencies is needed. Based on research on framework-conditions and goals of civil society action Europe should develop ways to support organisations of the movement by improving legal, financial and social conditions and establish routines of dialogue, like stakeholder-forums or citizen-councils.

Very important is a clear European position against national Spanish laws that either lead to unjustified precarisation or to the endangerment of civil rights. Thus, firstly, the Spanish law on evictions has to be revised and adopted to European standards. Furthermore, the failure to strongly oppose the recently sharpened Spanish law on public security is undermining trust in the European Union. Secondly, Europe must not accept that civil rights in member countries are restricted for example by fining people arbitrarily for taking food out of waste containers, participating in demonstrations or taking pictures of policemen beating nonviolent demonstrators.

Furthermore, immediate measures on national and EU-level for an improvement of the social situation in Spain which is not in accordance with fundamental EU values have to be taken. Hungry

7) CIS (2014): Barómetro de Octubre 2014. Avance de Resultados. Estudio n° 3041. 33S



children, rising homelessness and exclusion are not only a shame for Europe but endanger the core values of the European project. Instead of accepting the Spanish youth as a "lost generation", determined short-term strategies for labour market integration are needed. Education, labour market and

welfare politics are national competences but a determined use of existing legal opportunities could improve the situation in many aspects. Further, financial support for labour-market or social programs should be given.

Further Reading

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