

Spain (España)

Spain became a member of the European Community along with Portugal in 1986. Spain is situated on the Iberian Peninsula in south-western Europe, and also includes the Balearic Islands, the Canary Islands and two North African enclaves. Historically, Spain has shown keen support for the EU project and is a member of the Eurozone. However, it has experienced economic difficulties and has been a significant recipient of EU subsidies and aid. Nevertheless, given that it only established a stable democracy in the last quarter of the twentieth century, Spain's development is impressive.

Recent History

Spain was controlled by the Fascist dictator Francisco Franco until his death in 1975. In 1978 a constitution which emphasises Spanish linguistic and cultural diversity was signed. Since then it has moved in the direction of representative democracy. The Eurozone crisis has had a strong impact on the leadership of the country.

The current Spanish government is led by Mariano Rajoy of the People's Party (PP), which won an absolute majority (186 seats) in elections on 20 November 2011. The election was called early after the erosion of confidence in the previous government, which was reflected at the polls with the Socialist Workers' Party suffering their worst defeat ever. Less than a decade ago, the political landscape looked very different - it was the PP party who suffered at the polls (in a backlash against their handling of the Madrid Bombings in March 2004) and the Socialist Workers' Party, led by José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, stormed to power in 2004. In March 2008 Zapatero was re-elected, but the election was disrupted by a terrorist incident and economic troubles, and he failed to win an overall majority. Following the poor performance of the Socialist Workers' Party in local elections in March 2011, Zapatero called a general election for November 2011 and, after seven years in opposition, power was regained by the People's Party.

Spain's economy has been of grave concern during the economic crisis. In August 2011 the European Central Bank announced it would buy Spanish Government Bonds so as to effectively inject money into the Spanish economy, due to its rising debts. In response, Spain introduced a 'golden rule' amendment to its constitution which set a limit on the size of its budget deficit for the future.

Spain has struggled particularly with levels of unemployment which have consistently been the second highest in the EU in recent years, behind Latvia.

Government Structure

Spain is a constitutional monarchy, which means that King Juan Carlos is the Head of State. He appoints the Prime Minister (known as President of the Government) following a general election. The Spanish Parliament (*Cortes*) has two chambers: the Congress of Deputies (*Congreso de los Diputados*), with 350 members elected for four year terms, and the Senate (*Senado*), with 259 members also elected for four year terms. The first is fully elected using a **proportional representation** system, while in the second, 80% of the seats are directly elected, with the other seats filled by appointments from the regional legislatures.

Spain has 17 autonomous regions, each with their own governments, parliaments, budgets and levels of autonomy. The Basque Country, Galicia and Catalonia are particularly autonomous, with their own nationalities and languages.

However, the Spanish constitution expresses Spain's indivisible unity and keeps the regions together.

Relations with the EU

Spain had to make several changes in order to comply with the criteria for EU accession, such as improving its infrastructure and revising its economic legislation to meet the EU's guidelines. The undertaking of these changes contributed to strong economic growth for Spain over the next two decades. Spain was a founder member of the Euro in 1998.

Yet Spain's membership of the European Community was not without initial controversy. Until Greece, Spain and Portugal joined the European Community, it had been largely a club of affluent, northern European industrialised countries. The new members had much poorer and more agricultural economies. The 1980s saw a major expansion of EU regional aid to help bring poorer regions of these countries closer to the European average. Spanish membership in particular also led to alteration of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) to accommodate its large fishing fleet.

Spain held the 6-month EU Presidency until July 2010, the first presidency under the new rules of the Lisbon Treaty. Whilst it was criticised for being a 'low-key' presidency, Spain did make progress on Croatia's EU accession talks and tried to develop the relationship between the EU and Latin America and the Caribbean, particularly with Cuba.

Spain has been significantly affected by immigration. Estimates of over 15% of the population consisting of immigrants have caused social and economic tension. Romanians form the greatest proportion of those migrating to Spain, and controversy was sparked in 2011 when Spain denied work permits for Romanian migrants in an attempt to improve the unemployment rate, going against the fundamental freedoms of the EU. However, the European Commission approved the move and justified it by stating that limits are permissible in exceptional circumstances.

Facts and Figures

- Spain has a population of approximately 45 million.
- The Spanish economy relies on tourism and agriculture, although it also has a significant construction industry.
- With an area of 504,030km², Spain is the second largest EU member state after France.
- There are over 500million Spanish speakers in the world, making it the world's second most spoken first language.
- Spain has the second highest absolute net migration in the world, after the USA.

Quotes

"Spain is a deeply pro-European country that has constructed its scale of democratic values and aspirations for modernity and progress by looking to the rest of Europe as an example and as an ambition" – José Luis Zapatero, former Spanish PM, 1 June 2010.

Technical Terms

Proportional Representation: an electoral system whereby the number of votes a party receives is directly proportional to the number of seats they are given in the legislative assembly.

Links

- <http://www.la-moncloa.es/IDIOMAS/9/home.htm>