

1974–1977 Democracy and European integration

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The 25 April 1974 Revolution at last brought down the final government of the Estado Novo (Salazar dictatorship). Negotiations with the independence movements in Portugal's African colonies began at once. The revolutionary process — the remoulding of a country emerging from 40 years of dictatorship — opened the floodgates to months of intense instability: provisional governments came and went, the various factions set out their stalls, fighting for power and confronting each other, decolonisation was completed, efforts were made to democratise the country and to defend basic freedoms, and a new Constitution for the Republic had to be drafted.

Democracy and party pluralism won the day: the first free elections in 50 years were held for a Constituent Assembly on 25 April 1975, the new Constitution was approved on 2 April 1976, and the first legislative elections to the Portuguese Parliament (the Assembly of the Republic) were held on 25 April 1976, followed by Presidential elections in June, the first Constitutional Government taking office that July.

With the political situation framed by a constitution and with relative calm on the social front, the Government's main priorities were to consolidate democracy, take national reconciliation forward, and rectify the serious economic problems left unresolved from the Revolution: the effects of decolonisation, the loss of traditional markets, disorganisation in the production and financial systems and the traditional foreign trade deficit, all exacerbated by a global crisis which the Portuguese, focusing on their own problems, barely noticed.

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In foreign relations, as in other areas, though perhaps with greater intensity, the April Revolution represented a profound and irreversible break from the past.

A new cycle began in Portugal's approach to European cooperation, involving two specific stages between the Revolution and formal application for accession to the EEC in 1977. The first stage immediately followed the events of April 1974 and was dominated by decolonisation, parallel diplomacy, lack of clarity and an interest manifested by some civil and military forces in a kind of third-world outlook. With the Constitution now well established, the other stage, beginning when the first Constitutional Government took office, was marked not only by the return to democratic normality but also by the rediscovery of a European and Atlantic vocation and a refocusing of the country in the European context. Portugal, now without its empire, was thus seeking a new identity and a new purpose in international relations. It also became a nation of peace which attached great importance to good relations and to strengthening the bonds of friendship with its former colonies. The period of isolationism, a sanctuary and a reflection of its helplessness in various areas, was over for good, and everything could be called into question once more: a new direction had to be found, strategies and processes had to be defined, options had to be assessed, new paths had to be beaten and old paths had to be adjusted.

The effort to find a direction that would enable Portugal to discover its position in Europe — which was itself deeply involved in a search for a new identity — and in the world, where globalisation would come to set the pace of accelerated transformations, once again became evident and pressing.

The country's history, its recognition in a democratic framework, its reaffirmations and readjustments in a search for a new international position dictated both by national economic and financial circumstances and strategies and by international dynamics changed profoundly in nature and in pace.

It was naturally essential for the new political leaders to revitalise and modernise the Portuguese economy, providing it with structures and giving it a momentum that would allow it to develop towards the model adopted by the economies of the Western democracies.

Portugal's rapprochement with European structures began as early as 1976, with membership of the Council of Europe and renegotiation of the 1972 Portugal–EEC Free Trade Agreement, which culminated in the

signing of a number of additional protocols.

The country's accession to the European Communities then became a Government target. A variety of exchanges took place, the President of the EEC Council of Ministers visited Portugal, and in August 1976 the Prime Minister, Mário Soares, presented the first Constitutional Government's programme to the Portuguese Parliament. This included support for the integration of Portugal into the European Economic Community. At last, on 29 November 1976, the Portuguese Government was authorised to apply for accession to the European Communities. In the early months of 1977 the Portuguese authorities engaged in significant diplomatic activity to garner support for Portuguese accession from the Heads of State or Government of the Community countries. Finally, Portugal officially applied for membership of the European Communities.

The application to join the then European Community, formally submitted by means of a letter addressed by the Prime Minister, Mário Soares, to the President of the Council of the European Communities on 28 March 1977, represented a very significant watershed in international relations and in Portuguese foreign policy in particular. The well-known arguments adopted were used both to justify accession and to draw a veil over certain fanciful notions of 'national independence' based on an inward-looking, defensive and protectionist development advocated by a number of political and social organisations: firstly because integration into Europe represented not only permanent recognition of Portugal as a democratic state governed by the rule of law, but also a strong reinforcement of what was known at the time as the country's weak democracy; and secondly because the return to European borders determined a new effort to modernise and develop which only solidarity with the richest countries in Europe, reflected in Community aid, could bring about.