

# From democratic transition to Spain's accession to the European Communities

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## From democratic transition to Spain's accession to the European Communities (1975–1985)

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The democratic transition that began in 1975 — although not all writers are in agreement on that point — had one central objective: to move from the authoritarian Francoist regime to a democratic Spain, peacefully, cohesively and with the greatest possible consensus. From a domestic point of view, some writers consider milestones in this process to be the adoption of the Constitution in December 1978; the failure of the coup on 23 February 1981, signalling the consolidation of Spain's fledgling democracy; the PSOE's election victory in October 1982 and the formation of the first entirely Socialist government in Spain's recent history; and even Spain's entry into the European Community in January 1986, which marked a definitive normalisation of relations with Europe and Europeans.

Internal political transition can also be seen from an external perspective. We should not forget that, as transitology and comparative studies have shown, particularly since the revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989, in all cases of transition the **international factor** is important for understanding both the process and its results. It should be considered from two angles: the international factor's inward influence, in other words how the international system, its actors and international or transnational organisations influence, condition and determine the domestic transition process; and the factor's outward influence, meaning the way in which the state undergoing internal political transition is also required to alter its external policy course, moving from an authoritarian or non-democratic approach to a foreign policy that is democratic as regards decision-making, execution and scrutiny. Europe, represented most prominently by the European Community, was to be a priority for Spain's new leadership.

There is widespread consensus that Europe and accession to the Community played a central and decisive role in Spain's transition to democracy and the consolidation of this. This role was visible in six different areas:

- a) It helped to strengthen the legitimacy of Western European-style democracy in the eyes of the elite and the Spanish public.
- b) It allowed a consensus to emerge among all democratic political forces regarding membership of the European Community, which was interpreted as an essential guarantee for Spain's young democracy.
- c) It served to defuse the national-regional question, as the prospect of becoming part of Europe helped to lessen the conflict between the central State and the historical nationalities, aiding the development of a State comprising autonomous regions.
- d) It radically transformed Spain's social reality through much anticipated modernisation that was unprecedented in the country's political culture.
- e) It facilitated the adaptation of financial, business and production structures to meet the challenge of integration, which called for modernisation, openness, competitiveness and risk.
- f) It led to the definitive settlement of an age-old and fundamental issue for the country's foreign policy: defining Spain's place in the world.

A Spain needing to break with its most recent past would find in Europe a vision of development and wellbeing cut short by economic crisis, the path towards the consolidation of democracy and freedom, the model for advanced and progressive democracy that society was demanding, and the means of establishing a firm place for itself within the international community.

Europe was seen as a reference point towards which countries should turn for firm support for political change, becoming a key element of the emerging democratic culture and serving to bind the political class together in its aim of restoring democracy, in spite of the fact that it was not without its tensions and difficulties. At this point, Europe reached its zenith as model and myth in the formation of a system of democratic coexistence in Spain. To be admitted and accepted by Europe was a marker of political socialisation in the nascent democracy. The clear vehicle for this acceptance would be entry into Europe's supranational organisations.

As a result, democratic Spain would quickly set out to achieve integration and alignment with Europe on a political and institutional, military, economic, social and educational level, as the basis of a priority policy aimed at securing membership of the European institutions: the Council of Europe in 1977, NATO in 1982, the European Community in 1986 and Western European Union in 1989.

However, entry to the European Community was the major challenge and main foreign policy objective of Spain in transition. It was a goal that had the approval of all political forces and on which the various governments enjoyed the unanimous backing of public opinion, social sectors and civic groups. Europe — Western Europe — was an aspiration common to all sections of society. Membership of the European institutions meant normalising both Spain's presence in its natural context and its acceptance as a democracy through international backing for the process of domestic change. In fact, from an international perspective, accession to the Community marked the end of Spain's transition.

The first overtures to Europe were encouraging. On 28 July 1977, Madrid submitted its application in Brussels for the opening of negotiations for Spain's accession to the Rome Treaties. Soon afterwards, on 20 September, the Council of Ministers of the European Communities unanimously approved this application and charged the Commission with drawing up an opinion with a view to opening negotiations. Furthermore, in an undeniably successful turn of events, Spain was admitted to the Council of Europe on 24 November 1977, before the adoption of the Constitution in 1978, which was somewhat surprising given that the prior existence of a democratic constitutional text appeared to be one of the — *de facto*, if not formal — requirements made of other candidates. Europe had confidence in the Spanish political process. In order to lend the European objective greater impetus, Adolfo Suárez appointed Leopoldo Calvo Sotelo Minister for Relations with the European Communities on 10 February 1978. One year later, on 5 February 1979, the opening session of the accession negotiations was held in Brussels, although the talks would only really begin in September that year.

The Spanish authorities believed that the country would be able to join the European Communities sooner rather than later. This was not to be the case. The road to accession proved to be a complex one, fraught with difficulties. It was not a question of political doubts over the stability of Spanish democracy but of the economic and social repercussions for existing Member States of Spanish and Portuguese membership at a time when the European Communities were facing significant internal and institutional difficulties. Today, we are also aware that, throughout the long negotiation process, other issues, in one form or another, came into play: the link between accession to the Community and Spain's membership of and continued presence within NATO, which it had joined in 1982 but surrounding which uncertainty persisted until 1986, with the PSOE's Atlanticist U-turn and the narrowly won 'yes' in the promised referendum; the relationship, too, with recognition of the state of Israel, which would come about immediately following accession to the Community; the link between France's attitude and the fight against terrorism; and the all-or-nothing approach adopted by the Suárez Government in terms of its commitment to a neutral and non-aligned policy, which served as a form of pressure to speed up the negotiations under way.

One way or another, the lengthy negotiations would conclude on 29 March 1985, once the remaining complications with the United Kingdom had been resolved, along with difficulties in some chapters, in particular those on agriculture, fisheries, social affairs, the Canary Islands and own resources, which would indeed be the last chapters to be closed, in the course of a few days of tough negotiations in Brussels. The support of the Federal Republic of Germany and the Italian-led final six months of negotiations are worthy of a special mention in this regard.

At a formal ceremony, first in Lisbon and then in Madrid, the Treaty of Accession of Spain and Portugal was signed on 12 June 1985. On 1 January 1986, following ratification, the two countries became full members of the Community. It was thus that the Europe of the Twelve was born, differing greatly from the current Europe of 27. The country had reached the end of a long road, and somehow 'Spain was now in Europe', as some of the major national newspapers proclaimed on their front pages.

The signing of the Treaty of Accession led the Spanish Minister for Foreign Affairs, Francisco

Fernández Ordóñez, who took over from Fernando Morán, to write later some words that seem to sum up the mood of the Spanish people very well with regard to the significance of joining the European Community:

‘With its accession to the European Communities, Spain has acquired a new position in the world, from which it will be able to act more effectively. Spanish democracy has been strengthened, allowing it to move forward in the direction called for by our Constitution. The economic freedom the Communities represent is very important for the stimulation of our country’s productivity and capacity for innovation, as are the social guarantees it provides in terms of bolstering the sense of solidarity within Spanish society.’