

THE CRISIS OF SPAIN'S POLITICAL ELITES – SYSTEMIC FACTORS OR MASS MEDIA INFLUENCE?

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The subject of the discussion below refers to the political situation in present-day Spain in the context of a broad systemic crisis (economic, political, values, leadership, discourse etc.). Moreover, it covers the media's impact on the administrating elite who are also subject to the crisis. The research questions concern the nature of the interactions among the tri-fecta of political actors, the media and public opinion. The fundamental question is to what extent the crisis of political elites is a result of systemic dysfunction (a so called de-democratisation of political life) or an effect of the media's activities, which have disclosed and publicised some of the dysfunctions of the above elites¹. This article will attempt to verify the hypothesis of the aforementioned de-democratisation process in Spain, the extent of the media presence in political life, and the mediatisation of their politics.

¹ More correct version of a question should ask to what extent and which media contributed to the crisis of the elites? It is quite evident in Spain which media support a particular party. However, since these considerations are discussed in a separate article (see: *Hiszpańska prasa wobec kryzysu – zaklinanie czy kreowanie rzeczywistości?* Text in print), they have been limited here.

The crisis in Spain is now at the centre of European attention. Like Greece, the Spanish economy has become a focus for all the negative economic phenomena, which grew for years in the previous economic situation, and which were superseded by both regular and increasingly indebted citizens, and the ruling elite. We can risk making a comparison that the phenomena is similar to that which occurred in the economy and also took place in politics, which means that the systemic dysfunction grew gradually.

Richard Gunther and Jose Montero² in their book "The Politics of Spain" (2009) wrote that the Spanish political system was stable, consolidated, had a stable government and was within the mainstream of European democracies. They were not able to predict, however, how fast the change of this status quo would take place. One gets the impression that both the economic crisis and such extensive political changes surprised Spaniards and were not anticipated by either researchers or the inquisitive media.

Critics of Zapatero's government tried to blame the so called "socialist teams" for the crisis, but it seems that the causes of the political collapse were more complex, and it is hard to fully agree with the opinion that *"these are the costs of the recent eight years of Socialist government in Spain. There was time and money to promote homosexuality, there was the strength to fight with the Church, there was living beyond one's income and there was a lot of propaganda promoting the success of zapaterism. But there was nothing left for important matters and these are the costs now"*³.

It is interesting that the warning voices of the media were not heard at the time when the Spaniards were sinking into a spiral of debt and corruption was spreading to the next levels of power. The Spanish press became the director of events on the political scene only at the turn of 2012 and 2013 when the *El Pais* revealed the secret accounts of the ruling People's Party from the last twenty years.

² R.Gunther, J.R.Montero, *The Politics of Spain*, UK 2009.

³ <http://wpolityce.pl/wydarzenia/38057-tak-socjalistyczne-elity-zniszczyly-hispanie> [12.09.2013].

As noted by Frank B. Deakin, “newspapers reflect national consciousness”⁴, and in the case of Spain, the paraphrased term “tell me what you are reading, and I’ll tell you who you are” acquires particular veracity with regard to political sympathies.

Assuming the symbiotic coexistence of the mass media and political actors as a paradigm, it is important to have a closer look at the specifics of both of them. Indeed, there are grounds for formulating a hypothesis that when compared to the whole of Europe; they are unique and their distinctness results from historical, mental and social conditions. As Carme Augusti Roca notes “*probably every society has its own characteristics, which affects its political life and related events. When it comes to Spain and Catalonia, it consists in: the model of democratic transitions, the strength of social pressure to restore memory issues, the character of civil society, and the views and responsibility of various political groups (...)*”⁵.

The specificity mentioned here is reflected in the form of political processes and phenomena that moderate the character of the Spanish political system and lead to the already signaled de-democratization. This notion appears more often in the literature devoted to changes in Western Europe, although there is no consensus as to the scope of its definition⁶. For the purpose of the research, it was assumed that de-democratisation is a gradual erosion of rules and principles of the political game developed over the years, eventually to be replaced with elements destabilising the current system and leading to its evolutionary transformation. The question remains whether the completion of de-democratization will only be a transition to a different form of political system, or whether it will be regarded as a phase within future changes that apply to each system in different periods of its existence, modifying it, but not affecting its foundations. It links us to the next question, i.e. whether a departure from

⁴ See. F.B. Deakin “Spain Today”, USA, p. 177.

⁵ C.A.Roca “*Polityka odzyskiwania pamięci historycznej w Hiszpanii. Model kataloński*” [in:] “Polska a Hiszpania...”, p. 193.

⁶ See. E. Gauthier, “*Systemic “De-Democratization” in the European Union: Existential Dangers, New Political Challenges*”, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/systemic-de-democratization-in-the-european-union-existential-dangers-new-political-challenges/5321717> (25 09 2013 r.)

democracy can be done only in a violent manner (through revolution) or if it is possible to saturate democratic systems with undemocratic elements until it completely transforms. The same phenomenon of political change is well described in sociological literature and can be found, following Peter Sztompka's words, defined as "*the difference between the state of the system at one point in time and the state of the same system at another point in time*"⁷. Evolution of political systems has as its basis a series of changes taking place in social and political life – from changes in group interests through economic changes (including industrial ones) to technological transformations. However, in the case of de-democratization, we have to dismantle the mechanisms developed in the process of transformation.

The nature of the transformations taking place in contemporary Spain is not obvious to researchers. On the one hand, some argue that European Union membership is a sufficient guarantee of democracy as such, and every "deviation from the course" (see Hungary under Victor Orban) meets with a reaction from EU members; on the other hand, discussion of all the European Union's future shows its many scenarios.

It is worth recalling here that on September 16th, the Vice-President of the European Commission and Commissioner responsible for Competition, Joaquín Almunia, stated that a separate part of the country is not a member of the European Union and is treated as a third country- these words referred to the current situation in Catalonia.

Observing the political situation in the Iberian Peninsula, it is hard not to notice comparisons and references to the situation in Poland. Despite economic differences and various exogenous factors, the Spanish model of political transformation is quite often compared to the one in Poland.

This raises the question of how such a polarization happened – i.e. in Spain we can observe evidence of a departure from democracy, while in Poland the problem of an insufficient degree of democratic consolidation still remains visible.

A kind of litmus test of the above dichotomy was the Occupy Together movement which came to life in Puertadel Sol in 2011. Although it spread around Europe, it did not find much support in Poland (aside from the

⁷ P. Sztompka, *Socjologia*, Kraków 2007, p. 437.

ACTA movement, which received great attention from young Poles). It can be concluded that this was due to differences in problems affecting young people, or actually due to different degrees of their intensity (i.e., primarily in relation to unemployment and a lack of confidence in the government or aversion to politics as such).

It is not possible to understand the nature of the modern, democratic system of Spain without delving into the earlier stages of its formation. In a nutshell, one can say that with the death of General F. Franco, Spain had no fixed patterns of democracy to which it could refer directly and, therefore, they had to work them out. On November 22, 1975, King Juan Carlos appeared in the Cortes with the famous speech in which he reminded fellow citizens that the idea of Europe would be incomplete without the presence of Spaniards and their predecessors. Europe should count on Spain, and they, Spaniards, are Europeans⁸. This aforementioned lack of democratic practices and patterns, including a participatory political culture, is a common factor combining transformations on the Iberian Peninsula and in Poland (however, it is important to stress the differences too, especially the different economic situation, rate of transformations or the role of the Catholic Church). Over time, it turned out that the Spanish road to democracy was not easy. Conflicts between the centre of the country and the peripheral regions- so-called regional nationalism, religious conflicts, class conflicts, and finally a clash between monarchist and republican visions of the state- are just some of the historical determinants specific to the Spanish political system. The gradual overcoming of differences and the so-called politics of consensus resulted in a Spanish model of transformation that from the perspective of today can be considered stable.

De-democratization, in the face of an abundance of ideas, mechanisms or democratic institutions, is not just a theoretical pipe dream, and has some measurable evidence, that is:

- **unprecedented activity of social movements** since the fall of the dictatorship of Franco F. Their current strength and mobilisation

⁸ Following: E. Górski, *Idea Europy i myśl współczesna w Hiszpanii*, Warszawa 2013, p. 69.

come from the use of new communication technologies such as social networking, but also from a strong opposition towards politicians and their attempts to use the “capital of discontent”.

- **withdrawal of public support for the leading political parties**, i.e. PSOE (Spanish Socialist Workers Party) and PP (People’s Party), as a result of disillusionment with politics as such, and the loss of public confidence in the ruling elites and state institutions. Dissatisfaction with the two-party system and the action of the so-called “pendulum” that make Spaniards choose between the leading parties is particularly evident among young people. Following the words of the Spanish legal philosopher Jorge Urdániz Ganuza, “voters are millions of Spaniards who live in small electoral districts and are offered only two options: either to vote for the PP even though its list includes corrupt representatives, or to allow the PSOE to win the day. Or vice-versa: either you vote PSOE, whether you want to or not, or you will be allowing the PP to win”⁹.
- **loss of authority by Juan Carlos and his family** (due to corruption and sex scandals). It is quite relevant to note that the monarch’s esteem and contribution to the introduction of democracy were unquestioned. However, in the face of the current crisis, the unfortunate actions of J.Carlos, such as a trip to an expensive safari (as reported by the media), as well as the problems of his son-in-law, who is suspected of embezzlement from his own foundation, led to the unprecedented decline in support for the institution of the Spanish monarchy.
- **accelerated replacement of elites** and the decline of their authority (e.g. a wire-tapping scandal in Catalonia involving leading politicians who were hiring detective agencies in order to obtain confidential information about their opposition)
- **citizens feeling a sense of separation from power** (discourse and political debate crisis) and from non-governmental organizations

⁹ <http://www.presseurop.eu/en/content/article/3438361-economic-doldrums-and-political-crisis>

(e.g. the Spanish Confederation of Business, which is currently in a corruption uproar)

- **intensification of separatist movements in Catalonia**(economic arguments about the so-called robbing of the region by the state have become particularly buoyant in the face of the economic crisis¹⁰). At this point, it is worth noting that despite the referendum announced by Aruturo Masa (planned for 2014) institutional obstacles make the Catalonia disconnection from Spain practically impossible, but the real purpose of the Spanish separatist (and reformist) actions can be a cry of protest which politicians cannot ignore any longer¹¹).
- **crisis of leadership**(succeeding J.L.R Zapatero with M. Rajoyadid did not bring the expected results. In the 31st January 2013 issue, *El País* disclosed the so-called “secret accounting” book of the ruling People’s Party which shows a series of donations from well-known construction tycoons to PP. What is worse, the recovery system implemented by Rajoya revealed his indecisiveness and his incompetence as a leader).
- **the threat of so-called black populism**, i.e. actions based on manipulation of public opinion in order to gain public support and use it to take over power.

These symptoms form a kind of domino dependence, and the danger inherent in it is being noticed by an increasing number of researchers. According to Carlos Carnicero, “The various pressures weighing on politicians and institutions could result in the paralysis of the political system and an institutional breakdown that will mark the end of the current democratic model”¹². Given the above outlined situation, it therefore seems to be legitimate to use the term de-democratization as the changes take place at various levels and depths of the political system over time.

¹⁰ In the years 2005–2010, the deficit between taxes paid and received funds exceeded 10 billion euros/year.

¹¹ See R. Wiszniowski, *Przełomy współczesnego państwa. Przypadek Szkocji i Katalonii*, Warszawa 2013.

¹² <http://www.presseurop.eu/en/content/article/3438361-economic-doldrums-and-political-crisis>.

The overall conclusion is that although a changing of the elites is a natural mechanism of democratic systems, the erosion of the elites observed in Spain is exceptional. Researchers are unanimous in their opinion about the Spanish model of transformation (“from consensus to majoritarian democracy”¹³) but they have not yet defined the observed “retreat from democracy.” The media, especially the Spanish press, have strong ideological undercurrents, and they are either in favour of one of the two leading parties, or support a national identity at the regional level (e.g. *La Vanguardia* issued in Catalan).

It should be noted that in the days of the mindless indebtedness of the Spanish economy, the mass media did not give any direction, but rather focused on the current political situation and on the economic (in particular the construction) boom.

When the crisis came (which to a very large extent also affected journalists¹⁴) the Spanish press increased their role in exposing scandals and other questionable practices, but it happened from 2010 onwards. Without the press, many scandals, including the ones committed by those in power, would have never been disclosed. Reliable information was provided even at the cost of compromising the image of the royal family, which then was perceived as a guarantor of the legal and institutional order in Spain (despite the fact that “a monarch reigns but does not govern”).

It is symptomatic that, compared to other European countries, Spanish political actors made little attempt to “mediate” their actions. There were rectifications, apologies (e.g. the famous appearance of J. Carlos’s on TV after returning from a safari in Botswana) or- as in the case of M. Rayoja- an attempt to distance himself from incriminating events or inconvenient facts. The collapse of the political class in Spain is undisputed and concerns politicians from both leading parties. In the context of the question of this paper, the erosion of the political elites in Spain ought to be regarded as the effect of systemic dysfunction through years of corruption rather than the accidental media discovery of their activities. In the face of violent

¹³ See. S.Balfour “The Politics of Contemporary Spain”.

¹⁴ Media was affected by a specific crisis – not only sales dropped (by more than 18 per cent in the last five years) but also advertising revenue drastically got reduced (about 53%).

social reactions (Los Indignados), the Spanish political class has reduced its marketing means of communication with the public in order to make real attempts to rescue its reputation. Such a method of crisis management has not helped so far in rebuilding the loss of reputation. "We aspire to the European league, but playing in the third division (...) Spaniards' dream of living in a modern European country vanished. They feel ashamed, humiliated, angry and disappointed"¹⁵.

It is difficult to predict at the moment what will be the end of the "Spanish move away from democracy." There is every likelihood that the European Union security will not allow one of Europe's largest democracies to undergo such a systemic change of the system, which could lead to its restoration..... On the other hand, the number of accumulated and unresolved problems (ethnic and economic) is a challenge and new ground for scholars of political systems, politicians, and most of all the Spaniards who must redefine their identity.

SUMMARY

Political situation in present-day Spain is complicated because of many types of crisis. Interaction between media, public opinion and political actors is interesting because media's activity can cause many changes in political system. The main aim of this article is to verify the hypothesis of the aforementioned de-democratisation process in Spain.

Keywords: Spain, crisis, political elites, mass media

¹⁵ A. Lipczak, *Żegnaj Rajoy?*, "Polityka" No. 7, 13–19.02.2013.