



Aragon: a place in the sun

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Proud of their great achievements throughout history, the Aragonese have an obsessive tendency to demand special consideration from the Spanish state and the other regions, peoples and nations which make it up; their greatness in the past should mean they count for more now, despite their present smallness. Between its expectations regarding Spain, where it had hoped for much more, and its disappointment at the insufficiency of the response, Aragon wonders how to perpetuate itself in a globalised environment in which everything is levelled out and depersonalised, without concern for the unique qualities of each area and tradition.

And within the fixation of the Aragonese on their history, over the last five centuries the weight of the population (hand in hand with the economic weight) of Aragon has increased only by a factor of 6, while the average in the rest of Europe is 15, and in its immediate neighbourhood, the Basque Country has increased by a factor of 11, the Valencian Country by 19 and Catalonia by 21. We can add to these the relative proximity of the Community of Madrid, which in its location on the other side of the barely populated plains of La Alcarria, has multiplied its economic weight and its population by 100; we can also consider the difficult and precarious access to the rest of Europe via the Pyrenees, and then we will understand the concerns of a land which, unable to apply measures which would let it capitalise on its central location between all these nodes, seems condemned to remain an area of transit. As Juan Martín, Secretary General of the Aragonese nationalist party Chunta Aragonesista, puts it: "Aragon runs the risk of becoming a petrol station in the middle of a desert between Madrid, Barcelona, Bilbao and Valencia."

Aragon, with its large territory (nearly 10% of the Spanish state) is now and always has been a sparsely populated region (somewhat less than 3% of the population of the Spanish state), especially in the mountainous regions to the north and south of the Ebro valley, its main centre of development. Being essentially an agricultural land, in the 19th century there was some manufacturing based around the capital, Zaragoza, and in some districts, that with the acceleration of industrialisation during the 20th century and the development plans conceived in Madrid, led to a traumatic process of internal migration inwards (towards the capital and the areas which already had some industry, such as Cinca Medio, Sabiñanigo and Calatayud) and outwards (especially to Catalonia, but also to Valencia, the Basque Country and Madrid) which bled it of a third of its population, accentuating the demographic imbalances in the territory, leaving more than 400 villages abandoned and many more with an alarmingly aged population. In the Spanish state's conception of the urban network, Aragon was to

provide labour, energy and raw materials to the centres of growth. The only consolation was that at least Zaragoza and the Ebro valley would be one of those centres of growth, concentrating more than half the Aragonese population, which is certainly a problem from the point of view of a balanced development of the territory. But let's imagine: what would be left of Aragon if not even that had been saved?

Structural economics, with all its traumas, gave the Aragonese the unpleasant sensation that they were not being treated with the consideration that should be given one of the supposed "founding fathers" of the Spanish state, but were being exploited like a colony. Men and women, water, coal, cheap electricity... everything came out of Aragon at a bargain price, but the rural areas remained unmodernised and infrastructure (especially transport, within the territory and the cross-Pyrenees connections they had always wanted) failed to arrive. The clamour for self-government, which always appears throughout history at the same time or a little behind the more militant nationalities, never became a priority for Madrid, a fact which some attribute, reasonably enough, to the low voting numbers and economic weight of Aragon in the State as a whole. Even after obtaining a partial return of its historical powers, this turned out to be incomplete or poorly leveraged by successive Aragonese governments, whose leaders were excessively subservient to their party bosses in Madrid.

Together with this (or perhaps because of it), the Aragonese sensibility has stored up a long list of aggravated imbalances, from the appropriation of numerous items of its historic and artistic heritage by bodies based in Catalonia and Madrid and the constant neglect of the historical role of Aragon (or even its shameless falsification), to the refusal to grant its legally recognised right to have its own tax Office or at least to have a bilateral economic and financial agreement with the State. All of this contributes to keeping the flame of Aragon nationalism alive, a nationalism which is somewhat different to that of its Basque and Catalan neighbours. Thus, in Aragon, separatism is shared by only 3% of the population; but, without questioning whether Aragon should remain part of the State, the idea is palpable that the cut of the Spanish suit does not fit Aragon well, and that a more flexible type of relationship, within a federal or even confederal framework, could be more appropriate for a satisfactory resolution to most of these problems. This would explain the oscillating but notable weight of 20 to 30% of the votes which have gone to Aragonese nationalist parties over the last 30 years.

But while facing the obstacles of Madrid, Aragon also faces the challenges of pan-Catalanism and its concept of the "greater Catalonia" (the Catalan Countries), which call for the constitution of a linguistically based national political entity which would include the Catalan-speaking areas of Aragon. Given the indifference of Madrid to these proclamations, the Aragonese, whether they speak Catalan or not, tend to a gut reaction, to the point where many of them (w the support of the more conservative political parties) refuse to call the language they speak and share with the eastern neighbours, "Catalan". Worse still, these attitudes have led the latest conservative coalition government to also deny the unity of the Aragonese language, which they treat as marginal, as a dialect or an ethnographic curiosity (besides allocating it the tiniest of budgets), making it impossible to halt its alarming decline.

And despite all of this, Aragon, which has borne the brunt of the crisis, has constantly maintained a more positive differential in many economic indicators than the national average, thanks to its diversified industrial base (which has a greater relative weight than in other economies within the state), its moderately dynamic exports and its productivity. This is attested by its unemployment rate, which while high by European standards, is 7% lower than the average for Spain. Aragon, considered by the state and by the European Union as a "rich" country (to the surprise and annoyance of its inhabitants) is also one of the net contributors to the state coffers, although the amounts are less than in other regions where income levels are also above average.

There is still uncertainty as to the recovery of the economy and the social, economic and even political models. But there is one thing we can be sure of: Aragon has major geopolitical challenges regarding its immediate environment and European and world trends. Given its current situation, it will have to keep fighting hard for a long time to hang on to its place in the sun.

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