

WHAT LURKS BEHIND

TRIBUNE

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When you first meet them, Middle East sheikhs typically display the impeccable courtesy, elegance and charm of perfect ladies and gentlemen – as befits their exquisite western educations. Yet sometimes, amid a conversation, extraordinarily conservative social and political views come to the surface. No wonder: despite their civil, westernised manners, they are deeply aware of the exorbitant privileges underpinning their position – and on which they cannot renege.

This may be a good metaphor of one of Spain's most unique political features. Virtually everywhere in the world, voting trends in the largest metropolitan areas are less conservative and less prone to right-wing populism than their countries' average. The reason is obvious: far-right nativist, protectionist ideologies appeal primarily to the losers of globalisation, which is a game where large metropolises are the natural winners. This rule applies almost universally: New York, London, Paris, Berlin... or, for that matter, Barcelona. Yet a glaring exception consistently stands out: Madrid. In the November 2019 election, for example, Spain's far-right party (VOX) won 18.6% of the votes in Madrid (against Spain's 15.1%), while the sum of the three right-wing parties (PP, Cs, VOX) won 52.3% (vs. Spain's 42.7%). Imperial tradition does not explain this anomaly: most European large cities, from London to Istanbul, from Moscow to Lisbon, are former

imperial capitals. Nor does the heritage of recent dictatorships: think of Portugal, Greece or most of Eastern Europe, where dictators also ruled until less than 50 years ago. Madrid is the fifth-largest (and among the fastest-growing) European metropolis after Moscow, Istanbul, London and Paris... Yet, if anything, its peculiar political bias has only strengthened over time:



A recent demo by right-wing parties in Madrid. EFE

until the late eighties, when Madrid was 25% smaller and more provincial, left-wing parties dominated its political landscape. Why?

Madrid is unique within Europe (and most of the world) in its lacking the most basic geographic advantages of a metropolis: no other large European city, capital or not, stands so high above the sea level, or so far away from the sea or from any navigable watercourse. One must look East, at places like Ankara or Riyadh, to find comparably large, fast-growing cities whose success, like Madrid's, can only be explained through their role as capitals of strong, centralised states. These cities,

paradoxically, succeed in the global market's game of attracting businesses and professionals precisely through the extraordinary benefits their governments, against every market rationale, bestow on them, and which overcompensate for their obvious natural disadvantages.

Yet EU integration poses a particularly stark challenge to Madrid. A broad strip of increasingly empty land slashes across Western Europe from Liège in Belgium to Alentejo in Portugal, cutting through France ("la diagonale du vide") and Spain ("la España vacía"). As market forces gradually move economic activities to more attractive regions (e.g. on the Mediterranean coast) only one major city stands in this hollowed-out space in the middle: Madrid, proudly rowing against the market wind. This can of course only be sustained through the state's commitment to diverting business activity towards this more economically inefficient but politically favoured location and clipping the wings of its closest competitors –

which, for Madrid, means primarily Barcelona. Thus, Madrid's opinion-leaders, open-minded and cosmopolitan as they choose to be with other topics, often spouse centralistic, intolerant, high-handed views when debating state intervention to secure their city's place in the sun – for, as with sheikhs, it is state-sponsored privilege that lurks behind the glittering façade.

At huge waste, therefore, the Spanish state reverses market incentives to privilege Madrid at the expense of more attractive locations like Barcelona... No wonder most Catalans vindicate the need for Catalonia to have its own state.