

# SHADOW OF THE PAST

**TRIBUNE**

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Just recently we learnt of the premature demise of the European Parliament's president, David Sassoli at the relatively young age of 65. Beyond the mourning, Mr Sassoli also epitomises, at least for this column, the stark difference in the institutional edifices of both Italy and Spain; for it is remarkable how hard it is to find such bullet proof democrats in Spain, where a substrate of centralist chauvinism always prevails, regardless if they act under the umbrella of international institutions.

The two countries have often been compared due to their notorious fascist past. In fact, Mussolini's Italy, together with Hitler's Germany, was one of the key contributors to the Spanish nationalists' military takeover that finally triumphed in 1939. However, after its U turn in joining the allies late in the Second World War, Italy had a noteworthy democratic transformation. Just a few years later, in 1951, it joined France, Germany and the Benelux to form the European Coal and Steel Community, the embryo of today's EU.

In contrast, Spain continued for 40 years as a tyrannical dictatorship, which only declined with the despot's own dwindling health. Several reasons have been argued for it not holding up after Franco's death. One of them is that if Spain (and Portugal, for the matter) were to join NATO and the then European Economic Community, noblesse oblige, they had to pledge to democratic standards, vis a vis the despotisms on the other side of the

iron curtain.

Yet, Portugal endured a real purification of its authoritarian roots, after the "Revolução dos Cravos" in 1974, spurred by colonels from conflicts in African colonies. Spain has never undergone such a catharsis: there has been a continuity in the modus operandi, only under a democratic façade, in the few institutions that constitute the real power. This authoritarian substrate is especially exposed when challenged with the forces that, by way of history, culture and economy, manifest themselves as alternatives to Madrid, fundamentally the Basques and the Catalans.

Whilst there are excellent professionals "made in Spain", the mainstream reflects this lack of real democratic credentials. The antagonism between the ideals repre-

sented by Madrid and, say, Bilbao, San Sebastian, or Barcelona, results in very few Catalans, or Basques, having relevant positions in THE institutions: i.e. the judiciary, police, army, media, and so on. As a result, the norm is to pledge oneself to a centralistic mindset, infused by that genuine "made in Madrid" nationalism, rather than to abide by solid ethical and democratic standards.

Take Mr Josep Borrell, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy since 2019. Arguably one of the smartest in the room, his true face is particularly exposed when confronted with Catalonia's independence movement. For example, he mentioned "the need to disinfect those claiming independence" in a meeting of an institution

("Societat Civil Catalana") not shy of its pro-Francoist members; at the same time, in a fascinating twist of history, he's never afraid in comparing Catalonia's peaceful claims to self-determination to Hitler's Germany in the 1930s! Worst of all, beyond the murky arguments from those who should lead by example, Spain's lack of real institutional reform deprives it of the potential to be represented by different views and mindsets, offering knowledge, democratic standards and savoir faire. Granted, this system of mediocrity and ineptitude is functional to Madrid's corrupt political caste, self-centred in the sacrosanct unity of the state and in the continuity of their hold on power.

Author's original title:  
Spanish civil servants  
ranking low internationally



Franco supporters at the former dictator's reburial in 2018. EFE