

CONFRONTING VOICES ON THE EUROPEAN PROJECT AND THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA

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An op-ed article in *The New York Times* published by the end of 2013 captured the interest of Jorge San Miguel, a journalist for the online magazine *Jot Down*. In that article a famous Spanish writer, Almudena Grandes, remembered with nostalgia bygone times. According to her, Spain's society is nowadays "as poor as it was before" but now it lacks "pride and [is] unwilling to rebellion because Europe has taken all this away". Grandes' nod given to the past was hardly criticised by San Miguel, who stands up for the great development Spain has gone through since its integration into the EU. These represent the classic opposing points of view – 'Eurosceptic' and 'integrators' – that feeds an on-going debate on the European project that today seems more relevant than ever before.

On the one hand, Grandes brought up the idea that "any past time was better than today", evoking personal memories from the post-war period that strike a national chord. Over that time Spain, according to Grandes, ruled itself and still had personality. She based her argument on the assertion that "Germany is who runs our country and before we were free". On the other hand, San Miguel disagrees with Grandes' romantic illusion, highlighting that the economic and cultural development of Spain was mostly thanks to the work done together with the rest of European countries. San Miguel refuses that Spain's society wants to step back in time because, as the title of his article says, "we don't want to be poor Almudena". These confronting ideas represent a nation forever ideologically divided.

Indeed, there is a feeling of lacking sovereignty in those European countries most affected by the financial crisis. However, it seems that the majority in Spain aims to move forward and not to be stuck in the past, as San Miguel states. Kapuscinski once said that a journalist should report in a way that tries to help mankind and not to foster hatred and arrogance (Kapuscinski, 2006). Therefore, giving a biased and decontextualized romantic idea of old times, as Grandes did, may undermine Spain's desires for winds of political and structural change.

Past experiences have shown that in times of difficulties a cooperative work among nations brings more benefits than isolation. In this regard, it was concluded from the discussions at CIDOB workshop last December that the

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less nationalist a country is, the higher the European feeling. Michelangelo Conoscenti, member of the scientific committee, explained how Europe was a project with the aim of improving people's lives but what people actually perceive is that quality of life is decreasing.

Voices in favour of a withdrawal from the EU are whispered shyly for diverse reasons, for instance by Greece or the United Kingdom. A debatable idealistic economic independence is the main claim, which would squeeze Spaniards' pockets (in this case) even more sharply than current austerity measures. Although this is not what appeals the majority in Europe. Grandes' negative approach to the European project portrays the so-called 'Eurosceptic view', which is also a trend in reporting European affairs. Her discourse blames the richest countries in Europe, taking a domestic angle of the story and separating the EU from the home country, breaking up 'them and us'. As it was discussed at the CIBOD seminar, this is one of the most common 'mis-understandings' when reporting on Europe within the mass media. It was also identified that the majority of the press tend to address European issues from a negative approach. This seems to attract public interest more than positive news angles, which are usually too idealistic. European news are usually treated from a local angle for the same reason: it attracts more audience. Cottle identifies this phenomenon as the 'pull of the national' (Cottle, 2009). Grandes' analysis, furthermore, was made on an international media platform, what led us to bring into question how convenient is for non-European countries – such as the US – to portray a negative image of the EU.

The truth is that there is not a strong attachment between Spain and the EU. Europe still remains a distant place for many Spaniards. Although, as a result of many advances in technology and communication, we all have broken down barriers and modified the way we see the world. People are more able to engage with each other than ever before. And a 'respatialization' of the world is taking place while transnational connections happen simultaneously, as Scholte's definition of globalisation states (Scholte, 2005 [2000]). For instance, conflicts and famine in sub-Saharan Africa in the late 1990s caused a massive influx of immigrants arriving to Spanish coastline, and at the time that became a focus of national interest. There again is the 'pull of the national'.

Overall, how do we, as journalists, integrate diversity from all European countries? How can we make citizens feel part of a common project? Should we avoid the 'pull of the national'? The answer may be in re-educating citizens on what the European common project is about, where the media play a fundamental role. The two confronting views previously described – 'Eurosceptic' and 'integrators' – lead the debate. The media need to meet a balanced news discourse when reporting on European issues. And, at the same time, journalism is seen to have the responsibility to play the 'watchdog' role. It is a time of transition, a time of change. North, South, East are all Europe. If Europe wants to rebuild the common project, we all need to work together. Younger generations are more pro EU than the previous ones. European citizens are more willing to give up some of their particularities in favour of an integration process, which globalisation is definitely encouraging.

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