



## THE IBERIAN PENINSULA, TERRITORIAL HOMOGENEITY AND EUROPE'S PERIPHERY

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### Abstract:

The Portuguese have a strong and established external certainty of their independence. This clarity of vision is obviously not present when looking inwards at understanding and conceptualising their own internal borders. Apart from that, an administrative, or even political, integration between Portugal and Spain would be clearly advantageous in terms of rationalisation of resources and immediate productivity on a global level. However, it would seriously harm the interests of the Portuguese, and is far from being debated in the Peninsula.

**Keywords:** Spain; Portugal; territory; borders.

### Resumen:

*Los portugueses tienen una fuerte y establecida certeza externa de su independencia. Esta claridad de visión obviamente no está presente cuando miran al interior, al comprender y conceptualizar sus propias fronteras internas. Aparte de esto, una integración administrativa, o incluso política, entre España y Portugal sería claramente ventajosa en términos de racionalización de recursos y productividad inmediata a nivel global. Sin embargo, dañaría seriamente los intereses de los portugueses, y está lejos de ser debatida en la península.*

**Palabras clave:** España; Portugal; territorio; fronteras.

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## **Introduction**

When one asks any Portuguese if they have a clear notion their region's boundaries, the reaction is usually one of amazement. Ignorance on hydrographic basins and their inherent economic activities is commonly found amongst the people of this country.

If we ask a fellow citizen, with an average education, what is his or her notion of where our boundaries with Spain lie, we are sure to obtain a quick and clear answer.

Furthermore, he or she will show no signs of uncertainty regarding the exact location of the borders.

He or she will also not recall any border dispute with Spain in recent history. He or she will have likely heard of the Hydrographic Basins' Agreements, but will not relate them to any dispute. If he or she is minimally informed, he will know that the Douro Basin is overflowing into the Tagus' in Spanish territory. What most people are not aware of, nor have they a way of doing so, is that despite any regional or national planning, the only possible location where the Douro Basin can overflow into the Tagus', in Portugal, has already been built although is not operational, nor is it scheduled to be.

We will attempt to demonstrate that Portugal is a nation with a clear notion of its identity and independence in relation to others, but is almost dysfunctional in its affirmation and internal territorial identification.

## **1. The Artificiality of Portuguese Territory**

Contrary to the perception of the Roman Empire's 'great territory', and according to the extension of the hydrographic basins of the rivers Douro, Tagus and Guadiana, the development of the Iberian conquest and its various fronts, determined that the Portuguese territory developed transversally to these large hydrographic basins, their valleys and mountain ranges.

On the other hand, the Castilian pretension of dominating the whole Iberian pentagon has a very clear conceptual and territorial unity. Portugal is therefore a strange body that has appropriated itself of the Peninsula's Atlantic coast and which makes the economic development of a large part of the Spanish territory, unviable to a large extent by cutting the access to the Atlantic ports of these basins.

Portugal has organised itself internally into 19 districts, under a vision that derives from the notion of 'military region', where from the economic point of view, only the Algarve has an unquestionable identity.

Whereas the military see large rivers as boundaries or obstacles, economic history has shown instead that large rivers are elements of communication, they foster economic activity on both banks and cultural coalescence. Trás-os-Montes, Beira Alta, Beira Baixa, Beira Litoral, Douro, Ribatejo and Alentejo are expressions that are strongly linked to the marginalisation of their peoples in relation to their neighbours, regardless if they are Portuguese or Spanish.



If coastal regions, even those with estuaries, are isolated from main international routes that have always crossed nearby due to small circumstantial physical conditions, then one must admit that inland areas suffer from total isolation when pushed against an international border, made artificially 'impermeable', and whose main rivers have been neglected.

The main railroads that cross the Iberian Peninsula, activated almost one hundred years ago taking full advantage of the plain banks of the Tagus and Douro, have been practically abandoned.

Since Portugal has a territory profoundly marked by its deep valleys and accentuated orographic relief, the most natural ways of economic penetration, its rivers and main tributaries (in general naturally navigable for many tens of kilometres along the whole Portuguese coast) have seen their projects for navigability put aside and, with the exception of the Douro, have become unnavigable and obstructed.

The actual projects for future bridges currently being developed in Portugal and that will be located near the Atlantic coast are jeopardising any future plans for upriver navigation, due to the characteristics of their design.

The strongest example in history of riverside development in Portugal goes back to the Phoenicians.

## **2. Portugal and Isolation**

Until recently, Portugal perceived itself as an island between a vast Atlantic front of over six hundred kilometres and a border with Spain, where both kingdoms created an artificial desertification on either side, forming a natural buffer zone.

With a few exceptions, the population on both sides of the border lived completely, or almost completely, separated. Between them were two languages, Castilian and Portuguese, that had grown apart since the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

Due to several linguistic reasons, the lack of oral understanding between these two languages, even between neighbouring settlements, was relevant.

## **3. Independence or the Rationalisation of Integration**

The new reality of European integration has extinguished physical borders between the countries. Alongside to the removal of borders, Spain has become the second most important destination for Portuguese emigration, right after the United Kingdom.

The importance of Spanish companies in the banking sector, insurance, real estate and agriculture has gained tremendous relevance. There has also been a significant development in the logistics sector, namely ground logistics, in terms of their growth and organisational solutions.

The low-cost airline network, that extends rationally throughout the Iberian Peninsula and Balearic Isles, sees Portugal as an integral part of its logistics plan.



In the medium term, one can predict a much more expressive economic and financial integration of the two countries. A primary approach would suggest that as far as planning, transport networks, Atlantic coastal services, ports and rational management of the most important peninsular hydrographic basins are concerned, the integration of territorial administration would be a positive factor to the peoples of the Iberian Peninsula. This would be so, especially, to the inhabitants of depressed inland areas, in particular those near both sides of the border.

It seems clear to us that the Atlantic region, that encompasses the Tagus estuary in Lisbon and the Sado's in Setúbal, also including the extraordinarily important Port of Sines, is the natural interface to the World for the Central Region of Madrid. If confirmed, this projection would develop strategically and articulately the Spanish corridor that includes Trujillo, Mérida, Cáceres and Badajoz, an area which has been described historically as the most disadvantaged and with the least perspectives for development in Spain. This would be a real corridor for development at European level, even globally, that would place Central Spain and the Iberian Meseta as a crucial key to Spanish success and its international affirmation, a firm answer to aspirations to independence by Catalonia and the Basque Country.

The Spanish High-Speed Railway Network will be the most extensive and modern in Europe within the next few years, covering the whole of the Iberian Peninsula including the impressive backbone of Perpignan-Barcelona-Zaragoza-Madrid-Córdoba-Málaga, which will allow one to cross the Peninsula from north to south in a few hours, whilst simultaneously rationalising low-cost flights. Unaware of these plans, for the obvious reasons, a vast part of Portugal will be deprived of a modern railway network. Due to lack of vision, a large part of the Portuguese territory will soon be completely isolated from the European standard gauge, if its railway system does not articulate itself with the modernisation of the Spanish network.

Even as far as scientific and statistical records are concerned, it is painful to verify how information processed at various levels, may they be climatic, geological, amongst others, gets interrupted at the Portuguese border.

As we know, Portuguese meteorology systematically precedes Spain's by one day. The fact that the press in Spain and its media in general, purposefully exclude meteorological data on the Portuguese Atlantic rectangle results in a dramatic lack of information on their own weather predictions.

We know today that the majority of the Peninsula's economic flux is between the industrialised zones of the Mediterranean Coast and Cantabria to the Portuguese Coast. This could result in having the ability and critical mass needed to finally promote Portuguese ports, namely their potential as multi-mode and container terminals as an immediate alternative to the Mediterranean ports. In short, there would be both political and economic ability to finally implement the already old and legitimate idea of capturing the immense international maritime traffic that flows along the Portuguese coast and integrate it with aerial cargo transport (goods and agricultural produce) that crosses the southern Atlantic, namely from Brazil, Argentina and Chile.



#### 4. The Portuguese World and the Spanish World

The Iberian vision of political and administrative integration between Portugal and Spain is deeply limitative. Characterised by mysticism, territorial progression during the Catholic *reconquista* was concentrated on two fronts. Portugal's was the most successful and preceded Spain by two hundred years in the conquering of African lands. The advance of both fronts was never made independently and the support between them is clear. Whereas Spain suffers a setback of two and half centuries with the counteroffensive and rule of the Kingdom of Granada, Portugal does not hesitate to proceed with placing pressure and conquest of the North African Coast and also the Atlantic archipelagos (Madeira and Azores). With greater or lesser delays, the history of the control of the seas and of the 'new world' is well known, just as is the difference in approach to overseas policies and strategies for controlling the territory seized; on the one hand Spain's focus on exploitation of natural resources and territorial occupation, and on the other, Portugal's creation of logistical and commercial platforms and also military control of the nerve centres along the main maritime routes of the time, as were, for example, the Straits of Ormuz and Malaca.

The Portuguese-speaking world and the one commonly known as of 'Iberian expression' are two completely separate fields on the current globalised outlook. This is also reflected in the characteristics of the peoples in the former colonies.

Spain and Portugal, a large and medium-large European country, are witnessing the possibility of becoming large economies on a global scale due to the increase in economic cooperation with the new emerging powers of Latin America and Africa, namely through recent exploration of fossil fuels.

The relationship between Portugal and Brazil is especially paradigmatic as Portugal has kept its population fixed around 10 million in the last 30 years, whereas Brazil's, a country with which it shares deep cultural ties, has in the same period increased greatly from 80 million to 180 million. The Orthographic Agreement, which will come into force presently and with a much larger impact than in the past, indicates a very relevant straightening in linguistics between the two Atlantic countries, with cultural, scientific and editorial implications, amongst others.

Countries like Timor, in the far East, Angola, São Tomé e Príncipe in the Gulf of Guinea, and Cape Verde, show strong signs of 'umbilical' links to Portugal in the way in which they express their thought. The identity of these Portuguese-speaking countries is directly linked to the feeling of Portugal, as an independent nation.

Another reality that is rising is that of the number of Portuguese emigrants outside the European Union, with emotional links to Portugal. Around one million in Brazil, half a million in Venezuela, and many others in the USA, Canada and Australia are cohesively organised in communities whose essence is an Independent Portugal. The emotional intensity of this link is almost unheard of in Iberian Portugal.

Any of these communities, and this has been highlighted lately in the case of Venezuela, has specific relevance in the national economy of the host country, namely in its middle sectors.

Whereas integration in the European Union was naturally accepted by all of these Portuguese-speaking communities, an administrative or political union with Spain would be



foreign to the cultural identity of Lusophony<sup>2</sup>, especially in the case of Latin America due to Brazil's position as an emerging dominant power. Any integration of this kind would not be seen positively by these communities and this feeling would most probably be followed by a contrary reaction by the decision centres of world powers, which have appeared to support a strategic 'fracture' between the Kingdoms of Portugal and Spain for more than six centuries, and would today stand by the reasons for having done so.

## **5. Advantages of Autonomy**

Contrary to the advantages of territorial rationalisation in the Iberian Peninsula, Portugal is able to keep significant strategic scope of action by maintaining its independence, especially with regard to its strategic positioning and the territorial planning of its two most important urban communities.

In terms of geographical distribution of its urban communities, Portugal has focused on Lisbon and Oporto as developing centres, which scatter a western Atlantic region that is in no way threatened by any other Spanish urban centre.

The strategic and sustained planning of the Lisbon metropolitan area or that of the Greater Lisbon Community is incompatible with a rationalisation of the great transeuropean logistical and transport networks. A situation where two large Portuguese urban communities would be subject to a centralising territorial vision based in Madrid, or even on a Madrid-Lisbon axis, would also be incompatible. Portugal cannot have an optimised vision of its own development of the Port of Sines or of a cargo terminal in Beja, without undermining the pretensions for economies of scale of the whole network of airports and terminals that Madrid is currently building around itself. Aerial traffic from the southern Atlantic would have clear advantages on Portugal's Atlantic platforms.

In a centralised management of water resources from the hydrographic basins, Portugal would clearly lose ability to negotiate, namely on items such as the discussion of overflow from the river Douro to the Tagus and Ebro and also from the Tagus to the Guadiana.

Through the example of Galicia we learn that even the Portuguese language would stop being dominant in decision centres and that the promotion of Portuguese history would be sacrificed in favour of more pressing matters.

Madrid has been perceived negatively by some regions in its periphery, which have had difficulties in easily recovering parts of their autonomy.

The actual decision of establishing large networks across Spain came from the top and was focused primarily on Madrid, which in no way gave in to the alternatives put forward by the autonomous regions where priority was given to medium-technology and wider territorial coverage.

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<sup>2</sup> From the Portuguese term *Lusofonia*, the Portuguese-speaking world.



## Conclusions

The Portuguese have a strong and established external certainty of their independence. This clarity of vision is obviously not present when looking inwards at understanding and conceptualising their own internal borders.

In fact, there is no question about the inflexibility of Portugal's border with Spain and much less about complete autonomy.

When it comes to conceptualising and identifying the limits of specific regions, a clear difficulty becomes apparent and answers are inconclusive.

An administrative, or even political, integration between Portugal and Spain would be clearly advantageous in terms of rationalisation of resources and immediate productivity on a global level. However, it would seriously harm the interests of the Portuguese, namely the majority of the population living in the two urban communities of Lisbon and Oporto, especially with regard to taking advantage of Portugal's unique natural resources which, in the event of proper vision and strategy, would permit it to project itself globally through excellence, without necessarily including Madrid's interests.

The map of continental Portugal is clearly a strange body and an unnatural geographical discontinuity of the Iberian Peninsula with which the Roman Empire did not have to deal with, but that all other subsequent world powers have chosen to maintain.

This administrative integration would cause a considerable disturbance in the Lusophony, which is increasingly less Portuguese, and in the countries of 'Iberian expression', which are increasingly less Spanish, although they all project their identities and their differences precisely on their former colonialist motherlands.

Iberian rationalisation between the territories of Spain and Portugal, namely of the border areas and the Atlantic coast, are far from only being debated in the Peninsula. For better or for worse, the countries must learn to 'divide', with all the implications that this entails.

