

“Green Policies Are about Our Entire Way of Life”

Article by Inés Sabanés

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The Covid-19 pandemic is the latest in a string of crises Spain has faced in recent years, which have left the country weakened and many worried about its future. With elections on the horizon, Member of the Spanish Parliament Inés Sabanés explains how an all-encompassing Green vision can transform every aspect of society, and why Europe has the potential to help Spain overcome many of its difficulties.

Green European Journal: From the perspective of the Greens (Verdes Equo), what are the key political issues facing Spain in 2021?

Inés Sabanés: The pandemic has reset political priorities at both the Spanish and European levels. Three fundamental issues stick out; they were important during the 2021 Madrid elections and are present throughout our daily political life. First is the economic and social recovery: in response to the crisis caused by the pandemic but also in connection to the climate emergency. The distribution of projects arising from European funds needs to bring us out of this crisis through a fundamental structural change to the way our country works. Spain today is too susceptible to crises – our economy is overdependent on tourism for example – and needs to build its future on a more solid, productive, and better developed economic model.

The second major issue is the rise of the far right. Frequent elections have been a fundamental error and a lack of consensus between parties in government has led to a rise in the number of far-right members of parliament. Unlike in other European countries, the so-called “liberals”, Ciudadanos, and the traditional party of the Right, Partido Popular, are more than happy to work with the far right. It is a matter of great concern.

The third key dilemma is the constitutional question: territorial debates, currently centred around Catalonia, have remained constant. Spain has failed to create a national and regional model resting on dialogue and a more open vision linked to Europe.

What role does ecology play in Spanish politics? In many countries, parties from across the political spectrum are responding to green issues and proposing different solutions to the climate crisis. Is this also the case in Spain?

There is definitely a feeling at a local and municipal level that suggests that citizens can see the link between their own health and the health of the environment. I was the councillor for environment and mobility in the City Council of Madrid, where we made a large impact and started a national discussion on low-emission zones and the fight against pollution. Our example became the benchmark and it has spread to other parts of the country with a wider debate about health and the daily lives of people in Spain.

What has happened since then? Parties such as Más Madrid and Más País, in coalition with Verdes Equo, are growing in importance. More mainstream parties, including both the Socialists and left-wing Podemos, also defend green policies. The key difference is that we do not consider the environment to be merely a ministerial department or a political question, it has to drive a structural change in our politics. This is where our paths diverge. “Green” is not an arm of public policy. It is something that must run through our entire way of life, production model, and working day. It runs through all our political struggles.

How important is Europe to setting the political agenda in Spain?

With a few exceptions, European policies have a large impact in Spain and people have faith in the European project. Europe often helps Spain to progress in areas where the country lacks ambition. European policies and directives play a central role in driving policies that are crucial for the changes that we have to make in the next 10 years and beyond. Europe not only improves the here-and-now but it also helps change our model of growth and development, as well as generating job opportunities.

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Where does Spain sit in terms of European politics?

There are two sides to Spain’s relationship with Europe. Spain draws a lot from Europe: we are always influenced by the continent and we often look to Europe as a guiding partner. On the other hand, Spain is also a reference point for many in Europe. Movements such as 15M and Los Indignados helped galvanise grassroots campaigns for democracy in many other countries. Both as a result of 15M and in its own right, the feminist movement has exploded in Spain with younger people bringing their ideas to a more traditional feminist fight. Here is where Spain has set an example.

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Have the European Green Deal and the recovery fund helped to push ecological issues up the political agenda?

These are issues that have been around for a long time and they have been debated before: resource depletion, the lack of opportunities in our economic model, the fact that many young people have no choice other than to emigrate. The pandemic has reinforced the need for a European Green Deal and for European funds to deal with our recovery. It is

possible, however, that certain businesses and sectors, such as large corporations and energy companies, see the deal as a benefits system. They will be more than happy to receive funds while failing to make the changes that are so desperately needed.

However, many people are already seeing opportunities for change. The situation presents new possibilities and we saw this in the elections in Madrid where a clear message was sent about daily life, mental health, and the working day – all issues that are intrinsically linked to green policies. The Greens will keep fighting for the policies for which we have been fighting throughout the last 10 years. After years of green policies being locked out of the political agenda, we finally have a platform.

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**How do climate issues and the challenge of the green transition affect Spain?
What are the most pressing ecological problems in Spain?**

Spain is greatly affected by water and irrigation issues, especially in coastal and Mediterranean regions. It is no use trying to pin it down to one factor: energy policy and costs, water policy, drought and water transfer, and of course the effects of climate change all contribute. What we need is to change the urban and developmental model of the affected regions.

Right now, in light of the climate crisis and our fragility exposed by the pandemic, ecological policies are no longer an abstraction, they are everyday issues. We need to have an important debate as, for the first time, the public recognises the link between daily life and ecological issues. Previously little-discussed issues such as healthy eating and local food production are now on the table. The temperature in the southern outskirts of Madrid can be up to 8 degrees warmer than in other areas of the capital. Building renovations and energy efficiency are not the preserve of the wealthy but affect those in every income bracket.

**Which level of politics will be most important to the Greens in the coming years?
National, local, or European?**

Our political presence is active across the board and in constant campaign mode. We are setting our sights mainly on 2023 and 2024, when there may be elections first at local, regional, and national level, with European elections shortly afterwards in 2024. For different reasons, they will all be incredibly important elections for our country. The locals are important because you can put policy into practice that people can see in their daily lives. The regional elections are important for education and healthcare. At a national and European level, you have the grand themes of politics: territorial issues and conflicts, regional development, and our relationship with Europe. We took 17 per cent of the vote in the Madrid elections so our objective is to carve out a niche for green politics in Spain that is separate to social democracy and the more traditional Left. Neither a fusion nor confusion of these spaces is helpful. Instead, there needs to be a clear green space at every political

level, as exists in Madrid. Green policy is not environmental policy, it is holistic and calls for change across society. We will fight for this space because we cannot make the error of forgetting our key principles: preserving the right to a prosperous future while looking after our population and our planet: a 32-hour working week, mental health, care, and cooperation. It's a vision of radical change and transformation.

How do election results in neighbouring countries affect Spanish politics?

Elections in other European countries are the moments when Europe has most influence on Spain. Whether it's the German or the French elections, engagement with the elections going on around us brings many positives. The so-called "Green Wave" was very positive for us and we see it as an opportunity for Spain and for Europe.

I think there has been a key change: we used to see Europe as a protective space that provided directives, laws, funds, and grants. Nowadays, there is a much more intense political element, which translates into a more global vision. We are in an exceptional moment in which there is a much more fluid conversation between the different countries of the European Union and ourselves.

The European Union today faces important strategic problems, such as US-China tensions, climate change, and the pandemic. How does Verdes Equo see Europe's place in the world?

We have always seen the EU as an important tool for building peace, coexistence, and rights across the world. A European Union with a strong international voice can play an effective part in the defence of human rights with strong interventions in entrenched and long-running conflicts such as Israel and Palestine or the Western Sahara. With its independence and experience, it can have a fundamental role. However, Europe's credibility is at stake. The EU needs to maintain these commitments to freedom and peace and maintain a clear voice in the face of conflict and migration. Our Union contains Ceuta, Melilla, and Lesbos; it has to say it loud and clear that we will not tolerate inhumanity. Europe has done it before and it needs to do it again.

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What are the priorities for your party in the coming years?

At the moment, we want to keep building a green platform interwoven with the people, institutions, and other green parties. This is not only because we believe in our political work but because we have the firm conviction that preserving the future of the planet and fighting against the climate emergency is the great challenge of the 21st century. Building this green platform is more than a question of political ambition, it's a fundamental necessity. After that, stopping the rise of the far right is crucial, before they further chip away at human rights and their climate denial. That also means getting rid of the heinous agreements at both a European and national level that appease them.

However, this global vision does not leave behind the everyday themes: health, education,

bread and butter issues... Daily life should reflect the big changes that we want to make.



Inés Sabanés has been a Member of the Spanish Parliament since January 2020 and co-spokesperson of the Spanish Green Party, Equo, since february 2020. From 2016 to 2020, she was local councillor of the city of Madrid, in charge of sustainable mobility where she put in place Madrid Central, a low emissions zone in the centre of Madrid. She has occupied different political responsibilities in Spanish institutions, and she has always defended general interest, human rights and green politics as a way to get a fairer and more sustainable world.

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