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ANGELA MERKEL IN MADRID: a picture is worth more than a thousand words

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“Spain has really done its homework and I think it is on the right track.” With these words, spoken in Madrid on 3 February, the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, closed the twenty-third bilateral summit between Spain and Germany. The unevenness of expectations of both parties was increasingly evident as the meeting approached. While, for the Spanish Government, it represented backing for the economic reforms it has undertaken, for the German Chancellor, it was merely a protocol-ordained visit to one of the more problematic countries of the Eurozone.

This summit, the most economic in focus since the inception of these encounters in 1984, not only brought together the ministers for Foreign Affairs, Economy and Finance, Labour and Social Affairs, Transport and Infrastructure, and Education and Science, but it was also attended for the first time by union and employers’ leaders as well as heads of big enterprises in each country. Furthermore, in order to give additional solemnity to the occasion, King Juan Carlos I received Chancellor Merkel in the Zarzuela Palace.

With the Merkel-Zapatero duo at the helm, relations between Spain and Germany have been somewhat distant, in contrast with other memorable, more fruitful periods such as that of the Kohl-González tandem. Since Angela Merkel became Chancellor in November 2005, and in the wake of several inopportune declarations and different points of view with regard to business matters, the Spanish and German governments have gone from organising annual encounters to holding their bilateral summits on a biennial basis, more out of pure formality than shared interest. The most blatant case was the summit of March 2010, held in Hanover on the occasion of the visit by José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero to the inauguration of the CeBIT Technology Fair at which Spain was the guest country. With barely a ripple in the media, Merkel and Rodríguez Zapatero met for just over an hour to talk about the Europe 2020 strategy, the situation of the economy in Greece, and the latest events in international politics.

The distant relationship between Merkel and Zapatero hit an all-time low in 2010. The year began with one of Spain’s first proposals in its six-month Presidency of the Council of the European Union being very badly received by Germany. At a meeting with foreign correspondents, José Luis Rodríguez Zapa-

tero proposed introducing corrective measures (or sanctions) for those member states that did not comply with the objectives of the new Europe 2020 strategy, which was replacing the Lisbon Strategy. Germany's Federal Minister of Economics and Technology, Rainer Brüderle, peremptorily rejected this possibility, thus discrediting Spain. Another falling-out between Spain and Germany occurred over the European Protection Order for women victims of gender-based violence. In this case, Germany, along with other countries and also the European Commission, harshly criticised Spain's proposal without showing any willingness to smooth over differences. Finally, many of the murmurings and rumours that questioned Spain's solvency and hinted at a possible financial rescue along the lines of Greece's came from the German media.

2011 has begun by breaking the spiral of misunderstandings. In the words of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, the Madrid summit was "the most important of those held between Spain and Germany in recent years". It would seem that the annual basis of the summit might be resumed. Nevertheless, the uncertainty remains as to whether these are really summits with content or whether their utility is simply to be found in the photo at the end. On the most recent occasion, the summit agenda included very little in the way of bilateral cooperation, while the international agenda was, naturally, monopolised by the democratic revolts in the Arab world, and the European agenda was eminently economic. The latter included, on the one hand, the public presentation of the Spanish adjustment plans and, on the other, an explanation of the French-German proposal on the need for a European "competitiveness pact". In sum, a lot of photos, little debate and no joint proposal.

In the early 1980s Spain decided that the best strategy for prominence on the map of Europe was to move closer to its potential partners by means of holding bilateral summits. There was nothing new about this tactic since it was a repetition of the Franco-German model of the 1963 Élysée Treaty, which was based on the system of regular summits at the highest level of government. After more than twenty-five years of Spanish-German summits, the meeting has once again become useful for Spain's reputation.

The main result of this latest summit has been a photograph. The thousand words have yielded a bonus of confidence in, and an enhanced reputation for the Spanish economy but have not produced any agenda for cooperation at either bilateral or European level. The only thing that interests Germany is that Spain's economy is "on the right track" and Spain, whether alone or with other members, is hardly in a position to influence the European agenda. The asymmetrical usefulness of these summits, more sought by Spain than Germany, has yet again been demonstrated. The main goal of the summits between Spain and Germany should surely be that of having some influence in the European agenda. Yet the encounter between Merkel and Zapatero in Madrid will not be leaving any Spanish-German traces in the near future of the EU. Spain has returned to the (geographical and political) periphery of Europe.