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'We have to remain sceptical'

Dependent on regional parties, Spain's new left-wing coalition stands on shaky grounds. Gero Maass reports from Madrid

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Last year, the formation of a government failed because of personal differences, but now the social democratic PSOE under Pedro Sánchez and the left-wing populist Podemos under Pablo Iglesias are finally coming together in a joint government. Is this more than an alliance of convenience?

There is a coalition agreement between the two partners outlining the intended focus of their political work — but it's by no means comparable with the detailed coalition agreements in Germany, for example.

Spurred on by the PSOE's good results in the April elections, Sánchez had initially hoped for an even better result in the November elections — but in vain. He remained dependent on Podemos. Moreover, like Podemos, the understanding of the majority in the PSOE was clear: neither personal animosities nor tactical games about the number and competence of ministries — the PSOE had lost three mandates compared to April and Podemos had lost seven. Hence the quick agreement after the second new elections in November accompanied by the symbolic hugs between the two leaders.

Moreover, the alternatives were limited: the conservative PP rejected an election. The right-wing liberal Ciudadanos, the big election loser, was no longer an option as a partner because of its dramatic losses. Finally, they interpreted the strong result of the right-wing populist VOX as a warning. VOX entered the Spanish parliament for the first time with 15 per cent of the vote, making it one of the strongest parliamentary representations of right-wing populists in Europe!

The PSOE and Podemos do not have their own majority in parliament and this is the first coalition government in recent history. How stable

is this government then anyway?

We have to remain sceptical whether the decision to form Spain's first coalition government since the 1930s can become a progressive alliance that will shape the country for years to come. Both parties only managed to obtain 155 of the necessary 176 mandates for a majority. It remains a government on call and above all dependent on the Basque and Catalan regional parties. The latter already let the head of government down last year in the votes on the national budget, which was then the prelude to new elections.

They cannot expect support from the other parties. After the election disaster and the resignation of its leader, the right-wing liberal Ciudadanos is first of all preoccupied with itself and looking for a new course. The conservative PP will look for every possibility to bring down this — in their eyes — Frankenstein government.

Sánchez was elected with the votes of Catalonia's largest separatist party, ERC. What concessions did Sánchez have to make in return?

In a memorandum of understanding with the ERC, Sánchez agreed to a dialogue on the "political conflict" between Madrid and Barcelona. The ERC already interprets this as the beginning of negotiations on an independence referendum. However, the prime minister has always been clear that while it's possible to talk about more autonomy, it has to be within the framework of the Spanish constitution and Catalonia's remaining with Spain. The talks are due to start in two weeks' time and conflicts are inevitable.

But a solution to the Catalonia question would be a true blessing. It hangs like a dark cloud over Spanish politics and society. It divides the parties and ensures that often the really important issues of the future — such as pensions, digitalisation, climate — cannot be addressed.

The question is how to solve this issue that divides the country into Catalan independence supporters — like the ERC —, supporters of federal solutions — like the PSOE and large parts of Podemos — and centrist hardliners — PP and VOX. The latter would prefer to return to the strong central state and put the Catalan troublemakers under external administration once again. I see no alternative to Sánchez's course of dialogue and small steps forward.

What are the concrete reforms that the government is planning?

The socio-political flagship project is to reverse the conservative reform of the labour laws from 2012. That's why the two trade union confederations, the UGT and the CCOO, have been vehemently supporting a coalition government. They hope that they will once

again have better opportunities for organising and collective bargaining. This, however, requires a parliamentary majority and successful agreements between the social partners. The outcome is therefore highly uncertain.

Pedro Sánchez represents a confident Spain within the EU. What foreign policy can be expected from this left-wing government alliance?

The new government will remain not only a government on call, but also a government of domestic policy. Yes, there's a new European political self-confidence and the will to engage with Europe again after a decade of deadlock. The new EU High Commissioner Josep Borrell and the new leader of the S&D Group Iraxte García Perez express this new Spanish attitude.

Foreign policy is more likely to be driven by long-term considerations. The government will become involved where Spanish interests are directly affected, such as in a common European migration policy or relations with North African and Latin American countries.

This interview was conducted by Claudia Detsch.



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