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Spain's emptying lands

By tackling the growing rural demographic decline and lack of political representation, the España Vaciada movement is giving a voice to the affected

The rural idyll is booming as a lifestyle idea. But hardly anyone wants to live out in the country permanently. The trend is the same in many regions of Europe: entire swaths of the countryside are being bled dry. Politicians are confronted with similar challenges, as they are responding to declining population figures by cutting back on infrastructure, which leads to even more emigration.

Especially in the Nordic countries such as Finland and Sweden, but also in eastern Germany, regions are at risk and are struggling with shrinking population numbers. Overall, the EU is confronted with the problem of demographic changes, especially with the increasing ageing of the population. But remote rural regions could be caught in a 'vicious circle of decline', as the European Parliament put it in a briefing.

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The Spanish movement *España Vaciada* ('emptied Spain') no longer wants to accept this trend. With its success, for example in the autonomous community of Castile and León, it could become a model for the rest of Europe. In this region, which is almost as large as the former GDR, nearly two and a half million Spaniards were called to the polls in February to elect a regional parliament. In addition to the horror of the right-wing extremist party Vox, which for the first time was brought into a coalition by the conservative *Partido Popular* after its election success, it was above all the *España Vaciada* movement that shaped the election campaign. Its approach might well change politics in Spain.

España Vaciada put up lists in five of the nine provinces of Castile and León and even became the strongest party in the province of Soria. On

both the left and the right, parties reacted to the new competition and tried to adopt its themes for themselves. Luis Tudanca, the candidate for the Socialist Workers' Party, spoke of the 'nation rendered invisible'.

The plan to combat an emptying rural Spain

What does the movement want and where is it coming from? In 2016, the book *EspañaVacia* (Empty Spain) by local reporter Sergio del Molino was published. At the time he wrote: 'There is an urban and European Spain, in all its characteristics indistinguishable from any European urban society, and an inland and unpopulated Spain, which I call empty Spain.' According to Sergio de Molina, more than half of Spain's territory falls into this category. There are 7.3 million people living there, which amounts to 16 per cent of the population.

The term 'empty Spain' refers to areas that suffered massive emigration during the so-called rural exodus of the 1950s and 1960s. Regressive Spain was only able to embark upon the path to democracy in 1976 after the death of dictator Franco, who had been in power since 1939; it experienced an unprecedented wave of emigration in the 1950s and 1960s. 'We want to work, we don't want to emigrate,' was a protest cry that was heard often at the time.

España Vaciada is a political platform and social movement made up of a large number of citizens' groups and associations. Some of these have existed for two decades, and they compete under different names in many provinces. The movement tries to represent the interests of an increasingly emptier rural Spain – with increasing success.

The name of the platform not only refers to the process of depopulation, but also implies a critique of the relocation of infrastructure resulting from the chronic neglect of rural regions by the central government in Madrid.

For the province of Teruel, a representative of *Teruel Existe* even entered the Spanish national parliament in 2019 and tipped the scales in the vote of no confidence against Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, which he won with a razor-thin majority. The name of the Teruel platform expresses a certain gallows humour; roughly translated, it means: 'Teruel really does exist!' It is reminiscent of 'Ainielle exists', the first sentence in the preface to the 1988 novel *The Yellow Rain* by Julio Llamazares, which tells the story of the last remaining inhabitant in a Pyrenees village.

In its programme, the platform emphasises that it wants to correct the flawed, unfair and asymmetrical model of territorial development. Its goal is to put the exodus from rural areas, the dismantling of infrastructure, and the consequent risk of desertification on the political agenda. The name of the platform not only refers to the process of depopulation, but also implies a critique of the relocation of infrastructure resulting from the chronic neglect of rural regions by the central government in Madrid.

The example of Soria

One of the most depopulated provinces – in Castile and León and in all of Spain – is Soria. In an area four times the size of Saarland, a total of only 90,717 people are living in 183 communities. That is 8,116 fewer than in 1987, a decline of over eight per cent. This means that the population density has fallen below the limit of nine inhabitants per square kilometre ('demographic vulnerability'), which the EU classifies as dangerous. By comparison: in Saarland there are 383 inhabitants per square kilometre and thus 42 times more than Soria.

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The consequences of depopulation can be seen in Soria. The provincial capital of the same name has 39,000 inhabitants. It is connected to the next larger city, Valladolid, by national highway 122, which has been only partially expanded to four lanes and is a notorious accident black spot. *Soria ¡YA!*, the local department/division of *España Vaciada*, complains that hospital patients sometimes have to travel two and a half hours by ambulance to get to the hospital in Valladolid or Salamanca (three and a half hours) for medical attention.

In the Soria region, the platform achieved an impressive result in the elections: it became the strongest party with 42 per cent of the votes and entered the regional parliament with three representatives. Its success is due to its long history and local roots. In 2011 it was founded by individuals under the somewhat clumsy name 'Against being forgotten by institutions'. Now it has become the 'most mature platform' at *España Vaciada*, as Narciso Michavila, director of demoscopic company GAD3, commented.

Ensuring connectivity and mobility

España Vaciada's election programme is entitled '100/30/30'. The 100 stands for an internet connection with at least 100 megabits per second for the entire area. Basic public services and connections to national transport routes should be a maximum of 30 minutes or 30 kilometres away.

The fact that connectivity to the digital world is the top priority, even before the physical accessibility to services of general interest, shows that reliable internet access has become as basic as electricity, water and heating, even in areas that are still dominated by agriculture. The development of public infrastructure such as health centres, schools and police stations is also among the platform's demands. It proposes expanding and modernising rural and urban clinics. It advocates the introduction of employment, economic and housing incentives to encourage teachers to move to rural areas. *España Vaciada* also supports a policy of energy subsistence in the regions and the development of renewable energy sources. It argues in favour of extensive and organic farming rather than industrial farming because it 'keeps the population in rural areas and contributes to the preservation of biodiversity'.

This orientation – even though the movement, like many regional and nationalist parties in Spain, tends to be culturally conservative – makes *España Vaciada* an interesting alliance partner for the left. As the expansion of public infrastructure and an ecological orientation of energy policy and agriculture are also on the agenda of left-wing parties.

Guaranteeing a voice for empty Spain

As a rather densely populated area, countries such as Germany certainly have other problems. But it is also facing a restructuring of rural areas. The model of urban sprawl in the commuter republic of Germany, in which the automobile guarantees access to urban centres, is reaching its limits, and not only ecological ones. Sociologist Andreas Knie, for example, is calling for a digital-ecological traffic transport revolution with a revaluation of rural areas, a proposal which certainly shows parallels to *España Vaciada*'s 100/30/30 program.

Their demands for state investment in infrastructure and ecological agriculture

The advance of empty Spain into Spanish politics has so far varied greatly from region to region and depends heavily on local circumstances. In view of the difficult multi-party constellations that have replaced the traditional model of dominance by two major

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parties in Spain in recent years, their importance will probably increase. In the Spain-wide parliamentary elections planned for 2023, the local movements have a good chance of winning one or two seats in parliament.

Their demands for state investment in infrastructure and ecological agriculture make their positions seem compatible with left-wing notions of the state as a guarantor of services of general interest. In any case, one thing is clear: empty Spain has a voice and it will not remain silent in the future.



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