



07
2026

40 years of Spain and Portugal in the EU: From Periphery to Geopolitical Influence

By Carlos Uriarte Sánchez and Paula Pavičić Pérez

Introduction

On January 1st 2026, Spain and Portugal celebrated 40 years since their accession to the European Union. This event was celebrated across all major EU institutions, signaling the continuity, strength and unity of their membership and the Union itself. At an EU Parliament plenary in Strasbourg, king Felipe VI called Spain's membership transformative, and reiterated that in these dark times, unity in Europe is more necessary than ever. He argued that stronger defense, strategic autonomy and

an EU pillar within NATO cannot be delayed, and that a respectful and loyal transatlantic connection is crucial to avoid any further global escalation. Portugal's president Marcelo Rebelo Sousa also emphasized the positives of his country's membership and the need for alliances and partnerships to face international challenges. Anniversaries like these are a strong way to show how the EU is interpreting its own trajectory, and they invite the question of what these two countries in particular add to its strategic role today, when security has become a leading foreign policy topic.

1986: Democracy and belonging

When Spain and Portugal joined what was then the European Community in January 1986, they became two of only 12 members. Europe was divided by the Cold War, and the single market was still in its infancy. Both countries were undergoing democratic transitions after long dictatorships, and wanted a strong external partner that would ensure the consolidation of democratic norms, economic modernization and international credibility for their new governments. Therefore, accession was not only an economic decision, but a geopolitical strategy to show where these countries belonged in the current world order, and in Europe. 40 years later, membership in the EU has reshaped their economic model, infrastructure and citizen mobility, with EU cohesion and sectoral policies driving development domestically. Systemically, Spain and Portugal have helped the EU expand its cultural and political influence by strengthening its Atlantic and Mediterranean alliances and deepening its external partnerships, for example, through its membership in the Ibero American General Secretariat, SEGIB, of the Ibero American Community, an international organization founded in 2003 and headquartered in Madrid. The 30th biennial Summit of Heads of State and Government will take place in Madrid on 4 and 5 November this year. The EU CELAC Summit will take place in 2027, although the date has not yet been determined.

When Spain and Portugal joined the European Community in 1986, they became two of only 12 members.

The EU has become a tool of state capacity building in Spain and Portugal, and both countries are strategic assets for its evolving geopolitical role. Both countries are members of the EU MED9 group. Furthermore, Barcelona hosts the headquarters of the Union for the Mediterranean, an intergovernmental organization comprising the 27 EU Member States and 16 partner countries from the southern and eastern Mediterranean. From the EU's perspective, the enlargement expanded its reach, gaining more Atlantic coastline, stronger links to maritime routes, and greater connection to the Mediterranean, Latin America and North Africa. Geopolitically, enlargement made the EU foreign policy less centered on the continent, and more connected to overseas and post-colonial networks.

EU has become a tool of state capacity building in Spain and Portugal.

For Spain and Portugal, joining the European Community was a way of turning domestic democratization into a durable international alignment. Along with membership came adopting a new set of rules and norms across markets, governance and the judiciary. This was also a way of proving both states were committed to liberal democratic standards, thus becoming true members of the Western political spectrum, giving them the security of an alliance, especially important during the Cold War. Spain and Portugal were recently restored democracies, so the question was not whether Europe would influence domestic politics, and more if membership could protect their domestic

policies from destabilizing outside pressures. The new members' location is also one where European security challenges often intersect, and their interests are usually aligned with each other. Spain is at the junction of the Mediterranean and Atlantic, adjacent to North Africa and close to key maritime chokepoints. Portugal gives the EU a connection to the Atlantic and has historically had important links with Africa and Brazil through language, migration, and diplomacy. Portugal's membership in the Community of Portuguese Language Countries, an intergovernmental organization headquartered in Lisbon, further strengthens the role played by the country. This geography shapes the notion of European security of these states, with a preference for a broad view that includes the Eastern flank, but also the Southern neighborhood. The EU's own recent framing of Spain's contributions highlights Mediterranean and Latin America partnerships as part of Spain's value.

European integration and challenges of cohesion

Nowadays, Spain is considered both a beneficiary and a shaper of EU policy, both through leadership roles in EU institutions and repeated presidencies of the Council. Institutional presence allows both Spain and Portugal to push certain regional priorities, giving them a degree of agenda-setting power. Portugal's influence is often associated with the EU's constitutional and treaty evolution, symbolized by the Lisbon Treaty, which modernized its structure and made it more efficient and capable of addressing global challenges. Even though "Lisbon" is primarily a label for a broader EU compromise, the fact that the signing took place in Portugal and paved

the way for major institutional reforms shows how Portugal has been embedded in EU political milestones. Spain and Portugal often advocate for overlapping interests, such as cross-border infrastructure, energy connections, cohesion funding, and have a similar foreign policy approach in relation to the Atlantic and Southern neighborhood. Although their economies and size are very different, their coordination increases influence in the consensus-based system of the EU. Spain's greater population and economic scale tend to give it a louder voice, but Portugal brings assets such as Atlantic orientation, policy entrepreneurship, and external networks, especially with Africa. Spanish political figures include former Presidents of the European Parliament José María Gil Robles and Enrique Barón, as well as former EU High Representatives for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Javier Solana and Josep Borrell. Gil Carlos Rodríguez Iglesias, former President of the Court of Justice of the European Union, should also be highlighted. Among the Portuguese figures are António Guterres and José Manuel Durão Barroso, the latter a former President of the European Commission. Nor should we overlook the philosophical contribution to Europeanism made by the Spaniard Salvador de Madariaga, or the role played by former prime ministers Felipe González, Mário Soares and José Sócrates. Today, the current President of the European Council, António Costa, also brings this Iberian perspective to the institution.



Spain received over €150 billion in cohesion funding since 1986.

Economically, one of the main consequences of membership was the modernization of the two countries, as European institutions in Spain highlight more than €185 billion in EU funds over four decades. These are mostly linked to infrastructure, employment, innovation, and regional development. Spain received over €150 billion in cohesion funding since 1986, and more than 7 million households gained broadband access through regional EU funds, with close to 150,000 companies benefiting from cohesion programs. Portugal is similar, with modernization of infrastructure, improvements in education and health, and a more outward-looking economy in comparison to 1986. Integration into the single market reshaped Iberian trade patterns and production structure. Their global goods exports grew, indicating that membership deepened trade links worldwide. A major step for the economic integration of the EU was the adoption of the Euro as a single currency in January 2002 in 11 member states, including Spain and Portugal. The common currency strengthened the EU's global economic presence and reduced vulnerability to external monetary pressures. Spain and Portugal gained access to a form of collective monetary leverage, although it came with rules that constrained their own domestic policy choices. The euro created lower transaction costs and reinforced investor confidence, but it also reduced national flexibility in responding to asymmetric shocks.

Integration into the single market reshaped Iberian trade patterns and production structure.

Iberian integration increased their economy and competitiveness, but it also reduced their independent flexibility and bound them more tightly to EU-wide shocks, from global financial turbulence to energy price increases. For example, the 2008 financial crisis revealed vulnerabilities in Iberian growth models and the eurozone. A crisis such as this can weaken social cohesion and polarize politics, which then affects a state's reliability as a foreign policy actor and shapes its stance in EU negotiations. That is why the anniversary narratives often emphasize not only growth but "solidarity" during crises, pointing to the EU's role in helping Spain face challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic and natural disasters. This links economic support to the legitimacy of the European project. To sum up, EU membership helped Spain and Portugal move from relatively poorer peripheral economies toward more advanced and internationally integrated states. That modernization expanded their capacity to act, including externally. Yet structural problems did not disappear, and that inequality shapes how both states approach EU debates on competitiveness, social cohesion, and fiscal rules.

Spain's territorial tensions also became globally visible during the 2017 Catalan crisis.

While the end of the Cold War brought on a wave of optimism across Europe, Spain's late twentieth-century security environment was marked by ETA's terrorist campaign. While the conflict was mostly domestic, EU members' cooperation was crucial in ending it. ETA's inclusion as a terrorist

organization on the EU's list froze its ability to gather more funds. EU justice and home affairs cooperation deepened, cross-border police and judicial mechanisms became stronger, and norms of shared security helped prosecute the members across country borders. France's help was especially important for the arrest of high-level ETA members on French territory. Cooperation between European police and judicial authorities made it much harder for ETA to operate across borders. This helped "Europeanize" internal security standards and cooperation, and the group's dissolution in 2018 closed a chapter that had cost hundreds of lives and left deep social wounds. Spain's territorial tensions also became globally visible during the 2017 Catalan crisis. The EU treated the issue as an internal Spanish matter to be addressed within Spain's constitutional order. The Commission's statement on 1 October 2017 explicitly framed events as a matter for Spain, underlining adherence to the constitutional framework and the rule of law. This shows what has become a big tension in EU politics, as the Union is deeply involved in member states' governance through law and policy, yet it is cautious about intervening in constitutional disputes that could set precedents elsewhere. For Spain, the key benefit is that EU membership raises the cost of any unilateral rupture, as it would also signalize a departure from the Union of any breakaway region. While this does not remove identity conflict, it ties economic success and political legitimacy to membership. Currently, the European Union provides the strongest guarantee of democratic stability for both countries in the face of populist and identity-based movements, as well as government decisions that could amount to breaches of the rule of law. This is particularly relevant in Spain, where political polarization is especially pronounced.

Current situation: Ukraine, NATO and defense

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine changed the EU's role from being primarily an economic and regulatory power to a more security-conscious actor. The EU Military Assistance Mission in support of Ukraine, implemented partly in Spain, has trained more than 8,500 Ukrainian military personnel since late 2022, according to the EEAS. The war also increased debates over NATO members' spending on military and defense. Spain and Portugal have faced pressure to raise defense spending to the NATO benchmark, while balancing domestic politics and social priorities. In April 2025, Spain's prime minister, Pedro Sánchez, announced a plan to allocate 2% of GDP to security and defense, as part of a broader security and defense plan. Portugal's government similarly moved to reach the 2% target in 2025, ahead of its earlier timeline. Spain also hosts strategically important bases and maritime access points, and Portugal's Atlantic position adds depth. Sánchez has, however, pushed back against the idea that Spain should commit to a 5% of GDP defense spending target, framing it as unrealistic and politically unsustainable in Spain's current context. His position reflects a broader Spanish approach to security that tries to balance alliance credibility with domestic priorities, especially fiscal constraints and strong expectations around social spending. The debate shows a growing gap between member states calling for rapid spending increases and governments like Spain's that prefer a more gradual path focused on specific capability delivery, rather than a single percentage target. At the EU level, the broader trend is an increase in defense spending across member states, with the European Defense Agency reporting that EU member

states' defense expenditure reached €343 billion in 2024 and was estimated to rise further in 2025. Iberian budget decisions, therefore, align with the wider European rearmament context, but domestic constraints and political coalition dynamics make implementation uneven.

Sánchez has pushed back against idea that Spain should commit to 5% of GDP defense spending target.

Spain's government under Pedro Sánchez has emphasized investment in areas such as cybersecurity and telecommunications as part of defense modernization, and it has presented increased spending as compatible with European autonomy and with meeting commitments of the Alliance. At the same time, Spain's internal political landscape shapes its room for maneuver. While both states have shown their willingness and support for Ukraine, domestic friction can make Spain appear more cautious than some Northern or Eastern member states whose publics priorities deterrence more directly. The difference is not necessarily about whether Russia is a threat, but about how threat perception is balanced against other priorities, including social spending and the Southern neighborhood. This is where Spain often diverges from other EU leaders. Some governments place the Eastern Front at the center of their strategic narrative, while Spain maintains a "360-degree" approach. Eastern deterrence is important, but attention should also be paid to instability in the Sahel, migration pressures, maritime security, and the Mediterranean. Spain's value to the EU is partly that it keeps the Union from developing a one-dimensional security agenda.

The contemporary EU faces uncertainty about US commitments and preferences, which makes the transatlantic relationship both indispensable and politically contested. Spain and Portugal are Atlantic states with NATO commitments, but they also advocate stronger EU capability and autonomy separate from Washington's control. More recently, regarding the crisis in Iran, the European Commission has backed Spain after President Donald Trump threatened to cut off US trade with Madrid, following Spain's refusal to let US forces use its bases for strikes linked to Iran, officials saying the EU is ready to act to protect its interests. The episode deepens already-strained US-Spain relations over NATO defense spending and comes as wider EU-US trade tensions persist.

Spain aspires to act as a middle power within the emerging global international order.

However, Sanchez's negatives to Washington show Spain's ability to stand up against the wider tide of the EU and NATO, but also the EU's support, positioning it as an important and independent strategic actor. In this regard, Spain's leadership in promoting the recognition of the State of Palestine should be recalled, particularly at a time when this position has brought it into conflict with both the Trump administration and the government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Similarly, Pedro Sánchez's four visits to China, during which he met President Xi Jinping at a time of heightened tensions between the United States and China, as well as between the European Union and China, have attracted criticism from opposition parties and experts. Critics have argued that Spain is pursuing an independent foreign policy

position that has not been agreed domestically or coordinated with the other EU Member States. Some experts have also suggested that, under the present circumstances, the most sensible approach might be to maintain a lower profile and adopt a more diplomatic and cautious stance. Nevertheless, Spain aspires to act as a middle power within the emerging global international order. In this respect, it shares Portugal's commitment to strengthening dialogue with the so-called Global South.

Iberian Peninsula as a global bridge: Latin America, Africa, the Mediterranean, and the Atlantic

As competition among the major powers intensifies and supply chains are reassessed, Latin America has acquired considerable strategic importance for the European Union as it seeks to move beyond the United States–China axis. Shared language, diaspora networks and historical ties allow Spain to act as a bridge between EU institutions and Latin American partners, while helping to give Latin America greater priority on the EU agenda. During the EU–CELAC summit process, Spain promoted the summit as a platform for strengthening this strategic partnership and supported a joint declaration aimed at relaunching regular high-level political dialogue, including biennial summits and ministerial meetings between summits. Should the EU succeed in establishing a long-term commitment to Latin America, it would strengthen its global position and reduce its vulnerability to external coercion. In this context, it is important to recall the recent EU–Mercosur trade agreement, whose provisional trade component began to apply on 1 May 2026, the modernized EU–Mexico and EU–Chile Global Agreements of May 2026 and 2025 respectively,

as well as the existing trade agreements with the Andean Community countries of Colombia, Peru and Ecuador, and the EU–Central America Association Agreement. Portugal's external networks and its historical ties with Portuguese-speaking Africa also extend the EU's international reach. Portugal's Atlantic orientation is similarly aligned with EU interests concerning maritime routes, the protection of undersea infrastructure, and Atlantic security.

Portugal's external networks and its historical ties with Portuguese-speaking Africa also extend EU's international reach.

The influence of Spain and Portugal can also be observed through the EU's external investment activities. Spain, for example, contributes to the EU's Global Gateway initiative, which includes an EU funded clean energy project in Panama's Ngäbe Buglé region. This involvement demonstrates Spain's commitment to the EU's external connectivity agenda, which focuses on development and access to energy. Regarding Asia, Spain maintains historical ties with the Philippines and contributes to the common European effort set out in the European Union's recent Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. Pedro Sánchez visited India in 2025 and 2026, as well as Vietnam in 2025. Portugal, meanwhile, has historical ties with Goa in India, Macao in China and Timor-Leste. Another noteworthy fact is the personal connection of the President of the European Council, António Costa, with the Indian state of Goa, where his father was born.

Conclusions: Iberian EU membership then and now

Forty years after accession, Spain's and Portugal's membership of the European Union can be understood as a relationship of mutual reinforcement. For both countries, Europe has served as a driver of modernization, rights and opportunities, from cohesion funding to mobility and social programs, as well as a framework that has helped consolidate democracy. For the EU, these Member States have contributed not only economic weight, but also geopolitical expansion, a stronger Atlantic and Mediterranean presence, closer ties with Latin America, Africa, and even Asia, and a perspective that insists European security must be considered beyond any single frontier. The war in Ukraine has pushed the EU towards a greater focus on defense, and Spain's practical contributions, including the training of Ukrainian personnel, demonstrate that Iberian solidarity is both operational and symbolic. Debates over burden sharing within NATO reveal internal limitations, but also strategic commitment, as both Spain and Portugal moved towards defense spending equivalent to 2 per cent of GDP in 2025, although Spain has so far refused to align itself with the new US demand for 5 per cent. Despite persistent tensions, Spain and Portugal illustrate the balance that the EU itself is seeking to achieve by preserving the transatlantic relationship while strengthening strategic autonomy and the Union's place in the international order.

Finally, as Spain and Portugal have evolved from peripheral states into central actors within the EU, the Iberian Peninsula has become one of the Union's most effective platforms for building global alliances. Spain helps maintain a substantive EU agenda towards Latin America, while Portugal contributes to strengthening the Union's Atlantic and African networks. In today's world, where influence increasingly depends on connectivity and coalitions, these bridging roles form an important part of the EU's ability to remain a relevant global actor. In this sense, 1986 marked not only a moment of Iberian Europeanisation, but also a long-term investment in Europe's global influence, whose benefits are becoming increasingly visible in today's rapidly changing international order.

Dr. Carlos Uriarte Sánchez is a Professor of Law at Rey Juan Carlos University and President of Paneuropa in Spain, based in Madrid, Spain.

Paula Pavičić Pérez is a student of Geopolitics and Strategic Studies at Carlos III University, based in Madrid, Spain.

DISCLAIMER: The views presented in this paper are solely of the authors and do not represent an official position of the Institute for Development and International Relations (IRMO).

IRMO

Institut za razvoj i međunarodne odnose
Institute for Development and International Relations

Lj. F. Vukotinića 2, Zagreb, Croatia
www.irmo.hr