

Fairway to Poland

I sailed off to the other edge of Europe. A spell of mild weather in the East together with the expectation of a new experience abroad in a country facing huge challenges with a ramping-up economy were crucial inducements for me as a civil engineer.

After long mulling the venture of joining up the Bellevue Programme, I prepared the riggings for boarding. All masts and booms, recently varnished, were robust enough to tackle any rough sea. The Robert Bosch Foundation helped me set sail under canvas and head up the fairway to Poland.

The first impression which I got on my arrival in Warsaw at the end of September 2010 was that of an emerging city, full of modern gleaming buildings trying to fill the empty space left by communism blocks. The Polish language was totally unknown to me before starting the programme. I had undertaken elementary lessons at home in Madrid during the summer, so that from the beginning of my stay in Warsaw I could move easily around the city and most street advertisements would be understandable. However, full integration requires deep language study, and I thus passed virtually all the learning process at the host country. I remember the quaint moments when I still had to use animal talk in the restaurants, and people everywhere would talk in English to me. The moment of articulating my first sentences arrived by the end of November and filled me with enormous joy!

Poland constitutes now a focal point in Europe, not only because of its current presidency, but also because of its keystone role in the integration process in our continent. A high level of dialogue has been established between the Polish Administration, especially the *Ministry of Regional Development* and the European Institutions. Moreover, the cohesion policy has also been enhanced by the 20th anniversary of the Polish-German treaty of Good Neighbourship and Friendly Cooperation, enlarging thus the perspective of development of both countries.

In other respects, we can also take Poland and Spain as twinning partners. They both share some peculiar common features like a deep catholic tradition, strong family attachment and a feeling that they need to catch up with the rest of Europe. Total population and surface, as well as the peripheral character of both countries are also similar. However, their positions at the world scene have been very different. While Spain's main concern in the exterior was to maintain rabid hegemony over its colonies, Poland's sovereignty has been on the line until quite recently. In Spain, there is an almost inexistent feeling of patriotism, whereas in Poland, the motto 'bóg, honor i ojczyna' (God, honor and homeland) is ubiquitous.

The Polish administrative system is a very centralised one. Even though, like in Spain, there are four different levels (State, Voivodship, Powiat, Gmina), the range of decisions which have to go through the central level is much wider than in Spain. I was surprised to see that issues like street lighting and parkings in cities fall at great extent within the scope of the State. In this sense, a system of Polish regions having the level of autonomy of the Spanish ones is not thinkable at the present moment. In addition, most Spanish public institutions are reputed to be rather autonomous as long as funds are available to them. In Poland, however, many public issues are driven by two or three different institutions in such a way that there is a hierarchical control between each other.

The Polish society, including the political level, is fully convinced that closing ranks is a higher priority than creating special rights for particular regions. The Spanish model is very frequently presented at public debates in Poland as a misguided result of an attempt to satisfy territorially different long-standing inherited patterns. For instance, during the 4th Forum on European Funds in Poland, a conference took place on 6th may in Warsaw in which the high-speed train Madrid-Sevilla

was presented as a disproportional investment having contributed noteworthy to the occurrence of the crisis in Spain. In my opinion, this point of view seemed quite misleading and did not take the Spanish reality as a whole. All in all, territorial cohesion was seen as the bedrock of prosperity, and I think this is the most important positive point that was raised on that occasion.

From a self-critical perspective, I have to confess that many Spanish civil servants have the mentality that producing lots of paper is an indicator of work output. In contrast to this, Polish officials avail themselves of printed versions in a much moderate scale. Informal communication is by far much more important in Spain than in Poland. In my home Ministry, Fomento, spontaneous meetings with external professionals are very frequent, whereas in Poland, lack of a formalised procedure may be seen as an obscure action. It is simply not imaginable to meet between a beer and a sandwich after a phone call or a pop visit to solve common difficulties!

I think both Polish and Spanish civil servants need to find a better balance between individual and group work. While the professional atmosphere I am witnessing in Poland is really cellular –unit coordination meetings are really unfrequent-, many Spanish civil servants spend too much time in transmitting their concerns to more people than necessary. However, in Poland I miss the daily email litany beginning with “I have to solve the situation X, did any of you have something of the like before”? Decisions at the Polish Administration are taken in a fairly higher level than in Spain. Another interesting aspect is the fact that at the Polish Administration the political and the technical spheres are separated by a breach, whereas in Spain the border is quite blurry. Moreover, in Spain heads of units (*Subdirectores*) are perceived much neared by the technical staff than the Polish *Dyrektorzy* (which can be translated as *heads of units*, following the nomenclature used at the European Commission). The ordinary treatment in Spain using the “*tu*” treatment clashes with the Polish “*respected Mr. Director*” formula.

Starting a conversation with a superior has thus required a significant effort of adaptation from me. In Spain it is usual that both superior and subordinate initiate a spontaneous conversation when meeting; otherwise, an impression of lacking unity and common objectives would be transmitted. When I went to talk with my Director in April to try to set common goals I was extremely shocked by his introductory question: “what do you want”? In Spain, we tend to address ourselves in such a way to people we do not know at all and with whom we are not very motivated to establish links, for instance with a vacuum cleaner vendor knocking at our door.

In my case, the Bellevue programme is not only focused to doing something useful for my host institution and getting acquainted with alternative working methodologies. My aim is to reinforce liaisons between the Spanish Administration and Polish institutions in order to keep a permanent contact with professionals of the infrastructures sector in either side of the continent.

Learning how problems are tackled and decisions taken both in Spain and in Poland constitutes an invaluable added value to my career, not only to propose my home Ministry improvements in similar situations (for instance as a result of comparing technical norms and standards), but in the long range it will help me create a link between two formerly unconnected communities. In this sense, understanding other people’s behaviour and reactions as well being able to use their language is as important as knowing their legal and procedural context. In Brussels I can be a useful link in the European integration process, most notably because in many areas Spain underwent some twenty years ago a similar situation Poland is presently experiencing.

Both Spain and Poland get closer and closer in a long-lasting exchange of ideas and knowledge encompassing a united Europe. To add a brick to this monument, I am writing a list of things which could be imported from Poland into Spain or the other way round. These items entail not only

gastronomic products, but also a wide list ranging from pop-up toothbrushes to road elements, train station panels or supermarket labels.

The opportunity I have to give the best of myself in a country facing crucial and vertiginous changes makes me feel extremely happy and blissful. I am navigating through a bluewater ocean of unforgettable memories which help me learn the ropes to better steer my personal career now and in the future. As a simple sailor, I would like to thank the Robert Bosch Foundation for this marvellous cruise.