

THE MUNICIPAL MAP OF SPAIN: A GEOGRAPHICAL DESCRIPTION

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Spain's territorial diversity and its evolution over recent centuries have given rise to a municipal map of great complexity and plurality. Indeed, the administrative map can only be explained from a historical angle and it is therefore from this perspective that we will start this classification of the municipalities of Spain. The municipal map is a particularly suitable subject for the geographer on account of its overlapping political, cultural, physical and historical phenomena.

I. EVOLUTION OF THE MUNICIPAL MAP IN THE CONTEMPORARY PERIOD

Today's municipal map is a product of history and it remains in a state of constant evolution. Though only briefly outlined here, the main milestones in the historical development of the local map should not be overlooked, and particular those which have occurred in recent times and which might therefore be said to form part of the "constitutional municipality". Up to five constitutional municipal maps could be identified during the last two centuries.

1) The first municipal map came into being as a result of the Constitution of Cadiz, in two phases: 1812-14 and 1820-23. Though based on the final jurisdictional map of the *Ancient Regime*, the legislation facilitated and legitimised an evolution towards greater fragmentation. The Constitution required all settlements with more than one thousand inhabitants to have their own *ayuntamiento*, or local council (art. 310), and did not prevent their establishment in even smaller settlements (D. 23-V-1812).

2) The second constitutional municipal map was drawn up during the period of upheaval that coincided with the First Carlist War. This period began with the Royal Decree *for the provisional organisation of the local councils of the Kingdom* (23-VII-1835), a declaration that confirmed the continued existence of all the existing local councils. More liberal legislation was subsequently introduced, with the ratification of a tendency towards municipal fragmentation. However, as an exception, the principal novelty of this period lay in the crea-

tion of a new municipal structure in the four provinces of Galicia, through the merging of parishes to form relatively large municipal territories (Fariña, 1990). In 1842, the property register recorded around 11,300 existing local councils; this was, without a doubt, the highest number of such bodies registered during the modern period.

3) The third municipal map was the result of the application of article 70 of the law governing local councils of 1845, which legislated for the elimination of local councils with fewer than 30 households (around 150 inhabitants); this law affected about a quarter of the municipalities in existence at that time. This saw the largest reduction in the number of municipalities in the history of Spanish constitutional municipalism. The provinces most affected were those of the Pyrenees (Lleida lost 408 municipalities) and the ones that occupied much of the country's northern plateau. As a result of the reform, the first modern census (1857) recorded the existence of 9,342 municipalities.

This third map remained in force for a century. Over this extended period, the total number of local authorities varied little, but this does not rule out the occasional modification, with such notable changes as the ones that affected – and extended – some of the larger cities. In this way, Valencia absorbed 14 municipalities between 1870 and 1900; Barcelona incorporated another 8 between 1897 and 1921; and the area of Madrid increased from 68 to 607 km² between 1947 and 1954 and consolidated its supremacy over Barcelona with the annexation of 13 other municipalities.

4) The fourth municipal map corresponded to the second half of the Francoist regime and to the first years of the period known as “the Transition”. During this time, some provinces embarked upon an active policy of combining local councils. This led to a considerable reduction in the total number of municipalities, whose number reached a historical low of 8,020 in 1980 (in 1960, the figure had been 9,202). The provinces most affected by this measure were, on the one hand, the two provinces of the central Pyrenees, and on the other, the upland area extending from Álava to Guadalajara. This resulted in the appearance of many large municipalities in areas where there had previously been none. An example of this can be seen in the case of San Esteban de Gormaz, in Soria, which was the result of the merger of 17 local authorities (Fig. 1).

5) The fifth municipal map corresponds to the present day. The cycle of local council mergers could be said to have come to an end in 1980 with a historical low of 8,020 municipalities. The arrival of democracy saw a strengthening in local identity and favoured local government, including at the municipal level. This then led to a moderate wave of new segregations during the new democratic period (Fig. 2). Since 1977, a further 114 new municipalities have been created (Fig. 3).

A large number of these new municipalities had previously been eliminated by the Franco regime. Other cases include tourist resorts, newly created cities, agricultural colonies, residential developments in metropolitan settings and villages suffering pronounced geographical isolation. More recently, this wave of segregation has slowed down, partly as a result of the legal restrictions imposed by local autonomous authorities. The most recent segregation have been Guadiana del Caudillo (Badajoz). As for aggregations, since 1984 there have been just ten, with the last one taking place in 1997.

As a result of the evolution in the municipal map described above, there are now 8,115 municipalities in Spain (plus the two autonomous cities of Ceuta and Melilla located on the

African continent). This figure is high by European standards, being only exceeded in Germany and France, though the average size of a municipality in terms of population and land area remains close to the European average. Italy is the country that is most similar to Spain in terms of its municipal structure, while Spain's neighbour Portugal has only 308 municipalities, with an average surface area of 300 km² and an average population of 34,500. Both these averages are exceeded by countries such as the United Kingdom, Ireland, Denmark and, more recently, Greece (Izu, 2012).

II. MUNICIPAL SURFACE AREA

1. General Presentation

In a first approach (Table 1), Spain's municipal map presents a high degree of fragmentation (*minifundismo municipal*), as well as a notable north-south dichotomy. The Spanish mainland can be more or less split into two halves divided by the course of the river Tajo; with the south dominated by large-sized municipalities and the north by much smaller ones (Fig. 4). This dichotomy is essentially the product of the different stages of the *Reconquista* (the reconquest of Spain from the Moors). Having said that, it is impossible to ignore an ecological component, or one of adaptation to the environment: to the south, water is in short supply and this has historically limited agricultural exploitation and conditioned where settlements could be established (Bolòs, 1987).

But a more detailed analysis reveals exceptions to the general rule. In the Aragonese part of the Ebro Valley there are also some very large municipalities. There is also no shortage of relatively large municipalities in the Pyrenees, but in this case, they are of recent origin, being the result of the unions that took place during the second half of the Francoist regime, within a context of rural exodus. Galicia's municipal structure is of average size, which is an apparent contradiction given the extreme dispersion of its population (with 36,000 different population centres). This exception is the result of the profound reforms that took place between 1836 and 1845. On the other hand, the notable exception of the Principality of Asturias is a response to this territory's historical tradition.

In contrast, a high degree of jurisdictional fragmentation is not unknown in the southern half of the country. Almost the whole coastal area of the Autonomous Community of Valencia includes examples of small municipalities. Similarly, some local districts in Andalusia also exhibit a high degree of municipal fragmentation and even in Extremadura there are a number of modestly-dimensioned municipalities.

In accordance with the geographical pattern described above, and taking into account the expanse of each Autonomous Community, it is logical for Castilla y León to head the ranking in terms of the absolute total number of municipalities (with 2,248), although there are other communities – such as La Rioja and the Basque Country– with higher relative values, and more than 3 municipalities per 100 km². Apart from these three autonomous communities, municipal minifundism is particularly noticeable in Catalonia, Navarra, Valencia and Madrid, in that order. A lack of municipalities (average surface area of >100 km²), as observed in the three southern autonomous communities of Andalusia, Extremadura and Murcia, also fits into the latitudinal model described above. The exceptional case of Asturias

should also be included here, as the average size of its municipal areas more than doubles the national average.

The average number of municipalities per province is 162, with the lowest values being less than a third of the national average (Las Palmas 34), while the highest values more than double this average, in the case of Burgos (371). The average size of a municipal area in Spain is 62.3 km², with the extreme values corresponding to Bizkaia (19.8 km²) at the smaller size and to Murcia (251 km²) at the largest.

2. Macro- and micro-municipalities

The size of a municipality can be considered with respect to two of its constituent components: its land area and its population. In terms of land area, and bearing in mind the fact that the national average is 62.3 km², 67 macro-municipalities can be regarded as having areas of more than 500 km². Figure 4 shows how the vast majority of these large municipalities are to be found in the south, with only 7 being found to the north of the river Tajo. Seven municipalities have surface areas that exceed 1,000 km² (Table 2).

We can make an initial estimation of the number of smallest-sized municipalities by adopting a threshold of 10 km² (Fig. 5). At present, Spain has some 770 municipalities with surface areas that are smaller than this size. These are particularly numerous in Valencia, Barcelona, Navarra, Girona and Burgos. A threshold that would better illustrate this lack of area could perhaps be set at a mere 2 km². In Spain, there are 45 municipalities that are smaller than this, 21 of which are to be found in Valencia; the municipality of Emperador (Fig. 6) has a surface area of only 3 ha.

It is certain that whether or not a municipal territory could be deemed suitable or sufficient for a community of people is a very relative question and that it is difficult to tie this down to a specific size in terms of km². That said, one of the basic statistical indicators, population density, may be sufficient to indicate the level of occupation of a given municipality. In 2010, of the 41 municipalities with greater population densities than Madrid (5,403 inhabitants/km²), 27 had surface areas of less than 10 km². In contrast, very large municipalities with more than 90,000 inhabitants, such as Cáceres and Lorca, presented population densities that are more commonly seen in rural communities (55 inhabitants/km²). All of these examples highlight the shortcomings of using population density as an indicator of urban status. Although very low population densities do, unquestionably, correspond to rural environments which have been seriously affected by depopulation: the 13 inhabitants of Quiñonería (Soria) live in a municipality with an area of 38.5 km², which implies a population density of only 0.33 inhabitants/km².

III. POPULATION

1. Small, medium and large municipalities

When we speak about municipal size (small and large municipalities), the reference is nearly always to population rather than to the surface area. The same local legislation has tended to take the demographic factor into account, staggering the use of some competences

in line with thresholds of 5,000, 10,000 and 50,000 inhabitants (art. 26 of Act 7/1985 - law regulating the basis for the local-government system). In Spain, there is a statistical convention to consider municipalities with populations of more than 10,000 inhabitants as cities. Whatever the threshold employed to identify a city, it is clear that many of the municipalities that are statistically classified as urban in Andalusia, Asturias, Murcia and Galicia are, in fact, areas of a decidedly rural nature.

The decision relating to what constitutes a large or a small municipality varies from one autonomous community to another and depends on each geographical reality. This can be seen in local autonomy and local community legislation when it establishes a certain population threshold as a prerequisite for authorising municipal segregation (although some communities have no legislation governing this question). The thresholds that have been set range from 500 inhabitants in La Rioja to 6,000 in the Balearic Islands. It should also be noted that some guidelines also refer to the population that must be resident in the main centre of the municipality and to the minimum distance that must exist between different population nuclei (Table 3).

The number of inhabitants required to authorise aggregation is only cited in legislation for Catalonia (250 inhabitants) and the autonomous community of Valencia (500). In any case, the critical number of inhabitants should be established in relation to the type of population centre (concentrated or scattered). It is evident that the government action of councils with highly dispersed populations and whose populations are concentrated in small villages is a much more costly process (FMC, 1995). From a sociological perspective, a municipality with more than 300 inhabitants residing in a single village may well exhibit much more life and social cohesion than another made up of 10 different mini-settlements with a total of 700 inhabitants.

The classification of Spanish municipalities based on their population is a well-known statistic which is supplied by Spain's INE (National Institute of Statistics) (Table 4). Spain's municipal diversity is very apparent, with three-quarters of the municipalities in Castilla y León having fewer than 500 inhabitants (closely followed by La Rioja and Aragón). The second band (with between 501 and 2,000 inhabitants) finds its maximum percentage in Extremadura (followed by the three communities along the Cantabrian coast). Medium-sized municipalities (with 2,001 to 10,000 inhabitants) are particularly numerous in Galicia, where they represent more than half of the total number of municipalities (the archipelagos of the Balearic and Canary Islands are also well represented within this segment). Large municipalities are only in a clear majority in Murcia, while large cities only constitute more than 10% of the total in the autonomous community of Madrid.

The median value is better indicator of the most typical size for municipalities. In Spain, the median value was 574 inhabitants per municipality in 2012. The threshold of 500 inhabitants would therefore seem particularly appropriate for classifying a small municipality (Fig. 7), but this is in no way representative in the case of extremes: 1,759 municipalities have fewer than 150 inhabitants (21.7% of the total) and 2,651 (32.6%) have fewer than 250.

The municipal register for 2012 records 3,817 municipalities with fewer than 500 inhabitants; this represents 47% of the total number. The twelve provinces in which more than 70% of the municipalities have populations of less than 500 inhabitants can all be found in a large, central area of Spain which covers the whole of the northern plateau, as well as La Rioja,

Guadalajara, Cuenca and Teruel (Soria 88%). There are more than 200 municipalities of this type in Guadalajara, Salamanca and Burgos (309), whereas 1,118 local councils in Spain have fewer than 100 inhabitants (13.8% of the total). The smallest number of all is registered in Illán de Vacas (Toledo) where only two people are officially registered. The area without very small municipalities includes the Balearic Islands, the Canary Islands, Galicia, Murcia and the provinces of Cádiz, Jaén and Seville in Andalusia.

IV. OTHER GEOGRAPHICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MUNICIPAL MAP

In the past, many territories were shared by two or more municipalities. These generally consisted of grazing land or forests with no permanent population and were typically found at an intermediate or marginal geographical location between two settlements or valleys. The number of such shared territories has since declined, although 85 such cases still remain today. Navarra, with 18, is the province in which such territories occupy the largest surface area, with the equivalent of 5.7% of total area of this autonomous community. The largest of these communal territories occupies an area that extends over 420 km², called Bardenas Reales, and is shared by a community comprised by 22 local entities.

A municipal territory can be formed by a single uninterrupted polygonal area or by a number of different, physically unconnected, territories. In the latter case, there is generally one main, larger, territory which contains the *ayuntamiento* (seat of the local council) and one, or more, smaller, sparsely populated, enclaves. The best known of these territories are a dozen or so municipalities which have part of their territory located in a different province or autonomous community. Using the Spanish National Geographic Institution's municipal cartographic database, together with data obtained for Catalonia and the Basque Country, we have been able to refine and update calculations of the total number of such enclaves (Table 5). In mainland Spain, there are 461 municipalities with one or more enclaves (Xàtiva, for example has a total of 29) and this phenomenon is present in almost every province. The total number of such enclaves in Spain could be estimated at around 700. The most extreme example of the proliferation of enclaves can be seen in Valencia's *comarca* (region) of La Costera, where 12 municipalities have a total of 112 unconnected territories (Fig. 8).

Current legislation implicitly rules out the formation of physically discontinuous territories as a result of a process of aggregation (art. 2 of Royal Decree 1690/1986, Regulation of population and of the boundaries of local entities). Only Catalonia and Bizkaia have created a specific legal framework to help correct the deficiencies associated with some municipal boundaries. The Foral Diputation of Bizkaia have recently performed an authentic act of "municipal surgery" in order to solve the problem of the enormous profusion of small municipal enclaves found in the area immediately surrounding the city of Bilbao (Fig. 9).

A slightly different situation to the case described above can be found in municipal territories that are wholly located within territory belonging to a different municipality. Another similar situation arises when municipal territories have areas contain within their boundaries other areas over which their local councils have no legislative authority. This mainly occurs with large municipalities from which small villages have separated, during the course of history, but whose main population centre has maintained the ownership of extensive areas of

forest or arable land. Examples of this somewhat unusual geographical phenomenon can be found in Albarracín (Fig. 10), Badajoz, Cuenca...

CONCLUSION

Regrettably, the legal power of the autonomous communities to alter their respective municipal maps (art. 13.1, Act 7/1985, regulating the basis of the local-government system) has not resulted in specific actions directed at the creation of a more rational local map. This paralysis shows that the decentralization of political decision-making does not always lead to action being taken by the relevant local government powers. However, this does not exempt central government from its own responsibilities relating to the task of constructing a more viable municipal map. As recognised in article 13.3 of the Spanish Law regulating the basis of the local-government system: “Notwithstanding the authority of the autonomous communities, the State, in its dealings with geographical, social, economic and cultural criteria, may establish measures that favour and encourage the merging of municipalities for the purpose of improving the capacity of local public authorities to manage their own affairs”.

