

Spain's economy has returned to growth and its economy minister, Luis de Guindos, has earned plaudits from the country's eurozone partners for pushing through tough structural reforms. Yet with national elections to take place in twelve months, de Guindos's political future on the domestic front is far from certain.

When Mariano Rajoy, Spain's prime minister, put together his first cabinet in December 2011 he split in two the economic portfolio that had previously been occupied by the socialist Elena Salgado. De Guindos, 54, was made minister for the economy, while Cristóbal Montoro became minister of finance. Rajoy thus rewarded two men who had assiduously advised him on economic matters when in opposition.

De Guindos, a business administration graduate and executive president of Lehman Brothers in Iberia from 2006-08 and later head of financial services for PricewaterhouseCoopers Spain, would reportedly interrupt business meetings to field calls from Rajoy. Yet Rajoy, a cautious and loyal prime minister who has not once reshuffled his cabinet, studiously avoided promoting one man over the other.

The Spanish newspaper El Pais concluded that the division was a clear victory for de Guindos. In a gushing profile entitled "The man with the Herculean task", it argued that de Guindos was responsible for the government's economic policy, restructuring the financial sector, dealing with markets and international investors, while Montoro could only make cuts and raise taxes.

De Guindos has made a success of his given role. His experience in the private sector helped him overhaul the banking sector and manage the EU loans given to Spain to bail out its financial sector. De Guindos also devised a programme of structural reforms and austerity measures, the implementation of which has earned praise from Spain's European partners and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, which estimates that no country other than Greece has implemented more structural reforms than Spain.

"De Guindos is a true professional of economic policy and financial markets, who has been successfully driving reform in the Spanish economy," said Olli Rehn, who was European commissioner for economic affairs from 2009-14 and is now a liberal MEP.

De Guindos is also much admired by colleagues at the Council of Ministers for his fluent English and easy manner, together with his extensive private-sector experience. (More than one politician from Spain, which can be somewhat insecure about its role in Europe, has remarked that de Guindos's greatest success has been 'restoring Spain's honour' in the EU.)

De Guindos, who is married with two children, is a practising Roman Catholic in a country where that religion has had a strong and divisive impact on national politics. However his beliefs appear nuanced. On Saturday (27 September) he attended the beatification of one of the leaders of the conservative Opus Dei movement. Yet in the

press he has said he supports the right of gay people to marry and did not support the government's recently-withdrawn proposal to outlaw abortion.

De Guindos is a keen tennis player who often travels with his racquet. He is a life-long supporter of Atlético Madrid football team, even though his father, a pharmacist in Madrid, was an ardent fan of bitter city rivals Real Madrid. Indeed, de Guindos, who is described as one of the more media-savvy members of the government, speaks occasionally on the radio or at events about the fortunes of his football team and the trials and tribulations of being a fan.

But while Atlético's fortunes have soared in the last couple of years, de Guindos's ministerial star has waned slightly, despite the improvement in Spain's economy. His weight within Rajoy's cabinet appears to have diminished, largely to the benefit of Montoro, who has a strong presence in national politics.

Fact File

CV 1960 - Born in Madrid - Degree in business and economics from the Colegio Universitario de Estudios Financieros in Madrid 1988-96 - AB Asesores, business consultancy 1996-2000 – director-general for political economy and competition, ministry for finance and the economy 2000-02 – secretary-general for political economy and competition, ministry for finance and the economy 002-04 - secretary of state for the economy 2006-08 - executive president of Lehman Brothers, Spain and Portugal 2008-10 - head of financial services, Pricewaterhouse Coopers, Spain 2010-11 - professor at the Instituto de la empresa business school in Madrid 2011-present - minister for the economy

Montoro is a political operator, first elected to the Spanish parliament in 1993. He was minister of finance during the premiership of José Maria Aznar, and an MEP from 2004-08. By contrast, de Guindos is a 'techno' – the closest Spain has to the French énarque – who, after coming top of his year's entrance examination, rose expeditiously through the civil service to become secretary of state under Rodrigo Rato, minister for the economy and deputy prime minister under Aznar, overseeing Spain's entry into the eurozone.

De Guindos has never been a card-carrying member of the Partido Popular (PP). When the PP was pushed out of office in 2004, he decided to return to the private sector. A fair-weather supporter, growled some party members, who later questioned whether he deserved to be handed such a high-profile position within Rajoy's new government.

Nor did de Guindos's efforts to dislodge his former mentor and friend Rato from the presidency of Spanish bank Bankia improve his standing in the PP, where many members still revere the former director-general of the International Monetary Fund (2004-8). Rato was investigated for alleged fraud and other malpractices dating from his time in charge between 2010-12. In 2012 Bankia took a state bail-out worth some €20 billion.

This political uncertainty may have encouraged de Guindos to aspire to the chairmanship of the Eurogroup, the meetings of eurozone finance ministers, which would make more secure his hold on the economy portfolio in a PP government.

The way seemed clear in March, when the Christian Democratic Union of Angela Merkel, Germany's chancellor, supposedly promised to install de Guindos as the Eurogroup's permanent president in exchange for the PP's crucial support for their candidate to lead the Commission: Jean-Claude Juncker, now European Commission president-elect.

At that time it seemed that Jeroen Dijsselbloem, the Dutch finance minister and current Eurogroup chair, might become a commissioner. But the Dutch government nominated Frans Timmermans instead. So it now looks as if Dijsselbloem will see out his term until July 2015. Merkel has come out in support of de Guindos's candidacy – but only once the position is free. Unfortunately for de Guindos, that is likely to be just months before the PP faces difficult national elections. Will that looming uncertainty make him un-electable to his Eurogroup colleagues?

Other issues could also affect an eventual candidacy. The first is his time at Lehman Brothers, the bank whose collapse played an important role in triggering the 2008 financial crisis, which triggered the eurozone crisis. Challenged on this, he told Spanish television in 2012: "The only difference with Lehman Brothers and the rest of the banking sector is that Lehman Brothers did not get bailed out." Nor did Lehman's problems relate to its activities in either Spain or Europe, he emphasised.

The second problem is that de Guindos has never been elected. There is no shortage of technocratic ministers in the European Union. Neither Emmanuel Macron, France's economy minister and former investment banker at Rothschild, nor Pier Carlo Padoan, Italy's minister of economy and finances and former chief economist at the International Monetary Fund, has won election. But a consensus is emerging that the eurozone must be less technocratic and more technocratic. Where will that leave de Guindos.

Few doubt, though, that de Guindos is capable of occupying a position of such standing. Ramon Luis Valcárcel, a centre-right Spanish MEP and vice-president of the European Parliament, speaks for many when he says de Guindos has "a brilliant mind" and a "very international vision". But it may be that this minister with talents that are clearly suited to the international stage departs from it following next year's elections.