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Global

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FEATURE: Spain chews over possible time zone switch

A parliamentary committee in Spain is recommending that the country switch to a different time zone, pushing the clock back by an hour.

A decision taken by dictator Francisco Franco during World War II left Spaniards living in a geographically unsuitable time zone and with "permanent jet lag," researcher Nuria Chinchilla from IESE Business School told dpa.

The result is that Spaniards have their meals later than other Europeans and, officially, work longer days - a situation that impairs productivity and leaves them little leisure time, according to many experts.

The government has promised to consider the proposal by the parliamentary committee to change the time zone, and to shorten the working day.

Geographically, backers say, Spain should really be in the Western European time zone - the same that is in force in Britain, Ireland and neighbouring Portugal.

But in 1942, Franco decided to make Spanish time coincide with that of Nazi Germany, which his fascist regime had sympathy for.

So when Spaniards have lunch at 3 pm and dinner at 9 pm, they are actually doing so at 2 pm and 8 pm solar time, according to experts.

But many ordinary people are sceptical.

"It would be difficult for us to change a schedule that all of Spain follows," said engineer Juan Garcia, 52.

He arrives at the Madrid company where he works at 9 am (0700 GMT). At 11 am, he has a second breakfast comprising toast and coffee at a cafe next door.

"Otherwise, I would get really hungry before lunch, which I only take at 3 pm."

The leisurely lunch break can last up to two hours.

Garcia then takes another snack break in the afternoon to stave off hunger until he leaves work at 7 pm and has dinner at 9 pm.

Experts like Ignacio Buqueras from the National Commission for the Rationalization of Spanish Hours (ARHOE) feel such working hours are a disaster.

"They reduce productivity in a way which Spain simply cannot afford in the 21st century," Buqueras told dpa.

The long working hours reduce the time people can spend with their families and push back television programmes, making Spaniards go to bed later than other Europeans, he said.

The lack of sleep creates stress, increases accidents and school drop-out rates, Buqueras argued.

Buqueras described that situation as unique in Europe.

Pushing the clock back by an hour would bring Spaniards back in line with the solar cycle, the parliamentary committee said in a recent report.

The government will consider the proposal, though "it is not a simple issue," Economy Minister Luis de Guindos said.

Critics said shorter working days would affect the healthy Mediterranean way of life, which traditionally included afternoon naps and relaxing lunches that strengthen family ties.

Chinchilla dismissed such arguments, saying city dwellers no longer take siestas or go home to have lunch with their families.

"Many Spanish companies and city halls have already started rationalizing their working hours," Buqueras said. "Studies show that their employees are happier and more productive, and that they are able to cut costs due to a lower energy consumption."

But at the trade union confederation CCOO, a spokeswoman said she regarded the whole debate as a "joke" in a country mired in a deep economic crisis.

"There are people in this country who work double the working week that their contract spells out," she told dpa. "The government should give priority to regulating the labour market, instead of mulling over how to organize individual working days."

No firm decisions are expected on the issue any time soon - solar or otherwise.