

CATALONIA BACKGROUND INFORMATION [SERIES E / 2013 / 6.1 / EN]

Date: 02/07/2013

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IS CATALONIA HEADING TOWARDS INDEPENDENCE?

Catalonia is one of Spain's historic nationalities, with a population of some seven and a half million people and located on the border with France. It has its own language, part of the Romance family along with French, Spanish and Italian. Catalan is understood by all and spoken by most people, and is used in the education system and public administration; all Catalans also speak Castilian Spanish. Historically, Catalonia was part of the Kingdom of Aragon, which was united with Castile in the early sixteenth century, but, within the union of the crowns, Catalonia kept its own governing institutions (the Generalitat) and legal system. Only in 1714, after Catalans sided with the losing side in the War of Spanish Succession, were these abolished. The broad movement known as Catalanism, like other European national movements, is a product of the late nineteenth century, the product of a cultural revival and the industrial take-off that made Catalonia one of the most dynamic territories in Spain. Historically, Catalanism has sought the transformation of Spain into a plurinational state, with Catalonia playing a full part in Spanish politics, although from the early twentieth century there has also been a movement in favour of an independent state of Catalonia. Early Catalanists called themselves regionalists but gradually the term nation came to be preferred, coming into conflict with Spanish nationalists, for whom the only possible nation is Spain. Catalan nationalism is the stronger version of Catalanism, prioritizing Catalonia over Spain. The early twentieth century and the 1960s and 1970s saw a massive movement into Catalonia of migrants from other parts of Spain and the Catalanist movement has sought to assimilate them into the community, notably by encouraging them to learn the language.

Under the Second Republic (1931-1939), the self-governing Generalitat was restored but it was again abolished after Spanish Civil War resulted in the victory of the extreme right under Francisco Franco, who ushered in nearly forty years of dictatorship. The Franco regime suppressed the Catalan language and other symbols of Catalan national identity in the name of a single Spanish nation.

Restoration of self-government was among the prime demands of democratic forces following the death of Franco in 1975 and the Generalitat was soon re-established, along with self-governing institutions in the Basque Country and Galicia. The 1978 Constitution also allowed other regions to gain autonomy and soon the whole of

Spain was divided into seventeen autonomous communities. Since then, the big question has been whether all seventeen communities should be treated the same (what came to be known as *café para todos* or coffee all round) or whether special recognition should be given to the three historic nationalities. The Spanish constitution stipulates that there is only one Spanish nation but then refers to 'nationalities and regions' without specifying territories qualify as which.

Since the restoration of self-government, the largest party grouping has been *Convergència i Unió*, a partnership of two moderate centre-right nationalist parties. In more than twenty years in office, CiU sought to build and consolidate the Catalan nation, seeking a distinct status but within a plurinational Spain and with a strong presence of Catalonia within Europe. *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* (Catalan Republican Left) is a left-wing party, which supports independence. The Catalan socialists (affiliated with the Spanish Socialist Party) favour a federal Spain, deepening the current autonomous system, although some socialists are more centralist and others more Catalanist. The Popular Party is a Spanish party, which tends to centralism, as does a newer Catalan party, Ciutadans. The post-Communists and Greens are allied in *Iniciativa per Catalunya/Verds* which is strongly Catalanist but not quite nationalist.

For over thirty years, Catalans accepted their statute of autonomy as a reasonable compromise between Catalan nationalism and Spanish unionism, while gradually deepening self-government, notably in taxation matters. Opinion polls showed between 15 and 20 per cent in favour of independence, very few wanting to return to the old centralized system, and some support for a federal model for Spain. In the last three years, however, there has been a dramatic rise in support for independence, which now gains a majority in most polls. A series of unofficial referendums in towns and cities has shown majorities for independence – although in the large cities turnout has been low as opponents of independence abstain. A plethora of groups, think tanks and clubs has sprung up to support or to study the idea of independence and a demonstration in September 2012 brought around a million people on to the streets. So what has changed?

One factor is disillusionment with the idea of a Europe of the Regions, a concept popular in the 1990s, which envisaged a three-level federation of regions, states and Europe. Catalanists saw in this a way to recover their pre-1714 status as a European trading nation embedded in wider unions. Catalonia was a leader of this movement, with Catalanists, arguing that the old model of the nation state was redundant in the new Europe and that nations could exercise real influence without having to become states. There was some progress in the 1990s, for example in setting up the Committee of the Regions. On the other hand, the Convention on the Future of Europe leading eventually to the Lisbon Treaty (2007) offered little to the regions and nations and it has become evident that the European Union is founded on the member states. The EU Committee of the Regions is largely toothless and in any case represents everything from municipal governments to stateless nations and unable to distinguish among them.

The second factor is the fate of a reformed statute of autonomy intended to update the system and more clearly define and entrench Catalonia's power. This was

negotiated when the Catalan socialists were in coalition with ERC and adopted by nearly 90 per cent in the Catalan Parliament. It was toned down by the Spanish Parliament but the modified statute was nonetheless approved overwhelmingly in a referendum in 2006. At this point, however, the Popular Party, with the support of some other autonomous regions appealed it to the Constitutional Court. The Court has become highly politicized in recent years, between left and right and between centralists and supporters of autonomy. Unable to reach a verdict on the Catalan statute, it deliberated for four years, by which time the mandate of some of the judges had expired, so that court itself was not constitutional, while conservative judges sought to exclude progressive ones on various grounds. Finally a verdict was reached in 2010, which upheld most of the statute's clauses but subjected them to a very restrictive interpretation. Much attention was given to the claim of Catalonia to be a nation, an important symbolic matter for both nationalists and Catalanists. Eventually the court accepted that the Catalan Parliament claimed that Catalonia was a nation but that this was purely a subjective declaration with no force. This outcome which was seen as an evisceration of a statute approved by both parliaments and endorsed by referendum caused immense resentment in Catalonia and opinion turned sharply against Spanish institutions. Moderate Catalanists who had argued that home rule could be extended within the existing constitution drew the conclusion that this was a dead end and that only a break with the existing constitutional order would allow them to realize their national aspirations.

The Constitutional Court caused further controversy by limiting the application of Catalonia's language policies. These provide for the co-existence of Catalan and Castilian, but seek to avoid ethnic segregation by not separating Catalan and Castilian speakers at school – most of the latter are from families of incomers. While accepting the principle of linguistic immersion, the Court has insisted that Castilian-speaking families could have their children educated primarily in Castilian. In practice, most incomers are keen for their children to learn Catalan but there has been some tension over language.

The fourth factor is economic grievance. Catalonia is the largest contributor to Spain's redistribution system, although the magnitude is disputed. The Catalan government claims that it loses eight per cent of its GDP to other regions, while other observers put the figure lower. The Basque Country, on the other hand, because it has its own system of taxation, pays very little into equalization. This has prompted a movement, supported by the nationalist parties, many of the socialists, business organizations, trade unions and other civil society bodies for a 'fiscal pact' which would give Catalonia something like the Basque system while providing for some revenue-sharing with the other regions. This economic factor has allowed nationalism to reach sectors of society previously impervious to its appeal although by no means all supporters of the fiscal pact are inclined to independence.

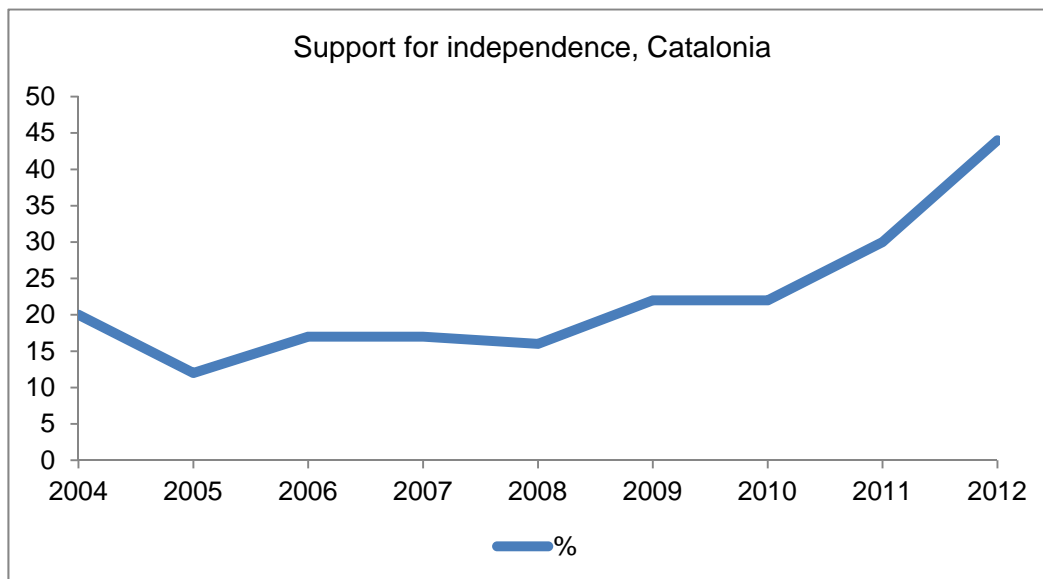
The fifth element is experience elsewhere and particularly that of Scotland. The UK Government's agreement to an independence referendum has inspired Catalan nationalists to challenge Spain to do the same, although matters are not so simple. Spanish governments have refused to recognize Catalonia's right to self-determination and, even if agreed, the Constitutional Court would provide another obstacle.

Artur Mas, CiU first minister of Catalonia, sought to put himself at the head of the burgeoning independence movement, calling an early election in November 2012. The result was ambivalent because, while CiU lost seats, the ERC gained. The proposal now is to call a referendum in 2014 on a question yet to be determined but centred on the 'right to decide', that is that Catalans could choose their own future, whether independence or not. 2014 coincides with the Scottish referendum, which continues to provide inspiration, but is significant in Catalonia as the three-hundredth anniversary of the loss of its old institutions. The Madrid parties remain opposed to this, insisting that it is unconstitutional. The Catalan socialists now say that the constitution should be changed to allow such a referendum, while insisting that they could campaign for a No vote, but this has not been endorsed by the party at the Spanish level.

Yet if independence is on the agenda, old ambivalences remain. Convergència bit of his party at their congress last year headed off an independence resolution but adopted the idea an *Estat Propi* (own state) a concept open to multiple interpretations. The leader of Unió had made it clear that he does not favour independence. As in Scotland and Quebec, discussion of the details rapidly leads to formulas providing for some continued connections to the state, what in Scotland is called 'independence-lite' and in Quebec has been sold as 'sovereignty-association' or 'sovereignty-partnership'. A similar proposal in the Basque country a decade ago was called 'freely-associated state'.

Support for independence depends on the exact question asked. On a consistent question posed over the years by the *Institut de Ciències Polítiques i Socials* (ICPS) asking voters to choose among options including more autonomy, support for independence shot up from a historic level of 20 per cent or less to 30 per cent in 2011 a clear reaction to the Constitutional Court decision. The low levels between 2005 and 2008, by contrast, reflect the hopes vested in the reformed statute. By 2012 support for independence was up to 49 per cent. Most polls now show that a majority would vote Yes in an independence referendum. Yet when independence is offered against other concrete options, including federalism and most autonomy, support falls somewhat. This is not unusual, as we find the same thing in polls in Scotland. There may also be differences between Madrid-based and Catalan polls. The table shows polls a few months apart from the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (in Madrid) and the Centro d'Opinió, which is supported by the Catalan government, comparing independence with other options.

A wide gap has opened up between the politicians in Madrid, who see Spain as a single nation state with a degree of decentralization, and the majority in Catalonia, who seek recognition of their own national status but not necessarily independence in the traditional sense. The 1980 statute of autonomy and its 2006 successor sought to bridge the gap, but the task is becoming ever more difficult.



Institut de Ciències Polítiques i Socials (ICPS).

Do you think that Catalonia should be: %		
	Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, <i>Barometro Autonómico</i> , 2012	Centro d'Estudis d'Opinió, <i>Baròmetre d'Opinió Política</i> 30 2a onada 2013
A region of Spain	12.1	4.6
An autonomous community of Spain	29.4	22.8
A state within a federal Spain	21.4	21.2
An independent state	33.7	47.0
No reply/ don't know	3.3	4.4

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