

The Internal Conflict in Spain: The case of Catalonia

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Historical Background

°Catalonia is one of the autonomous regions of the Spanish state. The history of this area is almost as old as the origin of Spain as an identity first and then as a state. Catalonia already existed as defined area since the 9th century and it became much stronger as a military and commercial empire during the 12th century due to the marriage of Ramon Berenguer IV, the Count of Barcelona and the Princess of Aragon Peronella, thus creating the Crown of Aragon.¹ This Crown functioned as a confederation of kingdoms including eastern Spain, much of the Mediterranean and southern Italy. This independent kingdom lasted until the 15th century when King Ferdinand of Aragon married Isabel of Castile and the two kingdoms united into an early form of the Spanish state but at the same time they had to respect the institutions and rules of all the cities that are a part of the Crown of Aragon.

Despite the fact that all of Catalonia's institutions had been retained for about 200 years, in the 17th century Spanish King Felipe IV decided that he wanted a more centralized policy and this behavior led to a strong opposition by the local population of Catalonia and the war against the King erupted (1640-1659). The outcome was beneficial for the Catalans because they gained the right to maintain their institutions but also this victory came at a cost due to the fact that Roussillon and half of the Pyrenean county of Cerdagne was taken from them and became a part of ²France. It is really important to maintain that from this point on the Catalan identity, especially through the language, started to cultivate the mentality of the local people (Joan Nogue, Joan Vicente, 2004).

When the 18th century began, there were some conflicts between two royal houses, concerning the succession of the Spanish crown, the Habsburgs and the Bourbons. The Catalans had aligned themselves with the Habsburgs because the latter had respected their institutions and rules so, inevitably, they came into conflict with the King Felipe V of the Bourbons and they lost. As a result, all their political liberties were curtailed and Spanish were imposed as the official language of the region. However, in the same century and in 19th century Catalonia flourished regarding the economic and demographical sector, especially on the industry and commerce, as well as in art and literature. This fact combined with a problematic economy of Spain fuelled the nationalist sentiment and mentality of the local population of Catalonia (Joan Nogue, Joan Vicente, 2004). This period was characterized as *Renaixença* which in Catalan meant "rebirth"³

Entering the 20th century, the Catalans had regained their political institutions and a relative autonomy with the creation, in 1914, of the *Mancomunitat*, and its purpose was to monitor the four provinces that form Catalonia which are Barcelona, Tarragona, Gerona and Lerida. In 1923, this period ended due to the fact that the dictator Primo de Rivera and after him General Francisco Franco decided that they would proceed with a more repressive policy towards Catalonia in order to eradicate the willingness of the local population for autonomy. It is crucial to maintain that this policy of Franco's regime was implied for all the autonomous regions and not only Catalonia. During the Franco dictatorship all the collective rights of Catalans, both cultural and linguistic had been abolished, thus, a resistance towards this behavior of the Spanish state began to form. The democracy in Spain came through a transition period that started from Franco's death in 1975 and ended with the newly created Spanish Constitution in 1978. In this Constitution under the Article 2 it was stated clearly the right for Catalonia to self-government. This move from the central state satisfied, even some strong-willed nationalists, who were a part of *Convergencia i Unio (CiU)*, a political party whose basic moto was a more extensive autonomy until 2010 (Christopher K. Connolly, 2013).⁴

Especially, after a referendum in 2006 in which the local people voted for the expansion of the Statute of Autonomy⁵, the nationalists of CiU were willing to cooperate with the Spanish government and live under

¹ History, Cataloniavotes, www.cataloniavotes.eu

² Catalonia, Spain's biggest problem, Adrew Dowling, (2017), www.historytoday.com

³ Catalonia, Encyclopedia Britannica, www.britannica.com

⁴ At this point of the history of Catalonia, it is a very important moment because in 1979 the *Generalitat de Catalunya* was established and since then it has played a major role on the quest of a portion of Catalan people for independence.

⁵ Meaning that the *Generalitat* would have more power over the day-to-day matters of the Catalonia and also Catalonia would be called a —nation— and would have its own language as an official one.

Spain. However, the prime minister of the conservative party Partido Popular, then in opposition, Mariano Rajoy, questioned the constitutionality of this decision and referendum and managed to succeed because the Spanish Constitutional Court stated the amended Statute of Autonomy is unconstitutional due to the fact that, according to the Constitution there is one nation and that is the Spanish nation. This judgment caused numerous reactions throughout Catalonia with the most organized ones being in Barcelona. Several non-binding referendums were held for the independence of Catalonia by the nationalists from December 2009 until 2011 (Christopher K. Connolly, 2013). Also another one in 2014 and in 2017 there was a binding referendum, according to the nationalists, in which the majority of the voters, who did not constitute the majority of the Catalan society, voted in favor of the independence at a 90% (The Telegraph, 2017).

The participation of the local people reached 43%. The Spanish Constitutional Court declared the referendum unconstitutional and Madrid, after the declaration of independence by the Generalitat in October 2017, enforced Article 155 of the Constitution and stripped away the Generalitat and the regional government of all their powers and seized control of the region.

The landscape of Catalonia

Most of the people of Catalonia are living in Barcelona. The landscape of this region is diverse meaning that there are enormous island valleys and plains and the peaks of the high mountains in the Pyrenees reach the 3.000 meters. The Ebro river delta is one of the 18 natural parks and it is worth mentioning that 30.44% of the area is considered as natural protected. Furthermore, the climate is appropriate for the South Europeans because it is Mediterranean and therefore a significant number of tourists are coming each year to this region.⁶ Therefore tourism is an important part of Catalonia's economy.

Another major part of this region's economy is manufacturing and metalworking because Catalonia processes 3 nuclear Power Plants, is a big consumer of natural resources like oil, natural gas, thus, creating a very competitive industrial sector and making this area one of the wealthiest in Spain. This can be accounted for by the fact that the economy of Catalonia reaches the 19% of the GDP (Gross Domestic Product) of Spain (BBC, 2018). Because of the fact that the landscape of Catalonia is boosting the local economy and it gives a relative prosperity in comparison to other regions of Spain, like the Basque Country, when the financial crisis erupted in 2008 the austerity measures from Madrid fuelled the separatists' will for secession.

Main contenders of the conflict

In this conflict it is really important to point out that we have two major sides. There are the political parties in Catalonia who are in favor of the independence and they have the main responsibility for organizing all the riots and marching basically in the city of Barcelona but also on other cities of the region. On the other hand we have the political parties who support the unity of Catalonia with Madrid and Spain, in general, and have the official or unofficial alliance with the Spanish capital. On the camp of the pro-independence supporters we have the Catalan European Democratic Party and its leader Carles Puigdemont is the former regional president of Catalonia but after the referendum in October 2017 he was stripped away from his powers and he is now into exile in Belgium due to the fact that the Spanish Constitutional Court issued a warrant for his arrest because of allegations for holding a banned referendum in 2017. His party has ruled the region for almost three decades and it is in competition with the Catalan Republican Left for the leadership of the pro-independence camp (Politico, 2017).

Moreover, the Catalan Republican Left is a party that is also in favor of the secession of the region from Spain. Its leader Oriol Junqueras is in jail in Madrid because of the referendum and as a party it wants to take the leadership of the pro-independence block from the Catalan European Democratic Party. However, nowadays it promotes social issues more than the question of secession and it is willing to go into negotiations with Madrid, a move that is unacceptable from the more radicals of the block. The rest of the pro-independence camp consists of the Popular Unity Candidacy, a far-left radical party that doesn't want to negotiate with Madrid or Europe regarding the status of Catalonia after the declaration of independence (Politico, 2017).

In the middle of this conflict and not having clearly expressed its opinion about which side it is on, is the Catalunya en Comu Podem due to the fact that it supported, as a party, the referendum in 2017 but it is not in favor of independence. This ambiguity costs the party many votes and this situation will continue until it clarifies its opinion. On the camp of unity, we have the party of Ciudadanos which is a centrist party and after the elections on 22nd December of 2017, it came as the first political force of Catalonia but it is very difficult for it to form a coalition in order to govern. That possibility is still at the hands of the pro-independence parties and also the Catalunya en Comu Podem has stated that it is not in their intentions to support a government by the Ciudadanos.

⁶ Catalan History, Cataloniavotes, www.cataloniavotes.eu

The rest of the pro-unity block is consisted of the Socialist's Party of Catalonia (PSC), the party that is in alliance with the national-wide Spanish Socialist Worker's Party (PSOE), and its leader Miquel Iceta wants to take the leadership of the non-independence camp in case a government is formed. Last but not least, we have the Popular Party of Catalonia which is the party that has the lowest popularity in the Catalan society right now because of the actions of Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy, who is from the same party but with its national-wide form (Politico, 2017).⁷

Forces that are involved in the conflict

In the conflict of Catalonia we have various forces that participate both on an internal level and in an external one. First of all, on one hand we have the nationalists that for decades were satisfied only with the expansion of the autonomy of Catalonia but after the rejected revised Statute of Autonomy by the Spanish Constitutional Court, they turned their attention towards secession. It is really worth mentioning that, according to surveys, not all the Catalans want independence and the portion of the society that desire to be an independent country is approximately 40% to 50% of the population. Before 2010, only 20% of the locals wanted the secession (Ivan Serrano, 2013). On the other hand there are groups inside the Catalan society that do not want their region to be a separate part of Spain because they believe that outside of Spain and Europe Catalonia would not have the advantages and the economic growth that it has right now. These groups of society and their mentality were cultivated during the 1960's and 1970's with the migration to Catalonia of people from different parts of the Spanish territory.

That is one of the reasons why nowadays the Castilian (Spanish) and Catalan language are both spoken in this region and many local people are feeling comfortable speaking only Castilian and do not understand the language of their homeland (Elcano Royal Institute, 2018). Another social group that functions as an internal force in the pro-independence camp is the middle and upper class of the society with high salaries and their main belief is that Catalonia would be better on its own due to the exploitation of their wealth from the central Spanish government. It is worth mentioning that in Catalonia the rural areas, such as Barcelona are in favor of independence whereas urban areas are against. Because of the this social and complex mixture the parties that were dominant all those years since the transition to democracy, were the Socialist Party of Catalonia and the Centre-right Catalan European Democratic Party, formerly known as *Convergencia de Unio*, two moderate parties who until 2010 did not pursue actively the independence.

The central government in Spain and basically the whole political system in Madrid do not want even to consider a separate Catalonia, especially the party that is now in power, the Popular Party and its Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy. In 2011 his party became the government, replacing the Socialists who followed a more soft and understanding, towards the demands of the nationalists, policy, and he decided to imply a more centralized and conservative policy (Elcano Royal Institute, 2018). In his assistance, as an external force in the conflict is the European Union. The European Commission and the European Parliament has condemned so far the excessive use of force from the police during the referendum, respecting human rights, but at the same time European Union, leaders of major European countries as well as United States recognized the unity of Spain and the rule of law (The Local, 2017).⁸

Furthermore, they are trying to maintain a balanced approach to this situation as the promote dialogue between Madrid and Barcelona and not any rush and irrational moves. Europe and United States are watching closely the development of this issue in Spain and they do not intervene because they consider this matter as an internal problem for Spain although they are looking forward for a swift and effective solution to this conflict otherwise other areas of Spain and Europe would follow Catalonia's way, such as the Flanders in Belgium, the Corsica in France, the Padania in Italy and the Basque Country in Spain (Frida Ghitis, The Washington Post, 2017).

The ideology of the conflict

The conflict of Catalonia has been characterized as —nation without state|| meaning that the Catalans have a distinct culture, language and a feeling of belonging to a territory that has been this for many centuries. A strong will for self-government in a non-independence character (Ivar Serrano, 2013) was the desire for the

⁷ In 22nd on December of 2017, there were elections in Catalonia for the new Catalan government. From 135 seats, the number of seats for the regional government, the Citizens (Ciudadanos) won 37 seats, Together for Catalonia 34, Republican Left 32, the Socialists 17, Catalonia in Common (Catalunya en Commu Podem) 8, Popular Unity Candidancy 4 and Popular Party 3.

⁸ However, unofficially, some EU officials stated that prime minister Rajoy could have handled better the situation in Catalonia and he also made a lot of mistakes with his policy towards the autonomy of Catalonia (Alastair Macdonald, Robin Emmott, Reuters, 2017).

nationalists even for the last 5 years but, as stated earlier, this feeling shifted towards a more radical approach, from the side of the nationalists. Separatists managed to convince a significant portion of the Catalan society, but not society as a whole, that because their language and culture is as old as Madrid's, then they should also have their own state (Joseph Huddlestone, *Foreign Affairs*, 2017). A closer look to the arguments of both sides of the conflict would help us understand its ideology.

Separatists believe that Catalonia would be better off on its own for several reasons. First of all, economy plays an important role. Catalans do not control their taxes and every tax goes to the central government and the funds for the regional government are disproportionately returned to them. This problem, in their opinion, explains the fact that Catalonia contributes 19% of the GDP of Spain to Madrid and it gets back 11% of it (Christopher Connolly, 2013, p.10).⁹ Staying on economy, during the Eurozone crisis, austerity measures, taken by the central government, affected mainly the middle class who now is a big supporter of the independence of the region, raised unemployment in the region and also making the political system in Madrid lose legitimacy in Catalonia. Although economy has a huge impact on the will of the nationalists to follow secession, there are other reasons as well.

Since the transition to democracy in 1978, the Catalan authorities had conducted a thorough plan of enforcing a distinct Catalan identity by creating schools with bilingual educational system and, through mass media, transmitting the national ideals and customs (Elcano Royal Institute, 2018). In addition, the nationalists believe that the Catalan language is being threatened due to the fact that even if their children are educated on both languages they feel more comfortable speaking Castilian outside of school (Christopher Woolf, PRI, 2017). In 2010, the Popular Party was in opposition but it made an appeal to the Spanish Constitutional Court regarding the Catalan Statute of Autonomy, which was voted on a referendum in 2006. The Court deemed the Statute of Autonomy unconstitutional and this fuelled the willingness of the separatists to proceed with the independence.

Spain and Madrid are really concerned about the escalation of the conflict. The Article 2 of the Spanish Constitution secures the unity of the Spanish Nation and does not entail any clause about a possible Catalan nation. That is the basic argument of the central government and also the fact that it is in Catalan's best interest to stay united with Spain otherwise, as stated by European officials, it would be very difficult for Catalonia to enter European Union, especially without the approval of Spain and the unwillingness of European officials and leaders of major countries to make a precedence with regional governments becoming independent. Another major argument used by the Spanish government is the fact that the majority of Catalans do not desire the secession of their region and this statement is supported by the fact that less than half of the Catalans voted on the referendum and several surveys, such as the one from Catalan's government Centre for Opinion Studies, only 35% of the local population supports independence and the rest wants to stay with Spain (Elcano Royal Institute, 2018). Moreover, Madrid counteracts the argument about taxes and the deficit with Barcelona, stating that due to the inefficiency from the regional government this deficit is so high.

Development and possible outcome of the conflict

After the referendum in October 2017 and the declaration of independence from the Catalan government in Generalitat, led by Carles Puigdemont, Madrid activated Article 155 of the Spanish Constitution meaning that the central government will take full control of an autonomous region in case this region does not comply with its obligations towards the state. Madrid has taken control of the public institutions of Catalonia and arrested Catalan politicians and Carles Puigdemont on charges of sedition, rebellion against the state and misuse of public funds (Angela Dewan, 2018, CNN). The Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy called for new elections on December 2017 in order for a new, moderate government, to be elected and, as we saw, the Cuidadanos, a pro-unity party won the majority of the votes but still the Catalan pro-independent parties, as a coalition, have the majority of seats. However, they have less than the majority of the public vote stating that most of the Catalans do not want the secession of Catalonia from Spain.¹⁰

⁹ Especially, since the Basque Country enjoys tax autonomy, which is protected by the law, this strengthens the stance of the separatists and creates a feeling of unfairness among the Catalan people (James Badcock, BBC, 2017)

¹⁰ Meanwhile, Carles Puigdemont, after Madrid activated Article 155, fled the country and went to Brussels in order to avoid arrest on a self-imposed exile. In March he went to Finland for some lectures but on his way back to Brussels he was arrested in Germany because a European warrant is issued for his arrest. For the time being he is in custody and Germany has 60 days in order to deliver him to the Spanish justice. Puigdemont knows very well that if he returns to Madrid he will be convicted, through trial, for his crimes and he will face up to 25 years in prison (Stephen Burgen, Philip Oltermann, 2018, *The Guardian*)

Puigdemont, after declaring that he will no be the leading figure in Catalan politics anymore, he appointed a new candidate for the presidency of the Catalan government and his name was Jordi Sanchez although he, as well, had to withdraw his nomination due to the fact that he is in jail. Currently, Catalonia has no government and if this situation continues to exist until 22 of May then new elections will be held (Agence France-Press, 2018, The Guardian). Definitely, this is a problematic issue for Spain. Even if a new president is elected or in the coming elections we have a new government it will take some time for the relations between Spain and its region Catalonia to stabilize and heal. Probably Catalonia will not get the independence because it is actually a separatist movement that does not express the view of the majority of the Catalans. Already, many banks, like Caixa and Sabadell, and multinational corporations have fled Barcelona because, without Spain and EU, Catalonia will not have access to the markets and to financial supply from Europe (BBC, 2017).

Therefore, the advantage of a strong economy that Catalonia has will become a strong drawback once this region decides that it will live outside of Spain. Moreover, EU does not support this movement, as the nationalists thought, thus making them look weak at the eyes of the local people and Madrid. The insecurity and uncertainty of such a scenario is the catalyst factor for the Catalans and that is why they want to stay with Spain. Secession has never been the main goal for the society but only a new discussion with the central government about the economic model of Catalonia is what matters to them the most.

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