

Committee: Special Political and Decolonization Committee (GA4)

Issue: Secession and Self-determination in Western Europe: The Case of Catalonia

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INTRODUCTION

Since 2017, the tensions rising within Spain have been notably presented by the media and have become an important topic of discussion both within the Spanish government and the European Union. Spain has been facing its biggest political crisis in decades. Catalonia, one of the 17 autonomous Spanish regions, has been fighting for its autonomy and independence from the rest of the nation. The case of Catalonia has become a controversial topic in politics, perceived by some as a democratic demand and by others as illegal separatism. However, the Catalans have been demanding their separation from Spain for almost 40 years.

Spain consists of 17 semi-autonomous regions, some of which obtain their own cultural identity. Catalonia is considered a territory with a strong regional culture and civilization. Having its own language and many cultural characteristics such as literature and cuisine, Catalonia has been recognized as a nationality, and many of its citizens do not recognize themselves as Spanish. In the area of Catalonia, there are currently living 7.5 million citizens with their own government, flag, and anthem. With its capital Barcelona, the region withholds a significant role in the Spanish economy, as a large percent of Spain's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) originates from Catalan businesses, and an important part of the annual taxes comes from the citizens of this area. Even though Catalonia was given the right of self-governance in 1975, the right of cultural and political self-determination has been growing intensively within the Catalan borders in the past decade.

The risks of Spain's separation escalated after the hold of a self-ruled referendum over the independence of Catalonia on October 1st, 2017. Violence occurred in the region as the Spanish Constitutional Court declared the referendum illegal and tried to prevent its happening. Approximately 1000 people were injured as the central government arrested many planning to vote, and closed voting stations. However, Catalans still managed to vote, with 90 percent of the voters being in favor of their independence. After the referendum, the

threats over the split of the Spanish government have gotten way more serious, leaving Spain in a severe political conflict.



Figure 1: Map showing the exact position of Catalonia within Spain

DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

Self-determination

Under international law, the right of self-determination allows minority groups to decide their political fate and form a representative government.¹

Secession

“The secession of a region or a group from the country or larger group to which it belongs is the action of formally becoming separate.”²

Statehood

Statehood refers to the status of being a recognized state with an independent government.³

¹ “Self-Determination and Secession Under International Law: The Cases of Kurdistan and Catalonia.” *ASIL*, 5 Jan. 2018, www.asil.org/insights/volume/22/issue/1/self-determination-and-secession-under-international-law-cases-kurdistan.

² “Secession Definition and Meaning: Collins English Dictionary.” *Secession Definition and Meaning | Collins English Dictionary*, HarperCollins Publishers Ltd, www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/secession.

³ “STATEHOOD: Meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary.” *Cambridge Dictionary*, dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/statehood.

Referendum

A referendum is a vote by the public on a measure proposed in order for it to decide whether it will pass or not.⁴

Constitution

A constitution is “a set of political principles y which a state or an organization is governed” mostly related to the rights of the people it governs.⁵

Gross Domestic Product (GDP)

The Gross Domestic Product of a country is the economic output of all the foods and services produced within its borders during a specific time period.⁶

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

History of Spain and Catalonia

Catalonia has never been an independent state or kingdom; however, its history is almost as old as the origin of Spain. It was part of the Kingdom of Aaron and later in 1492, joined the Kingdom of Castille, which would later form the Kingdom of Spain.⁷ Even though Catalonia was a Spanish region for many years, it demanded its independence for the first time in 1898, when Spain lost its last colony in Cuba. Cuba was of high significance for the Catalan trade, as it obtained an important market for textile exports. Due to this situation and the differentiation of culture, language, and history of Catalans with the rest of Spain, a Catalan minority demanded a self-rule government or their separation from the rest of the Spanish nation.⁸ During the 20th century, Catalonia preserved its relative autonomy. However, the status of Catalonia, as well as of all the Spanish regions, changed completely after 1939.

⁴ “Referendum.” *Merriam-Webster*, Merriam-Webster, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/referendum.

⁵ “CONSTITUTION: Meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary.” *Cambridge Dictionary*, dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/constitution.

⁶ Chappelow, Jim. “Gross Domestic Product (GDP).” *Investopedia*, Investopedia, 1 June 2020, www.investopedia.com/terms/g/gdp.asp.

⁷ Tzagkas, Christos Anastasios. *The Internal Conflict in Spain: The Case of Catalonia*. Article, June 2018, www.researchgate.net/publication/325595527_The_Internal_Conflict_in_Spain_The_case_of_Catalonia.

⁸ “THE CASE OF CATALONIA. A BRIEF EXPLANATION.” *Www.circulodeempresarios.org*, 31 Oct. 2017, circulodeempresarios.org/app/uploads/2017/11/the_case_of_catalonia.pdf.

Until 1975 Spain was under a fascist dictatorship. The dictator, Francisco Franco, eliminated all democratic liberties of the regions and limited regional diversity with the aim to create a common national identity. The Catalans were not allowed to use their language or conduct their local traditions. After the dictator's death in 1975, Spain converted into a democracy, creating a constitution that allowed the seventeen regions to be semi-autonomous, a constitution still valid to this day. For Catalonia, this legal document brought important changes as it granted its self-governance and recognized Catalan as the official language of the region.

Recent events leading to the referendum in 2017



Figure 2: Protests taking place in Barcelona demanding the region to gain independence from Spain

In 2006, for the first time after the creation of the Constitution, the citizens of Catalonia set a referendum with the aim to expand their autonomy. The referendum proposed the creation of a new economic model for Catalonia, its recognition as an independent state, and the establishment of Catalan as the main spoken language in the region. But the central Spanish government did not accept their demands. The years between 2010 and 2016, the idea of an independent Catalan state was gaining popularity. It was believed that Catalonia met all the necessary criteria, meaning territory, population, economic stability, and viability, to form an autonomous state.

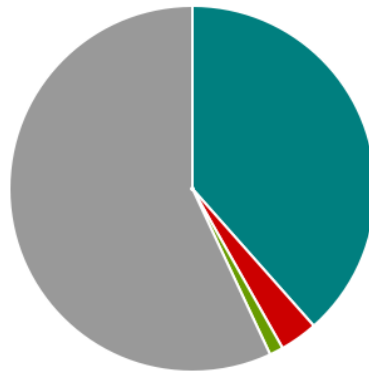
September and October 2017

In September 2017, the Regional Parliament of Catalonia approved a law for self-determination through a referendum, an action that was considered illegal by legal counselors. Moreover, they created a law called “Transitional law” that would help the Regional government through the transitioning period if the majority of citizens voted in favor of the referendum. However, both of these laws were rejected by the Constitutional Court that also requested the Catalan authorities that due to their recognition of the referendum as illegal, prevent from happening.⁹ The situation escalated dangerously on October 1st, the day of the referendum. The Catalan authorities arrested voters, confiscated ballots, and closed voting stations. Even though the voting was chaotic and the voting uncontrolled as some people voted multiple times, it was announced by the government that 2.3 million Catalans managed to vote, with 2 million voting in favor of the separation. The following days mass demonstrations took place in the center of Barcelona, and Catalans demanded their autonomy. On Friday, October 27th, the pro-independence groups in parliament announced an elaborate unilateral declaration of independence. On the same day, the Spanish Constitutional Court enforced Article 155 of the Constitution and limited the power of the Regional Government of Catalonia. Moreover, officials and responsible members of the secession attempt were charged with crimes against the government and fled the country.

⁹ “THE CASE OF CATALONIA. A BRIEF EXPLANATION.” *Www.circulodeempresarios.org*, 31 Oct. 2017, circulodeempresarios.org/app/uploads/2017/11/the_case_of_catalonia.pdf.

Result of Catalan referendum 1 October 2017

- Voted for independence
- Voted against independence
- Blank/spoiled ballots
- Didn't vote



Catalan Government figures



Figure 3: Graph showing the results of the 2017 referendum in Catalonia regarding the independence of the region from the Spanish state

Reasons for Independence

Justifying Catalonia's demand for independence is comprised of several reasons. First of all, the cultural differentiation of the region with the rest of the nation created the idea of separation in the first place in 1492. After the recognition of Catalonia as nationality and of Catalan as an official language, the contrast between Catalonia and Spain became even more intense. Secondly, there are economic factors leading to the Catalan request. Catalonia is one of the most affluent Spanish regions. Although it takes up only 6 percent of the nation's land, 20 percent of Spain's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) comes from Catalan firms and businesses. Moreover, a large percent of Spain's tax revenue derives from Catalonia, and in 2016, it reached 21 percent. It is believed by pro-independent Catalans that Catalonia, as a whole, pays more to the government than what it gets in return. The Catalan income contributes greatly to the support of poorer Spanish regions, leaving Catalonia with poorer living conditions that it could afford.¹⁰

Two major sides of the conflict

In such a conflict, it is significant to mention that there are two opposing sides. Firstly, there are the pro-independence politicians and citizens who are in favor of Catalonia's separation from the Spanish nation.¹¹ On the other hand, there are the anti-independence

¹⁰ Thornell, Christina. "The Rise of Catalonia's Independence Movement." *Vox*, Vox, 6 Nov. 2017, www.vox.com/videos/2017/11/6/16614318/catalonia-spain-independence-news.

¹¹ Tzagkas, Christos Anastasios. *The Internal Conflict in Spain: The Case of Catalonia Article*. June 2018, www.researchgate.net/publication/325595527_The_Internal_Conflict_in_Spain_The_case_of_Catalonia.

politician and Catalans who support the present situation and want Catalonia to remain an autonomous region of Spain. Due to the events before and during 2017, it is believed by many that the majority of Catalans wish to be separated from the rest of Spain. However, the reality is completely different. Although the existing cultural differentiation and the economic issues are recognized by all Catalans, the majority of Catalonia's citizens are against the Catalan statehood.¹² After the European economic crisis, an unemployment wave hit Spain in 2010, changing the opinions of many Catalans on the issue. Low-income families are more supportive of the unity of Catalonia and Spain than high-income families that mostly promote Catalonia's independence. Those being against the separation are dependent on Spain but on the European Union.

Dependence on the European Union

As it was previously mentioned, the majority of Catalans want to remain a part of Spain in order to remain a part of the European Union. Many multinational companies and businesses have already started to move their headquarters from Barcelona to other Spanish areas. Pro-independent groups have previously addressed the European Union for support, but most European leaders have instantly rejected them and sided with the central government.¹³ If Catalonia separates itself from Spain, then there is no way for Catalans to preserve their European citizenship benefits except from Catalonia as a whole applying for an EU membership. However, it is a well-known fact that such a process will take years as there are other countries still examined as Turkey and Albania.

Elections 2020

After the events in 2017 and the imprisonment of many politicians due to the failed secession attempt, controversy still existed over how Catalonia would separate from Spain. The unstable situation led to the early election announced on January 29th, 2020. The election was supposed to take place in March, but due to the coronavirus pandemic, it was postponed. Catalonia's separatist President Quim Torra justified his call for a snap election by saying that no government can work without unity and a common plan. In the current government there

¹² Carsten Humlebæk, Associate professor. "Is There a Solution in Sight for Catalonia?" *ScienceNordic*, 28 Aug. 2018, scienordic.com/denmark-forskerzonen-politics/is-there-a-solution-in-sight-for-catalonia/1458224.

¹³ Thornell, Christina. "The Rise of Catalonia's Independence Movement." *Vox*, 6 Nov. 2017, www.vox.com/videos/2017/11/6/16614318/catalonia-spain-independence-news.

are two pro-independence parties that cannot agree on the way to achieve Catalonia's separation from Spain.¹⁴

MAJOR COUNTRIES AND ORGANISATIONS INVOLVED

Spain

Spain is the major country involved in this issue as Catalonia is one of its 17 regions, and the conflict began within its borders. The reaction of the Spanish government towards the Catalan demand for separation has been negative and opposing all those years. Catalonia's independence would not only mean the loss of Spanish land, but also the loss of an economically significant region of Spain. As mentioned previously, 20 percent of Spain's economic output originates from Catalonia, and a large percent of the Spanish tax revenue comes from Catalans. Spanish authorities reacted violently in the Catalan region during and after the events in October 2017. The international community has held Spain responsible for violations of human rights and extreme violence. The imprisonment of separatist leaders has created reactions all over the world but more significantly in Catalonia. The Spanish authorities are justifying their actions with the principle of territorial integrity and the unity of Spain; however, many experts do not conceive this justification as valuable. Although these human rights violations, Spain seems to obtain the support of both the European Union and the United Nations.

European Union

As previously mentioned, an important percent of Catalonia is against Catalan independence because they want to remain a part of the EU. In order for autonomous Catalonia to obtain an EU membership, many years must pass, and an application as an independent nation must be formed as it will not be facing any special treatment. When Catalan separatist groups turned to European leaders for support, they did not receive any as most European countries have sided with the central government. However, there were a few countries that supported Catalonia. The United Kingdom, which in 2017 remained a member

¹⁴ Jones, Sam. "Catalan President to Call Early Election as Divisions Grow." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 29 Jan. 2020, www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/29/catalan-president-quim-torra-to-call-early-election-as-divisions-grow-spain.

of the EU. Nigel Farage, the former UKIP leader, accused the EU of not dealing with the police brutality in Catalonia on October 1st, 2017.¹⁵

TIMELINE OF EVENTS

Date	Description of Event
June 18 th , 2006	The first referendum over the Catalan separation took place. Due to this referendum, the Catalan government demanded its independence from the Spanish state and proposed a new economic model for their region.
September 6 th , 2017	On this day, the approval of self-determination law by the Catalan government took place, meaning that the regional government voted upon a self-determination law declaring them not being a part of Spain.
September 7 th , 2017	On this day, the Transitional law in case of self-determination was approved by the Catalan government. This law would help Catalonia through its transition period, from being a Spanish region to becoming an independent state.
October 1 st , 2017	The referendum over Catalonia's independence took place. Due to this referendum, the whole situation escalated quickly, making the issue of high importance for the Spanish state.
October 27 th , 2017	The Regional Government announced a unilateral declaration of independence, which was rejected by the central government. The Spanish Constitutional Court limited the autonomy of Catalonia and arrested many politicians related to the events on October 1 st .
January 29 th , 2020	The day the snap elections would take place. However, due to the coronavirus pandemic, they were postponed.

UN INVOLVEMENT: RELEVANT RESOLUTIONS, TREATIES, AND EVENTS

Due to the conflict occurring within the borders of Spain, the United Nations did not have the jurisdiction to intervene as such an action would violate Spanish sovereignty. However, there has been a discussion between the UN over the arrest and imprisonment of the politicians and other personnel related to the events and the referendum on October 1st, 2017. UN human rights experts blamed the Spanish authorities for violence and violation of fundamental human rights such as the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.

¹⁵ País, El. "Who in Europe Supports the Catalan Secessionists?" *EL PAÍS*, 6 Oct. 2017, english.elpais.com/elpais/2017/10/04/inenglish/1507129814_170926.html.

Many people responsible for the referendum and the declaration of independence were charged with rebellion and other crimes against the Spanish government in 2017 and were imprisoned or fled the country to avoid the arrest. However, the UN has urged the release of jailed Catalan separatist leaders through its report. Moreover, the topic of Catalonia's independence has been controversial even among UN experts and chiefs.¹⁶

UN Independent Expert on the Promotion of a Democratic and Equitable International Order

The UN independent expert urged the Spanish government in 2017 to reverse its decision on Catalonia's independence. In his statement, he mentions all the rights violated through Spain's decision. By denying Catalan citizens the right to express themselves over self-determination, denying the legality of a referendum, and using force to prevent it as well as punishing Catalonia by limiting its autonomy, Spain violated multiple articles of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Article 1 of the ICCPR focuses on the right of self-determination of all people, which was the main violation of the Spanish authorities.¹⁷ Then, the expert referred to the justification of the Spanish authorities for their actions that focus on the principle of territorial integrity. However, the UN expert responds that this principle is intended to apply externally in order to prevent foreign threats. In this case, this principle cannot be used against the right of self-determination.¹⁸

United Nations chief Ban Ki-moon

In 2015, the former Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon expressed the UN approach to Catalonia's desire to become independent and separate itself from the rest of Spain.¹⁹ The chief mentioned that the Catalan region is included in Spain, and in this way, the Spanish state was accepted in the United Nations and acts within the international community. He also clarifies that there are certain areas recognized by the UN as "non-autonomous," and

¹⁶ Acn. "Civil Groups Slam Spain's Human Rights Record on Eve of UN Review." *Catalan News*, Catalan News, 21 Jan. 2020, www.catalannews.com/society-science/item/civil-groups-slam-spain-s-human-rights-record-on-eve-of-un-review.

¹⁷ "International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights." *OHCHR*, www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx.

¹⁸ "UN Independent Expert Urges the Spanish Government to Reverse Decision on Catalan Autonomy." *OHCHR*, www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22295.

¹⁹ "UN Chief Insists Catalonia Has No Right to Claim Self-Determination." *TheLocal.es*, www.thelocal.es/20151031/un-chief-ban-ki-moon-catalonia-has-no-right-to-claim-self-determination.

Catalonia does not fall under this category and thus cannot refer to self-determination. He believes that even though there are cultural differences between the Catalan region and Spain, Catalonia is not the only Spanish region with a unique culture. All of these cultural diversities within its borders are part of Spain's cultural identity. However, he urges the central and the regional government to cooperate and seek a solution through dialogue and democratic tradition.

PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS TO SOLVE THE ISSUE

Due to the fact that the issue occurred within the borders of Spain, there have not been any previous attempts to solve the tensions by the international community. As previously mentioned, the United Nations have urged the Spanish central government and the Catalan regional government to cooperate and solve the issue diplomatically through dialogue. However, Spain's changes in the Constitution and attempts to limit the tensions can be considered an attempt to solve the issue in this case. First of all, it is important to remember that Catalonia had the highest level of autonomy compared to the other 16 Spanish regions since 1975. Furthermore, the Spanish government has made multiple attempts to negotiate with the Catalan politician since 2017. Almost three years after the referendum, the Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez of the new government formed in January 2020 has agreed to start a dialogue with the Catalan separatists in order to find a solution to the issue.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

The Catalan demand for independence is, without a doubt, the biggest political crisis Spain has ever faced. However, there are a few measures that, if taken, can eliminate the tensions within the Spanish borders.

First of all, as analyzed previously, the majority of Catalans are against the separation from Spain, and even if the referendum showed otherwise, due to the violence and the intervention of the Spanish authorities, the majority of people did not have the opportunity to vote. Consequently, an important solution could be a constitutional referendum with the aim to obtain a holistic view of the percentage of people who are in favor of Catalan independence. As this issue influences a large number of people, it is crucial to guarantee the voice of Catalans. Measures that allow a discussion to be created among the citizens of Catalonia and later on with the rest of Spain.

Second of all, the economic issues are another factor contributing to the creation of this demand as Catalan citizens believe that they pay too much for what they get in return. Therefore, an improvement in the living conditions in the region according to the local prosperity or making the separation of taxes more equal in Spain as a whole can lead to the satisfaction of the citizens. In order to avoid any false claims and speculations, monitoring the contribution of Catalonia to Spain and provide benefits according to the measured difference is necessary.

Furthermore, in order to avoid the separation of the region, the high level of autonomy it used to obtain can be restored. Giving back the autonomy and the benefits Catalonia had for decades will reduce the tensions and allow peaceful relations between Catalonia and the central government. On a more general note, it is very important for the Spanish government to negotiate with the Catalans about which benefits are feasible.

With that said, dialogue between the central and the regional government can bring peace, end the tensions, and also find the solution to the issue by analyzing the background of Catalonia's demand for separation. As the Catalan and Spanish government are both within the same borders, it is crucial for them to stop being enemies but to make efforts to reach common ground, cooperate, and look for solutions.

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