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Catalonia's Separatist Swell

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*Artur Mas, the regional leader of Catalonia, signed a decree on September 27 calling for a non-binding consultation on independence to be held on November 9 to determine the region's fate. Recent polls indicate that half of Catalans would vote to break away from Spain, while the other half would vote to stay on current or more autonomous terms. In the likely scenario that the Spanish Constitutional Court suspends the decree on the grounds that it is illegal, Mas is expected to call off the November 9 consultation. If he backs down on the consultation, however, pressure will rise in Catalonia for early regional elections. His party, *Convergència i Unió*, will likely lose votes in such elections to the more radically pro-independence party, *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* (ERC). If ERC makes big gains, Spain's prime minister, Mariano Rajoy, may soon face a new partner in Barcelona – one who is less willing to negotiate. Madrid would be wise to offer Barcelona far more than just fiscal concessions.*

Introduction

Artur Mas, the regional leader of Catalonia, signed a decree on Saturday, September 27 calling for a non-binding consultation on independence to be held on November 9 to determine the region's fate. Recent polls indicate that half of Catalans would vote to break away from Spain, while the other half would vote to stay on current or more autonomous terms.¹

Mas's decree signals that he is determined to move ahead with his plans in spite of Madrid's adamant refusal to sanction a vote. It was also the latest maneuver in what has become a predictable collision course.

Consider the most probable scenario: Madrid is expected to present an appeal to the Spanish Constitutional Court, arguing that the decree is illegal. The court will likely suspend the decree, and Mas, who has said that he wants to hold a legal, recognized non-binding consultation, will likely have to call the November 9 consultation off. If he backs down on the consultation, pressure will rise in Catalonia for early regional elections. In those elections, Mr. Mas's pro-autonomy *Convergència i Unió* (CiU) will likely lose votes to the more radically pro-independence party, *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* (ERC). "In other words," said Ferran Requejo, a professor at Pompeu Fabra University, "The political decision will be to substitute the consultation with the elections."² If CiU loses the next

Catalan elections to ERC, Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy may soon face a new partner in Barcelona – one who is less willing to negotiate.

The contours of this collision course first came into focus in May 2014, when ERC won the majority of Catalan votes in the European Union parliamentary elections. After years of being the most popular party in the region, CiU fell to second place. Anti-independence parties, including Spanish nationalist and socialist parties, tumbled in the polls.

These election results marked ERC's emergence as a formidable political force and showed the growing popularity in Catalonia of the idea of secession, which received an important surge of support during the 2008 financial crisis. Since then, support for independence has doubled.³ It gained further momentum in 2010, when the Spanish Constitutional Court ruled against many articles inscribed in the Catalan Statute of Autonomy, which had been approved by Catalan voters in 2006. Among other issues, the court ruled that the Catalan language must not take priority over Spanish, and that the reference to Catalonia as a "nation" is not legally valid.

The centerpiece of Catalan grievances is Madrid's insistent refusal to allow a Catalan vote, which stands in glaring contrast to London's approval of the (even more consequential) binding referendum in Scotland this September. Many more Catalans

– around 75 percent – support the right to vote in a plebiscite than those (circa 50 percent) who say they would actually opt to secede.⁴ As Alfred Bosch, a member of parliament for the ERC in the Spanish Congress, said: “The more they deny us [the consultation], the more we will want it.”⁵

The momentum is culminating now. This October, in the lead-up to the proposed consultation date, may be Madrid’s last solid chance for a while to lower the temperature in Catalonia. An analysis of what has propelled Catalan secessionism is necessary to evaluate how the two sides may best use this period to backpedal.

How We Got Here

The 2008 financial crisis, which devastated Spain’s economy, set into motion the current trend of rising Catalan secessionism. Catalonia, like other parts of the country, suffered from soaring youth unemployment and budget cutbacks. But as one of Spain’s wealthiest regions, Catalonia still contributes a relatively large share of taxes to Madrid, and these taxes are then redistributed throughout Spain’s autonomous communities. Catalonia’s fiscal deficit with Madrid – which some scholars estimate to be as high as 8.5 percent – led many Catalans to feel that their region was unfairly being dragged down by the weight of a struggling Spain. According to Alfred Bosch, “Most Catalans feel aggrieved due to the fact that a disproportionate share of the costs of Spanish administration have been forced on us over the past 35 years. . . . Practically everyone has a feeling that we have been, and are being, ripped off.”⁶

But fiscal woes alone cannot explain the phenomenon. Many years after the crisis started, and despite some economic recovery, support for independence has continued to rise. Since the spark of the financial crisis, the independence movement has since taken on a life of its own. It is fueled by the rising use of the Catalan language, a vibrant pro-independence civil society movement, and substantial youth support. The numbers tell an inescapable truth: the independence movement has staying power.

Mother-language education in Catalan has been on the rise since 1983, when the Catalan parliament passed a linguistic normalization law that emphasized teaching Catalan in schools. Miguel Abellan, an advisor to the Catalan parliament, said that the growing use of Catalan language since then has created a renewed sense of Catalan identity. “Language is at the epicenter of Catalan nationalism,” he said. “The education my generation received is completely different than people who are now twenty are receiving. There’s a nationalist bias in education.”⁷

According to the EUSCAT Project, a study conducted by the Barcelona Institute of International Studies (Institut Barcelona d’Estudis Internacionals, IBEI), there is a strong correlation between the use of Catalan language and support for independence.⁸ Eighty-four percent of those who chose to respond to the study’s questionnaire in Catalan (indicating that they were habitual Catalan speakers) supported independence. By contrast, only 24.9 percent of those who chose to respond in Spanish voted for independence. Diego Muro, an assistant professor at IBEI who worked on the study, explained that choice of language is the best predictor of support for independence. “Language is one of the pillars of the Catalan identity and the frequency of its use is therefore strongly connected to attitudes towards secession from Spain,” he said. “Other factors, such as the level of education, the area of residence, or the gender of the respondents do not have much explanatory power in this context.”⁹

The more widespread use of Catalan language in schools has given wings to a new generation with a strong sense of Catalan identity. Indeed, support for Catalan independence among youth is especially high: at least 60 percent. For those just entering the job market, the dire consequences of the economic crisis have also pushed youth to support independence. Unable to find emotionally fulfilling and challenging jobs that match their level of education, many Catalan youth have discovered a sense of cause and purpose in the independence movement.

Youth also play a significant role in pro-independence civil society, organizing social media campaigns and public demonstrations in support of independence. The Catalan National Assembly (Assemblea Nacional Catalana, ANC), the largest civil society movement in the region, has over 30,000 members (and at least 20,000 more activists) and has organized highly coordinated demonstrations of millions of people in support of independence for the past several years on Catalan National Day (September 11). In 2013, the ANC organized a human chain of 1.6 million people stretching from Catalonia's border with France to that with Valencia (covering 250 miles). This year, hundreds of thousands of Catalans demonstrated in support of holding a vote in downtown Barcelona.

At least part of the reason for the ANC's success is that the cause has broad appeal. It does not maintain official links with political parties or proclaim any political agenda other than pro-independence. This "lowest common denominator" platform has won the ANC support across the pro-independence camp. Ricard Gene, a member of the ANC's secretariat, explained: "From a political point of view, we [the ANC members] think quite differently. We have people from the right-wing to the extreme left working hand-in-hand in the Assemblea."¹⁰ As Ferran Requejo explained, "because the ANC is not controlled by any political party, it has maintained purity."¹¹

The ANC has become one of the most powerful and active engines of the Catalan independence movement. The group effectively utilizes both the virtual world on-the-ground initiatives to reach out to supporters; active social media accounts and slick websites co-exist with pro-independence booths set up throughout the city year-round and added presence at the September 11 rallies. According to Gene, in the lead-up to the scheduled date for the non-binding consultation this November, the ANC will focus on swaying undecided voters. The ANC's immense mobilization capacities in this regard will likely be boosted by the general frustration in Catalonia with Madrid's refusal to allow a vote.

Moving Forward

Any deal that Madrid may offer to Barcelona would need to go far beyond fiscal concessions. In addition to a financial settlement, Madrid would at the very minimum need to endow Catalonia with more autonomy regarding language rights, support policies that would open up new economic opportunities for youth in the region, and confer directly with Catalan civil society. Such a deal, if serious, would possibly necessitate a new constitution that would institute federalism in Spain.

But it may be hard to negotiate such an extensive bargain at this point in time. Catalonia and Spain have reached a stalemate; in the absence of any serious negotiation initiatives, more and more Catalans are turning to the independence movement as the only solution. Andrew Dowling, a professor at Cardiff University, explained:

Now support for independence is around 50–55 percent of the electorate. It hasn't grown, and it hasn't fallen back either, so we are very much looking at a stabilization of the movement. This means that it is a highly credible political movement that is not going away, contrary to what people in Madrid think. The idea that it's a flash in the pan, or that it's all about money – the movement has been going on for far too long for those arguments to be credible.¹²

Clever utilization of a few key players and issues, however, may offer an opportunity for both sides to walk back to a point where negotiations over a deal may begin.

The non-binding consultation: The fastest and easiest way for Madrid to reverse course would be to allow a non-binding consultation, demonstrating its good faith to the growing number of Catalans who are frustrated with what they see as the central government's insulting patronization. As Mas wrote in a *New York Times* op-ed in 2013, "the best way to solve any problem is to remove its cause. We seek the freedom to vote."¹³ Of course, holding a consultation risks allowing the independence camp to win it. But denying it will only bolster the

secessionist cause and encourage Catalans to seek an alternative – for example, early elections – which could have even more serious implications than a non-binding consultation would.

Artur Mas: Mas perhaps has the most to lose from the current collision course. If Madrid's refusal to allow a legal non-binding consultation succeeds in pressuring him to delay or call off the non-binding consultation, he will likely lose support in Catalonia. If he calls early elections in place of a non-binding consultation, his party will likely lose some votes to ERC. For the first time in almost a year, Mas and Rajoy met at the end of last July to discuss the non-binding consultation, regional financing, and a new education law. The icy two-hour talks failed to bridge the divide over the non-binding consultation, but Mas declared that a new "climate of open dialogue" had been established.¹⁴ Rajoy should jump on this opportunity before it is too late; if CiU loses the next Catalan elections to ERC, Rajoy may face a new Catalan leader who is less willing than Mas to negotiate.

The monarchy: Barcelona and Madrid may look to the new monarchy to create favorable negotiation conditions. Within a week of ascending the throne, King Felipe VI, delivered a speech in Catalan, an important overture intended to break with the image of his predecessor, King Juan Carlos, whose popularity in Catalonia had plummeted in recent years. This overture should encourage both sides to look to the King to create conditions conducive to negotiation. Diego Muro of IBEI said: "We know the King can't provide a solution ... [but what] he can do is tell people to talk and provide a space for that."¹⁵

The threat of losing EU membership: The majority of Catalan separatists hope to remain in the EU, and studies show that support for independence would drop dramatically if an independent Catalonia were excluded from the EU. According to IBEI's EUSCAT Project, when presented with the scenario that an independent Catalonia would not be able to join the EU, 5.6 percent of survey respondents who said they favored an independent state changed their minds and no longer supported secession. Yet the EU has remained vague on the process by which an independent Catalonia would enter the EU after its hypothetical secession from Spain. If the EU at least were to declare that an independent Catalonia would not automatically enter the EU, sketching the outlines of the required accession process, support for outright independence would likely decline.

The breakaway of one of Spain's wealthiest regions would not go down easy. Poorer Spanish provinces that depend on national revenue to maintain public services would be especially hard hit. Catalonia's relationship with Europe would need to be reworked. The new country's own economy could suffer during the transition period. A significant percentage of Catalans may feel less at home in their new state, giving rise to new tensions. Yet none of this means that Catalonia should, by some objective principle, forever remain a part of Spain. If a considerable percentage of the population desires to break away, the EU, and ultimately Madrid, should work toward an agreement that accommodates the new state.

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Notes

- 1 This article is based on developments that took place up to September 29, 2014.
- 2 Author interview with Ferran Requejo, Barcelona, July 2014.
- 3 “Barcelona braces for million-strong march for Catalan independence,” *The Guardian*, September 11, 2014 <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/sep/11/barcelona-march-catalan-independence>> (accessed September 29, 2014).
- 4 Giovanna Maria Dora Dora, “Will Scottish Independence Create a Bandwagon Effect?” *The American Interest*, <<http://www.the-american-interest.com/articles/2014/09/17/will-scottish-independence-create-a-bandwagon-effect/>> (accessed September 30, 2014).
- 5 Author interview with Alfred Bosch, Barcelona, January 2014.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Author interview with Miguel Abellan, Barcelona, January 2014.
- 8 *The Impact of the European Union on Secessionism: Survey Evidence from two Member States* (EUSCAT Project). Funded by the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung in 2013, carried out by Diego Muro and Martijn Vlaskamp, researchers at IBEL.
- 9 Author interview with Diego Muro, Barcelona, June 2014.
- 10 Author interview with Ricard Gene, Barcelona, July 2014.
- 11 Requejo interview (see note 1).
- 12 Author telephone interview with Andrew Dowling, May 2014.
- 13 Artur Mas, “A Referendum for Catalonia,” *New York Times*, September 10, 2010 <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/11/opinion/global/a-referendum-for-catalonia.html?_r=0> (accessed September 29, 2014).
- 14 “Spain and Catalonia Fail to Narrow Divide over Break-away Quest,” *Financial Times*, July 30, 2014 <<http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/835fff04-17f8-11e4-b842-00144feabdc0.html#axzz39XD8xQXQ>> (accessed September 29, 2014).
- 15 Muro interview (see note 7).

This paper is based on a presentation held at the “New Faces Conference: Citizenship and Political Participation in the Mediterranean” in February 2014, held within the framework of the EU-Middle East Forum (EUMEF) at the German Council on Foreign Relations. EUMEF is a dialogue and exchange platform on developments in the Arab region and Europe geared toward young and mid-level professionals from North Africa, Turkey, and the EU. This publication is part of a series intended to showcase a new generation of scholars, politicians, journalists, and representatives of civil society and shed new light on legal, political, and media developments as well as broader social trends in the EU’s Mediterranean neighborhood. It is realized with the support of the Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations (ifa e.V.) and the German Federal Foreign Office.

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