

# IRMO BRIEF

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## *Sí o no? Will Catalonia go it alone?*

*By Dr. Janko Bekić*

The United Kingdom and Spain have many things in common. Both countries are former empires, constitutional monarchies and parliamentary democracies; officially they are unitary states, however, devolution in the UK and the model of autonomous communities in Spain make them “federations without federalism”. Furthermore, they are both plurinational, in the sense that Britishness and Spanishness serve as overarching identities for the stateless nations of the English, Scots and Welsh within the UK, and the Castilians, Catalans, Basques and others within Spain (although, one could argue that the English and the Castilians are the real “owners” of the two countries). In the past, London as well as Madrid fought minority nationalisms with violence, triggering terrorist attacks by armed separatist and secessionist groups like the IRA and ETA.

More recently, the central governments of the UK and Spain have been faced with peaceful and democratic independence movements in Scotland and Catalonia, to which they responded quite differently. While London allowed the Scottish independence referendum of September 2014, and promised to honor its result, Madrid remains adamantly opposed to a similar plebiscite in Catalonia, and vows to disrupt it with all legal means at its disposal (which, ultimately, includes the use of force). The differing approaches of British and Spanish governments to secessionism within their borders are mirrored in their foreign policies: the UK recognized the Serbian breakaway province of Kosovo as a sovereign and independent state, while Spain (along with four other EU members) refuses to do so.

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The Scottish and Catalan independence movements share many similarities too. They are both rooted in civic nationalism, decidedly pacifist and staunchly pro-EU (meaning that they aspire to full EU membership of their countries as soon as possible after gaining independence). This allows them to remain within the political mainstream and makes them acceptable interlocutors to most international actors. In terms of strategy, both movements invoke a history of sovereign statehood going back to the Middle Ages, their nations' cultural and linguistic distinctiveness, and, most importantly, their strong economic performance. In 2013, a year before the Scottish independence referendum took place, Scotland's GDP per capita (oil and gas revenues included) surpassed that of the UK by more than 4.000 £. Similarly, in 2015, Catalonia's GDP per capita was more than 5.000 € above that of Spain. Inevitably, the political narrative of both independence movements is one of almost infinite potential for economic growth that has so far been stifled by the unfair and rapacious fiscal policies of the central governments.

The main difference between the two movements is that the Scottish one is clearly dominated by a single political party – Nicola Sturgeon's center-left Scottish National Party (SNP) – while the Catalan movement is headed by the Together for Yes (*Junts pel Sí*) coalition, bringing together ideologically disparate parties, such as the liberal-conservative Democratic Convergence of Catalonia (*Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya*) and the socialist Republican Left of Catalonia (*Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya*). The two parties disagree on everything but the need to separate their homeland from Spain and are bound to become bitter political rivals in the event of Catalan emancipation. Another disparity concerns the projected form of government. Supporters of Catalan independence are fiercely anti-monarchist and pro-republican (Carles Puigdemont, the current President of Catalonia, caused a scandal when he assumed office in January 2016 without making the traditional oath of loyalty to the Spanish king). By contrast, Scottish sovereignists are divided on the monarchy vs. republic issue, and, at the moment, a slight majority favors keeping the Queen as official head of state even in the case of independence (analogous to Australia, Canada, etc.).

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## Chasing the 50% threshold

The cases of Scotland and Catalonia are similar enough to boldly predict that the outcome of the Catalan independence referendum, scheduled for October 1st 2017, will be the same as the Scottish one, i.e. that independence will be repudiated. This political forecast is backed by the most recent opinion poll, conducted by the Catalan Center for Opinion Studies in March, that showed an insufficient 44,3% support for Catalonia's secession from Spain, with 48,5% of responders opposing such a move. The result of the latest Catalan opinion poll strikingly resembles that of the Scottish independence referendum three years ago, when 44,7% voted for the split from the UK and 55,3% opted against it (the SNP now claims that the context in which the Scottish plebiscite has been held changed dramatically with Britain's decision – also by means of referendum – to exit the EU, and that a second vote on Scottish independence should be held in the foreseeable future).

Surely, the backers of Catalan independence will point to the non-binding self-determination referendum held in November 2014, when a decisive 80,8% of voters answered "Yes" to a twofold question: "Do you want Catalonia to become a state?", and "Do you want this state to become independent?". However, the turnout for this popular consultation remained far below the 50% mark, leading to the conclusion that it was widely shunned by Spanish loyalists. It should also be noted that the non-binding referendum was proclaimed illegal by Spain's Constitutional Court, yet no move was made by

the authorities to disrupt it. Still, in March 2017 a court in Barcelona barred former Catalan president Artur Mas from holding public office for two years, following his 2014 decision to go on with the unconstitutional self-determination referendum.

## From autonomism to independentism

But what are the reasons for Catalonia's reemerging secessionist drive? What has changed so drastically since the autumn of 1990 when Jordi Pujol, then President of the *Generalitat de Catalunya*, expressed his sympathy and understanding for Croatia's bid for independence from Yugoslavia to the visiting Croatian delegation, but added that Catalans felt no more need to separate from Spain, since it has become a democratic and prosperous country in the post-Franco era?

The first answer pertains to Spain's peculiar model of regional autonomy, adopted in the late 1970s. This model accords to all Spanish regions the same degree of self-government, with the Basque country, Catalonia and Galicia enjoying a special status of nationality (the term is somewhat confusing, representing a kind of middle ground between the terms ethnic group and nation). The Catalan ambition ever since the adoption of the Statute of Autonomy of Catalonia in 1979 was to gradually expand the reach of its self-government and progressively transform Spain into an actual federation, thusly achieving internal self-determination (i.e. sovereignty without independence). An

important move in this direction was the 2006 promulgation of a new Statute of Autonomy of Catalonia (approved by both the Catalan and Spanish parliaments and confirmed by popular vote in Catalonia), declaring in its preamble that Catalonia was a nation (not merely a nationality) and expanding its sway over fiscal and educational matters. Four years later, Spain's Constitutional Court rewrote 14 articles of the Statute and reassured Spanish unitarists that the term "nation" used in the Statute's preamble had no legal standing. This prompted a massive demonstration in Barcelona on July 10th 2010, congregating more than a million people under the slogan "*Som una nació. Nosaltres decidim.*" ("We are a nation. We decide."). What followed was a striking shift in the overall strategy of Catalan parties away from autonomy and further devolution of the Spanish state, and towards full independence for Catalonia.

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The second answer is societal and economical. Since the resuscitation of Catalan autonomy in the late 1970s, education in Catalonia has been dominated once again by the Catalan language. This meant that younger generations would be

socialized differently from their parents and grandparents, developing a stronger Catalan identity and exhibiting a lower level of self-identification with the Spanish state as a whole. No wonder then that younger voters are more inclined to support Catalan independence (which, on a long enough timeline, should make secession a certainty). This development corroborates the thesis of some political analysts who argue that territorial autonomy is basically a preparation for independence, a trial run for its future governing class.

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and spent in vain. Certainly, one could criticize the Catalans for being selfish and parochial, but it is well-known that solidarity arises out of a sense of community, and in Catalonia Spanishness is a receding state of mind.

### **The naysayers**

So far we have established that Catalonia has a history of sovereign statehood and that millions of Catalans feel the time is ripe for its independence to be resurrected; Catalans are equally proud of their Catalan language, and many want it to become the 25th official language of the EU; further, Catalonia's economic performance is well above the Spanish average, and a large number of Catalans estimate that an independent Catalonia would be even more prosperous. So what are the naysayers' arguments against a split from Spain?

Firstly, they point to the fact that the Spanish constitution does not allow secession of any of its constituent parts. Section 2 specifies that "The Constitution is based on the indissoluble unity of the Spanish Nation, the common and indivisible homeland of all Spaniards". In other words, any move to separate Catalonia from Spain would be unconstitutional and illegal (lest the wording of the Constitution changes, which is highly unlikely). Another point put forward by sceptics is that since a peak in approval for Catalonia's independence in 2012 and 2013, not a single opinion poll has shown a majority favoring secession. To insist on holding a highly controversial referendum in these

circumstances, critics say, is irresponsible and poor judgement. Last but not least, there is the concern that an independent Catalonia would have to reapply for EU membership and that its admission could possibly be blocked indefinitely by a grudge-bearing Spain, or another EU member state fearing secessionism within its own borders (Belgium, France, Italy, etc.).

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Instead, opponents of Catalonia's secession want to continue reforming the Spanish state from within – by expanding the scope of regional autonomy, or even by pushing for federalization. They represent the continuation of Catalonia's mainstream politics from 1980 to 2010, which tried to advance Catalonia's position without challenging Spain's territorial integrity. Of course, there are even those who believe that a tighter union between Barcelona and Madrid is the right way forward. These unwavering loyalists and unitarists stand in the tradition of Francoism – a marginal yet persistent ideology on the Spanish political spectrum.

## Conclusion

The Catalan and Scottish independence movements are very similar cases, and therefore it is not unreasonable to forecast that Catalonia's independence referendum on October 1st will fail, i.e. that the autonomous community will remain a part of Spain. However, comparative politics teaches us that even most similar cases can have different outcomes if there is an important independent variable. That variable could be Madrid's stated intention to prevent the Catalan plebiscite from even taking place, let alone recognize its outcome. The last time the Spanish authorities heavy-handedly nullified Catalonia's attempt to strengthen its self-government (the decision of Spain's Constitutional Court from 2010), they

provoked a massive reaction, and essentially gave birth to a new independist movement in Catalonia. Should they resort to 20th century tactics of arresting Catalan political leaders or preventing the people to vote by the use of force, they could generate a crisis that could easily spiral out of control, become violent, and end with Catalonia's bloody separation from Spain (leading to a Balkanization of the Iberian Peninsula). On the other hand, should Madrid embrace London's amicable approach toward Scotland and allow the Catalans to determine their own fate, without any outside interference, it would reduce the stakes and take emotions out of the equation. And recent experience shows that Catalans do not respond well to muscle-flexing from the nation's capital.

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