

The rise of secessionism in Catalonia has emerged out of the will to decide the region's political destiny as a nation

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Will Catalonia secede from Spain? [Montserrat Guibernau](#) explores why many Catalonians now hope that it might. She argues that Catalonia's subsidization of less affluent regions, which leaves the region worse off, is a major root of discontent.



With 23% unemployment (rising to 40% among young people), the deepening of the economic crisis is hitting Catalans hard. Resentment against the Spanish government's economic policies and dissatisfaction with politics prevail: In the Catalan society, those who are 'dissatisfied with democracy' rose to 49% in March. Catalonia, a traditionally prosperous region, sees its wealth and status downgraded as it loses competitiveness and lacks resources and saving for infrastructure while accumulating annual deficit of 8% of GDP due to the financial arrangements imposed by the Spanish state. In this context, support for Catalan fiscal autonomy (*Pacte Fiscal*) is rising fast and secession, for the first time in Catalan history, appears as a legitimate option.

Catalan nationalism emerged in the 1960s as a progressive social movement defending democracy and freedom against Franco's dictatorship, demanding a Statute of autonomy for Catalonia and amnesty for the regime's political prisoners. Franco's death in 1975 allowed a transition to democracy led by members of his own regime. Catalonia played a key role in the democratization of Spain by strongly supporting EU membership; providing economic and industrial leadership and being committed to solidarity towards Spain. Vitality, Catalan nationalism was instrumental in overcoming the 1993 crisis and strongly supported Spain to fulfil the conditions to join the Euro. However, it was felt by many that Catalan loyalty and support did not pay off as Spain reinforced centralism.

In my view the roots of secessionism and the so-called 'right to decide' originate in the second mandate of Prime Minister Aznar and the landslide victory of his Popular Party (PP) in 2000. Soon after the election, sympathy and understanding towards Catalan demands for further autonomy and recognition were replaced by hostility embedded in a neo-centralist, conservative and neo-liberal political discourse. The Popular Party was dismissive of claims for greater autonomy for the historical nationalities (Catalonia, Galicia and the Basque Country) and adopted an arrogant attitude towards former political allies. In this period a *boicot* against Catalan products –in particular 'cava' (sparkling wine) – developed in Spain.

In Catalonia, growing dissatisfaction with the Aznar government guaranteed strong support for J.L. Rodriguez Zapatero, the leader of the Socialists Workers Party (PSOE) in the 2004 election. Most people received the PSOE's victory with joy and regarded Rodriguez Zapatero as sympathetic to Catalan political aspirations; an assumption which proved wrong after he was unable, or unwilling, to stand up by his promise to support the new Statute of Autonomy to emerge from the Catalan Parliament; a project led by fellow socialist and President of Catalonia, Pasqual Maragall.

The draft Statute of Autonomy – supported by 90 per cent of the Catalan Parliament – was significantly modified by the Spanish Parliament and Senate to fully comply with the Constitution prior to being approved by both chambers. The Statute was finally endorsed by the Catalan people in a referendum 18th June 2006. However, the Statute was immediately challenged in the Spanish High Court: the PP challenged 51 per cent of the text and the Spanish Ombudsman (PSOE) challenged 48 per cent.

The Spanish High Court issued its verdict 28th June 2010: it suppressed 14 articles of the Statute and modified a further 30 relating to symbolic, financial and judicial aspects as well as state investment in Catalonia, creating an unprecedented situation. On July 10th 2010, over one million people demonstrated in Barcelona against the Spanish High Court decision. Their motto: 'We are a nation. We decide'. The

demonstration was led by Jose Montilla, the then president of Catalonia. Shortly after that, fresh elections to the Catalan government resulted in a change of government; Artur Mas, leader of the nationalist party CiU, became president of Catalonia.

According to the latest available data Catalonia's average contribution to the Spanish Central Administration and Social Security corresponds to 19.40 per cent of the total. In contrast, Catalonia receives 14.03 per cent. After contributing to Spain's Solidarity Fund, Catalonia is worse off than those autonomous communities subsidized by the Fund and finds itself below average in per capita spending.

The 2012 Budget presented by Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy does not contemplate the State paying back its pending debts to Catalonia. According to the Statute these include, €759 million for 2008 and €219 million for 2009. In addition, the State's investment in infrastructure in Catalonia has been reduced by 45 per cent, and now stands at 11 per cent of the total, far from the 18.6 percent that would be an equal share for Catalonia.

In December 2009, with the support of 15000 volunteers, 166 Catalan cities held referendums on Catalonia's independence. The referendums were not legally binding, but they contained an important symbolic content. Participation amounted to 27 per cent, and 94.71 per cent voted in favor of Catalonia's independence. To date the Spanish State forbids the holding of a legally binding or consultative referendum in Catalonia.

In 2011, 42.9 per cent of Catalans supported independence, and at present support has risen to 44.6 per cent. In Catalonia the enthusiasm for democracy associated with the initial phase of the transition to democracy is gone. Lack of trust in politicians and institutional politics accompanied by central bad economic management and open hostility to Catalan demands has alienated a rising number of citizens. Only 4.4 percent of Catalans consider that they have too much autonomy, 24 per cent are satisfied with the current level and 65.7 per cent are frustrated by insufficient autonomy. Today 30.8% are in favor of Catalonia becoming a state within a federal Spain and 29% want it to become an independent state.

The rise of secessionism in Catalonia emerges out of the will to decide upon its political destiny as a nation. It questions the assumption that it is possible for a nation without its own state to flourish and develop within a larger state containing it, and within which it is not considered as an equal partner.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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