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Mariano Rajoy may have forced Artur Mas' hand over a Catalan independence consultation, but the issue remains far from settled



On 14 October, Catalan President Artur Mas stated that the planned vote on Catalonia's independence, scheduled for 9 November, would no longer be held. Instead, he has proposed a poll on the same day on the basis of regional laws not ruled out by the Constitutional Tribunal.

Sebastian Balfour writes that the new poll would have significantly less impact than the original proposal and may lead to the undermining of the unity of the Catalan pro-independence parties. Madrid's blocking of the referendum may also give rise to more radical protests over Catalonia's future and the poll may be followed by early elections from which the strongly pro-independence Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC) will benefit.

On 14 October, the Catalan President Artur Mas announced the withdrawal of plans to hold a consultation on independence in early November, after the Constitutional Tribunal had ruled it unconstitutional at the request of the Spanish government. The game of chess Mas has been playing with the Spanish President Mariano Rajoy has ended with a predictable victory for the latter.

But the matter will not stop there. Mas is calling for an alternative poll on

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independence on 9 November based on articles of the recent Catalan Law of Popular Consultations that were not suspended by the Constitutional Tribunal. These articles allow polls or surveys in which the Catalan citizens can vote on matters of public interest. The original consultation on independence was not designed to be binding, but it was meant to be conducted according to the rules of the electoral process. The new poll, on the other hand, will collect votes in offices of the region's administration. Even if it goes ahead, it will not have the same impact as the planned consultation and even less that of a legal referendum.

Another option that has been much touted is early elections with a single slate of parties that have backed the referendum. This is seen as a plebiscite on independence. But the Catalan government's phased retreat from a referendum has severely undermined the already fragile united front of Catalan parties seeking independence. The **Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya** (ERC – Republican Left), which is leading the opinion polls, has opted for early elections and hinted that if they won power they would declare unilateral independence. Mas' party, **Convergència i Unió** (CiU), relies for its majority on the parliamentary support of the ERC so the survival of the present Catalan government is very much in the balance.

What is the effect likely to be on Catalan opinion? For the many Catalans who wish to remain part of Spain, the withdrawal of the consultation will be welcomed. For those who wish for independence – a majority of the Catalan population according to some opinion polls – there will be profound disappointment and an intensification of their resentment of the Spanish government. This may well give rise to more radical protests in a process that has been almost exclusively peaceful so far. According to the Catalan paper *Ara*, the Spanish Ministry of the Interior has sent extra riot police to Catalonia.

Although Rajoy continues to claim he is open to dialogue, he has ignored Mas' efforts to negotiate a new devolution deal for Catalonia, something which may have been Mas' strategy all along (after all, the political heritage of his party was not characterised by any desire for independence). In contrast to efforts in the UK to bribe Scottish voters to remain in the Union with promises of devo-max (a perfectly rational choice if the cost is lower than independence), Rajoy's government has barricaded itself behind the Constitution. Beneath Madrid's

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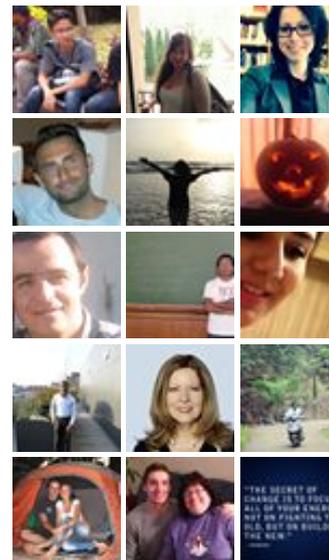
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impassiveness may lie a deeply entrenched ideological principle, the unity of an 'essential' Spain for which the Right has fought for centuries. On the other hand, an agreement to extend Catalonia's autonomy might have allowed Mas to claim a partial victory that would have boosted his party coalition's ratings in the centre and centre-right of Catalan politics and quelled the unease of its coalition partner, the more conservative [Unió Democràtica de Catalunya](#).

The origins of the tension between Catalonia and Spain go back centuries. Like many other states in Europe's semi-periphery, the Spanish monarchical state was relatively weak, relying on social networks of patronage. The slow and asymmetric process of modernisation in Spain led to dual economies, with a largely subsistence agricultural centre and south, on the one hand, and booming industrial cities in Catalonia and the Basque Country on the other. By the end of the 19th century, the sense of national cohesion was still weak and regional identities predominated, in particular in Catalonia and the Basque Country where there was a large middle-class. Historical grievances in Catalonia go back to the loss of its autonomy in 1714 after the Spanish War of Succession and through much of the 20th century to the offensive against the use of Catalan and the imposition of a monolithic national identity under the Dictatorships of General Primo de Rivera from 1923-1930 and General Franco from 1939-1977.

In the new democracy, Catalonia had further comparative grievances. The autonomy deals negotiated in Madrid in the late seventies gave greater devolution to the Basque Country than to either Catalonia or Galicia which could claim similar levels of historical, cultural and linguistic distinctness. Catalonia's efforts in the first decade of this century to increase powers by renegotiating its Statute of Autonomy were largely rejected when the conservative-dominated Constitutional Tribunal declared as unconstitutional many of the clauses of the new Statute negotiated between the Socialist central government and the Catalan government and passed in both parliaments.

Resentment has been fuelled since then by the increasing fiscal gap between Catalonia and all the other regions in Spain bar the Basque Country. Madrid's recently announced budget for 2015 awards Catalonia the comparatively smallest amount of state investment for 17 years (although the total represents an absolute increase for all regions). Catalonia will receive only 9.5 per cent in contrast to Andalusia, which will

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get 17.4 per cent and Castilla-León 15.5 per cent. This fiscal gap has grown over the last decade, in particular since the electoral victory of the Popular Party in 2011. In an effort to compensate for a historic deficit, Catalonia's new and highly revised Statute of Autonomy asserted that state investment in Catalonia should be equivalent to its contribution to Spain's GDP, which in 2014 amounted to 19 per cent. This target has not been met and the fiscal deficit is growing.

Defenders of Spain's ruling Popular Party would argue that rich regions should make a higher contribution to the economic health of the nation, especially in times of economic crisis. This contribution is already enshrined in the Constitutional principle of 'interterritorial solidarity', and is administered through a redistributive fund to which all regions, including Catalonia, contribute on the basis of a number of variables including tax revenues. But many Catalans feel that they are disproportionately penalised through a combination of fiscal deficit and financial redistribution. Any feelings of solidarity they may have had with Spain, indeed any shared identity, have dissipated in recent years as a result of the austerity policies carried out by Madrid and corruption scandals that have enveloped all levels of administration in Spain (not excluding Catalonia itself). As in Scotland, there is a widespread conviction that Catalonia does not belong to Spain and indeed would thrive without it.

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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. Featured image: Mariano Rajoy, Credit: Mariano Rajoy (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

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