


Catalan Separatism, a European Problem

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By [Marcus Pučnik](#) Both Catalonia and Scotland are looking towards a referendum on independence later this year, Scotland on September 18 and Catalonia on November 9. If independent, they both would like to join the European Union, yet the official EU stance is that Catalonia and Scotland would be “third countries” in regard to the EU and thus have to go through the full process of accession.



A demonstration for Catalan independence

This is where the similarities between Scotland and Catalonia end. While the Scottish [referendum](#) is agreed upon with London, the Catalan one is being blocked as unconstitutional by Madrid. Moreover, the Spanish government is also likely to veto Catalonia's EU-accession in the case of a unilateral declaration of independence. “We cannot be punished,” Catalonia's president Artur Mas said in an interview with [Corriere della Sera](#). Some very competent European experts share this point of view and call a potential Spanish veto of Catalonia a punitive measure that would represent “[an abuse of \[EU\] law](#)”. These experts expect both Catalonia and Scotland to fulfill all the necessary membership requirements, so that their applications could be fast-tracked. “[A simplified procedure](#)” should be put in place for countries that have “applied the EU's policies and legislation for 40 years”, or 28 years in the case of Spain/Catalonia. But would punishing those pesky Catalans really be Madrid's motivation? Is Catalonia really fulfilling all EU criteria, and would it thus be that special case for which [Article 49](#) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) cannot be interpreted literally? A closer look at the conditions on the ground gives some reason for doubt. Unlike Scotland, Catalonia does have a language conflict. It is a complex issue, one part of which is a general defense of the Catalan language. The other part is inside Catalonia itself, where the regional government refuses to heed court sentences that over the past years have consistently demanded that Spanish not be excluded as language of instruction in Catalan public schools. Treating Spanish as if it were a foreign language is not in the spirit nor the wording of TEU [Article 2](#), to which Article 49 explicitly refers. Both Spanish and Catalan are official languages in Catalonia. Over half the Catalan population has Spanish as mother tongue. Skewing public education in favour of Catalan has been necessary to repair past injustices, something that also the courts have recognised, but the exclusion of Spanish is a clear discrimination. Furthermore, based on the present situation we can expect a Catalan state to declare Catalan as the preferred or national language, turning the Spanish speakers into a functional minority. Equality, non-discrimination and minority protection are all values mentioned in Article 2. Catalan authorities take great pride in their monolingual system, yet a [committee of experts report](#) for the Council of Europe on the application of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages in Spain concluded in 2008 that “a system based on education essentially in the [regional or minority] language is supposed to be available to those who request it but not compulsory for all children”. Even though Catalonia was not the state under scrutiny, the

committee found words that seem to constitute a critical remark directed at the Catalan authorities: “The Charter does not demand compulsory education in Catalan for all pupils, only that it shall be made available so that all pupils will receive education in Catalan if parents so wish.” There are parents who have spent years immersed in legal battles to get bilingual education for their children. The opposition of the Catalan regional government, which also refuses to implement a new Spanish law that addresses this issue, might soon lead to a situation in which the principle of legal certainty is rendered ineffective. The rule of law, of which legal certainty is a part, is another value mentioned in TEU Article 2. One of the main arguments of Catalan nationalists, and also of the regional government, for monolingual education is what they call “social cohesion”. This is a euphemism for nation-building. Another difference with Scotland is that the borders of the envisaged Catalan state are all but clear. Catalan separatism is inherently expansionist, it seeks the [independence](#) of Catalonia today, so that tomorrow it can work for the “political reunification of the Catalan Lands” (in Catalan, “[reunificació política dels Països Catalans](#)”). This would mean absorbing other big chunks of Spain, and also parts of France (Roussillon) and Italy (Alghero), as well as swallowing the whole of Andorra. These are the territories where Catalan is spoken. Virtually all separatist organisations and parties have this ultimate goal in mind, including at least parts of Artur Mas’s CiU coalition, whose minority government depends on the parliamentary support of the Republican Left, or ERC. ERC quite officially defines the “Catalan nation” as the “Catalan people” which live within the boundaries of the Catalan Lands ([see here, and do mind the image provided](#) which outlines the Catalan Lands, [while this is the distinctive triangular shape of Catalonia proper](#)). Even though there is presently no threat of the use of force to achieve the aim of “reunification”, this ideology does (again) show the unwillingness of the Catalan nationalists and separatists to play by very well established rules. The pancatalanist orientation of the separatist movement might best be illustrated by the [2009-2011 mock referendum](#) on the, as the ballot paper put it, independence of the “Catalan nation”, which took place only in Catalonia but had [the Catalan Lands as reference](#), and in which Catalonia’s president Artur Mas participated. He made it known that he had voted yes. Any future Spanish veto of a Catalan state’s accession to the EU might therefore not be a mere punitive measure. Quite on the contrary, on the grounds of both individual rights and international law Spain might find valid arguments to refuse any assistance to a new country that would not only discriminate against Spanish speakers but also question its territorial integrity. Greece has been giving a hard time to Macedonia (FYROM) for much less. The Catalan problem is a European one with potential ripple effects for the whole Union. Especially because the precedent of Catalonia, if accepted by the EU, would make it likely that the Basque Country follows suit. Basque separatism, like the Catalan one, also claims territories which are presently both in Spain and in neighbouring France. _____

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