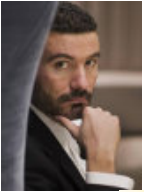


What will happen to Catalans after 1 October?



With only days to go before the scheduled date for Catalonia's independence referendum, it remains unclear what will take place and how the Catalan and Spanish governments will react. [Victor Lapuente](#) writes that while he is unsure of what will happen to Catalonia, his real concern lies with the fate of ordinary Catalans, with the independence issue likely to drive a wedge between the two sides of an already highly polarised debate.



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While attending college in Barcelona, I used to have friends on both sides of the independence debate. In a relaxed intellectual environment, Catalan secessionists and Spanish unionists teased each other, like FC Barcelona and Real Madrid fans after a Clásico. And, most of all, I had many friends in the middle, in the then highly populated no man's land between supporters of an independent Catalonia and of remaining within Spain.

Now, the middle-ground position has few vocal defenders. The positions regarding the territorial debate have sharply polarised, and the jokes between political adversaries have given way to wrath. Angry zealots on each side have taken the leading voices in the discussion. The storm created by radicals on both sides eclipses any reasonable exchange of arguments.

The old spirit of tolerance toward dissenting opinions – one of the cornerstones of the commercial and cultural success of Catalonia and Barcelona across the centuries – seems to have vanished. When I engage in debates with colleagues, what emerges is no longer happiness, the joy of mental challenge, but bitterness, the frustration of intellectual isolation.

Still, data indicates that many Catalans are somewhere between the two extremes. While support for secession has increased in recent years, what unites most Catalans is not the willingness to create a new state, but dissatisfaction with the status quo: around 67 percent of Catalans demand further self-government for their region.

Likewise, an overwhelming majority of Catalans supported the 2006 *Estatut*. This Statute of Autonomy updated the relationship between Spanish and Catalan authorities, recognising, among other symbolic and substantive advances in the level of self-government, the existence of a “Catalan nation”.

It was political opposition to the enactment of this Statute of Autonomy at the Spanish Parliament – led by the conservative Popular Party (PP) now ruling Spain – that triggered a reaction in Catalan society. Within a few years, those in favour of a *Catexit* moved from around 15-20 percent of the Catalan population to 40-45 percent. Some surveys have recorded support levels above 50 percent.

A couple of exogenous factors help in explaining why the secessionist movement was able to gain ground in such a small space of time. First, the economic hardship of the Great Recession in Spain, with unemployment reaching 25 percent, fostered the dream that an independent Catalonia would become a small, highly-productive, open economy – the Denmark of the Mediterranean.

Second, the endless procession of corruption cases and the crisis of political representation which formed the basis of the *Indignados* movement transformed Spain from being one of the European societies with the highest levels of trust in their national and supranational institutions, into a country with one of the broadest gaps between citizens and political elites. A breach larger than in most Central and Eastern European countries.

Consequently, Spain's national political landscape was shaken by the arrival of two new parties, *Podemos* and *Ciudadanos*, which currently compete neck and neck with the old establishment parties – the PP and PSOE. And, similarly, the regional party system in Catalonia also mutated, allowing the emergence of new electoral platforms with an explicit secessionist agenda.

It is the case of the ruling coalition in Catalonia, *Junts Pel Si*, which, with the parliamentary support of the anti-capitalist CUP, are pushing for the independence referendum on 1 October. The referendum has been declared illegal by Spain's Constitutional Court. And it is unrealistic to believe the international community will recognise its outcome, irrespective of the turnout – to start with, because there is no way of validating it in the absence of an official electoral census, ballot boxes and other guarantees of a due electoral process. The members of the electoral commission allegedly in charge of supervising the referendum resigned last week, following a dictum by the Constitutional Court condemning them to fines of up to 12,000 euros per day.

Officially, the referendum will not take place. On 2 October, Catalonia will remain a region in Spain. Yet the Spanish government should not rest on its laurels, or expect the Catalan separatists to change course. The current level of support for independence – around 41 percent, although it fluctuates substantially – is still insufficient for the pro-independence Catalan institutions to break from Spain.

However, the separatist movement has shown nothing if not resilience. They are capable of mobilising thousands of committed activists with a long history of support for the cause. And those Catalans who have recently become separatists show the same resistant faith of those newly converted to a religion. Meanwhile, the camp in favour of remaining in Spain cannot provide the selective incentives that believers in independence enjoy: a channel to express their discontent with the status quo and their hope for a promised land. A sense of identity in times of global uncertainties. And flowers.

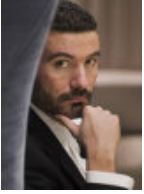
I do not know what will happen to Catalonia. What concerns me is what will happen, and is actually happening, to ordinary Catalans. The open-minded, pragmatist, funny, life-loving Catalans I encountered two decades ago, among the ranks of both separatist and unionist camps alike, have become a bit more close-minded, idealist, suspicious and bitter.

Now, not even Messi's goals seem to bring them together.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.

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