

The Catalan endgame: How we got to where we are



Large pro-independence demonstrations are expected in Catalonia today ahead of a proposed referendum on independence on 1 October. [Karlo Basta](#) highlights that although many explanations of the Catalan independence movement focus on technical issues, such as the legal provisions for Catalan autonomy or Catalonia's fiscal arrangements, it is the role of symbolic politics that has perhaps been most important in bringing Catalonia and Spain to their current impasse.



Demonstration on Catalonia's National Day (11 September) in 2014, Credit: [Anselm Pallas \(CC BY-NC-ND 2.0\)](#)

As recently as six years ago, advocates of Catalan independence were politically peripheral. Today, they are at the centre of power and about to bring their region to a turning point. On 6 September, after half a decade of shadowboxing with Madrid, the independentist Catalan government and the parliamentary majority on which it relies finally landed their first punch. Bypassing standard legislative procedure, and directly clashing with the Spanish constitutional framework, the regional parliament passed a law paving the way for the 1 October referendum on Catalonia's independence.

I have [already written](#) about just how unique this situation is. But how did it come to be? The standard accounts are far too static and truncated to be convincing. Yes, the economic crisis might have accounted for some of the anger about the Catalan fiscal arrangements, but *it alone* cannot account for the depth and severity of the current crisis. Neither can the 2010 decision of the Spanish Constitutional Court, one that watered down key provisions of the Catalan Statute of Autonomy.

It takes two to tango

In a recently published research [article](#), I argue that explaining secessionist crises such as this one requires paying attention to the longer-term interplay of symbolic politics among both majority and minority populations. Of course, conflict between the governments of Spain and Catalonia (perfectly normal in any multi-layered state) is about power, resources, and institutional advantage. But it is also about symbolic recognition and the clashing collective visions of the political community.

Thus, when the Catalan government initiated the reform of its Statute of Autonomy in 2004, it did so not only to shore up its policy competencies and fiscal capacity, but also to obtain recognition of Catalan nationhood – a crucial symbolic goal. The inclusion of this element in the Statute (originally in the body of the text, subsequently transferred to the preamble as the Statute moved through the Spanish parliament) would prove pivotal in shaping today's relationship between Spain and Catalonia.

The centre-right Popular Party (PP), at that point the official opposition and the self-appointed guardian of Spanish identity, mounted a sustained campaign of opposition to the Statute. Particular hostility was reserved for the recognition of Catalan nationhood. The PP called for the parliaments of all Spanish regions to pass resolutions opposing the new Statute; organised a mass demonstration against it in Madrid; and finally managed to collect four million signatures demanding a state-wide referendum on it. The culmination of this campaign came as the PP referred the new Statute to the Constitutional Court in the summer of 2006.

This open political backlash accomplished two things. First, it provided the Catalan independentists with valuable rhetorical ammunition to demonstrate the inability of a significant segment of Spanish society and the political classes to recognise Catalan specificity. Second, it opened the path for the aforementioned decision of the Spanish Constitutional Court in 2010. Among the most contentious parts of the Court's verdict was the section relating to Catalan nationhood. The Court denied legal force to this aspect of the Statute, submitting that the constitution recognises only one nation – the Spanish one. While this was hardly the only factor in the rise of pro-independence sentiment in Catalonia, it was a very important one. The massive demonstration on the streets of Barcelona following the Court's decision was held under the slogan 'we are a nation, we decide.'

Perhaps placing such emphasis on this single symbolic issue may seem like an overreaction, but consider the following thought experiment. What is more likely to provoke the anger of those identifying themselves with the majority nation: a laundry list of highly technical limits on the power of the central government, or a simple and easy to understand clause that seems to undermine national unity? What is more likely to stoke bitterness among members of a minority nation: the scaling down of regional juridical autonomy, or the apparent institutional denial of the very existence of one's collective identity?

Shifts in institutional symbolism need not automatically lead to political conflict, but they do feed resentment that can then be harnessed by the hardline political elements within each 'camp'. If and when this does happen, advocates of political compromise and moderation become increasingly less relevant, and their ideas pushed to the background.

Symbolic politics beyond Catalonia

Viewed from this angle, the Catalan example offers several valuable clues about the character of identity-based confrontations in multinational states. For one, such confrontations are never the result of only one (homogeneous) side's actions. Instead, they result from dynamic political contestation between and within *both* majority and minority elites and populations. While obvious to some, this point merits much more attention than it tends to receive.

Just as important is that the political volatility of these developments cannot be attributed to disagreements about dry and obscure administrative details such as the rules of fiscal federalism or mutual legislative encroachments. The fervor that accompanies them is often a product of more evocative symbolic matters. The institutional recognition or subversion of one's identity must count among the most significant factors. Because they are cognitively accessible and emotionally resonant, such issues are politically 'bankable'. Examples beyond the Catalan one abound. The recent US presidential election and the Brexit vote demonstrate that politics is as much about the pursuit of meaning as it is about the pursuit of interests.

What does this mean for the practice of politics in plural societies? Much depends on one's goals. For convinced proponents of independence, symbolic recognition that leads to majority backlash might be just what is needed to win broader support among co-nationals. For hardline majority nationalists, a secessionist crisis might be as welcome, as it may solidify opposition to further concessions to minority nations. Moderates on all sides, on the other hand, should approach symbolic institutional change with great care. Without broad based buy-in, even the most well intentioned accommodation could be politically explosive.

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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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