

Catalonia's declaration of independence: What comes next?



The Catalan parliament's declaration of independence on 27 October, coupled with the Spanish government implementing direct rule over Catalonia, has left Spain facing its greatest political crisis since the country's transition to democracy. [James Irving](#) assesses what might happen next, writing that ultimately it will be the reaction of ordinary citizens that will determine where Catalonia is headed.



Credit: [Parlament de Catalunya / Job Vermeulen](#)

With the Catalanian government having declared independence, and the Spanish government seeking to assert control over the territory, many are wondering: what next? Strangely, what comes next is likely to be an inferior version of what might have come before (had there been an agreed referendum).

While it is generally assumed that a declaration of independence marks the end in a process of gaining independence, in fact it is more like the beginning (at least in cases of contested secession). It is only in retrospect that the date of a declaration of independence becomes a reference point for the creation of a new state, because it is only later that the creation of the state is confirmed. Using the analogy of a car, a declaration of independence is a bit like the driver using the indicator, showing the intended direction of travel. One only knows if the turn is actually made once it has been successfully executed.

For a new state to come into being, its government needs to effectively rule over a defined territory and resident population. For the state's international personality to have substance, it will also need to be recognised by the existing members of the community it seeks to join (i.e. other states). Ideally, then, a Catalanian independent government would like to rule over its territory and population unchallenged by Spain, and be recognised as having the associated sovereign authority by others. Neither will happen for now, given the posture of the Madrid government, and the related interests of outside parties. So has the independence movement in Catalonia reached a dead end?

Despite the apparent impasse, it is far from certain that the Catalan separatists have run out of road. Ironically, what happens from here depends to a substantial degree on the question that the Catalanian authorities wanted to test in an agreed referendum (the same referendum which Spain would not countenance).

The call by [Carles Puigdemont](#) for peaceful resistance reminds us that the modern state is highly interrelated with, and dependent on, the people it seeks to rule. Without substantial popular acquiescence (if not positive support) government in a contemporary society faces an existential threat.

What happens next in Catalonia depends on how many people follow the orders of Madrid's new administrators. If there is general obedience then the regional elections planned for 21 December will be held as planned, and Madrid will be seen to have effective control over the territory (thereby confirming the pre-existing boundaries of the Spanish state). If, however, there is widespread resistance to the extent that, on balance, Madrid is seen to have lost control of the territory, then we will be headed in the direction favoured by the Catalan separatists.

If Spain loses control, it will be in a very difficult – perhaps impossible – position. Madrid could attempt to use force to overcome deficiencies in its popular support, but this could backfire (as it did on 1 October). Note Donald Tusk's [support](#) on 27 October for "force of argument, not argument of force". Any use of Spain's superior firepower against peaceful resistance is likely to prejudice its position rather than advancing it.

Of course, it would be nice, at this juncture, to be able to give a simple answer as to whether obedience or rebellion will prevail in the coming weeks. But much in history is contingent and circumstantial – the result of moments that cannot be predicted.

Recall, for example, Boris Yeltsin climbing on top of the tank outside the Russian Parliament, successfully resisting the Soviet government's attempt to reassert control over its restive regions. Compare this with the famous unknown man in front of a tank near Tiananmen Square just a couple of years earlier (the man who won a small battle, but whose side did not ultimately prevail). The Catalan experience can be expected to have its own (hopefully less dramatic, possibly entirely unseen) moments of decision, in relation to which precedent and analysis may provide little assistance.

For now, at least, it seems that the option of an agreed process of rational, sober-minded, loss-minimising decision-making will not be pursued. Instead of a referendum or other consultative process "the people" will "vote" by their daily actions. In 1975, Judge Ammoun stated in his opinion for the ICJ's Western Sahara Case that:

Nothing could show more clearly the will for emancipation than the struggle undertaken in common, with the risks and immense sacrifices it entails. That struggle is more decisive than a referendum, being absolutely sincere and authentic. Many are the peoples who have had recourse to it to make their right prevail. It is, one need hardly repeat, that thousand-year struggle which has established the right of peoples to decide their own fate...

But, it must be asked, is a struggle (as drawn-out, chaotic and damaging as they often are) really more decisive than a referendum? Is it so much more "authentic and sincere" than a vote (which can have appropriate procedural safeguards)? Perhaps if our politics were written by Hemmingway we would opt for struggle, but I would suggest that the version written by Canadian jurists in the [Quebec Secession Reference](#) is better; a procedurally protected referendum followed by good faith negotiations is demonstrably superior.

In the end, whether there is a successful election on 21 December, or whether there is a tussle veering off Spain's roadmap, the views of the people of Catalonia will assert themselves. If those views by and large favour existing arrangements then it is likely that Madrid could have avoided the current mess (and collateral damage) by formally accepting the role of Catalonia's citizens in determining their own future at an earlier juncture. If history turns in the other direction, the question will be pertinent: did Madrid lose the battle because it failed to approach things appropriately (at least for a modern state)? Did Madrid engage in a bullfight when diplomacy was the order of the day?

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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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