

The historical roots of the Catalan crisis: How we got to where we are



The Spanish government has indicated it is ready to suspend Catalonia's autonomy after a deadline passed for the Catalan authorities to drop their push for independence. [Gerard Padró i Miquel](#) writes on the role of Spanish nationalism in the crisis. He argues that moving towards independence using extralegal means is not only illegitimate but unrepresentative, but that it is also clear the status quo is unacceptable for a large majority of Catalans. A small window of opportunity might still be open for a solution to be reached through dialogue.



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The seeds of the current downward spiral in Catalonia go back a very long time. As any observer can attest, Spain is a very diverse country, with several focal points when it comes to economic activity and sense of nationhood. This reality periodically generates political tension between the centre and the periphery. Sadly, over the last couple of centuries this tension has typically been put down with brute force. The last of those episodes took place during the long night of Franco's dictatorship.

After the death of the dictator in 1975, a new era emerged. However, it was far from an easy transition. Crafting the institutional framework for the new parliamentary democracy required some important compromises. Franco's dictatorship was not ousted from power (indeed, no one has ever been indicted for the crimes of this regime). Instead, the regime had to be accommodated into the new framework if the democratic project was to survive at all. The Constitution of 1978 is a remarkable document which in many ways has been a success. However, when it comes to the regional architecture of the democratic state, the need to take into account the vetoes of the *ancient regime* ended up in a botched project.

A country with the economic and cultural diversity of Spain should probably be organised as a federation, if not a confederation. Its constitution should also probably acknowledge the fact that it harbours several nations. However, this was completely unacceptable to the Spanish nationalism that was the main ideology of the authoritarian regime the fledgling democracy was to replace. This red line was navigated with timidity. The Spanish constitution only accepts the existence of a single nation, stating explicitly its indivisibility. However, this statement is followed by a reference to the regions and “nationalities” which form Spain. Similarly, while the country is explicitly not organised as a federation of states, it calls its regional governments “autonomous communities.” What precisely a “nationality” is, and what degree of autonomy is necessary for a region to be an “autonomous community”, is not spelled out anywhere else in the document.

This ambiguity was probably a necessary evil at that perilous juncture. The Constitution emerged from the constitutional assembly and then was approved in a popular referendum, including an overwhelming majority in Catalonia. However, it is worth noting the fact that *Alianza Popular*, the precursor of the conservative *Partido Popular* (Popular Party) currently in power was divided on the issue, and a third of its delegates in the constitutional assembly voted against the mild and ambiguous concessions to diversity in the document.

From 1980 to 2010, the Catalan political establishment was dominated by two parties: CiU, a right of centre conservative party that espoused a romantic revival of the Catalan sense of nation; and PSC a left of centre party which is federated with the PSOE, the Spain-wide social-democratic party that dominated Spanish politics for a decade and a half in the 80s and 90s.

Both parties at that time agreed that the degree of autonomy of Catalonia was insufficient and the financing of the regional government needed to be fixed. Indeed, the promise of the Constitution was slowly eroding and the word “nationality” soon proved to be empty of legal content. However, both central Catalan parties implicitly or explicitly assumed that these problems could be worked out within the system. In this, they were representative of the majoritarian position within Catalonia: independence was supported by a small minority consistently hovering around the very low double digits.

A blow to the equilibrium

This status quo became severely strained when the Popular Party gained an absolute majority in the Spanish parliament in 2000. Confronted with the threat of resurgent Spanish nationalism, the Catalan political establishment tried to clarify the powers of self-government and constrain the reach of the central government. Partly to do so, they embarked on rewriting the *Estatut* of Catalonia, which is the equivalent of a State Constitution in a federation. It is worth noting that this process was not led by CiU, the conservative Catalan nationalist party, but by the PSC in coalition with other parties on the Catalan left, who reached power in Catalonia for the first time in 2003. The explicit aims of this document were to clarify and expand the responsibilities of the Catalan government, to protect those elements of Catalan identity that are fundamental, and to improve and guarantee the financing of the regional government.

The Catalan parliament approved a draft *Estatut* which addressed these issues by overwhelming majority. The draft of 2005 received the positive vote of 120 out of 135 regional deputies: only the 15 deputies of the Popular Party, which in Catalonia is a small party with less than 12% of the votes, voted against this draft. It is thus fair to say that this was a Catalan proposal for the rest of Spain, supported by the representatives of almost 90% of voters.

According to the constitutional procedure, the next step for the *Estatut* was to be approved by the Spanish Parliament. At this juncture, the Spanish Parliament could of course introduce amendments. Unfortunately, rather than amendments, what took place was an obliteration of the original text which imposed changes in almost all the articles of the draft. A symbolic point in case is the self-definition of Catalonia. The draft was clear, calling Catalonia a Nation that forms an autonomous community within Spain. What came out of the Spanish Parliament is rather different. The word “nation” was removed from anywhere in the main text and it was only allowed in the preamble, in the factual sentence “the Catalan Parliament ... has defined Catalonia as a nation.”

It is worth dwelling for a minute on the justification offered for this change. The argument was that calling Catalonia a nation was not allowed in the Spanish Constitution and that therefore the only option was to expunge it from the text. This is deeply flawed for at least two reasons. First, it would have been enough to provide a clarification that the ambiguous word “nationality” present in the Constitution actually included the meaning of a nation. This would not have been strange as this was indeed the understanding among those who wrote the Constitution (this is very clear from reading their memoirs and from the virulent objections of the Spanish nationalistic right as the Constitution was drafted). Second, faced with the Catalan proposal, the Spanish parliament could have decided that it was time to upgrade the Spanish Constitution, which in several respects shows the fact that it was written under the watchful eyes of Franco’s army. Instead, the Spanish parliament chose to side with the most restrictive reading possible of the Constitution, the reading most consistent with Spanish nationalism.

The *Estatut* that emerged from the Spanish Parliament was unrecognisable. It could not do any of the jobs it was designed to do (protect and clarify self-government, regional financing, and national identity). The political consensus behind it in Catalonia was broken, and in the 2006 referendum to finally approve the *Estatut*, it only managed 74% of votes in favour out of a turnout of 49%. This insult turned to injury as the Popular Party, unhappy with even the weakened version that had been approved, brought it up to the Constitutional Court. In 2010, the Constitutional Court amended the document further, and more importantly, ruled that several articles could not be interpreted as putting any limits on the actions of the central government.

The aftermath

This experience broke the political consensus in Catalonia. In a couple of years, the number of people who favoured independence reached above 40%. Trying to stem the tide, CiU proposed a fiscal pact in 2012 which was summarily rejected again by the central government. After this rejection, and dogged by corruption scandals and the undertow of austerity policies, this party decided to embrace the secessionist tide which was fast becoming the most active ideology in Catalan civic society.

These tensions came to a head in the 2015 regional elections, the last time Catalans have been properly asked about their political future. In these elections, parties openly in favour of independence obtained 48% of the votes. Parties in favour of Spanish unity obtained just 39% of the vote, although it is worth noting that this includes the PSC (13% of votes) which wants Spain to turn into a Federation. The remainder is a leftist party that favours conducting an official independence referendum.

What now?

These results tell us that Catalonia is not a monolithic region. They tell us that moving towards independence using extralegal means is not only illegitimate but unrepresentative. However, they also tell us that the status quo is unacceptable to a large majority of Catalans. Ever since destroying the 2005 draft *Estatut*, Spain has been unwilling or unable to politically engage with this problem. While thankfully Spain is today a more diverse country in the political realm, the political attitude towards the Catalan issue harkens back to the dark history of the last two centuries. Indeed, since 2010 the only answers Catalans have received are a combination of silence, Spanish nationalist scorn, and more recently riot police aggression and the arrest of civil society leaders.

In judging the dramatic events of the last few weeks, it is worth considering why we are where we are. It is certainly a time for dialogue and it seems that a small window of opportunity might still be open. However, the continued silence of Europe makes me worry that the situation will be resolved the same way it has in the past.

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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.

About the author



Gerard Padró i Miquel – LSE

Gerard Padró i Miquel is a Professor of Economics at the London School of Economics.