

Making sense of the uncertainty following Catalonia's declaration of independence



Catalonia faces an uncertain future following the events of the last month, but the regional elections now scheduled for 21 December are likely to be a key moment in determining its trajectory. [Mariana S. Mendes](#) assesses how the crisis developed following the 1 October referendum, arguing that by calling early elections, the Spanish government has attempted to give the pro-independence bloc little opportunity to build momentum behind their resistance efforts, but that if pro-independence parties take power in the vote, the crisis could escalate again.



Crowd on 27 October, Credit: [Assemblea.cat / Jordi Ventura Plans \(CC BY-NC 2.0\)](#)

A surreal month in Spain's political life ended the way the Catalan and the Spanish governments had promised to start it – with a unilateral declaration of independence on 27 October followed by the suppression of Catalonia's autonomy. Uncompromising positions took the lead and neither authorities in Madrid nor in Barcelona showed the necessary will or statesmanship to avoid the greatest political crisis Spain has faced since the end of Franco's era.

That it took the pro-independence bloc 27 days to proclaim independence rather than the 48 hours promised following the 1 October referendum shows, however, that attempts were made at avoiding such a drastic measure. Potentially important factors in this were dissenting voices within the ruling coalition, firms withdrawing from Catalonia, and the lack of international support.

The ambiguous announcement of a 'suspended declaration of independence' on 10 October – to make room for dialogue with Madrid – highlighted the conundrum that the head of the *Generalitat*, Carles Puigdemont, had to confront. On the one hand, pro-independence hardliners threatened to withdraw their support and break up the pro-independence parliamentary majority if independence was not declared. On the other hand, pro-independence pragmatists were alarmed by the potentially high costs of such a move – visible in the more than one thousand firms that moved their headquarters out of Catalonia – and preferred to take a more cautious approach.

To be sure, no one inside the ruling pro-independence coalition expected the Spanish government to react with complacency. What many certainly hoped for was that Madrid's response would help move Catalonia a step further to independence. If the Spanish authorities reacted with a heavy hand, the case for separation would be further strengthened and so would support for independence – which still requires a convincing majority within Catalonia itself. If instead Madrid had accepted Puigdemont's call for dialogue, he would be given some leeway to negotiate possible concessions: potentially the acceptance of constitutional changes allowing for a legal referendum, or, as a second best option, a reform of the Statute of Autonomy. At a minimum, he would have sought to avoid the suppression of Catalonia's autonomy and what is most likely a long prison sentence for him.

But Madrid's authorities did not need to tie themselves to either model. Instead, they followed the 'carrot and stick' approach of Puigdemont. Whereas the latter's 'carrot' was a proposal for dialogue – while keeping the potential stick of a blunt declaration of independence on hand – Madrid's 'carrots' were a series of requests that Puigdemont would have to abide by if they were not to apply article 155 of the Spanish Constitution – the 'nuclear option' of suspending Catalonia's autonomy and deposing the regional government.

Arguably, these were difficult 'carrots' for Puigdemont to accept: first, a request to make clear whether independence had been declared or not and, second, a demand to "return to the legal and constitutional order" (which, according to sources inside the executive, would require Puigdemont to call for snap regional elections).

This was part of a series of exchanges in which each side sought to pass the buck to the other to make their counterpart appear to be the one ultimately to blame. The situation would turn into something of a catch-22, with Madrid first threatening to use article 155 in case of a declaration of independence and Puigdemont later threatening to respond with a full declaration of independence if article 155 was applied. The central government's possession of a 'nuclear option', however, put the bargaining power in its hands and proved enough to tilt the balance against Puigdemont.

Though at first he did not give a clear answer to the Spanish government's request and offered a meeting with Rajoy as a counter-proposal (16 October), he would eventually recognise independence had not yet taken place, in a letter on 19 October. This was, however, insufficient for the conservative executive in Madrid, who considered Puigdemont's failure to comply with its second request – a "return to legal order" – sufficient reason to move forward with the application of article 155, approved by the cabinet on 21 October.

The lengths to which Puigdemont was ready to go to escape from this situation were made clear on 26 October, the day before the Senate was set to vote the application of article 155. On that day, and with the help of mediators, the head of the *Generalitat* negotiated a call for elections in exchange for the non-application of article 155 – the sort of capitulation the Spanish government had asked for the week before. However, and in the words of Puigdemont himself, he did not receive enough guarantees from the Spanish government and therefore was left with no option but to leave the door open for the Catalan Parliament to declare independence the next day.

The precise guarantees he was seeking are still unclear, with some assuming the Spanish government simply refused his deal and others indicating that a suspension of article 155 (after the Senate's approval) was still possible but that Puigdemont did not trust the Spanish government would do it. Plus, the damaging consequences that a call for elections (and a non-declaration of independence) would have for the future of both his coalition and Puigdemont's own party are also said to have played an important role in his final move.

And to be clear, it seems quite unlikely we would have seen the Spanish central government going back on the decision to apply article 155. This is what everyone inside the ruling conservative – and within other circles – had been asking for. The central government's response had so far been anchored on the rule of law rather than on politics (if one understands politics as the *art of compromise*) and was therefore unlikely to change – with the obvious added convenience that the law suits its centralist position. Its previous requests to the *Generalitat* might well have just been an attempt to gain time to decide on the contours of article 155 and, in the process, watch the pro-independence bloc either break up or give the central government definitive reasons to intervene.

All in all, what we have seen is a game of *realpolitik* in which the unequal balance of power and a general non-cooperative stance produced the current outcome. The interactions between authorities in Madrid and Barcelona lend themselves particularly well to game theory analysis, according to which the attempt to maximise relative positions leads to the worst possible collective outcome. The incentives for conflict or cooperation were, however, unequally distributed, reflecting their different power positions.

The Catalan government's (late) attempts at pursuing a cooperative stance were commendable from a moral point of view, but also have to be put in context as Puigdemont had more to lose from a non-negotiated outcome, and the Spanish government had little or nothing to gain from a negotiated solution at that point. Madrid's ownership of a 'nuclear option' meant it could more easily afford a non-cooperative stance, simply because the suppression of regional autonomy will likely nullify the declaration of independence and possibly turn the game into a win-lose situation for Madrid.

This is, of course, the case only if there is no massive resistance effort in Catalonia, with civil servants refusing to take direct orders from Madrid and street activists creating disruption. This does not seem to be happening thus far, in part because the central government played it smart and called for regional elections for 21 December, making the period of direct rule as short as possible. The strategy is to give the pro-independence bloc little opportunity to build momentum behind their resistance, and to redirect their efforts towards the electoral contest. It is far from sustainable in the long-run, though, as the election results might place in power pro-independence forces again, in which case Madrid better prepare to make some credible concessions or face another trial of strength.

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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



Mariana S. Mendes – *European University Institute*

Mariana S. Mendes is a PhD Researcher at the European University Institute in Florence. Her main research interests lie in the fields of comparative politics, nationalism, political violence and transitional justice.