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Teemu Sinkkonen
Researcher
The Finnish Institute of International Affairs

Is Catalonia looking for the exit? > Separatist rhetoric is side-tracking the real problems and adding to uncertainty in Spain and in the EU

Increased support for Catalan separatism is raising fears of a domino effect in Spain and the EU, since a possible secession would set a precedent for how to form a new state in the present day, and how to disengage from the EU and the monetary union.

“Would you like Catalonia to become a new state within the European Union?”

That is the question that the current Prime Minister of the Catalan Government, Artur Mas (Convergence and Union, CiU), wants to ask the people of Catalonia if he is re-elected in the upcoming elections on November 25. The proposal for a referendum has raised a storm between the strongly centralist Popular Party (PP) that runs the government in Madrid and the Catalan *soberanistas*. The EU took a stance in favour of Madrid when Commissioner for Justice Viviane Reding said that if the Catalans decided to claim independence they could not stay in the EU nor in the monetary union. It is not the question, but the possible answers in the ballot boxes that frightens the politicians both in Madrid and in Brussels.

The idea of strengthening Catalan self-governance is not new. It seems to resurface every time the conservatives have the lead in Madrid. So far the PP has successfully opposed all the initiatives to change the status of Catalonia in Spain. These include the Statute of 2006 and the more recent proposal for a fiscal pact, which would have allowed Catalonia to retain the fiscal income in the

autonomic community in a similar way to the Basque Country.

Indeed, inequality and complexity are remarkable in the current Spanish system of autonomic communities, where every community has a different degree of self-governance. Consequently, previous drawbacks and the catastrophic economic situation in Spain have given the Catalan *soberanismo* stronger momentum than ever before.

If the referendum goes ahead and the results are what the polls predict, Spain would face a severe legitimacy crisis in addition to the ongoing economic crisis. This would prolong the uncertainty in the country. The central government knows this and has strongly opposed the idea of a referendum. A similar referendum in 2006 on the reformed Statute of the Catalan Autonomy was overruled in the constitutional tribunal in 2010 and PP is using the same discourse, saying that a new referendum would be a coup d'état.

PP's politicians have also argued that, in addition to steering the discourse away from the real problems Catalonia is facing in the economy, an independent state would divide society, destroy jobs, make it impossible to pay pensions and lead to a totalitarian “banana republic”, where no laws would be respected.

CiU, which was a loyal ally of PP both in Madrid and in Barcelona until the electoral campaigns started, has raised the stakes by saying that “the next prime minister will not depend on Spain anymore” and that in the case of “conflict”, Catalan police forces would be “in the service of the Generalitat”.

Due to the polarizing political positions, the middle ground seems to be disappearing. Polls estimate that CiU can win an absolute majority in the parliament, and together with the other pro-independence parties it would have roughly two-thirds of the seats. The biggest loser in the elections would most likely be the Socialist Party (PSC), which is also the most moderate regarding independence.

According to public opinion, nearly 60% of Catalans would vote affirmatively in answer to the question posed in the proposed referendum. The problem, however, is that people do not agree on the kind of “new state” that Catalonia should be: A more independent autonomy or a wholly separate state. Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas's recent pre-electoral poll in Catalonia shows that only 16% of the people are in favour of maintaining the current state structures as they are, while 26% are in favour of more self-governance

Finnish Institute of
International Affairs

Kruunuvuorenkatu 4

PL 400

00161 Helsinki

Telephone

+358 (0)9 432 7000

Fax

+358 (0)9 432 7799

www.fiia.fi

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in Catalonia, and 41% support the possibility of converting Catalonia into an independent state.

Centralists in Madrid are afraid that the Catalan referendum would lead to a full-blown break-up of Spain, since Catalonia is not the only region that craves greater independence.

However, the status of Catalonia is not merely an internal issue. Secession would set a precedent for other regions dreaming about independence, such as Scotland, Flanders and Northern Italy. It would demonstrate how to disengage from the EU – a lesson that the EU does not want to deliver to anyone at the moment. The economic crisis is already dividing the union into “debtors” and “creditors” and speculation is rife about who will be the first to leave the monetary union, or even the EU. Catalonia could trigger a domino effect with its secession. That is not what the Catalans want. They are strongly pro-EU, and that is one of the reasons why the question in the possible referendum has been worded to reflect Catalonia as a new state within the EU.

However, one cannot go cherry picking when it comes to separatism. As Commissioner Reding has stated, there will be no shortcuts or exceptions for Catalonia if it decides

to separate from Spain. Catalonia would simultaneously separate itself from the EU and from the monetary union. Then it would have to stand in line with the other candidates for membership and undergo the same lengthy process as everyone else – a process that Catalonia would not even get through with the current economic figures.

The proposed question for the referendum is ambiguous and misleading: It does not mention the word independence at all and the Catalan status in the EU depends more on the other member states than on Catalan wishes. However, the centralism dictated by Madrid has only led to increased support for the full independence of Catalonia and an increasing number of people feel that the politicians are not representing them at all. That is a development that should be feared much more than any referendum since it encourages extra-parliamentary political action.

The question is, why not organize a referendum on the Catalan status, but organize it for real; putting all the options, with their price tags, on the table and then letting the people choose? Or is that something that even the *soberanistas* are afraid of?