

## CATALONIA BACKGROUND INFORMATION [SERIES E / 2013 / 11.1 / EN]

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### **DEMOCRACY AND SELF-DETERMINATION IN THE EU**

This article acknowledges the emergence of what I define as ‘emancipatory nationalism’ as a novel type of democratic nationalism rising in Western liberal democratic states where nation and state are not coextensive with each other; for example in Catalonia, Scotland and Flanders. It signals the coming of age of nations included within larger states invoking the right to decide upon their political future. At present, ‘emancipatory nationalism’ entails the quest for independence within the European Union as one of its novel and distinctive features.

Emancipatory nationalism stands as a step forward in the deepening of democracy by accepting the principle of consent. It defends the nation’s right to decide upon its political future by democratic means and it includes the right to secession. It signals a key transition in the life of the nation evolving from adolescence to adulthood; this is illustrated by the nation’s willingness to act and be recognized as a ‘demos’ able to decide upon its own political future.

This type of nationalism opens up a novel phase in the emancipation of peoples anchored in the ideas inspiring the French and the American revolutions of 1789 and 1786. Most recently, their claims are rooted in the Woodrow Wilson ‘Fourteen Points Speech’ of 8 January 1918, which included the right of peoples to Self-Determination. ‘Emancipatory nationalism’ abides the rule of law, respects human rights and is committed to obtaining legitimacy by the people’s consent. It is instrumental in voicing dissatisfaction with the status quo and challenges it.

States react in different ways to the demands of their national minorities and their reactions generally depend upon the political culture and history of each particular country. For instance, the British government’s willingness to recognize Scotland as a nation and its readiness to allow a referendum on Scottish independence in 2014 stands in sharp contrast with the Spanish position to forbid a referendum on Catalan independence.

According to the Constitution, Spain is a single ‘demos’ formed by ‘all Spaniards’; the Catalans are regarded as a part of that single ‘demos’ and this automatically deems any attempts to hold a referendum on self-determination in Catalonia illegal unless allowed by the state. In turn, Article 2 of the Constitution argues that ‘the Constitution is based upon the indissoluble unity of the Spanish

nation, common and indivisible patria of all Spaniards', and Article 8 states that 'the Army's mission is to guarantee the sovereignty and independence of Spain, to defend its territorial integrity and the constitutional set up'.

In Catalonia, public political distrust of and resentment towards politicians and the political system is combined with unhappiness regarding long-lasting limitations to demands for greater political autonomy. They also lament Catalonia's fiscal deficit as well as the lack of recognition of Catalonia as a nation within Spain. Cultural and identity issues feature prominently among their demands.

I locate the origin of the shift from devolution to secession in Catalonia as the outcome of two parallel processes:

First, the consolidation of democracy has allowed people to express their political aspirations without fear –this is new to a society that endured almost forty years of dictatorship - while regarding them as legitimate. New generations brought up within democratic Spain are convinced of the legitimacy of their claims, among them the right to decide upon their political future by means of a referendum, as it will be the case in other European democracies, for example in Scotland. To a significant extent this accounts for the Catalans' eagerness to engage in grassroots mobilization to express their discontent with the status quo.

Second, the Spanish state has been above all opposed to recognizing Catalonia as a nation and to demands for greater devolution, while defending a centralist view of the state shared by both conservatives and socialists. When interviewing in Catalonia, people with different political allegiances would once and again cite the lack of response to demands for greater autonomy for Catalonia (never secession, at the time). They would also point at the suspension of parts of the 2006 Statute of Autonomy, after it had already been adjusted to fully comply with the Constitution and sanctioned in a referendum (18<sup>th</sup> June 2006), as an unprecedented move without parallel in modern Europe and are eager to highlight Catalonia's fiscal deficit with the Central Administration in Madrid. These are arguments with a potent emotional content that have contributed to widen the gap between Catalonia and the Spanish state by fostering a growing sense of alienation among significant sectors of Catalan people, which has materialized in the rise of a secessionist civil movement in the last five years or so.

In Barcelona over one million people demonstrated in favour of self-determination (11<sup>th</sup> September 2012), and the 2013 so-called 'Catalan way' (a human chain which spanned Catalonia from north to south on 11<sup>th</sup> September 2013) gathered more than a million Catalans. This illustrates the strength of the civic movement in favour of allowing Catalonia to decide upon its political future by means of a referendum on remaining a part of Spain or becoming an independent country. At the time of writing, in Catalonia support for independence has risen to 52.3 per cent according to Spain's premier radio network, *Cadena Ser*, opinion poll 11<sup>th</sup> September 2013.

Currently, the European project is faced with the democratic peaceful demands of small nations, such as Catalonia and Scotland, who are willing to be recognized as nations within the EU. This could trigger a fundamental reconfiguration of power within the EU. It responds to a desire for greater democracy at a time when the traditional nation-state is being challenged by transnational and global governance as well as by the legitimate right of peoples to decide upon their own political destiny. In this environment, civil society emerges as 'the most viable domain for mounting challenges and constructing alternatives that consolidate participatory democratic processes' (Voss and Williams, 2011, p. 369) such as the Catalan democratic secessionist movement considered here. This new milieu provides an opportunity to redress the EU democratic deficit. It also opens up the possibility to lighten the bureaucratic burden of EU institutions. Above all, it stands as a unique occasion to enhance a shared sense of European identity by means of greater political and economic integration. Undoubtedly, dialogue is the way forward.

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## References

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