FOCUS: CATALONIA’S PROSPECTS FOR INDEPENDENCE

Insights from a Wikistrat Crowdsourced Simulation

August 2015
Rumblings of independence in Catalonia have been growing louder in the past few years. These demands have coincided with the European debt crisis and a tardy ruling from the Spanish Constitutional Court calling Catalonia’s ambitious 2006 Statute of Autonomy, which included recognition of the region as a “nation”, unconstitutional. Earlier this year, Catalonia’s president, Artur Mas, announced that regional elections in September would effectively serve as a referendum on whether or not to secede from Spain.

Wikistrat asked its analysts to imagine what the repercussions of Catalan independence would be. Although they identified some short-term benefits of independence, such as respect for Catalan heritage, economic arguments would seem to work against seceding from Spain.

An increased status for the Catalan language and culture would be the main benefit of independence. At the moment, Catalan shares co-official status with Spanish – and laboriously so. Everything from advertising and public signage to labeling is required in both languages. While Catalan is the main language of instruction in the region, with Spanish and English taught a few hours per week, the Spanish education system is trying to increase the hours of Spanish taught. Catalan is also actually the lesser-spoken of the two languages.

Especially since it was banned under Franco (1936-1975), the Catalan language has been at the heart of Catalan identity and the regional government has sought to protect and increase its use. An independent Catalonia could make Catalan its sole language, and decisions involving recognition of other languages would be at the complete discretion of the Catalan government rather than the other way around, as is often presently the case.

A union of Catalan-speaking areas was considered (Catalan is also spoken in the French department of Pyrénées-Orientales, which was a part of Catalonia until Spain ceded it to France in 1659), but ultimately decided to be far-fetched.
Unlike in the Basque Country – where separatists desire the unification of the three Basque provinces in France with the four in Spain – Catalan separatism is a relatively recent phenomenon, and the region has traditionally bargained with Madrid for its various privileges.

Supporters of independence argue that these privileges are eroding, and they lament the lack of fiscal equality between what Catalonia contributes to the Spanish coffers and what it receives in return. This sentiment has been attenuated by the European economic crisis though it hasn’t abated completely. Detachment from Spain would give Catalonia complete control over its public finances, but it could also leave it worse off financially.

Catalonia is the most indebted region in Spain. Independently, it would probably not be able to borrow at the same low levels it does now and might have immediate problems servicing its debt. At least in the short term, the economic arguments work in favor of Catalonia remaining within Spain.

Analysts also raised doubts about an independent Catalonia’s admission into organizations such as the EU and NATO, arguing that Spain and other countries with separatist movements (like Britain and Italy) could use their veto power to block Catalonia’s accession.

Catalans seem increasingly aware of the risks, and separatist sentiment may be waning. A “symbolic” referendum on independence in November 2014 garnered 80 percent of the affirmative vote. But fewer than one in four eligible citizens participated. Polls show the population more or less evenly split on independence, but the separatist parties are struggling to get a majority.

Wikistrat’s analysts attributed this to the rise of the anti-establishment parties Ciudadanos – which has mainly taken votes away from the mainstream conservative and socialist parties in Catalonia – and Podemos – which appears to have done the same to the separatist Republican Left.

The rise of anti-establishment parties has also had a broader impact on Catalan politics. Artur Mas’s governing Convergència i Unió party (CiU), comprised of his liberal Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya (CDC) and the Christian democrat Unió Democràtica, split in June when the latter left due to the CDC’s pro-independence stance. Mas then formed a coalition with the Republican Left. This left-right coalition – if it survives the election in September – could take advantage of a likely a four-way split in the Spanish general elections later in the year. If no single party is able to form a government in Madrid, Catalonia could capitalize on the political paralysis in the capital to declare independence. Mas’s alliance with the left demonstrates that the ruling party has become fed up with Madrid and abandoned its traditional position of bargaining for autonomy. Even if a majority of Catalans ultimately decides against seceding from Spain, the status quo is not sustainable.

---

**Dr. Ainslie Noble** is an educator and Wikistrat analyst with a PhD from the University of Melbourne, Australia. She specializes in Basque and Catalan nationalism and is the author of *Memory, Identity and Violence: Comparing Contemporary Catalonia and the Basque Country in France and Spain.*

**ATTRIBUTIONS**

[Cover photo] is a derivative of “PresidentMas.jpeg” by Martorell45 is licensed under CC BY 2.0; “Siñal d’Aragón.svg” by Dimartorell is licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0.
FOCUS:
CATALONIA’S PROSPECTS FOR INDEPENDENCE

Author:
Dr. Ainslie Noble

Editor:
Eva Dubinsky

August 2015