



The Catalan labyrinth: is there a way out?

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Catalonia is mired in a labyrinth of separatist conflicts and demands that are hard to integrate within the current Spanish and European political structure

The situation in Catalonia is hard to understand for an outside observer unfamiliar with its historical and economic background.

Catalonia is one of the most prosperous regions in Spain, with a rich and extensive history and culture. Ever since the War of Spanish Succession, in which the Bourbon dynasty triumphed, Catalonia has developed separatist sentiments that have been a latent presence since the 18th century and has tried to exploit the democratic periods of Spain's history to achieve its independence as a sovereign nation separate from Spain. It also has historical claims to part of the territory of France. This happened during both the First Republic (1873-1874) and the Second (1931-1939), operating as a destabilising factor of the democratic order.

However, since the Spanish Constitution of 1978 and the Statute of Independence, it had seemed that the "Catalan question" had been channelled into the form of an Autonomous Government with broad powers, in many respects going beyond those of other federal states. One of the paradoxes of the current situation is that it is the Catalan Government itself, with all its administrative, communicative and police apparatus (17,000 armed mossos) that is the leader of an independence process whose ultimate outcome is completely unknown beyond the high levels of self-government already achieved. In other words, the question that is being debated is whether there is a space for an intermediate political development between full independence and the autonomous state guaranteed by the current Spanish Constitution.

Against this background, the Catalan independence parties obtained 47.74% of the votes in the last elections to the *Parlament*, which gave them a slightly increased majority due to the peculiarities of the Catalan electoral system.

Based on this situation of self-governance and this configuration of forces, the Catalan Government produced a proposal for "independence" that was approved in a stormy parliamentary session, which was non-binding and during which almost half of the Members left the Chamber. This independence proposal is the one that was attempted to be submitted for endorsement in the *referendum* held on 1 October, which took place in a climate of chaos, conflict and the absence of minimal procedural guarantees. In other words, everyone was able to vote in a kind of "universal electoral census", anywhere and in any way. So the social networks soon filled up with *selfies* of people queueing to vote in various places.

Based on these facts, and the scenes of violence that were seen during the day of 1 October, the Catalan Government announced results with percentages that did not add up to 100, and with voting figures of 2,200,000 persons, of which it was said that about 2,000,000 had voted in favour of independence, out of a total population of 7,582,596, and an electoral census of 5,343,358. In other words, even if these figures were right, in Catalonia only 37% of the population of voting age supported independence.

What can be created out of this situation? Actually, very little. Above all, however, it is necessary to specify what the separatists want to build. In other words, what powers do they want to have on an exclusive basis? The little progress that has been made in this explanation points to the intention of gaining full autonomy in the management of economic resources, thus cutting the net contributions that, as one of the richest regions of Spain, Catalonia has been contributing to the national budget to cover the expenses of the State. To this must be added another more difficult aspiration to achieve, namely the intention to reject joint liability for the common element of the Spanish national debt, which is currently huge. This is an amount that the Catalan Government maintains is not its debt, due to the Spanish Government's low investment in public works in Catalonia. A controversial question indeed.

Although it is clear that a dispute of this nature needs to be redirected towards channels of dialogue and peaceful negotiation, some of these demands will make it difficult to reach agreements making it possible to overcome the conflict, while at the same time opening up the worrying question of where the erosion of some of Europe's current borders could lead. A problem that concerns not just the Spanish.