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There's still time to avoid a Catalonian split

But solutions to the crisis have to come from the left

The Catalan question, in spite of its own clear peculiarities, forms part of the wider political and institutional crisis experienced in Europe and beyond. On 1 October 2017 the Catalan government held a referendum on independence, which the Spanish state deems illegal and did its best to quash. The current tensions in this northern region of 7.5 million people have cast doubt on the very existence of the Spanish nation-state. If Spain were to lose one-fifth of its economy (Catalonia is a rich region), it would have serious knock-on effects for the European Union. With Brexit on the horizon, the country has risen in importance for the EU. French and German banks, meanwhile, have major stakes in the Spanish economy.

An abrupt secession of Catalonia would call the apparent inviolability of established national frontiers into question, and give a shot in the arm to breakaway movements in Flanders, Corsica and Scotland. These implications explain in part why the EU institutions have been so reluctant to publicly criticise the current Spanish government, even after Spanish police injured over 800 in their heavy-handed response to Catalonia's referendum.

In the mid to late seventies, Spain embarked on a political experiment of a new system of semi-federalism, the autonomous system of regional government, to address the problems posed by the legacy of repression of its historic nations. The regime of General Francisco Franco, who ruled Spain as a dictatorship from 1939 until his death in 1975, had sought to crush Basque and Catalan nationalism by political persecution. Yet Basque, Catalan and other identities emerged enhanced by the time the regime ended. For a few years, the close link between Franco's rule and the Spanish nationalism he espoused kept any renewed nationalist instincts at bay. Spain's political priority was to join the EU and modernise. However, Spanish nationalism re-emerged in the 1990s, determined to halt the ongoing process of concessions to the regions.

The increasing use of Spanish nationalist rhetoric by the Prime Minister

Mariano Rajoy's conservative Partido Popular since 2000 has offended many Catalans, Basques and others. Yet the desire of many Catalans to leave Spain is met with widespread incomprehension. Positive gestures towards Catalonia or towards the linguistic diversity within Spain have rarely been embraced by the Spanish government. Contrast this with how the British government addressed Scotland in 2014, where politicians, sportspeople and celebrities pleaded with Scots to stay within the UK. Similarly, Canadian institutions responded to their own secessionist issue by recognising the special character of Quebec.

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The absence of concessions from Madrid has pushed mainstream Catalan nationalism to embrace independence. The close to unilateral declaration of Catalan independence on 10 October 2017 (temporarily suspended) can be accounted for by the fact that Madrid has offered little beyond threats and the rule of law. Catalan political elites are more polarised from the Spanish political class than at any time since the death of Franco. The Spanish government has even threatened leading Catalan politicians with jail.

Aspects of the state order in Spain have long held comparatively low legitimacy in Catalonia: the Spanish national flag, the monarchy and the army are seen to represent Spanish nationalism. Since 2008, with the financial crisis, Catalans have increasingly rejected the judiciary, perceived as highly partisan, and the Spanish Constitution of 1978. The events of 1 October, with its scenes of indiscriminate police violence, have only deepened the Catalan sense of grievance. But neither the Spanish King, Felipe, nor Prime Minister Rajoy, have acknowledged the violent nature of the police action in recent speeches. In contrast, police officers' violence against voters and protesters have met with universal condemnation abroad, and Human Rights Watch issued a report detailing them.

The economic crisis that hit Spain after 2008 not only greatly contributed to Catalan independence; it also turned the country at large into a laboratory for new forms of political expression – not least the indignados or 15-M, an anti-austerity movement named after its foundation on 15 May 2011. The movement rapidly spread throughout Spain, though it has always been strongest in Madrid and Barcelona. It is typical of a new kind of politics that is emerging in Spanish cities – grassroots, impassioned, and topic-based rather than party-political. The movement is far-removed from the formalities of the Spanish parliament,

which is still dominated by the traditional parties.

This new politics achieved breakthrough at a local level on 24 May 2015 . Both Barcelona and Madrid delivered strong verdicts for change with the new post-15M parties taking control of both flagship city councils. The arrival of a new generation of political activists into local power – most of them well-educated and under 40 – as well as those elected to the Madrid national parliament for Podemos, has demonstrated that the old ways are being questioned.

Although the Spanish two-party system that emerged in the 1980s has broken, and a more fragmented parliamentary system has appeared, Spain's political order is re-asserting itself. The emergence of an informal grand coalition between the Partido Popular and a weakened PSOE (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party) in 2016 was a reflection of both weakness and strength: both the Partido Popular and the PSOE are heavily reliant on aged voters who hold a much more inflexible position on the question of Spanish nationhood. The PSOE is itself divided on the national question, partly because it fears accusations of 'disloyalty' by Spanish conservatives. This internal division explains why, until now, the PSOE has declined to join a new progressive front with Podemos and regional nationalist forces.

The hope for Spain, and indeed whether the country can survive in its present form, comes from the under 40s, who are more open, pluralistic and ready for compromise on the question of nationhood. For now, though, the old guard retains control over the government and the institutions of the state.

We can interpret the Catalan independence movement as a rebellion against the dictates of Madrid during an economic crisis. The Catalan revolt is against a type of state order, rather than the feeling of being Spanish. Here we can locate the opportunity provided by the new progressive forces in Spain, centred around Podemos and its regional sub-variants. The problem however is the PSOE, which continues to show reluctance to break with the Partido Popular in its approach to Spain's national question. The PSOE is deeply divided internally but the more it clings to the old order the less relevant it becomes to the future in Spain. Real political change is not possible until the PSOE joins a progressive alliance for change, so this is where pressure needs to be applied in future months.

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The Catalan question will only be resolved when Spain as a wider polity is prepared to embrace and welcome its internal cultural and

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linguistic diversity. The new narrative of Podemos around the Spanish nation, articulating a pluri-national Spain founded on mutual respect, is the first indicator that this change has begun, at least for the younger generation. Rajoy's government remains entrenched in an inflexible position, refusing to recognise the range of legitimate grievances of the Catalans. It is clear that the current government in Madrid is part of the problem, not the solution.



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