

Kosovo independence fuels regionalist divisions in Spain

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Kosovo's declaration of independence from Serbia has dramatically worsened tensions in Spanish domestic politics, fuelling an already volatile situation ahead of next month's general election. The declaration of independence has encouraged the drive towards separatism within many of Spain's constituent regions, increasing the possibility of the balkanisation of larger parts of Europe.

The Spanish government has refused to recognise an independent Kosovo. Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos told the press that most of the countries declining to do so were close to Kosovo geographically and had the best knowledge of the region. Spain, he said, "will not recognise the unilateral act" because it "does not respect international law."

While Moratinos claimed his government's position had "nothing to do with Spain," but was motivated only by concern that Kosovo's independence would "open Pandora's Box in the Balkans," his remarks were clearly aimed at countering already strident demands for separatism, or at the very least greater autonomy, in the Basque region and Catalonia. The ruling Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) and the main opposition party, the right-wing Popular Party (PP), take the same position on Kosovo.

The Spanish delegation to the European Union played a key role in opposing recognition for Kosovo by the major European powers—Germany, Britain and France—during attempts to formulate a common position. Unable to win a majority against recognition, Spain insisted that Kosovo should not be seen as a precedent and claims credit for having forced the declaration that it is a "special case."

Legally, Moratinos said, secession required either an agreement between the parties or a United Nations Security Council resolution, noting that the declaration of independence ran counter to the United Nations Charter.

At Spain's insistence, the EU statement contained a commitment to the member states' "adherence to the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity," and removed references to Kosovo "as an independent state." Another clause claimed that the decision to recognise

Kosovo should accord with "international law."

El Pais, the newspaper closest to the PSOE, praised the government's stance on the declaration's illegality in an editorial. It said that the government took this position because Kosovo's viability was "by no means clear," adding that the declaration "sets a dangerous precedent in relation to other conflicts."

Right-wing commentators have also noted the precedent. The daily *ABC*, sympathetic to the PP, warned, "By accepting a state that starts from nothing... the Western powers have set a precedent that no mere theoretical statements can undo."

The divisions over Kosovo have caught the PSOE between a rock and a hard place—needing to maintain friendly relations with its European allies while opposing regionalism and separatism within Spain. But this is not a conflict that can be simply resolved. In the end, Moritanos said the EU's declaration was acceptable to Spain because it managed not to say that Kosovo was a state.

Nonetheless, Spain is being dragged into the Kosovo quagmire. Moratinos has committed 1,200 Spanish troops to the NATO peacekeeping force in Kosovo, and also pledged a contingent of police and some 20 experts for the 1,800-strong EU mission being sent to Kosovo to replace the UN force.

Spanish difficulties were laid bare during a dispute with Russia shortly before the Kosovo declaration. Opposing Kosovo's independence ahead of the expected declaration, Russian President Vladimir Putin expressed his anger at European "double standards" when it came to solving regional questions.

"What's the use of encouraging separatism?" he told a press conference in Moscow. "People don't want to live in a Spain in the heart of a single state. Well, let's support them then!"

Although Putin was expressing hostility to the encouragement of secession, comparing Kosovo openly to Catalonia and the Basque country was too much for the Spanish government. The Russian ambassador was called in

to explain the remarks. He promptly issued a disclaimer, stating that they were not aimed at interfering in internal Spanish matters and that Russia “fully respects the political system and Spanish democratic institutions.”

Basque and Catalan regional separatists were quick to welcome the unilateral Kosovan declaration, hailing it as a precedent for their own ambitions.

Notwithstanding expressions of tactical disagreement with the form of Kosovo’s independence, there was a widespread view in the regions that this gave them some political leverage ahead of the March 9 elections. Regional autonomy was already a political issue at the elections, with the PP accusing PSOE Prime Minister Jose Luis Zapatero of having encouraged Basque separatism through his attempts to negotiate with ETA (Basque Homeland and Freedom). The PSOE has been talking tough on separatism in the run-up to the campaign, and has attempted to ban two Basque parties from standing.

Spain’s 17 autonomous regions all have significant governmental powers, but the wealthier regions, particularly the Basque country and Catalonia, are pushing for measures of independence in economic decision-making. The separatist movements are largely oriented towards international institutions like the EU. They seek to attract international investment through cutting corporate taxes and not paying national taxes, which are portrayed as an impermissible subsidy to Spain’s poorer regions.

The constitutional Basque National Party (PNV) heads the regional coalition government in the Basque country. PNV President Inigo Urkullu has said the party will push Madrid to recognise Kosovo.

Miren Azkarate, a spokeswoman for the Basque government, called the Kosovan declaration a “lesson to follow” in resolving matters of “conflicts of identity.” Respecting “popular will” is “the key to resolving political stumbling blocks,” she said.

That was hardly true in Kosovo, where the declaration of independence was encouraged and prepared by the United States and European powers. New Kosovan Prime Minister Hasim Thaci was himself a member of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), a militia secretly armed and trained by the US and Germany.

Another separatist party, Aralar, also agreed that the move was a “lesson in the defence of rights” and called on the national government to “grant the Basques the right to freely and democratically decide their future.”

Eusko Alkartasuna (EA), a split from the PNV and part of the ruling coalition, said it was in favour of a referendum on independence, rather than a unilateral declaration.

The PNV intends to hold such a referendum on the future of the Basque region in eight months time. Deemed illegal

by the national government, this is intended to be on the Basques’ “right to decide” on future options for the region, including independence.

The plan’s mastermind, PNV regional Prime Minister Juan José Ibarretxe, sees this as a way of finally resolving his party’s conflict with ETA. Prior to the declaration, ETA had announced that it would make its future actions dependent on the situation in Kosovo.

In the northeastern region of Catalonia, the Catalan Republican Left (ERC) also described the Kosovo declaration as “an important precedent.” Josep Lluís Carod-Rovira, head of the ERC and regional vice-premier, urged recognition. He has previously called for a Catalan referendum on independence by 2014.

Artus Mas, head of the nationalist *Convergència i Unió* (CiU), insisted that Spain must recognise Kosovo. If the PSOE “refuses to recognise what most of the EU recognises, that shows it is afraid or that it does not have democracy in mind,” said Mas.

Unlike the Basque region, Catalonia has not had an armed separatist movement and regional politicians were at pains to insist, as Mas put it, that “Catalonia is not Kosovo.” The CiU’s Pere Macias said that Kosovo was not a model for Catalonia because of its violent past.

Nationalist separatism within Spain is not confined to the two most prominent regions. Regionalists in Galicia have also welcomed Kosovan independence. Francisco Rodriguez of the Galician National Party (BNG) said that “Any process of self-determination is legitimate in any part of Europe.”

The PSOE’s response has been to offer further extensions of regional autonomy. In a recent op-ed piece entitled “A Kosovo for Euskadi?” veteran *El País* journalist Miguel Angel Aguilar contrasted Kosovo’s “gloomy panorama” with the Basques’ “exemplary system of regional autonomy.” He warned that if Ibarretxe’s proposals bore “any resemblance to the abyss of Kosovo, then the Basques would do well to keep their distance from the whole idea.”

Notwithstanding such cautions, political events have their own logic. Kosovo’s declaration of independence marks a new stage in the break-up of existing political structures and states that intensifies the danger of war, and the fault lines reach far beyond the Balkans.



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