

# Catalan independence referendum sparks growing concerns in Europe

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The Catalan independence referendum, planned for October 1 is setting the stage for a bitter clash between Madrid and Barcelona.

The Catalan secessionists—the Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC), Catalan European Democratic Party (PDeCAT) and the pseudo-left Popular Unity Candidacy (CUP)—are continuing to push forward with the referendum. The Popular Party government, Socialist Party (PSOE) and Citizens party are vehemently opposed, with Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy swearing that “all means” will be used to prevent it taking place.

A confrontation is likely to take place later this month as the Catalan parliament starts the formal drafting of the referendum law and the law of disconnection—the legal foundation for the transition from the Spanish legal system to a new Catalan republic should the “Yes” vote win. This would come into effect, regardless of the level of participation, and ignoring the fact that most of those opposed to independence will not vote because as they regard the referendum as illegitimate.

The PP government, which has appealed to the Constitutional Court and been supported by its rulings, has already put in place a repressive framework targeting the secessionists. It has pursued prosecutions, disqualifications from public office, threats to civil servants who facilitate the referendum (such as setting up voting booths in public schools), encouraged interrogations by the Guardia Civil without judicial authorization and spied both “legally” and illegally on secessionist figures. The PP has also threatened to withhold central government funding if the regional government uses it to prepare for the referendum.

These measures are backed by most of the Madrid-based media, with scant regard to their anti-democratic,

repressive nature. Official chauvinism has reached levels not seen since the Franco dictatorship.

For their part, the Catalan secessionists have passed an anti-democratic reform to the regional parliament’s statutes that will allow laws to be approved after a single reading, allowing the independence legislation to be fast-tracked with little or no debate.

The Catalan government has also replaced the chief of the 17,000-strong regional Mossos d’Esquadra police force, Albert Batlle. He had been under increasing pressure from the CUP to resign after he had said that he would obey Spanish law and courts. His replacement, Pere Soler, a staunch nationalist, has a track record of derogatory remarks about Spain, declaring last year, “I hope we secede now, because I feel sorry for all you Spaniards.”

The Madrid-based media has reacted by defining the whole process as a “coup” against the government and called for article 155 of the constitution to be invoked. *El País* declared it would be “the only ordinary way—short of declaring a state of exception—that the central government could legally take over the Mossos d’Esquadra law enforcement agency if the latter decides to cooperate with the Catalan executive’s secessionist plans.”

Batlle’s downfall came days after three members of Catalonia’s regional government stepped down and a few weeks after regional Premier Carles Puigdemont dismissed a senior member of his government for expressing doubts about the referendum.

It is in this context that the major European dailies are raising the alarm.

David Gardner for the *Financial Times*, in his article, “Rajoy is cutting it fine with his Catalonian intervention,” describes the prime minister’s last-minute offer of greater fiscal autonomy for Catalonia of

merely sounding “statesmanlike, waiting almost until the eve of a constitutional train-crash that could wreck Spain.”

He accuses Rajoy and the PP of bearing a “heavy responsibility” for the crisis, which they are then irresponsibly exploiting because they find “it electorally rewarding in the rest of Spain to incite antagonism against the Basque Country and Catalonia, where its centralising instincts severely limit its support.”

The *FT* concludes with a warning against the Constitutional Court sitting next month and “honing its legal weapons against the Catalan plebiscite.” Instead, “The test [...] will be if Madrid drops the alibi that Spain is trapped in a legal labyrinth, in which the constitution is a tablet of stone, and judges are shielded against a political problem elected politicians have a duty to resolve.”

The German *Suddeutsche Zeitung* in “Spain is threatening the Catalans, instead of transforming them” goes further, openly sympathising with the secessionists. It describes them as “a very pro-European coalition of Liberals, Conservatives and Social Democrats” working in “the tradition of the Spanish Republic, which was smashed by General Franco, who had the support of the Nazi regime in the Civil War.” The PP is described as “having emerged from the Francoites.”

The paper states that European Union (EU) diplomats “are surprised that the central government makes no attempt at all to woo the Catalans,” especially under conditions where most Catalans agree with holding a referendum but do not support secession. It concludes by warning that “the problem is not to be solved with prohibitions. The more Rajoy and his fellow campaigners attack Barcelona... the louder the demands for a referendum.”

An editorial in the French *Le Figaro*, “Spanish Divorce,” follows suit, criticizing Madrid for rolling out the “heavy weapons” and a whole range of other measures in a “legal arsenal” to prevent the referendum. It blames the government for its “hard” attitude and its failure to generate any initiative “to calm the fever.”

In their criticism of the Spanish government, the editors of the *FT*, *Suddeutsche Zeitung* and *Le Figaro* are following in the footsteps of *The New York Times*,

which last month criticised the PP’s “intransigence” and the way it had “galvanised” Catalan separatists.

The concerns on both sides of the Atlantic express the fears of sections of the ruling elite that a confrontation between Barcelona and Madrid, with its threats of suspending Catalan autonomy and military figures talking of sending in the army, might spark a crisis that will engulf Spain.

Such a scenario could rapidly spiral out of control, dragging down the fourth largest economy of the Eurozone and a key EU and NATO member. All this would occur post-Brexit, dragging the EU into a yet deeper quagmire.

It would risk inflaming already rising tensions between the major European powers, the US and Russia against a background of growing social tensions in Spain and across the continent provoked by one wave of austerity after another.

In Barcelona, July has seen a record number of strikes affecting transport. Industrial action has been taken by taxi drivers and workers in the metro, Bicing (the city’s bicycle sharing system), Renfe (the state-owned company which operates freight and passenger trains), Barcelona Airport security and Deliveroo (the British online food delivery company).

These struggles have been spurred by wage cuts, growing job insecurity—class issues recognised by workers throughout Spain, Europe and the world. It a reminder that the growth of separatism is a retrograde development that cuts across the critical struggle to unite the working class in opposition to the social counterrevolution being carried out by both Spain and Catalonia under the auspices of the EU.



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