

The EU must step in if Spain and Catalonia are to negotiate an end to the crisis



The EU's institutions and the governments of other EU member states have so far shown reluctance to become involved in the standoff between the Spanish and Catalan governments over Catalan independence. [Simon Toubeau](#) argues that if a solution is to be found, the EU will have to take active involvement in facilitating dialogue between the two sides and supporting an outcome that can bring an end to the crisis.



Mariano Rajoy, Credit: [La Moncloa – Gobierno de España \(CC BY-NC-ND 2.0\)](#)

Unless the Catalan and Spanish governments immediately open channels of dialogue about the constitutional future of Catalonia, the scenes we witnessed on 1 October may only be a mild precursor of things to come. But for this dialogue to take place, the EU must be actively involved.

With the instant, world-wide circulation of images of the brutal police repression of peaceful voters, the Catalan independence movement's cause seems to have won favour in the court of European and global public opinion. But the Catalan government remains isolated. The PP has maintained its hard line, refusing to recognise the exercise or its result. This strategy has been bolstered by King Felipe VI's intervention which, rather than appeal for national unity, offered a one-side condemnation of the conflict.

The PP's line is also supported by most other Spanish parties, as well as the editorial line adopted by the main Spanish dailies such as *El País* and *El Mundo*. The rhetoric emanating from this camp is one that condemns radical nationalist forces that have sought to undermine Spanish democracy with a nationalist *coup d'état*. Potential allies in other historic regions such as the Basque country have remained remarkably silent. And outside of Spain, European leaders have either taken a neutral stance, relegating the conflict to the status of an internal matter for Spain to resolve, or have offered support for upholding the rule of law.

Political brinkmanship

Undeterred, the Catalan government has not ruled out making a unilateral declaration of independence. However, this strategy is fraught with risk. First, it does not acknowledge the real divisions that exist within Catalonia about the desirability of independence, which were reflected in the ambiguous nature of the referendum result: 90 percent supported independence, but this represents only 40 percent of the electorate.

Second, it will force the Spanish state to maintain its course. The courts have already suspended the parliamentary session in which the Catalan government could declare independence. The central government could go further, using the power conferred by Art.155 of the constitution, to 'take all measures necessary to compel the President of the Autonomous Community to fulfil its obligations or to protect the general interest'.

This could mean police intervention, the collective arrests of members of the Catalan government, the suspension of the Catalan parliament and government, followed by fresh elections or the imposition of direct rule. If such action were opposed by mass peaceful demonstrations, it could lead to more street-level clashes.

But the central government's strategy is equally risky. It does nothing to address the growing sources of grievances in Catalonia. Moreover, it is not clear that it could work: the 10,000 policemen deployed across Catalonia last Sunday could not prevent over 2 million voters from casting their ballots in favour of independence.

The duty of the EU

Unilateral independence is a potential outcome, with serious economic ramifications for the EU. Already, two banks based in Catalonia – Sabadell and CaixaBank – have chosen to move their headquarters. With capital flying out of its largest economic region, the Spanish stock exchange has taken a tumble, one that is being closely followed by the falling value of the euro. The messy economics of a divorce – especially the thorny question surrounding the repayment of sovereign debt amassed by the Spanish and Catalan government – could lead to a sudden change in credit ratings, widening spreads on Spanish bonds and might even signal a return to the volatility that the Eurozone experienced in 2011-12.

It is for these reasons that the EU has a duty to facilitate dialogue between the Catalan and Spanish governments and to bring them back from the brink. The EU's reluctance to engage stems from the fact that these are uncharted waters. The violent territorial conflicts that have beset countries within and outside its borders, such as in Northern Ireland, Cyprus and Bosnia-Herzegovina were mediated by national governments, the United Nations and third parties like the United States. The EU has few procedures and instruments for bringing participants in a territorial conflict to the negotiation table. Creativity is therefore required.

What is to be done

The first necessary step is a resolution passed by the European Parliament and the general affairs council of the Council of Ministers that condemns the situation and recalls the cardinal values of the rule of law, democracy and minority rights in the European constitutional order. This resolution should receive a full endorsement by Donald Tusk, Jean-Claude Juncker, and the heads of governments of the leading member states.

The second action that will be required is for the EU to act as an impartial mediator in the dialogue. Given the heightened tensions and mutual recriminations, this dialogue cannot be left unmediated. The Catalan government will not accept that the Spanish government should be permitted to take on the role of both an interlocutor and an arbiter.

Third, as a mediator, the EU needs to offer a way out of the conflict. The basic condition for dialogue is a formal renunciation of the unilateral declaration of independence by the Catalan government, in exchange for the right to hold a new legally-sanctioned referendum on independence. In case of a No vote, the Catalan government should then open negotiations for a revision of the Catalan Statute of Autonomy, that offers symbolic recognition of Catalonia's nationhood and a better fiscal arrangement.

This bargain needs to be accompanied by the promise that the independence of Catalonia will not be recognised by the EU if it a referendum is carried out illegally and that the Spanish government will be suspended from the Council of Ministers if it is found to violate civil rights in its suspension of Catalan institutions. Europe is not short of diplomatic talent that could be called upon to help foster dialogue: Mary Robinson, Carl Bildt and Paddy Ashdown are well-seasoned politicians that could play a constructive role in defusing the crisis.

The alternative would have devastating repercussions for Catalonia, Spain and the EU. The Catalan government could choose to declare independence unilaterally, with all the damaging consequences that this could entail. Or, to force a reluctant central government to the negotiating table, Catalonia's citizens could deploy their most successful strategy so far: mass protests, general strikes, and wide-spread civil disobedience capable of bringing the regional and national economy to a standstill and generating further political turmoil.

Both scenarios would result from the EU's failure to act.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.

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