

The Pujol scandal might weaken the Catalan government, but it is unlikely to derail the campaign for Catalan independence

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Jordi Pujol, the former president of the Catalan government between 1980 and 2003, has faced a corruption scandal in recent months. [Alejandro Quiroga](#) writes on the potential impact the affair might have on the campaign for Catalonia's independence from Spain. He argues that while the scandal may have undermined attempts to draw a distinction between corruption in the Spanish government and the actions of politicians in Catalonia, it is unlikely to significantly damage the wider independence movement.



The Catalan political landscape has been profoundly transformed in recent times. In the space of six years, popular support for independence from Spain has tripled, reaching 45 per cent in the [latest polls](#). The Catalan premier, Artur Mas, has called for a referendum to be held on 9 November 2014 and publicly campaigned for secession. Led by the conservative Mariano Rajoy, the Spanish government has said the plebiscite will not take place because it would be illegal under the 1978 Constitution. Both governments have acknowledged negotiations are required to avoid a political train wreck but have done very little to reach an agreement. The so-called 'Catalan question' has become one of the main political issues in a Spain riddled with economic, social and institutional problems.

In late July, the secessionist camp was rocked by the revelations that Jordi Pujol, former president of Catalonia, had kept millions of euros in overseas tax havens for 34 years. In a public letter, Pujol, who ran Catalonia for 23 years as leader of the right-wing nationalist party [Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya](#) (CDC), admitted the crime. The confession was another brick on a wall of scandals associated with the Pujol family. The Pujols were awarded a number of profitable contracts over the last two decades, which investigators claim were handed out through false bidding when CDC was in government. According to the police, Pujol's eldest son, Jordi Pujol Jr., amassed a fortune illegally and kept part of his profits in Andorra. His brother, Oriol Pujol, was formally charged with bid fixing ITV vehicle inspection stations by the Catalan Supreme Court in March 2013. Oriol Pujol resigned as MP in the Catalan Parliament and CDC general secretary in June 2014, following further accusations of influence peddling and misappropriation of funds. In the last weeks Catalan opposition politicians have demanded new investigations into the Pujol family's offshore money, which some newspapers reckon could reach 137 million euros.

It is difficult to underestimate the importance of Jordi Pujol in Catalan politics. He is the father of modern Catalanism and, for many, the architect of today's Catalonia. Jailed and tortured by the Franco regime, Pujol founded CDC in 1974, played a key role during Spain's transition to democracy and governed Catalonia from 1980 to 2003 with his [CiU](#) bloc. For years, the Catalan premier acted as a bulk against separatism, by ensuring that the Barcelona authorities cooperated with different governments in Madrid.

In 2011, however, Pujol, together with CDC, converted to the pro-independence cause. According to some analysts, Mr. Pujol's tax evasion revelations, together with the grave judicial accusations his sons are facing in court, are going to seriously discredit the pro-independence movement. For Josep Antoni Duran i Lleida, the leader of [Unió](#) (CDC's partner in the Catalan government), the Pujol affair will clearly have a negative impact on the independence campaign. A recent opinion poll also showed that the majority of Catalans felt corruption linked to the Pujols was damaging the secessionist effort.

The effect of the Pujol scandal on the Catalan independence movement

One might expect that Jordi Pujol's fall from grace could have an impact on some Catalan nationalists who, like the Pujols themselves, have joined the pro-independence ranks in recent years. After all, the Catalanist discourse emphasised for years that corruption was a Spanish malady. Funds embezzlement, 'clientelist' practices and money laundering belonged to a backward and dirty Spanish political culture, alien to the modern and decent practices of the Catalan elites. The Pujol affair has debunked the idea that Catalonia was an oasis of honesty in the unscrupulous desert of Spanish politics.

But for all the disappointment that Catalan nationalists could feel, there are elements that indicate that the corruption scandals will not have a relevant bearing on the secessionist project. In some respects, secessionism is a bottom-up movement. Support for an independent Catalonia spread from civil society

organisations and was later adopted by the Catalan nationalists of CDC in 2011 – precisely because they realised how popular secessionism was. In other words, the CDC jumped on the bandwagon of independence and tried to control the political process from the Catalan government. Crucially, the CDC conversion to secessionism occurred in a society that profoundly mistrusts Catalan political elites, as regularly shown in opinion polls. In this context, the Pujol affair certainly adds insult to injury, but should not have a serious impact among those who wanted an independent Catalonia before CDC did.

The success of the secessionist campaign is based on the widespread propagation of a national master narrative that presents Catalonia as a historical victim of Spain. According to this narrative, Catalonia has suffered political, cultural and economic exploitation over the centuries. Since the return of democracy in the late 1970s, the storyline goes, the Catalan people tried to regain what Spain had stolen from them, but the intransigent, centralist, authoritarian nature of Madrid governments rendered the task impossible. Consequently, the time has come to leave a Spanish state that constantly mistreated the Catalan nation.

True, this master narrative had a long tradition among Catalan nationalists. Yet support for independence barely reached 15 per cent in 2007. The economic crisis that began in 2008 created a social environment that facilitated the popular assumption of a master narrative underlining the Spanish 'financial plunder' of Catalonia. Moreover, the CiU government in Catalonia explained its cuts in education, health and other social services as the result of poor financing by Spain. The national narrative dovetailed with political discourse to the point of establishing a tautological trope: to speak of Catalonia was to speak of the perpetual usurpation of its identity and resources.

The success of the Catalanist narrative is intrinsically linked to the failure of Spanish discourses in Catalonia. A [survey](#) conducted by the Centre d'Estudis d'Opinió in the spring of 2014 showed that 23 per cent of Catalans were happy with the current level of decentralisation, while another 20 per cent opted for a Catalonia within a federal Spain. However, those in favour of keeping the status quo have only recently begun to mobilise against independence. New civil society organisations have emerged in Catalonia to speak out against secession.

These Catalans denounce that the social hegemony of the Catalanist narrative enforces adaptation to the canon of what is 'nationally correct'. This has led some scholars to [speak of](#) a 'spiral of silence' that mutes academics, intellectuals and political segments of society discordant with pro-independence ideology. Other important sectors of Catalan society opposing independence, namely working-class, Spanish-speaking Catalans, are often ignored by political parties and have very little weight in the generation of alternative national narratives.



Jordi Pujol, Credit: Josep Tomàs (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

The new anti-secession civil society organisations have also asked the Spanish government for a different approach to the Catalan question. As explained by Diego Muro and Martijn Vlaskamp in a [recent post](#) in EUROPP, Mariano Rajoy's slant has been characterised by disdain, neglect and intimidation. This negative line has understandably failed to gain much support for the pro-Spanish camp in Catalonia. A positive message on the advantages of remaining part of Spain could reduce the lure of independence in Catalonia.

However, Rajoy's [Popular Party](#) (PP) is itself in a very difficult position. The self-proclaimed protector of Spain's unity is being investigated for dozens of corruption cases all over the country. Some PP leaders in Valencia and Mallorca have been given jail sentences and judicial investigations have concluded the party's treasurer, Luis Bárcenas, handed out envelopes of cash to PP senior leaders from clandestine donations. Mr. Bárcenas has been in prison since June 2013 over bank accounts in Switzerland and other countries that totalled at least 47 million euros. Mr. Rajoy has denied the accusations of PP illegal financing and assumed no political responsibility for the scandal.

It is against this backdrop of pervasive political corruption in Spain and Catalonia that Jordi Pujol's recent admission of tax fraud has to be understood. Both CDC and PP have wrapped themselves in their respective national flags, while illegally financing their parties, according to judicial investigations. Both CDC and PP have claimed to have the solution for the Catalan question, but their leaders have hidden millions in Swiss bank accounts. The Pujol family wrongdoings could end the moral superiority the Catalanist right has often proclaimed vis-à-vis Spanish governments. Yet Catalanist corruption is unlikely to affect those who believe that independence would change everything in Catalonia, including political elite's systematic public funds appropriation and money laundering.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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