Generic Brief: Catalonia

By Chris Jeub

***Resolved: Spain should grant Catalonia its independence.***

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This is a generic brief that pulls together current news items on Catalonia independence. Use these pieces to begin your research into the issue and as warrants for your claims in upcoming debate rounds.

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Catalan October 1 Uprising

Spain cracked down on Catalonia

Raphael Minder and Ellen Barry (reported from Barcelona, and Palko Karasz from Tarragona, Spain. Silvia Taulés and Marta Arias contributed reporting from Barcelona, and Germán Aranda from Berga, Spain). “Catalonia’s Independence Vote Descends Into Chaos and Clashes.” New York Times, October 1, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/01/world/europe/catalonia-independence-referendum.html>

BARCELONA, Spain — Catalonia’s defiant attempt to stage an independence referendum descended into chaos on Sunday, with hundreds injured in clashes with police in one of the gravest tests of Spain’s democracy since the end of the Franco dictatorship in the 1970s. National police officers in riot gear, sent by the central government in Madrid from other parts of Spain, used rubber bullets and truncheons in some places as they fanned out across Catalonia, the restive northeastern region, to shut down polling stations and seize ballot boxes. The clashes quickly spoiled what had been a festive, if expectant, atmosphere among voters, many of whom had camped inside polling stations and stayed on into late Sunday night, fearful that officers might seize ballot boxes.

Crackdown confirmed no clear winner

Raphael Minder and Ellen Barry (reported from Barcelona, and Palko Karasz from Tarragona, Spain. Silvia Taulés and Marta Arias contributed reporting from Barcelona, and Germán Aranda from Berga, Spain). “Catalonia’s Independence Vote Descends Into Chaos and Clashes.” New York Times, October 1, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/01/world/europe/catalonia-independence-referendum.html>

By the day’s end, both sides were claiming victory. Voting went ahead in many towns and cities, with men and women, young and old, singing and chanting as they lined up for hours to cast ballots. Just after midnight, the Catalan government said that the referendum had been approved by 90 percent of some 2.3 million voters. Those figures could not be independently confirmed. The Spanish government declared that the referendum had been disrupted. More than 750 people were injured in the crackdown, Catalan officials said, while dozens of Spanish police officers were hurt, according to Spain’s interior ministry. The day’s events left nothing clear except that the clashes over the status of the region — Spain’s economic powerhouse, where yearnings for a separate nation have ebbed and flowed for generations — had left supporters on both sides more hardened and polarized than before.

Spanish national police crackdown

“Hundreds injured as Spain cracks down on Catalan referendum.” CNN, October 1, 2017. <http://www.cnn.com/2017/10/01/europe/catalonia-spain-independence-referendum-vote/index.html>

Spanish national police launched a widespread crackdown on Catalonia's disputed independence referendum Sunday, raiding polling stations and firing rubber bullets in a concerted attempt to deny the vote legitimacy. In scenes that reverberated around Spain, riot police smashed their way into some polling locations and beat back voters with batons as they attempted to take part in the referendum. Regional officials said more than 800 people were injured.

Spain: Referendum is a “farce”

“Hundreds injured as Spain cracks down on Catalan referendum.” CNN, October 1, 2017. <http://www.cnn.com/2017/10/01/europe/catalonia-spain-independence-referendum-vote/index.html>

The national government is implacably opposed to any breakaway moves by the northeastern region. Spanish Deputy Prime Minister Soraya Sáenz de Santamaría blamed the violence on the "crazy rush" of the Catalan regional government to hold the "unconstitutional" vote. "The referendum couldn't be held, and it's not been held. To carry on with this farce makes no sense, it doesn't lead anywhere," she said in a news conference in Madrid on Sunday. The Spanish Interior Ministry said authorities closed 92 of about 2,300 polling stations. Catalonian officers said police had closed 319 stations. Defending the national police actions, Saenz de Santamaria said their objective had been to seize material associated with the referendum and not to target Catalans.

Catalans voted 90% in favor of independence

Sam Jones. “Catalan referendum: preliminary results show 90% in favour of independence.” The Guardian, October 1, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/01/dozens-injured-as-riot-police-storm-catalan-ref-polling-stations>

Catalan officials have claimed that preliminary results of its referendum have shown 90% in favour of independence in the vote vehemently opposed by Spain. Jordi Turull, the Catalan regional government spokesman, told reporters early on Monday morning that 90% of the 2.26 million Catalans who voted Sunday chose yes. He said nearly 8% of voters rejected independence and the rest of the ballots were blank or void. He said 15,000 votes were still being counted. The region has 5.3 million registered voters. Turull said the number of ballots did not include those confiscated by Spanish police during violent raids which resulted in hundreds of people being injured. At least 844 people and 33 police were reported to have been hurt, including at least two people who were thought to have been seriously injured.

PRO: Catalonia Independence

Violence is the fault of Rajoy government

Raphael Minder and Ellen Barry (reported from Barcelona, and Palko Karasz from Tarragona, Spain. Silvia Taulés and Marta Arias contributed reporting from Barcelona, and Germán Aranda from Berga, Spain). “Catalonia’s Independence Vote Descends Into Chaos and Clashes.” New York Times, October 1, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/01/world/europe/catalonia-independence-referendum.html>

Proponents of the referendum immediately pointed to the heavy use of police force as a blight not only on Mr. Rajoy’s conservative government, but also on Spain’s still relatively young democracy. “The image of the Spanish state has reached levels of shame that will stay with them forever,” the leader of Catalonia, Carles Puigdemont, told a crowd in the town of Sant Julià de Ramis, the scene of clashes. “Today, the Spanish state has lost a lot more than it had already lost, and Catalan citizens have won a lot more than they had won until now,” he said. He and other Catalan authorities maintained that balloting had proceeded in most of the polling stations and seemed determined to use the vote as further evidence of the legitimacy of their claim for a separate nation.

Catalan support for independence is rising

PAUL PRESTON Paul Preston (director of the Cañada Blanch Centre for Contemporary Spanish Studies at the London School of Economics). “The scars of Catalonia: How a century of mistrust and political incompetence fuelled a secession crisis that could lead to the break-up of Spain.” New Statesman, December 3, 2017. <https://www.newstatesman.com/world/europe/2017/12/scars-catalonia>

The start of the economic crisis together with the constitutional court decision resulted in the support for full independence increasing to 25 per cent and the return to power of Convergència in the elections of November 2010, now under the leadership of the suave economist Artur Mas. By 2011, that figure had risen to 46 per cent, although it had begun to drop as talk of outright secession increased. The fall in support for independence was reversed when the PP won a landslide victory in the Spanish general election of November 2011. Under pressure from younger radical nationalists, Mas held an independence referendum in November 2014. Madrid declared the process illegal but did not take the kind of violent measures it later took in 2017. The turnout was 37 per cent. Although the vote in favour of independence was 81 per cent, the low turnout hardly justified Mas’s claim that it opened the way to a process of full independence.

A/T: Catalan is a selfish, rich region

PAUL PRESTON Paul Preston (director of the Cañada Blanch Centre for Contemporary Spanish Studies at the London School of Economics). “The scars of Catalonia: How a century of mistrust and political incompetence fuelled a secession crisis that could lead to the break-up of Spain.” New Statesman, December 3, 2017. <https://www.newstatesman.com/world/europe/2017/12/scars-catalonia>

In the rest of Spain, the Catalan desire for greater autonomy or even full independence has been denounced as the selfishness of a rich region trying to keep its wealth to itself. This is not entirely true. Indeed, it could be argued that the greatest beneficiary of Spain’s economic development over the past 25 years has been Madrid. In 1983, Catalonia had the second-highest GDP of Spanish regions; by 2010, it had dropped to fourth place. With 16 per cent of the Spanish population, Catalonia provides 21 per cent of the national tax revenue. Catalonia receives around 66 per cent of the national average of state funding to the regions, and only 8 per cent of overall government investment.

The Catalan conflict could have been avoided

PAUL PRESTON Paul Preston (director of the Cañada Blanch Centre for Contemporary Spanish Studies at the London School of Economics). “The scars of Catalonia: How a century of mistrust and political incompetence fuelled a secession crisis that could lead to the break-up of Spain.” New Statesman, December 3, 2017. <https://www.newstatesman.com/world/europe/2017/12/scars-catalonia>

The disaster that ensued could so easily have been avoided. Although Rajoy legitimately insisted that the constitution did not permit a referendum on autonomy, he spoke as if the constitution were carved in stone rather than written on paper and open to amendment. Instead, he might have suggested that a consultative procedure, if it got a certain majority (say, 60 per cent) on a turnout of at least 70 per cent, could open the way to serious talks about the original 2006 autonomy statute. This would almost certainly have boosted the large numbers of citizens of Catalonia, already a majority, who do not want separation from Spain. They, unlike the supporters of the CUP who look forward to the collapse of capitalism, are concerned that a new, sovereign Catalan state would be confronted with huge economic problems as well as the virtual impossibility of reintegrating into the EU, where it would face the certain veto of Spain and probably of France, Italy and Belgium, too. Yet, happy to draw attention away from his party’s difficulties, Rajoy chose to combat the independence referendum of 1 October with the brutal intervention of the 10,000 officers of the Spanish police and civil guard sent to Catalonia from other parts of Spain, cheered off in some places by locals waving Spanish flags and, on occasion, chanting, “Go get them!” The firing of rubber bullets, the smashing up of polling stations and the violent mistreatment of women and old people evoked memories of the Franco dictatorship. The assertions by Rajoy and others of his government that these violations of human rights were “proportionate” – claims echoed by Juan Carlos’s son, King Felipe VI – have marked a return to the past. Hundreds of Catalans were beaten, including several who had intended to vote to remain in Spain. It is as if Rajoy was unaware of a pattern in the past century of Spain’s history: Catalan separatism feeds off Madrid’s centralist intransigence.

CON: Catalonia Should Remain With Spain

Catalonia split from Spain has significant consequences for both sides

“Here’s how bad economically a Spain-Catalonia split could really be.” CNBC, September 21, 2017. <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/09/21/heres-how-bad-economically-a-spain-catalonia-split-could-really-be.html>

A split between Spain and Catalonia would cause a major political shake-up in the country but would also have significant consequences for the economy of both sides, experts have told CNBC. Police fired rubber bullets, wrestled protesters, smashed doorways and carted off ballot boxes in several parts of Barcelona on Sunday, as long lines of people voted in an independence referendum that could radically reshape politics across a divided region. Pro-independence lawmakers hope the northeastern region will gain complete political and economic autonomy from Spain despite the referendum putting Catalonia in open defiance of central authorities in Madrid. As the most prosperous of Spain's 17 regions, Catalonia houses roughly 19 percent of Spain's economy, benefiting from tourism, exports, manufacturing, and industry. Catalonia has talked of separation from Spain since the founding of Estat Català – a political movement which began in 1922 - and throughout the 36-year dictatorship of Franco, however, the resurgence of the pro-secession movement over the past few years is due primarily to Spain's economic woes, a 2010 constitutional court decision to lessen Catalonia's sovereignty, and a distrust of Madrid or the centralized Spanish government. Amid discussions of Scotland's own relationship to the European Union after Brexit, questions have arisen on the economic implications of a Catalonia-Spain split. Here, CNBC investigates the implications if the two areas divide.

More demands for independence would follow

Victor Harel (former Israeli ambassador to Spain). "Why an Independent Catalonia Would Be a Huge Mistake." HAARETZ, October 27, 2017. <https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/europe/1.815155>

The heads of the European Union vehemently oppose letting a “Catalan State” join the union. Such a move not only contradicts the essence and purpose of the EU; it would also open the door to a flood of demands for independence across the continent.

Split demoralizes the democratic framework

Nacho Martin Blanco (journalist, political scientist and a Professor at the Abat Oliba CEU University of Barcelona). "The case against Catalan secession." Al Jazeera, September 1, 2017. <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2017/07/case-catalan-secession-170728105819426.html>

Perhaps the most tragic and lasting consequence of this political moment is the effect this is having on public opinion, eroding the idea of the state and the rule of law within a democratic framework that guarantees our individual rights and freedoms. After five years of continuous invective spewed by pro-independence politicians and commentators against the Spanish Constitution of 1978, this sort of depressing antisystemic discourse that would revile our hard-won democratic gains is not only becoming tolerated, but normalised. It is bad enough that nationalist leaders have managed to normalise a disdain for the rules of our democratic, constitutional system. But what is worse is that they have managed to do it from within the very institutions of the system that they so scorn. To those who would constantly try to caricature Spain as being a nation of "low democratic quality", it is worth pointing to The Economist's Democracy Index, which in 2016 grouped Spain once again among "full democracies", akin to Germany or the United Kingdom.

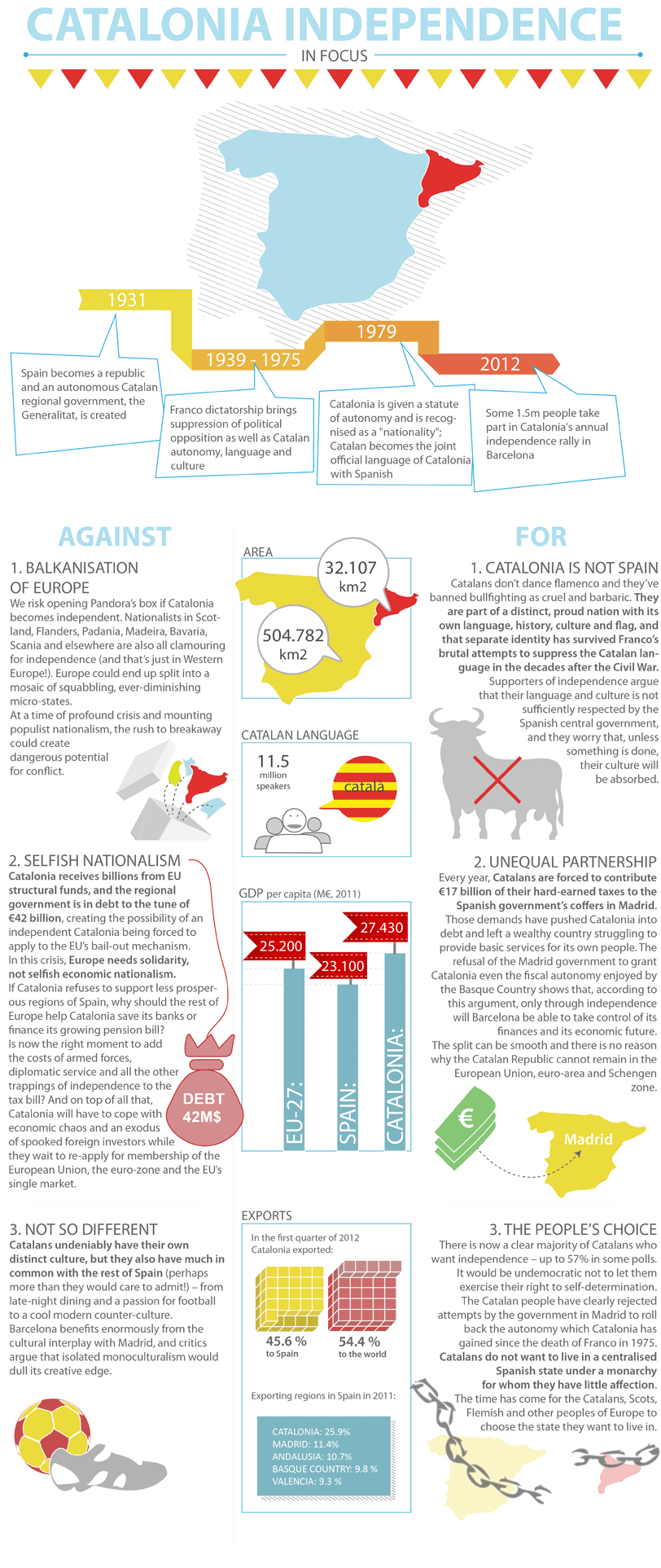
Less than half Catalans support split

Nacho Martin Blanco (journalist, political scientist and a Professor at the Abat Oliba CEU University of Barcelona). "The case against Catalan secession." Al Jazeera, September 1, 2017. <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2017/07/case-catalan-secession-170728105819426.html>

It is worth remembering that the nationalists are launching their challenge when they do not have the support of even half of Catalans. They know that the timing and political circumstances are against them; according to all the opinion polls, support for independence, which reached its peak at the end of 2014, has only decreased since then, coinciding with an improvement in citizens' perceptions of the economy. With good reason, the rise in support for independence coincided at the time with the worst point of the economic crisis, which hit Spain particularly hard. Instead of recognising that their electoral growth had much to do with the uncertainty and social unrest resulting from the crisis, the separatists endeavoured to prove that this progress was because the Catalan people had finally understood their "manifest destiny": separation, because "Spain doesn't care about us", "They're robbing us", "They're treating us badly", "They don't let us vote". This is the creed the nationalists have been preaching for years, notwithstanding the ominous consequences of their discourse for coexistence between Catalans, and between them and the rest of the Spanish people. The nationalists, set on confrontation with Madrid, have no interest in exploring moderate or compromising solutions. In order to hasten independence, they insist on presenting Catalonia and Spain as two opposing phenomena and they are not prepared to accept the plurality of Catalan society, of the citizens of Catalonia, the vast majority of whom feel as much Catalan as Spanish and need not renounce one or the other.

Pro/Con Infographic

“Arguments for and against Catalonia independence.” Debating Europe, accessed December 8, 2017. <http://www.debatingeurope.eu/focus/independence-catalonia/#.WisYvrQ-fUK>



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