

# CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF SECURITY AND DEVELOPMENT

## POLICY PAPERS

### How Catalan's Independence Leader Failed by Design

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Catalonia unilaterally declared independence from Spain on October 27, and with that, the fate of the European Union was briefly, once again, put in jeopardy. Since then, the international community, including Canada, the US, UK, Germany, and France, have all come forward to call for Spanish unity and quash the separatist tide.

The Spanish Constitutional Court has ruled the results of the October 1 secession referendum illegal. In response, the Spanish Senate triggered Article 155 of the Constitution, which effectively gave Madrid direct rule over the region of Catalonia. Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy then dissolved the Catalan Parliament and installed a caretaker government under the leadership of vice-premier Soraya de Santamaria before calling snap regional elections for December 21.

Nationalist sentiment in Catalonia has brewed consistently since 2010, when the Rajoy government stripped Catalonia of several statutory privileges that had been in place since 2006. The 2006 Statute of Autonomy formally recognized Catalonia as a "nation", lessened the distortionary effects of the Spanish tax code, and legitimized the political institutions of the self-governing Catalan region.

Last Friday, Spanish authorities issued a European Arrest Warrant (EAW) for the exiled Catalanian President, Carles Puigdemont. For nearly two weeks, the ousted separatist leader sought asylum in Brussels before turning himself in to Belgian police on November 4 to face charges of rebellion, sedition, and embezzlement of public funds. He was subsequently released from jail after forfeiting his passport.

It is now up to Belgian courts to decide whether Spain's arrest warrant is to be acted upon. Under the EAW Framework Decision, there are several grounds on which the host country may reject the arrest warrant; among them is the reasonable belief that the accused will be denied a fair trial. Mr. Puigdemont insists that the Spanish courts are heavily politicized. Now he awaits a judge's decision on whether his claim holds merit.

Though Puigdemont's fate rests in the hands of Belgian courts, Catalonia's quest for sovereignty is far from imperiled. This is owing largely to Puigdemont's brilliantly executed campaign. Perhaps his most effective tactic is the making of his martyrdom. With his exile, Puigdemont has signaled that he is willing to risk persecution for the sake of his long-sought Catalan Republic. And

now, with his arrest, he has become the figurehead around which Catalan nationalists will rally in the lead up to the upcoming regional elections on December 21.

Puigdemont's second success was in baiting Madrid's security forces into further grating the bonds of solidarity binding Catalonia to Spain. On referendum day, Catalonia experienced a level of state repression and police brutality unseen for decades. He ensured that every act of police brutality ended up on the media. This played into a rule that the separatists knew well: that more and more Catalans will follow their elected leaders if they perceive their country as being under attack.

Spain's actions are permanent. Rajoy cannot reverse his decision to send in Spanish police to forcefully remove ballot boxes, he cannot remove the videos of battered, defenseless women, of first responders protecting citizens from assault. Those images will remain with the Catalan people forever. Although the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, has expressed concern for Spain's use of force it is unlikely that we will see a formal denunciation much less any sort of international pressure to amend for their actions.

With the October 1 crackdowns fresh in their memory, independence has become the only reasonable option for many Catalonians—who could possibly stand for sharing a country with authorities so willing to resort to violence against their own people? The developments of October 1 have done well to put pressure on the more “neutral” actors in Catalan society to take sides on the issue, such as Barcelona Mayor Ada Colau and the Mossos d'Esquadra, Catalonia's regional police force.

Further, the Puigdemont's administration was successful in encouraging financial instability that may ultimately damper Spain's resistance efforts. Stationing security personnel in Catalonia is a resource-intensive affair that will quickly wear on the coffers of the Spanish state.

Public finances are already precarious in several other EU member states, and Eurozone policy mechanisms are largely unprepared to respond effectively to another financial crisis. If Spain is afflicted by a recession due to the separatist tide, there is a possibility of a snowball effect as it extends into Portugal and the Iberian Peninsula.

Markets detest uncertainty, and there is nothing sure about an independence movement. The last month has seen major Spanish multinationals such as Caixa Bank and Banco Sabadell announce their headquarters relocating out of Barcelona, and a Bank of Spain report warning of an impending recession in Catalonia. Sovereignty crises are followed downstream by economic crises, which spells a dismal future for the integrated Europeans who ultimately will be left to pay the price.

The entire project of European integration could be reversed if more constituent nations find themselves conflicted by separatist forces. One should look no further than the Scots, Bavarians, Kosovars, and Flemish that have each launched their own campaigns with varying degrees of success. Given how tightly bound Europe's political and economic union is, it stands to reason that any successful nationalist movement may pull the thread that causes its unravelling. For this reason,

expect European officials in Brussels and Frankfurt to stand firmly by the Rajoy Administration as they prepare for December's regional elections.

On Wednesday, the Spanish Foreign Minister, Alfonso Dastis, announced that a future vote on independence may be allowed if held in compliance with the Spanish Constitution. And with this, the gears are already set in motion for future independence movements. Puigdemont's struggle is thus far from over, which, although stalled, has been executed to perfection.

Since his taking office in January 2016, Puigdemont has masterfully ingrained the idea of the Catalan Republic in the collective consciousness. But in today's Europe, there is much more to lose than sovereignty alone. Snap elections have been called for December 21. All of Europe will watch closely until then.