

CATALONIA, SPAIN AND THE EUROPEAN UNION: A QUEST FOR LEGITIMACY

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Abstract. The regional government of the autonomous region of Catalonia and the central government of Spain have started a public conflict in recent years. The situation, originally domestic, has spread internationally in an effort of the regional government to attract external support to their political claims. The EU has become the object of desire of both contenders seeking international legitimacy for their actions. The current research aims to clarify the three-way relations and tries to establish the truth about the different positions held in this conflict.

Keywords: EU-Catalonia, EU-Spain, European nationalism, integration and disintegration

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1. Introduction

The formation of Spain dates from the fifteenth century when the kingdoms of Castile and Aragon (including the county of Catalonia) united through marriage, the subsequent conquest of the southern kingdom of Granada and the absorption of Navarra. The resulting kingdom, Spain, maintained the original institutions and laws of the different territories it entailed, including the singularity of Catalonia. In parallel, the new Spanish kingdom made use of soldiers, logistics and economic resources in different campaigns in Italy and northern Africa, supporting Catalonia's traditional expansion in the Mediterranean. It was a union of interests that benefited all, despite the fact that the greatest burden rested on Castile, a region of Spain that was simultaneously involved in other European conflicts and in the colonization of America.

Nevertheless, the inability of the Spanish Empire to face multiple challenges with the exhausted resources of Castile, led to a change in 1626 under the Conde-Duque de Olivares, favourite of King Phillip IV of Spain, and the de facto governor of the country. His reforms aimed to unify the war efforts of all the territories of the Crown in order to deal with the various existing conflict fronts. As a result, there was an insurrection in Portugal and Catalonia, prioritizing the government to recover Catalonia in a military campaign in the context of a wider conflict, the war between Spain and France for the hegemony of Europe. The Catalonian oligarchs, reluctant to resolve the conflict with the Spanish King, sought the support of France, in a clear attempt to make the conflict international. The Catalonian regional institutions asked support from France in their rebellion and accepted Louis XIII as king of Catalonia. The international support of France meant the occupation of Catalonia by France and its subjugation to the French law. The final recovery of the territory by the Spanish King was incomplete as France annexed in 1659 the Catalonian territories beyond the Pyrenees, the Roussillon, still today known as French Catalonia or northern Catalonia (Elliot 2003).

A new dynasty, the Borbón-Anjou, installed on the Spanish throne in 1700, initiated a new policy eliminating the regional differences of the kingdom (*decretos de nueva planta*) following the French model of uniting the territories under a common structure, fostering centralization and empowering the state. The country was affected by a civil war between the supporters of new and old dynasties. Catalonia and other territories of the Kingdom of Aragon supported the Austrian candidate and looked for international support of the United Kingdom (UK). The British partially supported them in the context of a wider conflict for the European hegemony between France and the UK. The international circumstances determined the end of the conflict and the settlement of the Bourbons in Spain. The peace treaty meant that Menorca, Gibraltar and all the European territories were lost for the Spanish kingdom in favour of British and other European powers (Gutiérrez 2016).

The French revolution and the expansion under the leadership of Napoleon also affected Catalonia. The occupation of Spain by the French troops and the plan of the emperor annexing all the territories beyond the Pyrenees up to the river Ebro (including vast parts of Catalonia) found a great opposition by an immense majority of the population. The Spanish Independence War presented a different pattern than previous occasions. A European power tried to use the Spanish regional differences for its benefit, but surprisingly the Spanish society remained cohesive and the French were finally defeated. This internationalization was fostered from outside and did not germinate inside the country (Álvarez-Junco 2013).

Social peace regarding internal cultural differences lasted in Spain until the 20th century. The country became a republic in 1931 and the internal situation degenerated with constant conflicts based on ideology and economic reasons. The Spanish Republic bestowed vast autonomy to the regions, especially to Catalonia, but could not properly address the territorial challenges and Catalonia proclaimed its independence in 1934. The Spanish army solved the situation with a proportional and minimally violent intervention. Nevertheless, the internal confrontation in Spain led

to a civil war in 1936 that practically collapsed the central government. Catalanian nationalists, nominally still a part of the Republic, behaved as an independent territory without coordination with the central government. The lack of Catalanian commitment with the Republic, among other factors, meant the imposition of a dictatorship in Catalonia and the rest of Spain for almost four decades. Nevertheless, during the conflict, Catalanian government tried to obtain international support for a Catalan democracy against a fascist Spanish aggression. The internationalization of the conflict failed because of the internal radicalization of Spain would have probably led to the imposition of a communist regime if the rebels were defeated. The supporters of the Catalanian government tried to use the international context of confrontation between Western democracies and dictatorial powers, but their hopes were useless and the external support never arrived except the Soviet Union's poor-quality sustenance. The Spanish Civil War entailed a great number of conflicts besides the territorial tensions, such as the fight inside Catalonia between the supporters of Trotsky and Stalin, the fight against the Church, the anarchists were also relevant in Catalonia, fight in the countryside between peasants and landowners, and among all of them Catalanian nationalism against Spain (Both, Republic and Monarchy). The confusion evolved to chaos and the rebels finally occupied Catalonia (Abengózar 2020).

The dictatorship of General Franco lasted until 1975 when he passed away and Spain became a democracy with a federal structure where the regions had a great deal of autonomy. Nonetheless, the regional government of Catalonia aimed for the independence after exhausting the state transfers of sovereignty allowed by the Spanish Constitution. The main hope for achieving their own Catalanian state, as the first step to build a Catalan state (including all the Catalans, not just the population of Catalonia) was the internationalization of the conflict, creating a scenario where Spain would be forced to accept the independence demands by the pressure of the international community. The European Union (EU) became the major object of desire for those supporting the independence of Catalonia, the shield protecting their goals from the interference of the Spanish government (Recio 2010). Therefore, the regional government of Catalonia launched a new internationalization campaign targeting the EU and other European institutions, such as the Council of Europe.

2. Catalan nationalism and Europe, a feeling of superiority

The Catalan nationalism is based on cultural, rather than ethnic aspects. It supports the claim for an independent state with the idea of greater benefits for the society. The Catalan nation (understanding those who share similar cultural standards, as a common language) goes beyond the territorial borders of the region of Catalonia, as there are Catalans in other regions of Spain, as Aragon, Mallorca and Valencia, in Southern France, Roussillon, and the Italian island of Sardinia. Nevertheless, so far, the movement for a national state includes just the region of Catalonia as a first step to encompass all Catalans living in other regions (Boyer

2004). As all other nationalisms, the idea of superiority and singularity is imbued in the social consciousness of the movement. The idea of pre-eminence is extreme in some cases, reaching irrational levels. The president of the autonomous region of Catalonia in 2020, Quim Torra, compared Spanish with beasts in an article (EL MÓN). The examples of these exacerbated nationalists are notorious and public, including academicians, as the controversial British historian Tony Judt, who claimed that Catalans were European because of their similarity to other regions of Europe. According to Judt, Catalans paid their taxes, they were better educated, and they had a work ethic and industriousness. Characteristics that other regions of Spain did not share, regions to which Catalans were forced to subsidize, having little weight in the decision-making of the Spanish government (Judt 1996). Vicens Vives emphasised that the main difference between Catalans and the rest of the Spanish resides in the European character of the Catalans and the southern essence of the Spanish (Vives 1954). Both communities could not share the same institutional framework because their spirit was different, European versus Mediterranean. Daniel Cardona i Civit, active Catalan nationalist in the first half of the 20th century, and honoured as a hero by current nationalist politicians in Catalonia, defended the idea of the Spanish as an inferior group degraded in clear evolution towards the African-Semitic racial component in contraposition to the European Catalans (Rubiralta 2008). Catalonia was Europe and the rest of Spain Africa. Therefore, Catalans were superior but were trapped in the Spanish state.

This cultural identification of the Catalan nationalism and Europe is based on supremacist ideas and was partially accepted by the Spanish themselves, by the general dejection after the decline of the Empire and the expansion of the Spanish Black Legend. The northern rivals of the Spanish Empire, mainly Dutch and English, attempted demonizing the Spanish, its people and culture, minimizing Spanish discoveries and achievements, and countering its influence and power in world affairs. The Spanish internalized it, a propaganda action in the context of an international conflict for world hegemony, as a reality (Kagan 2018). The Empire partially collapsed, and the socio-economic development was lower than in the United Kingdom or France. Consequently, a complex of inferiority spread into the Spanish society as the international influence of the country declined definitely in 1898 after the defeat against the United States of America (USA) in the Cuban War (Unamuno 2017).

Nevertheless, the suggested Spanish barbarism and its tendency to underdevelopment lacks any scientific or logical sustenance. Even though Spanish foreign power declined gradually, but inexorably, Spain still kept an avant-garde spirit in many other fields, catching up with the rest of Europe. In that respect, the Institute of New History of Catalonia (Institut Nova Història 2020), is reproducing the strategy belittling Spain for achieving greater international credibility for their idealized Catalonia and their independence project. Outstanding Spanish historical events or characters are assimilated in a clumsy historical manipulation. It is an attempt to emphasise the superiority of Catalonia over the rest of Spain. Miguel Cervantes, Hernán Cortés, Francisco Pizarro, Diego de Almagro, Elcano, and even such

international characters as Leonardo Da Vinci, Erasmus of Rotterdam, Ferdinand Magellan or Christopher Columbus are all redefined as Catalans. This process presents a dual objective: to make evident the Catalan superiority over the rest of the country, and the Spanish oppression that has hidden the outstanding history of Catalonia to dominate the area. These actions would be somewhat anecdotal, but the autonomous government of Catalonia is financing this misrepresentation of history, a clear attempt of reinforcing the European essence of Catalonia and the non-European spirit of the rest of Spain.

The Catalan nationalists have set their differentiation in their European character, in contrast with other Spanish, closer to other kind of Europe, the southern underdeveloped borders of the continent half way between Europe and Africa. Following this logic, Catalonia should not be part of Spain, because as they are Europeans, they would be better accommodated in Europe.

The spiritual roots of the idea of Europe resides in ancient Greece, as the cradle of democracy versus Asian autocracy. The identification of Catalonia with Europe and the rest of Spain with Africa implies the Catalonian respect for democracy and the Spanish inability to implement a functioning democratic system. It adds one more argument to the pretension of Europe saving Catalonia from Spain, saving one of their kind versus an alien force, saving something precious for Europe, democracy.

From a more pragmatic approach, Catalans, understood as Europeans as opposed to the Spanish, identified with a dark border area not belonging to Europe, are better managers. Therefore, the independence is a necessity to implement an efficient system, similar to those of Europe, increasing the quality of life of all the citizens of Catalonia (Serrano 2015).

The idea of Catalonia as part of Europe in contraposition to Spain was very important in the ideological premises presented to the people of Catalonia by the supporters of the independence in the last decades. They publicly claimed that the European Union would lobby Spain to accept the independence of Catalonia. The EU also would accept automatically the new state of Catalonia inside of the European Union as a member because of sentimental reasons, feelings based on a common identity, a sense of Europeanness that was above legal or political aspects. Therefore, Europe became the object of desire for the nationalist movement in Catalonia, the place where first, hopes, and after frustrations, are stored.

3. Catalan nationalism and Spain in the 21st century

Spain entered the 21st century with a functional federal system including a special sensibility for those territories claiming singularity. Therefore, Catalonia currently enjoys a high level of autonomy in the frame of the Spanish constitution. Nevertheless, it was not enough and during decades, the Catalonian politicians obtained greater transfers of sovereignty from the central government of Spain, in a constant flow favoured by their pivotal role in the Spanish parliament, including aspects of economy, finance, infrastructures, housing, environment, work, health system, social aspects,

education, culture, sport, administration, justice and public security, including the management of prisons and their own police force (Leon 2018).

This political system reveals a great respect for the distinctiveness of Catalonia compared with other European states entailing territories inhabited by Catalans, such as France (Roussillon) or Italy (Sardinia). It does not mean more democracy or effectiveness, but with higher sensibility for Catalan nationalism claims.

In parallel, the Spanish state shares a great deal of sovereignty in the European level. The popularity of the European Union is generally high in Spain and the EU enjoys approval among most of Spanish citizens. It explains the lack of Eurosceptic political parties in the country, as even the populist far right and the communist/far left are cautious and mild in their criticism of the Union. The prestige of the EU in Spain has two differentiated sources, the benefits in terms of modernization, including economic development, and the normalization of the external relations of Spain after the long international isolation during the dictatorship of General Franco (Troitino 2017).

Therefore, the Spanish state has to normalize its internal system with a federal strategy, and its external relations via a European communalisation of relevant policies. These multilevel reforms make the independence of Catalonia, aimed by local nationalist, impossible, as they discard any claim of discrimination, breach of human rights or any other requisite accepted by United Nations, and decrease the possibilities of internationalization of the conflict as the country is a full member of the European Union.

Nevertheless, the constant transfer of sovereignty from the central government to the regional powers did not satisfy the ambitions of the nationalists who aimed for the creation of their own national state based on the national concept of a united community. The idea of Catalonia managing better the problems of the citizens, regardless of globalization, is a constant in the arguments grounded on emotional perceptions rather than analytical solutions. The crisis of coronavirus brings it out clearly, as the acting president of Catalanian regional government, Torra, blamed the Spanish government of the expansion of coronavirus to Catalonia and presented pseudoscientific reports, without any academic credibility, proving that Catalonia alone would have fought more effectively against the virus. Clara Ponsatí, previous member of the Catalanian autonomous government and current member of the European Parliament, asked also for the complete isolation of Madrid from the rest of the country, criticizing the actions of the Spanish government, accusing Spain of spreading the virus to Catalonia, and tweeting jokes about the dead in Madrid (El Nacional 2020).

The confrontation has reached a high level of intolerance, fostered by the frustration generated by the impossibility of building a Catalanian state in the frame of the democratic Constitution of the country. Spanish national politics are blockaded by the confrontation and the democratic legal system that prevents the creation of a Catalanian state unilaterally. Therefore, the internationalization of the independence process, with the European Union as the main object of desire, is the only solution for the Catalanian nationalist.

4. Conceptual dysergy between Catalan nationalists and the European Union basis

The genesis of the European Union is a consequence of the confrontations between Europeans; especially those conflicts inducted by France and Germany, arch enemies with a great drag force involving other European states in their battles. The expansion of nationalism during the 19th century, and its control over the political structures, influenced negatively the cohabitation in Europe.

Nationalism is the most effective instrument providing cohesion to a society because it is based on feelings of identity, on irrational reasoning, an emotional manipulation of the past, present and future, factors easily shaped by the authorities that guarantee the loyalty to the political structures. Nationalism increases the loyalty of the members of the society and facilitates the functional capacity of the state, including a higher level of social cohesion and solidarity between its members. Nevertheless, nationalism has imbued a notion of superiority over other groups that ignites conflicts. Contemporaries perceived the great conflicts of the 20th century in Europe, WWI and WWII, as nationalistic conflicts, forces fighting for the supremacy deserved because of their national superiority (Greenfeld 2005).

A leading politician and highbrow theorist who lived through both conflicts, Altiero Spinelli, clearly pointed out nationalism as responsible for the slaughter. His intellectual work emphasized the necessity of a new model of society in order to avoid further conflicts, applying for a new socio-political model based on the concept of citizenship. Spinelli, leading federalist, included by the EU in the list of the fathers of Europe, defended the separation of cultural and political aspects in the organization of Europe. Nationalism as a cultural concept is based on similar features of a cultural community. However, it cannot homogenise all the members of a wider idea of European society. Moreover, nationalism accessing political tools paved the bellicose relations between Europeans as it provides the necessary tools for forcefully implementing the national superiority. Therefore, he defended the idea that the participation in the society should change from nationality, cultural aspects, to citizenship, political rights and duties regardless the cultural group (Spinelli 1960).

Many other influential actors involved in the European integration process, such as Jean Monnet, believed in the idea of Rousseau as for sharing the freedom in a community, the sovereignty (Troitino 2017). The controversy lies in to whom the individuals yielded their freedom for a common management, to the state, as a political actor, or to the nation, as a cultural community. Jean Monnet, the main architect of the EU institutional framework and the most influential person in the creation, implementation and development of the European Community, promoted the idea of sharing sovereignty beyond the nations and states, in a supranational level. The concept of separating politics and nationalism in a peace system is part of the essence of the current European Union, sharing sovereignty on a higher level of a community united by politics without a common or predominant national group (Fransen 2001).

Although the negative vision of political nationalism was practically unanimous in the post-WWII years, especially in Germany, France and Italy, not all the European states shared this vision. It is especially relevant in the case of the United Kingdom, a country that found a way of uniting its people by nationalism in perilous times facing the Nazi threat. The fabulous rhetoric of Winston Churchill addressing the British expressed nationalistic sentiments (Churchill 1974) and was very effective uniting the British against an external enemy. It gave cohesion to the society and loyalty of the citizens in a moment of great danger. Therefore, political nationalism is understood in the UK, even at the present time, as a benign force to face the main challenge of the society. It is one of the reasons explaining a higher support to the Catalan independence movement in the UK than in the rest of Europe. Although British identity is based on different layers, as English, Scottish, Welsh and northern Irish, as the Spanish is built up on the different regional singularities. Nevertheless, this is not relevant for the EU involvement in the conflict, as Brexit meant the British withdrawal from the European organization.

The aseptic separation of nation and politics is a process still under development in the European Union, encountering fierce resistance and several deviations. Politically disarming the nations is a great challenge for the EU, as it still has not found a more effective alternative to the fundamental cohesive role of nationalism. Nevertheless, the process is still moving forward, including the idea of no discrimination because of nationality as a supporting pillar of the Union, and increasing the level of supranational sovereignty. The challenges of Europe are becoming global rather than regional, increasing the necessity to find common answers and further transfers of sovereignty on European level. In addition, the spillover effect of the European integration increases the scope of common necessities following the pattern of integration, solving the existing problems, benefits Europe but generates new problems that can be solved via deeper integration, deeper transfer of sovereignty (Hix 1999). The EU model is based on step by step construction, via steady transfers of sovereignty. It conflicts with the Catalan nationalist model based on assuming at the regional level as much responsibilities and policies, and as much sovereignty as possible. Two different models of development pulling in different directions, sharing more sovereignty in a supranational level in contrast with a model based on increasing delegation of sovereignty from a higher communality to a regional institution.

The Catalan nationalism faces other challenges regarding the EU beyond conceptual issues, as the reluctance of other members of the European Union because of their own internal composition. Nationalism, as a cohesive force of society, tends to eliminate cultural differences absorbing other groups. This assimilation has been very effective in most European states but has not been complete in many cases. States such as France include several cultural groups that could claim their own state on the same basis as the nationalist Catalan statements. Brittany, the French Basque country, French Catalonia or Corsica could dismantle the French state if the European Union would support the birth of new nation-based states in Europe. Before it could happen, the member states of the Union would probably withdraw from the

organization emptying it of content and condemning it to extinction. Jean-Claude Juncker proclaimed in the European Parliament, before handing over the baton to Ursula von der Leyen, “Let’s fight against stupid and narrow-minded nationalism. Long live Europe” (EC 2019).

A more pragmatic obstacle are the legal consequences of a hypothetical independence of Catalonia from the EU perspective, as the member of the organization is Spain. The independence will automatically mean the exclusion of Catalonia from the Union, all its policies and areas of communityization and the Common Market. Then, the new state of Catalonia should apply to join the organization, initiating the enlargement process that most probably would not encounter major technical problems, but the political obstacles would be extremely difficult to solve. According to the European Union enlargement process, any enlargement must count with the unanimous support from all the members of the organization. Therefore, if the independence is not achieved with an agreement with the rest of Spain, Catalonia will probably face the Spanish veto in the EU. Moreover, many other member states will veto Catalonia as an effective way to prevent the expansion of its national political model to the rest of the continent, affecting the internal cohesion of several member states of the EU.

Catalonian government first projected the illusion that the EU would change its rules because Catalonia was an exceptional case. It reveals that the singularity of Catalonia cannot just be applied to the Spanish constitutional frame, but in the European context as well. The unrealistic implementation of this strategy forced the independentism movement to present a proposition on the creation of a new internal mechanism of the Union. The Catalan regional government announced on December 2019 in Brussels a plan to change the legal system of the organization with the creation of a European mechanism enabling the internal enlargement of the European Union. A procedure whereby new democratically created states within the EU would continue to be part of the organization without discontinuity, avoiding any veto from any member state (La Vanguardia 2019). This reform illustrates the Catalan wishes towards the EU, but also reveals a high degree of reverie because of the impossibility to implement such reforms inside the EU without the consensus of its member states.

The regional government of Catalonia has gone even beyond, claiming for the reform of the European Union to accommodate a national Catalan state. The local minister for external action, Mireia Borrrell, presented a report with the Catalan vision of Europe based on:

- Decentralization of the European Union policies
- Inclusion in the EU legislation the right for self-determination of all the European nations
- Decrease in participation of the member states in the decision-making for a higher involvement for the regions
- Acceptance of Catalan as an official language of the EU
- Reinforce the creation of regions beyond the current political borders of the member states. (A step further for the creation of the Catalan state including all Catalans)

The dissociation between Catalan political nationalism and European supranationalism is an impossible conceptual mismatch to save by mere feelings of Europeaness and weak programmatic reforms. The application of logical standard dissemination of the consequences of a hypothetical support from the EU to the construction of a Catalan state imbues highly negative consequences for the Union, making it unlikely to happen. However, nationalism is based on feelings rather than rationality, so Catalan nationalists are still looking towards the European Union, expecting intervention.

5. Help us, Europe

The concatenation of ideas identifying Catalonia with Europe and the necessity of internationalization, led the Catalan nationalists to actively seek the support from the European Union. As briefly described in this work, any analytical or logical approach had no chance to be sustained by the EU. Therefore, the Catalanian strategy focused on feelings, on common European identity and victimhood.

The professor of comparative literature at the University of Bergamo, Daniele Giglioli, has carried out a review of modern society, describing the ideology of a victim, applicable to social movements and hence to the Catalan independentism discourse. Giglioli emphasises that any natural and fair reaction to any loss, towards those similar to us, is to tend to help, to be interested in it without the necessity of any analytical thinking. The victim is the hero of our time because being a victim grants prestige, demands listening, promises and fosters recognition, activates a powerful generator of identity, of law, of self-esteem. It also immunizes against any criticism and guarantees innocence beyond reasonable doubt, because accusing a victim of any wrongdoing is inappropriate. In this sense, the victim would be immune against any criticism (Giglioli 2017). Catalan nationalism has followed, and still does, this strategy of an ideal Catalonia, democratic, prosperous, tolerant, and open to the European ideals under the yoke of a retrograde country, Spain. The reasoning continues with the moral obligation of the European Union to interfere and save one of their own.

The accusations evolve from the primal identification of Spain as a fascist country in contrast with the democratic essence of the Catalan spirit. The Spanish state is presented as the heir of the dictatorial regime of General Franco, which after a cosmetic transformation into a pseudo-democratic regime, still kept using the fascist mechanisms discriminating Catalans.

Alternative waves of accusations emanated from the high economic performance of the region of Catalonia. The regional government started a campaign with the illustrative motto, Spain robs us, denouncing that the taxes paid by hard-working Catalans were wasted in other parts of Spain subsidising lazy workers. It denounced an unjust system of oppression. Catalan nationalists understood that the concept of solidarity could not go beyond the Catalan nation (Another source of conflict with the EU, as solidarity beyond nations and states is a fundamental principle of

the European organization). This campaign was effective for decades, but the data logic prevailed proving wrong this claim (Leguina 2014). Finally, the international unpopularity of a rich territory complaining about solidarity, united to the flagrant cases of corruption in Catalonia organized by Jordi Puyol (a prominent Catalan politician) and his family, robbing hundreds of millions of euros from Catalonia, emptied this strategy completely of content. The idea of a rich territory wanting its independence to be richer did not match the role of a victim and was turning the international opinion against the thesis of the Catalan supporters of the creation of an independent state.

The next stage in the process was the link with the so-called right to decide, where the Catalan nationalism called for an illegal referendum about the independence obviating the legal system and the Spanish constitution. Protection of democracy, the right of peaceful citizens voting and expressing their opinion was at stake and only international pressure could normalize the situation. It was presented as the last act of a process that would lead to decisive EU intervention. The mobilization of nationalist supporters following this strategy was evident with an impressive demonstration in the streets of Barcelona on 2012. The slogan of that march was meaningful enough, Catalonia, a new state in Europe.

Another initiative was the Catalan Way demonstration in 2013, an imitation of the Baltic Chain in a gross attempt to establish a dual parallelism between Catalonia and the Baltic states, Spain and the Soviet Union. The Baltic Chain was a human chain uniting Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in their claim for independence from the Soviet Union, an autocratic state that occupied these states after the end of WWII. The Baltic states claimed their wish to have their own states grounded on European principles of democracy, human rights protection and functional market economy, in opposition to the Russian soul of the Soviet Union. However, the identification fostered by the Catalan nationalists did not reach the international recognition expected and generated more frustration.

The referendum of 2017, despite not having any democratic guarantee, accelerated the propaganda looking for the European support to protect Catalans (Europeans) against Spanish barbarism and violence. The voting was made to generate conflict and show the EU how the Spanish government restricted democracy. The reality of Catalan citizens voting freely in local, regional, national and European elections was concealed, to only highlight Spain's great democratic failure for not allowing an illegal referendum under the legal system and the Constitution of the country. The politics of victimhood and manipulation prevailed over rationality and the Catalan nationalism propaganda declared Spain a dictatorial country against democratic Catalonia (Aranda 2016).

So much resource, effort and illusions were invested in this strategy by the regional government of Catalonia, focusing on the internationalization of the Catalan independence conflict with special targeting in the European Union. However, the lack of the EU support to the nationalist thesis and its respect of the Spanish democracy and legal system, provoked a great deception and frustration among the Catalan nationalist movement. The main support obtained by this strategy

came from controversial characters, as the anti-capitalist wing of the British Labour Party, other nationalist political parties from other member states, especially from Northern Italy and Flanders and self-proclaimed international champions of freedom such as Edward Snowden, Julian Assange or Yanis Varoufakis.

This minimal international wave of accessions was clearly insufficient for forcing the Spanish state to concede the independence to the region of Catalonia. The failure of the nationalist strategy generated frustration and unrest. The victimhood role evolved into a new strategy, more aggressive and looking for positive results, and the role of the EU changed from the solution to become part of the problem in just two years.

6. Shame on you, Europe

Subsequently the illegal referendum and the unilateral declaration of independence, the Catalanian regional government was disbanded. Some of its members went to prison and were tried by sedition, others, included the former president Puigdemont, escaped to other European countries.

It was a great opportunity fostering the victimhood feeling in Europe and the most effective way internationalizing the conflict. Spain, as a non-democratic state was jailing politicians because of their ideas rather than for their illegal actions. The claim of political prisoners could not be sustained because after the new regional elections in 2017, when the new elected president of Catalonia was freely a fervent nationalist supporter of the independence. In fact, all the members of the new regional government shared the same ideology. The strategy of political prisoners was actively promoted in Europe, but the political resonance was not as expected. In addition, the response from the European Union was indifferent to the Catalanian claims, respecting the judicial independence of legal system in Spain.

The frustration became anger and passive victimhood became aggressive, accusing Europe of being Spain's accomplice by default on the oppression of the Catalanian region. The campaign, shame on you, Europe, started. As the Catalanian Way imitated the Baltic Chain, this copied a campaign regarding the immigration crisis in 2016 with the motto shame on you, Europe. The appropriation of the motto clearly expressed that the EU did not react properly to the migrant crisis in 2016, neither to the Catalanian crisis in 2017, seeking to promote the feeling of guilt of Europe to make it react and support their arguments (Andreu 2019).

The former president of Catalonia and current member of the European Parliament, Carles Puigdemont, convoked a massive parade in Brussels in 2017 as a part of this campaign. According to an official estimation, about 45,000 people participated in the demonstration that was headed by a big banner with the slogan Shame on you, Europe. Similar demonstrations were also organised in Strasbourg and Perpignan. Furthermore, Puigdemont declared, in an interview for the Israeli TV, that the European Union was a decadent organization formed by obsolete countries where the economic interest predominated in a clear preference of economic stability over

(Catalonian) democracy and Spanish fascism. His critics went beyond, suggesting that people who live in Catalonia should vote about their European membership, evidencing his arguable idea that sovereignty belong to Catalonians, not to Catalans, Spanish or Europeans. Nevertheless, in the same interview he committed himself with a reformed European Union, an organization built up on nations rather than on citizens or states (ABC 2017).

It is a clear dichotomy with the European building process where the Catalanian singularity has no place. Therefore, according to Catalanian independentism the EU must reform to accommodate Catalonia and its distinctiveness, as previously did the Spanish state.

The European elections of 2019 became a new scenario for dragging the EU to the Catalanian conflict, or at least, to bring the crisis to the heart of the European institutions. Puigdemont and Toni Comin, former head of the health department, obtained a seat in the European Parliament. Their status as members of the parliament (MEP) was challenged by the Spanish authorities because both had open legal proceedings in Spain, but finally the EU tribunals ruled in their favour and they eventually became MEPs. Clara Ponsatí, former head of education in the Catalanian regional government and fugitive of the Spanish justice for the unilateral declaration of independence, was a candidate in the 2019 European Parliament elections but she did not get a seat. However, after Brexit, the departure of the English MEPs caused the incorporation of new MEPs from different countries, including Ponsatí from Spain. Therefore, three political fugitives from the Spanish justice became members of the democratic chamber of the EU. A fact used as an example of undemocratic Spain subjugating democratic Catalonia.

The Vice President of the former Catalonia government, Oriol Junqueras, was sentenced by the Supreme Court of Spain to 13 years in prison for crimes of sedition and embezzlement after he was elected MEP. The sentence also included a penalty of political disqualification for the same period. Therefore, even elected he never became MEP. Independentism uses it as an example of how the votes of the Catalonians do not count, as their representatives could not take their seats because of the Spanish repression and European indifference to human rights.

At the beginning of the process, the EU was the solution for the independence, afterwards it became part of the problem when the EU institutions, or any member state, did not support the self-proclaimed independence of Catalonia.

7. Conclusions

Catalonian supporters of independence have been very active seeking the EU backing to their thesis. Nevertheless, so far it has not managed to raise any kind of understanding of the breakaway Spanish movement. The position of the EU institutions and the member states have been very clear, declaring unanimously that it is an internal issue of Spain.

The Legal Affairs Committee of the European Parliament began on 16 November

2020 the procedures to lift the immunity of Carles Puigdemont, Toni Comín and Clara Ponsatí, a process that will not conclude until February 2021 at the earliest. All meetings of this Committee are held behind closed doors to ensure the confidentiality of the process. This circumstance paralysed the procedure for eight months due to the Covid-19 restrictions, until a decision of the Parliament's legal services at the end of October endorsed being able to carry out the meetings online. The legal team of Puigdemont, Comín and Ponsatí has publicized its defence to prevent the lifting of immunity. First, they will argue that the Spanish Supreme Court is not competent to require this request. On the other, they will argue that the crime of sedition for which the end of immunity is claimed does not exist in several EU countries and they will declare themselves victims of political persecution.

It will damage the *shame on you* strategy if finally the EP votes positively on the initiative, as the Catalanian politicians will be again in danger of extradition to Spain. A process they will fight with great disqualifications against the Spanish democracy and against Europe out of complicity.

Judicializing the conflict, including Strasbourg and the Council of Europe, will lengthen the confrontation, sow doubt and make possible to keep alive the independence process. The plan is already implemented and, in the coming months and years, sentences are expected in different courts and trials. It will be enough to feed the emotional flame of Catalanian nationalism, its victimhood, its identification with democracy and Europe against Spanish positions. Nevertheless, it will be useless for achieving the support of the European Union because, as this article exposes, the Catalanian claims are emotional rather than rational and their vision regarding the EU differs from reality. They are not the first to claim for the Europe of the Nations, and probably not the last, but their political influence shaping Europe cannot be compared with outstanding forces, such as de Gaulle, that failed before them.

The entrenchment of the conflict will probably lead to some kind of folk attraction for all the anti-system and conspiranoids of Europe, a residual movement without major support in Europe. Even inside Catalonia, the Europeanization is generating a bipolar society that praise Europe when some event backs their thesis, as the rejection of the German judicial system to extradite former president Puigdemont for the crime of sedition, which was felt as a great triumph. On the other hand, when the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruled that Spanish judges acted legally in suspending a regional parliamentary session where a unilateral declaration of independence was to be made, it generated frustration and attacks against Europe for being antidemocratic.

The resolution of the conflict is not in Europe, but lies in internal dialogue in Spain in the frame of the Spanish Constitution. Therefore, all the forces involved in the confrontation should focus their energy in the Spanish political arena rather than in the European Union.

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