



Dear RAMÓN,

Catalonia holds its regional elections next Sunday. How strong is the likelihood that the result will actually be a popular vote for independence from Spain?



To anyone endowed with a minimum of common sense it must be surprising that with all the problems that currently affect thousands of people in Catalonia – including unemployment, increasing job instability, worsening living conditions and housing shortage –, the main topic of the regional elections to be held on 27 September would be independence from Spain.

And this is all the more surprising given the pragmatic mentality traditionally attributed to the Catalan people. But as it happened, a few months ago the party that governs the *Generalitat de Catalunya* decided to create a joint candidacy – named *Junts pel Sí* ('Alliance For Yes') – with the runner-up of the previous elections – the Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC) – with the intention of unilaterally declaring independence if they obtain a majority. With this tactic, the President of the *Generalitat*, Artur Mas, circumvented the Spanish government's refusal to hold a referendum on the independence of Catalonia, and converted ordinary regional elections into exactly this: a plebiscite about secession from Spain.

The stubbornness shown by the President of Catalonia in fomenting secessionist demonstrations has undoubtedly been one of the circumstances that have seriously aggravated the conflict. This is difficult to understand from someone who leads a party, *Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya* (CDC), which, until recently claimed an attitude of moderation and dialogue for itself and bragged about having contributed to the governability of Spain in recent decades. But the events have accelerated in the past few years, almost at the same speed that the CDC began to feel trapped by the legal embargo of some of its headquarters and the alleged involvement of once all-powerful leaders and their families in various cases of corruption.

The attitude of the central Spanish government led by Mariano Rajoy has not contributed to resolving the problem either, as his disdain and apathy have given strong arguments to the supporters of independence. The time wasted waiting for the economic recovery to resolve the main threat to the unity of Spain cannot be recovered, and it is difficult to imagine that warnings by different personalities in recent days about the risks and consequences of Catalan independence will be sufficient to keep so many people from sliding down the secessionist slope.

In reality, regardless of the results of the elections next Sunday, Catalan society already has some scars that will be difficult to heal. The popular demonstration on 11 September – Catalonia's national day – was truly impressive, even beyond the number of participants claimed by the organisers. The sociological data, however, show a much more complex reality than what the independence supporters intend. According to a survey published in *El País*, six out of ten Catalans want dual Spanish and Catalan nationality. The same survey shows that voter intention toward the independence parties, *Junts pel Sí* and CUP (a radical left-wing party in favour of independence that prefers to stand alone) is quite near an electoral victory, although it has hardly increased compared to the results of the previous regional elections. The same thing occurs among the opponents against independence, where it seems that there will be a redistribution of support that could situate the new centre-right party *Ciudadanos* as the 2<sup>nd</sup> political force in the Catalan Parliament. Although it is unlikely that *Ciudadanos* will be able to form a government in coalition with the rest of the parties against independence, as this would require a consensus among various parties that does not seem viable at this point, it appears likely that Catalonia is not going to become independent from Spain. Independence, in addition to being illegal, would also leave it out of the EU and the Euro, and it would have a very negative economic and social impact on its population. The two main Catalan banks already announced this week that they would move, if independence was declared, their main offices to Madrid.

This being said, even if Spanish democracy manages to avoid the assault of the Catalan independence movement, this does not mean it will remain unharmed. As numerous observers, analysts and intellectuals have demanded, Spanish society needs a new pact that would allow the nation to confront the country's many problems, among which Catalan independence is not the least important. The autonomous elections in Catalonia will be a decisive moment, as will the next general elections announced by the President of the Government for the month of December. The independence deadlock, which has put an unnecessary strain on society over recent years and has led the nation to the brink of rupture, can only be unlocked with a search for routes of confluence between the different parties and the patient reconstruction of broken relationships.

Best wishes!

Ramón

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