



A new state in Europe? Scenarios for Catalan self-determination



Jeroen Oskam *

European Tourism Futures Institute (Stenden University of Applied Sciences), P.O. Box 1298, 8900 CG Leeuwarden, The Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

Historically, the political structure of Spain has been a source of conflict: peripheral regions as Catalonia and the Basque country have questioned the centralized power of the state and have claimed a higher level of decentralization in view of their distinct history, cultural identity and language. Recently, political and social discontent has escalated in Catalonia, leading to the unilateral announcement of a Catalan self-determination referendum for November 2014. Regardless of political or ethical preferences, it will be necessary to foresee the consequences of this process for Catalonia, Spain and elsewhere. A scenario approach focuses on possible outcomes of the current debate rather than on the arguments put forward in the controversy. Those in favour of Catalan independence have depicted a future for their country with a booming economy that will situate it at currently unattainable levels of prosperity. Opponents of secession argue that Catalonia will become a failed state. These future visions of an independent Catalonia can be described as scenarios, the underlying assumptions and plausibility of which can be analysed. EU membership and the effect of borders on international trade are identified as key variables. The alternative scenarios will also be crucial to evaluate the broader impact of “a new state in Europe”.

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1. Introduction

Catalonia, the north-eastern region of the Iberian Peninsula with Barcelona as its capital, has intensified the debate on its political status as part of Spain. While the region has had a strong historical movement for self-determination and autonomy, in recent years public opinion has shifted in favour of full independence, with a massive demonstration of 1.5 million people calling for “Catalonia, new state in Europe” on the *Diada*—Catalonia Day—11 September 2012 (Guibernau, 2014; Pi, 2012). A referendum on self-determination has been announced for November 9, 2014. Unlike the Scottish referendum (September 18, 2014), the status of the Catalan “consultation” remains controversial: its alleged unconstitutionality makes it uncertain whether it can be held, and what its political effects will be. In the radicalized political debate different possibilities for the future of Catalonia have been depicted, especially focused on the economic impact of political choices.

A political debate reflects conflicting interests and is usually conducted in terms of a historical right and wrong. The proposed solutions tend to envision a one-dimensional future in which the desirable effects of the preferred choice are highlighted. A futures studies perspective can contribute to the debate, not as a substitute of the ethical stance, but through insight in the complexity of the outcomes of alternative choices.

* Tel.: +31 58 244 1992.

E-mail address: jeroen.oskam@stenden.com

This article will provide an analysis of the alternative proposals for Catalonia as different scenarios. We will trace back what path may lead to each of them, and which conditions would be required. The objective is not to judge which political choices are preferable for Catalonia and for Spain, nor is it the pretension to determine whether one of the scenarios is more thought through than the other ones. The analysis is only meant to identify key variables in the future political evolution of Catalonia.

2. Background

2.1. *How plausible is a Catalan secession?*

The first question is: can it happen? Secessions never seem plausible, and yet they occur. We are inclined to underestimate the possibility of nation states being divided or dissolved, as if they were too much rooted in our cultural traditions and in the organization of our social and political lives to be subject to serious modifications. The latest wave of country breakups was in Eastern Europe in the 1990s; but this process has rather been considered as one of oppressed nations rightfully shaking off the yoke of communist multinational states.

These examples show, in any case, that it is pragmatically feasible to rebuild the institutions of a new state and to restructure an economy independent from its former ties. However, they may not be representative of the cultural disruption that would take place in nation states in other parts of the world, as allegedly the boundaries of these countries had been defined by political ideology rather than by cultural tradition.

How plausible does this make secession in one of the Western European democracies? It is historically evident that many boundaries were drawn prior to the establishment of the modern democracies, which of course does not mean that these nation states cannot have grown democratic roots afterwards. But in this free part of the world we have countries with a democratic tradition and credentials as limited and recent as Spain. Precisely the debate whether the country should be considered as multinational or not has remained pending. It has resurfaced and culminated in a crisis in every democratic period. In recent years it has escalated and may be close to a climax or a new crisis.

2.2. *National identities*

To understand this debate—i.e. one homogeneous Spanish nation or multiple nations living within the political boundaries of one state—it is important to remember that national identities are social constructs, that were created, interpreted and orchestrated; they were disseminated through selected national symbols, in a process that became especially important in the last decades of the nineteenth century (Anderson, 1986; Hobsbawm, 2002; Weber, 1977). But despite the fact that national identities are neither innate nor spontaneous emotions, they have undeniably become part of political and sociocultural dynamics: nations are imagined communities, but that does not mean that they are imaginary (Pickering, 2001).

This means that, on the one hand, we will not find any genetic or historical evidence that could unambiguously delimit a nation and separate one from the other, and, on the other, that such a judgement would not be fully relevant. It is imaginable—in fact, it is real—that different definitions and delimitations of a nation coexist, so that some Spaniards and Catalans see themselves as a single community, while others understand that they are different nations. Also, it is not unthinkable that these preferences shift over time (Molina Aparicio, 2013).

Could language then be considered as an objective indicator of national identity? Hardly, because the choice of a mother language is closely linked to the construction of identity, and can be similarly altered or manipulated (Fishman, 2004). Languages can be suppressed; territories can be “*russified*”. In the twentieth century, Yugoslavians spoke a language known as Serbo-Croatian. An emerging language may deliberately diverge—e.g. choose different words or spelling rules—from related languages, such as Norwegian and Danish, or Galician and Portuguese. The Basque common language or *Batúa* was composed out of seven dialects in the nineteenth century. The differences between Catalan and the Valencian language are distinguished by politicians rather than by linguists. And in a particularly Orwellian example, the regional government of Aragón recently decreed that Catalan was no longer spoken within its borders, but instead something called LAPAO, or “Aragones language pertaining to the Eastern area” (Montserrat, 2013).¹

2.3. *Background of the self-determination movement*

Therefore, the different national identities should be analysed in view of the origins of these feelings. In recent years, the tensions generated by the self-determination debate in Spain have increased; a development which has been catalyzed by a hostile attitude towards Catalan aspirations in Spain's central governments, and which has been further aggravated by the financial crisis (Guibernau, 2014). The issue is highly controversial, to the extent that the analysis of potential outcomes may be considered as choosing sides in the debate: from the perspective of those who believe in a homogeneous nation the mere existence of dissenting voices is seen as illegitimate. However, scenario planning is not about advocating desirable outcomes, but about the study and description of plausible developments.

¹ The acronym stands for *Lengua Aragonesa Propia del Área Oriental*.

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