



By: *Ferry Biedermann*

# Europe keeps a wary eye on its regional independence movements



When pro-independence parties on 12 May for the first time in years **lost** their majority in the Spanish region of Catalonia, it was easy to imagine an almost audible sigh of relief being emitted in Brussels and other European capitals.

Large and small, separatist, secessionist or independence movements, whatever you choose to call them, have caused havoc in Europe through much of the 20th century.

To this day, independence-related violence continues to plague the continent and its periphery. Separatist movements are also seen as potential entry points for foreign, i.e. Russian and Chinese, interference.

Several European countries, both European Union members and others, face secessionist movements within their borders. France, for example, has faced an independence campaign in Corsica and is now preparing to give the island increased autonomy.

Possibly mindful of a cascade of further devolution demands, the country's president, Emmanuel Macron at the end of April felt the need to apply the brakes to a drive for more autonomy in France's Alsace region. "Let's not make this into a big institutional play," he said in the region's capital, Strasbourg.

The UK, Spain, Italy and Belgium are among other West-European countries facing significant independence or separatist movements of various strength and demeanours. Separatist violence has been on the wane but is still a concern for law enforcement.

## Foreign interference

The Catalan and Basque independence movements, have, for example, been **singled out** by Europol in its European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2023 as "the most active and violent within the Spanish separatist scene." At the same time, the agency also noted that the previous year had seen no separatist attacks in the EU.

Possibly more than the potential for violence, independence and separatist movements nowadays worry European policy makers because of the spectre of foreign interference. This is a wide-ranging concern, from attempts to sway elections, to industrial and political espionage, to general destabilisation.

On the Corsica issue, for example, the French have taken a very dim view of Azerbaijan earlier this year establishing a "support group for the people of Corsica".

This came on top of the Azeri 'Baku initiative Group', set up last year, which agitates against what it terms French colonialism in its overseas territories, such as New Caledonia. France has even accused Azerbaijan of stirring up the rioting that has shaken the Pacific Ocean territory in recent weeks.

The Chinese have been implicated in reaching out to at least one independence movement, the far-right Flemish nationalist Vlaams Belang. One of its former senators is under investigation for accepting money from China.

In this case, though, it appears not to be an attempt to undermine European stability, but rather to influence the European Parliament on behalf of China.

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Russian interference is by far the greater worry, though, as it has been for several years now. In 2016 the issue came to the fore with the election of Donald Trump in the US and the Brexit referendum in the UK. The EU has since been wary of Russian interference, including in the upcoming European Parliament elections in June.

The expected increase in the far-right vote in these elections causes concern, as these groups are seen as being especially susceptible

to Russian meddling. In some countries, such as Belgium and Italy, regional independence movements are also far-right, anti-immigration and anti-EU.

The Catalan separatists are mostly not far-right but they're nevertheless causing concern. The European Parliament last month **adopted** a resolution "on new allegations of Russian interference in the European Parliament, in the upcoming EU elections and the impact on the European Union."

In it, parliament: "Condemns Russia's participation in disinformation campaigns, as well as the alleged intense contacts and number of meetings between the agents responsible for Russian interference with a Catalan secessionist group."

## The Catalan episode

Catalan independence leader Carles Puigdemont has in the past dismissed such statements as mere justifications for the "relentless repression of the Spanish state against the Catalan independence movement."

Puigdemont and the Catalan issue have proved especially vexing for Brussels. He sought refuge there in the wake of the Spanish crackdown after Catalonia's unilateral declaration of independence in 2017.

In 2019 he also won election to the European parliament, while Spain was seeking his extradition. The EU was not impressed, emphasising Spain's right to enforce its own constitution, which allows for no path towards regional independence.



*The Catalan episode has underlined the EU's dislike for independence movements in its members states - Carles Puigdemont*

An EU court last year **stripped** Puigdemont of his immunity as a Member of the European Parliament, to make extradition possible.

But tensions were somewhat defused when Spain's Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez needed the Catalan separatist parties' support for his coalition in Madrid and proposed an amnesty law. The separatists' poor showing in the May elections in Catalonia, is expected to further calm the situation.

The Catalan episode has underlined the EU's dislike for independence movements in its members states, certainly when not sanctioned by a country's own laws but also in general.

## Independence movements are on the wane

EU membership has in several analyses been linked to increased regional support for independence. Being part of the EU with its open borders and free trade, is the reasoning, in many ways mitigates the effects of seceding from one of its member states.

The EU has taken pains to counter this narrative. In 2012, the European Commission stipulated that a country that had seceded from a member state would have to re-apply for membership of the bloc.

## Nationalism and regionalism have a tendency to crop up again and again at the most inconvenient of times and in the most inconvenient of places

In the run-up to the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, when the UK was still in the EU, Spain in particular made it clear that this would not be easily granted.

Catalan independence now looks more remote. In Italy, the once powerful secessionist movements in the north of the country have largely turned to Italian nationalism. And now outside the EU, even the popular pro-independence Scottish Nationalist Party is currently facing reduced electoral prospects.

It might be tempting to conclude that independence movements are on the wane and Europe's worries are overblown. But nationalism and regionalism have a tendency to crop up again and again at the most inconvenient of times and in the most inconvenient of places.

Watch, for example next month's Belgian national and regional elections that might re-ignite the issue with a vengeance, at the heart of Europe, at that.