

NATIONAL PROBLEMS AND FEDERAL SOLUTIONS:
A NEW HORIZON FOR CENTER-PERIPHERY CONFLICTS
IN SPAIN?

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Twenty-five years ago, in 1979, the approval of the Basque and Catalan Statutes of Autonomy marked the starting point of the process of decentralization in Spain. Whether sufficient or excessive, whether finished or still open-ended (as political and technical opinions differ widely), this process and the resulting structure of political power still play a central role in the Spanish political debate. In this presentation I will try to discuss what has been achieved and what still remains to be done, from a Catalan point of view, as the organizers have suggested, although not solely a Catalan one.

The first element to be commented on is the high legitimization of the «España de las Autonomías». It is very important to realize that the perception and divisiveness of the center-periphery conflict are enormously stronger at the level of the elite than for mass opinion. All survey research has constantly shown that the main concerns of Spanish public opinion are unemployment, terrorism, security or immigration; on the other hand, State organization problems, regional powers or discussions between central and regional governments have constantly ranked very low among the concerns of Spaniards. For instance, a recent study (Bericat *et al.*, 2003) on «cultural conflict in Spain», which reviews the ways in which Spanish citizens have conflicting views on a number of subjects, ranging from religion to family values, man-

agement of the economy or the Welfare State, simply pays no attention to the national identity conflict: it is something that does not appear at the level of the masses.

A large survey conducted by the *CIS* [Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas] in September (study 2455, «Institutions and Autonomies»), intended to measure attitudes about the territorial structure of Spain, discloses some additional information. The decentralized structure is perceived, as a whole, in positive terms by more than two thirds of the respondents (67.4 %), while only 12.6 % had a negative perception. Interestingly enough, these results are not very different from the figures relating to Catalan respondents: among them, 71.8 % held positive views, whereas 13.9 % would have a negative perception. Therefore, there is a clear phenomenon of convergence between the opinion of citizens from a region with strong regionalist views, such as Catalonia, and the average opinion of the whole country.

It is worth noting that, given the choice among various possible institutional arrangements, about a quarter of the respondents (26.5 %) chose the option «Prefer regions to be more autonomous»; but when asked about their own region, the figure of those claiming for more autonomy reaches 42.4 %. In other words: if Spanish public opinion may be somewhat cold about developing the system and making its regions more autonomous, the majority states that their own region should indeed be more autonomous.

This radical decentralization has reached deep into citizens' everyday life. The same *CIS* survey observed that 34.2 % of the respondents declared to be «very interested» or «interested» in regional politics, while the corresponding figure for national politics was only 30.4 %. This can be interpreted in terms of localism, but it also suggests how important regional administrations have become. In 2003, after the devolution of health services to all regions, regional governments spend the largest share of public expenditure, and employ more civil servants than central government. Regional governments have become essential players in the policy process, and have reached a high political visibility and salience.

However, their impact on the working of the central institutions of the political system is limited. We will review later what the situation at the administrative level is. At the parliamentary

level, and contrary to some widespread perceptions, the presence of nationalist or regionalist parties in the Parliament is limited (around 10 % of MP's), has not increased at all since 1986. Although at times they have been required as partners to bring about a parliamentary majority (as happened for the Socialist Cabinet in 1993 or for the first Aznar cabinet in 1996) they have always done it in favor of the plurality party, even if a shift in their alliances might have produced a Cabinet of the opposing political sign.

Therefore, as a whole, reasoning in terms of regional representation, of decentralization in policies and services, as well as the Cebsre's ability, the creation of «Comunidades Autónomas» must be termed a success.

But not a complete one. *Old and new conflicts* emerge around the center-periphery cleavage in Spain. The most dramatic one, of course, is the maintenance of a terrorist group, ETA [Euskadi Ta Askatasuna], active in the Basque Country. Although very seriously hit by police and judiciary action in recent years, and by the French authorities' cooperation, which had led twice recently to the dismantlement of its directive bodies, ETA remains as a permanent threat for thousands of businessmen, journalists, local councilors or university professors (just to name a few of the professional groups attacked since 2000).

The banning of Batasuna, ETA's supporting political group, in 2003, in spite of previous fears, was not followed by a terrorist offensive; this has suggested that the terrorist group is very seriously weakened and its days might perhaps (only perhaps) be close to coming to an end. But in a cruel paradox, the weakening of ETA in terrorist terms has come hand in hand with the break-up of political cooperation between political parties. The anti-terrorist agreements signed at the end of the 80's («Pacto the Ajuria Enea» and «Pacto de Madrid») had assured, in the past, a complete political unity around anti-terrorist policies. But the agreements between the PNV Partido Nacionalista Vasco] revealed in 1999 opened a new scenario: a frontal clash between «nationalists» and «constitutionalists», i.e., PSOE [Partido Socialista Obrero Español] and PP [Partido Popular]. The Basque regional government, after the departure of the PSOE, launched the so-called «plan Ibarretxe», which aims at weakening all linkages between the Basque country and Spain, with only a vague connection re-

maintaining with the Crown, and fully joining the EU. These institutional changes would be approved through procedures to be freely established by the regional institutions (and not according to the provisions included in the Statute), and would finally be approved in a referendum called by the regional government (and not by the central government, as the current legislation establishes).

The Basque conflict, thus intensified in the last years, and has clearly shifted lines; from a starting point where multi-partisan cooperation against terrorism was the rule, we are in a situation of open conflict between democratic parties. And, as is almost necessary in this type of conflict, it is the most extremist positions which prevail on each side.

Increasingly, the PP has tended to focus all its discourse around the issue of *national unity in danger*; and, instead of limiting the conflict to the Basque country and trying to gather alliances outside, has tended to extend the conflict towards the Socialist Party, under the accusation of being mild or, even worse, close to forge party alliances with parties and groups which endanger national unity.

This conflicting reasoning came to a limit after the formation of the new Catalan regional government. After the regional elections in November 2003, which saw the departure of Jordi Pujol, the charismatic leader of the moderate Catalan nationalists, the situation at the regional Parliament was far from clear: no party had a majority, the party with most votes was not the party with most seats, and the making of a majority required an agreement with ERC [Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya], a traditionally center-left nationalist party, but increasingly leaning towards more radical positions, both in left-right terms, and also in national terms, defining itself as pro-independence.

The negotiations between parties finally led to a left coalition, which includes the Socialist Party as senior member, ERC, and IC-V [Iniciativa per Catalunya Verds], the «green» party created by the former Communists. A coalition cabinet was formed, chaired by the Socialist Pasqual Maragall, former mayor of Barcelona and now President of Generalitat.

The formation of this cabinet triggered a wave of criticisms, even before being sworn in. Central government members and PP leaders took the floor, hurling all kind of criticisms at the Catalan government, in an unprecedented way. And when things seemed

to settle down, after a discrete intervention by the King, a bomb exploded: on January 26th, the Madrid newspaper *ABC* reported that the second in command in the regional government and leader of ERC, M. Carod Rovira, had met with the top leaders of ETA at the beginning of the year, somewhere in Southern France. Although Carod abandoned the cabinet in the days that followed, the scandal was worsened by a press conference by ETA three weeks later, where two gunmen declared a separate truce for Catalonia, «given the increasing electoral success of pro-independence parties there».

From the PP point of view, there was a clear syllogism: ETA meets, and cooperates, with ERC; ERC has made the election of a Socialist President in Catalonia possible; therefore, the Socialist Party might cooperate with the terrorists. Even within the PSOE this line of reasoning has had some impact, as some declarations by Socialist leaders have made clear.

In other words, the permanence of the terrorist generates waves which pollute political strategies and political discourse, awakening lines of reasoning completely out of touch with reality but which may be considered by some as being politically promising (such as the «national unity» of Spain, or some traditional and diffuse anti-Catalanism). For instance, the Minister of Territorial Administrations, Ms. García Valdecasas, commenting on the Catalan government, declared formally that the «Socialists were in coalition with murderers».

Regional decentralization also poses some *new problems*. The first bloc of them has to do with *European integration*. The 1978 Constitution was written without the possibility of joining the European Union in mind; thus, some matters are defined as being «exclusive power» for the regions, or for the central government, without realizing that, once inside the Union, those matters would be in the hands of the Brussels authorities.

A second problem on the European front is representation: when European bodies meet to discuss matters which depend on regional authorities, who should form the Spanish delegation?

Increasingly, Spanish regions (regardless of political colors) demand to be present in those negotiations, something which the Spanish government has frontally rejected in the last years.

Furthermore: after May 2004, ten new countries will join the EU, many of whom are smaller than some Spanish regions; and

a handful of new languages will become official within the EU, even if they are spoken by quite a small number of people. The comparisons between Catalonia and Malta, or between Andalucía and Estonia, or between Galicia and Slovenia, will become unavoidable.

A second bloc of problems has become visible in recent years: inter-territorial problems within Spain. As a simple example, the «Hydrological National Plan» intends to take water from the river Ebro, as it passes through Aragon and Catalonia, towards Valencia, Murcia and Almería, dry areas in the South East of Spain, with important problems of desertization. However, this Plan was approved without any negotiation with the regions from which water will be taken. On the contrary, the Minister was quoted as saying that «this will be as simple as a military parade». One should also recall that the PP is regionally in the opposition in Aragon and Catalonia, but in office in Valencia and Murcia.

The territorial distribution of public investment and the building of infrastructure raise problems in the same vein: the spectacular development of Madrid in recent years has meant a concentration of resources there, which were perhaps badly needed elsewhere.

How can one face these problems? Among scholars and researchers, an emerging consensus is that the transformation of Spain has only affected the powers of the regions, which is in itself a very important aspect, but far from sufficient. What is intended as being required is the transformation of the central structures of command, based still on a centralist view and not reflecting accurately the changes that have occurred at the regional level. On the other hand, differential realities are still strong, and there should be no problem in certain regions having what is sometimes called «asymmetrical federalism» (see Aja 2003) or specific arrangements.

In the political arena, a certain number of proposals have been put forward in the last few years. The first one, as mentioned, has been the strategy of the Aznar cabinet, and the PP as such: the territorial model is closed. Spain is just as federal as Germany, and, therefore, there are no additional steps to be taken. Furthermore: the general political evolution requires a stronger role for central authorities. For instance, security concerns, military involvement abroad or a new leadership within Europe are fields

where an essential role has to be played by the central authorities, thus becoming more important than in the past. In this view, no reform is necessary; on the contrary, often proposals for reform have been termed as «anti-constitutional» by the PP, thus questioning their legitimacy.

Against this neo-centralist strategy, a group of nationalist regional parties tried to rebuild the «*Galeusca*» platform (from the coalition between *Galicia*, *Euskadi* and *Catalonia* at the beginning of last century). This has taken the form of a «Barcelona declaration», signed by CIU [Convergencia i Uni6], BNG [Bloque Nacionalista Galego] and PNV (and, later by ERC and EA [Eusko Alkartasuna]), where these parties draft a joint platform, asking for a recognition of the multinational character of Spain, a role for regional governments in Europe, reforms in the Senate and the Constitutional Court, etc.

This ambitious platform, however, has not survived the acute confrontation about Basque politics. Although the documents were signed, no use has been made of them in the subsequent electoral campaigns, nor has any proposal emerged in parliamentary debates.

For the new Socialist leadership, it has been difficult to draft a strategy of its own. On the one hand, a relevant group of Socialist leaders do not feel the need for any more decentralization: names such as Rodríguez Ibarra, Bono or Redondo could be included here; it is true that this vision clashes with the views of their Catalan, Aragonese, Balearic or Galician comrades. But the major problem comes from the outside: given the strong «nationalist» discourse by the PP, the PSOE has been very careful in not opening flanks to criticism in this field, conceived as being critical for the electorate in the core of the country.

Only recently, in September 2003, has the PSOE produced a policy document, named after the town where it was approved (Santillana). The PSOE recognizes the need for reforming the Senate (which entails reformation of the Constitution); announces some changes in style, in order to more or less «federalize» the central decision-making process; and states that in any case, reforms would only be acceptable and discussed if they follow the procedures established by the Statutes and Constitution. Therefore, the Ibarretxe proposal must be abandoned by the Basque Government, as its procedures clearly differ from the legal provisions.

From the Catalan point of view, a first question to be examined is the role played by ERC, given its key role in the formation of the cabinet and its ideological definition. It is clear from its political stance and from its leaders' statements that a stand on independence is not in the agenda, at least for a long time: Mr. Carod's declared goal is to become the next President of the Generalitat. On the other hand, ERC is willing to play some role in Spanish politics, supporting the new Socialist cabinet. Therefore, we are not far from the Pujol style of combining a strong nationalist position in Catalonia, with pressure towards reform and modernization at the Spanish central level (and it may be appropriate to recall here how Mr. Cambó, the first Catalan nationalist leader, had to hear during a parliamentary debate that one of his opponents urged him to choose, «as you cannot be both the Bolívar of Catalonia and the Bismarck of Spain»).

The Catalan coalition government has defined, as the two major goals for its mandate, a reform of the funding mechanisms of the region, and the reforms of its Statute. On the first aspect, Catalonia is perceived as being under-funded (just like Andalucía), as a result of a number of factors: shortcomings in the public investment; a relevant rate of illegal immigrants (therefore not included in official figures, but generating all the same costs in health, education and other services); an economic structure rich in small size industries, whose essential fiscal output is channeled through taxes which remain in the hands of the central government.

As far as the Statute is concerned, the goals of reform are less clear, at least for now; in any case, it is clear that some of the sought reforms cannot be limited to the Statute: for instance, the recognition of the multinational character of Spain, or the reform of the Senate. These aspects cannot be touched upon without constitutional reform.

In which direction may things evolve? When writing this contribution, we find ourselves in a completely new (and largely unexpected) political context: the election of a Socialist cabinet, which has not yet entered into function. It is then too early to make any guess about its policies. The «Santillana» document sets a general framework, although later signs and statements have shown some more openness towards reforms; certainly, the weight of the Catalan change and the impulse it may have given to the

Socialist victory will give way to a more positive view of their claims.

On the other hand, the fact that the Socialist victory was somewhat largely unexpected may have positive aspects. The Socialist Party does not have a detailed, closed previous party program; therefore, it may be more open to exchange ideas and proposals with the other parties; and, given the composition of the Parliament, they will need to do so, which in itself will be quite a positive element.

The Feeling of relief which has followed the result of the Spanish General Election has not happened only in the European institutions; it has also been widely heard within Spain.

TABLE 1
Preferences for Institutional arrangements, 2002

	Whole country	Catalonia
Central State, without autonomies	9,2 %	6,9 %
State with autonomies, as it is now	48,1 %	27,5 %
State with regions more autonomous than they are now	26,5 %	42,0 %
State where regions might become independent nations	6,3 %	17,4 %
No answer	10,0 %	8,2 %

(Source: CIS survey # 2455)

TABLE 2
Distribution of public expenditure by levels of government, 2003

Central government	40,5 %
Regional governments	46,0 %
Local governments	13,5 %

TABLE 3
Distribution of seats in the Congreso de los Diputados, 1977-2004

	1977	1979	1982	1986	1989	1993	1996	2000	2004
National parties	327	323	326	315	313	318	318	317	317
Regional parties	23	27	24	35	37	32	32	33	33

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