

WHY EUROPE SHOULD WELCOME A REFERENDUM IN CATALONIA

The Catalans' historic grievances with Spain have intensified in recent years. A deadlock has been created by the Spanish refusal to even consider repeated proposals coming from Catalonia, including an honest attempt to renegotiate the 1979 autonomy charter. Starting in 2005, a new text was drafted and approved by the Catalan Parliament, and subsequently endorsed by the Spanish Cortes, but not before several key provisions had been pared down or simply removed. In the end it was ratified, resignedly, by the Catalan people in a referendum. But then in 2010 a not unbiased Constitutional Court ruled that several articles were unconstitutional and gave a restrictive interpretation of many others. In practice, the resulting text, far from improving the earlier charter, served to set limits to the scope of Catalan self-government, and the entire process revealed how little the Spanish side was willing to advance in that direction. At that point it became clear that the current system of territorial administration, established in 1978 after a long period of centralized rule, was being used to perpetuate the Catalans' status as a permanent minority in Spain. Today a growing number of Catalans feel that their collective affairs are being run by Madrid without regard for their needs and often against their vital interests, and many have lost all hope of a fairer bargain within the Spanish framework.

The Catalan government has pledged to hold a referendum on the relationship that Catalan society should have with Spain – whether to maintain in some form the present state of political subordination or start off as a new independent nation. That was the course of action chosen by Quebec in 1995 and by Scotland in 2014 and respected by the governments of Canada and the United Kingdom. But the Spanish authorities, relying on a narrow – some say partisan – interpretation of the Constitution, have declared such a referendum illegal and have vowed to prevent it. They are also working to undermine its preparation. In their reaction to alleged acts of disobedience by Catalan elected representatives, the state institutions seem to be reverting to some of the ways of the dictatorial past, to the point of threatening the very pillars of democratic governance.

The stated resolve of the ruling coalition in Catalonia to hold a referendum regardless should not be seen as a show of defiance but as an act of democracy. In this the leadership is following the mandate given by the hundreds of thousands who have been peacefully demonstrating year after year since 2010; by the 2.3 million who cast

their ballot in a symbolic vote in November 2014; by the nearly 2 million who handed a majority to pro-independence forces in the September 2015 elections to the Catalan Parliament; and, last but not least, by the three-quarters of the Catalan population that, according to every opinion poll, favor holding a referendum, irrespective of their eventual vote in it. It is for Catalans to decide on their society's collective future, and asking them directly is the only reasonable way to find out where everyone stands on such a fundamental issue.

In the end, a referendum is a good solution for all. Certainly for Catalans, because, whatever the result, it will necessarily open a dialogue on a fresh relationship with Spain, one that must be based on the recognition of their rights as a people, including the right to have the final word on the shape that such a relationship should take.

It may ultimately be good for Spain too, by forcing its government and the rest of political forces to reassess the foundations of the regime installed in 1978. This was the outcome of a transition to democratic rule designed and implemented by a political establishment whose members grew up under Franco's dictatorship. A satisfactory resolution of the Catalan question will give Spanish society a chance to finally break free from the ghosts of its authoritarian past and to address the flaws of a political system that is gravely conditioned by its origins.

And it will also be good for Europe. First, for a practical reason, because it will help to solve an age-old problem that, if allowed to fester, will only escalate, adding another front of instability on a continental scale. And second, and most important, as a matter of principle. In these days of political uncertainty, when in many countries the European project is being questioned from different camps, the Catalans' stance, determinedly pro-European, firmly grounded on democratic principles and relying on strictly peaceful methods, should be held up as an example for all as the only acceptable way of resolving controversies between nations and within states.

Sooner or later all European countries as well as their common institutions will be called to take a stand on this issue. It is a matter of democracy that the Catalans' legitimate claims as a historic nation and their inherent collective rights as a people are recognized, and it is a matter of justice that their constant and peaceful struggle is rewarded.

This is a joint statement prepared by [Col·lectiu Emma](#) and endorsed by [Col·lectiu Praga](#) and [Col·lectiu Wilson](#)