KOSOVAN STATEHOOD AS A PRETEXT FOR CATALAN INDEPENDENCE? BETWEEN DOMESTIC PREFERENCES AND EXTERNAL CONSIDERATIONS

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Abstract

The Catalan bid for independence has partly drawn inspiration from Kosovo's 2008 unilateral proclamation of independence from Serbia. This seemingly convenient resemblance has its limitations, especially when domestic political and social aspects, as well as the extent of international support are considered. Thus, apart from considerations involving specific settings and accompanying differences in terms of economic development, the analysis of the two cases underscores the crucial role of foreign stakeholders' decision to offer assistance so that the process of attainment of statehood and international recognition can proceed. Unlike Kosovo, whose leadership garnered backing from key Western capitals, the Catalan movement was left with minimal external advocacy, which at no point gave the green light to border alterations of a state found in a complex geopolitical situation.

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Introduction

The most recent iteration of the Catalan independence movement kicked off in 2012, following a failed attempt by the Catalan government to decentralize the Spanish tax system. As suggested by Dowling (2018: 100), "the new Catalan movement is reformist, peaceful, non-violent whilst also highly innovative. It has not adopted any strategy of passive or active resistance or civil disobedience. In spite of rhetorical claims, the only rupture evident is with Spanish legality." To defend their ambition, the Catalans often invoked cases linked to the dissolution of the Yugoslav state as a credible parallel – the case of Slovenia, which declared independence in 1991 and joined the EU and NATO in 2004, and the case of Kosovo, which proclaimed independence in 2008 and has secured international recognition by more than a hundred UN member states, including the major Western players (*La Vanguardia* 2016; 2018a; Lo Cascio 2017; Turp et al. 2017: 30).

However, the Catalan evocations of the Yugoslav cases overlooked the particularities of the then state disintegration, including their socioeconomic roots, the composition of their ruling classes, and the international context in which they developed. More specifically, while the cases of Slovenia and Kosovo are best understood in their respective contexts – the post-Cold War promotion of freedom and the need to expand the Euro-Atlantic security complex, either through economic liberalization or humanitarian intervention (Cox 2008: 43–46; also González-Villa 2019; Radeljić 2012; Woodward 1995) – the Catalan case is best understood in the context of the 2008 financial crisis and the consequent emergence of populism in Western Europe (Veiga et al. 2019: 184–187). The prospect of Catalan independence, if realized, was poised to materialize amidst the crisis of the European integrationist project process (including Brexit), and the resurgence of China and Russia as notable global powers with major stakes on the European continent (González-Villa and Radeljić 2023).

Indeed, the question of secession and realization of statehood has been approached from a range of perspectives since the end of the Cold War, when the issue ceased to be primarily related to the process of decolonization (Buchanan 1997: 33). Given that the new secessionism in Europe – resulting from the Yugoslav and Soviet dissolutions – did not reflect previous occurrences and the applicable international law, fresh explanations and theoretical frameworks proved essential. A large portion of scholarly inquiry has focused on the search of common guiding principles, including discussions about legitimacy and remedial approaches to secession (by looking at specific offenses and injustices suffered by a particular group) and primary theoretical contextualization, which sees the drive towards secession as a right concomitant of the existence of the group (Bolton and Visoka 2010; Brando

and Morales-Gálvez 2019; Seymour 2007). Other explanations, while eschewing possible moralistic prejudices, have focused on secession as a political option (Sanjaume-Calvet 2020; Sorens 2012). A notable gap in this picture is that of international aspects. With the exception of the state-building approach – in which the study of the involvement of international actors has been prominent (Woodward, Kostovicova and Bojicic-Dzelilovic 2012), most of the literature on secessionism has focused on the internal aspects of the creation of new states, which "risks falsely attributing to domestic politics what is driven by international affairs and world politics" (Siroky 2011: 60). The conflict in Georgia in 2008 and, even more so, the uprisings in Eastern Ukraine and Russia's takeover of Crimea following the Euromaidan protests in 2013–2014, have problematized secessionism in light of international developments, insofar as the great powers have used military power to advance their positions through unilateral secessionist bids (Pavkovic 2020: 88). This has also been incorporated into the scholarship concerned with legal issues, insofar as the Russian intervention in Ukraine has made use of the normative legacy that once justified the Yugoslav dissolution (Roth 2015).

In the Catalan case, the Advisory Council for National Transition (CATN), established in early 2013, was tasked with legitimizing the independence process that would eventually lead to a secession referendum. The council argued that the prevailing political and legal situation in Catalonia, together with the proposed consultation, aligned with the tradition of referendums conducted in various EU states to decide on significant constitutional matters and, in some cases, the formation of new states. To support this claim, it cited examples such as those of the Baltic states, Slovenia, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina (CATN 2013: 45–46). As pointed out by Lo Cascio (2017), these examples were strategically chosen to align with the interests of the Catalan secessionist leadership, despite some of them displaying contradictory characteristics.

Methodologically, this study explores different examples to see how working with other countries affects the paths of those trying to break away. Kosovo and Catalonia were chosen because they both used similar ideas and arguments to justify their attempts at becoming independent, but their results were very different. The comparison is based on three things: (a) when the attempts to break away happened – after the Cold War and after the financial crisis (Cox, 2008; Veiga et al., 2019); (b) the political and economic settings within the countries in question (Clark, 2000; Dowling, 2018); and (c) the extent of other countries' involvement (Woodward, Kostovicova & Bojicic-Dzelilovic, 2012). Instead of trying to separate causes in a controlled way, like some scientific methods do, this research uses a way of thinking that focuses on understanding how different causes work together in specific situations

(Jackson, 2010: 137–141). Even though Kosovo and Catalonia are different – Kosovo was a place recovering from war under international control, and Catalonia is a region in a country that is an EU member – comparing them makes sense because what other countries do is important in deciding if these attempts to break away succeed or fail (Siroky, 2011). It is understood that these two cases are not exactly the same: laws, history, and what is at risk politically are different, which means we cannot make broad statements based only on these two examples. Instead of advancing general claims, the present analysis seeks to demonstrate how developments and policy preferences in certain countries intersect with domestic dynamics in others, and how these interactions shape potential outcomes when one party elects to secede.

Similar to the comparison involving Slovenia and Catalonia (González-Villa and Radeljić 2023), an analysis of the secessionist cases of Kosovo and Catalonia suggests that it is the combination of the timing of the secessionist process and the dominant international trend that determines the chances of success of secessionist processes in the post-Cold War period, and not the composition of the ruling classes or state-society relations. While examining the distinctiveness and temporal-spatial background of two cases, we shed light on diverse historical contexts. The success of statehood bids in Kosovo and Catalonia is evaluated based on their particular institutional, ideological, and socioeconomic coherence. With this in mind, the role of international backing, even if limited, as seen in Kosovo's case, emerges as pivotal in determining the effectiveness of a secessionist approach.

The failed Kosovan reflector

The Catalan process began in 2012, after the International Court of Justice's 2010 advisory opinion on Kosovo's proclamation of independence in February 2008. Although the court did not give a definitive answer concerning the final status of the territory, which, in practice, left the subject a matter of negotiation between the Serbian and Kosovo Albanian parties (Hannum 2011), successive Catalan governments interpreted the Kosovan case as a precedent to legitimize the holding of a referendum (*Público* 2012), and an eventual unilateral act of secession (*La Vanguardia* 2016). However, as maintained by some legal scholars, while in the case of Kosovo, "the court determined that Serbia had been exerting an unlawful use of force on the people of Kosovo in a way that violated their rights," in the case of Catalan separatists, "they cannot simply declare their independence nor do they qualify to invoke the right to self-determination, with or without territorial integrity," and therefore "Catalonia's attempt to hold both unofficial and official referendums to achieve secession

would not succeed based upon the ICJ opinion on Kosovo" (Hayes 2019: 279, 287).

This section operationalizes the three comparative criteria – temporal context, domestic configuration, and international involvement – by situating Kosovo's bid for independence within the post-Cold War restructuring of Europe. The analysis begins by tracing how socioeconomic fragility and institutional erosion created a permissive environment for nationalist mobilization, before examining the catalytic role of external actors whose intervention transformed a marginal separatist claim into an internationally recognized statehood project. Anticipating the discussion that follows, the case illustrates how timing and geopolitical alignments amplified local agency, revealing the contingent nature of success in secessionist processes.

Economic deprivation and political exclusion in Kosovo

In the case of Kosovo, Yugoslavia's poorest region, already by the late 1960s the native communist leadership, numerous intellectuals, and illegal movements had fully embraced the idea of national liberation. Later, the 1974 constitution, while resembling a confederal rather than a federal model, seemed to offer some settlement of disputes across the Yugoslav state. Even though the new set of circumstances apparently provided the Kosovo authorities with an opportunity to improve the province's standing in terms of socioeconomic development, the success of their efforts was limited, if not fully suppressed by the leadership of the Republic of Serbia (Çeku 2016: 127). By this point, Kosovo had become trapped between the mismanaged aid provided by a federal fund for development of disadvantaged regions, the highest unemployment rate in the country (27.5%, comparing to Slovenia's 2%) and the steady erosion of the per capita income, with Albanians making less money than members of other ethnic groups (Mertus 1999: 22–23). In fact, the 1981 confrontations between Albanian students and local police forces – mainly inspired by economic difficulties and the demand to see Kosovo's status upgraded to that of a republic – suggested that the Albanian section of the population was awakening; it had grown into a more compact and united body that was determined to challenge the state command. In response, the Yugoslav manifesto for Kosovo was produced, which sought to justify the need for a state of emergency and the sealing of Kosovo's borders without really considering Albanian demands and expectations (Çeku 2016: 144–150).

The Kosovo Albanian community was additionally alarmed in 1987, when Milošević, then leader of the Serbian branch of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia, travelled to Kosovo and called for the "defense of

the sacred rights of the Serbs" in the province (cited in Malcolm 1998: 346). Concerned about the ultimate purpose of Serbian nationalistic discourse, the economically impoverished Albanians continued to organize and become all the more proactive. The new rounds of tensions climaxed with the Serbian takeover of Kosovo's institutions in 1989 (which, in reality, meant suspension of Kosovo's autonomy), with many Kosovo Albanian professionals being forced out of employment. For example, a motion of the European Parliament (1991a) placed the blame on the Serbian leadership and offered rather precise numbers of the ones subjected to human rights abuses: three secondary schools and one primary school were closed, 350 teachers and 7,000 pupils expelled, the Albanian theatre and library in Kosovo shut and the local archives confiscated by the Serbian authorities, numerous doctors and nurses fired and replaced with Serbs, about 50,000 Albanian workers dismissed and so on. As consequently assessed, "[t]he Serbian regime has begun a process of economic and cultural genocide" in Kosovo, which prompted some European officials to insist that "[h]uman rights are inseparable from the people's rights and the right to self-determination," leaving an impression that independence of the province of Kosovo could become an option at some point (European Parliament 1991b).

Given the circumstances, a group of Albanian intellectuals established the separatist Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) and, in line with their orientation and financial backing from the Albanian diaspora community, pursued the policy of peaceful resistance by forming unofficial parallel institutions. Following the outbreak of the Yugoslav state crisis and Slovenia and Croatia's declarations of independence in mid-1991, the Kosovo Albanians decided to hold an unofficial referendum in September, to secure their own independence, and unofficial elections in May 1992, leading to the proclamation of the Republic of Kosovo (Krieger 2001: 522). However, these efforts were completely ignored by the international community.

Throughout the 1990s, political distancing from Serbia could, in no way, imply improvements in terms of economic performance. The Serbian leadership sought to control public enterprises and Albanians' hard currency accounts, leaving many members of the local community highly dependent on diaspora support and small family businesses; still, as summarized by Clark (2000: 115), "[while] private enterprise had brought a form of stability, a *modus operandi* without war, [it] could not define what economic strategies would serve the goal of self-determination, what economic relations with Serbia would best serve to undermine the regime's domination of Kosovo and what economic programs would best serve Kosovo's own development." In such a context, the LDK's pacifist doctrine lost credibility and paved the way for the militarist Kosovo Liberation Army to take over the Kosovo question. The culmination of confrontations between the army and Serbian troops in early

1999 prompted a NATO-led humanitarian intervention, aimed at preventing the Serbian authorities from conducting ethnic cleansing and imposing full control over Kosovo's territory. Once terminated, some three months later, the two sides were to be presented with a number of initiatives, altogether exposing their own as well as other stakeholders' unpreparedness to resolve the Kosovo status (Radeljić 2014). However, as none of the proposals were capable of pleasing both sides, the Kosovo Albanian leadership took a major step in early 2008 by proclaiming independence from Serbia. In the view of the overwhelmingly united Albanians, this long-awaited moment firmly cemented their common goal of national interest.

Kosovo between local and international blessings

The process of Kosovo's attainment of statehood has been accompanied by numerous obstacles and disapproval, both locally (due to the strong Serbian factor) and internationally (due to disagreements between some key players). By the early 1990s, even though the situation in the province had often appeared uncontrollable and at the brink of civil war, and the Kosovo Albanian population was strongly in favor of independence and international recognition as the only solution to their position in the post-Yugoslav context, the question of Kosovo was marginal for the international community (Caplan 2005: 139). Even though policymakers kept discussing the situation and condemning violations of human rights, neither the 1992 recognitions nor the 1995 Dayton Peace Accords which officially put an end to the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, were deemed suitable occasions to address the autonomous status of Kosovo (Radeljić 2016a). Still, in the view of various Western officials, its independence was the only way forward; for example, Willem van Eekelen, a Dutch senator, while criticizing the West for "making the mistake of saying it prefers to keep the remainder of Yugoslavia together," and acknowledging that "the proliferation of small, perhaps unviable states is not an attractive prospect," went on to question as to "why make a difference in principle between, say, Slovenia and Kosovo when fundamental human rights are being crushed" (van Eekelen 1998). The pro-independence stance was also tabled by some non-profit organizations, such as the Public International Law and Policy Group which proposed to begin with an intermediate sovereignty and gradually progress towards a referendum on independence and finish with a pursuit of international recognition (Radeljić 2016a: 138).

However, the intensified confrontation between local Albanians and Serbian forces, which culminated in January 1999 with the (often-contested) Račak massacre, increased the level of international alertness (Johnstone 2002: 240–243; Kritsiotis 2000). As maintained by NATO allies, external action and consequent post-interventionist initiatives were required to stop repression and

protect human rights, although their eventual success has proved limited. The consequent NATO military intervention was subject to numerous criticisms, mainly that it occurred without a proper strategy, explicit authorization by the UN Security Council, and that it had nothing to do with humanitarian impulses (Bellamy 2000; Henriksen 2008; Roberts 1999; Wheeler 2000), but was largely about defending the West's geopolitical interests in the region, as well as about pushing United States power right up to the borders of Russia (Radeljić 2016b; Radeljić 2017). In the words of Baranovsky (2000: 455), "the Kosovo phenomenon" managed to influence Russia's understanding of its own position and its relations with the rest of the world; the fact that NATO nevertheless decided to get involved militarily in FRY – an approach strongly opposed by the Russians – was understood as a "manifestation of insulting disregard towards Russia and as one more attempt to disassociate it from crucial European issues. The air strikes against Yugoslavia, as viewed by Russia, were the most convincing justification for its negativity with respect to the prospect of establishing a NATO-centered Europe."

Once the intervention had terminated, the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244, passed on 10 June 1999, established the UN Interim Administration Mission (UNMIK), exercising full executive, legislative and judicial role. The resolution declared the "establishment of an interim administration for Kosovo as a part of the international civil presence under which the people of Kosovo can enjoy substantial autonomy within the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, to be decided by the Security Council of the United Nations. The interim administration was to provide transitional administration while establishing and overseeing the development of provisional democratic self-governing institutions to ensure conditions for a peaceful and normal life for all inhabitants in Kosovo" (UN 1999). However, neither UNMIK nor the NATO-led peacekeeping Kosovo Force (KFOR) was capable of preventing violations of human rights in the areas comprising the remaining Serbs and other non-Albanian population. Thus, in contrast to the initial situation when international involvement was needed to protect the Kosovo Albanians from Serbian oppression, now the foreign presence was expected to protect the Serbs from the Kosovo Albanians. As explained by Hughes (2013: 1005), "NATO's insistence on a marginal Russian military presence undoubtedly contributed to the ethnic cleansing of Serbs from Kosovo, as a stronger Russian contingent would have been more productive than NATO forces in defending Serb areas."

Apart from failing to please the Kosovo Albanians with speedy independence and international recognition, the foreign involvement has also failed to protect minorities as evident by the creation of Serbian enclaves that are politically and economically integrated with Serbia. The internationals welcomed the so-called standards before status approach, according to which Kosovo's attainment of statehood would be conditioned by its capacity to meet certain standards in relation to public administration, development of market

economy, protection of the rights of all ethnic communities, and so on (Ante 2010: 149–151). Kosovo's incapacity to meet the 2002 UN-prescribed standards was replaced with the Standards Implementation Plan and the infamous Vienna talks, altogether focusing on the economy, safety of minorities, institutions and the rule of law, and dialogue between Belgrade and Priština. As the overall progress was slow and unsatisfactory, with the Kosovo Albanian leadership having become frustrated by the lack of united support (from EU and Security Council members), the ruling elite opted for a unilateral declaration of independence in February 2008, with the Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo to be fully enacted in April. Such a move, in their view, "marked the end of the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia" (*BBC* 2008).

The process was boycotted by the Serb minority and, in response, the Serbian National Assembly stated that Kosovo's declaration of independence was an illegal act and therefore null and void. Prime Minister Vojislav Koštunica, supported by the Russian Federation, referred to Kosovo as a "false state," arguing that it was largely backed by the United States and that the whole process actually represented a "humiliation" for the European Union (cited in Bilefsky 2008). Moreover, the Serbian leadership decided to approach the International Court of Justice for an advisory opinion as to whether or not Kosovo's proclamation of independence was in accordance with international law. By the time of the verdict (ICJ 2010), more than sixty states (including some of the most influential Western governments) had already recognized Kosovo, making the court's decision – according to which Kosovo's adoption of the declaration of independence did not violate international law – look somewhat redundant, if not even more discouraging for the Serbian side and more encouraging for the Albanian side. As one account put it, "[t]he Kosovo opinion has seemingly had little impact in terms of increasing recognition for Kosovo; had the opinion explicitly said Kosovo's declaration was illegal, one can be skeptical that any State that had previously recognized Kosovo would have withdrawn its recognition" (Borgen 2010: 1033).

In the case of Kosovo, its second attempt to secure statehood, despite the fact that it has been more successful than the previous one, has been far from straightforward. For example, China and Russia, who had strongly objected to the NATO intervention – viewed as the US way to reinforce its global supremacy (Sakaguchi and Mayama 2002) – have remained Serbia's close allies and continued to side with Belgrade. In the EU, five members' determination not to recognize Kosovo's independence has been analyzed in the context of their own problems (as in the case of Spain), even though the relevance of the Kosovo case has repeatedly been downplayed. Apart from the individual position of EU member states, the Brussels administration – regardless of the efforts of the European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX), established in 2008, with one of its tasks being to investigate cases of war crimes and inter-ethnic crimes (Borger 2014; de Wet 2009; Greiçevci

2011; Radin 2014), or the 2010 advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice (Falk 2011; Hilpold 2012; Pippan 2010; Vidmar 2011) – continued to identify problematic issues, but also to suggest that any substantial progress could largely depend on further recognition of Kosovo, including the possibility to secure seat in the UN and the Council of Europe.

On the other hand, the position of the Russian Federation was in stark contrast to the one adopted by the dominant Western powers. Its Ministry of Foreign Affairs reacted immediately, stating that the UDI "violat[ed] the sovereignty of the Republic of Serbia, the Charter of the United Nations, UNSCR 1244, the principles of the Helsinki Final Act, Kosovo's Constitutional Framework and the high-level Contact Group accords," and warning the international community of "the risk of an escalation of tension and inter-ethnic violence in the province and of new conflict in the Balkans" (MFA Russian Federation 2008). Similar massages were delivered by individual statesman, ranging from Putin, for whom "[t]he precedent of Kosovo is a terrible precedent, which will de facto blow apart the whole system of international relations" (*Sunday Morning Herald*, 2008) to Russia's next president Dmitry Medvedev, who after his visit to Belgrade, when he supported Serbia's determination to fight against Kosovo's independence (*Aljazeera* 2008), went as far as to state that "[f]or the EU, Kosovo is almost what Iraq is to the United States, [being] the latest example of the undermining of international law" (*ABC News* 2008). In the words of Oeter (2015: 71–72), the West's need to label Kosovo's unilateral secession as a "'unique' case that creates no precedent… seems more than doubtful. There exist quite a number of voices in international legal discourse (and also in state practice) that do just the opposite, by using Kosovo as a precedent for making legal claims in other cases … [T]he Kosovo case thus unfortunately constitutes a precedent, although a very unhappy one." In fact, many critics have interpreted the insistence on uniqueness of the Kosovo case in terms of the West's own hypocrisy due to its readiness to apply double standards in front of secessionist requests, with such an exposure being particularly relevant for discussions concerning policy preferences in the cases of Crimea and Catalonia.

In Kosovo, as reported by national institutions, such as Anti-Corruption Agency, Central Election Commission, Independent Media Commission, Ombudsperson Institution in Kosovo, Constitutional and Supreme Court of Kosovo, as well as international stakeholders, such as OSCE, UN-led bodies, Council of Europe, EU Rule of Law Mission, different foundations and non-governmental organizations, the state leadership has been expected to show a much stronger commitment and a more effective implementation of standards regulating human rights, the fight against organized crime and corruption, and the consolidation of the judiciary and prosecutorial system (Radeljić 2016a: 140). However, while primarily concerned with their own interests in the region, the Brussels and Washington administrations have turned a blind eye,

abandoned the standards before status policy, and welcomed semi-authoritarian elites whose focus has been on power and wealth maximization through clientelist exchanges, rather than on reforms and democratic transformation of the young, fragile state. For example, looking at the outcome of the 2010 parliamentary elections, Ulrike Lunacek, Member of the European Parliament and a strong advocate of Kosovo's independence, observed that "[t]he relative weakness of the Kosovo government, after fraudulent elections and a prolonged process for the voting and inauguration of the new president and the formation of government … do not give Prime Minister Hashim Thaçi the argumentative standing and power that he would need in order to show the necessary strength in the diplomatic arena and at home" (Lunacek 2012: 151).

Similarly, the subsequent rounds of elections have confirmed the existence of institutional weaknesses preventing Kosovo's consolidation, as evident from Prime Minister Albin Kurti's statement that his government's project was to "liberate our state from within" (cited in *The Economist* 2020). Such a standpoint goes hand in hand with Kosovo's refusal to be used as a justification for Catalan independence; while seeing the analogy as "meaningless," some policymakers have insisted that Kosovo "will never recognize the independence of Catalonia" since doing otherwise "would mean 'denying history or misinterpreting it' because Kosovo 'fought for democracy, but above all, for human rights', which is not the case with Catalonia" (*Kosovo Online* 2023). Most recently, by recognizing Kosovo passports (Istrefi 2024), Spain (as well as other EU non-recognizers) has prompted a new round of questions about the continuation of the actual position vis-à-vis Kosovo's statehood and independence.

The Catalan failure

The unsuccessful Catalan endeavor for independence has traversed several significant events, which when taken together, expose disagreements among secessionist factions, the lack of a social consensus on secession, and socioeconomic shifts within Catalan society following the 2008 global financial crisis. On that basis, a robust political and social movement was built, but one that was unable to prevail over Spanish institutions. For example, neither of the two referendums convened by the Catalan authorities (in 2014 and 2017) secured the necessary approval from the Spanish government. Even though the Spanish state is the only authority to convene referendums, which meant that the outcome of the Catalan referendums would be declared unconstitutional and rejected for procedural reasons, Catalan president Carles Puigdemont nevertheless declared independence on 10 October 2017. However, aware of the issues, the decision was promptly suspended, all with the hope of triggering a dialogue with the Spanish government. The pro-independence leadership was clearly disappointed with international reactions, and specially the absence of

EU reaction in front of "the Spanish clampdown" and the suspension of Catalan autonomy (Bremberg and Gillespie 2022: 64). As it would turn out, the insufficient intervention of external stakeholders would prove a key element in the conflict's outcome. Later on, successive regional elections have resulted in nationalist majorities and, paradoxically, less capacity for agreement between secessionist parties due to the increasingly divergent strategies of Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (Republican Left of Catalonia, ERC) and Junts Per Catalunya, the party led from exile by Carles Puigdemont (Pallarés 2023, 15).

This section applies the same comparative lens to a different setting – a sovereignty movement emerging in the aftermath of the Eurozone crisis within a consolidated EU member state. The analysis first explores how economic grievances and the fragmentation of Catalonia's social coalition reframed autonomy demands into a secessionist agenda, then turns to the absence of external endorsement as a structural constraint that shaped the failure of internationalization strategies. By foregrounding these dynamics, the case anticipates a broader argument: that in the absence of geopolitical leverage, even highly institutionalized movements remain vulnerable to domestic contradictions and external indifference.

The (dis)united Catalan middle-class

The Catalan independence process has its roots in the decomposition of the social coalition that gave stability to the nationalist governments of Jordi Pujol (1980–2003), with the coalition Convergencia i Unió (Convergence and Unity, CiU), and the tripartite governments of the Partit dels Socialistes de Catalunya (Socialists' Party of Catalonia, PSC), ERC, and the ecosocialists of Iniciativa per Catalunya Verds (Initiative for Catalonia Greens, ICV), between 2003 and 2010. Despite all having a political agenda aimed at greater autonomy, none of these governments had a secessionist character.

The 2008 economic downturn was a key point regarding the question of the Catalan class structure. Talking about its breakdown, scholars note that the crisis implied a transition "from an industrial society to a post-industrial one" (Sarasa et al. 2013: 81). The post-industrial landscape – characterized by a diminishing significance of the secondary sector and significant decline of industrial labor (from 23% to 16% between 2006 and 2011) – witnessed a decline in job prospects, particularly in the construction sector. On the other hand, the state witnessed an erosion of living standards (less income and social protection), as well as job insecurity, higher rates of poverty, and a more pronounced inequality. Bearing in mind the skepticism as to what extent the financial crisis might have been responsible for the consolidation of the pro-

independence sentiment (McRoberts 2022: 197–199), it is fair to conclude that "[it] has become increasingly framed as a north/south issue within Spain. What has been interpreted as the relentless siphoning off of Catalan wealth to Madrid and then its wasteful disposal in the south has emerged as a key political theme. In this way, economic grievances rose in importance and an economic crisis became a state territorial crisis" (Dowling 2018: 132).

In such a setting, those most in favor of Catalan independence were primarily individuals with vested financial interests, including people with well-remunerated positions whose household income had remained stable, if not improved. Put differently, "[t]he nationalist vote in Catalonia is located in the rural districts, which are overrepresented, and in the wealthy districts of Barcelona, and other large cities" (Tortella 2017: 296). On the other hand, those against independence were primarily people earning less than 1,200 euros per month or had already experienced declining household income, if not a proper job loss, themselves or by their friends or relatives (Centre d'Estudis d'Opinió 2017: 32–33, 38). The trade unions failed to adequately address this apparent contradiction. While abstaining from a clear-cut stance on the issue of independence, they nevertheless supported the secessionists' insistence on the "right to decide" on self-determination through a proper debate with the state authorities (Pérez 2017). Such an ambivalent attitude reflected a crisis of representation, insofar as unions had reduced working class visibility, especially that of the most precarious factions of society, which were precisely those that had recently grown the most.

According to media reports, most of the traditional families of the Catalan high-bourgeoise adopted a clear position against secession (Bustamante 2017; Leal 2018). As witnessed, after the proclamation of independence in October 2017, major Catalan corporations, including Abertis, La Caixa, Gas Natural, and Banco Sabadell, moved their headquarters from Catalonia, with more than 4,000 companies doing so by May 2018, fearful of the economic consequences of political uncertainty (Segovia 2018; Zaar and García Ávila 2019). Otherwise, there was a visible fragmentation at the level of employers' organizations, which had been on the verge of rupture on several occasions. This was due to the divergence between Foment del Treball (the Catalan branch of the Spanish Confederation of Employers' Organizations), which opposed independence, and the organizations CECOT and FEPIME, which represented small and medium-sized enterprises, whose members were largely in favor of secession (McRoberts 2022: 27; *Vozpópuli* 2017).

Internal disunity

In 2010, after having spent seven years in opposition, the center-right coalition CiU, known for its alignment with the interests of the Catalan bourgeoisie

(Girón Garrote 2018: 128), returned to power in the regional government. Previously, center-left coalitions aimed at enacting a new statute of autonomy. This legal reform would accentuate disparities between autonomous communities and reshape the Spanish autonomic system through a reform of the Spanish constitution (Crameri 2014; Cruz Villalón 2006; Gillespie 2020). However, upon assuming office, CiU recognized that progressive parties had steered the traditional Catalan discourse toward the left. This was confirmed in 2011, when the new conservative national government was confronted by the Indignados Movement because of its privatization and austerity policies. The Madrid-originating anti-austerity Indignados Movement (15-M) quickly spread to Barcelona, triggering a crisis that ended up questioning the Spanish territorial model. At one point, thousands of demonstrators surrounded the regional parliament, where the chamber was about to discuss the yearly budget proposal; the regional president himself had to enter the building by helicopter and several members of government and parliament were harassed outside by the protesters (*La Vanguardia* 2011).

The tensions sparked a surge of separatist Catalan nationalism. From the perspective of Catalan authorities, the new Indignados Movement represented a threat to their dominance. Concurrently, the nationalist movement capitalized on social discontent, rallying opposition against the Spanish Constitutional Court's 2010 decision to limit Catalonia's statute of autonomy. This paved the way to a massive demonstration on 11 September 2012, Catalonia's National Day, meticulously orchestrated to galvanize nationalist sentiment in response to the Indignados Movement (Amat 2017: 74). As noted by Kraus (2017: 99–100), bearing in mind the breadth of public protests and disappointment with Madrid's standpoint, "[f]rom the Catalan perspective, independence has become the only viable option to overcome the shortcomings of an autonomy regime that, because of the structural inertia of Spain's institutional system, does not respond to the aspirations of a collectivity which is conceived of by many of its members as a subjugated nation."

Subsequently, populist rhetoric and social mobilization served to polarize Catalan society and increase support for more autonomy and even secession (Canal 2018: 161; also Barrio et al. 2020; Bel 2015; Cuadras-Morató 2016). However, even though the nationalist president Artur Mas promoted the secessionist agenda, his true objective was to negotiate a new financial and tax arrangement and infrastructural investments with the Spanish state, presenting them in Catalonia as a political triumph (García 2018: 25). The central government resisted, which made pro-independence actors escalate their pressure. As the result of 2013 and 2014 pro-independence mobilizations, the Catalan assembly proclaimed the "sovereignty and right to decide of the Catalan people" (23 January 2013) and launched a "participatory process" (9

November 2014), which was a response to the Spanish Constitutional Court's decision to suspend a referendum. All these moves reflected the search for an impossible balance between controlling radical secessionist actors, continuing neoliberal policies, and preserving the relationship with the Spanish government. The tensions led to early regional election in September 2015.

Secessionists attributed to this election a "plebiscitary" character, thus imagining it as a referendum. The transversal coalition Junts pel Sí (Together for Yes) – largely represented by civil society figures, but politically influenced by the Republican Left of Catalonia and the Democratic Convergence of Catalonia (formerly part of CiU, dissolved in 2015) – aimed to secure secession. However, Junts pel Sí faced disappointment as the election results fell short of expectations, with ten seats shy of an absolute majority. Those ten seats were won by the far-left and Popular Unity Candidacy (CUP), which were crucial even though the combined votes of secessionist options were below 50%. Apart from losing his position due to corruption allegations on his party, Mas made another mistake by appointing Puigdemont as his successor, then mayor of Girona and a staunch proponent of independence, which was in contrast with Mas's pragmatic agenda (García 2018: 26).

Going forward, during 2016 and 2017, Catalan politics was characterized by the continuity of the political coalition of secessionist parties, despite insufficient political and social backing for undertaking significant actions, such as the establishment of a new state. On the other hand, the Spanish Constitutional Court kept halting Catalan initiatives including the adoption of the November 2015 resolution by the Parliament of Catalonia, which formally declared the beginning of the sovereignty process, the creation of designated state structures, and the formation of a commission for the organization of a constituent process. The limits of the secessionist aspirations were also confirmed in 2017, when the Catalan government, in response to the rejection of the 2016 budget proposal, arranged for a referendum hoping to subsequently declare unilateral independence. The day of the referendum (October 1, 2017) was characterized by police brutality, which was condemned by different EU officials and international organizations (McRoberts 2022: 222–224). Moreover, President Puigdemont's decision to "suspend" the Declaration of Independence and his admission that the state was ready to employ all means including military mobilization to prevent secession, indirectly pointed out that substantial groundwork required for the establishment of a new state had not actually been done (Vila 2018: 23).

Thus, in the context of their vulnerability, it was also key that the Spanish government possessed ample maneuvering space to suspend Catalan autonomy and assert its authority. In the words of García Oliva and Hall (2023: 144), "the government effectively weaponized the [Constitutional] Court in a

bid to block an independence referendum that authorities in Catalonia wished to hold, and this appropriation of judicial power for a political end has jeopardized the role of the Court going forward." In addition, the central government's agenda was facilitated by the unreserved approval from the general Spanish population (*El País* 2017), endorsement from the Brussels administration (Emmott 2017), and weak resistance from local civil servants (Juliana 2018). Indeed, in the December 2017 regional elections, which followed the suspension of Catalan autonomy, the nationalist Quim Torra, who also served as a proxy for Puigdemont who had fled to Brussels after facing charges of rebellion, came to the forefront. Understandably, the following year, attention centered on steps necessary for a unilateral pursuit of independence and the status of imprisoned government members facing rebellion charges. After being convicted in October 2019 for various crimes, including sedition, embezzlement of public funds and disobedience, they were pardoned by the coalition government in Madrid, led by social democrat Pedro Sánchez. The formation of a new government in 2023 required the support of Catalan nationalists in exchange for a general amnesty, which included secessionist leaders who had not been prosecuted because they are fugitives from justice abroad, as is the case of the current MEP Carles Puigdemont.

The internationalization strategy employed as part of the Catalan independence process implied significant expenditure on lobbying on the part of European governments and activities targeting international public opinion (Cardenal 2020, position 1.231). Despite these efforts, the alliances forged during this process proved insufficient. While Slovenia displayed the most visible sympathies within the EU, these sympathies lacked official endorsement (*ARA* 2017; *El Mundo* 2018). Looking at the EU overall, some political backing came from the European Parliament through the informal EU-Catalonia Dialogue Platform, which attracted regionalist and nationalist parties on the left and right. Even though the Catalan cause gained prominence within the EU following the police intervention during the October 2017 referendum, prompting a European Parliament plenary session to consider a mediation process between the Spanish central government and the Catalan autonomous government (Cardenal 2020, position 1.155), the European Commission ultimately sided with the Madrid leadership.

In the context of the overall expectations, scholars have also argued that despite being open to recognition of unilateral secessions outside the EU, the Brussels authorities found themselves somewhat trapped in front of the Catalan case: "There simply was no precedent of a region within a member state becoming an EU member state on its own and EU officials were not disposed to facilitate one in the case of Catalonia" (McRoberts 2022: 245; also Bourne 2021: 187–189). Authorities in Madrid did count and receive EU

support back in 2017, and afterwards, when some key Catalan politicians found themselves in exile and different EU stakeholders acknowledged "that a political problem existed and had been exacerbated by the way the Spanish authorities had responded to it" (Bremberg and Gillespie 2022: 63). In the end, the central insistence on the constitutional provisions and the conveniences of the international legal system served to discredit Catalan plans. As Wesslau (2017) predicted, given that "[n]o state has expressed support for Catalonia's separatists or even hinted that recognition is a possibility," it is reasonable to believe that "Catalonia's declaration of independence will remain worth little more than the paper it was written on."

Conclusion

As widely acknowledged in the literature, statehood is not contingent upon universal recognition but upon the fulfilment of objective criteria, while recognition remains a political act (Crawford 2006). As warned by Vrbetic (2013: 308), "[b]esides creating a troublesome legal precedent, the recognition of Kosovo represents a bad model for international conflict management. The issues of concern are the viability of future interim settlements, good faith negotiations and the legitimacy and guarantees provided by the international involvement, including the authority of the UN Security Council." In the case of Catalonia, analogies with previous secession cases were a vehicle for independence through which they sought to compensate at the ideological level for the practical deficiencies of the process, which, in the light of Kosovo, can be viewed through political, socioeconomic, and international dimensions, with the latter being the key one. Accordingly, their examination points out that drawing parallels, while admittedly sometimes useful, has inherent limitations when confronted with actual circumstances. Moreover, while some accounts maintain that "[t]he main problem Spain has with Kosovo is related to the 'procedure' by which it declared independence, i.e. the Unilateral Declaration of Independence" (Ferrero-Turrión 2021: 357), others have gone even further to argue that "[t]he decision not to recognize Kosovo based on the situation in Catalonia and the Basque Country helped form a faulty analogy between the two cases" (Vila Sarría and Demjaha 2019: 86).

In Kosovo, the declaration of independence was accompanied by episodes of unrest in the Serb-dominated north Kosovo (Tran 2008), and also in Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. For example, in Belgrade, a group of protesters set fire to the United States embassy, while others chanted "Stop US terror!" and "Kosovo is Serbia!" (*The Guardian* 2008). Finally, in the case of Catalonia, a massive anti-independence demonstration, organized by Societat Civil Catalana (an anti-independence group) took place on 8 October

2017, just two days before the failed declaration of independence. Internal divisions could also be seen through the clashes between pro-independence activists, who demonstrated against a Spanish far-right gathering in Girona, and the Catalan anti-riot police, which caused internal controversies within the Catalan government concerning the extent to which police should tolerate political violence (*La Vanguardia* 2018b).

The Catalan comparisons with Kosovo underscore political, socioeconomic, and international dimensions, with the latter being particularly crucial. However, while in the Kosovan case internal actors enjoyed a determined, albeit partial, support of international actors, Catalan actors did not receive any relevant support. In this vein, the analogies selected by the Catalan leadership are based on a biased self-referential analysis of a series of transcendental events, and not on the actual similarities with chosen cases. While both in Kosovo and Catalonia, nationalist movements emerged as vehicles for sociopolitical coalitions in critical stages, the chances of success for each of them depended on their capacity to engage with international actors in their respective contexts. In Kosovo, political and economic contradictions have been at least partially compensated for by international intervention, whereas in Catalonia, the decomposition of the social bloc has only been erratically addressed by local policymakers.

With regard to the critical question of internationalization, Kosovo of the early 1990s was neither sufficiently developed nor sufficiently homogeneous; back then, the situation in Kosovo was not relevant to generate any major reaction to the referendum held in September, let alone international recognition. However, the escalation of internal struggles and insertion in internationalization dynamics in the region made Kosovo a fertile ground for cross-examination of policy preferences in the international system. Therefore, regardless of the Serb and Kosovo Albanian failure to come up with a common position, the Kosovan statehood process has very much depended on the contractual relationship between Kosovo and other governments, due to their power to dictate the pace of developments, either by acting as firm supporters of Kosovo's independence or by insisting that Kosovo is actually a quasi-state. In the case of Catalonia, the Brussels administration adopted a radically different position. It decided not to give any kind of legitimacy to the October 2017 declaration of independence; on the contrary, EU leaders insisted that for them nothing had changed and that "Spain remains our only interlocutor" (*New Europe* 2017). In this context, the Spanish government seems to have won the hand despite having applied a purely bureaucratic approach and not having lifted a finger on the international public opinion front.

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