

## Catalan Independence Fighters with Just Cause but Wrong Weapon

‘Rivers of ink’, as the Spanish saying goes, have been written in the Spanish media about the constitutional crisis caused by the prospect of a referendum in Catalonia. But in the midst of all the domestic debate, sometimes the words of a foreigner are enlightening. In his book [Ghosts of Spain](#), Madrid-based journalist Giles Tremlett writes: “I did not realise just how hard some Catalans were prepared to fight.” Although Tremlett was speaking about the end of the 1970s and the 1980s, when Catalonia was trying to recover from the repression of the Franco dictatorship, it is a phrase that neatly describes current affairs.

This time I think nobody, not even the Spanish government in Madrid, realised how hard some Catalans were prepared to fight for the cause of independence, using the weapon of a referendum on [Catalan independence](#). The Spanish government has tried everything it possibly can to stop this illegal referendum, first with words and references to the [Spanish Constitution](#) of 1978, later also by confiscating ballot boxes and promotional materials, putting pressure on mayors, and even by placing the Catalan police force again under control of the Spanish ministry of interior.

One can of course argue that the Catalan ‘[nation](#)’ is a social and political construct, but it is one with a long history, a language and a very strong cultural identity. Besides, all nations or ‘nationalities’ in Spain – terminologies that by themselves create heated debate – are ‘[constructed](#)’ in a territory where Iberians, Romans, Visigoths, Moors and many other people, ethnic groups and tribes have come and gone. In that sense, the cultural trajectory of Catalonia, which as some would argue goes back to at least the year 988, is very consistent and stable.

But why do ‘some Catalans’ fight so hard and who are they in the current context? Surveys conducted among the 7.5 million people living in Catalonia have shown different results throughout the years, but the common denominator is that they reveal a [highly divided region](#). While a majority may now be in favour of an independence referendum, the result would probably never go strongly in one direction or the other.

The main reason for that is the fact that so many different people live in Catalonia, which from the 1920s onwards attracted migrants from poorer areas in Spain such as Andalusia and more recently from other countries as well. Catalonia is clearly a [region of immigrants](#). More than 1.1 million ‘Catalans’ [descend from Andalusians](#) alone, which shows how complex and challenging the struggle for independence is.

But it is a just cause. Falling only just short of a federation, Spain’s [system of autonomous regions](#) provides a high degree of autonomy for its seventeen regions and two autonomous cities (Ceuta and Melilla) with many competencies in sectors such as agriculture, education, health, culture and social welfare. But there is no law of nature that dictates this is the end of history. People, whoever they are, have the right to self-determination and should be able to choose their sovereignty in line with the [Charter of the United Nations](#). They may not succeed but they have the right to pursue a democratic path that might lead to a new political arrangement.

The problem is that their current weapon, the referendum, is not the right instrument for their cause. Firstly, besides that it is illegal, the referendum reduces a highly important, complex process to an often [binary choice](#) between yes and no. Secondly, as the recent experiences in Colombia and the UK have clearly shown, a referendum about independence is never only about independence. As Francisco

Laporta, professor in the philosophy of law at the Autonomous University in Madrid, [has explained](#): “In the referendum, some will say yes and others will say no, but probably not to the same things.”

In other words, the referendum will be about a whole set of issues, frustrations, grievances and diverging political viewpoints that often have nothing to do with the possible independence of Catalonia. Even a highly complex referendum with many different questions runs the risk of not reflecting the opinions of the people or, even worse, can probably be interpreted in many different ways.

In its current form, autonomous regional governments could organise the binary referenda over and over again, until they find the right sentiment in society that creates a majority for what is often a [minority viewpoint](#). For the Catalans aiming for independence, this means that the only viable route currently is the [political dialogue](#) with that other political and social construct: the government of Spain in Madrid. That may be a long and bumpy road, especially with the current right-wing government of Spain, and it may never lead to independence. It might, however, lead to even more autonomy.

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