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TOO LITTLE, TOO LATE: THE CATALAN DEBACLE IN LIGHT OF THE SLOVENIAN ATTAINMENT OF INDEPENDENCE

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Abstract. The failed Catalan sovereignty process, launched in 2012 and then crushed by the intervention of the Spanish central government in 2017, relied to a certain extent on a discursive framework based on the evocation of previous secessionist experiences in Europe. Among these, the case of Slovenia (successfully completed in 1992) stood out. A close examination of these cases outlines the limitations of these analogies, notably through their differences in terms of political and social articulation and, in particular, the diverging success of external engagement. Beyond political and social articulation and the degree of economic development (heterogeneous aspects in many successful statehood processes), the comparison of these cases demonstrates that a sound internationalization strategy is essential for statehood attainment. The success of such a strategy does not solely depend on the secessionist actors' ability to reach out to the relevant international players, but also on the latter's readiness to provide necessary support. While the Slovenes managed to promptly engage with the rapid geopolitical changes in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, the Catalan bid for secession found receptiveness only among marginal actors within major powers, all together unwilling to push for border changes of a state located in a sensitive area of the Euro-Atlantic security complex.

Keywords: Slovenia, Catalonia, secessionism, post-Cold War, international recognition
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Introduction

Since the very launch of the Catalan sovereignty process in 2012, its key figures have insisted that they were following a path to liberation, already successfully pursued by some other European peoples who had experienced the yoke of exploitation. They repeatedly referenced the dissolution of Yugoslavia; in particular, the case of Slovenia, which – after its proclamation of independence in 1991 – progressed and secured membership in the EU and NATO in 2004. Between 2012 and 2018, the Slovenian scenario was featured in pro-sovereignty media outlets, civil society platforms and, most importantly, Catalan autonomous institutions, including successive presidents.

For many political and social leaders, analogies represent powerful propaganda tools; they tend to simplify and decontextualize real events, even though the then variables do not serve the explanation of current dynamics [Jervis, 1976]. Here it is worth mentioning the celebration of the Catalan Way in 2013, which directly evoked the Baltic Way of 1989[1] and the screening of documentaries on Catalan public television explaining some recent cases of secession[2]. It also recalled the use of cases such as that of the Russian minorities in the Baltic countries to warn political opponents of possible consequences if not supporting the sovereigntist agenda. The Catalan autonomous institutions also legitimized the sovereignty process through bodies such as the Advisory Council for National Transition (Consell Assessor per a la Transició Nacional – CATN), created in February 2012 with the aim of generating ideas for holding a secession referendum. In its first report, which contained recommendations to the autonomous government, the CATN highlighted the use of cases such as those of Scotland and Quebec to legitimize the consultation on independence of November 9, 2014 as an instrument of an "advanced and cosmopolitan conception of democracy"[3]. According to the council, the consultation was part of the long list of referenda that were regularly held in different EU countries in order to decide on relevant issues. In this vein, it referenced settings in which a referendum led to the creation of new states, listing the examples of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovenia, Macedonia and Montenegro; the failed case of Quebec in 1995; and that of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which was accompanied by the outbreak of civil war. These examples were not chosen arbitrarily. They all pertained to matters in the interest of the Catalan secessionist leadership, even though some of the cited cases were of a contradictory nature [Lo Cascio, 2017].

As it happened, cases of agreed referenda were analyzed, such as the Scottish referendum; those related to international legal compliance, such as the problematic situation in Kosovo; or integration as a model EU state, as in the case of Slovenia. Indeed, the

[1] ARA (2013) 'Carme Forcadell: "La cadena humana és un gran repte logístic, però l'autèntic repte és polític",' 2 August. URL: https://www.ara.cat/politica/Carme-Forcadell-repte-logistic-lautentic_0_967103430.html (accessed: 10.03.2023).

[2] TV3 (2012) 'La independència pas a pas', 4 November. URL: http://www.ccma.cat/tv3/alacarta/programa/La-independencia-pas-a-pas/video/4317930/ (accessed: 20.03.2023).

[3] CATN (2013) 'La Consulta sobre el Futur polític de Catalunya, Consell Assessor per a la Transició Nacional'. URL: https://www.ara.cat/politica/informe-consell-assessor-transicio-nacional_0_1120088191.html (accessed: 14.03.2023).

propagandistic emphasis on similarities (regardless of their largely decontextualized character) between the Catalan case and that of Slovenia's attainment of independence was instrumental at critical junctures of the entire process of Catalan self-determination[1]. For example, just before the declaration of independence of October 10, 2017, MEP Ramon Tremosa (PDeCAT, ALDE group) pointed out that, as per the Slovenian path, the Catalan proclamation of independence would also witness an immediate opening of negotiations with the mother state[2]. Moreover, as reported by Sandrine Morel, *Le Monde* correspondent in Spain: "On the night of 10 October, when independence was declared and suspended, my colleague at *Le Monde*, Isabelle Piquer, spoke to some of the demonstrators gathered in front of the parliament. One woman told her then that she trusted Puigdemont [then regional president] because the president had chosen a path 'similar to Slovenia's.' She knew because she had seen it on television: 'Now I understand why TV3 [Catalan public broadcaster] has talked so much about it: it was to prepare us!' This comparison was daring, if not absurd" [Morel, 2018: 122].

However, the evocations of the Slovenian case in Catalonia overlooked the particularities of the Yugoslav disintegration, including their socioeconomic roots, the composition of their ruling classes, and the international context in which they developed. To begin with, it is worth stating that the Yugoslav state was a one-party federation, which incorporated six republics (one of which – Serbia – with two autonomous provinces), which were further divided into communes. Before the 1974 constitution, the state had already become "segmented along republic borders. […] Yugoslavia's artificial and arbitrary internal, administrative borders were progressively 'upgraded' to national or 'civilizational' fault-lines and increasingly became communications barriers" [Sofos, 1998: 165]. Later, following the 1974 constitution, which provided individual republics with a state-like status, it was a matter of time when federation's peoples or nationalities would exploit internal fragilities and start seeking more independence – a process largely facilitated by the economic and political nationalisms of the 1980s [González-Villa, 2019; Hayden, 1999; Pešić, 1996]. For the most Westernized republics (Slovenia and, to a lesser degree, Croatia), the Yugoslav model had been exhausted; this standpoint was repeatedly tabled during the outbreak of the Yugoslav state crisis and the two republics' attempts to secure international support and recognition [Radeljić, 2012].

In contrast to Yugoslavia, since the adoption of the 1978 constitution Spain has been a nominally unitary state which, through a complex system of devolution of powers, is structured as a "state of autonomies." The system was initially designed with an asym-

[1] La Vanguardia (2016) 'Puigdemont evoca la DUI de Kosovo en el Parlament', 4 May. URL: https://www.lavanguardia.com/politica/20160504/401551083480/dui-kosovo-puigdemont-parlament.html (accessed: 20.03.2023). La Vanguardia (2018) 'Torra plantea la vía eslovena porque "ya no hay marcha atrás" posible', 9 December. URL: https://www.lavanguardia.com/politica/20181209/453445198374/independentismo-via-eslovena-comin-torra-consell-republica.html (accessed: 10.03.2023).

[2] La Vanguardia (2017) Tremosa apunta a la vía eslovena: Declarar la independencia y suspenderla un tiempo, 9 October. URL: https://www.lavanguardia.com/politica/20171009/431919589121/ramon-tremosa-eslovenia-independencia-suspenderla-tiempo.html (accessed: 20.03.2023).

metrical structure, according to which the territories with historical and linguistic specificities (the Basque Country, Catalonia, and Galicia) were to be constituted as autonomous communities by "constitutional delegation" and would have greater powers [Aparicio Pérez, 2010: 74]. However, as a consequence of political developments in the early 1980s, the process was informally homogenized; this gave rise to the creation of up to seventeen autonomous communities with similar competences in a highly decentralized model [Estupiñán Achury, 2011: 116]. The exception was the Basque Country and Navarre, which retain a wide margin of fiscal and tax autonomy protected by the constitution by virtue of their historical rights [De la Hucha Celador, 2004]. The dynamics of decentralization, therefore, did not stop with the approval of the constitution. Later, in 2006, with a second wave of reforms tackling the question of autonomy [Seijas Villadangos, 2008], the Catalan political parties promoted a regulatory change that broke the balance of two decades of autonomous system, insofar as it modified the Spanish legal system unilaterally [Carrillo, 2008], including the constitution [Cruz Villalón, 2006]. The haircut suffered by this reform at the hands of the Constitutional Court in June 2010 ended up being a precedent of the Catalan sovereignty process, and an important element in the discourse on the grievances suffered by Catalonia in Spain.

Beyond the differences in the structure of the state, the Yugoslav drama unfolded at the time of geographical expansion of globalization and enlargement of the Euro-Atlantic security complex. In particular, Lloyd Cox notes the importance of neoliberalism in the weakening of states that were affected by secessionist struggles, and the fact that the change in the distribution of power brought about by the end of the Cold War allowed the involvement of the United States and European powers in favor of some secessionist movements in Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union [Cox, 2008: 43–46]. Local conditions in the former facilitated such dynamics. Decentralization stemmed from the unequal organization of production across Yugoslavia, which reproduced political dilemmas typical of semi-peripheral states. In her study about the link between unemployment and Yugoslav dissolution, Susan Woodward [1995a] identified two economic models, corresponding to (a) the development of export-oriented production processes and close to full employment, as in the Slovenian model, and (b) the production focused on raw materials, energy, and infrastructure, as in the so-called Foča model, which was highly dependent on federal funds to compensate for periods of economic contraction. This involved the adoption of a technocratic style in the 1970s, which gradually facilitated embracement of capitalism with the help of local cultural apparatuses, emblematic of self-managing socialism in the late 1980s [Močnik, 2017: 293]. Such a trend made the relationship between the more developed republics and the federal government, over the control of funds available for investment, increasingly contentious. Nationalism, in those circumstances, became a powerful mechanism of additional economic pressures in the field of production [Močnik, 2009]. Consequently, the crisis of the social coalition and regulated access to public employment sustained the dismantling of the Yugoslav state as a single market [Woodward, 1995a: 371–374]. Most relevantly, in contrast to the context of the Yugoslav case, the Catalan case was closely related to the post-2008 financial crisis developments, including the rise of populism in Western Europe [Veiga et al., 2019: 184–187]. This context was a far cry from the one in which the United States aspired to maintain its unchallenged hegemony through liberal interna-

tionalism in its various forms [Veiga, 2015: 543–552]. Catalan independence, if successful, was to be synthesized during the course of the crisis of the European integration process, the collapse of the European security system established in the Cold War, the articulation of the new transatlantic axis represented by Donald Trump's United States and Brexit in the United Kingdom, and the reaffirmation of Russia and, above all, China as great powers.

Through the analysis of the cases of Slovenia and Catalonia, this paper argues that there is a contrast to aspects such as the composition of the ruling classes or state-society relations; the synthesis between the timing of the secessionist process and the international context are fundamental aspects for understanding the chances of success of secessionist processes in the post-Cold War period. Rather than comparing the two cases through a set of previously established variables, the analysis of their individual nature and space–time context will allow us to contrast different historical settings, in line with critical realism [Jackson, 2010: 108–111]. The level of success of bids for statehood in Slovenia and Catalonia is assessed individually, in terms of their own institutional, ideological, and material consistency. International support emerges as a decisive factor in the success of a secessionist strategy.

A Slovenian mirror?

The Slovenian case was idealized in October 2017 as contradictions characterizing the Catalan sovereignty process emerged. Its democratic profile, its relatively low cost in material and human damage, and its exemplary character in the context of the 2004 EU enlargement made Slovenia an appropriate model to replicate. The idealization of Slovenia, however, had begun in the Yugoslav context from the moment its own sovereignty process took place. As Francisco Veiga put it, "the Slovenes developed a pattern which, to a greater or lesser extent, was applied by the rest of the secessionist factions" in Yugoslavia. This included the use of propaganda aimed at selling their struggle for democracy as a David vs. Goliath battle, a strategy aimed at provoking international involvement [Veiga, 2011: 46–49]. The standardization of the Slovenian model conditioned Croatia's development from the outset, as it struggled unsuccessfully to keep up with the fast pace imposed by Ljubljana and ended up in a bloody armed conflict [Silber, Little, 1996: 149–150].

Roots of the social coalition

Slovenian distinctiveness is rooted in the idea of a community of common interest comprised of local political elites, technical cadres and managers of popular extraction, and the organized working class. This started to gain a fuller shape following the introduction of market economy elements into Yugoslavia in the mid-1960s. Slovenia's unique productive structure, which favored exports of manufactured goods to Western markets and tended to have full employment, was reinforced through the reforms that consolidated the decentralized model [Kirn, 2014: 295]. This helped to underpin differences between the rich northern regions and the poor areas of southern Yugoslavia, with the former enjoying greater funding capacity and, ultimately, benefiting from the low wages of the latter. In this way, the Slovenian political and social forces managed to form a community gathered around common interests that, in the name of competitiveness, opposed the Yugoslav federal authorities' control of economic policy.

Within the above framework, the new managerial class operated hand in hand with the working class (organized through official unions) who played a harmonizing role within companies and between these and political power. The position of unions consolidated throughout the 1960s and 1970s, reaching its peak in the 1980s [Stanojević, 2003: 293]. In this period, conflict within companies reinforced the foundations of the Slovenian political–social coalition considering that the strikes were fundamentally inspired by socioeconomic motivations, rather than political demands. The benefit of such an arrangement was that it slowed down the questioning of the system as a whole at the republican level. At the same time, it facilitated polarization vis-à-vis the federal level and the inclusion of the workers' movement in the independence process. Thus, the dissatisfaction with the economic situation in Slovenia (price- and labor-related) ended up being channeled through accusations of the inefficiency of federal aid and the state's investment in the south (fed to a large extent by Slovenian money). Later, following the attainment of independence, the integration of the labor movement into the system materialized through the act of preserving some aspects of the system of contractual socialism. This included the re-founding of the official Association of Trade Unions, which became the Association of Free Trade Unions in 1991 [Bembič, 2016; Lukšič, 2003].

As a constituent part of the socialist Yugoslavia, Slovenia was the most economically advanced entity and the one that focused on central economic processes, as in Immanuel Wallerstein's (2004) world-systems analysis. Consequently, it was the social coalition to be most interested in consolidating trade relations with Western countries. Still, Slovenia also played a central role in Yugoslavia's semi-peripheral position, as it was able to diversify its trade relations after the 1970s crisis by strengthening its relations with developing countries from 1972 onwards in a clearly exploitative way [Ramšak, 2014: 742]. By 1980, Slovenia had the second largest interregional trade balance in Yugoslavia and the most favorable one externally [Bićanić, 1988: 121–123]. This was helped by its geographical location and autonomy in terms of infrastructural development including electricity, railways, telecommunications, and piping systems [Mencinger, 2014: 15]. Overall, the favorable situation was reflected in the standard of living of the population; by 1975, Slovenia's Gross Social Product was USD 2,782 per capita, which was 202.7% of the Yugoslav aggregate [Zimmerman, 1977: 36]. In fact, the growth of unemployment in Yugoslavia did not affect Slovenia, which continued to enjoy full employment levels throughout the 1980s [Woodward, 1995b: 51–53].

The Slovenian military-like model

Slovene independence materialized thanks to a set of political and military maneuvers, carried out to preserve the position of the ruling class as well as to ensure the continuity of the country's social coalition [González-Villa, 2019]. The institutional phase commenced in September 1989, when the socialist parliament passed a constitutional reform introducing a multiparty system at the republican level, while unilaterally turning the Yugoslav state into a confederation [Hayden, 1999: 35]. This mostly happened in response to the culmination of previous social mobilizations, characterized initially by the action of anti-systemic groups close to the youth branch of the Communist League of Slovenia. Later, this was through the unity of action of those same groups with nationalist and conservative actors in 1988, in the

context of the so-called Ljubljana trial when four Slovenian politicians were imprisoned because of their critical writings about the Yugoslav People's Army [Silber, 1996: 51–56].

Following the spring 1990 elections, Slovenia was presented with a configuration of a collective presidency – with the former communist Milan Kučan at the forefront – and a multiparty parliament dominated by the nationalist Slovenian Democratic Opposition (Demokratična opozicija Slovenije – DEMOS) coalition. Despite the fragmentation of the legislative branch, the sovereignty process was characterized by unity of action, not only because of the fact that all parliamentary parties were included (to some degree) in the government. It was also because of the relations between the executive branch and the collective presidency, which ended up being equivalent to those of a cohabitation [Rupel, 2011]. In the new setting, the presidency controlled the state apparatus; as pointed out by the then Head of Internal Affairs Igor Bavčar [2011], "we [the government] had no political or organizational experience. We discussed hours and hours with fellow writers and academics about what we should do, but no one had much idea at first." Simultaneously, President Kučan kept embracing the government's proindependence agenda.

A critical point in the process was the secession plebiscite, which took place in December 1990. In preparation for this, a number of steps had been taken including the introduction of a new national anthem and the approval of the Declaration of Sovereignty of the State of the Republic of Slovenia. This went ahead with 187 votes in favor, 3 against, and 2 abstentions [Pesek, 2007: 196]. The plebiscite was driven by internal dynamics, such as the necessity to reinvigorate the political initiative, which had stagnated in the absence of a viable economic program [Woodward, 1995b: 138]. But it was also driven by the fear of the DEMOS group (led by Jože Pučnik) that Slovenia would be left behind in the acceleration of geopolitical changes in Europe [Pesek, 2007: 222]. The plebiscite initiative was adopted by all political forces in the parliament, including the former communists who limited themselves to defending specific provisions for the plebiscite law. These were in relation to census (that all residents in the republic could participate regardless of their origin), the establishment of a minimum percentage of affirmative votes (50%), and the introduction of a six-month negotiation period with the rest of the Yugoslav actors after the event. Those talks, in any case, were to be based on the premise that Slovenia would become an independent state.

Elite consensus was reflected at the ballot boxes, in which secession won by an overwhelming majority. From that moment on, the aforementioned negotiation period only served to ensure the swiftest possible path to statehood. The Slovenian leadership prioritized bilateral talks with other Yugoslav republics and international actors over multilateral talks and initiatives within the federation. During the weeks leading up to the proclamation of independence, the parliament passed a package of thirteen laws aimed at ensuring the successful functioning of the state from the following day [Pesek, 2012: 181]. Throughout the first half of 1991, the republic took full control of the tax system and laid foundations for a free market economy. Moreover, it had formed operational armed forces, flexible enough to allow prompt participation in a conflict against the Yugoslav People's Army. This was achieved through the import of weapons—facilitated by the support of Israel, Singapore, and the United Kingdom [González-Villa, 2019: 155–157] – with the most robust

shipment, consisting of sixteen containers with some 193 tons of weapons, scheduled to arrive just a week before the proclamation of independence [Šurc, Zgaga, 2011: 206].

The war in Slovenia broke out on June 27, 1991, two days after the overwhelmingly supported proclamation of independence [Pesek, 2007: 382]. The confrontation resulted in a limited number of casualties; it consisted of a series of armed confrontations resulting from Slovenia's takeover of airports, federal administration buildings, and border check points with Austria, Italy, and Hungary. Armed clashes lasted for no more than five days and took place in an area equivalent to 2% of Slovenian territory [Kolšek, 2001: 167]. The federal army deployed barely 3% of its air capacity, 15% of the forces of the fifth military region, and a small number of armored vehicles, many of which were without combat ammunition [Bebler, 2003: 139]. These numbers reiterate the fact that the war was carefully contained by Ljubljana and Belgrade, where Slobodan Milošević had already taken effective control of the federal presidency. Violence provoked a swift reaction from the European Community, which negotiated a ceasefire and a three-month moratorium on the declaration of independence that, in practice, consolidated the *faits accomplis.* In January 1992, both the European Community and its twelve Member States—with Germany at the forefront, and pressured by the involvement of other state as well as non-state actors, such as the Vatican and the Western media—recognized Slovenia as an independent state [Radeljić, 2012: 143–145].

The failed Catalan case

Since its inception, after the failed negotiation with the central government in 2012 aimed at achieving greater fiscal autonomy, the Catalan sovereignty process has gone through several milestones. These include (a) the holding of two referenda (in 2014 and 2017) – neither of which had the essential approval of the government; (b) a declaration of independence of October 10, 2017 – suspended by the Catalan president during the very same speech with the aim of opening a dialogue process with the Spanish government; and (c) four autonomous elections as of February 2021. The political complexity of the process is the result of the absence of a social consensus on secession, the profound differences between the secessionist parties, the socioeconomic transformations of the Catalan society after the 2008 crisis, and the lack of international support.

Conditions for the Catalan middle-class uprising

The Catalan sovereignty process has its roots in the decomposition of the social coalition that gave stability to the nationalist governments of Jordi Pujol (1980–2003) between 2003 and 2010. This involved the coalition Convergence and Unity (Convergencia i Unió – CiU), and the tripartite governments of the Socialists' Party of Catalonia (Partit dels Socialistes de Catalunya – PSC), Republican Left of Catalonia (Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya – ERC), and the ecosocialists of Initiative for Catalonia Greens (Iniciativa per Catalunya Verds – ICV).

The disintegration of class structure originated in the 2008 economic crisis, a period witnessing "a great step from an industrial society to a post-industrial one" [Sarasa et al., 2013: 81]. The Catalan sovereignty process developed in the middle of the consolidation of this

post-industrial society, which reduced the importance of the secondary sector of the Catalan economy and its construction industry, thereby deepening the lengthy process of tertiarization of the economic structure. The percentage of population classified as industrial labor dropped from 23% to 16% in the period from 2006 to 2011. During this time, the loss of employment opportunities, with the construction sector being affected more than others, was partially mitigated by the creation of jobs in the service sector and the extension of the category of new tertiary managers. All of this coincided with the reduction of social protection and income levels, the spread of poverty, and the widening of inequalities. This was especially within the middle class, between managers and the growing number of self-employed workers, as well as the increasing risk of job losses – a feature that permeated all social classes.

In addition, Catalonia progressively lost its leading role in the Spanish economy. The double crisis, represented by the world economic crisis and the political crisis of the secessionist process, deepened the loss of the Catalan "leading role in the political and economic development of Spain" [Dowling, 2023: 81] – a trend that had begun in the late 1990s. Until then, Catalonia was the genuine economic engine of Spain due to its geographical position and manufacturing specialization, to the point that many observers recognized this region as capable of "boosting industrial production and advancing along the path of internationalization" for the whole of Spain [Maluquer de Motes i Bernet, 1999: 459]. However, this dynamic was completely reversed after the sovereignty process. In comparison with the Catalan trend GDP, its real GDP slowed its growth by 4.6% as a consequence of the sovereignty process [Brunet, 2022: 255]. Far from being a conjunctural loss, this decline has been accompanied by a drop in foreign investment, a fall in exports to the rest of the country, a downgrading of public and private debt ratings, and a reduction in competitiveness.

In the above context of fear and uncertainty, support for the pursuit of Catalan sovereignty was greatest among those who had something to lose. According to different surveys, the main advocates for independence were people in well-paid jobs, the majority of whom were satisfied with the income they had received in the autumn of 2017. Also supporting independence were those who considered that the economic situation of their households was the same or had even improved over the previous year. Opposition to independence was predominant among those whose income was less than EUR 1,200 per month, those who had lost their job, those whose household income had fallen in the previous year, and those whose relatives had become unemployed[1]. The presented contradiction was not dealt with accordingly by the trade unions, which, in order to overcome the plurality of views within their bureaucracies, avoided expressing opinions on the question of independence. Still, they did express support for the "right to decide" – an expression used by secessionists to avoid the legally controversial question of right to secession and self-determination – through a negotiation with the state[2].

[1] Centre d'Estudis d'Opinió (2017) *Baròmetre d'Opinió Política 41, Segunda oleada.* URL: https://ceo.gencat.cat/es/barometre/detall/index.html?id=6288 (accessed: 20.03.2023).

[2] Pérez, M. (2017) 'La clase obrera y el "procés",' La Vanguardia, 12 March. URL: https://www.lavanguardia.com/economia/20170312/42801045779/clase-obrera-proces.html (accessed: 20.03.2023).

The erratic Catalan path

The origins of the Catalan sovereignty process stem from a regional political dispute, following the return of CiU – a coalition that used to represent the traditional interests of the Catalan bourgeoisie – to the regional government in 2010, after seven years of opposition to center-left coalitions. The strategic goal of these governments was to pass a new statute of autonomy that would exacerbate the asymmetries between autonomous communities and change the structure of the Spanish autonomic system by passing a reform of the Spanish constitution [Cruz Villalón, 2006]. The idea initially clashed with the Catalan right-wing vision, which was more interested in the long-term consolidation of a nationalist political culture than in the transformation of the Spanish system as a whole [Amat, 2018: 32; Canal, 2018: 112].

Once in power, CiU noted that leftist parties had shifted the traditional Catalanist discourse to the left. This became particularly relevant in 2011, as the new right-wing government faced criticism over its privatization and austerity measures. Pressure increased dramatically with the emergence of the anti-austerity Indignados Movement (15-M) in Madrid, which soon spread to Barcelona and represented the beginning of a long struggle that ended with a crisis over the Spanish territorial model. Clearly upset, the conservative and nationalist Catalan government ordered the eviction of those camping out by the regional autonomous police on May 27, 2011.

These events inspired a wave of nationalism the following year. Catalan authorities' perspective of the situation was that the radical left was directly threatening their hegemony. At the same time, nationalist movements managed to steer social discontent in the direction to oppose the Spanish Constitutional Court's decision to curtail the statute of autonomy of Catalonia in June 2010. This decision was interpreted as an unacceptable violation of self-government by virtually all regional political actors, with the exception of the People's Party (PP) and Citizens (C). The result was a massive demonstration on September 11, 2012, the National Day of Catalonia, which was carefully planned in order to generate vast nationalist mobilization in response to the Indignados Movement [Amat, 2017: 74].

From then onwards, social mobilization remained active through appeals to emotions and advocacy for economic autonomy [Canal, 2018: 161]. The highly populist character of this approach served to polarize the Catalan society and secure further public support [Canal, 2018: 195]. Accordingly, the nationalist president Artur Mas invested his political capital in calling for a referendum on self-determination. However, his real goal was to negotiate a new financial arrangement as well as investments in infrastructure with the Spanish state, which he could sell in Catalonia as a political victory [García, 2018: 25]. As the central government resisted, pro-sovereignty actors increased their pressure. Mobilizations that carried on into 2013 and 2014 contributed to two major institutional events: the Parliament of Catalan's declaration of sovereignty (on January 23, 2013); and on November 9, 2014, the so-called participatory process – promoted by the regional government following the previous suspension of a referendum convened by the Catalan government by the Spanish Constitutional Court.

The election had a "plebiscitary" character; according to the secessionists, results should have been interpreted as equal to a referendum. The joint list Junts pel Sí (Together for Yes), headed by the independent and civil society figures but politically controlled

by the Republican Left of Catalonia and the Democratic Convergence of Catalonia (previously part of CiU, which was dissolved in 2015), attempted to bring together the secessionist vote. Elections allowed the former to approach the objective of leading the pro-sovereignty space, while the latter saw an opportunity to deepen a long-range strategy of social influence [Amat, 2017: 54], which subsequently required a new electoral brand given the unpopularity of Mas's economic policy between 2010 and 2012 [Canal, 2018: 174]. Junts pel Sí's weak foundations were further eroded by the election results, which were lower than expected; the joint list was left with ten seats of the absolute majority. Given the plebiscitary character that had been attributed to the election, the ten places obtained by the far-left and pan-Catalanist Popular Unity Candidacy (Candidatura d'Unitat Popular – CUP) became vital, despite the fact that the sum of the votes of secessionist options did not reach 50%. However, the CUP's impact was short-lived, including the fall of Mas as a consequence of the revelations about corrupt affairs of CiU's historical leader, Jordi Pujol. An additional fallout was Mas's decision to elect someone he barely knew as the new leader—Carles Puigdemont, then mayor of Girona, who, contrary to Mas, had a clearly independentist profile [García, 2018: 26].

The main feature of Catalan politics in 2016 and 2017 was the preservation of the political coalition formed between secessionist parties, despite the government's insufficient political and social support to carry out far-reaching actions, such as an establishment of a new state. This could be seen through initiatives such as the approval of the November 2015 resolution declaring the start of the sovereignty process, the establishment of so-called state structures (including a new tax agency), and the launch of a commission of studies for the planning of a constituent process, all of which were suspended by the Spanish Constitutional Court. In this context, the fragility of the secessionist institutional bloc became evident once again when the CUP forced a motion of no confidence after the rejection of the 2016 budget proposal. The reaction of the Catalan government was to arrange for a referendum and, subsequently, proclaim unilateral declaration of independence in the autumn of 2017, but without making any preparations for the establishment of a new state, as one member of that very government has recalled [Vila, 2018: 23].

These developments exposed the limited political capital available within the secessionist faction, as observed during the approval of the referendum and transitional laws in early September, and then the proclamation of independence in late October. It was also clear that the Spanish government enjoyed sufficient space of maneuver to suspend Catalan autonomy and impose its authority, largely thanks to the enthusiastic support of the country's population, sound backing from the Brussels administration, and lack of resistance by Catalan civil servants. This was especially evident after the imprisonment of different leaders of pro-sovereignty nongovernmental organizations and the intervention of Spanish anti-riot units in the October referendum through direct control of the Catalan administration, which was not opposed by local civil servants[1].

[1] Juliana, E. (2018) 'Se cumplen cien días de la aplicación del artículo 155', La Vanguardia, 4 February. URL: https://www.lavanguardia.com/politica/20180204/44518036224/se-cumplen-cien-dias-de-la-aplicacion-del-articulo-155.html (accessed: 14.03.2023).

New regional elections were held soon after the suspension of Catalan autonomy, in December. A new, nationalist-oriented administration was constituted, led by Quim Torra, an exponent of the ethnocentric faction appointed as a representative of Puigdemont who had escaped to Brussels following indictment for rebellion charges. Throughout 2018, the key focus was on the status of members of the government made prisoners and charged with rebellion. Claims for a unilateral pursuit of secession were restated in December, after Torra's visit to Ljubljana, during which he informally met with Slovenian president Borut Pahor[1]. A few hours later, at a meeting of the Council for the Republic – a proindependence Brussels-based lobby – Torra brought back in the case of Slovenia, stating that "the Slovenes decided to push forward with all the consequences. Let's do as they did and be ready for anything to live freely"[2]. In addition, he made it clear that "in Slovenia, we were told that they did it and that we can do it, too."

The internationalization strategy of the Catalan sovereignty process involved a large economic effort to influence international public opinion through dissemination activities of various kinds and to lobby European governments (Cardenal, 2020, position 1.231). However, the complicities gained in this process were not sufficient. The most visible sympathies within the EU came from Slovenia, but they did not have an official character. According to the notes of Pere Aragonès (the then Minister of Economy and Finance of the Catalan government), his trip to Ljubljana in January 2017 served to gain support of the governor of the Bank of Slovenia before the Governing Council of the European Central Bank, and to compile information in order to compare the experiences of both territories[3]. Two months later the head of international affairs, Raül Romeva, met in the Slovenian capital with the main figures in the country's independence movement [*ARA*, 2017]. Beyond Slovenia, political support was articulated in the European Parliament through the EU–Catalonia Dialogue Platform, an informal cross-cutting forum with MEPs from regionalist and nationalist parties on the left and right. The Catalan secessionist agenda only came close to a major victory within the EU after the police intervention during the October 1, 2017 referendum, when the issue was debated in the plenary session of the European Parliament. An attempt was made for the European Commission to push for a mediation process between the Spanish central government and the Catalan autonomous government (Cardenal, 2020, position 1.155). The European Commission ended up closing ranks with the Spanish central government.

[1] La Vanguardia (2018) 'Torra: "La Constitución ya no sirve; es una jaula para muchos catalanes",' 6 December. URL: https://www.lavanguardia.com/politica/20181206/453395814084/quim-torra-eslovenia-constitucion-jaula-catalanes.html (accessed: 14.03.2023).

[2] La Vanguardia (2018) 'Torra plantea la vía eslovena porque "ya no hay marcha atrás" posible', 9 December. URL: https://www.lavanguardia.com/politica/20181209/453445198374/independentismo-via-eslovena-comin-torra-consell-republica.html (accessed: 10.03.2023).

[3] Segovia, C. (2018) 'Las empresas fugadas de Cataluña superan las 4.000', El Mundo, 28 May. URL: https://www.elmundo.es/economia/2018/05/28/5b0a93b0e5fdeab2528b4583.html (accessed: 14.03.2023).

Conclusion

The study of the cases of Slovenia and Catalonia clarifies the limits of the evocations made in the Catalan case. Analogies have their limitations when contrasted with reality, and those made by Catalan political actors are no exception. Analogies were a vehicle for independence through which they sought to compensate at the ideological level for the material shortcomings of the process which, in light of Slovenia, can be viewed through political, socioeconomic, and international dimensions, with the latter being key.

In terms of internal political consistency, the unity among policymakers in Slovenia, including their close collaboration with departments responsible for defense and interior affairs, increased the capacity to withstand external penetration. Moreover, there were no clashes between citizens and security forces. In fact, the only relevant police operation prior to the declaration of independence had taken place in 1989, when the Slovenian authorities sought to prohibit a protest organized by the Serbian leadership as part of the so-called anti-bureaucratic revolution. In the case of Catalonia, a massive anti-independence demonstration took place on October 8, 2017, two days before the failed declaration of independence. Internal divisions could also be seen through the clashes between proindependence 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 about the extent to which police should tolerate political violence[1].

In contrast to the case of Slovenia, where the matter of a solid class coalition served as the driving force for political transformation and timely external approval, the case of Catalonia has experienced different levels of conflict and disapproval. This has prevented proper consolidation and successful statehood attainment; Catalan actors did not receive any relevant support from international actors. In this vein, the analogy selected by the Catalan leadership is based on a biased self-referential analysis of a series of transcendental events, and not on some actual similarity. While in both cases, 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. This was only fully achieved in Slovenia. In Catalonia, the decomposition of the social bloc has only been erratically addressed by local policymakers.

With regard to the critical question of internationalization, the Slovenian case seems to have materialized in accordance with the spirit of its age. At the beginning of the 1990s, independence bids – framed around democracy and European values, liberation from the (already dying) socialist world, and right to self-determination of a national group – received immediate attention and international support. Germany, as the key player in the process, had no problems persuading the rest of the European Community to follow suit. 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.

[1] La Vanguardia (2018) 'Torra quiere llevar las cargas de los Mossos al Consell de Govern del martes', 9 December. URL: https://www.lavanguardia.com/politica/20181209/453462419669/torra-buch-reunion-cargas-mossos-consell-de-govern-martes.html (accessed: 10.03.2023).

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