

## **Why Catalonia matters for EU foreign policy**

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On October 1<sup>st</sup>, more than 800 people were injured as Spanish police attempted to stop the region of Catalonia from holding an independence referendum. While the referendum was illegitimate according to Spain's constitutional court, the way in which police were directed by the Spanish government to respond was undoubtedly more illegitimate.

As Lauren Frayer in the L.A. Times reported:

“Spanish police smashed windows, severed internet cables with wire cutters, swung billy clubs and fired rubber bullets at voters across Catalonia, a region with its own language and culture and a long-standing desire for more autonomy from the rest of Spain. At least 844 people were injured, regional health officials said. Local media showed images of elderly people with bloodied faces” <sup>1</sup>

For the European Union, Catalonia is the latest chapter in a book of woe. Perhaps the integrity of the EU has never been more in jeopardy. Britain's withdrawal from the EU stood amidst a rise in worldwide populism. For France, Austria and Germany candidates on the far right are now major contenders to the political establishment (in the US case, embezzling the establishment). This rise in nationalism has induced EU heads of state to focus on securing their home territory foremost. For the EU, its core objective in the coming months is to ensure the bloc does not disintegrate further. Because of this the EU stands with Spain's ruling that the Catalanian referendum is not lawful, while also saying nothing regarding the Spanish police “dragging young women away from polling stations by their hair.” <sup>2</sup>

The situation in Catalonia and EU foreign policy may seem unrelated and distant, but the two are much more intertwined than at first glance. The EU has not

condemned the violence in Spain in part because it lacks the tools to scrutinize human rights abuses by its own member states, but more importantly because the EU is a product of its members. If the EU is a car, the union controls the accelerator, the member states control the breaks, and both are wrestling with the steering wheel. The Union cannot effectively pursue foreign policy aims without the unity of its member states.

The EU is currently seeking to project its own international voice as set out in the Treaty of Lisbon. The European External Action Service led by Frederica Mogherini is expanding its Global Strategy Initiative, Pushing for “a European Union of security and defence”<sup>3</sup>. Such initiatives will not be possible without unified member states to effectively support and sustain them. The structure of the EU, and its protection of individual state sovereignty, means that any in-fighting blows any prospect of advancing foreign policy out the water. The EU cannot pursue foreign policy while its member states are distracted dealing with their own crises. For the citizens of Catalonia, the prospect of collective security against foreign threats must seem insurmountable, considering personal security against your own nations police.

As member state unity is required for EU pursuing foreign policy, soft power is required for enforcing it. The EU has never been a bastion of military might and hard power like the United States. To conduct foreign policy the EU relies on economic might and legitimacy gained through soft power. The EU is unique in that it does not command military legitimacy, but moral legitimacy. If you ask someone if they think the U.S, Russia or China is fighting for a better world, and not out of a realist sense of self-interest, the answer is likely to be no. If you then ask the person the same thing, but of the EU, even a Eurosceptic would unlikely deny the EU’s beneficial effects. Soft power allowed the EU to take the lead negotiating the Kyoto Protocol in 1997. Soft power aids legitimacy.

EU inaction against Spain drains its soft power. A union defending human rights now seems to allow abuse on its own doorstep. The EU’s bank of soft power is crucial to its presence as a moral actor that can act and enforce foreign policy. The EU has to compel others to act in a moral fashion as it would like. If it can’t

compel its own member states to act as such, it can't compel others. Attempting to do so under present conditions would likely be laughed at.

The situation in Spain has the EU stuck in a rock and a hard place. The EU cannot effectively pursue foreign policy without unified member states, and it cannot enforce foreign policy if seen as an illegitimate actor. It has always walked the line between respecting sovereignty and having a will of its own. The EU will continue to have a difficult time pursuing foreign policy with such domestic upheaval happening around it. So to as the personal is political, domestic policy is foreign policy. A lack thereof, finds lacking in the other.

## References

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<sup>1</sup> Frayer, L. (2017) *Amid scenes of chaos and violence Catalonia independence vote is projected to pass overwhelmingly*. Available at: <http://www.latimes.com/world/europe/la-fg-spain-catalonia-independence-20171001-story.html> (Accessed: 5 October 2017)

<sup>2</sup> Strange, H. (2017) *Catalonian referendum violence plunges EU into crisis as '90pc of voters back independence'*. Available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/10/01/eu-crisis-catalonian-referendum-descends-violence/> (Accessed: 6 October 2017)

<sup>3</sup> European Union Global Strategy (2017) *The EU Global Strategy – Year 1*. Available at: <https://europa.eu/globalstrategy/en/global-strategy-foreign-and-security-policy-european-union> (Accessed: 6 October 2017)