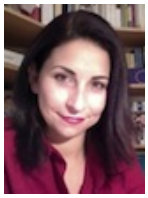
Without a drastic change in approach, further conflict appears inevitable in Catalonia

Following the Catalan independence referendum on 1 October, there are now concerns over what might happen next. **Bonnie N. Field** *and* **Astrid Barrio** *write that a potential declaration of independence by the Catalan government could further escalate tensions and prompt an even more severe clash with the Spanish authorities. Yet without a change of leadership in either Madrid or Catalonia, calls for dialogue to find a consensual resolution to the crisis are likely to fall on deaf ears.*

Protest in Barcelona on 3 October, Credit: Adolfo Lujan (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

On Sunday, Catalans were called to vote in a referendum on independence that had been suspended by Spain's Constitutional Court. A significant portion of Catalan society turned out to vote and the Spanish police attempted to prevent it, using force in many cases. While it is too soon to know the full effects of the events, tensions are higher than ever. If nothing happens to alter the current dynamics, the Catalan authorities are moving toward a unilateral declaration of independence, to which the Spanish authorities will likely respond by curtailing Catalonia's autonomy. The latter is expected to require the use of security forces, with a high probability of triggering more violence.

According to the Catalan authorities, of the 5.34 million eligible voters, over 2.26 million turned out, and more than 2 million voted for independence. The results cannot be considered entirely reliable because the voting process lacked procedural guarantees. The voter census was illegally constructed. Spanish authorities prevented some polling stations from opening. The electoral board appointed to oversee and certify the election had been disbanded. By the end of the day, voters were able to cast ballots at any polling station they could find, with few controls, among other deficiencies. At the same time, the Spanish police forcibly emptied polling stations. More than 800 people were injured. Images of police in riot gear confronting citizens were broadcast around the globe. Additionally, 400 police officers were injured.

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It was the latest and most severe clash between two, thus far, irreconcilable positions. One side has systematically demanded a referendum on Catalan independence for five years now. Proponents include the secessionist parties (ERC, PdeCat and CUP) and some on the left, as well as the pro-sovereignty associations Catalan National Assembly and Òmnium Cultural, which have a tremendous capacity to mobilise supporters. Leading up to the referendum, most polls showed that 70 to 80 percent of Catalans would support a legal referendum. Support for independence has fluctuated near 40 percent. The Catalan government, and its leader Carles Puigdemont, ultimately decided to hold a referendum whether the Spanish government agreed to it or not.

On the other side, the Spanish government led by the Popular Party considers it unconstitutional for a regional government to call a referendum, much less one related to Spain's territorial integrity as it would violate the indissoluble unity of the Spanish nation, stipulated in the constitution. To date, the Constitutional Court's rulings have backed the government's position, though some jurists consider it a restrictive interpretation of the constitution.

These two positions entered into open confrontation on 6 September when the Catalan parliament approved a self-determination referendum law, using controversial parliamentary procedures and with a bare majority. The Spanish government filed an appeal with Spain's Constitutional Court, which suspended the law and the referendum, pending a final ruling. The Court ordered action to prevent the referendum and warned the Catalan authorities. The Catalan government said that it would not abide. From that moment on, the Spanish authorities systematically acted to undermine the Catalan government's ability to carry out the vote.

In the aftermath of Sunday's events, the positions are more polarised than ever. The Catalan authorities announced that they will move to declare independence in the coming days, in accordance with the referendum law, and called on citizens to protest the use of force by Spanish authorities, which also triggered international condemnation. Hundreds of thousands of protesters took to the streets in Catalonia on 3 October.

Despite the damage to its image, the Spanish government has thus far maintained the support of key foreign governments. If the Catalan authorities move forward with their declaration of independence, the Spanish government will likely use Article 155 of the constitution, which, with the approval of Spain's Senate, would allow it to suspend powers of the Catalan government. The King appeared to support the government's position in a speech on 3 October. This option, for now, only has the unconditional support of *Ciudadanos*, the government's parliamentary ally. The Socialist Party is divided. The government's weakened position could trigger early elections.

In Catalonia, new elections, without employing Article 155, are less likely. This would go against the referendum law and exacerbate differences within the governing coalition. Moreover, the Catalan government sees an opportunity to internationalise their grievances. For the first time and because of the violence on Sunday, Catalan secessionists can now more effectively claim to have a just cause for secession and demand international mediation, which for the moment no country, far less an EU country, seems willing to offer. Nonetheless, if it opts to declare independence unilaterally, the sympathy it may have generated in recent days could fade.

Despite calls for dialogue to find a consensual resolution, this seems impossible without a change of leadership. Spain and Catalonia appear headed for an even more severe clash.

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About the authors

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