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Why Independence? Dispatches From Catalonia

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BARCELONA, Spain — It was nearing midnight on the 10th of September in Barcelona. Hundreds of people crowded the plaza of *Foressar de les Moreres*, bodies so tightly knit together that it was difficult to find space to walk. Many wore enormous gold-and-red Catalan flags draped like capes around their shoulders; others had small flags painted on their cheeks and forehead like war paint. In front of the crowd was a raised pedestal, decorated with Catalan colors, behind which a woman shouting in angry Catalan held the crowd's rapt attention. At each mention of the word *independència* the crowd erupted in loud cheers. On the sidewalk near the entrance to the plaza, someone had carefully arranged hundreds of small votive candles to outline the word *independència* in bold yellow flame. Though I don't speak Catalan, I didn't need a translator to tell me that we'd stumbled into a demonstration for Catalonian independence from Spain.

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Based out of the south of Spain, Malia is looking at the primary migration routes via Morrocco and the Spanish enclaves in North Africa. She previously worked for Mint, an Indian business and economics news daily paper, where she wrote on a variety of social issues including disability issues, internal migration, gender, social entrepreneurship and development trends. As a fellow at the Village Voice, she wrote primarily about immigration. Malia has won multiple awards for her reporting and published articles in the Wall Street Journal Asia, Far Eastern Economic Review, Foreign Policy Magazine, Reason Magazine, and Migration Policy Institute's monthly magazine The Source. She has reported from China, the US-Mexico border and South Korea, and speaks fluent Spanish, conversational Mandarin, and intermediate Hindi. Malia holds an M.S. in multimedia and investigative journalism from Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, where she was a Stabile Fellow, and a B.A. in Liberal Arts from Hampshire College.

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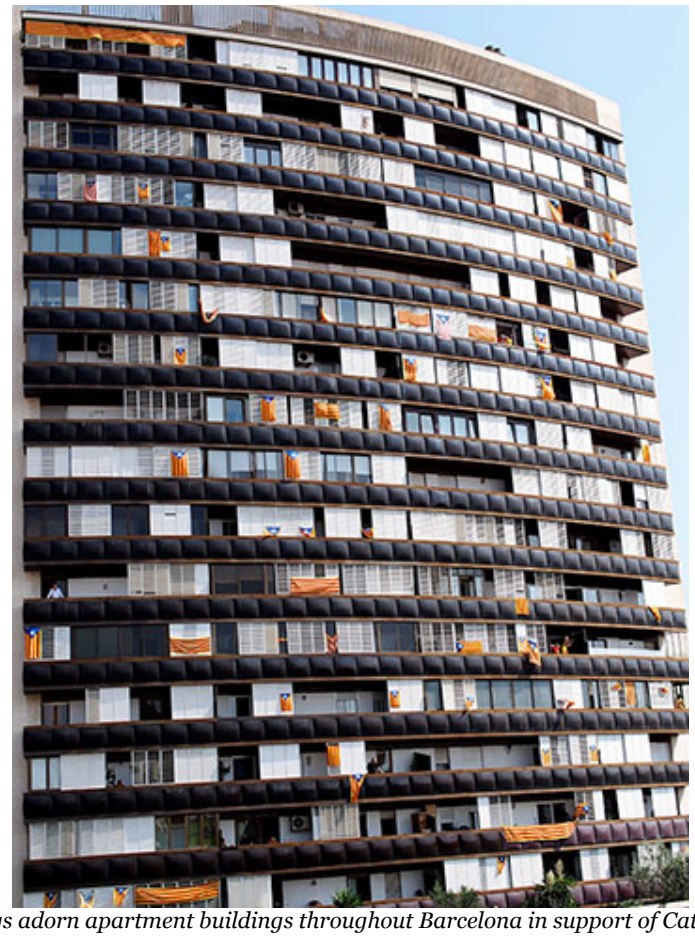

Flags adorn apartment buildings throughout Barcelona in support of Catalan independence on September 11th.

As the bell from the nearby Basilica tolled midnight, the speaker began to sing — her voice joined by hundreds of others as she led the crowd in *Els Segadors*, the song that has been adopted as the Catalonian national anthem. "*Catalunya triomfant, tornará a ser rica I plena. Endarrera aquesta gent tan ufana I tan superba.*" (*Cataluñia, a triumphant shall again be rich and bountiful. Drive away these people, who are so conceited and so contemptful…)* A man to my right accidentally jostled me. An older gentleman with a crown of white hair, he was violently waving an enormous six-foot flag over the heads of the people in front of him, tears streaming down his face as he sang.

Protestors stream into the streets of Barcelona in preparation for the September 11th March.

Midnight ushered in September 11th, an annual festival known as *La Diada* (Catalan National Day) in Catalonia commemorating the day, exactly three hundred years ago, that the city of Barcelona fell to the Bourbons in the War of Spanish Succession. That day marked the beginning of the end of an autonomous Cataluñia. Following the fall of the city, the new king wiped out Cataluñia's institutions and constitution, bringing the region further into the folds of Spain. Recently, the holiday has been coopted by activists, who use it as a rallying cry for independence.

The entire scene left me feeling uneasy. Though I am personally neutral on the score of Catalan independence, extreme nationalism of any kind makes me nervous — an anxiety I undoubtedly inherited from my grandfather, an Austrian Jew, who, along with his brother, was one of only two people among his entire extended family to escape death in the Holocaust. As a third-generation survivor raised on stories of the nationalist fervor that led to the rise of the SS, I have acquired a distinct wariness of extremism of any kind — and particularly of groups that seem to overly identify with an extreme political agenda or national cause.

Despite my discomfort (or perhaps because of it) I find myself drawn to regions where separatist sentiments simmer, sometimes erupting into violent insurgencies. India — my previous home of three years — currently hosts more than half-a-dozen such movements vying for

currently hosts more than half a dozen such movements vying for

independence or greater autonomy, several of which I've personally investigated and written about. Though I didn't always agree, I could understand the desire of some Kashmiris, Nagas and Assamese to separate from India — groups that have either experienced extreme violence and suppression at the hands of Indian paramilitaries in some cases, or extreme poverty and neglect by central authorities in others. Coming from America, it makes sense to me that people might choose to fight for independence from a power that has used excessive violence to control a region, or has been unfair or unjust in the distribution of resources.

The modern struggle for an independent Cataluñia, on the other hand, is one that I find more difficult to grasp. One of the wealthiest regions in Spain, Cataluñia contributes nearly one-quarter of the country's GDP and enjoys more autonomy than nearly any of Spain's other 17 autonomous regions. Still, the demand for independence sky-rocketed over the past decade — rising from 15 percent support for independence ten years ago, to nearly 55 percent today,[1] according to recent polls[2]. My curiosity about the movement brought me to Barcelona, where I hoped to discover some of the reasons driving the movements' recent surge in popularity. What do today's Cataluñian supporters seek from independence? And even more importantly — do they really have a chance?

* * *

2014 will prove to be a pivotal year for the Catalan movement, and for Spain. Battered by the worst economic crisis in recent history, plagued by political, economic and royal scandals, Spain's political stability is tottering. Now, emboldened by last month's referendum in Scotland, the Catalans are pushing for their own non-binding referendum on the 9th of November, which would give Catalonians the opportunity to answer two questions: "Do you want Cataluñia to become a State," and "Do you want this state to be independent?

Spanish President Rajoy has categorically opposed the referendum, which he claims is illegal under Spanish law, going so far to take the matter to the Spanish constitutional court in order to halt — or at least delay — the vote. Rajoy's unwillingness to entertain the referendum is understandable; if the vote is allowed to take place, Spain could lose more than just Catalonia. Two other independence movements — one in Basque country, and another in Galicia — are closely watching how Madrid responds. Should the Cataluñian be successful, they would almost certainly soon follow suit in demanding their own referendum — a risk that Spanish politicians, already troubled by economic problems, can ill afford.

This year marks the 300th anniversary of Cataluñia's loss of autonomy — an event that had Catalans flooding the streets of Barcelona in record numbers to show their support for the 9th of November referendum. Wearing red and gold T-shirts inscribed with "Any as

referendum. Wearing red and gold T-shirts, inscribed with "*Ara es l'hora* (now is the time), the demonstrators marched down two separate streets in to form red and yellow stripes in a giant, human mosaic of the Catalan flag. At exactly 4:45, the two groups met to form a giant V, in a dramatic demand that the November vote take place.

Catalan activists participate in the September 11 La Diada protests in Barcelona.

Spain's recent economic woes seem to have galvanized support of the movement; 1.2 million people participated in the La Diada demonstration four years ago in 2010. This year the numbers rose to nearly two million — the largest number of demonstrators to date. According to the Center for Opinion Studies in Cataluñia, support for independence has risen from 19 percent in 2010, to 48 percent at the end of 2013. Now, more recent polls find the numbers to be closer to 60 percent.[3]

Wandering through the crowd, I spoke to demonstrators about their reasons for participating in the movement. Regardless of which part of Catalonia they came from, whether old or young, the issue of the economy came up again and again. "It's clear that Madrid isn't interested in addressing our issues," said 29-year-old Laura Caralt. An elementary school teacher, she and her boyfriend, Jordi Serrallonga became active in the movement in 2009, a year after the economic crisis hit Spain. Both strongly felt that Catalonia has been unfairly treated by Madrid — an opinion echoed by dozens of others I spoke with that day. "They just want our taxes. We are like a bank to them. They take our money, but they don't address our needs. We'd be much better off on our own."

* * *

Anna Aroca, a well-known Catalan activist, did not participate in the *La Diada* demonstrations this year. Instead, she spent most of the day on the couch in her pajamas, updating the world about the protests via Twitter and Facebook, G-chat and Skype, fielding questions from journalists and pundits from as far away as Japan, and as close as

France. The founder of *Help Catalonia*, an online news platform that translates articles from Catalan into French, Spanish, German, English and Italian, Anna is one of a score of Catalan activists who have helped to launch the Catalan independence movement into cyberspace.

It is to the Internet that Aroca credits the independence movements' new momentum. "Five years ago, people were too scared to openly talk about Catalan independence," she explained to me over coffee the day after the protest. "Even though many people have wanted it, they didn't know how many others felt the same way. Social media has allowed people to communicate online in Catalan. It provided a safe environment where people could speak freely about their desire for independence, and provided a platform to organize. Without it, there is no way the movement would be as strong as it is today."

Enlisting supporters via Facebook, popular blog-rolls and Twitter, activists have stoked the flame for independence, organizing showy events and demonstrations such as Flash-mob and group dances they later posted to YouTube in an attempt to bring global awareness to the issue. "Ironically, the more successful we were at raising global awareness, the more local Catalans showed their support." Last year's *La Diada* saw a demonstration for Cataluñian unification for independence in the form of a 249-mile human chain across Cataluñia, involving approximately 400,000 demonstrators, which spanned from the Pyrenees Mountains to the Mediterranean Sea — an idea inspired by protestors from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania where protestors formed a million-person human chain 600 kilometers long in 1989 to protest the oppression of those Baltic Republics under Soviet Rule.

Like many modern Catalan activists, Aroca's patriotism is intricately linked to her understanding of history. While many suffered and died under the dictatorship of Francisco Franco, few suffered as much as the Catalans. Upon assuming leadership of Spain, Franco began a systematic campaign to annihilate Catalan culture, outlawing speaking or writing in Catalan, and imposing large fines and prison sentences on those who disobeyed. Franco's followers also imported migrant families from Andalucia to live in Cataluñia, in hopes their presence would further dilute Catalan culture.

Just a generation removed from Franco's dictatorship, Anna grew up hearing the stories of Cataluñian suffering under Franco's rule. Both of her grandparents served time in Franco's prisons, and her grandfather was tortured when Franco's followers discovered a stash of books in the Catalan language that he had been hiding under his bed. Even speaking Catalan was punished imprisonment and extravagant fines. Phone lines were monitored, and people were encouraged to turn in their neighbors.

Though things in Cataluñia have improved markedly since the days of Franco, Aroca claims that Spanish cultural imperialism is still very

much present. A native Catalan speaker, Aroca has had many experiences of Spanish strangers who, upon hearing her speak Catalan to her children, demand that she address them in Spanish. Several years ago, she lost her job when her employer found out that she was active in the Catalan independence movement, and she knows many others who are afraid of publically supporting the movement for fear of retribution.

The Spanish government is doing little to salve the fears of Catalans. Under President Rajoy, central government investment in Catalonia has fallen by 58 percent.[4] The *Partido Popular*, the current political party in power, recently implemented controversial legislation passed in 2012, further angering Catalan. Known as the "Wert Law," it mandates that instruction should be switched from Catalan to Spanish, should one parent of a child in classes where Catalan was the language of instruction complain.[5] For Aroca, the law is a clear indication of a new wave of anti-Cataluñian discrimination coming from Madrid. "It is clear that our language and culture is not respected in Spain," she explains. "I want my children to be able to grow up speaking Catalan. I want them to be able grow up in a country where they can be themselves, without being judged by others."

This year, Aroca believes that Cataluñia might just have a chance. "Rajoy thinks he can stop it — but he can't. Too many people want the referendum now — it's reached a tipping point," she said. "One way or another, Spain has to address the people's frustrations."

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