Spanish steps: on the Catalan secession referendum

The long-standing conflict in Spain over independence for Catalonia has escalated into a full-blown political crisis. The legislature of Spain's north-eastern region last week passed a law to back the **October 1 vote for secession,** consistent with the narrow electoral mandate it received on a promise of self-determination. Under its terms, a declaration of independence would follow within hours of the announcement of a 'yes' vote, no matter how low the turnout. In turn, the Spanish constitutional court, which had until now cautioned that a plebiscite would be unconstitutional, has swiftly declared the law illegal. A political confrontation is thus imminent, whatever the outcome of the referendum. The conservative government of Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy had so far merely threatened to invoke Article 155, which confers extraordinary powers on Madrid, with a view to **preventing the referendum**. It is now gearing itself to suspend self-governance in the province, an approach that could raise awkward questions in a European democracy. In June, Mr. Rajoy had warned of dire consequences if authorities in Catalonia utilised regional development funding for expenditure connected with the plebiscite. But the separatists hope that Madrid's hardline stance will further stoke a defiant sentiment against the national government. Such consolidation is critical for them since their support base has reportedly shrunk since the years of the Spanish credit crisis earlier in the decade, despite the enthusiasm for a vote on secession.

All you need to know about Catalonia's independence referendum

Although the constitutional court has invalidated the plebiscite, the prospects for the conduct of the poll appear more realistic, whatever its legal and political implications. Conversely, the confiscation of ballot boxes by the police, or their refusal to allow polling booths to be opened, seem to be more a theoretical possibility given the broader regional context. The European Union would undoubtedly distance itself from any secessionist demand in Spain; it was careful not to offer a *carte blanche* to Scotland on membership in the bloc during its 2014 independence referendum. It may nevertheless cause Brussels some embarrassment to remain silent on any overt obstruction of a popular vote by Madrid, especially as it has come out strongly against attacks on democratic freedoms in Hungary and Poland. A more likely scenario is that the Catalonian referendum would be treated as an informal exercise. The roots of the separatist conflict in this relatively affluent area are linked to a tribunal's overturning of a statute for greater regional autonomy, as well as an effort to apportion the blame for the austerity of the eurozone debt crisis to Madrid. With some imagination, it should not be hard to tap into the currently improved economic prospects for Madrid to strike strategic compromises with Barcelona. Such a conciliatory stance is imperative considering the risk of a populist upsurge in a region where separatism remains a live issue.

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