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Multinationalism in the Spanish Territorial Debate during the COVID-19 Crisis. The Case of Catalonia and Intergovernmental Relations

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the relationship between the COVID-19 crisis and multinationalism in Spain from two complementary angles. First, it provides an overview on how the multinational and decentralized character of Spanish territorial politics shapes the response to the crisis. We find that the management of the crisis reflects and exacerbates the main features of the Spanish territorial model as a case of incomplete federalism with severe intergovernmental deficits. Second, we analyze the effects of the pandemic on Catalan self-determination demands through a brief description of parties, public opinion and governmental reactions. We argue that Catalan secessionism faces several new impediments as a result of the pandemic, but we also find that the COVID-19 crisis provides a window of opportunity for this movement regarding grievance-building and regional governmental performance and salience. We conclude with a general reflection on the ambivalent impact of COVID-19 crisis on Spanish regionalism and territorial politics. Overall, the COVID-19 crisis does not seem to mean an improvement but a potential setback for the accommodation of national diversity.

Introduction

“This virus does not respect borders.”¹ These words, from the WHO director general, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, were the standard argument to justify the centralization of crisis management during the first steps of the pandemic in Spain. The state of alarm, declared on 14 March 2020 without consulting regional governments, imposed a unique commandment in Madrid on regional governments.² This first over-centralization reaction lasted for more than four months, renewing long-standing concerns about the Spanish territorial division of powers. The lockdown de-escalation phase was gradually accompanied by a reverse approach; during this phase, regional powers began to matter to the containment of the virus, and intergovernmental relations gained prominence. The territorial politics of pandemic management in Spain reflects both institutional features and territorial conflicts related to the heterogeneity of ideological and national identities of the country. How has the COVID-19 crisis been shaped by multinationalism in the Spanish case? Can we assess its impact on Spanish territorial politics? Has the COVID-19 crisis affected the Catalan territorial conflict?

The aim of this article is to answer these questions through an analysis of institutional actors during the first period of the pandemic, specifically the first wave and the beginning of the second in Spain and Catalonia (that is, from March 2020 to October

2020).³ Our main argument is that the COVID-19 crisis may have an impact on Spanish territorial politics due to its capacity to deepen the deficits of the Spanish decentralization system, such as its underdeveloped system of intergovernmental relations. Moreover, the COVID-19 crisis, at least in the short term, has had a negative effect on the resolution of the Catalan territorial conflict (the major challenge to Spanish constitutional stability since 1978) because it has altered the political agenda and its priorities. As a result, political talks on the future of the region have been dropped. In this context, the window of opportunity for partisan polarization has been enlarged substantially and it has considerably narrowed that for making concessions and for seeking negotiations.

The article is structured as follows. First, we briefly summarize the emerging literature on federalism and nationalism related to crisis and COVID-19 management. Second, we describe how the Spanish territorial model has shaped the response to the crisis. Third, we analyze the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the Catalan territorial conflict. We focus on institutional actors and public opinion and describe the main reactions to the Spanish Government management to the crisis, as well as the internal evolution of the pro-independence movement. Finally, we discuss our findings and their general implications.

Literature and theory

The COVID-19 crisis has created a boom of all kinds of social sciences academic production. Journal articles, blog posts, and books have bloomed, aiming at analyzing the pandemic's impacts on social and political life.⁴ Nonetheless, the implications of this crisis for federal systems and multinationalism are still largely unknown. In this article, we bring together literature on federalism and nationalism to analyze the Spanish case. This section summarizes the evidence we have so far on the relationship between COVID-19 and these concepts found in the recent research.

The so-called “cavalry imaginary,” borrowed from the American context, is common during times of emergency in all federal systems.⁵ Centralization, single leadership, and eventually federal troops on terrain appear as common-sense solutions to human disasters both at practical and theoretical levels. At first glance, the efficiency principle seems to demand a unique commandment of the crisis. Historical and contemporary evidence suggests that crises and disasters generally stimulate the appetite of federal governments for the centralization of policy measures. While the two World Wars are classic examples of this centralizing tendency,⁶ we can also find recent evidence, such as Hurricane Katrina or the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States.⁷ In addition, federal systems provide a unique institutional setting for political actors to manipulate responsibilities and dilute accountability.⁸ Elites and institutions can use multilevel governance as a tool for blame-game strategies. In a study on the consequences of Hurricane Katrina, Maestas et al. concluded that “this phenomenon of muddled responsibility works equally well across levels of government (from federal to state). When blame can be shifted, elite actors will manipulate the stories to alter citizen responsibility judgments. Citizens respond to this manipulation, especially those who are predisposed to accept the alternative judgment, and shift blame accordingly.”⁹

Recent contributions have already discussed this point regarding the COVID-19 crisis.¹⁰ In an analysis on the US federal system performance during the pandemic, Carter and May¹¹ conclude that “the pandemic response reflects a feeble policy regime, reflected in inferior federal direction and an inconsistent, disorganized patchwork of state, local, and nongovernmental actions.” According to Palermo,¹² even if initial reactions to the crisis suggest emergency powers and centralization as reasonable responses, federalism shows its strengths in managing the crisis because of its potential coordination, efficiency and specific policies tailored to local necessities. Buthe et al.,¹³ in a study comparing unitary and federal democracies, found evidence that federal systems offer better heterogeneous regional responses to the virus, although they also observe in the Italian case that autonomy within a unitary system might be used for other (political) purposes than fighting the virus. Therefore, according to the literature, severe crises generally imply centralization trends, but heterogeneous policies are possible although they open the door to other political uses and do not guarantee more efficiency in fighting the pandemic. As in the US example, federalism might be used by political actors as a tool for deepening political polarization.¹⁴

Federalism and nationalism tend to be interlinked phenomena. Many federations are multinational and experience territorial tensions due to their internal diversity.¹⁵ The literature on nationalism and COVID-19 suggests an expected effect of reinforcement of this political phenomenon, a global trend that was already there before the pandemic “shock” and implies the rise of exclusionary politics.¹⁶ The crisis could have implied at least two complementary effects. First, the return of the state in the middle of the “de-globalization” process.¹⁷ The pandemic could potentially accelerate this return as it can promote the emergence of populist and protectionist policies facing scarce medical resources and social or/and economic effects of the virus.¹⁸ This might be fueled by the return of strong state nationalism, but it might entail a reinforcement of sub-state nationalisms and ethnic divisions as well.¹⁹

Second, there is evidence of a “rally around the flag” effect in the reaction to the crisis. This effect might entail stronger national sentiments, but it can provide additional popular support to institutions and even benefit incumbent political leaders or/and institutions not related to the pandemic management. In fact, rally effects were already observed in Denmark and other countries during the first months of the pandemic.²⁰

Finally, there is little evidence on the effects on autonomy or self-determination demands of this crisis. Indigenous peoples’ demands have obviously linked the fight against COVID-19 to territorial self-determination due to their situation of communitarian vulnerability regarding the virus.²¹ Other authors suggest a general trend of counter-secessionist politics linked to the pandemic, at least when comparing Western European cases.²²

Our specific framework of analysis for the Catalan case is inspired by the literature on secessionism²³ and social movements dynamics.²⁴ According to the literature, secessionist movements operate in a specific strategic field. Their main task is to make their home state accede to their demands, and alternatively, call the attention of the international community. However, as with any other political and social factors, they might face oscillating dynamics depending on incentives, critical junctures and windows of opportunity.²⁵ Obviously, these dynamics, including the windows of opportunity and repertory of action might be affected by the pandemic situation, as we will see.

In short, we expect to find a negative impact of COVID-19 pandemic on multinational accommodation in Spain and Catalonia. Our hypothesis is that the COVID-19 pandemic and its management could imply an increase in territorial tensions and national divides through the mechanisms described in this section: (a) A wave of state nationalism and return of (central state) in a regionalized (but not federal) territorial model (see below); (b) a “rally around the flag” effect both at state and sub-state levels implying more partisan polarization at various levels; and (c) a reinforcement of counter-secessionist policies during the pandemic and political fragmentation at sub-state level.

Multinationalism and COVID-19 in Spain

When on 14 March 2020 the Spanish Government declared the state of alarm to the whole territory and subsequently defined the institutional structures and decision-making bodies that would deal with the emergency, no other option apart from a centralized single commandment headed by the Spanish Ministry of Health seemed to be even thinkable. No consideration was paid to the autonomous communities within this emergency decision-making framework. Not even when, from a logistical perspective, executive powers on health are a responsibility of the autonomous Communities, and, from an analytical perspective, the idea that Spain is one of the most decentralized political systems in the world has been accepted and promoted from Spanish political parties and their respective think tanks.²⁶ In this sense, and following the path of reactions to catastrophes mentioned in the previous section, the initial impact of the unexpected COVID-19 crisis on the Spanish institutional setting exposed the fact that political decentralization is trapped in a mentally and institutionally centralizing frame.

The Kingdom of Spain is formally established as a uni-national state and does not recognize the existence of other nations but only of “nationalities,” a term that remains undefined in constitutional texts. Constitutional case-law does not accept regional “national definitions” to have any political or legal consequence. In fact, nationalities and regions enjoy few veto powers.²⁷ The *Estado de las Autonomías* has both federal and unitary characteristics.²⁸ On the one hand, there are two levels of government, with regional governments and parliaments, regional competences and taxes, a territorial upper chamber (the Senate) and intergovernmental relations. On the other hand, however, regional powers are not constituent powers but rather the product of decentralization (they do not appear in the Constitution as such); the Senate, despite its “territorial” constitutional label, is a classical second parliamentary chamber that represents state-wide party lines on the basis of provinces (not ACs); the power distribution is biased toward central powers and regions do not have fiscal autonomy. In addition, shared rule in Spain is very weak compared to federal countries. Moreover, intergovernmental relations (IGR) remain basically vertical, controlled by the Spanish Government Ministers and underdeveloped. The IGR system lacks any principle of collaboration or loyalty.²⁹

From the very beginning, the COVID-19 pandemic made clear that there is no articulation of shared-rule and that the already existing system of intergovernmental relations was, as a matter of fact, a policy system that relies on a hierarchically

constitutional and legal framework with the Spanish Government and its administration in a paramount position. Therefore, the initial centralizing response could hardly have been otherwise. In need of an immediate and urgent reaction to an unexpected situation, responses to the health emergency could only be based upon “what you already are.”³⁰ “What Spain already is” is a political system in which decentralization is framed into, and therefore constrained and limited by, a classical uni-national institutional setting.³¹

The COVID-19 crisis, thus, indicated that the evident absence of shared-rule is not just a simple deficit or inefficiency of the intergovernmental institutional setting; it is, rather, a question of state-wide institutional design and framing. Integrating the autonomous communities into Spanish-wide decision and policy-making processes cannot be reduced to creating new and more intergovernmental forums and on changing their internal proceedings, as it had been the policy path followed so far.³² Neither would such integration depend on institutional evolution, as some views on the Spanish system have implicitly suggested, as institutions do not evolve “naturally,” and more decentralization does not always imply more federalism.³³ The question is, rather, that the uni-national paradigm has shaped an institutional setting that blocks by default the promotion and, especially, the legitimacy of territorial voices within state-wide decision-making processes. It is, thus, more of a question of legitimacy than it is of internal institutional design.

In this sense, the political and administrative rationales (absence of shared-rule and uni-nationalism) framing a single commandment that excluded the autonomous communities of having any other role than that of being the executors, were linked to, at least, two aspects: the default-institutional setting, as said before, and the inexperience of political actors working through an efficient intergovernmentalist scheme. As for the first aspect, the constitutional and legal setting defining and articulating the three different types of exceptionality (state of alarm, state of exception and state of siege),³⁴ was neither approved nor subsequently adapted to match a decentralized political system in which shared-rule could ever be developed and which involved self-rule as a basis of the system. The central vertex of declaring and implementing any of the three states of exceptionality lies with the Spanish Government, that holds on its own the initiative, and the Congress (the Senate has no role at all), that authorizes extensions (state of alarm) and proposals. Of course, this is far from surprising, but it influenced how the immediate response to the crisis was framed: as the triggering of all constitutional and legal mechanisms does not involve the autonomous communities at all, any willingness to make them part of it could only emerge from a previous definition of this exclusion as a political problem.

As for the second aspect—inexperience—Spain, as with many other European countries, had no experience in managing large-scale catastrophes and/or health crises. This lack of experience had a double effect on framing the response: as the COVID-19 outbreak spread, with no available proven know-how, the system was not only inexperienced and unprepared in relation to the management of the pandemic itself (using Capano’s terms for the Italian case³⁵), but also in relation to the management of a pandemic as a decentralized political system.

The implications of the pandemic shape an analytical perspective of a double nature. On the one hand, testing the capacity to react to the crisis; and, on the other hand,

unveiling that the system was unfit to adapt to the high level of decentralization in times of crisis. Thus, this situation revealed new aspects of the territorial system: either it was not as highly decentralized as it was supposed to be, and/or the analysis of the model emphasized for decades an optimistic perspective regarding intergovernmental cooperation.

The unique commandment led by the Spanish Government found itself facing logistical and political dilemmas: the exclusion of the autonomous communities from the decision-making processes on the management of the COVID-19 crisis came along with the recentralization of their powers on health to avoid policy diversity across the country. At the same time, the Spanish Government reinforced its message on the need to cooperate, although from its top-down perspective. Recentralizing in order to homogenize policy definitions and policy instruments clashed with the fact that the operative dimension of the health system was in the hands of the autonomous communities, so the dilemma appeared in terms of efficiency: deciding without having a clear picture of the implementation instruments was a clear handicap. In this sense, therefore, logistics brought about a timid questioning of the adequacy of the response. Nonetheless, the decisive factor that pushed for a change was the double political dilemma the Spanish Government had to face. As the extensions of the state of alarm were approved one after another by the Congress, the perception that the Spanish Government's idea of cooperation did not include any bottom-up participation at all started to spread. This stance was criticized by autonomous-community premiers from all political perspectives. In this sense, criticisms coming from all parties and the need to look for parliamentary support on other issues beyond the pandemic (the Spanish Government is a minority coalition government³⁶), pushed the Spanish Government to re-address its approach to cooperation, opening the door to some participation of the ACs in the decision-making processes on the COVID-19 crisis. Participation consisted in changing the dynamics of the weekly meetings between the Prime Minister and the autonomous-community premiers from pure one-way communication meetings to meetings intended to define and agree on common criteria and measures. This new trend persisted during the de-escalation and the second wave of the pandemic since October 2020.

From a comparative perspective, the Spanish territorial reaction to the first wave of the pandemic was almost unique. In federal countries such as Germany, Belgium, Canada and Australia, pandemic measures were implemented which preserved sub-unit powers and reinforced intergovernmental relations (Canada, Germany) or shared-rule (Australia). Rozell and Wilcox³⁷ show that these countries benefited from their institutional setting and shared responsibilities between federal and states governments. Obviously, the territorial politics of the pandemic were not free of contention. The US case, partly due to party polarization, has not been an example of efficacy fighting the pandemic, but at the same time, federal powers were not overridden. The most similar case to the Spanish territorial centralization and political debates was Italy. In the Italian regionalized system, centralization was also imposed from the center although without a constitutional mandate, only through central legislation, and regions such as Lombardy raised their voice against the Spanish Government as in the Catalan case.³⁸

To sum up, the impact of the pandemic on the Spanish decentralized system and multinational reality has mainly had to do with throwing light into its defining features.

The initial response was shaped by the institutional policy legacy: centralization and, consequently, the exclusion of the autonomous communities from the decision-making process. The change experienced since May 2020 by integrating the autonomous communities in some partial aspects of the COVID-19 crisis decision-making can be seen either as a first step toward a change in the conceptual framing of the system, or as an adaptative strategy meant to avoid both disagreements in the parliamentary arenas and part of the blaming for the rather chaotical management crisis. Time will tell whether the claims for homogenizing some indicators and for strengthening the Ministry of Health with “more resources” will not imply another drain of powers from the autonomous communities.³⁹

The context of the pandemic: Catalan self-determination movement

Since the Catalan autonomous community has recently been actively demanding national recognition, self-determination, and secession we focus on the relationship between the pandemic situation, multinationalism, and this specific case. Indeed, the events of October 2017 can be seen from this perspective. Catalan authorities organized a unilateral referendum without a legal basis, mainly to compel the Spanish authorities to accept their self-determination demands. Moreover, the internal competition within the secessionist movement to achieve the secessionist goal as fast as possible implied a competition rationality explained by Qvortrup⁴⁰ as a competition proximity model⁴¹ and it was the result of a long period of growing mobilization of the pro-independence political movement in Catalonia.

Since the October 2017 events and the subsequent suspension of Catalan autonomy, Catalan politics have been stuck in a frozen territorial conflict with Spanish authorities. Support for independence is now regarded as a deep change compared to traditional supports for incremental autonomy among Catalan public opinion.⁴² Alternative territorial arrangements (federalism and regionalism) maintain high levels of support, those opposed to independence do not articulate an alternative project beyond status quo.

The Catalan political context, even before the coronavirus crisis, was already precarious regarding the self-determination movement and its objectives. In fact, the virus irrupted into Catalan politics in a moment of extreme uncertainty regarding the future of the movement. In fact, the consequences of the events of October 2017 still loom large in Catalonia far beyond the suspension. The prosecution and conviction of Catalan leaders, together with a myriad of other judicial proceedings against individuals, civil servants and senior officers are factors that have shaped strongly the political and social mood. This context conditioned at least three aspects of Catalan politics: regional authority, pro-secession political parties, and public opinion.

In January 2020, the Catalan Prime Minister (CPM), Joaquim Torra, announced that, once the annual budget was approved, he would call for early elections although he did not mention any specific date. In March 2020, both autonomous-community governmental officials and citizens were clearly aware that the term in office was over. However, there was still a pending issue: the date of the elections, given that the regional budget had to be approved first. The elections were finally called for February

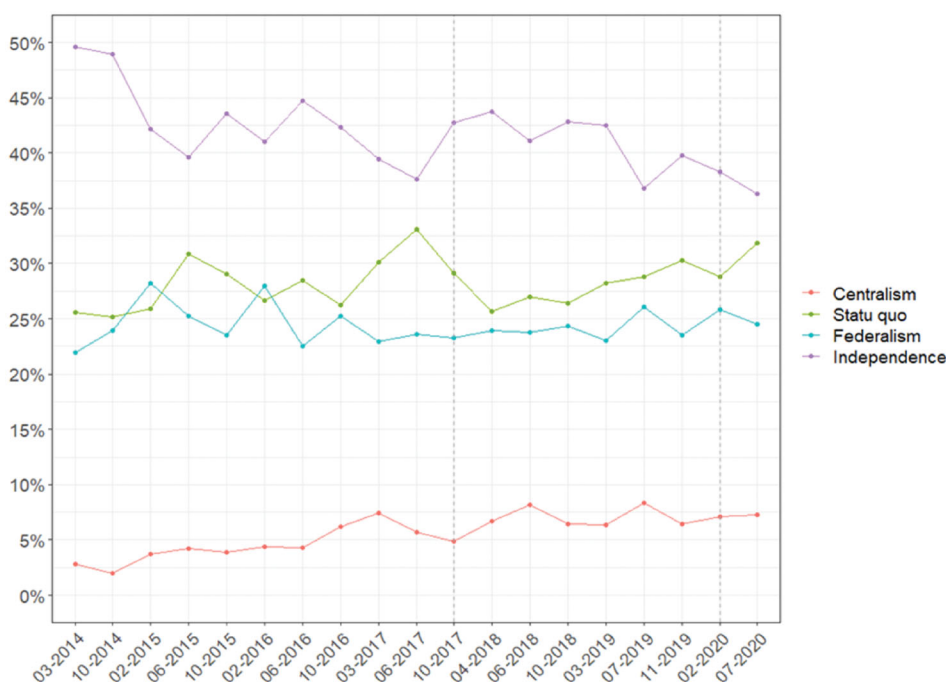


Figure 1. Evolution of territorial preferences in Catalonia (2014–2020).

2021, but the first steps of the fight against the pandemic had to be managed in a precarious political equilibrium within the regional minority coalition cabinet.

Mistrust between governmental partners (Junts per Catalunya—JxC—and Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya—ERC) became evident in many political decisions. The governmental debates between the members of the coalition on the pandemic management mixed with strategic divergences. In the early steps of the pandemic, the CPM (JxC) personally appointed epidemiology experts, undermining the powers of the regional Minister of Health, Alba Vergés (ERC). Later, coordination and participation in intergovernmental multilateral forums became an object of political disputes among coalition members as well. Governmental tensions were, to some extent, a reflect of strategic divergence and intra-party disagreements. Since 2017, the strategic unity among pro-independence actors that dominated the period 2012–2017, vanished and divergence regarding the future of the movement emerged (see [Figure 1](#)). This is not surprising since every political movement faces oscillations. In this case, a critical source of divergence came in June 2018 with the change of the state-wide political scenario: the successful motion of no confidence against Mariano Rajoy (PP) and the subsequent investiture of Pedro Sánchez (PSOE) as the Spanish Prime Minister (PM), opened the door to official talks on Catalonia’s future, changing the strict “law and order” approach of the former conservative government. Within the Catalan pro-independence movement, there was a clear divergence on how to deal with the new scenario.⁴³

Divergence has grown between hard-line secessionists who claim the legitimacy and mandate for secession of the 2017 unilateral independence referendum (most of the JxC leaders), and moderate secessionists (the mainstream position within ERC) who

advocate for seizing the opportunity this new scenario has opened and push for a negotiated settlement with central powers. Moreover, after the “second round” of the 2019 General Elections, the thirteen ERC members of Congress abstained in the investiture voting contributing to the election of Pedro Sanchez as Prime Minister, together with the other regionalist parties and Podemos. The JxC parliamentary members, together with the members of Catalan radical left and pro-secession party, CUP, voted against, as did the three state-wide parties PP, Vox and Cs and other regionalist forces. The general strategic divergence ended up dividing the political space of JxC in a heated debate on its future. Under the leadership of the former CPM, Carles Puigdemont, JxC transformed from an electoral platform into a full-fledged secessionist political party.

As shown in [Figure 1](#), the pro-secessionist government has faced the COVID-19 pandemic in a context of relatively less enthusiasm for independence, although the holding of an official referendum on the future of the region as a potential solution to the territorial conflict remains a strong preference among Catalans. The pandemic seems to have reinforced supports for the *status quo* rather than for secession; however, we do not have enough data to statistically confirm this effect. In any case, this effect contrasts with what is observed in Scotland. In the post-Brexit Scottish case, the pandemic seems to reinforce support for independence. However, apart from noticing the contrast, no more can be said. Further research should be carried out in order to adequately compare whether the pandemic has had an impact on pro-secessionist supports in both cases.

COVID-19 and Catalan secessionism

The impact of the Covid-19 crisis on the Catalan self-determination movement has been Janus-faced, implying both obstacles and opportunities. In this section, we analyze the main factors affecting the self-determination objectives of the Catalan regional government, parties, and civil society movement. First, we describe the context in which the COVID-19 crisis irrupted into Catalan politics. Second, following the literature on social movements, we analyze the main effects on its repertory of collective mobilization. Third, we identify windows of opportunity the crisis has opened. Finally, we search for provisional conclusions on the potential effects on the pro-independence political chessboard.

Effects on the repertory of collective action and strategic field of Catalan secessionism

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the self-determination movement range from logistic to substantive aspects. First, as with any other political movement, nationalist parties and organizations were forced to adapt their political activity to the pandemic lockdown and other requirements. This has had, so far, at least two serious implications for the pro-independence forces. First, it has meant a more complex relationship between leaders and party members in a context that already was logistically demanding, with their party leaders in jail after being sentenced to several years.⁴⁴ The pandemic measures have further restricted communication between the jailed leaders

and the party, reducing their capacity to coordinate the strategies. Being in prison has also obviously cut their opportunities of public exposure. Before the COVID-19 crisis, the convicted secessionist leaders had been gradually granted some temporary release measures, but the Spanish Supreme Court overturned them using the pandemic as justification. This situation has obviously worsened political coordination. Second, lockdown and social distancing measures have affected the mobilization capacity of the movement. Popular mobilization on the streets has always been a powerful tool of the Catalan self-determination movement. Since the start of the pandemic, massive gatherings have been substituted by decentralized mobilizations that have had a limited media impact. The National Day of Catalonia, which had registered massive mobilizations over the last few years, could not gather independence supporters in Barcelona, and it provoked internal debates on the safety of these events. Reactive mobilizations were also scarce. In October 2020, the arrests of several pro-independence supporters accused of financing Puigdemont's network abroad, were criticized in the media but again could not be challenged on the streets.

From a more substantive perspective, the pandemic does not seem to provide an appropriate framework for rebuilding the self-determination roadmap. The context described in the previous paragraphs is unlikely to foster any long-term project on independence. The absence of pressure from grassroots militants on the streets, more radical than the average voters, and the urgency of fighting the pandemic contributed to maintain the self-determination movement in a long strategic stand-by.

The pandemic has first and foremost meant uncertainty regarding the political future. In these circumstances, public opinion seems to be more cautious and less enthusiastic than it was in relation to pro-independence plans. The ANC (National Assembly of Catalonia), a civil society pro-independence organization, insisted in March 2020 on the necessity of adopting a new Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) if pro-independence parties reached more than 50% of the vote in the next regional elections; however, one must consider that this proposal, made in its general assembly, was held precisely during the initial moments of the pandemic. Later, in October, the ANC adopted a plan to monitor pro-independence party manifestos. However, the absence of any possible leverage for popular mobilization makes these resolutions minimally effective in influencing secessionist political parties and government.

However, despite the organizational and communication hurdles, some aspects of the pandemic could be a new window of opportunity regarding the management and territorial politics of the pandemic and for the self-determination movement. We turn to this point in the next subsection.

A window of opportunity?

The management of the pandemic has provided a window of opportunity for the secessionist perspective in three dimensions: grievance, performance, and salience.

The first steps of the pandemic management were criticized by the Catalan Government because of the centralization of regional powers. The literature on secessionism has well established the relevance of economic and political grievances in constructing secessionist movements.⁴⁵ In this sense, the PSOE-Podemos coalition

government provided a powerful grievance to the secessionist narrative that, later, would be adopted by other territories, such as the Madrid region. In the Catalan political context, the immediate centralization of powers and declaration of State of Alarm was identified as an attack on Catalan self-government. Health, after all, is a matter under the powers of the Catalan administration. In general terms, two common criticisms came from the autonomous communities regarding the immediate centralization of powers: the first was that centralization would negatively affect efficiency in fighting the pandemic; the second was that centralization lacked or had little legitimacy. Moreover, the Catalan Government also criticized the centralization of lockdown decisions, decisions on sanitary measures and even the centralization of purchase of sanitary material such as masks. From its very beginning, the narrative behind these grievances was clear: an independent Catalonia would perform much better in fighting the COVID-19 crisis. In a radio interview, the Catalan government spokesperson was asked what an independent Catalan government would have done and stated “I’m sure there wouldn’t have been so many dead or so many infected and this pandemic could probably have been controlled in a different way.”⁴⁶

During the first weeks of the State of Alarm (14–29 March 2020), the Catalan Government complained to the Spanish Government about what it considered a soft lockdown (the economy was still functioning) and asked for stronger measures against the pandemic such as a “total lockdown” that could only be triggered and implemented by the Spanish Government, which is what finally happened on 29 March 2020. The State of Alarm was then extended until 10 May when the de-escalation phase began. Again, during de-escalation, many grievances against centralization were raised, but this time designed to criticize the de-escalation phases and the necessity of adapting the de-escalation speed to the Catalan territorial necessities. In short, the centralization of lockdown and health measures offered a good opportunity for grievance-building rhetoric, which is central to any self-determination movement.

However, grievances from the Catalan governmental coalition, supported by other regional authorities such as the Basque Government, did not show unity of action within the framework of Spanish institutions. Table 1 tracks the votes for extending the State of Alarm decree during the first and second waves of the pandemic (a compulsory vote every 15 days according to the Spanish Constitution). The votes show a more nuanced picture compared to the relative unity shown by the governing coalition partners in Catalonia vis-a-vis the Spanish Government. ERC abstained in the first vote and maintained it up to the fourth extension; JxC abstained in the first and second extension but switched to “No” already in the third. In the sixth vote, as the expected result

Table 1. State of Alarm COVID-19 crisis extension votes in Spanish Congress (2020).

	1st wave						2nd wave 1st
	1st 25th March	2nd 9th April	3rd 26 April	4th 10th May	5th 24th May	6th 7th June	
ERC	Abst	Abst	Abst	No	No	Abst	Yes
Junts	Abst	Abst	No	No	No	No	No/Abst ^a
CUP	Abst	No	No	No	No	No	Abst
Yes/No (Abst.)	321/0 (28)	270/54 (25)	269/60 (16)	178/75 (97)	177/162 (11)	177/155 (18)	194/53 (99)

^aDeputies belonging to “Junts” platform split votes due to party-line differences.

Own elaboration on official data at *Congreso de los Diputados* database, available at: <http://congreso.es>

was rather unclear, ERC stepped back to abstention to facilitate the approval. The extension votes of the second wave (voted on 25 October) reflected even more the strategic divergences between the two parties as their votes went into completely opposite directions: ERC voted in favor; JxC voted against. The internal cohesion of the JxC parliamentary group split as members voted differently following the alignment criteria of each internal political family. The total support to the State of Alarm extensions shown in [Table 1](#) reflects the difficulties of the Spanish minority coalition government to obtain parliamentary supports to legitimize the State of Alarm. The heterogeneous parliamentary support that invested Pedro Sanchez (leftist and regional parties) was extremely fragile from the very beginning of the term and, therefore, forced PSOE to find new parliamentary alliances. This need for stable and permanent support became even more urgent in March 2020. During the pandemic, the PSOE-Podemos coalition have been facing a fierce opposition from PP and radical-right Vox. The latter has organized rallies against the Spanish Government's management of pandemic all over the country. In September 2020, Vox tabled a strategic motion of no-confidence that was only supported by their own 52 members. In short, the pandemic situation puts more pressure on the Spanish Government and, during the first votes of the State of Alarm, distanced the PSOE-Podemos governmental coalition from its support among pro-independence parties; this support was then replaced by Ciudadanos. Spanish government's legitimacy was affected by a strong centralization without homogeneous territorial and political supports.

The performance of the autonomous-community governments became more relevant during the de-escalation phase. Although performance is a goal pursued by all parties once in government, secessionist parties often struggle to appear as effective in managing government affairs at a regional level, and simultaneously "radical" enough in their secessionist objectives.⁴⁷ After a long "grievance" period of centrally controlled lockdown, the autonomous-community governments recovered their powers in June 2020 and began to have effective command of pandemic management. This new scenario was a challenge and a sort of reversal in the blame-game of pandemic management. In July 2020, a solid increase of COVID-19 cases in Catalonia was used to blame Catalan authorities of mismanaging the crisis when, at the same time, these authorities were blaming the Spanish Government. On this blame-game issue, public opinion seems to be divided following, precisely, political lines.

As we show in [Figure 2](#), using data collected in October 2020, we observe that many pro-independence voters supported the grievance discourse regarding Catalan management of the crisis: "This Government knows how to solve the problems of the pandemic, but it needs more powers and more resources," while this is not the case of centralist or federalist voters. Unsurprisingly, these positions reversed when responding to the Spanish Government.

We do not observe many differences before and after the COVID-19 crisis in terms of governmental evaluation. As we show in [Figure 3](#), governmental evaluation seems to improve as a general trend after the pandemic outbreak, although there is no statistical significance. Surprisingly, preferences for the status quo seem to be linked to positive evaluations on the Catalan Government, while, to a certain extent, people expressing their preferences for centralization and people supporting federalism seem to shyly

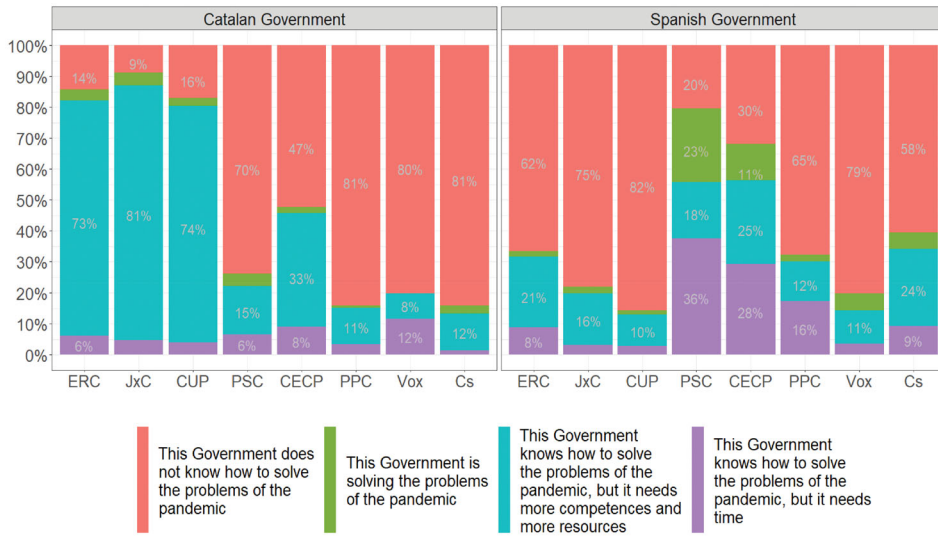


Figure 2. Opinion on governmental management of COVID-19 pandemic by vote in general elections.

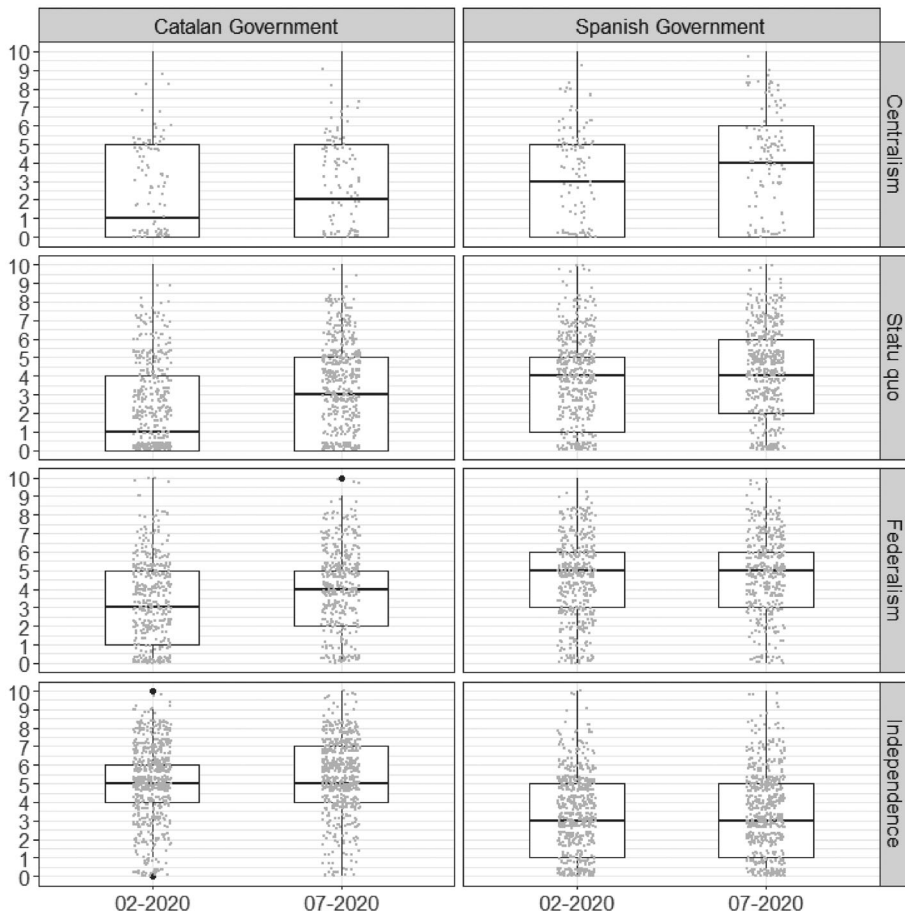


Figure 3. Government evaluation by territorial preferences and level of government in Catalonia.

show some good impression on the management of the crisis by the Catalan Government. In contrast, only those who express their preferences for centralization and status quo, have a good impression of the Spanish government capacity of managing the crisis. This could imply more margin of maneuver for an intergovernmental management of the pandemic (as we observe during the second wave of the virus) and less room for grievances against the Spanish Government.

Finally, “governmental salience” has been a crucial dimension in shaping the window of opportunity provided by the pandemic. We do not have data on salience, but it seems clear that the Catalan authorities, having much more leeway to implement their own policy, are more concerned by this new salience regarding the pandemic. An example of this trend was the appointment of an expert with a very technical profile, Dr. Josep Maria Argimon, as Health Secretary of the Catalan Government. Argimon also has the key role of officially communicating all new measures decided by the Catalan Government. In this second declaration of the State of Alarm, the autonomous-community governments oversee the pandemic, although the Spanish Government sets the range in which regional variations of the measures are allowed. In this sense, for instance, in relation to curfews, the Spanish authorities established that it cannot start before 10pm and no later than midnight, and that it cannot end before 5 am and after 7 am. The Catalan Government adopted a long nocturnal curfew from 10pm to 6am and a strict local (perimetral) lockdown on weekends (30 October 2020).

A balance of the pro-independence political chessboard

At the time of this writing, the second wave of COVID-19 has just started and it is still too early to assess the long-term impact of the crisis on the political chessboard. Based on this brief analysis of the first seven months of the pandemic, we consider that some logistic and substantive elements hinder self-determination goals in pandemic times, but at the same time recognize this crisis might be regarded as a window of opportunity. Which actors gain and which ones lose because of the pandemic crisis in the Catalan territorial conflict?

An initial analysis seems to suggest a potential polarization effect in the short term that would be cooled down by the salience of sub-state governance and a certain moderation of public opinion. When comparing with the political situation just before the outbreak of the virus, it seems that the pandemic has broadened the gap between the two sides of the conflict. On the one hand, the Spanish Government seems to be now less prone to political alliances with the Catalan parties in government as the crisis has provided clear incentives to accept supports from the center-liberal party Ciudadanos. Moreover, the crisis has stimulated Vox⁴⁸ and, to a lesser extent, some PP autonomous-community leaders to put pressure onto the Spanish Government, while some Socialist territorial leaders have openly criticized the management of the crisis. On the other hand, grievances against the Spanish Government and its new alliance with Ciudadanos, seem to have fueled more radical positions within the pro-independence movement. In one of his last interviews as CPM, Joaquim Torra described the existing Catalan self-government as “an obstacle to achieve the independence.”⁴⁹ However, as we have described in the previous subsection, governmental performance and salience are now

more crucial than ever. Therefore, the general perceptions indicate that there is less room for grievances against the Spanish Government, and more appetite for regional government performance.

In the Spanish PM investiture debate in January 2020, ERC abstained in return for a promise of starting official talks between the Spanish and the Catalan governments on the future of Catalonia.⁵⁰ Afterwards, a dialogue table with representatives from both governments was constituted but they met only once.⁵¹ However, the start of the pandemic in mid-March blocked the situation and the dialogue table has, so far, not been called. In brief, the pandemic has affected this initial expectation of starting a negotiated process.

Discussion and conclusions: hard times for multinational accommodation

Our analysis of the relationship between multinationalism and COVID-19 in the case of Spain sheds light on the potential territorial effects of this crisis. Overall, the COVID-19 crisis has a relevant territorial dimension and affects multinationalism, in the sense of accommodating national diversity, and does not seem to mean an improvement but a potential setback for those pushing for sub-state nationalism. In the context of multinational states, the automatic institutional choice for centralization in fighting the pandemic could be understood as one indicator of the weakness of central governments' internal territorial legitimacy. On the one hand, we find evidence of deficits and destabilizing effects, such as party polarization implying more territorial tensions. On the other hand, we observe potential changes in the patterns of public policies to fight the pandemic that could lead to a future more federal territorial approach; the indicator of this change lies on the fact that the decision-making process revolving around the COVID-19 measures, includes the autonomous communities.

The analysis from a territorial perspective of the crisis management in Spain confirms the already existing evidence about crisis and federalism. We observe a centralization trend, at least as a primary reaction following a sort of "cavalry imaginary" narrative. This reaction is also shaped by the nature of the Spanish territorial system. We subscribe to Capano's approach: "you can only be what you already are." In this sense, the Spanish reaction in March 2020 to the COVID-19 crisis completely unveiled its centralized and nonfederal nature, as well as its intergovernmental deficits. However, the subsequent events and political fragility of the governmental coalition led to a more open approach to territorial management. In this sense, it seems that there is some potential for intergovernmental coordination based on multilateral principles. In this new dynamic, we do not observe any multinational dimension. That is, we observe more decentralization, still controlled from Madrid, but not any multinational dynamic.

In fact, if we exclusively focus on multinationalism, the COVID-19 pandemic does not imply good news for the accommodation of national diversity in Spain for various reasons. Firstly, intergovernmental relations remain symmetrical among regions. As is usually the case, multinational perspectives, if any, are channeled through partisan negotiations in the *Congreso de los Diputados*. In this case, some Basque and Catalan parties (PNB, EH Bildu, ERC, Junts) have had a relevant role in shaping the de-escalation of

the first wave and the measures of the second wave (from October 2020). At the end, these pressures have applied to all the autonomous communities without asymmetries within the decision-making powers in multilateral intergovernmental forums.⁵² The only asymmetries are related to specific details such as curfew timings and minor restrictions. No multinational approach was even thought to be applied.

Secondly, political, and social tensions derived from the COVID-19 have empowered Vox, a far-right ultranationalist party, providing a window of opportunity to this radical form of Spanish nationalism. The strategic non-confidence motion tabled by this party is proof of this opportunity although the electoral benefits of such a move are still unknown. In any case, the strengthening of Vox's style of nationalism is not a positive sign for improving national diversity accommodation. Regarding political alliances, as explained in previous sections, the leftist coalition in the Spanish Government has attracted supports from Ciudadanos.

Thirdly, the Catalan self-determination movement has become more polarized, although the internal competition within the pro-independence movement already existed before the crisis. The effects of the COVID-19 crisis have worsened the relationships between the Spanish Government and the autonomous-community authorities by increasing territorial grievances and reinforcing those criticizing (JxC) the moderate approach of ERC. Moreover, the crisis has postponed the promised dialogue table on the Catalan conflict, and worsened some logistical aspects related to internal communication among secessionist leaders. In short, the pandemic has worsened the personal situation of the leaders in jail and in exile, while, at the same time, it has closed the potential institutional avenues of conflict resolution that were open in early 2020. The effects of the pandemic have polarized strategic positions between parties and reinforced hard-liners, making agreements on territorial issues less probable in the short term.

The Spanish case is a prototypical example of centralization facing an unexpected crisis⁵³ and nationalism exacerbation⁵⁴ involving an increase of territorial tension. In this article we find a negative relationship between the COVID-19 crisis and multinationalism. Fighting the pandemic in Spain has meant more centralization, an increase of Spanish nationalism, closing institutional avenues of territorial conflicts resolution and partisan polarization regarding political strategies. However, these findings may be temporary and might change in the future. Most of these effects were already present before the pandemic and their current trend might be contingent to the situation and imply few or null structural changes. In any case, our findings are consistent with previous research on federalism, nationalism, and COVID-19 crisis.

The implications of these findings are relevant for future research on the effects of COVID-19 pandemic and crisis in general. More in-depth research can shed light on the evolution of the reaction to the crisis, as well as its effects on public opinion and political actors. Recent developments of the Spanish policies to fight the pandemic suggest that a plural approach might be more effective than a centralized one. It also highlights the relevance of governmental performance and salience as a potential variable that might moderate nationalistic reactions to the crisis.⁵⁵ Viruses might not respect borders, but governmental jurisdictions, and accountability, seem to matter both for granting political stability and public opinion approval.

Notes

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