

Europe's Secessionist Movements and Covid-19

Jonathan Parker* 

University of Sussex, United Kingdom

*Corresponding author. Email: jp560@sussex.ac.uk

Abstract

For three European states in particular, the Covid-19 pandemic has served to catalyze pre-existing territorial disputes. While the United Kingdom, Spain, and Belgium have all had very different responses to the pandemic, in all three cases the actions of central and regional government have put existing structures of regional autonomy under strain. In Spain, the pandemic response has become intertwined with the Catalan independence debate (especially in disputes between pro-independence parties), and elsewhere in the country it has cemented co-operative relationships between moderate nationalists and the statewide left. In Belgium, the pandemic has accentuated territorial disputes and further complicated government formation. And in the UK diverging responses to the pandemic have helped boost nationalist movements in the devolved nations; particularly the cause of the Scottish National Party (SNP) and their ambitions to create an independent Scottish state. While the year has been highly significant for secessionist movements in all three states, only in the UK does a decisive shift towards state-breakup seem to have occurred. The article argues that whether or not a secessionist movement benefits from the pandemic is highly contingent on contextual factors, including the performance of state-level governments in responding to the pandemic and the relative autonomy of regional governments during the response.

Keywords: elections; political party; nationalism; institutions; Europe

The territorial dimension has become increasingly important in many European states in recent decades. For the UK, Belgium, and Spain, its effects have been particularly dramatic in the last decade. Belgium has seen the constitutional crisis of 2010 and the revival of Flemish nationalist parties to a position of unprecedented prominence. And Spain and the UK have faced surging secessionist campaigns in Catalonia and Scotland respectively, which have become central to the political dynamics of the country as a whole. As the continent is enveloped in the crisis of Covid-19, sub-state nationalist movements in these countries have been greatly affected, much like any other aspect of political life.

Spain, Catalonia, and Coronavirus

When faced with a surging outbreak of the novel coronavirus, the Spanish government, led by Pedro Sánchez of the center-left PSOE, responded by re-centralizing certain powers (most notably health and policing) for a Spain-wide strategy. This approach stands in contrast to the UK, which has seen no attempts to temporarily modify autonomy arrangements to meet the demands of the pandemic, allowing devolved governments to take diverging responses to the crisis. Such a decentralized response would have been preferred by the pro-independence Catalan government. Then-Catalan President Quim Torra and other prominent members of his Together for Catalonia (JxCat) alliance adopted a

highly confrontational attitude towards Sanchez's government, calling at various points for a much stricter lockdown (including the closing of Catalonia's borders) as part of a narrative that an independent Catalonia would have provided a more competent response to the pandemic (*El País*, April 18, 2020). Torra and other prominent pro-independence figures have also criticized the deployment of the Spanish army in Catalonia and bemoaned that Catalonia will be forced to pay disproportionately for Spain's recovery—an argument reminiscent of central themes in Catalan nationalism.

Catalonia has long been one of Spain's most prosperous and economically productive regions, and one of the key arguments of Catalan nationalist forces down the decades has been that Catalonia contributes much more to other regions through transfer payments than it benefits through being part of the Spanish state (Dowling 2012). These arguments are far from uncommon themes in regionalist movements, seen in Flanders and Northern Italy and latterly in Slovenia and Croatia during the dissolution of Yugoslavia (Masseti 2009). In Catalonia the desire for more fiscal independence from the state had in part driven the revised Statute of Autonomy in 2006. This had sought to create a Basque-style system of "economic agreement," which would have seen the Catalan government keep all taxes raised in the region and passing on a contribution to the Spanish government for national services (Colino 2009). Its rejection by the Spanish supreme court fueled the rapid rise in support for independence early in the 2010s, and with the challenging recovery from the pandemic on the horizon, economic issues are going to massively impact a political climate in Catalonia highly charged with territorial issues (Dowling 2012).

The other party in the Catalan government, the left-wing Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC), indulged in Torra's strongest lines of attack to a certain extent, but their attitude throughout has been rather more conciliatory. The party supported Sanchez's requests for extensions to the state of alarm—the device by which certain powers were re-concentrated in Madrid (*El País*, May 31, 2020). The ERC began to pull away from the hardline unilateralist stances of JxCat in the years since the abortive independence referendum in 2017, moving into a strategy of dialogue with the new Spanish government of Sanchez. JxCat, on the other hand, insisted on keeping tensions with Madrid high (*Catalan News*, June 22). With the coalition partners' diverging ever more, combined with disputes over Torra's dispute with the court system (see below), a snap regional election was floated by the President. The poll had been tentatively scheduled for May before the Covid outbreak, and was seemingly set to see the ERC triumph over JxCat and vindicate its strategy of bilateral negotiations with the Spanish government for further autonomy.

The crisis was initially seeing something of a rebalancing between the two forces. JxCat saw a small poll bounce, possibly attributed to the global "rally around the flag" effect, but more importantly Covid-19 undermined the ERC's dialogue strategy. Bilateral talks have stopped, and the party has lost its bargaining strength in the Spanish Parliament after Sanchez found an additional and unexpected ally in the form of the liberal and pro-centralization Citizen's (C's) party (*El Correo*, June 13, 2020). Under pandemic conditions and a new leader C's has begun to present itself as a more centrist force and amicable to negotiations with the PSOE—after attaching itself firmly to the right in the last two national contests—meaning Sanchez has more room to maneuver and less reason dependency on the ERC and other regionalist forces.

As the parties ready themselves for an election now tentatively scheduled for February, the nationalist space has begun to splinter further. JxCat has broken apart in the run up to the election (*Catalan News*, July 25, 2020). Former Catalan president Carles Puigdemont, who remains influential in Catalan politics despite his exile for his involvement in the 2017 referendum, became engaged in a dispute with one of the alliance's main components—the liberal Catalan European Democratic Party (PDeCat). PDeCat is the successor to the Democratic Convergence of Catalonia (CDC), the long running governing party of the region which expired in 2016 under the weight of corruption charges, and has refused dissolve itself into a unitary JxCat party. Left-right disagreements between PDeCat and Puigdemont had also begun to emerge, with the economically liberal party becoming disquieted at the ex-President's leftward drift. Puigdemont instead consolidated all the other forces in JxCat into a new "Junts" party,

which will be unilateralist and progressive. Reconciliation between the two forces became even more unlikely after Puigdemont and several jailed former ministers formally resigned their memberships of PDeCat (*Catalan News*, August 31, 2020).

The two parties now look to run separately in the election against the ERC (with its more bilateral stance), the far-left and enthusiastically pro-independence Popular Unity Candidacy (CUP), and a new alliance of moderate anti-independence nationalists composed of splinter groups from the old CDC. And this is not to mention the various statewide parties in Catalonia—generally staunchly anti-independence—as well as the semi-independent Catalan Socialists (PSC) and leftwing Catalunya en Comú, which have taken more moderate but generally pro-union positions on the constitutional issue (Colomer 2017). It seems likely that the nationalist forces will retain their majority in parliament, but their unity, always fleeting has been shattered. The relationship between the ERC and the successors to JxCat, forged entirely around agreement on the constitutional issue, seems to be too damaged to form the basis for a stable governing majority. If the ERC does emerge in first place (it still leads polls, although not by much), it remains to be seen whether it will change tack and seek to form a more “left”-aligned government based on cooperation with the PSC and Catalunya en Comú rather than attempt to reinvent the nationalist concordat (*El Español*, February 2, 2020).

It is within the already febrile environment in the nationalist camp that the removal of Torra as President must be considered. Torra’s dispute with Spanish courts stems from 2019, where he was sentenced by the High Court of Justice of Catalonia to 18 months disqualification from elected office for his refusal to remove pro-independence symbols from government buildings during the Spanish general election campaign—which the court claimed had violated the neutrality of the institution (*El País*, December 20, 2019). What followed was a months-long battle between Torra and the courts, with the president escalating the case to the Spanish Supreme Court. But it also became a battle between Torra and the ERC, who have acquiesced to the judgement. In January, the Speaker of the Catalan Parliament, a member of the ERC, refused to count Torra’s parliamentary vote (*El Periódico*, January 27, 2020), and in doing so probably ended hopes of the long term unity of the independence bloc. On September 28 of this year, the Supreme Court formally upheld the lower court’s decision, stripping Torra of his office and effectively making the ERC’s Pere Aragonès President, at least temporarily (*BBC News*, September 28, 2020). While the court’s decision could potentially whip up further support for independence, the fact that Catalans have remained evenly split on the issue throughout all of the dramatics of the past decade doesn’t seem to suggest the movement has much room to grow. What is certain though is that the secessionist bloc is now highly divided, and the composition of the government resulting from the upcoming elections is highly uncertain.

Elsewhere in Spain, two autonomous communities—the Basque Country and Galicia—faced regional elections during the pandemic. Both contests were initially delayed from their April 5 date to July 12 because of the crisis, and both contests delivered impressive results for nationalist parties. In the Basque Country, the results saw massive success for both the centrist Basque Nationalist Party (EAJ/PNV) of incumbent Lehendakari (regional president) Iñigo Urkullu and the left-wing EH Bildu. The EAJ/PNV managed to boost its already commanding position in the region (the party has led all but one government since 1980) thanks to its well-regarded response to the pandemic. EH Bildu, on the other hand, saw much more sweeping gains, profiting from the decline of the Spanish left parties in the region. Together the two main nationalist parties gained 66.3 percent of the vote between them—the highest in a regional election since 1990—and control 52 of the 75 seats (Parker 2020). Whereas the branches of the PSOE and the Spanish center-right People’s Party (PP) were able to combine to form a government in 2009, now the statewide parties are nowhere near being able to form a government.

Urkullu has been able to fairly easily renew coalition agreement with the Basque section of the PSOE—the PSE—with the main issue for debate being proposed revisions to the statute of autonomy. In the end this issue was largely absent from the governing agreement and left to parliamentary debate (*El Confidencial*, August 27, 2020). As in Catalonia, there is division within

the nationalist camp about the way forward in achieving greater self-government, with EH Bildu urging a more radical approach and the EAJ/PNV opting for a more cautious process which would not run the risks of floundering on the intransigence of Spanish institutions. In this it has probably a more willing partner with the PSE (*El País*, November 26, 2019). The good relationship built up between the nationalists and the socialists, both at the Basque and Spanish levels (the EAJ/PNV supports the PSOE government in Madrid), means that success at achieving more autonomy probably has a high chance of success. The two forces, working so closely under the pandemic, seem to have established a close concert, and Urkullu is wary of returning to the days of the so-called “Ibarretxe Plan” in the 2000s, when the party’s attempts to push for the Basque Country to enter into a relationship of Free Association with Spain not only failed, but also deeply polarised the region’s politics (Keating and Bray 2006).

In Galicia too, nationalists took also saw notable surges in support, although they are very far from achieving the dominance that their peers in the Basque Country and Catalonia possess. The Galician Nationalist Bloc (BNG), a leftwing nationalist outfit similar to the ERC and the BNG, made significant gains. It leapt from 4th to 2nd place, leapfrogging the Galician socialists and expelling the leftwing alliance—which included the centrally-governing Unidas Podemos (UP)—from parliament entirely. The party increased its support by 15.5 percentage points to receive 23.8 percent of the vote and gained 13 new seats (Parker 2020). The result is all the more impressive considering that the BNG has undergone two decades of electoral decline—the last time that it came second in a Galician election was in 2001, and in the last election in 2016 it had only received 8.3 percent of the vote. The Bloc’s success has mainly been attributed to the strong leadership of its charismatic spokesperson Ana Pontón, and, as in the Basque Country, to its ability to attract the votes of the UP (Parker 2020). The BNG has a long way to go before it is in a position to oust the Galician PP from its position of dominance, however, and last time it reached this position it lost momentum thereafter.

The key question is whether the rise in support for EH Bildu and the BNG is symptomatic of a greater desire in these regions for secession from Spain, where such ideas have not been so prominent in recent years as in Catalonia. The answer broadly seems to be no, for the time being at least. Polls conducted in Galicia in June of this year saw only 7.4 percent declare their support for independence, marginally up from 3.8 percent at this time last year, with a further 22.6 percent supporting further autonomy—up from 12.3 percent in last year’s poll. While these numbers are increases on 2019, they are broadly in line with the figures recorded in 2016—an unusually high year for both options. And in the Basque Country, polling at the same time revealed 24.6 percent support for independence and 28.3 percent for further autonomy—both figures being similar to the constitutional preferences of previous years (*Análisis* 2019–20).

A more likely explanation for these parties’ success is that they may be starting to be considered as leftwing options for all voters in the region. The percentage of votes lost by the UP affiliated slates in each region was almost identical to that gained by the left-nationalists (Parker 2020). Indeed, both the BNG and EH Bildu to varying degrees support the centre-left government in Madrid. Alternatively, voters may simply be “returning home” to these parties after experimenting with the UP in the last few elections. Regardless, the pandemic does not seem to have witnessed a surge in support for secession in either region. And in Catalonia too, despite the drama of the ructions within the sovereigntist camp, the dial hasn’t shifted dramatically towards independence. Pro-secession parties poll at just under 50 percent and support for independence itself seems to have even dropped slightly—in short, the population seems fairly evenly divided on the issue (*Political Opinion Barometer: 3rd Wave 2020* 2020). Even if, as looks likely, the sovereigntists maintain a parliamentary majority, they will still have many minds to persuade to achieve their goal.

Given that the pandemic in the United Kingdom seems to have served as a catalyst for centrifugal tendencies and boosted support for secessionist parties (see below), it is pertinent to ask why this doesn’t seem to have happened in Spain. Part of the answer may be in that the Spanish regions have been much more constrained in their reactions to the pandemic than the devolved administrations in the UK have been, where independent handling of the crisis appears to have raised awareness of

devolved government and allowed comparison to the center. In Scotland, independence has not been the subject of a concerted campaign by the pro-secession government, but nonetheless support for separation has risen significantly. And while it remains to be seen what the effect of Torra's ejection will be, on a first inspection it does not seem like the Catalan leadership's belligerent attitude has been as effective as their Scottish counterpart's more subdued approach.

Challenges to Federalism in Belgium

At the onset of the pandemic, Belgium was nearly a year without a federal government. Following elections in May of 2019, the main parties struggled to put together a coalition of parties capable of commanding a majority of seats in the federal parliament, bringing back memories of the similarly long period of government formation which followed the 2010 federal elections. The need for a stable government during the Covid-19 crisis led to an abrupt end to the process in March and the instillation of a minority caretaker government led by incumbent Prime Minister Sophie Wilmès (*Politico*, May 11, 2020). This "emergency" administration was never very strong and widely assumed to be temporary. As the height of the pandemic's first wave passed, negotiations began again in earnest, leading to the eventual formation of a so-called "Vivaldi" coalition (named for Vivaldi's Four Seasons and reflecting the inclusion of four party families—the liberals, social democrats, greens and Christian democrats) in September (*Politico*, September 30, 2020).

While the formation of any government was welcome, its negotiations were incredibly protracted and the governing program includes far fewer binding policy agreements than is usual. It is also a potentially ominous development for the future of a united Belgium. The two largest parties in Flanders—the conservative nationalist New Flemish Alliance (NVA, the leading component of the Flemish government) and the Far-right secessionist Flemish Interest (VB)—are excluded from the administration. This means that the government has a decisive majority in francophone Wallonia, but only a minority of Flemish MPs. While the VB has long been subject to a cordon sanitaire (Pauwels 2011), the NVA was part of the last federal government, and is infuriated by its exclusion. There is fear now that the party will turn to an alliance with VB—something the party repeatedly mooted last year during Flemish government formations, and something which would constitute a dramatic realignment of Belgian politics. Such a formation might herald the creation of a majority nationalist government in Flanders at the next election (*Le Vif*, July 5, 2020), but for the present the NVA finds itself shut out of the corridors of power.

Coalition formation has been rendered so difficult because of the gulf between a right-leaning and increasingly secessionist Flanders and a leftist Wallonia uninterested in further decentralization. This divide has led to regional disputes at every stage of the lockdown, with even the construction of a Brussels bike lane to reduce the use of public transport generating a territorial spat (*The Guardian*, May 11, 2020). And as in Catalonia, Flemish nationalists are alleging they will be left to foot the bill for the recovery of less prosperous Wallonia, whose center-left government seems likely to demand a redistributive solution to the economic fallout of the pandemic (*Politico*, May 11, 2020). Already before the pandemic, the VB was building on its impressive performance in 2019 and had overtaken the NVA in opinion polls.

While the new government is not one that would be disposed to consider further state reform, its prospect has once again been seriously raised throughout the crisis. In line with its own long-standing commitment to the gradual dissolution of the Belgian state, the N-VA has been attempting to use the crisis to bring more powers from the federal level down to the regions. Arguing that the split in healthcare responsibilities between levels has hampered the response to the pandemic, it calls for health to become a solely regional responsibility and has published its proposals for another round of state reform to transform Belgium into a confederation (*Politico*, May 11, 2020). The radical nature of these proposals and the NVA's intransigence on this issue, combined with the already yawning right-left gulf, contributed to the protracted nature of coalition talks over the summer.

As in 2010, when it also took well over a year to put a government in place, the dysfunction in federal institutions in Belgium risks doing the job of the secessionists for them. If a stable government is this difficult to form at the federal level, it gives grounds for many to question the utility of a united Belgium (*Politico*, May 11, 2020). In 2019, the regional parliaments were elected simultaneously with the federal, and the regions all had new governments within a few months of polling day. Belgium is more accurately not one highly fragmented party system but two quite cohesive systems that have to coexist uneasily in joint institutions at the federal level (Deschouwer 2013). The pandemic has served to make the issues which divide the parties at the federal level more acute and more urgent.

The difficulty in putting together an acceptable coalition was rendered more difficult by the fact that the party families don't always move in lockstep anymore. In Belgium, all the main statewide parties split into Dutch and French speaking equivalents in the 1970s, operating as parallel "sister" parties from that point on. But in recent years they are increasingly becoming more independent of one another. While the Flemish Christian democrats entered the 2014 federal government, their Walloon counterparts, adopting an increasingly leftist stance, did not. Aside from the NVA and VB the other parties in Flanders are also not immune to nationalist rhetoric, and frequently also press for state reform to decentralize powers (Deschouwer, 2013). The previous constitutional crisis around government formation a decade ago resulted in just such a state reform.

What then are the prospects of the Flemish nationalist movement succeeding in its goal of the dissolution of the Belgian state? The prospect is not being discussed with the same level of seriousness that it was in 2010, when then leader of the francophone Socialists Elio Di Rupo's "Plan B"—partition of the country if no government could be formed—seemed close to occurring (Deschouwer, 2012). And importantly, Flemish nationalists are not included in the federal government this time as they were in 2014. The cordon sanitaire around VB seems to be holding after much speculation post-election it could be breached. While the NVA and the VB are currently polling at around 48 percent together, marginally above what the two parties received last year, it is questionable if they have room to build on this (already impressive) base of support, and the nationalist project still seems to be restricted to the political right. The key test will be what the effect of a francophone majority government will be in Flanders, which could potentially serve as a wedge issue for the nationalists and a means to discredit the Flemish parties which have taken part in the new administration.

The Disunited Kingdom

For the UK, the pandemic has laid bare the divergence in terms of policy and electoral behavior that has been increasing over the past two decades since the devolution settlements in Scotland and Wales. Unlike in Spain, decentralized powers were not returned to the center, and regional leaders have been given the opportunity to "outperform" their national counterparts. The Scottish government, run by the center-left pro-independence Scottish National Party (SNP), has been boosted by the rally round the flag effect common to other states. And unlike the boost given to the Conservative government in London, this effect has not abated, perhaps indicating public approval of the Scottish Government's more cautious and measured approach to tackling the pandemic. The five most recent opinion polls for the Scottish parliamentary elections gave the party an average of 47 percent support (by way of contrast, the last five polls of 2019 gave them an average of 38 percent), which would almost guarantee them an absolute majority and the passage of a bill for a second independence referendum (Ballot Box Scotland, 2020).

The next elections to the Scottish Parliament are scheduled for May next year, and the contest has already been billed by some as the most important of Boris Johnson's premiership. The only realistic way for the pro-independence camp to extract permission for a binding referendum from Westminster—which has so far refused to grant permission for such a vote, arguing the matter was settled in 2014 (*The Guardian*, January 14, 2020)—is to win big at these polls and present an

irrefutable popular mandate for such a plebiscite. Prior to the pandemic, while the SNP were definitely the clear favorites to form the next Scottish government, the chances of such an emphatic victory seemed much less likely, especially given that the SNP will have been in government for 14 years at the time of the 2021 election and questions about their competence in government have started to emerge. But First Minister Nicola Sturgeon's comparatively able (at least relative to the Westminster government) handling of the pandemic has seriously boosted her party's election prospects and the likelihood of a second independence referendum. This was aptly demonstrated in August, when the party weathered outcry over the downgrading of A-level exam results via algorithm and suffered no apparent damage to its standing in the polls (*New Statesman*, August 18, 2020).

The record support for the SNP, combined with the seemingly steady Green vote, seems likely to return a substantial pro-independence majority in the Scottish Parliament. But what would be the prospects of the secessionist camp winning a second referendum, even if they could secure this from a reluctant UK government? The signs are that a "Yes" campaign would have a much easier route to victory this time than it did in 2014. In the last five polls, "Yes" has led "No" on average 50 percent to 41. The pandemic appears to have achieved the lead for independence that was widely expected after the vote to leave the EU in the 2016 referendum, and despite other polling suggesting that a large majority of Scots don't see secession as a priority, a passive acceptance of leaving the UK may be just as deadly for unionists. Acting as a "head of government in waiting," (*New Statesman*, August 19, 2020) Sturgeon seems closer to guiding her country out of the union than at any point in her premiership.

Peripheral nationalist movements in other parts of the UK have also been affected by the pandemic. In Wales the nationalist movement has traditionally been weaker than in Scotland and remains out of government, thus not allowing it to receive much in the way of a "Covid bounce." Plaid Cymru has improved its polling numbers over the course of the pandemic, but only marginally (*Spectator*, June 5, 2020). What the party does now face is a potential rival in the nationalist space, something which it has lived without for essentially all its history. Ex-Plaid member of the Senedd (the Welsh parliament) Neil McEvoy announced the formation of a new outfit—the Welsh National Party (WNP)—after continuing disputes with his former party on policy and disciplinary issues. While none of the various nationalist splinters that have emerged from Plaid Cymru before have ever come close to success, the WNP starts out with a sitting parliamentarian and several local councilors (*ITV News*, February 10, 2020).

Furthermore, there has been a growth in pro-independence activity outside of party politics, with the cross-party pro-independence YesCymru movement remaining active throughout the pandemic and continuing to grow in strength. And it must be noted that support for secession in Wales is currently running at an all-time high (although still only peaking at 33 percent) (*Attitudes to Devolution and Welsh Independence 2020*). The dial does not seem to have shifted too much, especially given Wales's lack of an independent media environment which means the actions of Welsh institutions usually receive little attention compared to those in Westminster. There does seem to be some evidence that, like in Scotland, the devolved government's superior handling of the pandemic has created more awareness in Wales about what policy is actually made in the country and the degree of influence autonomous government has on everyday life (*Spectator*, 2020).

It is unclear at this stage what effect the pandemic will have on the fortunes of the Irish nationalist movement in Northern Ireland. Support for a united Ireland had certainly surged in the years since the Brexit vote—in a poll in February of this year, 45 percent said they would vote for unity in a referendum, up from 28 percent in a September 2016 survey by the same pollster (*Results of a future border poll 2020*). The ramifications of leaving the EU, combined with the loss of the Protestant demographic majority, had begun to make unionists uneasy and the prospect of a single Irish state suddenly realistic. While Covid-19 may end up serving as a unifying force and distract the political sphere from constitutional issues, there is good reason to suggest that in the long run the pandemic makes a united Ireland seem more rather than less likely. The logic of the crisis has fundamentally

stressed the unity of Ireland—with the island being manifestly one “epidemiological unit” (Gorvett, 2020) and rationality suggesting a coordinated cross-border response. Irish republican party Sinn Féin, now established as the most popular party in the republic and the most popular nationalist party in the north, has explicitly called for a united response. Its leader Mary Lou MacDonald labeled Covid an “accelerant” of the process of Irish unity to unionist consternation (*BBC News*, April 27, 2020).

In contrast, the cause of Scottish Independence seems to have been boosted by the ability of the public to favorably compare the Scottish handling of the virus to that of the UK. In Northern Ireland, the interconnectedness of the island’s two jurisdictions and their long land border has allowed for close comparison of the approaches of the British, Irish, and Northern Irish governments. In this comparison the Irish government’s response clearly comes out on top regardless of its own failings—death rates between been noticeably higher in Northern Ireland than in the Republic (*The Irish Times*, April 22, 2020). Northern Ireland’s own approach to the pandemic highlights its internal divisions and its growing estrangement from Great Britain. As with Scotland and Wales, the government in Belfast, only recently reformed after three years of deadlock, was left room to shape its own response in many ways, providing a precursor to the almost inevitable divergence between the province and the rest of the UK when the Brexit transition period ends. Tensions between nationalist and unionist blocs have also occasionally flared up, with the two largest parties in the power sharing government—the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Féin—sparring over whether to align their responses more with the UK or Ireland (*The Irish Times*, April 1, 2020).

The pandemic comes at an already vulnerable moment for the union between Northern Ireland and Great Britain. The issue of the border between the province and the republic was largely ignored in the debates during the 2016 referendum on the UK’s membership of the EU, but they came to dominate the discussions around the UK’s relationship with the EU post-Brexit. It rapidly became obvious that the only possible outcomes were a “hard” (i.e. a regulatory and customs) border between Northern Ireland and Ireland, or an internal border between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. While the former was heavily favored by nationalists, who had voted overwhelmingly to remain, and was the only option which would limit economic disruption to a minimum, the latter was an anathema to unionists. As the crisis dragged on year after year, it became apparent to Ulster unionists that supposed “unionists” in the Conservative Party did not actually have any great attachment to the union with Northern Ireland, and were beginning to see it as an unnecessary difficulty to achieving a favorable withdrawal agreement (WA) with the EU.

Shortly after assuming the premiership, Boris Johnson gave approval to the idea of a GB-NI border, and the possibility of Northern Ireland remaining in the EU’s customs and regulatory orbit even if the rest of the UK wasn’t. Crucially, the deal gave the Northern Ireland Assembly—which no longer has a unionist majority—the power to approve the arrangements in periodic votes (*The Guardian*, May 23, 2020). Unionist parties vehemently opposed the withdrawal agreement, seeing in it an existential threat to the union. They may yet be right: in many respects the logic of the situation the agreement imagines is similar to that which has come about thanks to the pandemic. The WA contains the potential to make the situation on the ground much closer to that of a united Ireland, drawing the province closer to the republic and away from Great Britain. There certainly is the potential that (given we know from polling that a single Irish state is seen as much less taboo than it once was) in a future referendum on the subject defending the union will become much harder and joining with the republic will come to be seen as a more logical choice, given the depth of ties to that state and the weakness of links to the rest of the UK.

The response of the government in London to this challenge has been the Internal Market Bill, intended to ensure frictionless trade across the UK. The bill is incompatible with the Northern Irish clauses of the WA, and thus “break[s] international law in a specific and limited way” (Reuters Staff, 2020) in the words of Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Brandon Lewis. In addition to undermining the WA, the bill also appears to decentralize certain powers the devolved administrations consider to reside with them, and to prevent the devolved parliaments from setting

standards on goods and services coming from other parts of the UK (McEwan, 2020). The Scottish and Welsh governments have united against the bill, which they perceive as a threat to their autonomy. The Johnson government claims the bill is designed to ensure the UK's territorial integrity, and is evidently trying to pursue a strategy of strengthening the institutional unity of the UK to ward off a slide towards ever increasing autonomy on the periphery. But by undermining the devolution settlement it may end up just further weakening support for the union.

Such a strategy represents something of a change of course for the government, perhaps induced by a fear at the increased prominence of the devolved governments during the pandemic. Prior to the bill, there were some signs Johnson was instead more inclined to try to make constitutional concessions to preserve the union. The possibility of turning the UK's archaic upper chamber—the House of Lords—into something resembling the German Bundesrat had been discussed (*The Times*, January 5, 2020), and Johnson has certainly made comments in the past that indicate he would be favorable to a strategy of far-reaching autonomy for Scotland at least. Such an accommodative strategy may have benefits, and some initial evidence from my own research seems to suggest that those European regions with highly autonomous status tend to be the ones with the weakest support for secessionist parties (although not for regionalist parties in general). The strategy inherent in the Internal Market Bill, however, is very far from this approach, and seems to be a much less wise course of action that risks provoking further conflicts between the UK government and Scotland and Wales. The lack of devotion in England, which means that the UK government appears as a de facto English government, gives this clash the contours of an inter-regional struggle as well as a center-periphery conflict.

It is hard to draw conclusions, therefore, that the UK government has a clear or workable strategy to prevent the increasing weakness of the British state. The economic impact of Brexit, on top of the Covid-19 recession, could also dramatically undermine the popularity of the union. For Scottish voters in particular, the government's version of Brexit, and now the poor handling of the pandemic, will most likely render the UK more unappealing. The expected refusal to grant a second independence referendum will in all likelihood also increase support for secession. And of course Scotland is not the only challenge to the unity of the UK, although it is at the moment by far the most serious. Wales is still a long way behind Scotland in terms of its desire for secession, and the situation in Northern Ireland arguably awaits Brexit before the pendulum swings dramatically. The end of the transition period has the definite ability to draw the province closer to the republic and further from Great Britain. The current crisis has consistently served to underscore what the Brexit debates have done—that the island is increasingly one interconnected unit.

Conclusion

Not all of what has happened in the past months in those regions of Europe with strong secessionist movements is due to Covid-19, and almost all of the trends and debates occurring now have roots long in the past. In all of the regions discussed here, constitutional issues have been rising up in the agenda in the past decade. But the pandemic is intensifying political debates about the constitutional futures of these regions, just as it has served as a catalyst for so many other processes. Many on the pro-independence side have been empowered by the crisis, which is highlighting the failings of central governments and underscoring the power of the regions. But the crisis has also in many areas underscored divisions in the secessionist movement, hampering the achievement of their goals. It is probably in Scotland, where—despite the threat of splinter parties emerging—the movement remains fairly united in the SNP, that the cause of independence has the best chance of succeeding in the near future.

So why is it that the SNP has seen definite progress with its aim, while their Catalan and Flemish equivalents have not overseen a similar shift in opinion? Part of the explanation may lie at the center. While the Spanish and Belgian governments have also been poor performers against Covid by European standards, their response glows in comparison to the British response, now widely

regarded as approaching shambolic within and without the UK. While Spanish cases have been among the highest in the continent, only 3.8 percent of cases have resulted in deaths, while 7.1 percent of British cases have been fatal, despite the UK's total cases being around 300,000 lower (John Hopkins University, 2020).¹ It is certainly possible that the failures of the UK government on such an important issue would drive Scots to support independence.

However, the Scottish record in fighting the virus is only marginally better than that of the UK as a whole, and pure numbers cannot explain how Covid has destroyed faith in the UK government but reinforced trust in the Scottish government. There is a general consensus, however, that Sturgeon has been much more effective at conveying competence in the face of the virus, with much clearer messaging than the much-mocked pronouncements of the Prime Minister, and she has continued daily briefings much longer than he has. Furthermore, the cause of independence has been aided by the fact that the First Minister and the Scottish government have barely mentioned the issue, and for the most part refused to use the crisis to explicitly make the case for an independent Scotland. Given the marked rise in support for separation in this period, the approach seems to have paid off, with voters responding to what they see as greater competence rather than any arguments made by pro-independence actors.

This approach has markedly differed from that of the Catalan government, which has used the pandemic to aggressively pursue a nationalist narrative around the pandemic. In some respects, this response must be viewed through the fact that the initial response to the pandemic in Spain was much more centralized, and the Catalan government has had little opportunity to “show not tell.” But the government was not entirely stripped of its powers during the crisis, and it remains probable an ERC led administration may have pursued a more “demonstrative” pathway. Instead, the JxCat government has spent the pandemic attacking the Spanish government and its coalition partners. Additionally, Catalan independence supporters also know that they face, if anything, an even greater hurdle to achieving their goals than the Scots do, even if Johnson currently says he wouldn't allow any referendum. The leader of the opposition Labour Party in the UK has already indicated that an SNP victory would mean that there was a mandate for a referendum, and there is no constitutional bloc on holding one. By comparison, Catalan secessionists must face the courts and a Spanish establishment united in its view that a referendum would be illegal.

Disclosures. None.

Note

1 The way Belgium counts Coronavirus deaths is so different as to belie meaningful comparison.

References

- ACN. 2020. “Puigdemont quits PDeCAT, certifying divorce with his new party JxCat.” *Catalan News*, August 31, 2020. <https://www.catalannews.com/politics/item/puigdemont-quits-pdecat-certifying-divorce-with-his-new-party-jxcat>. (Accessed November 30, 2020.)
- Alonso, Jose Mari. 2020. “PNV-PSE oficializan su pacto sin apenas citar al nuevo Estatuto y con la duda de Mendia.” *El Confidencial*, August 27, 2020. https://www.elconfidencial.com/espana/pais-vasco/2020-08-27/pnv-pse-pacto-coalicion-gobierno-vasco-idoia-mendia-urkullu-jeltzale_2726616/. (Accessed September 3, 2020.)
- Análisis. 2019-2020. Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas. <http://www.analisis.cis.es/cisdb.jsp>. (Accessed October 26, 2020.)
- Attitudes to Devolution and Welsh Independence. 2020. Elections in Wales. <https://blogs.cardiff.ac.uk/electionsinwales/>. (Accessed November 30, 2020.)
- Alan-Scully, Roger. 2020. “Welsh Tories are misreading the mood on Covid.” *The Spectator*, June 5, 2020. <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/welsh-tories-are-misreading-the-public-mood-on-covid>. (Accessed September 3, 2020.)
- Bouckaert, Celine. 2020. “Une alliance N-VA-Vlaams Belang, un scénario possible pour 2024?” *Le Vif*, July 1, 2020. https://www.levif.be/actualite/belgique/une-alliance-n-va-vlaams-belang-un-scenario-possible-pour-2024/article-normal-1306485.html?cookie_check=1599134674. (Accessed August 21, 2020.)

- BBC News. 2020. "Quim Torra: Spain's top court bans Catalonia leader from office." September 28, 2020. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-54328334> (Accessed November 4, 2020.)
- Brooks, Libby. 2020. "Boris Johnson refuses to grant Scotland powers to hold independence vote." *The Guardian*, January 14, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/jan/14/boris-johnson-refuses-to-grant-scotland-powers-to-hold-independence-vote>. (Accessed September 3, 2020.)
- Chown, Aaron. 2020. "Lords may become 'House of Regions.'" *The Times*, January 5, 2020 <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/lords-may-become-house-of-regions-63kxl2xsq>. (Accessed October 13th, 2020.)
- Colino, C. 2009. "Constitutional Change without Constitutional Reform: Spanish Federalism and the Revision of Catalonia's Statute of Autonomy." *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* 39 (2): 262–288.
- Colomer, J. M. 2017. "The venturous bid for the independence of Catalonia." *Nationalities Papers* 45 (5): 950–967.
- Cué, Carlos E., Blanca Cia, and Anabel Díez. 2020. "Spanish government secures support for sixth and final extension to state of alarm." *El País*, May 31, 2020. <https://english.elpais.com/politics/2020-05-31/spanish-government-secures-support-for-sixth-and-final-extension-to-state-of-alarm.html>. (Accessed July 19, 2020)
- Deschouwer, Kris. 2012. *The Politics of Belgium*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Deschouwer, Kris. 2013. "Party strategies, voter demands and territorial reform in Belgium." *West European Politics* 36 (2): 338–358.
- Dowling, Andrew. 2012. *Catalonia Since the Spanish Civil War*. Sussex Academic Press.
- Fàbregas, Laura. 2020. "ERC tendría mayoría absoluta con los partidos catalanes de Sánchez (PSC) e Iglesias (En Comú)." *El Español*, February 2. https://www.elespanol.com/espana/politica/20200202/erc-absoluta-catalanes-sanchez-psc-iglesias-comu/464204071_0.html. (Accessed September 3, 2020.)
- García, Jesús. 2019. "Quim Torra, condenado a un año y medio de inhabilitación por negarse a retirar los lazos amarillos." *El País*, December 20. https://elpais.com/ccaa/2019/12/19/catalunya/1576750819_163784.html. (Accessed October 13, 2020.)
- Gorospe, Pedro. 2019. "La sintonía entre Podemos, PSOE y el PNV en Madrid se traslada a Euskadi." *El País*, November 26. https://elpais.com/politica/2019/11/22/actualidad/1574438554_530837.html?rel=mas. (Accessed November 30, 2020.)
- Gorvett, Jonathan. 2020. "Will Ireland and the U.K.'s Divided Responses to COVID-19 Fuel Irish Unification?" *World Politics Review* May 7. <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/28743/will-ireland-and-the-u-k-s-divided-responses-to-covid-19-fuel-irish-unification>. (Accessed September 3, 2020.)
- The Irish Times*. 2020. "The Irish Times view on Northern Ireland's crisis: divided and incoherent." April 1, 2020. <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/editorial/the-irish-times-view-on-northern-ireland-s-crisis-divided-and-incoherent-1.4218153>. (Accessed September 3, 2020.)
- Jordan, Guifré. 2020. "Puigdemont's new party takes off with uncertainty over deal with center-right bloc." *Catalan News*, July 25. <https://www.catalannews.com/politics/item/puigdemont-s-new-party-takes-off-with-uncertainty-over-deal-with-center-right-bloc>. (Accessed November 30, 2020.)
- Jordan, Guifré. 2020. "State of alarm over: Catalonia on the verge of a snap election again." *Catalan News*, June 22. <https://www.catalannews.com/politics/item/state-of-alarm-over-catalonia-on-the-verge-of-a-snap-election-again>. (Accessed September 3, 2020.)
- Keating, Michael, and Zoe Bray. 2006. "Renegotiating Sovereignty: Basque Nationalism and the Rise and Fall of the Ibarretxe Plan." *Ethnopolitics*, 5 (4): 347–364.
- Mortality Analyses. 2020. John Hopkins University Coronavirus Resource Centre. <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/data/mortality>. (Accessed October 14, 2020.)
- Massetti, Emanuele. 2009. "Explaining Regionalist Party Positioning in a Multi-dimensional Ideological Space: A Framework for Analysis." *Regional and Federal Studies*, 19 (4-5): 501–531.
- Masters, Adrian. 2020. "Independent AM Neil McEvoy to launch new Welsh National Party." *ITV News*, February 10. <https://www.itv.com/news/wales/2020-02-10/neil-mcevoy-welsh-national-party>. (Accessed September 3, 2020.)
- McCormack. 2020. "Coronavirus: Foster criticises Irish unity claim by Sinn Féin." *BBC News*, April 27. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-52445887>. (Accessed September 3, 2020.)
- McEwan, Nicola. 2020. "The Internal Market Bill: implications for devolution." *Centre for Constitutional Change*, September 11. <https://www.centreonconstitutionalchange.ac.uk/news-and-opinion/internal-market-bill-implications-devolution>. (Accessed October 13, 2020.)
- Moens, Barbara. 2020. "The Flemish nationalist exit strategy." *Politico*, May 11. <https://www.politico.eu/article/belgium-coronavirus-the-flemish-independence-nationalist-exit-strategy/>. (Accessed November 30, 2020.)
- Moens, Barbara, and Camille Gijs. 2020. "Flemish liberal Alexander De Croo to be appointed Belgium's prime minister." *Politico*, September 30. <https://www.politico.eu/article/flemish-liberal-alexander-de-croo-to-be-appointed-belgiums-prime-minister/>. (Accessed October 13, 2020.)
- Niven, Alex. 2020. "Why the Covid crisis will hasten the break-up of Britain." *New Statesman*, August 19. <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2020/08/why-covid-crisis-will-hasten-break-britain>. (Accessed September 30, 2020.)
- Parker, Jonathan. 2020. "What the Basque and Galician elections told us about the state of Regional and national politics in Spain." *LSE European Politics and Policy*, August 10. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2020/08/10/what-the-basque-and-galician-elections-told-us-about-the-state-of-regional-and-national-politics-in-spain/> (Accessed November 30, 2020.)

- Pauwels, Teun. 2011. "Explaining the strange decline of the populist radical right Vlaams Belang in Belgium: The impact of permanent opposition." *Acta Politica*, 46 (1): 60–82.
- Political Opinion Barometer: 3rd Wave 2020*. 2020. Centre d'Estudis d'Opinió. <http://ceo.gencat.cat/ca/inici>. (accessed November 7, 2020.)
- Rankin, Jennifer. 2020. "Can coronavirus cure Brussels of its addiction to driving?" *The Guardian*, May 11. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/11/slow-streets-can-coronavirus-cure-brussels-of-addiction-driving>. (Accessed August 28, 2020.)
- Reino, Christian. 2020. "Torra y Ciudadanos torpedean los planes de ERC para alcanzar el poder." *El Correo*, June 13. <https://www.elcorreo.com/politica/torra-evita-desvelar-20200613152603-ntrc.html>. (Accessed August 30, 2020.)
- Regué, Júlia, and Roger Pascual. 2020. "El veto a Torra en el Parlament fractura el Govern." *El Periódico*, January 27. <https://www.elperiodico.com/es/politica/20200127/secretario-parlament-ordena-retirar-acta-torra-7823642>. (Accessed October 13, 2020.)
- Results of a future border poll on a knife edge*. 2020. The Detail. <https://www.thedetail.tv/articles/a-majority-favour-a-border-poll-on-the-island-of-ireland-in-the-next-10-years>. (Accessed November 30, 2020.)
- Reuters Staff. 2020. "UK bill will break international law 'in limited way', minister says." *Reuters*, September 8. <https://uk.reuters.com/article/us-britain-eu-lewis-law/uk-bill-will-break-international-law-in-limited-way-minister-says-idINKBN25Z1ZS>. (Accessed October 13, 2020.)
- Ríos, Pere, and Camilo S Baquero. 2020. "Catalan premier seeks to further independence cause during coronavirus crisis." *El País*, April 18. https://english.elpais.com/politics/catalonia_independence/2020-04-18/catalan-premier-seeks-to-further-independence-cause-during-coronavirus-crisis.html. (Accessed October 13, 2020.)
- Savage, Michael. 2020. "Johnson's promised Brexit border in Irish Sea 'will not be ready in time.'" *The Guardian*, May 23. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/may/23/johnsons-promised-brexit-border-in-irish-sea-will-not-be-ready-in-time> (Accessed September 13, 2020.)
- Scothorne, Rory. 2020. "Scotland's dreaming: why the SNP appears unstoppable." *New Statesman*, August 18. <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/scotland/2020/08/scotland-s-dreaming-why-snp-appears-unstoppable>. (Accessed September 13, 2020.)
- Scottish Parliament Polling*. 2020. Ballot Box Scotland. October 2020. <http://ballotbox.scot/scottish-parliament/polling-scottish-parliament>. (Accessed September 19, 2020.)
- Spinks, Jason. 2020. "Wilmès ready to resign without majority backing." *Brussels Times*, August 31. <https://www.brusselstimes.com/news/belgium-all-news/politics/129211/pm-wilmès-ready-to-resign-failing-vote-of-confidence-on-17-september/>. (Accessed October 13, 2020.)
- Tomlinson, Michael. 2020. "Coronavirus: Ireland is one island with two very different death rates." *The Irish Times*, April 22. <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/coronavirus-ireland-is-one-island-with-two-very-different-death-rates-1.4234353>. (Accessed September 3, 2020.)
- Torregrosa, Iñaki Pardo. 2020. "La Lliga, Convergents y Lliures crean una comisión conjunta y piden un concierto fiscal para Catalunya." *La Vanguardia*, July 23. <https://www.lavanguardia.com/politica/20200723/482474759714/lliga-lliures-convergents-comision-conjunta-elecciones-programa-concierto-fiscal-catalunya.html>. (Accessed September 3, 2020.)