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Catalan Bid for Independence Seen in Broader Context of European Disintegration

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Catalonia's secession movement has been growing in Spain for decades. The region has its own language and culture. On August 28, two pro-independence parties in Catalonia, the Junts Pel Sí («Together For Yes») coalition and the radical-left Popular Unity Candidacy (CUP), submitted a bill to the regional parliament, which outlines the legal framework for the transition to independence. The two parties currently hold the balance of power in the assembly and, therefore, control the regional government.

The bill is set to be passed before the next referendum on secession will take place on October 1, fulfilling a pledge made by a majority of Catalan MPs. According to opinion polls, a majority of Catalans favor holding a referendum on their status.

While Catalonia has been steadfast in its determination to hold a separation vote, the idea of referendum has been firmly opposed by the central government in Madrid. Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy's conservative government is attempting to use the courts to prevent it from happening. Spain's Constitutional Court has previously quashed Catalonia's resolution to hold a referendum.

The court and Spanish government have also warned Catalanian officials that they could face legal repercussions and sanctions if they help organize the vote. The war of words between Catalonia and the central government has escalated recently. The recent terrorist attack in Barcelona has failed to bring unity against a common foe. The Catalans are reluctant to comply with Spanish courts' rulings and the use of force by the central government is hardly an option.

Catalonia, a prosperous region in northeast Spain, which generates a fifth of Spain's GDP and already has wide sovereignty, managing its own education system and police forces. But it lacks the privilege the Basque Country enjoys, running its own taxes.

Over 70% of Catalans back the referendum, but a "yes" vote is far from being a slam dunk decision. In an opinion poll taken before the recent terrorist attack, 41 percent of respondents said they want Catalonia to be independent, while about 49 percent said they do not. Similar polling information following the attacks is not available. If people say yes, independence will be declared in 48 hours and a new parliamentary election will be held in six months to be followed by a vote on new constitution. Catalonia will form its own military, a supreme court and a central bank.

Catalonia is not the only such place one in Europe. More and more regions in Europe demand independence, greater autonomy and sovereignty. There is increased momentum for regionalism. The dream of independence never abandoned the Basque region, which is mainly located in Spain, but extends into France. In Germany, Bavarians wish for greater autonomy or, even, independence. The calls for secession get louder there as immigrants' flows hit the region.

Republika Srpska (RS) in Bosnia Herzegovina mulls secession. Brexit would likely trigger a second referendum on Scottish independence. Two of Italy's wealthiest regions, Lombardy and Veneto, have announced plans for referendums in late October aimed at obtaining greater independence.

There is also a secessionist movement in Italy's South Tyrol. A pro-independence movement is strong in Flanders, the northern region of Belgium. There are also other, more marginal separatist movements in Europe, including Wales, Cornwall, Northern Ireland (the United Kingdom), Galicia, Aragon (Spain), Silesia (Poland), Frisia (the Netherlands, Germany), Sardinia (Italy), Brittany, Occitania, Alsace, Savoy (France), the Aaland Islands (Finland), the Faroe Islands in Denmark, as well as other small parts of Italy, Spain and Monaco.

The more integrated Europe becomes, the more secessionist movements appear on the continent. And the secessionist movements within national states are not the only thing to divide Europe.

A deeper look shows that the much vaunted European unity is a myth. Europe is getting increasingly divided between political alliances. Southern European countries tend to integration. The Visegrad Group, made up of Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia (the V4), is a bloc within the EU. In its turn, the European Union is on the verge of being divided into a «two speed» or «multi-speed» Europe. The idea of a «Federal Union» has been floated. It

is expected that the final decision on the future functioning of the community will be made in December. The coming months are likely to see further turbulence. Germany holds legislative elections in September.

Multi-speed Europe would create rival blocs and perpetuate divisions, with France and Germany setting the rules and others left to catch-up. Countries outside the core will be marginalized being kept outside of the decision-making process. The EU is to become a loose alliance, a patchwork of blocs within blocks.

Actually, Europe has never seen such hard times in its history. The process of disintegration has started and is unstoppable. Today, the continent is divided into clubs, at times overlapping mini-coalitions based on shared geography or interests. «The purpose, even existence, of our Union is being questioned», EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini wrote in the foreword to the EU Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy – the document that emerged a year ago.

The Brexit-started domino effect is continuing the chain reaction across Europe. Crises abound, and all of them boil down to people ultimately prizing their national and regional identities over state or supranational projects. The upcoming changes may make the West as we know it fade away, with new groups of states or national identities emerging. Russia, an island of stability on the tumultuous continent, will see the divisive issues aggravating its relations with the EU simply vanish as time goes by. Moscow will have to deal with something new to take the place of the disintegrating Europe.