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As the conflict escalates between the main actors in Catalonia and Spain and in light of their inability to reach dialogue, the arguments calling for European mediation grow stronger. For some time, the Catalan government has sought to internationalise the conflict, and external mediation is the strongest proof of this. The Spanish government rejects mediation, insisting on the need to rely on the existing internal law without seeming to translate that into any political way out of the crisis. Brussels, let's be honest, is reluctant to involve itself in the domestic affairs of a member state, above all given the lack of precedents. What follows are the four previous conflicts that may be invoked when speaking of possible European mediation.

First, the European Commission played an active role in the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland, both during and after the peace agreement. During the process, it was present as an actor that was able to economically chaperone a largely political process. After the peace agreements were signed the European Commission's support was institutionalised through the "**Northern Ireland Task Force**", whose main task was to encourage the socioeconomic development of Northern Ireland within the framework of the EU's regional policy. The parallels of this case with Catalonia and Spain lie in the Commission's involvement in a matter which fundamentally concerned member states (the United Kingdom and Ireland); where the comparison falls down is that it was assisting a bilateral peace agreement and addressed it from a socioeconomic rather than political point of view.

A socioeconomic focus and regional approximation also characterised the Commission's participation in the conflict between Austria and Italy over the Tyrol-South Tyrol-Trentino region. The creation of a **Euroregion** facilitated the establishment of a direct channel for dialogue with Brussels, which in turn allowed a secession movement to be channelled through the European cooperation framework, including cross-border agreements. As in the previous case, the Commission's involvement was circumscribed by its regional policy, making use of this legal basis to support a political conflict. The parallel with Catalonia and Spain

lies in the region's belonging to the EU, but vanishes when we consider that two member states (Italy and Austria) preferred to Europeanise the conflict, and that existing mechanisms were available to the Commission as part of its Euroregions framework.

Third, the case of Gibraltar also relates to a bilateral conflict in which the Commission got involved, sending a "fact-finding mission" to assess the complaints of malpractice at the borders. Its contribution was made through the Directorate-General for Home Affairs and concerned a cross-border dispute – making this also inapplicable to the case of Catalonia and Spain for not being a technical issue of border control. At any rate, the Commission's facilitating presence had the agreement of the Spanish and UK authorities.

Finally, the EU has involved itself actively in the Cyprus conflict. Its presence in the rounds of negotiation, particularly the last, included the active participation of Juncker as Commission President, and Federica Mogherini as High Representative for Foreign Affairs. As a conflict in a member state with a region that it does not control (the northern part), no parallel exists with Catalonia, where EU directives apply. With Turkey not being a member of the EU, this was also a case of international mediation, which explains Mogherini's active role. In addition, the negotiations in Cyprus were carried out under the UN umbrella.

In the case of Catalonia and Spain, we are facing a challenge of great political dimensions without precedent in terms of EU mediation (as Commission spokesperson **Margaritis Schinas** recently recognised). The Commission is aware that Spain is central to the EU, and as the political scientist Ivan Krastev reminds us, large political projects never collapse from the peripheries, but because of crisis at the centre. **The consequences for a battered EU of a unilateral independence process and a Spain thrown into crisis could call the future of the union into question.** It is therefore in the EU's general interest to contribute in some way to resolving the conflict.

Nevertheless, the Catalan government is mistaken if it limits this mediation to the safeguarding of articles 2 (founding values) and 7 (sanctions for the breach of those values) of the Treaty on European Union. The authorities in Brussels insist that Spain is an established democracy and that it has acted in accordance with its domestic constitutional framework, although concern is growing and the excessive use of force by the police on October 1st is clear (and acknowledged in Brussels *sotto voce*). Europe is already watching Catalonia and understands that its stability is at stake, but the Commission will avoid taking sides for the same reasons it avoids it in Poland, even if its **last statement** was, fundamentally, a wake-up call for both Rajoy's government and the unilateralists in Catalonia.

Given the escalation and the growing concern in Brussels, a larger role for the EU is necessary. It goes without saying that any initiative from the Commission would need the approval, explicit or implicit, of the parties involved – the Catalan and Spanish governments. But the insistence of many MEPs at the European Parliament's plenary session on October 4th could contribute to the Commission's sense of urgency. From its presidency, the Commission could promote **the creation of a task force for political dialogue between the governments.** Without preconditions on the main points of this dialogue, the principal task of this mechanism would be to **reach agreement to end the current confrontation on the basis of compliance with a minimal agreement.**

Certainly this task would not sit easily within the Commission's policies, as was the case for the precedents analysed above. But calling for a task force would not contravene the capacities granted to the Commission by the treaties. This task force should avoid positioning itself at an intermediate level between the govern-

ments of Catalonia and Spain. Instead of encouraging bilateral dialogue, it should opt for the wide participation of actors with capacity to influence a political solution. Among them, the Barcelona and Madrid city councils should be included, along with active members of the European Parliament (Catalan, Spanish and from other European countries), experts from the European Commission, international mediators and even respected figures from European civil society (*Politico* listed a number of these in its October 4th morning newsletter).

Although it is neither direct nor bilateral mediation, the Commission could apply pressure for the creation of this task force. Express requests by the Catalan and Spanish governments and resolutions in the Catalan and Spanish parliaments should more than suffice for the Commission to make a move. Other European states could join the calls and involve the European Council too, as a representative of the member states. As *Juncker* said during the Cyprus peace negotiations, “when it’s about peace, one needs to take risks. Not taking risks, is the biggest risk”. In this case, these words could hardly be more relevant.