

## DCCD 2020

### Dialogue of Cultures - Culture of Dialogue: from Conflicting to Understanding

# PROBLEMS OF THE DIALOGUE ON THE SETTLEMENT OF THE CATALONIA SELFDETERMINATION ISSUE

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### *Abstract*

The article is devoted to the analysis of the negotiation process between the official Madrid and the Catalan authorities aimed at the settlement of the autonomy selfdetermination issue at present stage. The main aim of this research is to determine the general lines of the conflict sides' confrontation, as well as to identify features of the dialog, which caused communication failures, and to reveal the profound reasons that prevented from the finding a compromise solution. The central concept of the Catalans' rhetoric is the realization of Catalonia's right for the selfdetermination and the independence through the negotiations with the Spanish government and the EU leadership. On the contrary, the central concept of the Spanish government is the indissoluble unity of the Spanish Nation, based on the Constitution. These opposite positions go from the different political motivation, as the real reason of this intercultural confrontation is deeper and lies in another sphere of social life, not in ethnic and cultural. The analysis of the negotiation process of 2017 reflects the struggle of the elites inside the country. It confirms that the key point of this struggle is not the desire to gain independence, for which Catalonia will hardly ever be ready, but to reach more and more economic preferences and to take a dominant position throughout the country.

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**Keywords:** Intercultural dialogue, negotiation analysis, selfdetermination problem.



## 1. Introduction

Spain is one of the most decentralized states in the modern world. Spanish regionalism originally arose as a result of the natural diversity of the Iberian Peninsula and took deep roots (Prohorenko, 2011). It did not disappear or was not even significantly weakened either after the creation of a unified state (due to the political unification of the Christian kingdoms during the Reconquista), or during the centralization policy realized by the Spanish Habsburgs and Bourbons first and by Francisco Franco in the 20th century. (Prohorenko, 2011).

This unique state system, that became a result of numerous discussions, was then fixed in the Spanish Constitution, approved in the referendum of 1978. The model of the Constitution is pragmatic and sets in fact two dimensions. On the one hand, there is a transfer of authority from the State to the Autonomous communities, on the other hand, there is an acquisition of sovereign competences and powers of a State, which is a member of the EU, with the purpose of developing a common policy (Luzarraga, 2006).

The unique feature of this state model is that it allows the regions to expand different rights and freedoms to the extent they can manage, gradually moving towards the greater independence from the Central Government. At the same time Spain continues to be a unitary state. According to Article 2 of the Spanish Constitution, «the Constitution is based on the indissoluble unity of the Spanish Nation, the common and indivisible homeland of all Spaniards; it recognizes and guarantees the right to selfgovernment of the nationalities and regions of which it is composed and the solidarity among them all» (“Spain's Constitution of 1978...”, 2020 p. 5).

From this point of view, Spain can serve as an example of selfdetermination within the state. This is a «State of Autonomies» – a kind of intermediate state between a centralist unitary state and a Federation – based on a distribution of powers between the center and the regions, as well as on the financial autonomy of the regions (Repina, 2011).

Nevertheless, the heterogeneity of the political space of the country has created a basis for the ethno-political conflict between the center and the regions, as well as between the autonomous communities themselves (Prohorenko, 2011). The legal asymmetry of the Spain regions is complemented by the actual asymmetry in the different levels of their social and economic development (Prohorenko, 2011). This gap between the most advanced and successful regions, such as Madrid, Catalonia or País Vasco, and the most backward Extremadura or Castilla regularly leads to the regional confrontation (Prohorenko, 2011).

## 2. Problem Statement

The history of the regional conflict between Spain and Catalonia goes back several centuries, just like the nationalist tradition in Catalonia. The Catalans have never existed as an independent state. Therefore, modern Catalan nationalists, appealing to the right of Catalonia to independent existence, don't delve into the ancient history of this region, realizing that they won't be lucky to get any evidence here (Orlov, 2020). Catalanism, which became the foundation for the formation of Catalan nationalism, was an ideologically heterogeneous current, where the separatist component was present, but not dominated. (Henkin, 2018a). During the centuries the general position of the most part of the Catalan elites was the struggling for the widest possible autonomy within Spain, but not for a full independence (Filatov, 2017).

Catalan nationalists initially sought to federalize the country and gain broad autonomy in order to take a dominant position throughout the country, and big Catalan bourgeoisie supported the nationalist movement in order to use it to push Madrid to conduct the protectionist policies (Filatov, 2017).

The Spanish Constitution and the Autonomous Statute, adopted on its basis, granted Catalonia relatively broad rights and freedoms. The region received its own Parliament and Government (so called Generalitat de Catalunya headed by the President acting as the head of Catalonia), the police force, its own mass media, and expanded financial independence. Besides Catalan was recognized as an official language.

However, since that time all this was not enough for the separatists, and more and more demands were constantly put forward to official Madrid. Thus in 2004 Catalonia decided to strengthen its presence in Brussels and open its official representative office there, and it was followed by opening such offices in France, Great Britain, Germany and the USA (Dronova, 2015). It meant the securing of the region's independence if not legally, at least psychologically (Dronova, 2015). Regional elites are «the subjects of identity politics not only at the local and regional level, but also at the national level, participating in the formation of political discourse on issues of nation building and historical memory, influencing the development of the national agenda and, as a result, influencing the Central authorities' choice of political practices» (Prohorenko, 2015, p. 84).

The global economic crisis has affected both Catalonia and Spain as a whole. Catalonian external debt increased from 15,776 to 50,948 billion euros (from 17,8% to 23% GDP) for the period of 2011-2012, and this was followed by an increase in unemployment (Baranov, 2016). The refusal of the Central authorities to subsidize the budget deficit of the autonomous communities, including Catalonia, brought a tension to the relations between Madrid and Barcelona, as Catalonia demanded to increase their share in the distribution of taxes (Baranov, 2016).

However, the Central Government didn't pay much attention to the situation believing that no one would dare to act contrary to the Spain basic law. In 2017 the blatant demonstration of the regional authorities of the desire for the autonomous region independence and the announcement of the referendum date made by Carles Puigdemont (the President of the Generalitat of Catalonia) gave this old conflict another serious impulse. The Catalan authorities, despite the repeated statements from Madrid about the illegitimate and unconstitutional nature of their separatist actions, held a vote on the issue of withdrawing the autonomy from Spain and forming an independent state – the Republic of Catalonia.

According to official data (Final results, 2017), 43,03% of the autonomy citizens, who have the right to vote, took part in the voting. 90,18% voted for the region's secession from Spain and 7,83% were against it. Empty ballots (1.98%) were dropped into the ballot box. Thus, about 57% of the Catalan residents, the so-called «silent majority», did not participate in the referendum, making it completely unrepresentative. (Moiseev, 2017). The elections, which took place later in December 21, confirmed as well that there was no social majority in Catalonia that was seeking independence, as only 47,5% of voters voted for separatist parties, that is even 0,3% less than in 2015 (Henkin, 2018b).

Nevertheless, the results of the referendum caused protests in Catalonia. The Central Government made it clear that it would not allow any unconstitutional actions from the part of the Generalitat. The Spanish Constitutional Court blocked the meeting of the Catalan Parliament devoted to unilaterally declared independence, and additional security forces were deployed to the region. In 2019 the Spain Supreme Court

has sentenced nine Catalan politicians to real prison terms for the sedition and the embezzlement of public funds. The sentencing provoked new public riots and protests and new use of force. Various forms of protest were practiced. Many of them are mass demonstrations which involve dozens or hundreds of thousands of people, such as the so-called "freedom marches", when columns of protesters from different parts of Catalonia flocked to Barcelona (Henkin, 2019). The initiator of the referendum – the former head of the autonomy Carles Puigdemont – left Spain for Belgium.

### **3. Research Questions**

The problem is that this time the longstanding confrontation reached a referendum followed by mass protests and riots, and part of the international community perceived it seriously as the desire of the Catalans to gain independence. In political and public circles there renewed a debate regarding the Catalan problem. By analyzing the negotiation process of 2017 we try to resolve this dilemma and answer the key question: is Catalonia really ready to implement the right to selfdetermination and secede from Spain, or is it just another extremely serious attempt of the Catalan elite to apply pressure in order to gain preferences and secure a dominant position throughout the country?

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The article is devoted to the analysis of the negotiation process between the official Madrid and the Catalan authorities aimed at the settlement of the autonomy selfdetermination issue at present stage. Using discourse analysis approach and content analysis of the media field, we try to identify specific features of this intercultural dialog, which could cause communication failures. The main aims of this research are to determine the general lines of the conflict sides' confrontation and to reveal the basic purposes and intentions of the conflict sides, as well as the profound reasons which prevented from the finding a compromise solution within the negotiation process. We focus our attention on the conflict sides' public discourse, which took place in the Spanish media field.

### **5. Research Methods**

Despite the awareness of public officials, philosophers and politicians of the importance of negotiations, until the 18th century there were no works that studied how negotiations were conducted (Lebedeva, 2018). In 1714 Francois de Callière published his book «On the ways of negotiating with sovereigns». Since then it was the only scientific study on the negotiation process until the beginning of the 20th century (Lebedeva, 2018).

First of all, it is worth mentioning a classic work «Diplomacy» by H. Nicholson, where he defines diplomacy and international relations through the concept of negotiations. The turning point in the study of the nature of negotiations came in the 50-70s thanks to such authors as S. Sidzhel and L. Fureker, Ch. Osgood, A. Lol. Their works within the behaviorist paradigm made a new contribution to the evolution of research on the negotiation process at the experimental level. They identified patterns of behavior in the negotiation process, which lead to a maximum gain. In the next decades a special attention was paid to the

structural component of the negotiation process in the researches, which were based on real negotiating experience.

In the last decades the researches devoted to a negotiation process were arranged in a systematic scientific framework. A significant contribution to the study of negotiations was made by such American researchers as F.C. Ickle, R. Axelrod, G. Raifa, R. Fisher, W. Ury. They expressed an idea of principled negotiations based on a partnership approach. Fisher and Ury (2012) noted that negotiations were aimed at reaching an agreement in the conditions when your interests and the interests of the opposite side partially coincide and partially diverge. Dutch scientist Mastenbruk (1993) also considered as a distinctive feature of negotiations a complex combination of interests and an impossibility of their independent implementation through unilateral actions, which made the participants interdependent.

Modern scientific knowledge has a theoretical basis for studying the negotiation process, which can be conditionally classified into four groups (Lebedeva, 2018). The first group includes researches devoted to a consideration of theoretical regularities of the negotiation process. The second group includes works, which gives recommendations or describe specific techniques for conducting negotiations. These works are often partially subjective. The third group of researchers considers the negotiation process within the game theory and assumes the creation of negotiations mathematical models and prognostication of results. The fourth group contains psychological studies of the principles and psychological aspects of the relationship between negotiators.

Our research lies within the framework of the fourth approach. We also use a discourse analysis approach as a basic methodology for our research, which allows to interpret various types of statements as products of people's speech activity carried out in a specific socio-political circumstances and cultural and historical conditions. And finally, a content analysis method allows us to identify the general lines and most important statements of the leading participants in the ethnopolitical conflict between official Madrid and Catalan authorities.

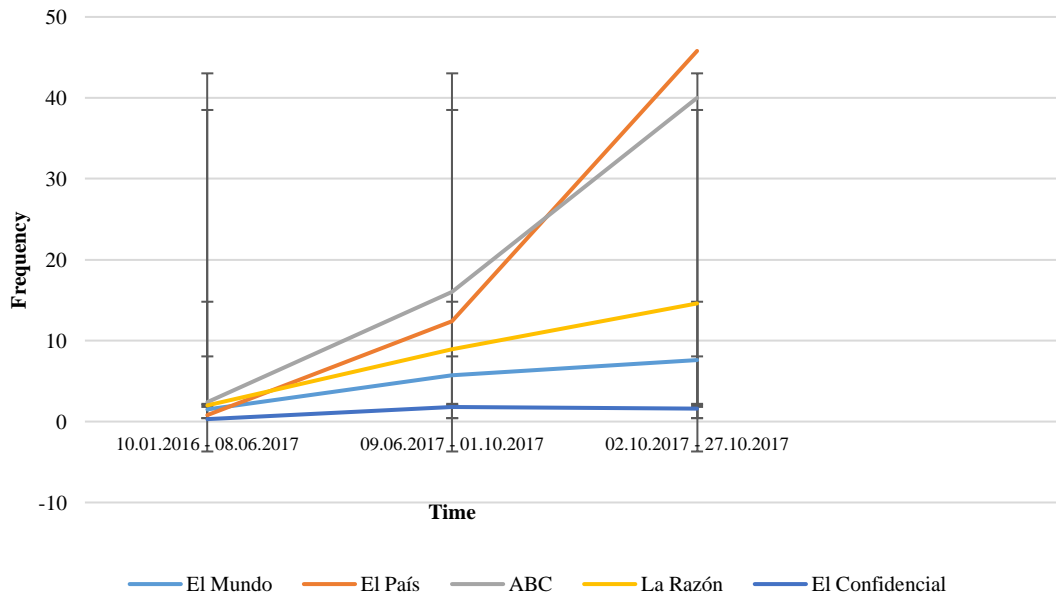
## **6. Findings**

The existing situation and the negotiation process in Spain were widely covered in the leading Spanish media. To conduct the analysis of materials devoted the negotiations between the official Madrid and the Catalan authorities on the settlement of the autonomy selfdetermination issue we selected leading Spanish national online newspapers, such as: El País, El Mundo, ABC, La Razón, La Vanguardia, El Periodico de Cataluña, El Confidencial, Expansión and El Economista. The amount of materials we selected for a detailed analysis (out of the total amount of more than 300 articles devoted to the described situation) is represented by 20 unites. One article includes approximately from 500 to 900 words (about 700 words on average), 2 to 8 quotes (about 4 quotes on average).

Generally, El País and El Mundo are the most widely read newspapers in Spain and the most quoted in the international press. Together with the oldest ABC, La Razon and El Confidencial they mostly adhere liberal conservative views. Catalan La Vanguardia is famous for its opposition views towards the official Madrid and supports Catalan nationalists, while Catalan El Periódico supports left-centrist forces. A key daily newspaper of Northern Spain El Correo stands for the unity of the country and doesn't support

nationalists. *Expansión* and *El Economista* are financial and economic daily newspapers and they mainly focus on the economic consequences of the constitutional crisis.

The negotiations were held in an extremely tense atmosphere. Both the existing situation and the negotiation process itself received a wide coverage in the leading Spanish media. The Figure 1 below shows that the frequency of references to the referendum increased by approximately six times after the announcement of the date and by approximately sixteen times after the referendum had been held.



**Figure 01.** The frequency changing of references to the Catalan referendum on independence in some Spanish media

The aim of our research is to analyze the course of negotiations and to understand the basic purposes and intentions of the conflict sides, by including the linguistic aspect, as well as the causes of communication failures in the negotiation process.

To start any negotiations the parties must have overlapping interests and no alternatives to the negotiation process (no BATNA – best alternative to a negotiated agreement). Let's see if these two components were a part of this situation. The starting point for the activation of the Catalan problem was the announcement by Carles Puigdemont of the referendum date in June 2017. Madrid was too late, as it hadn't paid much attention to the situation, believing that no one would dare to oppose the Constitution. In those conditions, which included the quick exacerbation and aggravation of the situation, Spanish Premier Mariano Rajoy tried to persuade the Catalan leader to refuse to hold the referendum and start negotiations. People from his circle hinted at the advantages that the Catalans could get during the negotiation process. From the information reflected in the media it was not very clear what exactly the Spanish government was proposing, but it was clear that it was not enough for the Catalan authorities, as the pressure and tension on their part were gradually increasing and they continued to spinup the situation with the referendum.

It is important to mention here that the conditions prepared by the Catalan authorities by the time of the referendum allowed them to behave harshly. A new Catalan law on the referendum stated that a simple majority was enough to make a decision. Besides, the voter turnout threshold was canceled. From a

linguistic point of view, the position was plainly articulated. Puigdemont replied that it was too late to negotiate. The Catalans made it clear that even if the negotiations took place the subject of their discussion could be only the terms of secession from Spain.

The following months were marked by a public confrontation between the Central government of Mariano Rajoy and the Catalan authorities. Some people from the Prime Minister's circle noted that the position of official Madrid was too soft and would not lead to the desired result. They talked about using National Security Act or Article 155 of the Constitution, according to which the Spanish government with the approval of an absolute majority of the Senate can protect the common interests by force. Mariano Rajoy pointed out that he would turn to Article 115 only in case of the unilateral proclamation of independence of Catalonia.

*Example: "Rafael Hernando, portavoz del PP en el Congreso, ha acusado este martes a Pedro Sánchez, el secretario general del PSOE, de "pastelear" con los independentistas al proponer la apertura de un diálogo con Carles Puigdemont, el presidente de la Generalitat, para solucionar la crisis territorial que vive España." (El País, 03.10.2017)*

*Translation: "Rafael Hernando, the spokesman of the PP in Congress, accused this Tuesday Pedro Sanchez, the Secretary General of the PSOE, of "baking" with the supporters of independence by proposing the beginning of a dialogue with Carles Puigdemont, the president of the Generalitat, to solve the territorial crisis in Spain."*

The meaningful dialogue didn't come out. The Catalan referendum on independence was held by the Catalan authorities on October 1, 2017. On October 10, Carles Puigdemont signed the Declaration of independence of Catalonia from Spain. However, at the same time he called on the Parliament to immediately suspend its operation, which meant to postpone it for an indefinite time. He also suddenly expressed readiness to lead Catalonia to independence through negotiations with the Spanish government and the EU leadership.

This moment was a turning point in the negotiation process, when the initiative passed to Madrid. It was clear that the separatist leader decided not to realize the chance to achieve independence. The request of Carles Puigdemont for negotiations was viewed by Madrid as a reverse gear and allowed to take a tougher position. Since then the negotiations took the format of letters' exchange, which was broadcasted in detail by all media. Madrid declared that it didn't recognize the independence of Catalonia and came out with the ultimatum. By October 16, it demanded from the Catalans a clear answer to a clear question: Does Catalonia declare independence or not?

In response to this demand Carles Puigdemont used a tactic of silence to gain time and probably to provoke Rajoy to some action. However, the Spanish Premier was patient and kept silent. The Catalan leader sent his answer on the day of the ultimatum deadline. The letter did not provide a clear answer to Madrid's question. It was written rather ornately. The separatist leader asked "to stop the repression" against the common population» and insisted on the "sincere dialogue" and on holding a meeting "to reach a compromise".

*Example: "No dejemos que se deteriore más la situación. Con buena voluntad, reconociendo el problema y mirándolo de cara, estoy seguro que podemos encontrar el camino de la solución" (El País, 17.10.2017)*

*Translation: "Let's not allow the situation deteriorate further. With good will, recognizing the problem and looking at it face to face, I am sure we can find the way to the solution".*

Despite the fact that Carles Puigdemont continued to emphasize the independence of Catalonia, the lack of a clear response to the question posed by Madrid meant the reluctance of the Catalan authorities to follow the path of independence. At the same time, such behavior is difficult to explain by the fear of force measures, as the balance of power after the referendum was clearly on the side of the Catalan authorities (even despite the fact that only about half of the population supports the independence, as we mentioned above).

However, the Catalan leader did not take this step and did it deliberately. The problem is that the concessions, proposed by Madrid in a situation when Spain was going through the extremely difficult economic times, were probably not so attractive and did not satisfy the Catalan authorities. They assumed that another attempt to hold a referendum and declare independence could again influence Madrid in a desired way. But this time the Spanish Government took a tougher position.

In fact the sides actually changed their places. To sit down at the negotiating table Mariano Rajoy put forward clear and uncompromising conditions, demanding that Carles Puigdemont renounced the "deferred sovereignty". The Catalan leader insisted that negotiations began without any conditions. On the one hand, Carles Puigdemont showed that he wanted to build a relationship on equal terms with the state, but on the other hand, he insisted on an urgent meeting with Mariano Rajoy to find an opportunity to establish a dialogue. The ambiguity of Puigdemont's actions, as well as the petition for an urgent meeting with the Prime Minister are also clear markers for the necessity of negotiating process, more likely non-public, rather than an independence, or the worse – a civil war.

*Example: "La carta que hemos conocido hace unos minutos parece que no va en esa dirección y por tanto no responde a lo que se le ha solicitado", añadió (el Ministro de Justicia Rafael Catalá), antes de señalar: "La pregunta era clara y parece que la respuesta no lo es tanto". (El Confidencial, 16.10.2017)*

*Translation: "The letter we got a few minutes ago seems not to go in that direction and therefore does not respond to what has been asked of him", he (Minister of Justice Rafael Catalá) added, before pointing out: "The question was clear and it seems that the answer is not so much".*

Since then the dialogue between the Spanish Government, on the one hand, and the Catalan authorities and a located in Belgium Carles Puigdemont, on the other hand, has been resumed from time to time in the same manner. In 2018 the former Catalan leader came out with the statement that Pedro Sánchez (socialist from PSOE and a new Spanish Prime Minister), was a new "opportunity" for a dialogue between



the Catalans and the Spanish Government, but again didn't miss a chance to call Pedro Sánchez to put forward "specific proposals" on "Catalonia's right to selfdetermination".

In 2019 the head of the Catalan authorities Kim Torra called the Spanish Government to declare an amnesty for all the twelve leaders of the movement for the Catalanian independence. But Pedro Sanchez immediately rejected this request, stressing the fact that the sentences had to be carried out. He called the parties to start a dialogue and added that it was time for a new chapter in the Catalan political process. Thus, the Catalan issue will remain a key point both in the Spanish agenda and in the Spanish parliamentary debates for an indefinite period.

## 7. Conclusion

Approximately two-thirds of the analyzed information array convey the negative attitude towards the Catalan problem and the referendum itself, while one third of the array stylistically neutral. Mostly the authors refer to the statements and comments of the leading representatives of the conflict sides. The texts are emotionally colored and rich in expressive means and stylistic devices, such as idiomatic expressions, reference to the authority and authoritative people, hyperboles, comparisons, colorful metaphors etc.

In general, the Catalan authorities base their political rhetoric on the opposition of "us – them", where "them" is the state of Spain which is opposite to Catalonia as if it were an independent state, but not part of the Kingdom. The central concept here is the realization of the right of Catalonia for selfdetermination and the independence through the negotiations with the Spanish government and the EU leadership. On the contrary, the central concept of the Spanish Government is the indissoluble unity of the Spanish Nation, based on the Constitution.

These opposite positions go from different political motivation. The real reason of this intercultural confrontation is deeper and lies in another sphere of social life, not in ethnic and cultural. The analysis of the negotiation process of 2017, as well as the whole long and sometimes dramatic history of this ethno-political conflict, perfectly reflects the struggle of elites inside the country. The key point of this struggle is not the desire to gain independence, for which Catalonia will hardly ever be ready, but to reach more and more economic preferences and to take a dominant position throughout the country. In such a situation it is possible to reach the consensus only due to the common sense of the politicians and the desire to put the interests of the country above their own ambitions.

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