MEMBER PROFILE

CATALONIA

ASSEMBLEA NACIONAL CATALANA

Last updated: May 2019
**Population:** 7,543,825 (2018)

**Area:** 32,108 km²

**Capital City:** Barcelona

**Language:** Catalan (daily use for 36.29%, knowledge by 95.12%), Spanish

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**UNPO Member Perspective**

The Assemblea Nacional Catalana (ANC) is the representative of the Catalan people's interests within UNPO since 14 December 2018. The Assembly defends the rights of the Catalan people in a national context, promotes the right of the Catalan people to self-determination and subsequent proclamation of a Catalan Republic, as self-determination through the organisation of a negotiated referendum gets the support of 80% of the Catalan population, as different opinion polls published throughout the years. Operating through democratic, socially inclusive, civil and peaceful means, the ANC seeks to bring all around the cause of independence, through initiatives such as petitions and demonstrations.

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**Overview**

Located in the north-eastern corner of the Iberian Peninsula, Catalonia is currently integrated into the Kingdom of Spain and is composed of 947 municipalities and four provinces (Barcelona, Girona, Lleida and Tarragona). Home to about 7.5 million people who have their own language, parliament, civil law and traditions, Catalonia has further control over some public services and has its own police force. The northern part of Catalonia is currently integrated to France, since 1659.

The capital, Barcelona, is the second most populated city in Spain and is one of the major economic, financial and cultural urban centres in Europe, as well as one of the world’s leading technological, tourist, cultural and trade hubs. It is also an important European transport hub, home to one of the busiest cargo ports in the Mediterranean and the biggest one in terms of cruising activity, as well as the seventh busiest European airport in 2018.

With the 4th highest gross domestic product per capita (GDP) in Spain (after Madrid, the Basque Country and Navarre) in 2017 (Expansión, accessed 12 March 2019), and a national economy equivalent to states such as Denmark (BBC News, 4 October 2018), Catalonia has historically been a trading nation due to its geostrategic location. Nowadays it represents a meeting point for international business, foreign trade and it is leading foreign investment attraction in Spain,
having being considered twice the most attractive region in southern Europe for foreign investment (Government of Catalonia, 12 February 2018).

Catalonia also leads on exports, with over €70 billion (2017), representing over a quarter of Spain’s total. Additionally, having received over 18 million foreign tourists in 2016, it is one of the main destinations in Europe, with tourism representing 12% of the region’s GDP (Government of Catalonia, accessed on 12 March 2019). Catalonia is also a research and development hub, with leading science centres in biotechnology, pharmaceuticals and IT technologies and education, with 12 universities and more than 30 international schools (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2014).

As a result of being geographically open to the Mediterranean and other European countries, Catalonia has a tradition of incorporating foreign philosophy, art and other trends, which has culminated in a culture that is both national and cosmopolitan, fostering two founding principles of Catalan society: tolerance and coexistence.

This country is mainly inhabited by Catalans, having their own history, culture and language. The Catalan language is a Roman language derived from Latin which is only partially recognised by the Spanish state, and currently identified as a dialect in France. This language is also spoken in the region of Valencia, the Balearic Islands, Andorra, Southern France and the city of Alghero.

Throughout history, the Catalan people suffered multiple wars, pillaging, imposition and assimilation by both the Kingdoms of Spain and France. After the death of dictator Francisco Franco, Catalonia has recovered a certain degree of autonomy, but its laws and decisions are ultimately subjected to the rule of the Spanish State, which uses this superiority as political leverage against Catalonia’s will for cultural recognition, self-determination and with this increased powers.

**Historical Background**

Civilisation in the Catalan territory has its origins in the local Iberian people who thrived by trading with Greeks, Phoenicians and Carthaginians, only to be later conquered by the Roman Empire establishing Tarraco (Tarragona) as the capital city of the peninsula.

By the beginning of the eighth century, the last Roman successor kingdoms were overrun by the Muslim conquerors and one century later the Franks, under the command of Charlemagne, established the Catalan territories as a border to control the expansion of Muslim territories. During the next couple of centuries, self-governance grew until Borrell II, King of Barcelona, declared independence from the Frankish Empire due the lack of military support against the Muslim Caliphate.

The County of Barcelona, later known as the Principality of Catalonia (1117), was a feudal kingdom with its own parliament (1214), constitution (1283), government (1289) and division of powers
The Principality of Catalonia signed a dynastic union with the Kingdom of Aragon, as part of a composite monarchy and expanded militarily to Valencia, the Balearic Islands, Corsica, Sardinia, Sicily, Naples and parts of Greece. As a major Mediterranean power, it fostered trade throughout this sea, and established the first international mercantile laws thanks to the *Carta Consular* (1258) and its Sea Consulates established as trade posts in dozens of ports.

After the dynastic union with Castile (1492), Catalonia was pillaged by both the French and Castilian armies during multiple battles. The outcome of this was the Reaper's War (1640), establishing the First Catalan Republic. The latter was later dissolved during the Spanish Succession War and especially after the one-year siege of Barcelona (1714), when the Spanish Kingdom resolutely crushed Catalan self-government, the constitution, laws and the language.

Despite the Napoleonic Wars and multiple civil wars in Spain, Catalonia thrived economically during the 19th century due to the industrialisation process, becoming a major textile producer in the Mediterranean. Alongside this economic blossoming there was a cultural renaissance, with major efforts to bring back and defend Catalan culture and language. Despite these efforts, relations with Madrid were always problematic and Catalonia self-governance was always meek at best.

It was not until the Second Spanish Republic that Catalonia was granted greater political autonomy and the Catalan language declared official again, while the Catalan parliament was restored. However, Francisco Franco’s *coup d’état* against the Republic and victory after the civil war resulted in a military dictatorship that brought a new dissolution of the Catalan government and laws, as well as a ban on the public use of the language. Hundreds of thousands of pro-independence and/or left-wing Catalans were exiled or killed. But despite political repression, Catalonia remained the economic powerhouse in Spain.

With Franco’s death in 1975, the *Generalitat*, the Catalan government’s historic name, was restored to grant Catalonia self-government. With the new 1978 Spanish Constitution, the nation also restored its parliament and the Catalans recovered their linguistic rights, even though Catalan is only considered co-official today. Catalonia currently enjoys a certain degree of autonomy, including in the fields of the police forces, healthcare and education.

**Current Issues**

Since the restoration of Spanish democracy, one of the main reasons behind Catalonia’s claim for independence has been the lack of power to decide over the region’s laws, financial system and general affairs, which is still held by the Spanish State despite Catalonia’s legal framework to operate with autonomy.
Since Spain’s 2008 debt crisis, a widespread feeling that the weight of Spain’s fiscal system is too heavy for Catalonia spread over the population, as a substantial amount of the Catalan GDP is transferred to the central government, with little return or investment into the region. Resentful of the State’s public territorial spending policy, supporters of Catalan independence appear to have increasingly gained force, claiming that Catalonia’s wealth would make it a feasible prospect for it to become a sovereign state.

Amidst the debt crisis, Catalonia’s parliament was working to enhance its self-government through a new Autonomy Statute – a legal framework for self-rule. This Statute was later validated by a referendum and by the Spanish Congress. But Spanish political parties treated the new Statute as a threat to the State, therefore starting a political campaign to abolish it, resulting in a 2010 Constitutional Court resolution against the Statute which drastically limited its power. In the meantime, other Spanish regions replicated parts of the banned Catalan Statute without facing any consequences, showing the specificity of Spain’s stance on Catalan issues.

Catalan civil society then launched a grassroots movement to defend the region’s right to self-determination, culminating in the 2010 one million people march on Barcelona under the banner “We are a nation, we decide”. This movement set the foundation of the Catalan National Assembly, which organised a new demonstration in, this time with one and a half million participants, with the slogan “Catalonia, new state in Europe”. This demonstration represented a landmark on the Catalan political agenda and has prompted the president of the Generalitat to call on snap elections for the Parliament of Catalonia and declaring its political party would be supporting Catalan independence for the first time in history.

Another million and a half-strong mass demonstration was held on the Catalan National Day in 2013, when a human chain for Catalonia’s independence united the country from North to South, spreading over some 400 km. From this date onwards, every 11 September mass demonstration sees hundreds of thousands of participants marching in Barcelona and other Catalan cities.

In 2013, the Catalan government supported a citizens’ legal initiative to vote for Catalonia’s independence on 9 November 2014. Due to Madrid’s prohibition to vote on this topic, the referendum was organised as a non-binding consultation which resulted in 80% of voters supporting independence. In September 2015, pro-independence parties won the election with 48% of votes and a majority of seats in the Parliament. After long debates, on 9 November 2015, the Catalan parliament approved a declaration that stated its will to start the process to create a Catalan State under the form of a Republic, on which the Catalan people would be consulted through a referendum to be held on 1 October 2017.

Days before the referendum, on 20 September 2017, Spanish police teams started searches in buildings from the Catalan government and tried to access to Catalan political parties’
headquarters, even though they did not have judiciary orders for all of these actions. They detained politicians and public workers for being organisers of October’s referendum and burst into printing houses and transport companies who were also involved. Spontaneously, thousands of Catalans protested these actions peacefully.

On the day of the referendum, 1 October, after moving thousands of police and paramilitary officers from the “Guardia Civil” from all around Spain to Catalonia, the central government violently shut down polling stations. The events were broadcasted by media from all around the globe: as millions of Catalans were trying to peacefully vote on the independence referendum, thousands of Spanish police officers used force to shut down polling stations and confiscate ballot boxes, causing numerous injuries. The harsh speech pronounced by the Spanish King days later, not taking into consideration the Catalans’ rights or the violence used against them, only increased general resentment among Catalan society. Despite the tense situation, during the referendum more than 2 million Catalans voted for independence, equivalent to 90.18% of the voters (Government of Catalonia).

As of today, the Spanish government maintains that Catalonia has no constitutional right to hold referendums on its status. This in contradiction with the Charter of the UN, framing the principle of self-determination of peoples as one of its purposes. Spain’s stance is also at odds with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which proclaims that all peoples have the right of self-determination and therefore to freely determine their political status and pursue their development as they wish to. This same Covenant also stresses that its parties must promote the realisation of self-determination. Furthermore, having declared the referendum as illegal, Spanish authorities have cracked down on voters, injuring hundreds to prevent them from casting their votes and imprisoning the independence leaders and forced political leaders into exile, seven of which remain exiled.

On 16 October 2017 Jordi Sánchez and Jordi Cuixart, respectively the leaders of grassroots pro-independence organisations the Catalan National Assembly and Omnium Cultural, were called to declare before a judge and immediately put in pre-trial detention.

On 27 October 2017, the majority formed by pro-independence members of the Catalan parliament voted to declare independence. The Spanish government immediately applied article 155 of the Spanish Constitution, temporarily imposing direct rule on the region, bypassing its constitutional autonomy and dissolving the parliament. After the implementation of this article, all the members of the Catalan government were requested to declare before the Spanish courts, and most of its members, arrested and put in pre-trial detention. President Carles Puigdemont and half of his government fled into exile to Brussels, Belgium or Scotland. Ms Carme Forcadell, speaker of the Catalan parliament, was also imprisoned, for allowing political debate about Catalonia’s independence.
In the subsequent elections called by the Spanish Government on 21 December 2017 the three pro-independence political parties (Republican Left of Catalonia, Junts per Catalunya and the Popular Unity Candidacy) won 70 of the 135 available seats in the parliament, once again holding a majority.

Currently Mr Quim Torra is the Catalan President, while Mr Puigdemont remains the legitimate Catalan President exiled in Brussels, creating the Council for the Republic (Consell per la República) to assist Catalonia’s self-determination rights outside the legal framework of Spain. In the Kingdom of Spain, self-determination or any agreement on a referendum for Catalonia is out of question for all major political parties, including the Popular Party, the Socialist Party, Ciudadanos and far-right Vox, with the only exception of Podemos, which represents less than 15% of the electorate.

In February 2019, the trials of Catalan political prisoners began in Madrid. The leaders are facing up to 25 years of jail, being accused of rebellion, disobedience and misuse of funds for peacefully defending the rights of the Catalan people. According to independent observers having attended week 5 of the trials, the latter suffer multiple flaws, indicating a lack of objective impartiality on the part of the Court (International Trial Watch, 18 March 2019). In the meantime, the ANC launched the “Make a move campaign: self-determination is a right, not a crime”, in order to bring light to the repression faced by Catalan activists, trying to get support from foreign States and international organisations.

**Culture and Environment**

Catalonia’s environment is marked by an immense variety of soils and climates. With a coastline of 580km and a mountainous formation that extends for more than 200km, Catalonia has a great wealth of landscapes, habitats and species. This unique concentration of diverse landscapes and its geographical position, providing direct contact with the Mediterranean and the European continent, have helped shape the region's culture and traditions, contributing to the inception of a simultaneously national and cosmopolitan culture. Having received multiple and distinct cultural influences, Catalonia has traditionally absorbed different art and thought trends, as well as incorporated values of co-existence and tolerance.

When thinking about Catalonia’s culture, the region’s language might be the first thing that comes to mind. In Catalonia, the majority of the population speaks both Catalan and Spanish. Mainly as a consequence of the history of oppression of the Catalan language, especially during the military government of Francisco Franco, locals are extremely proud of their language, which is used on a daily basis throughout the region and represents the region’s distinction and uniqueness. The Catalan language is thus an important aspect of the region’s identity. Furthermore, the Senyera, the flag of Catalonia, illustrates the region’s unique historical background and culture, as it
represents the King of the Crown of Aragon. Similarly, the Senyera Estelada, the unofficial flag of the supporters of Catalonia’s independence, adopted by the Catalan Republic proclaimed in 2017, is a symbol of the region’s nationalism. Its design takes up on the red-and-yellow bars of the Senyera and adds a white five-pointed star in a blue triangle at the hoist. Inspired by the flags of Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines, the lone star in the flag represents national freedom and independence. This version was first used before 1904 in Catalonia, with a clear nationalist intent, and symbolises the region’s aspiration for independence.

Apart from the Catalan language, which is easily spotted by tourists on signs around Barcelona, Catalonia has its own history, which has culminated in its distinct culture, traditions and cuisine. To start with, due to Catalonia’s geographical localisation near the sea and mountains, Catalan cuisine consists of a mix of seafood and meat-based dishes, and keeps on evolving and changing. Some examples of the region’s typical foods are the Escudella, a stew made of meat, beans, potato and cabbage; patatas bravas, potatoes fried in oil and served with a warm and spicy tomato sauce; and the Fideua, the Catalan version of Paella that uses short noodles instead of rice. As for the region’s historical culture, the Castellers, human towers that are a unique tradition, have received protection by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2010, making them culturally exclusive to Catalonia. Particularly common during big celebrations such as La Merce, an originally religious celebration that now includes several Catalan traditions and music performances, the Castellers consist in the idea of making the biggest human tower possible. La Sardana is a traditional dance that is particularly performed during local celebrations. Because it includes core Catalan values such as harmony, brotherhood and democracy, the dance has become a symbol of Catalan nationalism.