

European Union stares at disintegration

After Brexit, the fast-spreading Euroscepticism has engulfed Catalonia and it could imperil EU if not addressed quickly.

Catalonia, one of Spain's richest regions, is likely to declare independence from the southwestern European country next week. On October 1, more than two million Catalans voted in a referendum despite Madrid deeming it 'unconstitutional' and riot police lashing citizens to stop them from casting the ballot.

Over 900 civilians were injured in the clashes as Spain's right-wing Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy chose force to stop the referendum spearheaded by Catalan secessionist leader Carles Puigdemont. Separatist leaders claim that a vast majority voted for independence and it seemed to have shaken Madrid.

Spain's head of State King Felipe VI was prompt to back Rajoy in junking the referendum, saying it was 'outside the law' and a 'display of unaccepted loyalty'. Last Friday, the government blocked Catalan parliament from declaring independence.

But Madrid's knee-jerk attempts to stop the breakaway will only push the Catalans more towards independence, Peruvian-British journalist Daniel Hannan wrote in *The Spectator*.

Tongue-tied EU

As protests and violence paralysed Catalonia, plunging Spain into the darkest constitutional crisis it has seen since the military coup attempt of 1982, the European Union (EU) refused to lift a finger to help better things and steered clear of a blame game. All that a timid EU Commission said was - 'Violence can never be an instrument in politics'.

Donald Tusk, President of the European Council, tweeted after meeting Rajoy on October 2 - 'Sharing his constitutional arguments, I appealed for finding ways to avoid further escalation and use of force'.

Some may attribute this dull response to the choppy waters the world's largest political-economic bloc is sailing through. Brexit pushed the EU into 18 months of chaos, public debt looms large, coastal countries are struggling with refugee crisis, economic mood is glum, growth rate is stuttering and unemployment increasing.

The geopolitical environment too is turning unhealthy with Turkey President Recep Tayyip Erdogan upset with the EU for rejecting the country's membership. US President Donald Trump is openly urging others to follow Brexit.

Mend for Unity

Sixty years after its birth, disintegration stares EU in the face and its supporters say the only way to save the bloc is by tightening ties and shunning its one-size-fits-all attitude. Some argue that the Catalan crisis was the opportunity for the EU to regain the trust of its voters who frown upon its illiberalism, and contain the growing Euroscepticism.

Instead, the bloc threatened Catalonia that quitting Spain would mean quitting the bloc - further fuelling the secessionist sentiment.

"Someone needs to tell the Catalan people the truth. If you contest the law to abandon Spain, you also need to know that you abandon the EU," spokesperson of the European People's Party, the largest party in European Parliament, said.

But, this is hardly a threat because "a breakaway country would have to reapply for membership, which obviously makes independence less attractive for the people who would like to leave," argues Anton La Guardia, deputy foreign editor of The Economist.

A Powerhouse

Moreover, the EU is in no position to threaten an economic powerhouse like Catalonia. The region contributes to nearly 20% of Spain's GDP and it has Barcelona — the biggest port in the Mediterranean and the world's fourth largest cruise ship destination.

Catalonia is also home to top business schools such as ESADE and IESE and has an established tradition of business competence. It is because of Catalonia that Spain is the fourth major power in the EU. This is also why Spain does not want to

part with it.

Fundamental Flaws

Another reason the EU has remained tongue-tied on the crisis is that it does not have a mechanism in place to deal with a dispute of this kind. The Catalan vote was 'not legal' and the issue was 'an internal matter for Spain', the EU Commission said.

Article 4.2 of the Lisbon Treaty (signed in 2009) states that EU 'shall respect' the 'essential State functions of its members', including 'territorial integrity' and 'maintaining law and order'. This means 'the EU has no power over how a member State decides to organise itself or its constituent regions,' French journalist Natalie Nougayrede wrote in *The Guardian*.

This exposes the flaws in the bloc's very fundamentals. Many say this needs to be fixed, but no one wants to get their hands dirty.

Even founding members Germany and France have not said much to cool the outrage pouring on Catalonia's streets. Primarily because Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel's party is an ally of the ruling party in Spain and France's President Emmanuel Macron is all for Spain's 'constitutional integrity'.

Cracks Deepening

In its 60 years, the EU has only known expansion and probably never foresaw disintegration. Now, the Catalan referendum seems to have 'deepened the cracks in its plan for greater integration, driving debate around identity across the continent,' says economist Franz Bushca, Professor at Westminster Business School, in the *Quartz*.

Secessionist sentiment is rife in many richer parts of Europe — Scotland in the UK, Flanders in Belgium, Corsica in France, Bavaria in south Germany and northern Italy to name a few.

On Exit Path

Poland, where national sovereignty is a fundamental issue, seems to take cues from Britain. Its argument is that the EU should allow member nations to have a say in planning the union's future. It also wants a stronger autonomy from EU

institutions.

“There is a quiet revolution happening with the countries left in the EU, countries like Poland and Hungary are standing up for themselves and they are looking towards Britain and Brexit. The last thing we want is a Europe dominated by the EU,” says Robert Oulds, a British Conservative politician.

Ireland, Denmark, Lithuania and Sweden could be next to leave the EU. The situation is such that it is not hard to predict that another member nation could copy a Brexit, points out The Economist.

It is still not late to save Catalonia – give it greater autonomy, power to keep its taxes and more protection for the Catalan language. Indirectly, the EU can help with this by junking its rigid reforms and introducing a ‘multi-tier or multi-speed’ system, which will help address grievances at a more microscopic level.

Hands down, the Catalan crisis has exposed the EU’s political limits. The bloc is fighting its illiberal reforms and the resulting rise in nationalism. “It is no longer unthinkable for the EU to break apart,” said Sigmar Gabriel, Germany’s Foreign Affairs Minister.

Time to Unite

In fact, the three pro-Europe bigwigs – Tusk, Macron and Jean-Claude Juncker, President of the European Commission – have been fighting among themselves to become the saviour of the EU.

This was evident at recent digital meet hosted by Estonia. While organisers banned Brexit and EU discussions at the meet, saying the topics were way too serious for such a platform, Macron put his foot down to debate on the EU budget.

But Tusk managed to have the last word by saying: “First and foremost, I will do everything in my power to keep the unity of the EU. Secondly, I will concentrate on finding real solutions to real problems of our citizens, who are concerned about security, migration or unemployment. And finally, we will all make sure that Europe is making progress”.

It is now more than ever that the 28-member union (soon to be 27 with Britain leaving) needs enhanced cooperation to overcome sluggish markets, silence anti-

EU voices, keep the euro alive and tackle the threat of a possible political accident.

Juncker recently proposed new electoral processes, a joint EU army and an expansion of the eurozone, which could be a new starting point for discussions towards a more cohesive European Union.

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