

Catalans see pain in Spain as chance for independence

The eurozone crisis has triggered calls for the break-up of a key member state, **David Charter** writes from Vic, Catalonia



A simple act of defiance in a medieval square 380 miles from Madrid shows the revolutionary fervour that could crack Spain apart.

The distinctive red and yellow striped Estelada flag, with its white star for freedom, hangs from the Gothic town hall in Vic, a market town in the heart of Catalonia, after the council declared independence from Spain.

When journalists from Madrid phone up to ask if it is true that the town is not flying the national flag any more — which is against the law — officials tell them that they only have one flagpole and it is occupied with the town standard.

Meanwhile, the council balcony and a hundred other windows overlooking the Plaça Major are draped in the colours of Catalonia in a permanent dis-

break-up of a European member state. "Europe is tired of paying for the south and Catalonia is tired of paying for Spain," said Josep Vila d'Abadal, 58, the Mayor of Vic and an MP in the Catalan Parliament in Barcelona. "No region in Europe pays 8 per cent of its GDP to the government. Probably this is the best moment for us — as Einstein said, the world only changes through crisis."

Spain's woes stem from its burst property bubble, which in turn was fuelled by the European Central Bank's one-size-fits-all interest rates. The crisis has made Catalans painfully aware that they transfer a net €12 billion a year to the rest of Spain. At the same time they took €5 billion from Madrid to tackle their own budget deficit.

Mr d'Abadal is the convener of the Associació de Municipis per la Independència, a movement of Catalanian towns for independence, which has been joined by 551 of the 900 mayors since December.

While Vic's declaration of freedom was symbolic, the association's goal is true independence by 2014 — the anniversary of Catalonia's defeat by Spanish troops in 1714 that ended an earlier period of independence.

"We are in a decisive moment for the future of Europe and Spain," said King Juan Carlos in an unprecedented appeal for unity earlier this month on his website. "We will only overcome the current difficulties by acting together, uniting our voices, pulling in the same direction... the worst thing we can do is divide our forces, encourage dissent, chase chimeras, and deepen wounds."

But Mariano Rajoy, the conservative Prime Minister, is playing hardball with the region that provides nearly a quarter of national GDP.

He refused Catalonia's request last week for the same tax-raising powers as the Basque region, prompting the normally moderate regional leader Artur Mas to call a snap election on November 25 to "consult the will of the Catalanian people" on a becoming an independent state.

The Basque country is also in political upheaval after Patxi López, the Prime Minister, called an election for October 21 which is set to be a close-fought contest between nationalists and separatists.

As the economic disaster turns into a political and existential crisis, Spain's financial outlook remains bleak. "The Spanish Government can do very little to address this crisis," said Simon Tilford of the Centre for Economic Reform in London. "It cannot pump liquidity into the markets as the UK has done. It has to attempt to meet very high levels of fiscal austerity and its economic reforms are very unpopular."

"The Government is most definitely not going to be in a position to satisfy the Catalans. It is a highly combustible situation."

As if to prove the point, someone burnt the huge Catalan national flag hanging from the council balcony in Vic earlier this week. It was swiftly replaced.

"If there is violence, I promise you the Catalan people will not be involved in it," said Lluís Coromimas Salom, 45, an accountant and separatist campaigner in Vic. "Please, all I want is to be Catalan. We cannot even play in the European football championship like Scotland and Eng-

land. We have been waiting and working for this moment for nearly 40 years and I think people have lost their fear."

Aristarc Claramunt, 26, an unemployed graduate in prosthetics from Vic, added: "I don't think Spain will risk being kicked out of the EU by taking the tanks out. That would be an undemocratic act, it would be an act of civil war."

Additional reporting by Graham Keeley



"I don't think Spain will be taking the tanks out," said Aristarc Claramunt



play usually reserved for the region's national day.

Emboldened by the economic crisis, Catalan nationalists believe that their moment has come. After a demonstration of about one million people in Barcelona, the Catalan parliament voted on Thursday to hold a referendum on independence during its next mandate, which runs until December 2016.

The response from Madrid was swift and stern. Spain has "legal and constitutional instruments to stop this and the government is prepared to use them", the deputy prime minister said.

With retired generals quoted in newspapers urging military force to keep the country together, the atmosphere has become volatile and unpredictable.

The eurozone crisis that has toppled governments across the continent and driven a wedge between the prosperous north and the south has moved into a new phase that could trigger the

Lluís Coromimas Salom: "All I want is to be Catalan"



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