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Catalonia

# The post-election political landscape

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**1. The Catalan parliamentary elections of December 21st, 2017 (21D) saw an unexpected electoral mobilization, with a historic rate of participation of 79.04% (these are the official figures after the counting of votes from abroad). The balance of power between the two big blocs in contention is relatively similar to that of September 27, 2015 (27S): 2,079,340 votes (47.49%) and 70 deputies for the pro-independence camp against 1,902,061 votes (43.49%) and 57 supporters of Article 155.**

And, between them, a self-proclaimed modest third space, that of Catalunya en Comú-Podem: 326,360 votes (7.45%) and 8 deputies. Within each camp a conservative party is in a hegemonic position: Ciudadanos, indisputably, for the constitutionalist bloc, in the face of a collapsing People's Party (PP) and a Party of Socialists of Catalonia which, despite slight progress, has failed to emerge from its peripheral role in Catalan politics; and Junts per Catalunya (Together for Catalonia), for the independentist bloc, albeit in a much more precarious way and practically on par with the ERC (Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya - Republican Left of Catalonia). As usual, the independentist forces gained more votes in Catalonia in the interior, and in small and medium-sized cities and the big city centres and gained less votes in the greater metropolitan area of Barcelona and Tarragona (especially in traditional working-class neighbourhoods) and other (post) industrial enclaves. However, they suffered a slight decline compared to 2015 in some of their traditional bastions (certainly due to hyper-mobilization at the time) while progressing very slightly, especially thanks to the ERC, precisely in the urban centres and neighbourhoods where they are traditionally weaker and where their influence is below their national average.

2. In the context of the defeat suffered when it reached its peak, independentism has managed to keeping disconcerted social base mobilized, and it achieved its highest score to date, comparable to that of the "Yes" vote on October 1st, 2017 (2,044,038 votes) and slightly higher than the elections of September 27, 2015 (1,966,508 votes, 47.8%) and that of the Yes-Yes vote during the non-binding citizens' consultation of November 9, 2014 (1,897,274 votes, although the mode of scrutiny was different then and does not allow valid comparisons). The strength of independentism depends on its consistency and endurance, but its weakness lies in its prolonged structural stagnation since 2014. This does not detract from the indisputable fact that it won more votes than the opposite bloc. Despite the mismanagement of the Catalan government during the events of October 1st and the culminating point of the proclamation of the Republic on October 27, the independentist people have been overwhelmingly loyal to their majority political and social organizations of reference. The repressive offensive of the state led the independentist base to retaliate by closing ranks, probably with less illusions and less candour than in the previous period. However, this reflects, in a deeper way, a constitutive character of the movement that appeared five years ago, with the exception of the decisive days of September 20 and October 3: its strong institutional logic, especially after the elections of September 27, 2015, its weak disruptive capacity and the effectiveness of the framing provided by the ANC (and Æmniun).

3. Against all prognoses, the rivalry between the ERC and Puigdemont turned out to the advantage of the latter. The limits of the party led by Junqueras and Rovira have again blatantly emerged. Without a cutting edge, it is the clearest expression of the unabashed politics of official independentism. Politics conceived not as "an art of the counter-time, of the conjuncture, of the propitious moment that must be seized", a form of Leninism in the manner of Daniel Bensaid, but as a permanent lamentation of the lost opportunity. and the renunciation of making the most of the potential of the concrete situation, a form of politics of abstention as a strategic substratum. The rise of Puigdemont is explained by the legitimacy of the presidential figure in exile. It is therefore partly a conjunctural vote for the President, who had the foresight to set up an electoral system in partial autonomy in relation to the PdeCAT (European Catalan Democratic Party) - whose daily management can only provoke friction between the various power clusters of the Catalanist right - and to adopt a discourse of a somewhat epic style compared to that of the ERC - albeit fundamentally just as lukewarm - with studied accents studied in the manner of an unclassifiable

maverick, capable of asserting that what was at stake was not so much his personal candidacy as the legitimacy of the institution itself which he embodied and that of the day of October 1st. Puigdemont managed to merge his own person and the representation of the presidential institution and the Catalan people themselves, at least the independentist people. The *procés* initiated in 2012 suffered from hyper-presidentialism, with a constant enthronement of the presidential figure, Mas first and then Puigdemont, as the keystone of all strategic architecture. This proved decisive on 21D. But the hyper-presidentialism of independentism has a very specific character, more related to the institution than to the person (despite the ridiculous and repeated attempts at glorification and cult of the personality to which its representatives are subject). Artur Mas can attest to this. And Puigdemont has embodied it to the full.

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4. The success of the Puigdemont operation is a new proof of the undeniable instinct for self-preservation of the Catalan right which, although having obtained the worst results in its history, has not definitively lost hegemony in the Catalan nationalist camp, thanks to its institutional and social anchors forged during decades of the exercise of power which allowed it to benefit from a clear advantage against its competitors in the independentist camp. An ability to survive and structural weakness go hand in hand for a right whose neoliberal model prevents it from stabilizing a solid social base and which can only be partially galvanized by the proposal to create its own state, at the price of a confrontation with the central state which is increasingly difficult to manage.

The Catalanist right came to power in November 2010 with an ultra-neoliberal governmental project that soon experienced a collapse without popular appeal and legitimacy. The independentist process that developed from 2012 offered it a discourse and a problematic to cling to, an epic vision which it lacked and a *raison d'Être* it had lost. But without escaping two inevitable and interlocking contradictions: the contrast between the strategic discourse advocating a movement to easy and painless independence and the real difficulties of this path, and the tension between the real project of the movement (independence) and that of the Catalan government (using independentism to renegotiate relations between Spain and Catalonia). These two immanent contradictions in the project, combined with the economic crisis and the anti-establishment potential specific to the movement of the Indignados (15M), have prevented the Catalan right from consolidating the social base of its new project and crystallizing a new social bloc. . This is where its weakness lies.

5. For five years, Convergencia has lost influence to the benefit of the ERC, more credible in terms of independence, and less identified with the old regime, neoliberalism and corruption. It was on the question of independence that a change occurred, due to ERC's hesitations during the campaign, the reformulation of the debate in terms of presidential legitimacy and the relative autonomy enjoyed by Puigdemont. But his list, Junts per Catalunya, actually contains an important component of headlong rush and conjunctural tactical and strategic improvisation, which accelerates that undertaken in 2012 during the turn to independence. The ex-Convergent right still oscillates between an unfinished refoundation and its own Ponzi scheme strategy. Junts per Catalunya can in no way be considered as a successful project and depends totally on the uncertain choices of Puigdemont who will fight not to remain a symbolic figure sentenced to prison or exile. Its electoral success does not mean that the Catalan right has finally managed to rebuild successfully after the failure of the creation of PdeCAT in July 2016. But it is in better conditions to achieve it.

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6. The victory of Ciudadanos - 1,109,732 votes (25.37%) - is due in large part to the capture of the right-wing Spanish centralist vote at the expense of the PP and to an increase in participation, which allowed it to channel much of the abstentionist vote of the working and popular layers. It benefited from a logic of the useful vote and an anti-independence strategic vote, with good results both in wealthy areas and in the working-class neighbourhoods of large urban concentrations. It is as much an identity vote as a vote motivated by order and fear. Its progress expresses a fundamental double dynamic: the infernal combination of a national identity-based logic of exclusion and of a political-cultural destruction of the working class. But an important component of this vote is conjunctural or, at

least, specific to elections circumscribed to the autonomous region, and should not be confirmed in other types of elections such as municipal or general elections. The success of Ciudadanos is based on a mixture, in the first place, between a discourse of democratic regeneration and neoliberal modernization that attracts the dominant classes as well as the most conservative sectors of the traditional political working class who have been won over to a meritocratic and individualistic mentality, and secondly, the activation of an anti-independence identity-based drive, historically built on the reference to origins and language (Catalans of Spanish origin and Spanish-speaking) as a factor of individual configuration and collective political identity. It is, broadly speaking, a Macron project of mainstream neoliberal modernization that can claim to be outside the traditional political class, even if the identity-based reference of this vote and the identity-based construction of its politics are reminiscent of the logic of the European far right (even if it is not a question of claiming a national identity vis-à-vis the foreigner, but a dominant Spanish national identity in the face of the Catalan national identity which should dissolve itself therein).

7. Independentism won the election, but without a clear road map nor even the appearance of one. A victory without a plan, then. Managing the 21D verdict will be complex, now that the hypothesis (the official public narrative) of an easy independence and disconnection by agreement has been refuted. The movement that emerged in 2012 is unprecedented in its massive and ongoing nature. It has obtained the greatest support in its history after having suffered a serious (and arguably self-inflicted) political defeat on October 27 (27-O) and having badly mismanaged the referendum vote of October 1 (1-O). [1]

But its foundational strategy is exhausted. The policy of first independence, later the rest, the policy of delinking the national and social questions, is a worn-out paradigm, responsible for the collateral damages inflicted on the movement, the effects undesired by its promoters. It will not help to create a broader social majority or to shape a project that guarantees economic and social change. And it has boosted the identitarian polarization promoted by Ciudadanos in the working-class neighbourhoods.

But it does so on the basis of the social devastation caused by a neoliberalism that has relied to a large degree for its implementation on the complicity of the left and the workers movement. Added to the obliviousness toward independentism in the popular neighbourhoods is a long tradition of insouciance that started in the institutionalization of the workers movement after the Transition and its turn to social-liberalism, conservative Pujolist nationalism centred on the middle class and the less urban parts of Catalonia, and the social-liberal Catalanismo of Maragall that sought to attract support from the former Convergència middle sectors but on the basis of excluding the working-class peripheries. [2] The new left that arose after 15M [the May 15 occupation movement that began in 2011], Podemos and the Communes, owed much of its success to the recovery of support in the popular neighbourhoods, but it did not go beyond doing this with a superficial electoral-media model that was not deeply rooted and is therefore very limited in its ability to reverse the historical tendencies of social, cultural and political destructuring, and vulnerable to changes in the overall context.

8. Newly minted in 1968 by Josep Benet, the slogan *un sol poble* [a single people] has been a constituent part of the political imagination of Catalanism, a recurring presence in diverse but decisive junctures, among them October 2017. In its original meaning it had a dual aspect, both social and national, that at the time expressed the will for national integration under a project of social integration of the Spanish immigration from the rest of Spain that had come to Catalonia. [3]

But by the end of the Transition, the articulation between national and social had been disassembled by a dual and combined process: on the one hand, the rise of Pujolism with its identitarian vision of the nation, suitable to economic neoliberalism, seesawing around the middle classes and relegating to a subaltern role the working class that had been the sustenance of opposition to Francoism; on the other hand, the decomposition of the workers movement as a result of the impact of neoliberal restructuring and its particular process of institutionalization and bureaucratization. Hollowed out from below, with a dismembered social base, and integrated into the state from above, the historical workers movement ceased to embody a project either of social transformation or of dynamic articulation between

class and national identity. And with this, a structural part of the Catalan working class was relegated to a peripheral position both socially and in the national narrative, one of the most visible, albeit superficial, manifestations of its significant disaffection with respect to Catalan institutionality being its well-known differential abstention in the autonomous territory's elections.

9. Contemporary independentism has likewise taken up the idea of *un sol poble* but with a meaning distinct from the original, shorn of its class dimension. This has been noted by the historian Marc Andreu, a great authority on the anti-Francoist workers movement and the historical evolution of the working-class neighbourhoods, although he overlooks the responsibility of the left and the effects of its bureaucratization and social-liberalization in the desynchronization between the social and national. The contemporary delinking between the national project and the social question splits in half the idea of a single people, smooths the way for its fracturing along identitarian lines and boosts *Ciudadanos*. If there is to be a single people, in the sense of a minimal social consensus around some socio-cultural references and a collective identity, there must also be a single people in terms of equality and social justice.

Herein lies the Achilles heel of the foundational strategy of independentism. In 1845, the British Conservative politician Benjamin Disraeli published his novel *Sybil, or The Two Nations*, on the squalid situation of the English working class. The idea of two nations is a recurrent one in history, referring to social fracture. It is useful to resort to it in the current debate in Catalonia as it points to the close link between the social and national questions that is requisite for strategic thinking about what is meant by *un sol poble* if that idea is to have an emancipatory content. And the very idea of *un sol poble* needs to be updated in the context of the social transformations in Catalonia, the social fragmentation, the cultural changes, the process of individualization, and in particular the impact of the new immigration from outside the Spanish state. ¿Un sólo pueblo plural? ¿Un pueblo de pueblos? Whatever the case, it expresses the desire to find a basis of shared references within a framework of pluralism and cultural diversity. To work in that direction presupposes going beyond the strategic limits of independentism and the passive politics of those within the ranks of the left who have stuck closely to emphasizing those limits without having a plan to intervene in the real processes.

10. The immediate road ahead for independentism is bifurcated. Either it clings to an exhausted strategic paradigm that spectacularly collides with the state, or it is refounded to keep alive the flame of the rupture. In other words, the choice is between a strategic stagnation "à la Euros" flavoured with a paradoxical combination of the unreal foundational illusionism and a new self-image as the victim following the October 27 defeat "à la Euros" or a general refoundation-reformulation. Strategic quietism will mean entering into a political death-agony, albeit dissimulated in the short term by a defensive anti-repression logic in which independentism can end up evolving into a movement with a project for a break with the state disconnected from any road map and short-term objective. That is, dissociating its formal objective from its more prosaic day-to-day practice and converting itself into the protagonist of a structural conflict of Catalan and Spanish politics but without any presumption that it will be resolved.

On December 21 the winner was an "independentism without independence" as conservative commentator Enric Juliana put it, an independentism that could not realize independence but still with a formal project to proceed to independence albeit without a convincing plan even from the propagandistic standpoint (strategically, its limits were always apparent). The question is whether it will be forced to proceed toward a stage not only of independentism without independence but of independentism without an independence project, and whether it will locate itself traumatically in a climate of defeat and demoralization mixed with an exclusively defensive anti-repression dynamic, or whether it will be able to do this in the context of a strategy for struggle holding out for a new phase.

This could occur simply through the solidification of an independentist bloc too weak to win but too strong to be definitively defeated, generating a continuation of the conflict in the context of a normalized instability and used by the leadership of both contending blocs to keep its social base intact and mobilized. But it could also remake itself through a global reorientation of the perspective and objectives of independentism in a sense that helps to overcome

its basic weaknesses and its more contradictory aspects.

11. The road toward a strategic reformulation involves, as we have emphasized in many previous articles, tying the independentist agenda to anti-austerity policies and defending a constituent process compatible with an independentist and confederal future. This dual turn is decisive to the urgent two-fold job facing independentism: to expand its social base while articulating an alliance in Catalonia with the federalist partisans of the right to decide and who are opposed to the 1978 Regime, and to break the persisting isolation throughout the Spanish state that has smoothed the way for the repressive route taken by Rajoy.

This fits very poorly with Puigdemont's leadership within the independence movement and with an ANC [Catalan National Assembly, a mass nationalist organization] that since October embodies better than anyone the strategic crisis of independentism, on the one hand permanently locked into the foundational paradigm of first independence, later the rest, and on the other hand having subordinated itself completely to the Catalan government and its president. In reality, if the ANC wants independence for Catalonia, the first conclusion it would have to reach would be the need to free itself from its initial paradigm and from the Catalan government itself. In other words, the independentist strategy requires strategic independence from its own limits and from the Catalan executive.

However, it is certainly not easy to implement a strategy of disconnection with its foundational hypotheses and with the excessive institutionalization-governmentalization of the *procés* (in particular post-2015). And there is no signal that things are evolving in that direction. But faced with the paralysis of the major political and social organizations of independentism, posing this necessary reorientation must be the central task of the independentist left grouped around the CUP (which involves questioning its own strategy as well) and the non-independentist left represented by Catalunya en Comú-Podem (which presupposes abandoning passivity as a permanent orientation).

12. Beyond its concrete capacity to transcend its own real limits and its strategic impasse, independentism has become a structural given of Catalan society and a durable mass social-political movement reflecting a substantial transformation in relation to the traditional objective of Catalanism under its different variants, reform of Spain. It has solid roots, to take up a Gramscian terminology, inside "civil society" and "political society". But it is affected by a triple fundamental problem: firstly, the dialectic between the social and the political has evolved towards a growing subordination of the former, which has facilitated the displacement of the political leadership of the *procés* towards the institutional sphere in a phase where it has been dominated by moderate currents; secondly, independentist "civil society" has been solidly structured by the ANC (and to a lesser extent by Òmnium), the veritable skeleton of a movement equipped with an admirable constancy and cadence, but deprived of punch and bit, and strategically armed with what we could call immaterial hypotheses, constitutive of a kind of strategic idealism ill designed to face the material reality of relations of power. It was only in the period from September 20 to October 3, in the brief electrifying phase of the movement, that a disruptive "civil society" emerged; and thirdly, the independentist "civil society" is subject to significant distortions: distortions of class with a shift towards the (old and new) middle classes and public sector employees; socio-spatial distortions, with a localisation in medium sized towns, centres of big urban concentrations and small localities; and generational distortions with a concentrated implantation among youth and young adults.

13. What will be the outcome? After reaching its apogee, independentism has failed strategically and suddenly all its weaknesses have become apparent. Incapable of sustaining a confrontation with state, a confrontation which ontologically rejected its fraudulent hypothesis of "deconnection", it has not succeeded in making the state bend, although it has not itself suffered a decisive defeat either. Are we heading towards a phase of normalization of an undecided conflict which is transformed into a major structuring element of Catalan politics and to a large extent of Spanish politics? It's impossible to say at the moment. Paradoxically, independentism has acted simultaneously as the main opponent of the 1978 regime and as the scapegoat that has facilitated a temporary institutional blockage from above, as defensive as it is authoritarian and aggressive, in the form of what we have called elsewhere an offensive resistentialism, whose very nature is nevertheless continuing to fuel the fundamental factors of the regime's

crisis. The political crisis and the permanent crisis of legitimacy as a form of authoritarian governance is both a manifestation of strength (the ability to manage the crisis and use its contradictions to gain the active support of a part of society) and weakness (the impossibility of stabilizing a new social bloc and a new hegemony capable of generating a non-confrontational "normality"). Rajoy and the dominant regime are taking advantage of the relative easing of the economic situation and the end of the 15M cycle to use the Catalan question as an element to isolate Podemos and put an end to the crisis of the regime. Although successful in the short term, this policy is more like a temporary solution than a structural remedy and could be very fragile, especially if the economic situation deteriorates again. But beyond its capacity to aggravate the reactionary nature of the political situation and orchestrate a counter-offensive, the dominant power bloc is currently unable to articulate a "passive revolution" in the Gramscian sense, which completes self-reform from above and reintegrates/disables a part of Catalan independentism and the social base of Podemos as part of a new social, political and state project. The first would require a reform of the state that comes up against the hard core, the source code, of the 1978 Constitution and the identity of Spain. The second is conditioned by a new cycle of economic growth and purchasing power that would represent a credible future (half real, half imaginary) for the middle classes and youth. As long as this is not possible, the breach leading to democratic change and rupture will remain open, beyond the difficulties of the moment, marked however by the risks of an involution as authoritarian as it is reactionary.

14. From the standpoint of those who favour emancipatory social change, the two most negative results of 21D are the poor showing of the CUP and Catalunya en Comú-Podem, two forces whose mutual exclusion in their respective alliances is already an initial signal of strategic gridlock. Contrary to the conventional journalistic commentaries, electoral results cannot be the sole way in which to assess the success or failure of the project and orientation of a political force. These must be considered in relation to the general political influence of a party, its capacity to define the political agenda and condition the public debate, and whether or not it acts as a general political-cultural reference for broad social sectors with their own possibilities to organize and mobilize around their political initiatives. Analytical electoralism, in this sense, is as superficial as strategic electoralism.

The relation between electoral success and the correctness of a party's political orientation is complex, too. There can be situations in which a party has poor results that are the consequence not of a mistaken political line but of the fact that it defended what is correct in a complex situation. Going against the stream may on many occasions be the only commendable and, in retrospect, courageous course. But it can prove costly in the short run. On the other hand, the contrary is also true: adapting to the pressures of the context may in certain situations save the situation but at the price of laying the basis for a later political defeat of greater scope. Reformist parliamentarism is a true master at this.

The complexity of the relation between political orientation, project and electoral results, however, cannot be used to fall into a minority mentality that makes a fetish of resistance and self-justification when things go badly. Aspiring to build a party with majority support must be a constant objective and, precisely, understanding the non-linear nature of this link is a necessary condition to avoid slippages, a tendency to self-complacent resistance, or an obsession with results that lack content. And in both cases that concern us, CUP and Catalunya en Comú-Podem, the disappointments of 21D should encourage a self-evaluation both of the political line that was followed and of the project itself.

15. The drop in the CUP vote was clear: from 336,375 votes (8.2%) and 10 deputies in 2015 to 193,352 votes (4.45%) and 4 deputies now. It lost primarily in the metropolitan area of Barcelona. Many of the lost votes were "loaned" to the ERC by voters who did not want to vote for Junts pel Sí, but it appears as well that the CUP lost votes to Junts per Catalunya in the Catalan interior. For many voters a "useful vote" for oficialista (outgoing government) candidates, in particular the ERC, outweighed a critical assessment of how the Catalan government had managed the October 1 vote.

The CUP's poor results, largely in the major urban areas, reveal the CUP's limits as a political and organizational

force. Beyond the question of its orientation, the 21D vote is suggestive of problems of a more structural nature in its project which, despite everything, is an exceptionally strong one in comparison with the other European anti-capitalist parties. Overcoming those problems means considering popular unity as a broad strategic project that transcends what is popularly referred to as Unitat Popular and requires alliances and interface with other realities of the political and social left which, moreover, is not necessarily wedded to independentism. This in turn means engaging with the process from both within and without and not working exclusively inside it in a context where it is essential to redefine its foundational premises.

16. The result of Catalunya en Comú-Podem, 326,360 (7.45%), was also disappointing: less than the total vote obtained by its predecessor, the unsuccessful coalition between Podem, ICV and EUIA, and Catalunya Sí- que es Pot (CSQP), 367,613 votes (8.94%). [4] Caught in the electoral polarization, it proved unable to create a space for itself, and may well have lost votes to both left and right, to ERC (and CUP) and to PSC (and Ciudadanos). The basic question is not so much the orientation it adopted in this election campaign, but the entire political line adhered to since its irruption in Catalan politics from December 20, 2015 onwards, in which its tactic was one of strategic passivity, hoping that independentism would soon collapse, instead of trying to be an active influence in the particular context by developing a constituent and anti-austerity proposal for Catalonia that could lead to a convergence between the impulse generated respectively by 15M and the pro-independence movement.

But besides its orientation in the independentist debate, the future of the Commons project as a whole is at stake. Having lost the initial boost of the two victories in the general elections (20-D 2015 and 26-J 2016), and without the militant impact of the launch of Barcelona en Comú in the summer of 2014, Catalunya en Comú, founded in April 2017, has failed to take off organizationally or politically since then, becoming embroiled in a poorly managed row with Podem, which it remained entrapped in until October 1. In the few months it has existed, it has taken shape as an electoralist, institutionalized party without lively internal debate and lacking in territorial and social influence or, worse still, without a project to obtain it. [5]

In this new stage, its leading team will have to decide whether it is permanently located in the historical-strategic continuity running from the Moncloa Pacts (1977) to the tripartite government (2003-2010) or whether it is located in the slipstream of the constituent challenge of 15M. A crystal-clear dilemma, to speak openly, which allows many tactical nuances but tolerates no strategic ambiguity.

PS:

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[1] On October 27, Catalan President Carles Puigdemont, having received no answer from Madrid to his request for negotiations following the October 1 vote for independence, declared Catalan an independent Republic. Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy immediately followed this declaration by implementing emergency powers under article 155 of the Spanish Constitution of 1978, dissolving the Catalan Parliament and calling a general election in Catalonia on December 21.

[2] Jordi Pujol, President of the Generalitat of Catalonia 1980-2003, promoted the creation of a federalized Spain, but not an independent Catalan Republic, while Pasqual Maragall was President of the Generalitat of Catalonia from 2003 to 2006.

[3] For the origin and context of the slogan, see the recent biography of Benet published by Jordi Amat, *Com una pàtria. Vida de Josep Benet* (Barcelona: Edicions 62, 2017).



## The post-election political landscape

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[4] [Podem=The Catalan counterpart of Podemos; ICV=Initiative for Catalonia Greens; EUiA=United and Alternative left; CSQP=the coalition of the preceding parties, formed in 2015 to contest that year's Catalan election

[5] For a more detailed analysis of the major aspects of the project of Catalunya en ComÃº, this series of three articles published after its founding congress may be consulted: "The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner," Jacobin, 28/06/17:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/06/the-loneliness-of-the-long-distance-runner>