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Spain Could Collapse Like the U.S.S.R.

By Boris Kagarlitsky

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Catalonia has adopted a declaration of sovereignty. To those of us who lived through the collapse of the Soviet Union, this is very much deja vu. Everything here began exactly the same way. First, there were eloquent speeches on how the federal center is a dictatorship that stifles national identities and prevents local economies from developing. Next came colorful but abstract declarations with ambiguous promises to respect democratic values. Those were followed by the collapse of the state, the division of property, harassment of ethnic minorities, border disputes, the rewriting of history, an upsurge in chauvinism and the suppression of the very same national culture for the sake of which the original drive for independence had ostensibly been waged.

Of course, Catalonia today is not Ukraine or Georgia of 20 years ago. But the paradox is that in the context of contemporary Europe, the slogans for independence sound even more provocative and demagogic than the same sentiments sounded during the time of the Soviet collapse. The intelligentsia in the Soviet republics supported the idea of sovereignty, associating the Communist leaders in Moscow with censorship, bureaucratic control, an inefficient economy and shortages of consumer goods.

They thought that gaining independence would necessarily lead to the appearance of democratic societies guaranteeing full civil rights to their citizens. That is why a large number of educated Muscovites were sympathetic to those ideas and saw the awakening of national aspirations as part of the overall desire for political freedoms.

The call for independence became a standard tool for consolidating conservative forces and expanding their privileges. It became a convenient pretext for employing anti-democratic practices and an ideological basis for fighting critics from the same national culture they supposedly cherished.

There is no basis for modern Catalonians to hold the same illusions with which Soviet intellectuals flattered themselves in the early 1990s. True, Catalan language and culture were repressed during the dictatorship of Francisco Franco, under the last of the Hapsburgs and during the reign of the early Bourbons. But today, a trend toward positive discrimination can be seen, one that elevates the status of the national language.

There is no cause for complaining about a lack of democracy or autonomy. In fact, starting three decades ago, the Spanish province has taken as many rights as it could. The economic propaganda espoused by Catalonian nationalists is somewhat dubious as well. They complain that Madrid redistributes money earned in Barcelona to the poor provinces in southern Spain.

Overlooking for the moment that a lack of desire to help your neighbor could hardly be called a virtue, simple arithmetic indicates that if Catalonia were to become an independent state, it would have to pay far more to the European Union. But instead of sending budgetary funds to the Spanish capital, Catalonia would be providing aid to corruption-ridden Romania or Bulgaria. But this is only in the event that the new state would remain part of a united Europe.

The call for independence springs entirely from the egoism of the Catalonian elites. Its members use those slogans to redirect social discontent brought on by the crisis toward Madrid before it is focused on them.

The question now is this: Will Catalonians allow themselves to be duped the way residents of the Soviet Union were 20 years ago?

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