



Attraction and Centrifugal Force: A Historical Perspective on the European Integration Process

Based on the Perspective of France-Spain Relations and the Catalan Issue

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Abstract. Despite the European integration process having a history of over 70 years, we still see separatist issues such as Catalonia's bid for independence as EU member states strive for a united Europe. Only by examining these phenomena comprehensively and deeply from the perspective of relevant countries' geopolitics through the lens of history can we understand the overall trend of European integration. From a historical standpoint, by examining the relationship between France and Spain and using the Catalan issue as an entry point, we can distinguish local separatism within the European integration process from nationalism at the national level. In doing so, we can recognize these issues as a form of internal interest politics and understand that they will not fundamentally undermine the overall direction of European integration.

Keywords: European Union · Catalonia · Spain · France · Geopolitics

1 Introduction

European Integration is a historic endeavor of cross-national unity explored through peaceful means. Since the Treaty of Paris in 1951 which established the European Coal and Steel Community, the European integration process has been ongoing for over 70 years, evolving from the European Community to the European Union. Within this historical process, there exist both centripetal forces based on political and economic interests, as well as historical and cultural roots, and centrifugal forces created by various interests and cultural conflicts, as well as their lingering effects. Multiple forces intertwine, driving and restraining the EU's arduous progress. The recently prominent "Catalan issue" and the relationship between France and Spain surrounding this issue undoubtedly serve as a valuable entry point for us to deeply analyze the European integration process from a historical and cultural perspective.

2 The Catalan Issue and the Relationship Between Spain and France

Despite the saying attributed to Napoleon that “Europe ends at the Pyrenees”, France and Spain have had a long-standing and close relationship. The two countries are not only geographically adjacent, but also have close ties in politics, economics, and culture. At the beginning of the 18th century, the French prince, Duke of Anjou, inherited the Spanish throne and became King Felipe V. The French lineage has been continued within the Spanish royal family, and the current Spanish King Felipe VI is still a descendant of the Duke of Anjou. The cooperation and conflicts between the two countries, along with the complex relationships between various duchies and principalities, are intertwined to create a rich and colorful historical panorama. This intricate historical panorama is the key to our deeper understanding of the internal relationships within the EU today.

The close cultural and economic ties between France and Spain are almost self-evident. As both countries are deeply influenced by the Roman Catholic Church, they share the same Latin cultural tradition. The two countries share many similarities in daily life, especially in the South of France and the North of Spain. Their literature and arts also demonstrate similar cultural qualities in many aspects. According to Eurostat, Spanish is the most studied foreign language by French people, after English, while French is the second most studied foreign language by Spanish people, after English [1]. The economic ties between France and Spain are also very close. According to data from the European Economic Data Statistics website, Datosmacro, Spain has been among the top five destinations for French trade exports since 1995. From 2015 to 2017, Spain was the second-largest destination for French trade exports, after Germany. The data in Table 1 shows the important position of Spain in French foreign trade. Multiple pieces of evidence demonstrate that France and Spain have a significant influence on each other in many aspects.

Although the Catalonia issue is an internal problem of Spain, it is also deeply influenced by the complex relationship of both close cooperation and conflict between France and Spain. This influence has continued until today and reflects the delicate relationships that play an important role in the process of European integration.

In the late 10th century, the Count of Barcelona in Catalonia declared independence from the Frankish Kingdom and Catalonia broke free from Frankish rule. “Although the issue of sovereignty was not resolved until 1268, Catalonia had actually become an independent region.” [2] p. 204. It can be seen that the emergence of “Catalonia” as an

Table 1. French Exports to Spain from 2011–2020 and Their Proportion in France’s Total Annual Exports (Total Amount in Millions of Euros)

Year	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Total Exports	428,500.6	442,643.4	437,150.6	437,785.9	456,514.7	453,075.8	473,814.8	492,964.1	509,948.2	427,236.2
Exports to Spain	31,023.4	29,657.1	29,464.0	31,082.8	33,234.3	34,252.5	33,640.9	38,451.2	37,940.1	31,487.3
Proportion	7.24%	6.70%	6.74%	7.10%	7.28%	7.56%	7.71%	7.80%	7.44%	7.37%

Data source: <https://datosmacro.expansion.com/comercio/exportaciones/francia>

ethnic identity was originally closely linked to France. The first Catalan independence uprising was also directly linked to France. In 1640, France invaded Spain, and the Spanish king forcibly recruited over a thousand people in the Catalonia region on the border of France, which sparked popular resistance. With France's instigation and intervention, it eventually led to the Catalan region's independence uprising [3]. This uprising and a series of subsequent battles are collectively known as the "War of the Reapers" (*Guerra de los Segadores*). This uprising, which sought independence for Catalonia, ended with the signing of the Treaty of the Pyrenees in 1659, which brought the Catalonia region into the French territory.

When discussing the identity rift between Catalonia and the central government of Spain, we cannot fail to mention the War of the Spanish Succession (*Guerra de sucesión española*) from 1701 to 1714. Due to the extinction of the Habsburg dynasty in Spain, the Bourbon dynasty of France and the Habsburg dynasty of Austria contested the Spanish throne, leading to a war between two camps: the alliance supporting the French Prince of Anjou, composed of France, and several German princes, and the anti-French alliance supporting Charles, composed of the Holy Roman Empire, Britain, the Netherlands, several German princes, and most of Italy. The war ended with the French Prince of Anjou succeeding to the Spanish throne as Philip V. "The War of the Spanish Succession was not only an international dispute between dynasties, but also an internal conflict in Spain, a conflict between the Aragon and Castile dynasties." [4] pp. 106–107. In this war, the Aragon dynasty, where Catalonia is located, stood on the side of the anti-French alliance and was opposed to the Castile dynasty, which supported the French Prince of Anjou. As the king has a special symbolic significance in ethnic consciousness, this conflict undoubtedly planted the seeds of the Catalonia issue. Although Carlos I became the sole ruler of Castile and Aragon in 1516, and Spain became a unified country [2] p. 246, the self-identity of Catalonia as a subculture group of Spain did not disappear completely. The outbreak of the War of the Spanish Succession also confirmed this, and France's role in it was evident. This situation is a common phenomenon in Europe, where numerous states unite to form a nation-state, and still has an important impact on the historical process of European integration today.

In addition to the politically intertwined relationship, the cultural relationship between Catalonia and France and Spain is also complex. In the Catalonia issue, the legal status of the Catalan language has always been a sensitive issue. Catalan, Spanish, and French all belong to the Western Romance branch of the Romance language family. However, if further subdivided, Catalan and French belong to the Gallo-Romance branch, while Spanish belongs to the West Iberian Romance branch. That is to say, in terms of language, Catalonia's culture is closer to French culture. This undoubtedly gives France a special cultural significance in the Catalonia issue in Spain.

From the perspective of economic and trade relations, Catalonia's connection with France is particularly close compared to other regions of Spain. As can be seen from the statistics in Table 2, Catalonia has consistently accounted for just over one-fourth of Spain's total export trade with France. Although Catalonia is one of the most economically developed regions in Spain, the close economic ties between Catalonia and France are undeniable.

Table 2. Spain's total export trade with France and the percentage accounted for by Catalonia (Total Amount in Millions of Euros)

Year	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Spain	38,697.1	38,646.2	39,590.2	40,170.9	42,860.5	43,490.6	45,735.1	43,689.4
Catalonia	9,893.4	9,899.7	9,821.4	10,451.0	11,208.2	11,514.1	12,310.3	11,499.8
Catalonia's share	25.6%	25.6%	24.8%	26.0%	26.1%	26.4%	26.9%	26.3%

Data source: Statistical Institute of Catalonia (Institut d'Estadística de Catalunya), <https://www.idescat.cat/pub/?id=aec&n=356>

The relationship between France and Spain is close, and among the various regions of Spain, Catalonia's relationship with France in terms of economy, culture, and other aspects is particularly close, which makes France's position and role in the Catalan issue more delicate. This complex and delicate relationship can typify the internal mechanism of the various centrifugal and centripetal forces and their interaction in the process of European integration. In other words, European integration not only faces the coordination of interests in politics, economy, and culture between member states, but also the relationships between different ethnic groups formed by various principalities in history. These relationships are complex and intertwined, and it is expected that they would create some disturbances in the process of European integration.

3 France's Attitude and Significance Towards Catalonia Issue

The Catalonia issue is a typical reflection of the turmoil caused by regional separatism in the European integration process. The reality of interest games, combined with the ups and downs of the relationship between the former principalities in history, constitutes the most basic structural foundation for the operation and development of the EU. By analyzing the progress of the Catalonia issue in recent years, especially the Spanish constitutional crisis triggered by the Catalan independence referendum in 2017 (La crisi constitucional espanyola), we can form a deeper understanding of the European integration process. In the 2017 Spanish constitutional crisis, the official attitude of EU member states clearly showed the power of solidarity, but hidden underneath this solidarity were different interest positions, among which the important role played by France deserves special attention.

In 2011, Mariano Rajoy, the leader of the People's Party, became the Spanish prime minister and expressed a very tough attitude towards the Catalonia issue, arousing strong dissatisfaction among the Catalan people. In this context, the *Convergència i Unió*, a party with a dominant position in the Catalan Parliament, began to actively promote the Catalan separatist movement. This is an alliance party composed of two nationalist parties with local characteristics in Catalonia, representing the Catalan separatist forces and competing with other political forces such as the Socialist Party of Catalonia in the Parliament. In 2015, *Junts pel Sí*, an alliance party composed of four separatist parties with local characteristics in Catalonia, won the Catalan parliamentary election, and the Catalan separatist movement began to reach its peak. On September 6, 2017, the Catalan regional parliament passed the so-called "referendum law," demanding a referendum on

whether Catalonia should become an independent republic. On October 1, the independence referendum was held as scheduled, and the results were announced on October 6. 43.03% of Catalans participated in the referendum, with 90.18% of the total votes supporting Catalonia's independence. The referendum result was nothing less than a heavy bomb in Spanish politics. On October 26, the Spanish central government dissolved the Catalan Parliament in accordance with Article 155 of the Constitution, froze the autonomy of the Catalan region, took over the Catalan region, and held a new parliament election. The Spanish government arrested some Catalan independent politicians, and some of them were forced to flee abroad. On December 21, 2017, the results of the Catalan parliamentary election were announced, and the "Spanish constitutional crisis" was declared over.

Understanding and comprehending such regional separatist events that arise in the European integration process, including understanding and comprehending the attitudes of relevant countries in the EU towards such events and the actual impacts produced by these countries, undoubtedly has special significance and value for us to deeply understand and comprehend the European integration process.

As one of the six founding countries of the EU, France has always occupied a pivotal position within the EU, and its European policy aims to consolidate its core position within the EU. "France's promotion of the development of European integration is mainly to better safeguard its own interests, and to enhance France's position in the international community by establishing a 'strong Europe' located at the center of Europe." [5]. Although as more and more countries become members of the EU, France has had to face the problem of its leadership position within the EU being diluted, the global financial crisis and the European debt crisis in recent years have led to changes in the power structure of the EU, and the "Franco-German axis" has reemerged as a leader in European integration and governance [6]. Under such a power structure, on the one hand, France's stance on the Catalonia issue can reflect to some extent the position of the entire EU, and on the other hand, France's attitude towards the Catalonia issue should also be in line with the core interests of the entire EU.

Looking back at the entire "Spanish constitutional crisis" in 2017, we can see clearly the cautious official attitude of France. Shortly after the crisis broke out, then President Macron made it clear that "I am confident in Prime Minister Rajoy's determination to defend the interests of the whole of Spain" [7] and publicly stated, "If I were to intervene in the Catalonia issue, I would be meddling in Spain's internal affairs, which would be unacceptable to the Spanish Prime Minister and the Spanish King." [8]. On the one hand, this reflects the restraint of the basic international relations principle of "non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries", as well as the effective constraints of the EU's pursuit of European integration and its relevant laws and treaties on member states. On the other hand, it also reflects the delicate situation of France, which is striving to be the leading force in European integration, in the Catalonia issue.

In addition, France has another hidden consideration in its attitude towards the Catalonia issue, which is that due to the "Catalonia effect", Napoleon's birthplace, Corsica, is also seeking independence [9]. This is undoubtedly an important factor that has prompted France to firmly support the central government of Spain in public on the Catalonia issue.

However, public statements do not mean that France has given up its influence on the Catalonia issue. France's geopolitical influence on Spain has always existed. In fact, France has intervened directly in Spanish affairs many times in history, and sometimes even deeply involved itself. In the War of the Spanish Succession and the War of the Reapers mentioned earlier, France was a major participant. In 1808, France invaded Spain and Napoleon supported his elder brother Joseph Bonaparte as King of Spain, which aroused the resistance of the Spanish people and triggered the Franco-Spanish War that had an impact on the entire European situation. Today, as an important neighbor of Spain, France's influence on Spain's internal affairs will certainly not disappear, and this is also evident in the Catalonia issue.

France's strong influence on the Catalonia issue can be found in many aspects, including economic and trade relations. As shown in Fig. 1, after the "Spanish constitutional crisis" in 2017, Catalonia's trade with France, particularly its exports to France, showed a clear increase. In 2016, when Catalonia began simulating an independence referendum, Catalonia's share of exports to France as a percentage of total exports from Spain to France also increased from 24.8% in 2015 to 26.0%. The year-on-year changes in Catalonia's trade with France, as shown in Fig. 1, allow us to see the growth in trade more clearly. The reasons for this change may be simple or complex, but the growth in economic and trade relations between the two sides is a fact that cannot be ignored. These subtle clues leave us with a lot of room for imagination.

In fact, France has always been an important place for Catalonia's separatist activities, with many Catalan separatists living in France for long periods of time. In the 2017 Catalan independence referendum, 5–6 million ballot papers were printed in Elna, a town near Saint-Cyprian in France, and not all of them were printed on home printers. This small French town, about 30 km north of the Spanish border, is one of the activity bases of the Catalan radical separatist organization "Yes, for the Catalan Country" (*Sí al país català*). The current leader of the organization is Jordi Vera, and Bruno Salvador, a member of the organization, runs a printing factory in Elna. On September 20, 2017,

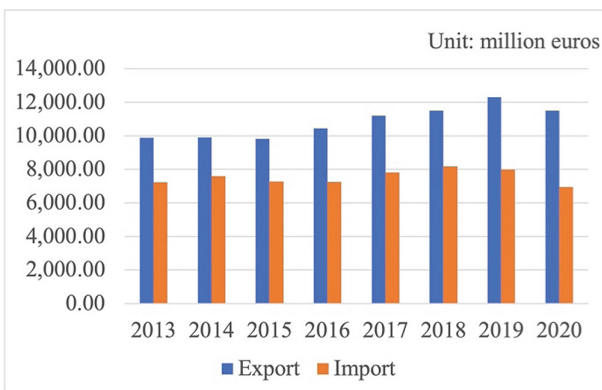


Fig. 1. Changes in the total trade volume between Catalonia and France. Data source: Statistical Institute of Catalonia (Institut d'Estadística de Catalunya), <https://www.idescat.cat/pub/?id=acc&n=356>

the French police seized nearly 10 million ballot papers for the Catalan independence referendum at this printing factory.

On July 16, 2021, in the same town of Elna in France, the Catalan Cultural Heritage Protection Committee (Òmnium Cultural) held a commemorative event celebrating the organization's 60th anniversary, which was attended by many high-ranking members of the Catalan independence movement, including former president Carles Puigdemont, who was arrested in Spain, and Oriol Junqueras, the leader of the Republican Left of Catalonia (Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya). Jordi Cuixart, the president of the Catalan Cultural Heritage Protection Committee, gave a speech at the event, stating that they would continue to promote the Catalan independence movement and declared, "We will not stop until the Catalan Republic is established." [10].

The area where Elna is located is in southeastern France and used to belong to Spain. When the War of the Pyrenees ended in 1659, King Philip IV of Spain ceded the area to Louis XIV of France. Many people in this region still call it "Northern Catalonia" and consider themselves Catalans, maintaining close ties with Catalonia, with many having relatives there. Such geopolitical relations make it impossible for France to completely stay out of the Catalonia issue, and it is precisely because of these relations that France's attitude towards Catalonia has become even more subtle and important.

The Catalonia issue reflects the centrifugal force in the European integration process, and France's attitude towards this issue also reflects the basic attitude of EU member states towards separatism. From the official stance expressed by France on the Catalonia issue, the power of unity is still the mainstream of relations between EU member states; local separatist forces are only a small undercurrent surging in the process of European integration, and in the short term, they will not fundamentally hinder the overall European integration efforts. At least for now, they are not the main factors hindering the historical process of European integration.

4 France/Spain: The Dilemma of Catalan Cultural Identity

Historical research shows that the two terms "Catalans", representing the ethnicity, and "Catalonia", representing the place name, first appeared in an article written by the monk Henry of Bisa in 1110. The article described the participation of Ramon Berenguer III's army in the Crusade to the Balearic Islands. Interestingly, before that time, people living in the County of Barcelona were referred to as "Franks" (francos) [4] pp. 36–37. This suggests that France was also an important historical background in the formation of Catalan cultural identity as a subculture group.

As mentioned earlier, the Count of Barcelona announced that he would no longer pledge allegiance to the Frankish Kingdom at the end of the 10th century. In the mid-10th century, the churches in Catalonia began to unite, and the various county territories gradually strengthened their unity and integration with the Count of Barcelona as their core. During this period, the Arabs repeatedly looted Catalonia, and Catalonia also sought protection from the Frankish Kingdom, but a reconciliation with the Carolingian dynasty of France was not reached. In 1137, the County of Barcelona and the Kingdom of Aragon were unified through marriage, followed by Catalan families taking control of the Kingdom of Aragon, greatly increasing their economic strength and gradually

achieving equal status with the Kingdom of Castile located in central and northwestern Spain. Since then, in the process of recovering lost land from the Arabs in the south and resisting invasions from France and Portugal, the Kingdom of Castile and the Kingdom of Aragon have continued to unite until they formed the unified Kingdom of Spain in 1516. Therefore, the group identity of “Catalans” is a result of not acknowledging themselves as French, while the group identity of “Spaniards” is primarily the result of the continuous unification of Catalan and Castilian peoples.

The above historical background fundamentally determines that the Catalan issue will not fundamentally shake the national identity of Spain. This national identity was formed during the long history of resistance to foreign rule, including the struggles against Roman rule and the Arabs, as well as resistance to French invasion. Therefore, even if Catalans do not acknowledge themselves as Spaniards, they will not consider themselves French. From its own interests, France will not have a strong urge to support the Catalan independence movement. The long history of national fusion in Spain has determined that the conflict between Catalonia and the central government of Spain is not fundamentally irreconcilable but rather a manifestation of internal interest games. As long as this internal interest game is controlled within a certain range, it will not fundamentally cause a split in national identity.

According to a survey conducted by the Catalan Civic Association in 2015, 26.1% of residents in Catalonia identify themselves as solely “Catalan,” while 12.1% identify as solely “Spanish.” 34.6% identify as both “Catalan” and “Spanish,” and 18.7% and 4.8% identify more strongly as “Catalan” or “Spanish,” respectively. At the same time, those who identify with both “Catalan” and “Spanish” are the largest group, and those who identify or lean towards identifying as “Spanish” make up 51.5% of the population [11]. This data suggests that recognizing oneself as “Spanish” is still the majority opinion among residents in Catalonia. This is consistent with the historical process of forming Spanish identity.

Political parties opposed to Catalan independence have inclusive political views. These include: (1) Catalonia is a region of Spain; (2) Catalonia is a region of Spain with autonomy; (3) Catalonia is a country, but not an independent country, and should join the Spanish Federation as a non-independent country. While these diverse political views make it difficult for parties opposed to Catalan independence to become a dominant political force in parliament, the survey results from the Catalan Civic Association suggest that the appeal of these parties in the hearts of the people is still significant if their political views are combined.

It should be emphasized that although the County of Catalonia existed before the formation of the Kingdom of Spain, the identity of “Spanish” as a group is even older. The word “Spain” comes from the two provinces of “Hispania Citerior” and “Hispania Ulterior” during the Roman Empire, and from the beginning, it was a geographical and cultural concept with inherent cultural coherence. The Spanish people had stood together as early as the guerrilla war against Roman rule. Therefore, we cannot assume that the identity of “Catalan” as a group is older than that of “Spanish”; simply because the County of Catalonia existed before the formation of the Kingdom of Spain. On the contrary, the identity of “Spanish” as a group was gradually established through the long-term struggle of the people living on the Iberian Peninsula against foreign invaders

such as Romans, French, and Arabs. It has a more profound and long-standing historical foundation than the identity of “Catalan”. The survey results from the Catalan Civic Association in 2015 also support this point.

Although Catalonia is deeply influenced by French language and culture, factors such as the Pyrenees mountains have made the cultural identity of Catalonia more inclined towards Spain rather than France. Although people living in this area were called “Franks” before Catalonia’s independence movement, and although Catalan culture is more similar to French culture, the Catalan people were still on the opposite side of France during the War of the Spanish Succession. That is to say, the Catalan people did not see themselves as French, which also means that France’s influence on Catalonia is limited.

On the other hand, “Spanish” itself is the result of the fusion of many ethnic groups. The Castilians, Catalans, Galicians, and Basques in the current reality have all made important contributions to Spanish culture, and in the past, the Romans, Moors, and Franks have also added rich colors to Spanish culture. Therefore, Spanish culture itself has a strong diversity and inherent inclusiveness and integration when it comes to the local characteristics of Catalan culture. Like other people in other regions of the Iberian Peninsula, the Catalan people have also gone through a series of ethnic conflicts and integrations in history and should be able to integrate into mainstream Spanish culture.

The dilemma of Catalan cultural identity demonstrates that we cannot confuse regional separatism in the European integration process with “nationalism” at the national level. Even during the most intense conflict between Catalonia and the Spanish monarchy in the War of the Reapers, we cannot simply elevate Catalan national sentiment to the level of “nationalism,” or even see it as the origin of modern Catalan nationalism. This has been fully demonstrated in the research on the War of the Reapers by Spanish historian Xavier Torres. Because the interests reflected in this war are multifaceted and complex, not only including the conflict between Catalonia and the monarchy, but also the resistance of the poor and ordinary people against the rich and privileged [12]. According to Jordi Canal, a Spanish historian, the word “Catalan nation” (*nació catalana*) in ancient Catalan language appeared in the 14th century, which is significantly different from the modern Catalan word “Catalan nationality” (*nacionalitat catalana*), which has a stronger political and nationalist color [4] p. 45. This proves from the perspective of etymology that the conflict between Catalonia’s regional separatism and the Spanish central government is not fundamentally a nationalist opposition, but only a form of interest game, including the identity dilemma caused by historical and cultural differences such as the County of Barcelona and other regions, as well as the influence of specific policies of the Spanish government in history (such as the dictatorship of Franco) and reality (such as the tough stance of Rajoy’s administration towards Catalonia).

The interest game between Catalonia and the Spanish central government has some typicality in the separatist conflicts within the EU countries. This conflict is still a non-fundamental internal conflict as a whole. As long as the central government adopts appropriate strategies and with mutual support among EU member states, this conflict is certainly reconcilable. Although there are extremist separatist organizations like ETA in the Basque region, such a small number of extreme separatists cannot have a significant impact on the overall situation of European integration. The negative impact of regional

separatism on European integration cannot be compared with the significant impact caused by the conflict between national states such as Brexit. This also explains to some extent that although the process of European integration is tortuous and varied, its integration trend has not been fundamentally destroyed.

The integration of Europe is deeply rooted in the identity of European culture. Although various international relations and inconsistent practical interests often bring various twists and crises to this historical process, these twists and crises are only temporary. As long as the desire of the European people to unite and share peace does not disappear, the basic direction of this historical development will not reverse. This also conforms to the basic historical laws reflected in the concept of “a community with a shared future for mankind”.

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