

## PROTEST CYCLES AND REFERENDUMS FOR INDEPENDENCE. CLOSED OPPORTUNITIES AND THE PATH OF RADICALIZATION IN CATALONIA

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### ABSTRACT

This article seeks to understand the trajectory of radicalization in the Catalan 'procés'. Regardless of their formal legal standing, referendum campaigns are distinct political opportunities which also generate further opportunities. Contrary to what some theories of protest would predict, when political opportunities are closed down at national level, and repression toughens, violent escalation leading to fragmentation and ultimately demobilization does not necessarily ensue, at least in the short term. As the Catalan 'procés' illustrates between the mid-2000s and late-2018, the combination of mechanisms such as appropriation of opportunities, downward scale shift and movement convergence can mitigate escalation processes. A dense network of local and grassroots assemblies displaced the previously dominant, major civil society organizations that led mass protests, especially during the 2012-2015 'diadas'. These grassroots actors prioritized the organization of dissent through more direct, more disruptive, but mostly peaceful forms of action. This in turn facilitated movement convergence, based upon solidarization, as it opened up local spaces where the activists from across the spectrum could mobilize together, pre-empting a clear violent escalation and the emergence of violent splinter groups till late 2018.

### KEYWORDS

Policing of protest; Secessionism; Referendums; Downward scale shift; Movement convergence.

## CICLOS DE PROTESTA Y REFERÉNDUMS POR LA INDEPENDENCIA. OPORTUNIDADES CERRADAS Y EL CAMINO DE LA RADICALIZACIÓN EN CATALUÑA

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### RESUMEN

En este artículo desarrollamos un marco interpretativo para comprender la trayectoria de radicalización en el "procés" catalán. Independientemente del estatus legal del referéndum en cuestión, las campañas de referéndum son capaces de crear, y de hecho son en sí mismas, oportunidades políticas. En contraste con las predicciones desde las teorías de los ciclos de protesta, cuando se cierran las oportunidades a nivel nacional y la represión se intensifica, no necesariamente se desarrolla un proceso de radicalización que contribuye al declive del ciclo, al menos a corto plazo. Como el caso catalán ilustra entre mediados de los años 2000 y finales de 2018, varios mecanismos pueden mediar este proceso, incluyendo la apropiación de oportunidades políticas, el cambio de escala hacia abajo y la convergencia del movimiento. Una densa red de asambleas locales de base reemplaza en el a las grandes organizaciones de la sociedad civil que hasta entonces, y especialmente durante las *diadas* entre 2012 y 2015, habían liderado la movilización social. Aunque estas asambleas ciudadanas han abrazado repertorios de acción más directos y disruptivos, estos han sido mayoritariamente pacíficos. Asimismo, este reemplazo ha favorecido la convergencia del movimiento, abriendo espacios donde activistas de un amplio espectro pueden movilizarse conjuntamente, y evitando de este modo una escalada violenta y la emergencia de grupos escindidos violentos (al menos hasta finales de 2018).

### PALABRAS CLAVE

Vigilancia de protestas; Secesionismo; Referéndums; Cambio descendente de escala; Convergencia de movimientos.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Although the waves of new states emergent after World War I, the de-colonization period and the breakdown of the Soviet Union, have declined in intensity (Haklai 2015, 462), a steady trickle of non-state nations continue to assert demands for collective self-determination in vastly differing political contexts, from Scotland and Catalonia to New Caledonia and Bougainville (della Porta, O'Connor and Portos 2019). Referendums have been increasingly used to put forward and validate such claims to self-determination. Recent research has demonstrated that referendums are not simply an elite-designed, technical procedure involving one single act of mass engagement on the day of the actual vote (della Porta, O'Connor, Portos and Subirats 2017a). Rather, several referendums have been induced and/or appropriated by social movements in many heterogeneous contexts, beyond states with constitutionally enshrined rights for citizen-initiated referendums, like Italy, or states with deep rooted traditions of direct democracy such as Switzerland.

Irrespective of their legal status (institutionally endorsed, legally binding or symbolic), referendums have become epicentres of contestation in broader cycles of contention. Instead of mere devices that institutional actors use to retrospectively legitimize technocratic decisions, “referendums from below” build upon the participatory and grassroots processes that foster— and conversely, are fostered by— years of civil society mobilization that pre-date the actual vote (della Porta et al. 2017a, 2017b; della Porta et al. 2019). As instances of heightened contention, referendums from below can provoke repression by incumbent powerholders, triggering processes of radicalization, understood as escalation via an interactive process from nonviolent to increasingly violent repertoires of action over time (Bosi and Malthaner 2015; della Porta 2018; Malthaner 2018). Violent tactics— defined as physical damage to people and property— are more likely to be deployed by actors in cases where claims for self-determination are blocked by the prohibition of institutionally binding referendums. Catalonia presents some of the conditions often considered as propitious for a violent escalation. With the crucial support of regional and local-level institutional allies, a prolonged cycle of contention beginning in the early 2000s, developed into a mass movement. During the process, claims escalated towards increasing support for independence; and as political opportunities at the national level closed down, repression and political polarization intensified. While there was an increase in the use of collective direct-action initiatives and disruptive forms of protest (such as streets blockades), protest has remained mostly peaceful. Even in the face of harsh repression and institutional closure, in this article we argue that the pro-independence

movement’s surprisingly constrained repertoire with limited violence— at least until late 2018— can be explained by three mechanisms: the appropriation of local opportunities, the downward scale shift of mobilization and movement convergence as produced by solidarization processes.

We develop our argument by looking at the trajectory of radicalization during the Catalan *procés*. Empirical data from semi-structured interviews and descriptive statistics will be used throughout for illustrative purposes.<sup>1</sup> First we summarize the literature on cycles of contention in social movement studies, singling out expectations about the radicalization of forms of action. The article proceeds to provide a contextual background of the case, addressing the onset and consolidation of the cycle of protest for independence in Catalonia, and outlining the limited violent escalation throughout the cycle of contention. In the subsequent section, we introduce and illustrate how the identified mechanisms interplay and have contributed to the patterns of radicalization observed in Catalonia.

## 2. RADICALIZATION AND CYCLES OF PROTEST

Social movement studies have suggested that forms of protest tend to change during periods of intense contention, as protest events cluster in time and space; cycle, waves, campaigns and tides are concepts developed in order to define “a punctuated history of heightened challenges and relative stability” (Beissinger 2002, 16). Protest includes non-routinized, unconventional ways of affecting political, social, and cultural processes. They can be more or less radical in nature, ranging from more conventional petitioning to more conflictual blockades, and potentially, episodes of violence (della Porta 2018). A protest cycle is characterized as “a phase of heightened conflict and contention across the social system that includes: a rapid diffusion of collective action from more mobilised to less mobilised sectors; a quickened pace of innovation in the forms of contention; new or transformed collective action frames; a combination of organized and unorganised participation; and sequences of intensified inter-actions between challengers and authorities which can end in reform, repression and sometimes revolution” (Tarrow 1994, 153). Cycles have been assumed to develop through some specific sequences in their rise, peak and decline as mobilization unfolds “from institutional conflict to enthusiastic peak to ultimate collapse” (Tarrow 1994, 168), following relational, cognitive and emotional mechanisms that concatenate in different ways.

Typically, upon the emergence of protest, the repertoire of action is innovative, with disruptive tactics often promoted by new social and political actors to

surprise the authorities and attract media attention. These tactics are often later emulated by other social groups that subsequently become mobilized. As the forms of protest evolve, and their disruptive capacity normally declines, processes of institutionalization and radicalization tend to co-occur (Tarrow 1994; della Porta 2013). At the outset of protest, violent action is usually limited in its presence, small in scope, and unplanned (often the unforeseen result of police intervention during protests). As the protest spreads, spin-off movements contribute to the mobilization of other groups, adopting new forms of action, broadening protest demands and winning concessions, but they also push elites and counter-movements to form law-and-order coalitions (della Porta 1995, 2013). Moreover, as the newsworthiness of protest tends to decline over time, and as the mass media tend to refocus its attention elsewhere, radical actions succeed in re-gaining attention, but at the price of broader stigmatization. Clashes between demonstrators and police or counter-demonstrators that start out as occasional episodes tend to take on a ritual quality. Their very presence increasingly discourages the more moderate (individual and collective) actors that often abandon the mobilization, subsequently contributing to demobilization.

Repression has an important role in these trajectories of radicalization of action repertoires. As the cycle unfolds, authorities tend to increase repression, but also to learn how to better target it against emerging actors. First, the authorities tend to channel the protest through the selective repression of some actors and some specific forms of protest, with the parallel acceptance of others. Repressive events that are perceived as unjust have the potential to generate public outrage, thus potentially leading to greater movement mobilization (Hess and Martin 2006). Authorities often aim at dividing the movement, through a mix of co-optation and exclusion (Tarrow 1994; McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001). As formal organizations emerge out of the protest and previously existing ones (such as unions or parties) become displaced, a form of intra-movement competitive re-positioning ensues. The final stages of the cycle thus see both processes of institutionalization and of radicalization, as indicated by a growing percentage of violent actions. When institutional alternatives open up, divisions among movement strands follow, leading to demobilization (Tarrow 1994; della Porta 1995; della Porta and Diani 2006). While the most rebellious movement milieus stick to unconventional tactics, usually radicalizing their repertoires of action, the most moderate sectors tend to embrace more institutionalized routes of action (Portos 2019).

Radicalization has been considered as the most likely outcome of the closing down of political opportunities and the adoption of strong and indiscriminate repression (Crenshaw 1981; della Porta 1995;

Piazza 2017). However, radicalization in a violent form is not an inevitable consequence of cyclical dynamics, as the spread of violence during the cycles of protest varies in time and space. Cycles of protests during the formation of the nation-state led to a repertoire of centralized political activity and social movements organized at the national level (Tilly 1978). More recently, challenges to the state have led to the development of multi-level social movement organizations in frequent interaction with international organizations (della Porta and Tarrow 2004). In particular, radicalization is influenced both by political opportunities and by relational dynamics, rather than being determined by either structural constraints or fixed patterns of evolution (della Porta 1995, 2018).

Building upon this model, we introduce three caveats to extant literature that will help us to frame our case study as a case of repression with constrained violent escalation of repertoires of protest. First, we point out the need to distinguish between behavioural and ideational forms of radicalization, or radicalization of forms of protest versus radicalization of frames of protest—alternatively described as the difference between tactical and ideological radicalization (Busher, Holbrook and Macklin 2018). Social movement studies have predominantly defined radicalization as the progressive shift toward acceptance and use of violence as a means to achieve political goals (see e.g. della Porta and LaFree 2012; Alimi, Demetriou and Bosi 2015; McCauley and Moskalenko 2017; Lindekilde, Malthaner and O'Connor 2018). The radicalization of the definition of political objectives, rather than just the means of achieving them is also relevant, considering “the expansion of collective action frames to more extreme agendas and the adoption of more transgressive forms of contention” (McAdam et al. 2001: 69). Addressing the question of ‘radical relative to what?’ (Sedgwick 2010, 482), we will not draw on some amorphous “status quo” or ill defined “moderate mainstream beliefs” (Bartlett and Miller 2012, 2), but rather relate our understanding of *radical* to the existing repertoire of contention employed by the broader Catalan independence movement. More specifically, by radicalization of frames, we mean the adoption of independence rather than enhanced autonomy as an objective; by radicalization of forms of protest we consider increasing degrees of disruptiveness such as the blocking of motorways, rather than the symbolic performances of the *diadas* (National Day of Catalonia). Importantly, the radicalization of the forms of protest, which is our focus throughout, is understood in a relational fashion. It is derived from a spiral of negative and unforeseen feedback that is rooted in the interactions between relevant actors such as challengers and authorities (della Porta and Diani 2006; Alimi et al. 2015; della Porta 2018).

A second caveat is related to the “eventful” character of protest. Historical sociologist William H. Sewell

has promoted an “eventful temporality [that] recognizes the power of events in history” (1996, 262). The events have a transformative effect, in that they “transform structures largely by constituting and empowering new groups of actors or by re-empowering existing groups in new ways” (Sewell 1996, 271; McAdam and Sewell 2001). A transformative event—or campaign—refers to “a crucial turning point for a social movement that dramatically increases or decreases the level of mobilization” (Hess and Martin 2006, 249; see also McAdam and Sewell 2001). This implies that protest events must not be regarded merely as an *explanandum*. According to Meyer and Kimeldorf (2015, 429), events “are also social mechanisms of their own with the capacity to initiate change across multiple registers and levels of explanation”. In this sense, the protest events which comprise cycles are not considered as determined by their context, but rather as constituting arenas in which collective experiences develop through the interactions of different individual and collective actors, replete with different roles and objectives. In other words, events can become the *explanans*. Many protest events have in fact cognitive, affective and relational impacts on the very movements that carry them out (della Porta 2008). During protest events, new tactics are experimented with, signals about the possibility of collective action are sent, feelings of solidarity are created, organizational networks are consolidated, and sometimes public outrage at repression is generated. Events initially constrained by the external, structural conditions, help, therefore, in redefining the conditions for a successive chain of events. Hence, the eventful character of specific protest events (or sets of events) such as the 1<sup>st</sup> October 2017 referendum, can become key turning points within a cycle, thereby shaping the whole radicalization process.

A third caveat addresses the complex interaction of multilevel political opportunities. Sidney Tarrow has authoritatively defined political opportunities as “consistent – but not necessarily formal or permanent – dimensions of the political environment or of change in that environment that provide incentives for collective action by affecting expectations for success or failure” (1994, 85). Varying across different levels from the local to the transnational (Meyer 2003), opportunities are all interlinked in intended and unintended fashions as “changes in the municipal level can bring about changes at the state level and, in turn, at the international level. This interplay can lead to outcomes that can go any number of ways” (Alimi 2009, 227). In parallel to institutional closure at the state level, windows of opportunity can emerge with institutional allies at the local and regional levels.

In sum, multiple cases have demonstrated that repression, or the transformation of opportunities to threats can lead to a radicalization of movements’ repertoires (Almeida 2003, 2018). Yet, this has oc-

curred only to a limited extent in the Catalan case till late 2018. We argue that this puzzling instance of constrained escalation is a result of mechanisms that concatenate after certain eventful protests: appropriation of local opportunities, downward scale shift and movement convergence. On the one hand, conflict scaled down and new grassroots and local actors that emerged were able to appropriate opening political opportunities and lead the organization of dissent, also including many youth-led initiatives. On the other hand, consistent with the broadening constituency, as well as with democratic-emancipatory frames developed throughout the cycle, different secessionist milieus converged for strategic reasons following certain mass protest events, notwithstanding profound ideological internal tensions.

### 3. PROTEST AND POLICING IN THE CATALAN PRO-INDEPENDENCE PROCÉS

The cycle of protest that developed around the process is embedded in, but has also transformed the tradition of Catalanism. While the Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC) remained initially weak after the transition to democracy, the post-Franco history of Catalan politics has long been shaped by the nationalist project of Jordi Pujol, leader of CiU (Convergència i Unió) since the first democratic election in 1980 until the mid-2000s. A centre-right and moderate nationalist coalition made up of centrist-liberals and demo-Christian style conservatives, it sought to increase Catalan autonomy within the extant constitutional framework of the Spanish state. The increasing salience of Catalan nationalism has led to a re-configuration of traditional left-right cleavage through demands for enhanced territorial autonomy and even independence (Dinas 2012). While traditionally the Catalan nationalist left was a stronger proponent of independence, recent years have seen Catalan centre-right nationalist milieus abandon their ambiguous positions of the past to also campaign for independence.

The process of reform of the Catalan Statute of Autonomy, from 2003 to 2010, is “widely regarded as providing a favourable context for a public discussion of Catalonia’s relationship to Spain and for the Catalan secessionist movement to gain momentum” (Muñoz and Guinjoan 2013, 49). The Catalan cycle of protests for more autonomy and then independence from Spain started with the opening up of opportunities for strengthened autonomy brought about by the concurrence in power at regional and state levels of the Partit dels Socialistes de Catalunya (PSC) (2003-2010) in the Catalan government, and of the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE) in the Spanish government from 2004 to 2011. The fraternal relations between the two parties and the prevailing prosperous economic conditions facilitated the opening of opportunities for the re-negotiation of

Catalonia’s institutional relationship with the central Spanish government. Catalan discontent increased, however, as the proposed reform of the Statute of Autonomy (Catalonia’s Basic Law), approved by the Catalan parliament and in a Catalan wide referendum in 2006, was strongly opposed by the Partido Popular, then in opposition, and some of its key content was ultimately ruled unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court in 2010. The conflict between centre and periphery subsequently spiralled as the Great Recession hit Spain, resulting in a complicated multi-level economic, social, political and territorial crisis that developed during this period. The contestation around the territorial cleavage intensified under the economic distress of these years coincided and overlapped with mass mobilization and resistance to the anti-austerity policies implemented at Catalan and state levels. It is important to note that the 15M/ indignados in Barcelona were met with harsh repression by Catalan authorities.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, the CiU-controlled regional government promoted a neo-liberal agenda as a response to economic distress that included severe cutbacks and welfare retrenchment (del Pino and Ramos 2018).

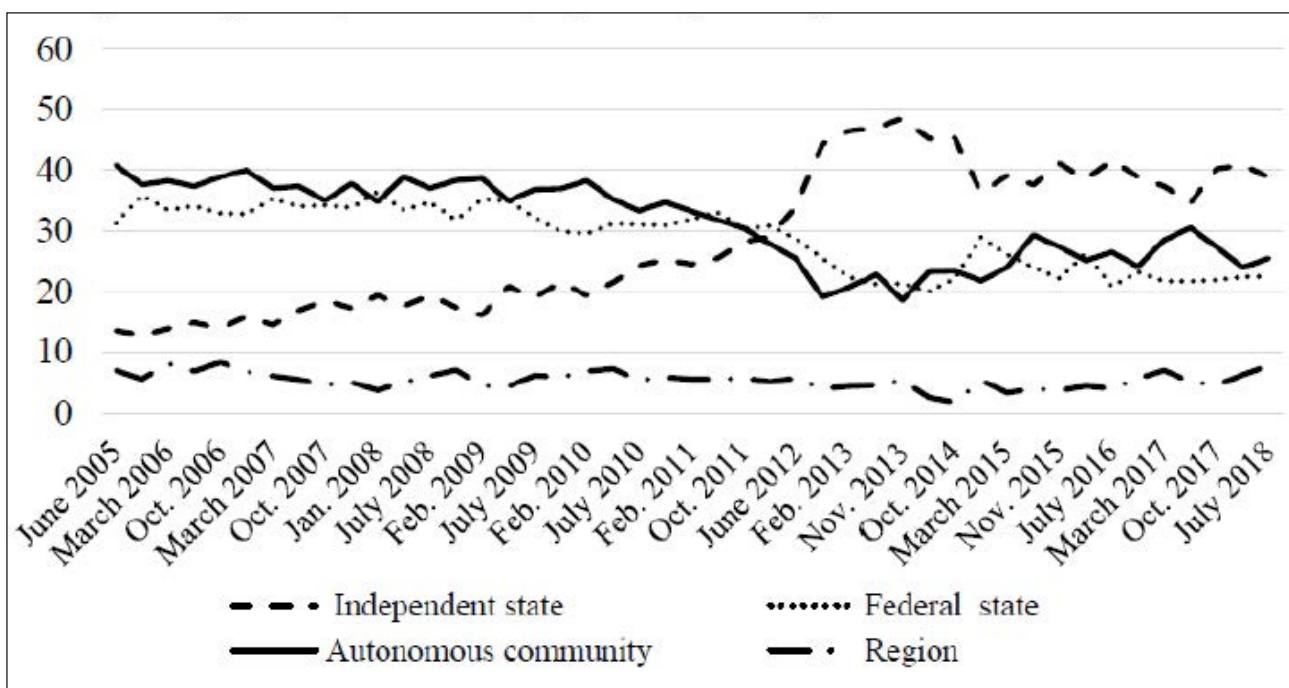
Between 2006 and 2010, the forthcoming decision of the Constitutional Court on the new statute of autonomy had begun to be framed by Catalanist actors as likely to result in a rejection, in whole or in substantial part (Basta 2017). This was seen by many of those who desired greater powers and enhanced recognition for Catalonia as confirming the

impossibility of a negotiated solution, thus necessitating a change of approach away from institutional strategies to a more broad-based mobilization. In June 2010, the Constitutional Court declared several provisions with reference to Catalonia’s status as a nation and its language policies, as well as to a range of economic and political competencies, null and void. This resulted in a major boost in support for independence, which had been theretofore rather marginal in Catalonia in terms of parliamentary support and public preferences (Basta 2017). As Figure 1 shows, support for an independent Catalan state slowly increased from 13.6 per cent in June 2005 to 19.4 per cent in February 2010, before jumping to 48.5 per cent by November 2013. In a striking development in the history of the Catalan nationalist movement, many Catalans abandoned simple advocacy for the nation’s linguistic and cultural identity and for further institutional autonomy. Instead, many Catalans embraced outright independence, challenging Spain’s constitutional arrangement in place since 1978, with its deliberately ambivalent compromise on regional autonomy and symmetric devolution (Guibernau 2013).

Given the seemingly insurmountable legal and political obstacles precluding any possibility of substantially altering Catalonia’s relationship with Spain, the cycle of contention swung toward grassroots movement actors, with increasing pressure from the streets in the form of mass protest (della Porta et al. 2017a). In fact, the cycle of protest was characterized by a considerable capacity

**Figure 1.**

*Preferred status for Catalonia in relation to Spain. X-axis: date (barometer released). Y-axis: percentage of respondents*



Data source: Baròmetre d’Opinió Política (Centre d’Estudis d’Opinió, Generalitat de Catalunya). Own elaboration.

for innovation of the protest repertoire, as well as a broadening of the social bases of mobilization (della Porta and Portos 2018). From 2012 to 2015, *diadas* launched by civil society organizations such as Òmnium Cultural and Assemblea Nacional Catalana became major occasions to voice national grievances. On 11<sup>th</sup> September 2012, roughly one in five Catalans gathered to voice their collective desire for secession in the largest (at the time) pro-independence march in democratic Spain. Exactly one year later, following the ancient Via Augusta from Le Perthus (France) to Vinaroz (Castellón), civil society organizations gathered 1.6 million people— many of them wearing t-shirts with the logo ‘My place in history. Catalan Via towards Independence’— who joined together along the 400-kilometre Catalan coastline in what was reputed to be the largest human chain ever assembled. Under the slogan ‘Now is the time, united for the new country’, in September 2014 about two million protesters filled the streets of Barcelona in alternate colourful rows resembling the *Senyera* (Catalan flag). Apart from these large-scale events, civil society’s contribution to pro-independence activism also included international publicity campaigns, cultural performances, and local dissemination activities (Cramer 2015, 104-5). Preceded by more than 500 municipal-level non-binding consultations on independence that took place from 2009 to 2011 (Muñoz and Guinjoan 2013), on 9<sup>th</sup> November 2014 about 2.3 million people cast their votes in a massive symbolic and non-binding voting performance led by extra-parliamentary actors and movements, with the collaboration of the Catalan parliament (della Porta et al. 2017a, 39).

As national opportunities closed, new opportunities were forged at regional level. In fact, the increase in support for, and mobilization around independence coincides with the subsequent repositioning of the traditionally moderate Catalan nationalist forces (Rico and Liñeira 2014). Importantly, CiU abandoned its once pragmatic nationalist positions and embraced more openly pro-independence stances. The 2012 election ‘produced a [Catalan] parliament heavily polarized on the territorial question, with traditionally minor parties gaining ground over mainstream formations’ (Rico and Liñeira 2014, 257-8). Despite a relatively disappointing electoral showing, CiU managed to remain in power through a minority government externally supported by the other pro-independence parties, dependent on CiU sticking to its promise to hold a referendum on independence against the firm opposition of the main state-wide parties (Rico and Liñeira 2014). In January 2013, the Catalan parliament adopted the Declaration of Sovereignty, which asserted Catalonia as a sovereign political subject. Although declared unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court, this highly symbolic act signalled the

political will to hold a referendum in the near future, exacerbating the conflict between Catalan and Spanish institutions (Orriols and Rodón 2016).

In the 2015 Catalan election, the main pro-independence civil society organizations and parties (ERC, CiU) ran together in a joint electoral platform, Junts pel Sí (“Together for the yes”).<sup>3</sup> The governing pro-independence coalition coalesced around the promise to hold a binding referendum on independence, committing to an eventual unilateral declaration of independence, providing it obtained more than 50% of the votes (della Porta et al. 2017b) — notwithstanding the pro-independence majority in the regional Parliament in terms of seats, secessionist parties never won a majority of Catalan votes. Although Spanish authorities largely tolerated the 2014 non-binding symbolic vote, the organizers of the 2017 referendum were targeted with harsh policing at various protest events and the juridical action that led to the arrest of several Catalan pro-independence politicians and prominent pro-independence figures. According to della Porta et al. (2017b),

“Events in the weeks preceding the [1<sup>st</sup> October 2017] referendum, however, triggered renewed grassroots mobilisation. On September 20<sup>th</sup>, Spanish *Guardia Civil* officers raided several offices of the Catalan regional government, arrested 14 senior officials, and confiscated 9.6 million referendum ballot papers as part of an operation to prevent the referendum from taking place. Spanish authorities also threatened judicial measures against the organisers of the referendum, blocked websites, froze regional financial assets, limited credit and imposed central supervision over payments for non-essential services by the Generalitat and other public institutions... thousands flocked onto the streets of Barcelona blocking major roads in the city chanting the slogans “*no tinc por*” (I am not afraid) and “*fora les forces d’ocupació*” (occupation forces out). In the wake of the hard-line actions taken by the Spanish authorities which prevented the Catalan government from logistically preparing for the vote, the organisational burden was taken up ordinary citizens. People were organised through local ‘*Comitès de Defensa del Referendum*’ (Referendum Defence Committees) that coordinated through Twitter, WhatsApp and Telegram”.

On 1<sup>st</sup> October 2017, 2.2 million Catalans turned out to vote, defying the heavy repression by state security forces who resorted to firing rubber bullets and the seizure of ballot boxes and closure of polling stations. Mass actions of civil disobedience ensured that the Spanish national police were only able to shut down 319 out of a total of 2,315 polling stations<sup>4</sup>. Civil society organizations and individual citizens hid ballot boxes, occupied polling stations in order to prevent the police seizing them, replicated the website created to organize the referendum ([www.referendum.cat](http://www.referendum.cat)) under new domains, as soon as it was removed, and erected barricades on

the day of the vote in order to facilitate voting and block police access (della Porta et al. 2017b). According to the— admittedly disputable—figures the Generalitat provided, 893 people required medical assistance as a consequence of the intervention of the Spanish police as the latter attempted to enter the polling stations and confiscate the ballot boxes<sup>5</sup>. The policing of these events raised concerns among human rights organizations; for instance Human Rights Watch claimed that “Spanish police used excessive force in Catalan referendum”.<sup>6</sup> Although the Spanish authorities intervened to inhibit the holding of a democratically credible vote, thus denying a key opportunity for the pro-independence forces to claim a full victory, the eventful character and grassroots efforts to protect the referendum generated opportunities at the local level, by mobilising thousands of activists to facilitate the vote.

A toughening of protest policing in Spain had already been noted in state reaction to anti-austerity mobilization, with authorities deploying a mix of coercive forms of street repression that gradually evolved towards softer and more subtle tactics, e.g. fines, identity checks, and surveillance activities (Calvo and Portos 2018; Martín García 2014). During most of the cycle of protest in Catalonia, the policing strategy of the central government against the *procés* actors has combined some attempts at the de-escalation of street-based activities, with legalism. While the Spanish authorities presented the increasing support for a referendum and independence as a defiance of the rule of law, they dramatically underestimated the scale of the mobilization and the re-intensification of the territorial cleavage (della Porta et al. 2017a, 39-68). At the political level, rather than articulating a political discourse that sought compromise around self-determination, central state institutions opted for a policy of intimidation by threatening prominent individuals with legal prosecution (della Porta et al. 2017a, 60-1). While positions polarized (among both civil society and political elites), the conflict escalated. As the policing strategies toughened, endogenously fostering grievances among— and beyond— the pro-independence milieus, tensions and clashes between activists and police seem to have increased in Catalonia, not only in the weeks preceding and during the referendum, but also thereafter.<sup>7</sup> This repressive turn strengthened the resonance of the democratic-emancipatory frames the Catalanist actors had been developing in preceding years (della Porta et al. 2017a). The cycle brought about a considerable degree of radicalization and polarization of claims, frames and justifications for independence (and anti-secessionism), but a very limited amount of actual violent forms of action deployed by the challengers (at least until late 2018), which mainly came in the form of intermittent clashes with police.

#### 4. APPROPRIATION OF LOCAL OPPORTUNITIES, DOWNWARD SCALE SHIFT AND MOVEMENT CONVERGENCE AS MECHANISMS OF CONSTRAINED RADICALIZATION

In order to explain the path of radicalization of frames but very limited behavioural violence by the pro-independence challenges during the Catalan *procés*, we firstly need to take the changing multi-level political opportunity structures into consideration (McAdam and Tarrow 2018). Political opportunity explanations have considered elections and balances of parliamentary power as opportunities (Jung 2010, 28; Meyer 2003). However, the issue of scale shift (with changing balances of political opportunities across different institutional levels) has been arguably neglected in theorizations on the effect of political opportunities on protests. In the Catalan case, the opening up of opportunities at both the regional and local levels triggered the original process of constitutional change that sought to increase the power of the regional institutions. In order to remain in power, Junts pel Sí's parliamentary coalition needed the support of the radically independentist CUP, therefore the CiU could not slip back to its previously more pragmatic approach to independence. Notwithstanding that referendums are a major form of democratic expression in liberal democracies, second only to elections, the literature has, to date, focused much less on their role in creating political opportunities, or as opportunities in their own right. Although, referendums that do not have institutional or juridical approval have been dismissed as “at best a statement of protest” (Sussman in Scheindlin 2012, 67), the campaign for the *Dret a Decidir*, a call for the right to democratic self-determination, resonated with growing discontent among the Catalan citizenry regarding the slow pace and uncertain destiny of the process. While it is unlikely that those who voted in the municipal consultations of 2009-2011, in the non-binding voting performance in 2014, and in the prohibited 2017 referendum, had believed that their votes would bring about a straightforward implementation of independence, the holding of a referendum on self-determination can in itself endogenously contribute to identity consolidation (Tierney 2009, 362). A consolidated identity enhances movement cohesion, draws in broader demographics of supporters (e.g. young first-time voters) and subsequently strengthens the movement, allowing it to better resist the repressive actions of the central state, engineer new political opportunities and fuel mobilization.

In short, with the conservative Partido Popular (PP) winning national elections in 2011, opportunities for a negotiated enhanced autonomy (not necessarily full independence) for Catalonia closed down at national level. Some important precursors notwithstanding,

at this point civil society organizations strengthened and were able to lead the mobilization of mass dissent, most visibly in the form of mass protest and performances during celebrations of Catalonia's national day. Importantly, secessionist movements found allies at the regional level in the Catalan Parliament, which increasingly adopted more radical frames towards the territorial issue, before eventually embracing outright independence. As the cycle unfolded, polarization increased and repression on the side of central state actors toughened, as illustrated by the use of force during the 1<sup>st</sup> October 2017 referendum. Conversely, opportunities for mobilization gradually opened up at the regional and also at the local and grassroots levels, which some pro-independence milieus were able to appropriate and use to consolidate support and pro-independence activism.

Grassroots pro-independence mobilization has existed at least since the creation of the *Plataforma pel Dret de Decidir – PDD* (“Platform for the Right to Decide”) and the organization of local consultations on independence (2006–2011). With the support of institutional and semi-institutional actors (e.g. Association of Municipalities for Independence, pro-independence parties, unions, etc.), two major civil society organizations— *Assemblea Nacional Catalana* (ANC) and *Òmnium Cultural* (OC)— were central to secessionist mobilizations in Catalonia from 2011 to summer 2017. As the cycle of contention unfolded, new actors emerged and took over the leading role of mobilization. There was a shift of scale downwards in the organization of pro-independence contestation, especially during and after the referendum campaign of 1<sup>st</sup> October 2017. Decentralising dissent beyond the major organizations, grassroots *Comitès de Defensa de la República* (CDRs)<sup>8</sup> organized at the neighbourhood-level in order to empower people and promote left-wing independence. In a way, the CDRs are the consequence of the unique way in which the mobilization unfolded. The following quote from an interview with an activist illustrates the main features and aims of CDRs as linked to rooting at the very local scale:

*“CDRs are born in an autonomous way, to organize neighbours, they are born to cover this need... in a way, they are the natural evolution of large organizations such as ANC and Òmnium. These organizations became mass endeavours but do a very superficial activism... it has been very much criticized as activism-for-the-picture: I organize a massive demonstration, with millions of people, I take a wonderful picture, but it has zero impact, then they do very little work at the local level. It doesn't create a fabric and works in a very hierarchical way. ... CDRs instead come from the local people who feel they need to get organized in order to have the referendum” (Int.2).*

Similarly to the 1965–1975 Italian cycle of protest, the secessionist wave of contention rose “like a rolling tide that engulfed different sectors of society at

different times” (Tarrow 1989, 339). As mobilizations unfolded across sectors, the bases of social conflict shifted and broadened (della Porta and Portos 2018). Not only did dissent spread across layers of society, but contention diffused to different levels of the polity, with new institutional settings and additional actors coming into play, ranging from Catalonia's ruling political parties to neighbourhood assemblies. Scale shift is a mechanism associated with diffusion processes, referring to the “change in the number and level of coordinated contentious actions leading to broader contention involving a wider range of actors and bridging their claims and identities” (McAdam et al. 2001, 331; Tarrow 1989, 1994). Normally, scale shift in political contention has been studied upwards, from local to translocal (even transnational) spheres. As a polycephalous, decentralized network of actors gradually integrates and coordinates, it brings about changes in the actors and their interactions (della Porta and Tarrow 2004). In contrast to this, downward scale shift occurs when coordinated contentious activities move their focus downwards— e.g. as in Catalonia, with the local level taking up national issues. The scale shift downwards and the emergence of grassroots local-level endeavours are key to explaining the trajectory or repertoires of collective action within the cycles of protest. They facilitated, to some extent, the kind of tactics advocated by some of the more militant movement strands (i.e. more direct, disruptive actions), but nevertheless, precluded escalation into more substantial forms of oppositional violence such as strategic attacks on police or state functionaries or even violence targeting infrastructure. Despite some scattered incidents of brawls and intimidation, we argue that no substantial radicalization in terms of the endorsement or use of violent tactics to achieve the goal of Catalan independence occurred until late 2018.

Toughening repressive strategies— widely perceived as disproportionate repression especially following the 1-O referendum— played an important role in strengthening the social legitimacy of the CDRs. By embracing more disruptive tactics, CDRs aimed to halt the circulation of traffic, block access to cities, motorways and to the French border. The CDRs were also key actors in the general strikes in Catalonia on 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2017 against the repression which followed the 1-O events, and on the 8<sup>th</sup> November 2017 against the implementation of Article 155 of the Spanish Constitution, which led to the suspension of Catalonia's autonomous powers. Some public institutions and companies gave workers the day off, enabling workers to participate in the strike without incurring any risks to their jobs, thus likely boosting participation. Blockades, occupations, and occasional clashes with police took place during those days and recurred during the subsequent weeks as reactions to the arrests and imprisonment of some members of President Puigdemont's government and the leaders of civil society organizations.<sup>9</sup> As stated by an



activist in a CDRs, unexpected levels of repression fuelled further mobilization:

*“The 1-O came as a collective shock. With all the brutal repression people saw on TV, the way children and elderly people were forced out of the schools, beaten for exercising democratic rights, this was a reminder of the dictatorial times. On the basis of the repression, the organizers and citizens suffered the previous day, people could smell something was going on... Masses of people came to get information, to find out what was going on... right before 1-O we had neighbourhood assemblies with more than 400 participants in this small neighbourhood. But probably nobody expected the level of repression we saw... after 1-O, people interested in our activities, supporting us, and engaging in the assemblies increased exponentially” (Int.2).*

As another CDR activist explained, because of the broad support of the mobilization, the collective reaction to the perceived injustice of the central state’s measures could be channelled into nonviolent forms, from blockades to strikes:

*“You block roads, you have a general strike, you do an occupation, and you have a higher impact... it is impressive to see a liberal from CiU blocking a road or a motorway, but they realize it is effective, they see the great job CDRs are doing, and see their [own] discourse often does not translate into coherent action... The president of the CEOE [Spanish Confederation of Business Organizations] acknowledged that little has been said regarding the amount of hours and money lost during the November strikes...<sup>10</sup> if we manage to keep spreading this type of activism, we can get to a situation where the Spanish government will be on the brink, where they will be forced to negotiate” (Int.3).*

Although repertoires of action became more disruptive, there was no clear escalation toward violence (till late 2018). Yet, the radicalization in the framing of the objectives of the struggle was strengthened by further repression and spiralling processes of solidarization with the victims of repression, including the injured and the imprisoned activists. CDR activists increasingly became the target of police repression. For instance, 150 activists held a protest in Barcelona’s Palace of Justice on 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2018, which led to 14 people being arrested and prosecuted under charges of resistance towards authority and public disorder (and two of them for alleged attacks on public authority).<sup>11</sup>

An additional mechanism constrained substantial radicalization of repertoires, the convergence of pro-independence milieus through solidarization triggered by repression. Through ‘the radical flank effect’, increasing tensions at one or both extremes of a political continuum drive less extreme political actors into closer alliances (McAdam et al. 2001, 162). In the case of the Catalan *procés*, increasing institutional polarization and toughening repressive

strategies on the side of Spanish authorities fuelled emotions related to grievances and solidarity, bringing pro-independence milieus together for strategic reasons and thus disincentivising more radical or potentially violent forms of contention. Convergence through solidarization is facilitated by the broadening cross-cut social basis of secessionism but also by the strong emphasis on non-violence, inclusive identities and democratic-emancipatory frames for mobilization during the *procés* (della Porta et al. 2017a). Additionally, various protest performances such as the 2012-15 Diada events activated the convergence mechanism, as these encompassing mass— admittedly intermittent and occasional—contentious performances implied sharing spaces with other actors. Importantly, the 1-O referendum campaign allowed Catalan secessionist activists to give priority to the fighting of specific, smaller battles and to set more easily attainable goals, such as preventing the police from entering polling stations, and actually succeeding in holding the vote.

As the scale of contention decreased to disaggregated local levels, the— actual and expected— rewards from involvement tended to be better defined. These collaborations were key to allow for the overcoming of traditional dividing lines (e.g., ideological) among the secessionist milieus and converged in various mobilization endeavors, which maintained the intensity of mobilization high, broadening the constituency and spreading the movement’s appeal. In the words of a feminist pro-independence activist and a member of a CDR assembly: “the decentralized organization of the 1-O through schools, and then through CDRs, marks a turning point... it appealed to many people who didn’t use to get involved with either of these big organizations or with parties... it was more of a cross-cutting momentum. There was also a broadening of the ideological composition” (Int.1). In the perception of the activists, CDRs “are truly cross-cutting, people from very different ideologies, age, social background, etc., and very different when it comes to their traditional relationship with politics. They encompass people from CUP, but also from ERC, PDeCAT<sup>12</sup>, people without any particular affiliation, even anarchists” (Int.2).

These excerpts help illustrate how the convergence mechanism unfolded. As police strategies toughened, there was a need to build broad coalitions and engage in grassroots work to maintain the intensity of mobilization. In part due to previous interactions and instances of collaboration, such as the diadas, the CDRs became spaces for cross-cutting mobilization and brought different generations and milieus together in local spaces. The 1-O referendum can be conceived as an eventful performance, which was forcibly repressed by the state in what was regarded by a large proportion of the Catalan population as disproportionate and

illegitimate, thus favoring the convergence of different actors. Interacting with the downward scaling of the conflict the movement was undergoing, and the latter's ability to appropriate opening political opportunities at both the regional and local levels, the movement convergence mechanism was key to shaping the radicalization processes.

## 5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This article has made two substantial arguments. Firstly, informed by the Catalan referendum campaigns in 2014 and 2017, we argued that referendums should not be viewed as merely a way to technically adjudicate on constitutional issues. Rather, regardless of their legal standing, referendums create and are political opportunities in and of themselves. They influence subsequent phases of the cycle of contention, re-positioning multi-level mobilization and drawing in different cohorts of activists and social groups. Secondly, this article has highlighted that during a protest cycle, even when political opportunities are closed at a national level, and repression increases, violent escalation is not inevitable. In our case, a combination of three mechanisms restrained escalation: the appropriation of local opportunities, downward scale shift and movement convergence. Regarding the first one, while political opportunities closed at the Spanish state level, the pro-independence parties maintained power in Catalonia, providing channels of institutional access for movement actors. The second mechanism channelled popular outrage derived from the moral shock of repression viewed as unwarranted in its brutality into a dense array of mostly non-violent initiatives organized by local CDRs. Yet, some of these actions were sufficiently confrontational to appease the tactical preferences of more militant actors. The mass base of the movements facilitated the resort to disruptive (but mostly peaceful) forms of direct action, including blockades and strikes, in order to challenge the state and consolidate internal solidarity. Repression in turn guaranteed solidarization processes with ensuing movement convergence, as it opened up local spaces where activists from across the spectrum (from radical to moderate, from left to right) could mobilize together, thus maintaining broad support and inhibiting the formation of potentially violent radical splinters, at least till late 2018.

These three mechanisms were likely facilitated by some additional context specific factors in preventing violent escalation. The first is the negative example of the armed campaign in the Basque country. The perceived failure of violence in Euskadi to achieve independence and the high price paid in terms of deaths, social confrontation and polarization, prison sentences and ultimately political marginalization served as a cautionary tale for more

militant elements of the secessionist milieu in Catalonia. The second factor is the impact of historical legacies and processes of movement self-identification. Many movements find it difficult to reconcile the use of violence as part of their collective self-identity (Asal and Rethemeyer 2008, 245). Catalan nationalism remained overwhelmingly non-violent for generations, even when faced with harsh repression under Franco's fascist regime (de la Calle 2015, 62-109). Precursors of the PDD and the ANC, such as La Crida in the period immediate following the return to democracy were avowedly non-violent.<sup>13</sup> In addition, many of the movement activists, particularly in its leftist extra-institutional elements, have been socialized within the non-violent global justice movement of the late 1990s and early 2000s, and the more recent anti-austerity mobilizations (della Porta and Tarrow 2004; Portos 2019). Additionally, if the PSOE is returned to power, particularly if it relies on the support of the left-wing parties such as Podemos and other minority nationalist parties that tend to be more open to a 'right to decide', it may re-open a small window of opportunity to accommodate some claims, if not in terms of secession, potentially for further devolution and possibly the right to self-determination.

Our findings echo the views of McCauley and Moskalenko when they questioned the relationship between the radicalization of beliefs and behaviour (2017). In the Catalan case, there has been a notable radicalization of the goal of the broader Catalan movement, radical in the sense that its previous goals were enhanced autonomy and now it is outright independence. Yet, there has been no clear substantial radicalization of the repertoire of the movement until the end of 2018, meaning it has not included or endorsed the use of violent tactics as a means to achieve its objective of an independent Catalonia, notwithstanding the exacerbating presence of increased repression. Thereby confirming the complex and highly contextualized relationship between means and goals but qualifying some of the prognoses of the radicalization literature (i.e., institutional closure is expected to lead to violent radicalization). However, this is no guarantee that the immediate future will also remain characterized by restraint and the absence of interpersonal violence.

The consolidation of far-right Spanish nationalism bolstered by the recent electoral growth of the VOX party and the adoption of some of its policies and rhetoric by other right-wing actors such as the PP and Ciudadanos could exacerbate tensions and result in a reciprocal escalation of tactics. In fact, recent episodes of threats as well as physical and verbal aggression towards journalists of state channels covering pro-independence gatherings might call into question to what extent we are experienc-

ing a proper delayed radicalization process on the side of independentist actors.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, at the time of revising this article in October 2019, lengthy prison sentences for Catalan independentist politicians and activists led to massive protests that at times radicalized, including the building of barricades, rioting, stone throwing, property damage and physical clashes with the police that responded with increasingly repressive tactics. In the first days of the protests, across Catalonia there were 200 arrests and almost 600 injuries, including several injured police man and at least four protesters risk losing their sight due to the police's use of rubber

bullets.<sup>15</sup> It is unclear if this will prove to be a turning point, marking an enduring pattern of violent escalation leading into 2020 or merely a violent upsurge likely to fizzle out in the immediate future. Further research is needed to assess the contribution of other broader contextual elements such as the aversion to armed violence following ETA's failed campaign in Euskadi to explain the Catalan case, as well as to assess the robustness of the mechanisms that we have singled out in our analysis vis-à-vis other potentially relevant factors such as media framing or movements/parties' changing strategies and leaderships.

## NOTES

- [1] Qualitative data was gathered in 14 semi-structured interviews conducted with Catalan pro-independence activists and key informants in three different rounds of fieldwork, late 2014, three years later in 2017 and then in 2019—this choice is consistent with the longitudinal approach developed throughout the article (materials from these interviews were used in previous academic outputs, e.g. della Porta et al. 2017a; della Porta et al. 2019). While a snowballing strategy was used to recruit interviewees, they were balanced by organizational membership, past record of activism, gender and cohorts, as described in the Appendix (see della Porta 2014; della Porta et al. 2017a).
- [2] See <https://www.publico.es/espana/mossos-reprimendureza-indignados-y.html>
- [3] Although the JxSi coalition secured 62 seats, it was not enough to win with an absolute majority. It needed the support of the pro-independence radical left-wing Candidatura d'Unitat Popular ("Popular Unity Candidacy"), which is formed by semi-autonomous decentralized assemblies and gained 10 seats in the Catalan chamber.
- [4] See [https://elpais.com/ccaa/2017/10/01/catalunya/1506820373\\_674242.html](https://elpais.com/ccaa/2017/10/01/catalunya/1506820373_674242.html)
- [5] See [https://elpais.com/elpais/2017/10/02/hechos/1506963876\\_226068.html](https://elpais.com/elpais/2017/10/02/hechos/1506963876_226068.html)
- [6] See <https://www.hrw.org/es/news/2017/10/12/espana-la-policia-utilizo-la-fuerza-de-manera-excesiva-en-cataluna>. Similarly, Amnesty International observers "confirmed excessive and unnecessary use of force by police, including the beating of defenceless people and the use of rubber balls to subdue peaceful protesters" (<https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/catalan-referendum-dangerous-use-force-spanish-police-confirmed-amnesty>).
- [7] See e.g. <https://www.elpais.com.uy/mundo/enfrentamientos-espana-policia-votantes-hay-heridos.html>; <https://www.elmundo.es/cataluna/2018/09/29/5bafd93922601d0e1c8b4654.html>; <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/catalonia-independence-referendum-polls-open-vote-protests-barcelona-madrid-police-guardia-civil-a7976341.html>.
- [8] First named Committees in Defence of the Referendum—*Comitès de Defensa del Referèndum*—, and then the Committees in Defence of the Republic—*Comitès de Defensa de la República*.
- [9] See [https://www.eldiario.es/catalunya/general-principales-Cercanias-carreteras-cortadas\\_0\\_705879454.html](https://www.eldiario.es/catalunya/general-principales-Cercanias-carreteras-cortadas_0_705879454.html)
- [10] See <https://www.europapress.es/economia/laboral-00346/noticia-rosell-ve-brutal-tremendo-cataluna-perdiera-octubre-10-millones-horas-huelgas-20171128104615.html>
- [11] See <https://directa.cat/catorze-detencions-per-una-accio-de-denuncia-de-la-repressio-al-palau-de-justicia-de-barcelona/>
- [12] Founded in 2016, the PDeCAT (Partit Demòcrata Europeu Català) is considered the successor of the center-right nationalist *Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya*, which was part of the CiU coalition that dissolved in June 2015 amid internal tensions and corruption scandals.
- [13] The only exception being the terrorist independentist organization *Terra Lliure*, which caused hundreds of attacks and five dead people (four of which were members of the very *Terra Lliure*) between 1978 and 1991.
- [14] See, e.g., [https://elpais.com/ccaa/2019/10/01/catalunya/1569961792\\_640543.html](https://elpais.com/ccaa/2019/10/01/catalunya/1569961792_640543.html); <https://www.elperiodico.com/es/politica/20191007/consejo-europa-alerta-agresion-periodista-manifestacion-independentista-7670803>
- [15] See <https://www.lavanguardia.com/politica/20191020/471095242135/cataluna-disturbios-detenidos-policia-heridos-barcelona.html>

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## APPENDIX

### LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

- Int.1: T. (39). Feministes per la Independència, Ca la Dona, Sindicatura Electoral Catalana, UPF. Barcelona, December 2017.
- Int.2: R. (21). Local CDR, left-wing pro-independence activist. December 2017.
- Int.3: M. (34). Pro-independence activist, CUP, CDRs' territorial committee, November 2014.
- Int.4: T. (36). Pro-independence activist, scholar, ANC, December 2017
- Int.5: F. (42). Pro-independence activist, CUP (Endavant), Associació di Municipis per la Independència, December 2014.
- Int.6: M. (19). Universitats per la República, student assemblies UPF, JERC. December 2017.
- Int.7: J. (44). Plataforma pel Dret de Decidir/Platform for the Right to Decide (PDD) founder, December 2014.
- Int.8: J. (28). Catalunya Sí Que es Pot (previously ICV-EUiA), November 2014.
- Int.9: F. (63). University professor, expert on Catalan nationalism, member of the Consell Assessor per a la Transició Nacional (CATN), November 2014.
- Int.10: R. (42). Left-wing activist for the Yes campaign, member of Ciemen, November 2014.
- Int.11: R. (36). Journalist, El Crític, November 2014.
- Int.12: A. (25). Member of Òmnium Cultural, November 2014.
- Int.13: L. (37). Scholar, April 2019 (via skype).
- Int.14: S. (24). Student, April 2019 (via skype).

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