

Counter-paradiplomacy, the highest stage of Spanish diplomacy

Until 2010, Spain actively avoided tackling the Catalan question at the international level, a policy which matched the central government's narrative of this being of an 'internal nature' | This is no longer the case



The Secretary of State for Global Spain, Irene Lozano, a body created specifically to confront the discourse of Catalan secessionism. | ThisIsTheRealSpain.com

New terms help us foster our understanding of new realities. One such new reality is 'counter-paradiplomacy', a term we have coined to describe a burgeoning phenomenon that is dominating some states' entire foreign policy apparatus (Castan Pinos & Sacramento, 2019). As the nomenclature suggests, the term derives from the concept 'paradiplomacy', which encapsulates the international engagement of substate governmental actors (see Aldecoa, 1999; Keating, 1999; Crikemans, 2010). **In most cases, a territory's paradiplomacy is conducted in close alignment with the parent state's own diplomacy** and foreign policy objectives, and often stems from central government-led decentralisation initiatives. In other cases however, the territory's paradiplomacy may have divergent objectives from that of the central government. We argue that in these cases of incongruent, even conflicting, subnational engagement, antagonism with the parent state emerges, resulting in the state opting to strike back.

Counter-paradiplomacy therefore describes **the reaction by a parent state aimed at opposing and disrupting a paradiplomacy that it perceives to be hostile to its interests**. The most severe counter-paradiplomatic measures, and therefore the most easily observable, are employed in cases where secession is a subnational territory's objective. We can see this, for instance, among states which are challenged by secessionist parastates such as Serbia, Georgia

or Azerbaijan, but also in comparatively less volatile cases such as Catalonia. In fact, to illustrate our new concept, we will focus on Spain's application of counter-paradiplomatic instruments against Catalan paradiplomatic efforts.

Castan Pinos, J. & Sacramento, J. (2019). L'Etat contre-attaque: un examen de la contre-paradiplomatie espagnole en Catalogne (2012-2017), Relations Internationales 179 (3): 95-111.

As Catalonia's political conflict escalated in the early 2010s, its paradiplomacy, thereto unencumbered, became the target of Spain's increasingly organised strategies. This in large measure being as a result of some of these diplomatic activities carrying secessionist aims, principally in the form of ensuring potential future recognitions of a Catalan state. In essence, Catalonia's paradiplomatic endeavours became the new battleground between Madrid and the Catalan government. **Spain had until that point actively avoided tackling the Catalan question at the international level**, a policy which matched the central government's narrative of this being of an *internal nature* - this no doubt being influenced by the would-be argumentation in a legal case, itself also a counter-paradiplomatic tool. The Spanish government therefore has been seemingly stuck between not wanting to give credence to the Catalan cause by dismissing - or be seen to be dismissing - the issue, and ensuring that any formal international recognition of the same is not granted - which requires international engagement.

On June 2018, the then vice-president Soraya Sáenz de Santamaría bragged about the liquidation of the Catalan Diplocat agency through the application of article 155 of the Constitution.

Spanish counter-paradiplomacy can be divided into two core dimensions: a) **taking legal actions internally in an attempt to scupper the capacity for Catalan paradiplomacy**, and b) high-level diplomatic interaction, to both solicit support and ensure foreign dignitaries toe the line. This diplomatic effort included *quid pro quos* which had significant consequences for Spain's foreign and defence policy.

In March 2017 the ex-Spanish Foreign Minister, **José Manuel García Margallo, revealed the efforts his Ministry had made to convince other states to support Spain's position**. "No one knows how many favours we owe to many people for making them give the statements [of support] they did." One of the 'favours', Margallo mentions is that Spain 'bought' Latvia's support for Spanish territorial integrity with the deployment of 313 soldiers and 80 vehicles at the Latvian-Russian border. The tentative conclusion is that **counter-paradiplomacy, like other forms of diplomacy, comes at a cost for the state that implements it**. In light of the various declarations from international leaders -primarily Europeans- supporting the Spanish position or at least stating that Catalonia was a Spanish internal affair, **it could be argued that this approach had been successful** in achieving support from foreign governments and the foremost international organisations.

However, despite this, the strategy has been criticised for being too "cold and bureaucratic" to attract foreign media; which, the Catalan authorities had been much more proactive in captivating. In other words, the Spanish government had indisputably won the political-diplomatic battle but the same cannot be said about the narrative war, particularly on October 1st. The images, broadcast by global media outlets, of Spanish Police officers using violence against peaceful voters arguably contributed to that defeat. **Spain's narrative fiasco has been acknowledged by former foreign minister** (and current high representative of the EU) Josep Borrell who admitted that Catalan secessionists had won the narrative war in the international context: "I have to congratulate them [Catalan secessionists] because they have been more skilful and efficient than the [Spanish] government."



Irene Lozano, swearing in as Secretary of State for Global Spain in 2018, accompanied by her predecessor Carlos Espinosa de los Monteros, High Commissioner of the Government for the Spain Brand, and Foreign Minister Josep Borrell. Photo: Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Unsurprisingly, a few weeks after these declarations, in October 2018, the Spanish government launched a new institution -the Secretariat of State for Global Spain- with the primary aim of improving Spain's international image. **Needless to say, the role of this institution is eminently counter-paradiplomatic.** The initiatives of this institution have been to internationally promote Spain's narrative and, by doing so, undermining (or at least attempting to) the Catalan secessionist one. They have, among other initiatives, published and distributed videos, reports and other documents arguing, *inter alia*, that the Catalan independence bid was based on fakes and that by extension the trial against Catalan political and civil society leaders was fair. It is, of course, difficult to ascertain the influence of these initiatives. What seems clear, however, is that Madrid is fully invested in consolidating its counter-paradiplomatic institutional architecture. **The paradoxical effect of this strategy is that it makes the Catalan crisis more international.** And thus, it inevitably challenges the internal affair narrative the Spanish state has made its cornerstone.

It is clear that since 2010 **counter-paradiplomacy has formed part of Spain's high-level**

bilateral engagements, particularly with European counterparts from whom Spain has sought support for its counter-secession claim. And it has also formed part of its multilateral interaction, even when this has been at the risk of harming its diplomatic relations with allies. Spain has proven a steady objector, even obstructer, to international moves towards secession, most prominently refusing to recognise Kosovo's independence in 2008, along with most of its fellow European Union and NATO member states. Spain's counter-paradiplomacy has, indeed, visible and significant effects which go well beyond Catalonia. It is therefore possible to argue that **counter-paradiplomacy is not merely an epiphenomenon but a core factor, arguably the most central part of Spanish diplomacy**.

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