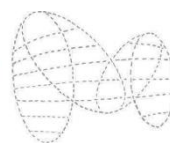


# PERSONAL DATA AND POLITICAL INFLUENCE IN CATALONIA

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TACTICAL  
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COLLECTIVE



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# SUMMARY

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## Introduction

Since the autumn of 2018, Catalonia has found itself in the unfamiliar position of occupying international headlines. For several months, the Catalan regional government's bid for independence from Spain has been depicted in foreign newspapers and 24-hour news networks as another example of European disintegration, often including boilerplate references to Brexit, the Scottish referendum and Russian interference.

In the wake of the prohibited October 1 referendum, unsettling images of Spanish riot police confiscating ballot boxes and swatting voters with batons proliferated. Meanwhile, politicians made grand speeches about the very nature of democracy. The Prime Minister of Spain at the time, Mariano Rajoy, emphasised the rule of law, praising the role of the Spanish courts and the country's security forces against the Catalan government's reckless disobedience. In contrast, the Catalan President at the time, Carles Puigdemont, depicted the referendum as an unprecedented exercise of popular sovereignty against the Spanish government's obstinacy and repression.

But beyond the epic tone of each side's rhetoric lies a messier, more complex reality. What the conflict in Catalonia illustrates is not just a case of clashing government institutions, but one of clashing legitimacies, where data is a contested space for legitimacy to be constructed and sovereignty exercised.

## An institutional break

Before delving into the data-centred aspects of the dispute, let us first take note of their legal context. While it was the events of October 1 that captured the attention of the international media, from a strictly institutional point of view the key break between Catalonia and Spain took place the month before. This break took place after five years of pro-independence Catalan governments and massive mobilisations by pro-independence

civil society organisations, most notably the Assemblea Nacional de Catalunya (ANC) and the Catalan cultural association Òmnium Cultural. Surveys have repeatedly shown that Catalonia is **split** on the question of independence from Spain. In other words, the high degree of institutional conflict described in this report is taking place with no clear majority on the central point of confrontation.

The first key moment took place between September 6 and 8. During this period, the Catalan Parliament approved two laws that effectively broke away from Spain's legal framework and installed its own, parallel legality. These were Law 19/2017 on the Referendum on Self-Determination and Law 20/2017 on Juridical Transition, better known as the Referendum and Transition Laws. In the short term, these were passed to make the result of the October 1 referendum legally binding, in spite of the vote's prohibition by the Spanish institutions. But the implications were much more profound, as becomes especially clear upon reading the Explanatory Memorandum introducing each law. For the Referendum Law, it states:

*The passing of this Law is, then, the ultimate expression of the democratic mandate arising from the elections of 27 September 2015, in which, in the decision taken by the Parliament of Catalonia to culminate the process with the calling of the self-determination referendum, there is a confluence of the historical legitimacy and legal and institutional tradition of the Catalan people—interrupted, over the course of the centuries, only by force of arms—and the right of peoples to self-determination, enshrined in international legislation and jurisprudence and the principles of popular sovereignty and respect for human rights, as the basis for all legal systems.*

The Transition Law goes one step further, formalising the previous law's claims to historical legitimacy and sovereignty:



*Thus, succinctly, this law constitutes Catalonia as a democratic and social Republic of Law, it attributes national sovereignty to the people of Catalonia, and recognises itself as the supreme law of the land until a Constitution is approved, proclaims its respect for European Union and international laws, and defines the territory within which its sovereignty shall be exercised...*

Interpretations of these laws by anti-secessionists were predictably critical. “There is not one iota of lawfulness to it,” writes *El País* journalist Xavier Vidal-Folch, referring to the [Referendum Law](#). He goes on to list several sections of the Spanish Constitution and the Catalan Statute of Autonomy that, in his view, had been violated. Beyond the law’s content, Vidal-Folch also claims that its approval violated mainstream conventions of democratic procedure. Most notable among these was the Venice Code of Good Practice On Referendums, established by the European Commission for Democracy through Law, an advisory body to the Council of Europe. In addition to denying the opposition a chance to introduce amendments or request a full assessment from the Parliament’s legal services, the pro-independence parties reduced the majority needed to elect the administrative body in charge of the referendum from two-thirds to a simple majority. As Vidal-Folch points out, it is precisely a two-thirds majority that is needed by the Catalan Parliament to approve new electoral laws, and the reason Catalonia has no electoral law of its own is because the Parliament has never been able to achieve this majority.

The view that the Referendum and Transition Laws had placed Catalonia’s governing institutions outside of the law was shared by the Spanish judiciary. The Constitutional Court promptly suspended both laws and notified Vicent Sanchís, director of Catalonia’s public television channel TV3, that dissemination of the October 1 referendum was to be suspended. Meanwhile, the High Court of Justice of Catalonia accepted the Spanish public prosecutor’s lawsuit against Catalan President Carles Puigdemont and the rest of Catalonia’s executive branch for disobedience, misappropriation of public funds and perversion of justice.

Another critical moment took place on September 20, when Spain's Minister of the Treasury took control of Catalonia's budget and fourteen high-ranking members of the Catalan Government were arrested by Spanish military police. This led to intense protests outside several buildings that had been raided by the police, the largest taking place outside the Catalan Ministry of the Economy in the centre of **Barcelona**. Over the next three days, the Spanish Ministry of the Interior took control of Catalan security forces, the Constitutional Court fined the referendum's electoral committee and the Spanish National Court accused organisations linked to the September 20 protests of sedition.

On September 27, the High Court of Justice of Catalonia took control over the October 1 referendum by ordering all voting sites to be closed, with military police confiscating 2.5 million ballots and one hundred ballot boxes. Two days later, the Spanish Ministry of Public Works and Transport ordered Barcelona's airspace to be closed to helicopters and light aircraft until the day after the referendum was to be held.

## **The Census and the Use of Personal Data**

On the day of the referendum, just an hour before the polls opened, the Catalan Government made a surprise announcement. Rather than relying on lists of registered voters specific to each electoral district, a universal census would be used to track participation in the **referendum**. All five million registered Catalan voters would be able vote at any polling station, regardless of their place of residence, by providing a valid form of identification: either a passport or a Spanish national ID card. To avoid the possibility of voters casting multiple ballots, a specific app would be used to double-check that the voter had not been logged elsewhere. This was all carried out from an encrypted and distributed technology approach, in anticipation of the Spanish government's efforts to stop the vote through digital blocking.

It may sound like a mundane detail on the surface, but one of the more serious accusations made by the Spanish institutions and anti-independence voices had to do with the creation of this census. As journalist Marta Peirano explains in an article for *Eldiario.es*, the census

used for official elections is formally the one updated every month by the Office of the Census, part of the Spanish National Statistics Institute (INE) run by the Ministry of the **Economy**. As Peirano points out, for the Catalan Government access this data, the referendum needed the approval of the Spanish Congress, the Prime Minister and the King, which it did not have.

There was another option, however. In Catalonia, municipal registers used by city governments to track population figures are gathered by the Catalan Statistics Institute (Idescat). These registers contain the full names, place of residence, sex, nationality and date and place of birth of all residents in Catalonia. As Peirano points out, while the list has no electoral competences, Article 54 of Law 23/1998 regulating Catalan statistics considers that “data from the Catalan Population Registry will be transferred to other public administrations soliciting them, without the prior consent of the affected person, only when these are needed for the exercise of their competencies and exclusively in matters for which one’s residence or home address are considered relevant information”.

While this argument is often wielded by those who defend the referendum, anti-independence voices have strongly rejected its validity. Digital daily *El Confidencial* claims that high-ranking Catalan officials ordered the regional Telecommunications and IT Center (CTTI) to combine their data with confidential personal information extracted from the Idescat databases, including names, addresses, birthdates and **nationalities**. Moreover, the authors claim that the system used to overcome the Spanish government’s prohibition exposed the data of five million registered voters by using insecure hashing **methods**.

It was based on this suspicion that, on September 27, the Spanish Data Protection Agency (AEPD) notified the Catalan Data Protection Agency (APDCAT) regarding complaints received about a website requesting personal information including ID numbers and birthdates--which in turn were checked against a separate database--in order to provide users with their assigned voting sites. According to the AEPD, the Catalan agency had the competency to investigate these claims and declare whether files created or managed by Catalan public institutions had committed any infractions. Previously, the Spanish agency had sent the APDCAT a report claiming there was no legal basis for the use of specific



datasets to create a census, and informed the Catalan agency about activities which, in their view, might have violated Spain's data protection laws.

The Catalan Data Protection Agency denied these claims. Months earlier, in July 2017, director Maria Àngels Barbarà **argued** that the legislation in force at the time made it possible to use local population registers to prepare a census for popular consultations. Specifically, Barbarà cited an APDCAT decision from February 2014, which was issued in the context of a previous consultation on Catalan independence. The APDCAT juridical services **confirmed** to *La Vanguardia* that this remained valid. Nevertheless, the Spanish Data Protection Agency issued a public statement threatening anyone participating in the October 1 polling stations with **fines** of up to 300,000 euros. This was **rejected** by the Catalan Data Protection Agency, who argued that those at the polling stations were not in charge of treating personal data, and that this responsibility lay instead with the corresponding electoral administration.

In spite of the APDCAT's arguments, however, on December 5 Spanish National Police raided Idescat with a warrant issued by the Catalan High Court of Justice, who **told** *Eldiario.es* that the search took place after Idescat refused to comply with a request for information. The goal of this investigation was to determine whether the Catalan statistics office had indeed played a role in creating the census used on October 1. If this was the case, it would be considered felony disclosure of confidential information.

On May 29, 2018, the Spanish National Police filed a report with the judge claiming that, based on e-mails between the center's director and technicians obtained during those searches, Idescat provided the Catalan Ministry of Economics with "the technical and electronic means necessary to access files with personal data from the population registry and the registry of Catalans in foreign countries", which were key to creating the census. Specifically, investigators pointed to an e-mail exchange from May 2017 between Idescat director Frederic Udina and the chief technician of the Catalan Ministry of Economics, Daniel Gimeno, in which files containing personal data from the registers was sent from the former to the latter. Both were detained during a raid on the morning of June 12, 2018, and released later that day.

According to journalist Oriol Solé Altamira, investigators confirmed that there was a formal agreement between Idescat and various departments of the Catalan administration to use that data for popular consultations but, critically, not for referenda. This point was emphasised by the Spanish National Police in a report containing several references to the political ideology of the people under investigation, as well as asides delegitimising unrelated aspects the October 1 vote.

The Spanish government's intervention in Catalonia on the grounds of the violation of personal data during the creation of the census has been strongly criticised by a number of civil society organisations. Among the most significant of these is the digital and democratic rights-oriented Xnet collective, a member of the European Digital Rights association (EDRi). A few days after the October 1 referendum, Xnet published a statement criticising the “alarmism” surrounding the census, arguing that “the security of the census was good even in comparison with the security of the censuses of the national elections in Spain”, particularly considering the value of the data at risk, which included a truncated national ID number with only the last 5 figures, a postal code and a date of birth. In their view, the strategy of the Catalan Government was “risky but functional and a sufficiently secure emergency solution”. Cryptography experts consulted by Xnet claimed that, in terms of security:

*The cryptographic algorithm used is secure and in line with the ISO/IEC 18033-1:2015 and 18033-3:2010 standards. It uses a CBC encryption block that is also used in military environments and 256-bit AAS Hashing-compatible. In this case, it is normal not to use 'SALT' because the database would have had to be distributed and the decryption carried out for each client. This would have required an exposure of 'SALT'. The criticism of not using SALT betrays a certain ignorance and/or an inability to take into account all the facts of the case.*

*Thus, in our professional opinion, the authors have not endangered the personal data of the Catalan census, since the encryption procedure followed is in line with the standard procedure. Although the brute-force attack scenario may be plausible, the relationship between the data obtained in proportion to the economic investment in technology required would not be efficient.<sup>1</sup>*

## Europe's first civil cyberwar?

The clash between Spanish and Catalan Data Protection Authorities was just one instantiation of a broader institutional conflict that spilled over into the Catalan and Spanish ICT worlds. On September 13, Spanish military police shut down the official website of the Catalan referendum following an order issued by the High Court. Then on September 23, the High Court ordered the “blocking of websites and domains which are publicized in any account or official social network of any of the members of the Government of the Generalitat which, directly or indirectly, even referring to other accounts, give information on how to access domains whose contents are related to those that are now blocked”.

As Xnet describe in another communiqué denouncing the Spanish government's repression of the vote, “this was not just a matter of a specific list of sites but a general order giving a free hand to forces of security in ordering Internet providers to shut down websites.” With these new powers, military police blocked the domain *gateway.ipfs.io* and thereby cut off connection, not only to the referendum website, but also to all content from the Spanish state hosted in IPFS through this gateway. As a result, the shutdown affected NGOs and social movement **websites** such as *empaperem.cat*, *assemblea.cat* and *webdelsi.cat*.

Ultimately, the offices of the .cat internet registry were raided and major telecom operators in Spain were ordered to monitor and block all traffic to [websites](#) with information on the [referendum](#). Moreover, the central system used to [confirm](#) that voters were in the census was taken down by Amazon on the morning of October 1 Google was also ordered to take down a [voting app](#) that provided information on polling stations.

Several mirror sites appeared almost immediately and were disseminated with some assistance from the Pirate Party. According to probe network measurements collected from three local networks by the Open Observatory on Network Interference (OONI), at least 25 sites related to the Catalan referendum were blocked by means of DNS tampering and HTTP [blocking](#), every day from at least September 25 to October 1. Roughly a dozen people were interrogated by Spanish police, accused of creating mirror sites associated with the referendum. Among those summoned was freedom of expression activist Daniel Morales, who was accused by Spain's leading media outlet [El País](#) of collaborating with Russian hackers to mirror the [blocked sites](#)

The culmination of the Spanish government's offensive against the digital infrastructure of the October 1 vote came on September 30, when the military police occupied the CTTI, blocking or suspending all information services which could be used to facilitate the referendum. As Marta Peirano points out in another detailed [article](#), the entire operation was facilitated by the so-called [Torquemada Law](#), which outlines a number of exceptions to internet freedom and [privacy safeguards](#).

At the CTTI, police detained chief of ICTs David Franco, chief strategist Josuè Sallent, head of technical projects David Palanques and president Jordi Puigneró. They also detained Rosa María Rodríguez Curto, director of T-Systems, the company in charge of Catalonia's information services, as well as the regional head of ICTs Xavier Puig, under charges of misappropriation of public funds, disobedience and perversion of justice. The occupation was described by Spanish government officials as the "definitive blow" to the October 1 vote, with government spokesperson and Minister of Education Íñigo Méndez de Vigo claiming that the referendum had been effectively "nullified".

The announcement proved **premature**. In response to the central government's crackdown, citizens supporting the referendum used continuous replication and VPN on a mass scale to access blocked sites, as well as WhatsApp and Telegram to share relevant information, including petitions, articles, letters to the EU, websites that had avoided shutdowns, videos, propaganda and a considerable amount of fake news. Fearing that the entire internet would be blocked for all of Catalonia, many downloaded FireChat in order to communicate without having to rely on an internet **connection**.

The occupation of the CTTI allowed Spain's security forces to block access to the internet in key polling stations and dismantle Catalan databases outside Spain's borders. The Telefónica- operated network used by Catalan schools, for instance, had been disabled. However, a number of hackers developed an alternative information system to centralise the database containing census information. This was achieved through the website Registremeses.com, stored on Amazon and protected by Cloudflare, though the domain was eventually disabled by Spanish **operators**.

Thus, in addition to the movement in the streets, October 1 was also characterised by a game of cat and mouse between Spanish security forces and hackers on both the pro-independence and anti-secession sides. A number of cyber-attacks were launched against the referendum's information systems, many of which were traced back to the notorious Forocoches message board, whose relationship with the Spanish far right is akin to that of 4chan with the so-called "alt-right". In response to these attacks and the proliferation of images of police violence, Anonymous launched DDoS attacks on Forocoches, the Community of Madrid and various police websites, sharing databases on police servers as well as databases belonging to the Spanish police union SUP.

Interestingly, one hacker collective, Spanish Electronic Army, changed targets during the course of the day. While it had initially attacked the websites of the pro-independence party Esquerra Republicana, after seeing the widespread images of police violence, they decided to make Spanish police databases public.

As a result, despite the efforts of the Spanish government, over two million people (roughly 42% of Catalan voters) defied the Spanish judiciary and security forces by voting on October 1. Riot police intervened throughout the region, injuring hundreds. As we have shown above, however, disruption of the vote was not limited to the use of physical force. Indeed, some have referred to the events surrounding the prohibited referendum as the first cyber war to take place within the European Union.

In keeping with the Catalan administration's vow to make the result of the October 1 referendum binding, on October 10, Carles Puigdemont declared independence from Spain, only to suspend that independence seconds later with the hopes of forcing the Spanish government to negotiate on equal terms. This led the Spanish President at the time Mariano Rajoy to invoke Article 155 of the Spanish Constitution, dismiss the Catalan Government and call for elections. Currently, many of the pro-independence politicians who were in the previous government are currently in prison or in exile.

Yet the results of the December 21 elections confirmed the deadlock. Once again, while pro-independence parties obtained a parliamentary majority, they achieved 47% of the popular vote. Anti-secession parties, on the other hand, obtained roughly 45% of the vote. The remaining 8% of votes went to Catalunya en Comú, whose voters are fairly mixed on the question of independence. Moreover, because most anti-secession sympathisers essentially boycotted the referendum, the 42% of the voting population that participated was almost entirely in favor of independence.

Formally, the institutions continued along the path set out by Spain's current legal framework. Yet, while there is relatively little debate regarding the current legal situation, there is a major crisis of legitimacy affecting relations between Catalonia and Spain. And because legitimacy is socially constructed, the narrative of how the two arrived at this point has become a key point of conflict.



In this context, the role of fake news takes on an even greater importance. In the lead-up to the December elections, much was written about the influence of fake news on the mobilisation of pro-independence voters<sup>1234</sup>. Fact-checking website *Maldito Bulo* [identified](#) several images of police violence from other protests that were widely circulated on October 1 and depicted as images from the interventions against the vote. But perhaps the most [influential articles](#) on the subject were written by the Managing Editor of *El País* David Alandete. Over several articles, Alandete claimed NATO intelligence showed Russian online networks were focusing their activities on Catalonia in order to “make the most of the secessionist crisis”. He also [accused](#) the left-wing party Podemos of being a “Trojan horse for the Kremlin”<sup>5</sup>. Yet a [report](#) presented to the UK Parliament debunked these claims, citing a failure to accurately use digital analytics tools, dubious methodology, one-sided analysis, exaggeration, careless analysis of questionable sources and overstating the influence of figures such as Julian Assange and Russian media outlets.

Indeed, an analysis of Twitter interactions in Madrid and Barcelona by the AI [analytics](#) platform Citibeats shows that the misrepresentation of information was the most contested topic on Twitter in the aftermath of the October 1 vote. However, it was after the December elections that real-time historical revisionism in Catalonia took a surreal turn.

## Defining reality through the social networks

“Citizens of Tabarnia, I am not here,” says the man at the podium. Surrounded by flags, actor and theatre director Albert Boadella [mocks](#) the first words of Josep Tarradellas, President-in-exile of Catalonia during Franco’s regime, upon returning to Spain after the dictator’s death. “I am not here because the usurpers of sentiment, money, institutions, clubs and flags have made it impossible for people who love liberty and good humour to breathe in this territory.”

The filmed speech was shown at the Catalan Association of Journalists on January 16, 2018

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-41981539>

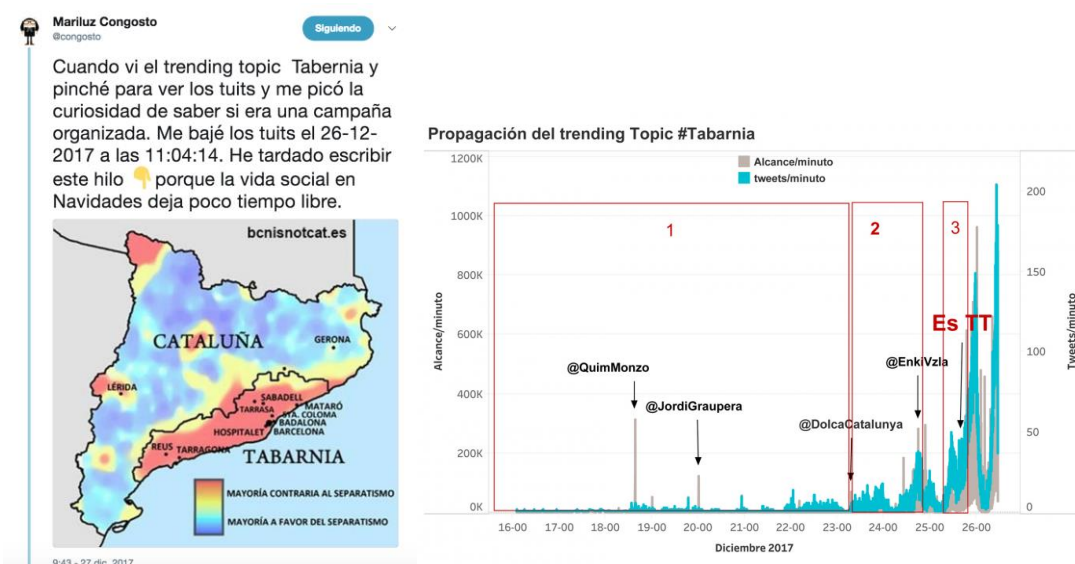
<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/08/catalonia-demo-injuries-fact-checking>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/10/19/how-fake-news-helped-shape-the-catalonia-independence-vote/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.cd03889b9ffe](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/10/19/how-fake-news-helped-shape-the-catalonia-independence-vote/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.cd03889b9ffe)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-spain-politics-catalonia-russia/spain-sees-russian-interference-in-catalonia-separatist-vote-idUSKBN1DD20Y>

in Barcelona. At the event, Boadella was introduced as President-in-Exile of the Government of **Tabarnia**, an imaginary territory spanning Barcelona and parts of neighbouring Tarragona claiming to be separate from Catalonia and desiring to remain a part of Spain. The idea was launched several months earlier by a platform called 'Barcelona is not Catalonia', but it took on a life of its own after the December 2017 Catalan elections saw pro-independence parties maintaining their parliamentary majority, despite having less support in Barcelona and Tarragona.

This can be seen in the image on the left-hand side below, where majority support for pro-independence parties is depicted in blue and green, and in red and yellow for non-independentist. This graphic was shared by Mariluz Congosto, a researcher specialising in social network analysis at Universidad Carlos III in Madrid. In an [article](#) for *Business Insider*, she explains how the Tabarnia phenomenon went viral through organic growth--as demonstrated by a fairly steady increase in tweets per minute--rather than as an organised campaign, where increases in tweets per minute tend to be more abrupt. This can be seen in the figure on the right-hand side below.



Congosto concludes that, although the initial group promoting Tabarnia was very active, they did not manage to amplify their message beyond a small community. In this initial phase, which lasted from December 16th to December 23rd, 1,778 users re-tweeted Tabarnia-related messages 2,254 times. This changed on December 23rd, when the pro-Spain @DolcaCatalunya profile shared a blog post on Tabarnia, extending the message to

its 32,000 followers and a whole new set of users. The final phase began on Christmas Day, aided by the fact that it is a notoriously slow news day and there tends to be little discussion on Twitter. At 16:40 GMT, the time that Christmas meals tend to wind down in Spain, it reached a rate of 50 tweets per minute, rising to a maximum of 200 after becoming a Trending Topic on December 26th.

In an interview carried out for this project, Congosto points to the main differences between the use of social networks by pro- and anti-independence users. In her view, pro-independence users are more organised, more constant in their activity, more focused on a single message, with a common set of arguments to defend their points. In contrast, anti-independence users, in her view, generally discuss a very broad range of issues and are simply triggered by discussions of Catalan independence. While there are bots on both sides, Congosto suspects there are more on the pro-independence side. As evidence, she points to the unusually high number of cancelled accounts she found when examining Catalan president Carles Puigdemont's most re-tweeted tweets after Twitter began to shut down accounts it suspected of being bots. However, she is quick to point out that, although she feels there's a certain degree of "professionalisation" in the use of social networks by pro-independence users, she agrees that widely shared stories about Russian interference in the conflict--most notably the aforementioned articles by David Alandete--are false and based on unsound methodologies.

"Ultimately, what made Tabarnia work is that it was a joke," Congosto says. "A very good joke." As polarisation over the conflict in Catalonia increased, she explains, Twitter seemed to go from being a space for transmitting ideas to a space of frayed nerves and confrontation. In her view, the joking tone behind the spread of the Tabarnia meme helped make the situation less tense. It also hurt the other side, she says, since it ridiculed the more solemn and serious tone of pro-independence arguments. "Some of them didn't accept it as a joke," Congosto says, "They treated it like something real. They were offended."

There are some rather troubling aspects beneath the guise of humour, however. For instance, the account that helped make the Tabarnia meme go viral, @DolcaCatalunya, belongs to a far right organisation that participated in violent protests with a high number

of **fascist salutes**. Meanwhile, Albert Boadella's speech was peppered with unsettling phrases that recall the metaphors favoured by far-right populists throughout history. At one point, he **refers** to the citizens of Tabarnia as "antibodies capable of reacting against the epidemic" of pro-independence sentiment: "**Tabarnia** is no joke," says Joan López, one of that event's organisers. "Tabarnia is a guarantee that there will be a response if they try another unilateral declaration of independence...We will go as far as the independentists want to go".

These statements suggest that a high degree of tension remains in Catalonia following the Catalan elections. Indeed, on March 28th, 2018 *El Mundo* **reported** that 315 violent incidents had taken place in Catalonia between September 1st and November 8th, 2017, as a result of the push for independence. "Some of the most aggressive episodes took place in Sant Esteve de les Roures," claimed the Spanish military police report cited by the paper. There was a catch, however. The town of Sant Esteve de les Roures doesn't exist.

This fake news item, published by a mainstream media outlet, was immediately seized upon by the pro-independence social networks. Several Twitter profiles were created for imaginary institutions and community organisations: hospitals, firefighters, city police, even a music festival. At one point, the "official" account of the Sant Esteve de Les Roures town council published a real video from several years ago of Spanish military police firing rubber bullets at migrants swimming to Spanish shores. The military police took the bait, and **criticised** the local government for using an "official" account to slander them, when the institutions is supposed to represent all of the town's citizens.

Beyond the realm of fanning confrontation on social networks, fake news has had a real effect on the institutional sphere. In December 2017, the Spanish government announced that the country's National Security Strategy would be expanded to include so-called "hybrid warfare", which expands traditional notions of warfare to include cyber-attacks, foreign interference in domestic politics and disinformation **campaigns**. Though the Rajoy government originally intended to create a specific organisation in charge of detecting and countering those disinformation campaigns, the responsibility was ultimately given the National Council on Cyberscurity, which was created in 2013 after passage of Spain's draconian Gag Law in order to strengthen security against cyber attacks.

The Council is presided by the National Intelligence Center and composed of the Department of National Security, the Joint Command of Cyberdefense, the National Centre for Cryptology, the National Centre for the Protection of Critical Infrastructure and the National Cybersecurity Institute. According to *El País*, as of May 19, 2018 only one meeting had been organised by the council against fake news. Its focus was the December elections in Catalonia. Following the decision to extend the National Council on Cybersecurity into these areas, a working group was established within the Defense Commission, bringing media experts and editors of major media outlets together to debate Spain's strategy for dealing with fake news.

Yet, as shown in this section, a great deal of misinformation was published precisely by Spain's leading media outlets. Indeed, one of the main consequences of the high level of polarisation around the conflict in Catalonia has been a sharp decline in any pretense of objectivity in the country's mainstream media. "Most Spanish coverage of the complex crisis remains heavily spun," writes journalist Marc Herman in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, "and buys into the culture of rumors surrounding the Catalan story."

Recently, however, Mariano Rajoy's government came to a calamitous end. Following a corruption scandal, the Spanish Socialist Party won a no-confidence vote in the Spanish Congress on June 1st, 2018. Party leader Pedro Sánchez now presides over the Spanish government thanks to an agreement with the left-wing Podemos party, regional nationalist parties in the Basque Country and pro-independence parties in Catalonia. With the shake-up this implies at several levels of administration, it is not yet known whether and how this might change the outgoing government's National Security Strategy or how it will affect the conflict in Catalonia. In his speech to Congress, however, Sánchez promised a more conciliatory approach than the one adopted by his predecessor. With so many pieces already in motion, he will certainly have his work cut out for him.