

# THE IMPACT OF THE EU REGIONAL POLICY ON POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT OF SPAIN <sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract.

In this paper, we argue that in the configurations leading to less autonomy, there is a low level of economic development, a low volume of EU funding streams and the less presence of language as a factor of identity. The group of cases such as Andalusia, Asturias and Galicia is of particular importance in these configurations. In the configurations that lead to greater autonomy, two patterns were noted. The first group of cases (Catalonia and the Basque Country) demonstrate a link between the presence of regionalist parties in Parliaments of Autonomous Communities, the level of economic development, a high level of identification with regional language and centrifugal tendencies. At the same time, the second group of cases (Valencia and the Canary Islands) provides a framework where *the role of funding streams under the EU regional policy programs for the period 2014-2020 is additionally traced*. The scientific novelty of the article lies in the analysis of the dynamics of centrifugal trends explanations in modern Spain via the crisp-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (csQCA).

**Keywords:** Spain, centrifugal tendencies, regional policy of the European Union, Qualitative Comparative Analysis

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### **Introduction.**

The regional policy of the European Union has had a significant impact on all the dimensions of development of Spain. One of the most considerable consequences of this external factor may become contribution to centrifugal rather than to centripetal forces. The regional programs of the EU are one of the many reasons for drives away from the center. This factor has played a role in virtually all such conflicts (the less developed and more developed parts of a country each feeling exploited by the other and hence liberated). It may be sufficient to refer to the case of Great Britain, in which the dynamics of the center-regions' conflict play a special role in the development of the state. However, it is by far not the only one: ethnic and/or linguistic and/or religious and/or cultural differences play a role as much as historical memories such as past independence. Hence the problem is how EU regional policy in its various guises impacts on these factors and that turns to causal mechanisms.

The EU regional policy has a number of aims such as, e.g., competitiveness (for the more developed parts of the country) or convergence (for the less developed) and overall wants to create a sense of Europe united. It does not specifically aim at alleviating grievances within member states, but can certainly be instrumentalized in such a way by central governments to counter secessionist moods. However, these are indirect effects and it requires a careful study of cases to identify causal effects along the lines of the argument (for the simple reasons that there can be many reasons for the ebb and flow of such moods).

The problem of the EU regional policy influence on development of different regions of the EU member states has received a great deal of attention. In particular,

there is an exhaustive strand of literature on the EU regional policy impact on the economic development of regions (Crescenzi, Giua, 2017, 2018; Medeiros, 2017; Adan, 2015).

In recent years, the contribution was made about the positions of regional governments to the European integration process after targeted measures of the EU regional policy (Gross, Debus, 2018; Dotti, 2015). The contribution of the EU regional policy to setting up support for the EU institutions and strengthening the 'European idea' was explored.

In particular, questions were raised about how lobbying activities of regional parties are manifested at the level of the European Union. As Marks (1993) and Tatham (2008) posit regional politicians can potentially influence the first stage of the negotiation process regarding the EU cohesion policy through the Committee of the Regions and the European Commission (Marks, 1993; Tatham, 2008).

Increased research on this topic has still left several important questions unanswered. There have been a limited amount of studies challenging the issue whether the EU regional policy contribute to centrifugal rather than to centripetal forces. It remains largely unclear what factors and for what reasons lead to the calls for "decentralization". A more fine-grained study is needed to disentangle the impact of regional political actors on the structure of funding schemes (Gross, Debus, 2018: 608).

This study aims to redress the gap in the literature by investigating how the EU regional policy contributes to centrifugal rather than to centripetal forces.

As for methodological frame, the crisp-set QCA will be employed to identify all possible reasons, which might impact on calls for autonomy and try to find out which

are present in the 17 cases and which are not. Then we get a combination of factors and might be able to see what cases are more viable and whether the EU policy makes a difference.

### **Empirical data and methods.**

There are many studies that analyze the explanations for the growth of centrifugal trends in Spain. Slightly less developed in world science is the analysis of the influence of the European Union (EU) on these dynamics. However, there are no studies that have tested these theories via Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA).

In regard to the research topic, QCA is the most appropriate method. First, we study possible reasons for the increase of centrifugal tendencies in Spain at the level of the autonomous communities. There are 17 autonomies in Spain, QCA is typically a reasonable choice of method for sample sizes of 12 or more (Fainshmidt, Witt, Aguilera, Verbeke, 2020). Secondly, we are interested in looking for a set of reasons that can, on the one hand, lead to an increase in support for autonomy, and on the other hand, result in its absence. It is quite obvious that there is no single reason that leads to this outcome, it is necessary to study the causal relationships in the complex, and QCA allows to test it. Thirdly, we are convinced that the use of such a research method as QCA is a completely new approach to the study of causality in domestic policy of Spain and allows to trace continuity and change in Southern European countries.

## Conditions

This section describes the main conditions used in this research. We focus on the five main conditions that are as follows: Regional Policy of the European Union (or Cohesion Policy of the EU), Regional Authority Index (RAI), the level of economic development, regionalist parties, regional language as a condition of identity.

**Regional policy of the European Union.** The European Union is widely recognized as the most developed form of integration association in the modern world. Several studies have shown that the participation in integration structures allows regions to gain access to wider free trade areas (FTAs) without appealing to the center (Alesina & Spolaore, 2003). Large states provide certain economic benefits to their regions, for example, low social spending per capita, the appropriate size of trade zone without customs restrictions. In its turn, economic integration by removing interstate trade barriers can lead to a decrease of the region's necessity to be the part of the state. Thereby, the integration association is the guarantor of regions' access to the FTA market. (Brancati, 2014: 70) Accordingly, participation in the EU could result in requests for gaining more regional powers.

The EU's regional policy has a number of aims, i.e. to ensure the harmonized economic development of the EU regions through investments from the European structural and investment funds (ESIF). The Maastricht Treaty has strengthened the role of regions at the European level by creating a Committee of the Regions, which consists of local and regional representatives and has an ability to influence the decision-making process in the supranational institutions of the EU (Debus & Gross, 2018: 3). Moreover,

regional politicians can influence the process of decision-making at the first stage in the European Commission.

**Regional Authority Index (RAI).** The territorial structure of the state, as well as the institutional relationship between the center and regions, can be viewed as the most important prerequisite for the dynamics of centrifugal tendencies (Bache, 2000). Some researchers agreed that there is a strong interdependence between economic and political decentralization. (Ibid: 18) An important component of accelerating the process of internal devolution is the presence of pre-established territorial communities. The regions that receive additional powers quickly (historical autonomies in Spain) have an opportunity to participate more effectively in the decision-making process and request for more autonomous rights (Ibid).

In order to assess the impact of the regional powers' level on centrifugal tendencies, we use data showing the volume of real rights of autonomies. The Regional Authority Index (RAI) project measures the political subjectivity of a region, i.e. the ability to participate in making decisions regarding their own status and not only to make decisions by themselves (Panov, 2020: 105). Within the framework of RAI, there is a "self-rule" and "shared rule" dimensions: the powers that the regional authorities possess (the depth of institutions' authority, the volume of political powers, tax autonomy, level of representation); the powers that regional authorities have on a national scale (tax control, the possibility for constitutional reforms, control of the executive branch) (Hooghe et al., 2010). The combination of these indicators is the final index, according to which it is possible to operationalize this factor in the QCA model.

**Level of economic development.**

Developed countries are more likely to adopt decentralization policies than developing ones (Schakel, 2010). The high level of per capita incomes leads to demands for greater autonomy, because the benefits of decentralization are more tangible than in less developed countries (Bahl, 1999). A study by Branko Milanovic and Nicolas Sambanis depicts that there is a correlation between the demand for higher sovereignty and economic income. According to their approach, the region can generate the calls for more sovereign rights in order to control language, educational and / or tax policies. However, these opportunities have such consequences as reduced economic integration with the rest parts of the state, costs for business, slowed down economic growth and so on. In this regard, the size of the region matters, since a larger economy results in lower costs per capita. In its turn, small but wealthy regions also tend to ask for more sovereignty, especially if they are budget-donor regions (Milanovich & Sambanis, 2011: 8-9). In this regard, the problem of «internal colonialism» arises, when regions feel disadvantaged as a result of state policy, which creates economic inequality by developing some regions at the expense of others (Hechter, 1975).

In this study we use GDP per capita as an indicator of the level of economic development in different regions. This indicator is widely used as an indicator of the economic well-being of the region in various studies. Moreover, GDP per capita is the main parameter according to which, within the framework of the EU regional policy, the regions are divided and receive the distribution of investments from the ESIF. The calibration of the Spanish autonomies are carried out on the basis of the median, which makes possible objectively identify the aggregate of more and less developed regions.

**Regionalist parties.** Regionalist parties can be considered the political manifestation of the existence and relevance of the centre- periphery cleavage in a given political system (Masseti & Schakel, 2015: 866). In this regard, the key issue for such parties is the promotion of the territorial issue and a greater degree of self-government. In its turn, the Spanish researcher Cesar Colino suggests focusing attention on the activities of regionalist parties and social movements as engines of centrifugality (Colino, 2020: 72).

In this article, we define regionalist parties in accordance with the criteria proposed by Emmanuel Masseti and Arjan Shakel. First, regionalist parties are self-contained political organizations that contest elections. Secondly, such parties are present only in a particular sub-territory (region) of the state and / or are candidates for contestation in regional elections, but not national ones. Third, the political activities of such parties are limited to the territory of the region, which results in the protection of the interests in only their own region. Finally, the main task of regionalist parties is to achieve, protect and / or strengthen territorial self-government. (Masseti and Schakel, 2015) Moreover, according to Oscar Martínez-Tapia, regional elites are interested in intensifying and maintaining the latent stage of the center-region conflict in order to achieve political goals (Martínez-Tapia, 2016).

**Regional language as a condition of identity.** The language of an autonomous community or a regional language are emphasized by some authors as a condition for the identification of citizens with their region (Álvarez Pereira, Portos, Vourdas, 2017: 3). On the one hand, the rise of secessionism in such regions as Catalonia can be explained from cultural and linguistic points of view. On the other hand, the regional



language in other autonomous communities does not play an important role in relation to the regionalist sentiments. For example, such autonomous communities as Valencia and the Balearic Islands demonstrate resistance to any separatist sentiments and moderate support for a greater autonomy. According to the authors' observation, a distinctive minority language should be evaluated only in connection with other factors that determine support for greater decentralization (Álvarez Pereira, Portos, Vourdas, 2017: 3).

### **Results**

The data were collected from various primary sources (i.e. El País, CIS estudio N2956, CIS estudio N3247, EUROSTAT, Hooghe et al. (2010, p. 359), DG Regio) and compiled into a single table of initial variables (Table 1).

Regionalist parties were chosen as a condition only if they have seats in Parliament, and therefore have an opportunity to influence the political decision-making process. Language as a condition of identity was taken from a large-scale survey in 17 Autonomous Communities by the Center for Sociological Research conducted in 2012. The European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) amount was obtained by putting all distributions of EU funds together. In this case, the regions of Spain were receiving funds from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the European Social Fund (ESF), the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD). We also decide to take GDP per capita at the beginning of 2014 because it is necessary to reveal the allocation of funds from the EU, and not their direct expenditure. In other words, the GDP is taken "clean" without injections from the ESIF, which allows us to consider this indicator as a separate condition from the ESIF. Finally, support for

autonomy or autonomism was calculated by adding up the following two responses from the Center for Sociological Research polls conducted in 2019: “I believe that Spain should represent a state in which the autonomous communities have more rights than they currently have” and “I believe that Spain should represent a state recognizing the autonomies' right to independence ”.

**Table 1. Summary table of the main conditions for csQCA analysis**

| Autonomous Community | Regionalist Parties in Regional Parliaments   | Regional Language as Condition of Identity (%) | ESIF 2014 (mln. euro) | RAI  | GDP per capita 2014 (euro) | Autonomism  |
|----------------------|---|--|-----------------------|------|----------------------------|-------------|
| Andalucía            | -   | 13,8   | 6151,1                | 14,5 | 16395,36                   | 9,6         |
| Aragón               | Partido Aragonés (PA)<br>Chunta Aragonesista (CHA)  | 28,5   | 663,9                 | 13,5 | 24836,92                   | 17,6        |
| Asturias             | Foro de Ciudadanos (FAC)  | 9,2  | 675,6                 | 14,5 | 19669,52                   | 2,7         |
| Baleares             | El Pi-Proposta per les Illes Balears (El Pi)  | 20,8   | 241,9                 | 13,5 | 24335,45                   | 39,4        |
| Basque Country       | Partido Nacionalista Vasco (PNV)  | 14,4   | 320,9                 | 15,5 | 29846,19                   | 57,2        |
| Canarias             | Coalición Canaria (CC) - GP Nacionalista Canario(CC-PNC-AHI)  | 16,2   | 1385,7                | 13,5 | 18698,10                   | 26,1        |
| Cantabria            | Partido Regionalista de Cantabria (PRC)   | 4,7  | 177,6                 | 14,5 | 20095,00                   | 10          |
| Castilla la Mancha   | -   | 14,6   | 1954,2                | 13,5 | 17161,65                   | 7,6         |
| Castilla y León      | Unión del Pueblo Leonés (UPL); Por Ávila (XAV)  | 10,3   | 1407,7                | 13,5 | 20615,60                   | 8,2         |
| Catalonia            | Junts per Catalunya (JxCat); Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC) - Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya-Catalunya Sí | 31   | 1488,9                | 14,5 | 26401,22                   | 64,8        |
| Extremadura          | -   | 5  | 1925,7                | 13,5 | 15617,43                   | 9,2         |
| Galicia              | Bloque Nacionalista Gallego (BNG)   | 25,8   | 2125,6                | 14,5 | 20070,37                   | 13,4        |
| La Rioja             | -   | 8,1  | 115,1                 | 13,5 | 24790,32                   | 14,2        |
| Madrid               | -   | 10,9   | 660,1                 | 13,5 | 30945,87                   | 12,2        |
| Murcia               | -   | 10,1   | 655,2                 | 13,5 | 17808,00                   | 4,6         |
| Navarra              | Geroa Bai (GBai); Euskal Herria Bildu (EH Bildu)  | 18,4   | 200,8                 | 14,5 | 29173,33                   | 24,4        |
| Valencia             | Coalició Compromís (CCPV)   | 14,8   | 971,6                 | 13,5 | 19657,14                   | 17,4        |
| <b>MEDIAN</b>        |   | <b>14,4</b>                                    | <b>675,6</b>          |      | <b>20095,00</b>            | <b>13,4</b> |

*Sources: compiled by the authors based on data from El País, CIS estudio N2956, CIS estudio N3247, EUROSTAT, Hooghe et al. (2010, p. 359), DG Regio*

The results of the calibration of conditions and the outcome using the crisp-set technique are presented in Table 2.

The condition Regionalist Parties (RP) was assigned an indicator «1» if such parties are represented in the regional parliaments, and «0» if they are not represented. According to Regional Authority Index, indicator «1» means that the result exceeds the average number for the autonomous communities (13.5). For the rest of the conditions, the calibration was carried out via the median. The motivation is twofold. First, this method of calibration is mentioned for crisp-set QCA in the training materials on this method of analysis proposed by Schneider and Wagemann (Schneider & Wagemann, 2012). Secondly, if we study the level of autonomy in the autonomous communities carefully, we will notice that the average level is higher than the median. This result can be explained due to the fact that support for centrifugality in Catalonia and the Basque Country is higher than in all other regions significantly. High rates pull the average for Spain, therefore, we decided to use the median in order to neutralize this effect.

**Table 2. Data matrix for csQCA**

| Autonomous Community | Regionalist Parties in Regional Parliaments | Regional Language as Condition of Identity (%) | ESIF 2014 (mln. euro) | RAI | GDP per capita 2014 (euro) | Autonomism |
|----------------------|---|--|-----------------------|-----|----------------------------|------------|
| Andalucia            | 0   | 0  | 1                     | 1   | 0                          | 0          |
| Aragon               | 1   | 1  | 0                     | 0   | 1                          | 1          |
| Asturias             | 1   | 0  | 1                     | 1   | 0                          | 0          |
| Baleares             | 1   | 1  | 0                     | 0   | 1                          | 1          |
| Basque Country       | 1   | 1  | 0                     | 1   | 1                          | 1          |
| Canarias             | 1   | 1  | 1                     | 0   | 0                          | 1          |
| Cantabria            | 1   | 0  | 0                     | 1   | 1                          | 0          |
| Castilla la Mancha   | 0   | 1  | 1                     | 0   | 0                          | 0          |
| Castilla y Leon      | 1   | 0  | 1                     | 0   | 1                          | 0          |
| Catalonia            | 1   | 1  | 1                     | 1   | 1                          | 1          |
| Extremadura          | 0   | 0  | 1                     | 0   | 0                          | 0          |
| Galicia              | 1   | 1  | 1                     | 1   | 0                          | 0          |
| La Rioja             | 0   | 0  | 0                     | 0   | 1                          | 1          |
| Madrid               | 0   | 0  | 0                     | 0   | 1                          | 0          |
| Murcia               | 0   | 0  | 0                     | 0   | 0                          | 0          |
| Navarra              | 1   | 1  | 0                     | 1   | 1                          | 1          |
| Valencia             | 1   | 1  | 1                     | 0   | 0                          | 1          |

*Sources: compiled by the authors*

In the process of logical minimization, a condition or configuration of conditions can be considered sufficient if it meets the constancy criterion not less than 0.75. (Schneider & Wagemann, 2012) The constancy criterion of csQCA is the proportion of cases in the truth table that lead to a given outcome. As a result of the analysis, 13 significant configurations that meet the criterion of constancy were obtained. Analysis was performed in the fuzzy-set QCA program. The program generates solutions of three types. The first one is a *comprehensive solution* – the interpretation of the configuration with logical remainders that are possible combinations of conditions, which, however, do not occur in the existing database. The second one is *parsimonious solution* - all configurations with potential combinations are considered as positive. And the last but not least is an *intermediate solution* - only some configurations with possible combinations are considered (easy counterfactuals). In this study, we operate with the intermediate solution as a compromise option. (Table 3)

**Table 3. Minimal formulas for intermediate solutions**

| AUTONOMISM                      |   | autonomism                     |   |
|---------------------------------|---|--------------------------------|---|
| Formula                         | Cases   | Formula                        | Cases   |
| GDP*LANGUAGE*RP                 | Aragon,<br>Balears,<br>Basque Country,<br>Catalonia,<br>Navarra | gdp*rp                         | Andalucia,<br>Castilla la Mancha,<br>Extremadura,<br>Murcia |
| rai*ESIF*LANGUAGE*RP            | Canarias,<br>Valencia   | gdp*RAI                        | Andalucia,<br>Asturias,<br>Galicia                          |
| <i>Solution coverage: 0,875</i> |   | esif*language*RP               | Cantabria   |
|                                 |   | rai*language*RP                | Castilla y Leon   |
|                                 |   | <i>Solution coverage: 0,88</i> |   |

*Sources: compiled by the authors (Capital letter conditions indicate the presence of a condition for the outcome, small letter - absence. Left column contains conditions that lead to centrifugality, right - to the absence)*

First, the results demonstrate a *direct interdependence* between the condition of Regionalist Parties, the level of economic development, a high level of regional language, with centrifugality. In both formulas, these conditions are necessary for a high level of autonomism. Examples of Catalonia and the Basque Country as the most economically developed regions are indicative here. There are strong RPs in the regional parliament in both autonomous communities. In the Basque Country, 28 of the 75 seats are held by the Basque Nationalist Party (BNP) [Partido Nacionalista Vasco (PNV)] and is forming a ruling coalition with the local socialist branch. In Catalonia, the ruling coalition is the Together for Catalonia [Juntos por Cataluña (JxCat)] party and Izquierda Republicana de Cataluña (ERC)]. Both coalitions have wide support among the population and can influence the political agenda. In particular, the Catalan coalition declares its desire not only to expand autonomy, but also to gain sovereignty. Moreover, the declaration of sovereignty is reinforced in political discourse by the potential benefits from an independent economic development.

In the cases of Canarias and Valencia, the role of EU funds is emphasized additionally. Both autonomous communities cannot be included in the list of economic leaders of Spain (GDP per capita is below the national median), while they receive quite a lot of assistance from the EU funds, which results in a certain financial dependence on the ESIF. According to the QCA results the presence of regionalist parties only strengthens the authorities' ability to manage the EU funding streams on its own. In this sense, regional policy of the EU stimulates attempts to directly interact with the EU, bypassing the central authorities.

In configurations that lead to less autonomy, we can observe the following configuration: a low level of economic development, a low volume of inflows from the EU funds and the absence of language as a factor of centrifugality. The cases of Andalusia, Asturias and Galicia are of particular interest in this configuration formula. In particular, a lower level of economic development coupled with the presence of a high RAI result in a lower level of centrifugal tendencies. If we compare this group with the group including Catalonia, the Basque Country and Navarra (as the most "centrifugal" ones), it will turn out that the difference leading to other outcomes lies in the level of economic development, the level of dependence on the ESIF (only if it is considered to be as a ratio of EU funds to GDP).

At first glance, the level of regional authority as a factor does not play a decisive role in our analysis. In fact, all Spanish autonomous communities have a similar set of rights and are included in a single fiscal system. The only exceptions are the Basque Country and Navarra. The problem is the fact that there is the lack of differentiation of regional powers that leads to the contradictory influence of the Regional Authority Index on the centrifugal tendencies. However, the pre-established regional powers should be taken into account as a factor because the presence of quasi-federal rights creates additional channels of influence and expands the possibilities of lobbying at different level of governance, including at the EU level. In this regard, there is a clear relationship between the opportunities created by the EU regional policy and sub-territory structures capable using these opportunities effectively.

### **Conclusion.**

In this research we trace the impact of the EU regional policy on centrifugal tendencies in modern Spain via the crisp-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis. This method creates an opportunity to determine that despite the fact that traditionally Catalonia and the Basque Country are distinguished by strong centrifugal sentiments, there is no direct influence of the EU regional policy in these regions. Moreover, it turned out that centrifugal tendencies are fueled by the EU regional programs in such regions as Valencia and Canarias. In the case of Catalonia and the Basque Country, a direct relationship was found between the presence of regionalist parties in the Parliaments of the autonomous communities, the level of economic development, the high level of the regional language as a component of identity and centrifugal tendencies.

In future studies we propose to focus more on the role of the EU regional policy in reinforcing centrifugal tendencies in Valencia and the Canarias using other methods, for instance, the process-tracing, which will provide a deeper understanding of causal dynamics and highlight the causal mechanisms linking the cause and outcome in the set of causally similar cases.

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