

**THE PERSISTENT CATALAN-SPANISH TURMOIL: A GEOPOLITICAL
READING OF THE FIRST WEEKS OF THE COVID-19 CRISIS
MANAGEMENT IN CATALONIA AND SPAIN**

ABSTRACT. Critical geopolitics conceives of the internal organization of the state as a relevant geopolitical subfield. In this context, this paper aims to develop a geopolitical interpretation of the COVID-19 crisis management in Catalonia and Spain from March 2020 to mid-April 2020. The paper begins by providing an overview of internal geopolitics literature by Spanish geographers, focusing on the Catalonia/Spain conflict, followed by a thorough analysis of written and oral materials compiled for that purpose. Three discursive periods are identified: up until the declaration of the State of Alarm in mid-March 2020, the first two weeks with this in force, and the first half of April 2020. The paper evinces that the examined materials support contested visions about the distribution of territorial powers within Spain, while also unearthing some specificities that ultimately relate to the Catalan national question. *Keywords: geopolitics, nation-state, devolution, Catalonia/Spain, COVID-19.*

Many public speeches and tweets produced throughout March 2020 reveal that the Catalan government requested the Spanish government to impose a lockdown in Catalonia to fight against the spread of COVID-19. This move would entail closing Catalan borders not only with France and Andorra, but also with other Spanish regions, resulting in border control between Catalonia and the neighboring Spanish regions of Aragon and the Valencian Community. The Spanish government refused to do so, arguing that the Catalan government did not have power in this matter and repeatedly

stated that “the virus does not care about territories.”¹ However, the Spanish government decided to close down its international boundaries on 16 March 2020. Hence, the internal European Union (EU) boundaries with Portugal and France were reestablished in an exceptional decision in the context of the EU citizens’ freedom to move and work across the Schengen area. It can be argued that the COVID-19 debates in Spain are geopolitically mediated. Thus, a geopolitical reading is possible, acknowledging that discussions addressing the distribution of powers between different territorial authorities can be regarded as internal geopolitics of Spain.

The origins of geopolitics in the late nineteenth century, represented by authors such as Friedrich Ratzel and Johan Rudolf Kjeleen (Engelbrekt 2017), clearly relate to a growing concern with the study of modern nation-state frontiers. For decades, the discipline centered on the nation-state as the only possible actor, resulting in the “territorial trap,” as labelled by John Agnew (1994). In this regard, power was supposed to be exerted by the nation-state only, as Joe Painter (2015, 141) contends: “Until relatively recently, political geography has been resolutely state-centric, and power meant state power, and in particular the control of territory. State, power, and territory formed a kind of Holy Trinity for political geography. The state was understood as an institution, territory as bounded space, and power as control” The nation-state was seen as the “” not only of power, but also of wealth, culture, and society (Taylor 1994).

However, from the late twentieth century onwards, the nation-state has increasingly experienced different processes of political and economic reconfiguration

¹ Spanish prime minister Pedro Sánchez has repeatedly said **that** ‘the virus does not care about territories’, allegedly referring to territorial demarcations and authorities or, more precisely in this context, autonomous communities. In Latin languages ‘territory’ has a broader meaning than in English. Hence, a more accurate translation into English could be ‘the virus does not care about borders’.

(Jessop 2014; King and Le Galès 2017), particularly in the sense that it is confronted to share power with other territorial actors downwards and upwards, in such a way that geopolitics no longer focuses exclusively on nation-states, as defended by the so-called “critical geopolitics” (O’Tuathail 1996). Thus, the counternarratives taking place inside the nation-state have become one of the new instances of geopolitical inquiry (O’Tuathail and Dalby 1998). This article departs from the premise that current domestic processes affecting the organization of the state are a relevant geopolitical subfield (Jonas 2012; Giblin 2017).

This paper aims at offering a geopolitical interpretation of the COVID-19 crisis management in Catalonia and Spain from March 2020 to mid-April 2020. It evidences how some academic reflections on the Catalonia/Spain conflict produced in recent decades may inform the current public discussion. Importantly, the objective of this paper is not to assess the specific measures taken by the Spanish government and the devolved Catalan government, since this article does not refer to public health issues as a stand-alone matter. Furthermore, the focus will not be on constitutional and administrative law contents, although some comments will be made to understand the context.

To provide a context regarding the recent Catalan-Spanish turmoil, it must be said that the 1978 Spanish Constitution created the so-called “State of Autonomies.” In short, this territorial model consists of 17 “autonomous communities,” approved through their respective Statutes of Autonomy (Map 1). According to Article 2 of the Constitution, these internal political entities are defined as either “regions” or “nationalities” (Map 1). The first Statutes of Autonomy were passed for the de facto constitutional nationalities (2nd transitional provision): the Basque Country (1979), Catalonia (1979), and Galicia (1981).

[MAP 1 HERE]

In Catalonia, a new Statute of Autonomy was initially passed by the Catalan Parliament in September 2005 and sent to the Spanish Parliament---then accepted with amendments in 2006 and passed in a referendum held in 2006. From late 2003, while the new statute was being drafted, the discussion about Catalonia escalated in Spain, especially in terms of the legal definition of Catalonia as a nation, a possible new status for the Catalan language, financing, and which new powers could be conferred to the Catalan authorities after those allegedly achieved in 1979.

2010 marks a turning point in such debates. In that year, and in the context of the tough post-2008 GFC, the 2006 Statute of Autonomy was considered partially unconstitutional by the Spanish Constitutional Court. This resulted in a massive demonstration in Barcelona on 10 July 2010, convened under the slogan “We Are a Nation: We Decide,” which was the first of the exponential yearly protests throughout the 2010s demanding self-determination and/or secession. The crisis peaked in autumn 2017 with the independence referendum, declared unconstitutional and legally suspended, yet controversially celebrated. As a result, the Catalan government was suspended with the polemical application of Article 155 of the Constitution, which empowers the Spanish government to take extraordinary measures to ensure that autonomous communities meet constitutional and legal obligations when not allegedly fulfilling them.

As argued above, recent decades have witnessed a growing interest in Spanish internal geopolitics. We will here focus on the relevance of emerging interpretations of the Catalan-Spanish conflict by Spanish geographers. After this initial review, some discussion concerning methodological considerations will be introduced, followed by a section devoted to analyzing the way in which the management of the COVID-19 crisis

unfolded during the period that is examined. The paper finishes by discussing such developments considering the views expressed in the background section.

BACKGROUND: SPANISH GEOGRAPHICAL APPROACHES TO THE INTERNAL GEOPOLITICS OF SPAIN

The internal geopolitics of Spain has not been an object of scientific inquiry for Spanish geographers for decades. In the early 2000s, Josefina Gómez Mendoza (2001, 21) provided a balance of the first 25 years of the Association of Spanish Geographers by stating that “geographer ...could not, or would not, authoritatively speak for themselves in the debate on regionalization”² experienced in the 1970s--1980s. Hence, in the most vibrant period in which the territorial distribution of power was discussed and decided in Spain, geography as a discipline was mostly absent from such debates (García Álvarez 2002, 2009, 2021; Lois 2009; Gómez Mendoza 2013; Rullan and Vives 2020; Nel·lo and Durà, 2021). The devolution to autonomous communities was designed and practiced with alarming inattention from geographers. This is ironic, given that, at least since the eighteenth century, the so-called “Regional Geography of Spain” subdiscipline has been particularly relevant (Solé 1968; García Álvarez 2002, 2021; Gómez Mendoza 2013; Mata 2013; Olcina and Farinós 2017), including the period of Franco’s dictatorship (1939--1975).

Thus, many Spanish geographers saw the internal geopolitics of Spain as taboo, whereas international geographers readily applied a geopolitical approach when analyzing Spain. Cases in point are Barbara Loyer (2006), who entitled her book *Geopolitics of Spain*, and James Derrick Sidaway (2000), who refers to “Iberian Geopolitics” in his work. One of the reasons for this domestic lack of interest might be a

² All translations, including this one, are ours.

certain continuity with the kind of geography built during the Franco dictatorship, which disregarded the links between politics and geography (Reguera 1991). However, when democracy was recovered in the late 1970s and geographers could once again discuss politics openly, the lack of an accurate geopolitical lens could be perceived.

During the 1980s, the 1990s, and the early 2000s, geographers were mostly keen to accept and reproduce the map and the distribution of territorial powers set in the 1980s. That was particularly the case of some conflictual decisions made in the late 1970s to the early 1980s---for example, the creation of the autonomous community of Castile and Leon (amalgamating two clearly differentiated historical regions) and the autonomous community of Madrid (split from Castile, the historical region). Thus, geographers tended to admit and justify such top-down and centralist delimitations, surprisingly agreed upon without the participation of geographers themselves (Gómez Mendoza 2001, 2013; García Álvarez 2002, 2009, 2021; Lois 2009; Mata 2013; Rullan and Vives 2020). In this sense, the new “Regional Geographies of Spain” published in the 1980s and 1990s accepted the map without questioning the spatial framework---for instance, José María García Álvaro and José Antonio Sotelo’s (1999) book.

During these decades, many geographers devoted their work to studying Spain as a whole or the seventeen autonomous communities, mostly without considering the power relations set (García Álvarez 2002, 2009; Lois 2009). An example of this is provided by Manuel Antonio Zárate (2005, 7), who considered that the creation of the autonomous community of Madrid had been beneficial because “the regional government has focused its effort on modernizing a small region and improving its citizens welfare. Unlike other autonomous communities, *some of them facing problems of national identity that imply high economic and social costs*, the regional authorities of Madrid have made planning their priority” (our emphasis). This quote entails a clear

geopolitical discourse, and displays how academic geographers tended to accept and reproduce the autonomous communities already established. The same is applicable to José María Serrano (2000), who positively described the 1978 constitutional model and its subsequent political-administrative map, but considered nationalisms (excluding Spanish nationalism) as potentially dangerous.

The turning point in the involvement of geography as a discipline in Spanish internal geopolitics can be found in an essay whose evocative title---*Unfinished Spain* (Romero 2006)--- anticipated the author's fruitful production pivoting on this topic, as is the case of *Geopolitics and Territorial Government in Spain* (Romero 2009). The title is, again, relevant, since it entails a Spanish geographer's first use of the word "geopolitics" to address the particular situation of Spain. In the same year, Jacobo García Álvarez (2009, 458) still maintained that, despite the intense mass media discussion about the spatial distribution of powers in Spain after Franco's death, geography was "much less present than other academic disciplines." García Álvarez (2009, 460) quoted Joan Romero (2006) as inspiring groundbreaking work, acknowledging that this topic was "still a pending matter" for geography. The following paragraphs will explain how the internal geopolitical debate has gained momentum among geographers in the post-2010 decade.

Romero (2006, 19) states that Spain is "a complex reality in permanent construction...which in its evolutionary process will continue to face crisis and difficult situations," implying that the territorial model set in the late 1970s to early 1980s was called into question in the mid-2000s. Interestingly, he begins his reflection by mentioning the negotiation of a new Statute of Autonomy for Catalonia, especially as regards to whether Spain should be de facto and/or de jure conceived of as multinational, and Catalonia as a nation. Romero (2006) infers two geopolitical

challenges for Spain: firstly, the acknowledgement of Spain's multinationality, assuming that some minority nations---such as Catalonia---are not properly recognized. Romero's (2006) second challenge addresses the transformation of the political territorial model, moving from decentralization towards federalism. Regarding the latter, Romero (2006) argues in favor of coordination and cooperation as basic territorial procedures to be held in Spain by/between the Spanish government and/or the other political-administrative levels, namely the autonomous communities. These propositions have been iterated by Romero (2009, 2012, 2017) and Romero and Josep Vicent Boira (2017). In his latest contribution, in 2017, Romero bitterly regrets having "reiterated" the same diagnosis and proposals "together with dozens of colleagues, for decades," "thus it is in the domain of politics where the problem, and the solution, lies" (Romero 2017, 2384--2385).

In the 2010s, three collective books edited by Gómez Mendoza and others (2013), Joaquín Farinós and Jorge Olcina (2017), and Farinós and others (2019)---all of them geographers and whose major contributions also originated from geographers---reveal how the internal geopolitics of Spain has become a major issue. The first and the third books cited above are focused on this topic, while the second one is a new "Regional Geography of Spain"---that is, the subdiscipline explained before---, which avoids the scheme of Spain consisting of regions and analyzing each one individually---for instance, García Alvarado and Sotelo's (1999) book. Farinós and Olcina's (2017) book dares to question the regionalization of Spain and the inherited political organization of the country---a nonexistent approach in previous "Geography of Spain" textbooks.

It is impossible to provide a detailed analysis of the 44 chapters included in these three edited books and, indeed, not all of them specifically refer to the internal

geopolitics of Spain. However, these books reflect the progressive questioning of the Spanish territorial model in the 2010s, especially impelled by the so-called “Catalan crisis.” Indeed, this concept is used by various authors in these books, figuring prominently in the titles of these chapters. In general terms, it can be argued that the exponential political conflict in Catalonia throughout the 2010s concomitantly signals the rise of internal geopolitical reflection by Spanish geographers.

Broadly speaking, most geographers in these collective books maintain Romero’s (2006, 2009, 2012, 2017) and Romero and Boira’s (2017) main points of analysis. On the one hand, there is increasing attention to the cultural, linguistic, and, some might argue, national diversity of Spain informing the scholars’ geopolitical analysis. For instance, the current president of the Association of Spanish Geography (since 2017) examines the cultural and linguistic geography of Spain, linking it with the Catalonia/Spain conflict and the complex engagement with other national and/or regional identities in Spain (Olcina 2013). On the other hand, the political territorial reform is now being intensively explored. In general terms, the territorial model set in 1978 and developed afterwards is widely seen as perfectible by transitioning towards federalism. There are multiple diagnoses addressing such problems and challenges, and federalism emerges as an explicit option for, at least, 9 out of the 44 analyzed contributions in the aforementioned three books. In any case, some of these 9 chapters even include details about how federalism in Spain might come about, relating the question to other geographical matters such as planning, territorial cohesion, financing, infrastructures, and mobility, among others.

Some authors address the Catalan secession as a prospective political scenario, which is generally seen as both problematic and unlikely. The analyses about Catalan secessionism mostly favor interrogating the underlying causes of its rise and

consolidation (Font 2013; Nel-lo 2013; Frago 2019; Oliveras 2019; Rullan and Vives 2020). Social, cultural, historical, linguistic, economic, and political factors are some of the interwoven reasons mentioned, hence mobilizing scales beyond Catalonia and Spain: the Iberian Peninsula, the so-called Pyrenees-Mediterranean Euroregion, Europe/the EU, and globalization, among others. Some geographers relate Catalan secessionism with international theorizations on nationalism. Nevertheless, the Catalan secession is not perceived as an imminent situation.

Finally, some Spanish geographers seem reluctant to engage with the above-mentioned research inferences. A common point shared by these authors entails the suggestion that the Spanish government should recover some powers that have been “devolved” to autonomous communities to guarantee, for instance, interterritorial solidarity and cohesion and a general framework for spatial planning (García Álvarez 2009; López Trigal 2019; Zoido 2019). In this sense, the 1978 constitutional model is assumed as acceptable, yet requiring adaptations in order to counterbalance the prominence attained by the substate scale and, sometimes, by the alleged misuse practiced by the nationalist parties governing in some autonomous communities (Serrano 2000; García Álvarez 2009, 2021; López Trigal 2019).

<<A-HEAD>> METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Geopolitical research drawing on mass media is not uncommon (Laine 2019). This is consistent with the relevance given to press analysis in the social sciences (Duverger 1961). Content analysis as a method has epistemologically and ontologically been explored by Michel Foucault, who argued that avoiding preconceptions is essential to carry out content analysis (Waitt 2010). Despite the obvious relevance of the Foucauldian approach, this paper is rather embedded in geopolitics and assumes the situation in Catalonia and Spain as a conflict. In this sense, this empirical investigation

relies on a critical geopolitical reading of oral and written political speeches to grasp the discursive changes experienced from late February to mid-April 2020 in Catalonia and Spain. This essay examines those political debates prior to the Declaration of the State of Alarm on 14 March 2020, and also those debates that took place until 12 April 2020, a period characterized by the strictest regulations concerning public health and safety. Although this paper focuses on Catalonia, other Spanish regions will occasionally be mentioned when needed in analytical terms.

Justifying the media used for constructing the corpus is required to guarantee reliability (Duverger 1961; Laine 2019). Due to the authors' difficulties in accessing conventional print journals during the lockdown from 14 March to early May, two Spanish and Catalan electronic newspapers have been selected on the grounds of free distribution and the existence of a specific section devoted to the COVID-19 crisis coverage. According to a survey carried out by the Centre d'Estudis d'Opinió in December 2019, the highest-ranking newspaper in terms of fulfilling the two criteria is *Vilaweb*. According to this source, *Vilaweb* is the sixth most read newspaper in Catalonia, rising to the third position in political news. In the case of Spain, the *Digital News Report* (Reuters Institute) published in mid-2019 rates *ElDiario.es* as the first newspaper meeting the two criteria, being the third most read online paper. *Vilaweb*'s COVID-19 section offers the option of creating a PDF file with all generated news (including tweets), which amounts to approximately 1,980 news items under scrutiny. *ElDiario.es* also offers a COVID-19 section, but news has to be checked individually---with 377 pages, with an average of 10 news items per page, the news items analyzed amount to 3,770.

Additionally, Twitter accounts of Spanish prime minister Pedro Sánchez [PS] @sanchezcastejon and the Catalan president at that time Quim Torra [QT]

@QuimTorraIPla have been analyzed, including not only their own tweets, but also political speeches (which have been listened to and transcribed) and press releases, among others. There are hundreds of tweets as well as retweets from their government offices (@desdelamoncloa and @govern, respectively), including contents originating from members of their governments at that time, the ones most quoted in this paper being: Miquel Buch [MiB], minister of the interior of the Catalan government; Meritxell Budó [MeB], minister of the presidency of the Catalan government; Teresa Cunillera [TC], representative of the panish government in Catalonia; Margarita Robles [MR], minister of defense of the Spanish government; Fernando Simón [FS], director of the Spanish center of health emergencies; and Alba Vergés [AV], minister of health of the Catalan government.

This research is based on these politicians' direct quotes, obtained from the media, or extracted from tweets, transcriptions, or other texts. Any parts of the news items that could be construed as the journalists' opinions have been omitted.

<<A-HEAD>> RESULTS

Three periods have been identified: the days prior to the declaration of the State of Alarm by the Spanish government---as this is the only legal option according to the Constitution to limit citizens' freedom to move and meet---in mid-March 2020; the first two weeks with this in force; and the first half of April 2020. Although these coincide with announcements of legal changes in the management of the crisis, the periods are primarily defined in discursive terms, and do not necessarily relate to the decisions taken per se.

<<B-HEAD>> THE EARLY DAYS: UP UNTIL THE DECLARATION OF THE STATE OF ALARM

February 2020 ended with more than 40 officially reported COVID-19 cases. The first identified tweets about coronavirus by the main political leaders reported here date from early March. [PS 4/3] mentioned the Spanish government was continuing to “work in coordination with different levels of government...against the virus,” while in his first message [QT 6/3] only referred to an internal meeting of the Catalan government concerning this issue that, from this moment onwards, gained momentum.

Around 10 March, the spread of COVID-19 was reported to be spatially uneven in Spain, with some concentrated foci. On 7 March, the Spanish government decided on a “drastic” quarantine for a specific neighborhood of Haro (autonomous community of La Rioja), “a decision in which the [involved autonomous] community has to take responsibility” [FS 7/3]. A lockdown for this area was decided on between the government of this autonomous community and the Spanish government, and implemented by the Spanish police. The Basque Country was the first autonomous community to close schools, colleges, and other public premises in some specific areas on 9 March.

On 10 and 11 March the first speeches specifically devoted to the COVID-19 crisis were made by both Spanish and Catalan leaders. [PS 10/3] mentioned the criteria for managing the crisis, including “maximum coordination” given that “public health management is in hands of the governments of the autonomous communities.” He also added that “together...we will overcome this crisis” in a self-invoked “message of unity.” [QT 11/3] stated that the government of Catalonia “will work in a coordinated way with all public institutions and governments.” At that stage, coordination was

widely invoked and indeed [PS 11/3] convened the presidents of the autonomous communities for an online meeting³ on 14 March.

Throughout 11 March, several fake news items about a possible territorial lockdown of Madrid were spread, emulating the territorial lockdowns decreed in Italy for most affected regions. Both the government of the Community of Madrid and the Spanish government denied this possibility, the latter adding in an official press release that “we reiterate the express will of the government...to cooperate and coordinate constantly with the autonomous communities.” On the evening of 12 March, the Catalan government decided on the lockdown of Igualada and its outskirts (Conca d’Òdena),⁴ because “we have noticed [a] severe increase [in COVID-19 there] and we are obliged to take measures” [AV 12/3]. Immediately executed by the Catalan police on the same day at midnight,⁵ this territorial lockdown has been the only one enacted in the studied period in Spain. On 13 March and 14 March, several authorities contrasted this territorial lockdown with the situation of the Spanish capital city and region. For instance, the president of the Valencian Parliament declared that “Igualada [was] in lockdown whereas Madrid [was] exporting the virus. Why has it not been put on lockdown?” [13/3], thus alluding to several news items evidencing the arrival of residents from Madrid to the Valencian Community and the Region of Murcia.

Increasing interregional mobility among Madrid residents seemed to be fueled by the preventive announcement that the State of Alarm was soon to be decreed “in all Spain.... It is an instrument present in the Constitution endowing the [Spanish]

³ For a specific discussion on this type of meeting, commonly known as the ‘Meeting of Presidents’, see the last section of this paper.

⁴ A sub-region covering four municipalities in Central Catalonia, with 66,048 inhabitants (2019).

⁵ Only in the Basque Country and Catalonia do their own respective police substitute the Spanish police.

government with extraordinary resources” [PS 13/3]. Interestingly, the prime minister began to shift his discourse, explicitly omitting the autonomous communities and focusing instead on “mobilizing all the resources of the State...: economic resources, health resources” [PS 13/3]. By doing so, he subtly suggested that decisions taken by the Spanish government were to affect at least one devolved power, namely health. The final slogan was that “we will stop this virus together” [PS 13/3], used ad nauseam from this moment onwards.

Following the decision taken in Igualada, the Catalan president stated on 13 March that “a total lockdown for Catalonia is necessary, that is, to restrict incoming and outgoing mobility” [QT 13/3]. He also declared that to implement the measure, “we need the collaboration of the Spanish government” [QT 13/3]; but the Spanish government did not answer this call. Territorial lockdowns were being demanded by at least four autonomous communities at that stage. The day the Meeting of Presidents was scheduled, [QT 14/4] admitted to “have received a call to tell me that the meeting will be tomorrow” and added: “We cannot waste any more time. ... We offer all our collaboration to the Spanish government, but... I insist: the lockdown of Catalonia is necessary.” During the course of that day, it was leaked that the Spanish government had prepared decisions unaligned with the Catalan government’s demands. At this time, the Catalan president called the Basque president and declared that, “We agree that we cannot accept that the Spanish government confiscates our authority in health, public safety and transport. We need help, not recentralization” [QT 14/4].

<<B-HEAD>> THE FIRST TWO WEEKS OF THE STATE OF ALARM

On the evening of 14 March, the prime minister made a live speech to announce the decision to decree the State of Alarm. [PS 14/3] declared that “from today the competent authority in all the territory is the Spanish government,” emphasizing that

“all health resources...are put at the disposal of the [Spanish] Minister of Health...to guarantee cohesion and equity in all the Spanish territory” This call for unity also meant that after “40 years of our Constitution, sometimes we are 17 autonomous communities but, others, like so many times in the History of Spain, we have to be the great country we are, we are going to give an answer together.” To sum up, [PS 14/3] defended that “the virus does not care about territories ,” the underlying assumption being the possibility “to give the same answer to all the territory: one solution for one problem.” After this speech, the Catalan president immediately tweeted “experts recommend...the lockdown of the country [referring to Catalonia]. Prime minister Sánchez’s and the Spanish government’s prescription is a lockdown of the Catalan government. This is about health and people’s lives, not about patriotic manifestos” [QT 14/3].

On 15 March, the Meeting of Presidents took place online. After the meeting, the prime minister said that “all the presidents [of the autonomous communities] answered the call for unity of action...and will act in their territories with responsibility and loyalty” [PS 15/3] and an official press release from the Spanish government acknowledged that “the presidents [of the autonomous communities] have endorsed a joint statement.” However, the Catalan president was the only one who did not endorse this position and claimed that the Spanish government was “severely irresponsible” in failing to decree a total lockdown as “it is necessary to cease now all activities which are not indispensable and essential” and to avoid “the exodus of citizens from the most affected areas, including Catalonia” [QT 15/3]. He rejected the “imposition,” claiming it was “authoritarian and centralist” and added that the Catalan government was not going to work “behind the Spanish government but alongside it” [QT 15/3].

The Spanish minister of defense, who had acquired new responsibilities in the State of Alarm---having the army at her disposal to patrol streets, if necessary---bitterly

regretted the Catalan president's statement and suggested he did not "deserve to be a political leader" [MR 16/3]. The highest-ranked military officer in the Spanish armed forces declared that "the deployment [of the army in Catalonia and in the Basque Country] will be the same as in the rest of Spain" [16/3], but the Catalan minister of the interior disagreed, stating that "here we don't need the army, the law is enforced by the [Catalan] police" [MiB 18/3].

On 16 March, the Spanish government established border controls with neighboring countries. The Catalan president said it was "too late," but still recognized that it was "necessary to close down the boundaries" [QT 16/3]. In addition, he reiterated his demand to "the Spanish government that they [would] authorize a total lockdown [of Catalonia]" [QT 16/3], thus reproducing the international boundaries decision to the boundaries of Catalonia with neighboring Spanish regions. When the prime minister was directly asked about this petition, he answered, again, "the virus does not care about territories" [17/3].

The Catalan president reiterated the need for a territorial and total lockdown (that is, affecting Catalonia and the region of Madrid), for instance, retweeting international news about decisions taken in this respect in Austria, California, or Italy, among others. On 17 March, he appeared on primetime Catalan TV, stating again that "the best solution is total lockdown," and adding that "these days I'm hearing a lot about boundaries and flags.... Now, I don't give a damn!...I care about health and people's lives" [QT 17/3]. Two days later, the Catalan president also appeared on BBC World, regretting that "our competences were centralized by the Spanish government, so we have fewer competences to help our people" [QT 19/3]. These words were considered by the Spanish government as "deeply disloyal" [MR 20/3]. The Catalan president sent a letter to EU institutions on 20 March, reiterating the urge for a

territorial lockdown. Again, the Spanish minister of foreign affairs stated that it was “the time for unity. [...] I hope Mr Torra [the Catalan president] is listening” [21/3], to which [QT 21/3] quickly replied “I’m perfectly listening to you.” However, the Catalan president had already expressed his “impotence” given that he could not “issue the [necessary] legal decrees” [QT 20/3] because of recentralization.

In terms of health policies, the Catalan government claimed that centralization was causing major problems to Catalan hospitals; for instance, by means of the intervention of the systems of provision of materials, which had apparently been discontinued by the Spanish government: “They cannot stop our orders!” [AV 19/3]. The Catalan Ggovernment repeatedly insisted on an end to the “centralized purchasing decreed by the Spanish government” given that “it has not worked, nor will it” [MeB 26/3].

“Despite not having received an answer” [MeB 21/3] to the repeated calls for total lockdown, the Catalan president participated in the second Meeting of Presidents held during the crisis, insisting on the same points. [PS 22/3] answered, once again, by stating that “this is not about territories,” asking for “collaboration, coordination and solidarity” and regretting “selfishness.” He also said that “as the president of the government of the *nation*, my essential role is coordinating the tasks of all public bodies” [PS 22/3; our emphasis].

On 25 March, the Catalan government announced the reinforcement of the territorial lockdown of Conca d’Òdena: “everybody must remain at home, except essential services” [MiB 25/3]. However, the Spanish government answered in a press release that the “only competent authority” was the Spanish minister of health [26/3], who subsequently approved the continuity of this territorial lockdown.

<<B-HEAD>> THE STATE OF ALARM WITH TOTAL LOCKDOWN AND THE GROWING
DISCUSSION ABOUT LIFTING COVID-19 CONTAINMENT MEASURES

The extension of the State of Alarm until 11 April was announced by the prime minister to the presidents of the autonomous communities on 22 March. On 28 March, and after repeated calls by the Catalan government, other autonomous community governments and different actors, the prime minister declared that this extension would imply a total lockdown for all citizens, except essential workers. He finished his speech by arguing that “in difficult times, we will resist, united,” each one having to decide “between cynicism and commitment, between selfishness and generosity” [PS 28/3]. [QT 28/3] quickly tweeted “I thank the prime minister for eventually having heard the demands from Catalonia.” Unfortunately, March 2020 ended with more than 102,000 officially reported COVID-19 cases.

The Catalan government continued condemning the centralizing system imposed by the Spanish government, for instance regarding the virus tests supply: “We haven’t received any” [AV 1/4]. The same was argued by the president: “We don’t expect anything from Madrid because there’s nothing arriving from Madrid” [QT 2/4].

On 4 April, the prime minister announced an extension of the State of Alarm until 25 April that, however, did not require the previous “extraordinary [lockdown] measures” [PS 4/4]. The Catalan president reacted by arguing that “we agree in extending the State of Alarm but we also demand the extension of the total lockdown, except for essential services. We don’t want the Spanish government to be mistaken, again” [QT 5/4]. On 4th April, the prime minister called again for a big deal to bring about “unity,” emulating the so-called ‘Moncloa Agreements’ held in 1977 between most political parties. [QT 16/4] put forward several conditions to participate in the

talks for these agreements, one of them being “to democratize this state and not to launder the 1978 regime” so “Catalonia can claim its right to self-determination.”

Thus, the apparent idyll between both governments had lasted for just one week. The Catalan government insisted on the need to postpone the total lockdown once again, while the Spanish government was determined to put an end to it by Monday 13 April, which was what eventually happened. The Catalan government repeatedly demanded to know which scientific opinions were considered to support this decision, arguing that Catalan scientists were not in favor of those: “On which grounds has this decision been taken?” [QT 10/4]. The Spanish minister of inclusion replied that the experts consulted by the Catalan government were not as “informed” as those of the Spanish government [14/4], to which the Catalan president replied that this showed a “lack of respect” [QT 14/4].

On 4 April, the Catalan government decided to ask for an end to the lockdown for the Conca d’Òdena. The Spanish government accepted and decreed the end of the lockdown which came into force on 6 April. Ten days later, territorial lockdowns and lifting measures were rejected by the Spanish ministry of health, because “with the State of Alarm it is the central government that is responsible for these decisions” and that “its homogeneous implementation” “has been beneficial” [FS 14/4].

Tensions regarding the Spanish government’s centralized distribution of health materials to the autonomous communities continued. Indeed, a controversy emerged concerning the number of face masks sent from the Spanish ministry of health to Catalonia: 1,714,000.⁶ This was seen as “a symbolic amount for Catalonia, but also a

⁶ In 1714 the siege of Barcelona ended, the most decisive battle of the War of Spanish Succession. Afterwards, the King of Spain abolished the Catalan institutions and set a centralized Spanish kingdom.

disastrous one” [MiB 13/4]. The Spanish government explained that distribution was calculated according to population figures, thus clarifying how “there’s no time, there’s no will, there’s no deliberateness” [TC 14/4] as to the significance of such figures.

[PS 12/4] declared that “one of the main successes...of the State of Alarm is the existence of a homogeneous answer...for the whole country,” thus justifying measures which “save lives and benefit all Spanish citizens, irrespective of where they live, as...applied homogeneously in the Spanish territory” [PS 15/4]. He sympathized with the wish of presidents of the autonomous communities “to have more decision-making capacity” but “with those levels of uncertainty...and a relentless enemy...the government of Spain has to take measures” [PS 12/4]. The Catalan president seemed to respond when asking the prime minister “could you imagine if Germany suspended the authority of Länder during the virus crisis?...Decentralized Germany has one of the lowest mortality rates in Europe” [QT 16/4]. In response to an Austrian journalist as to whether Catalonia would have managed better if it had been an independent nation, he answered that “smaller or more decentralized countries are those reacting better to the pandemic” [QT 16/4].

<<A-HEAD>> DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

By making use of an internal geopolitical perspective applied to Catalonia and Spain, this paper has analyzed the first month and a half of the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, indicating that it has a two-fold implication: on the one hand, crisis management deals with the distribution of territorial powers within Spain; on the other, the crisis directly relates to the specificities inherent to the Catalan national question. This is consistent with Romero’s (2006) detected geopolitical challenges for Spain, which have been reiterated in his successive works (Romero 2009, 2012, 2017) and in other authors’ subsequent contributions (e.g. Gómez Mendoza 2013; Nel·lo and Durà 2021).

The autonomous communities of Spain, including Catalonia, initially took measures to manage the COVID-19 crisis, consistent with their devolved powers in public health and other relevant issues. At an early stage of the crisis, the Spanish government found this approach adequate and even justified, since it complied with the distribution of territorial powers. However, on 14 March the Spanish government took charge by means of a State of Alarm, centralizing powers because of the alleged need to fight against a common enemy. Whether or not political responses should be centrally articulated is debatable since, among other reasons, the virus spread out differently in spatial terms across Spain. In addition, the bitter, ongoing discussion between a centralized or regionalized model on lockdowns and/or lifting COVID-19 containment measures shows a lack of consensus. In this regard, academic geography has intensively reflected that Spain is spatially uneven and that decision making should be consistently heterogeneous (Lois 2009; Farinós and others's 2019 introduction; Oliveras 2019; Rullan and Vives 2020), even acknowledging that "various historical nationalities or national feelings" existing within Spain (Romero and Boira 2017, 107).

The Spanish government repeatedly used the word "coordination" during the period under inspection, introducing an intentional change in its meaning on 14 March, moving from an urge to cooperate with other territorial powers to the sole exercise of the Spanish government's preeminent role. In this sense, Romero (2006, 2009, 2012, 2017) and Farinós (2019) have persistently warned against the real problems of territorial coordination in Spain. Beyond the numerous thematic coordination conference types---around 40, according to Farinós (2019)---a case in point is the Meeting of Presidents, a forum previously unforeseen by the 1978 Constitution, convening the prime minister with all the presidents of the autonomous communities. Before the COVID-19 crisis and up to 2004, the forum had convened six times, whereas

during the COVID-19 crisis and until 16 April 2020, it convened five times (online). As said by [PS 12/4], “never in history have there been so many Meetings of Presidents...[now] once a week.” However, these meetings are evidence of the coordination failures in Spain---they are allegedly an opportunity for participation, yet only after the decisions have already been taken by the Spanish government. Thus, despite the fact that this paper has focused on Catalonia, it is evident that the territorial model of Spain as a whole is utterly challenged, as widespread geographical academic reflection on the envisaged transition to federalism attests to (Gómez Mendoza 2013; Mata 2013; Oliveras 2019; Rullan and Vives 2020).

However, tensions in Catalonia go beyond a mere problem of reframing the Spanish territorial model. This is proved by detected arguments such as symbolic confrontations (for example, 1714), the demand for the right to self-determination, and the controversial presence of the army on the streets. Moreover, words used by the Catalan government, such as “imposition,” and by the Spanish government, such as “disloyalty,” testify to this political confrontation, in tune with Joan Vicente’s (2019, 66) suggestion that the Catalan/Spain conflict stems from an unsolvable “antagonism” that Onofre Rullan and Sònia Vives’ (2020, 14) define in terms of mutual “incompatibility.” As this paper has shown, Spanish geographers have been propositional in the 2010s by arguing that a federal model of Spain would contribute to alleviating the Catalan-Spanish conflict. However, our findings question that the existence of a prospective federal transition could provide a solution for Catalonia. According to Jaume Font (2013, 33, 40), Catalan secessionism “is here to stay,” as the Catalan president overtly claimed by relating self-determination with a better management of the COVID-19 crisis.

Our analysis infers that the long-repeated sentence “the virus does not care about territories,” used by the Spanish government, can be interpreted as an unwillingness to share powers with, or give them to, the autonomous communities. Conversely, Spanish international boundaries were closed displaying the never-ending nation-state territorial power. Thus, Spanish nationalism is gaining momentum (Núñez Seixas 2018), a development that had mostly gone unnoticed in Spain because of the focus given to nonstate nationalisms, echoing the mirage of banal nationalism, as Michael Billig (1995) has termed it. Besides, the closure of the Spanish boundaries with Portugal and France opens a new debate reaching the EU: member states have given individual answers to the crisis, looking inside their own bounded territories, thus reiterating the territorial trap (Agnew 1994). The EU has reacted late, and in a soft manner by failing to criticize the reintroduction of border controls within the Schengen area.

Furthermore, this research shows potential links with other geographical approaches examining the spread and effects of the COVID-19 crisis. Our geopolitical analysis for the specific case of the Catalonia/Spain conflict could be read alongside Oriol Nel·lo’s (2013), Nel·lo and Aina Gomà’s (2018), and Lluís Frago’s (2019), among others, which entail examinations of the interrelationships between social inequities, economic crisis, and political crisis, in the wake of emerging scholarship on the socioeconomic effects of COVID-19.

From mid-April 2020 onwards, the management of the pandemic has undergone different phases in Spain. After lifting the first State of Alarm on 21 June 2020, a new State of Alarm was declared on 25 October 2020, remaining active until 9 May 2021. Significantly enough, the Spanish government decided to decentralize the management of the COVID-19 crisis in favor of autonomous communities. This devolved policy making implied the power given to autonomous communities to declare either partial or

full territorial lockdowns, the opposite to what had been applied in the period studied in this paper.

Similarly, forthcoming research could address international comparisons as to COVID-19 management between Spain and other countries by drawing from territorial and geopolitical perspectives. This paper has provided a case study in the wake of such perspectives. In any case, and by way of conclusion, it seems clear that the confronting discourses pivoting on the management of the COVID-19 crisis unearth political tensions that demonstrate that the Catalan-Spanish conflict is far from being closed, thus determining every action or measure in which the concepts of power and territory are at stake.

<<A-HEAD>> ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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<<A-HEAD>> NOTES

<<A-HEAD> REFERENCES

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