

Author:

Giulio Pitroso
Griffith University, Australia
giulio.pitroso@griffithuni.edu.au

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Pitroso

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The Catalan Digital Republic. A Theoretical Review

Giulio Pitroso

Griffith University

Abstract

This theoretical review analyses digital nationalism in Catalonia. It describes the context of the confrontation between the pro-independence movement and the Spanish government. This confrontation is characterised by a paradigm dominated by negotiations, mobilisations, and repression, which eventually led to the 2017 independence referendum. The failure of the independence process led grassroots groups and major parties to develop original digital strategies. Whilst grassroots groups relied on digital tools to organise spectacular protests, the *Junts per Catalunya* (Together for Catalonia) party and the *Consell de la República* (Council of the Republic) organisation promoted the *República Digital* (Digital Republic) project. The study frames Catalan nationalism in relation to previous research on digital nationalism. It underlines how, in terms of actors involved and ideologies promoted, the Catalan secessionist project does not fit into models described by the academic literature about digital nationalism. Furthermore, this research analyses how the Digital Republic has been articulated by Catalan institutions and nationalist organisations in order to create a “virtual state”. Finally, the study discusses the Digital Republic as a strategy to avoid direct confrontation with the Spanish authorities and its attempt to create a “digital surrogate” to independence.

Keywords: *digital nationalism; Catalonia; separatism; digital activism*

Introduction

This study investigates digital nationalism in Catalonia and its specific features. It is focused on the Catalan Digital Republic, a concept promoted by activists and politicians and implemented by Catalan institutions. Since research about the Catalan Digital Republic (henceforth the Digital Republic) is scarce, this study aims to build a theoretical framework to investigate such a phenomenon. The present article analyses the Digital Republic in the context of Catalan digital nationalism. I describe the context that engendered the confrontation between Catalan nationalists and the Spanish government. Also, I consider the principal actors involved and relationships between the pro-independence parties. Therefore, the article explores two aspects of Catalan nationalism and online spaces.

First, I consider how certain features of Catalan digital nationalism challenge previous studies about nationalism in digital spaces. Indeed, digital nationalism has been studied widely as a right-wing phenomenon and in relation to authoritarian regimes. I argue that Catalan nationalism mainly relies on democratic values and that xenophobia is discouraged by major nationalist leaders. I also explain how institutional actors involved in digital nationalism collaborate with grassroots groups so as to oppose the central state. Overall, I describe how separatist groups promote symbolic actions that rely on digital tools. Potentially, these may cause repressive Spanish interventions.

Second, I explain why the Digital Republic is a part of a political strategy that strives to overcome the abovementioned action-repression paradigm. The Digital Republic is supposed to establish its sovereignty over online spaces in order to avoid direct confrontation with the Spanish authorities. This strategy is articulated at the institutional level by *Junts per Catalunya*, whilst the organisation *Consell de la República Catalana* promotes the Digital Republic among civil society and the municipalities. I explain how between 2018 and 2021, the Catalan *Generalitat* developed public policies aimed to create a “virtual state”, including a special ID system called *IdentiCAT*. I also describe how CdR included the Digital Republic as a vital part of its political agenda. Finally, I highlight how the strategy of the Digital Republic was not able to work around direct clashes with the Spanish government and that the project lost the support of Catalan institutions, becoming a symbolic instrument of the secessionist agenda.

Methodology

This study is a theoretical review about Catalan digital nationalism and the project of the Digital Republic. To frame digital nationalism in Catalonia, I had to rely on established theories about Catalan independentism and digital nationalism. The research has been informed by an analysis of non-academic books, YouTube videos, and online newspaper articles. Websites and online newspaper articles have been included in the present study when it was not possible to do otherwise. This research also considers documents, webpages, and YouTube videos from the following organisations: *Consell de la República Catalana* (Council of the Catalan Republic) (www.consellrepublica.cat), *Generalitat de Catalunya* (www.gencat.cat), *Govern of Catalunya* (www.govern.cat). These websites present the most important documents that could support research on the Digital Republic.

The *Generalitat de Catalunya* is the institutional system of Catalan self-government. It is made up of different kinds of organisations, including public bodies, public companies, and the *Govern de Catalunya* (Executive Council). I entered words thematically linked to the topic of this investigation in the search bar of the aforementioned websites so as to find relevant resources: e.g., “Digital Republic”, “Digital Catalonia”, etc. I also included the website of *Consell de la República Catalana*, henceforth CdR, because of its involvement in the campaigns for the Digital Republic. Furthermore, I watched YouTube videos about the Digital Republic, retrieved from the official channels of the institutions mentioned above and the CdR.

1. Catalan conflicts

This article does not intend to fully explain the Catalan question. This topic has been widely studied, especially in relation to the last twenty years of confrontations between Spanish and Catalan institutions (Clua i Fainé, 2014; Crameri, 2014; Dowling, 2018; Giral Quintana, 2019; Perales-García & Pont-Sorribes, 2018; Waugh, 2020). However, it is important to highlight how certain major events led to the conception of the Digital Republic and how the main actors involved in the Catalan conflicts situate themselves in the Spanish political arena.

According to Vázquez et al. (2015), political groups involved in the Catalan question can be classified in relation to their position towards Catalan independence and willingness to negotiate with their counterparts. In this sense, Spanish parties capitalise on either contrasting or negotiating with the multiform pro-independence movement. Catalan independence has indeed been supported by “an unstable alliance and a movement that has been repeatedly prone to internal division in terms of tactics, goals and strategies” (Dowling, 2018, p. 112). The

centre-left-wing *Partido Socialista Obrero Español*, known as the PSOE, is traditionally linked to federalism (Geniola, 2018) and has often played an intermediary role between Spanish authorities and local nationalist parties. The PSOE acknowledges the existence of cultural “nationalities”, such as the Catalan one, within the Spanish political nation (López, 2020). Major political regionalist parties in Catalonia, such as *Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya* (CDC), were mostly interested in negotiating political autonomy for the region (Dowling, 2018, pp. 11, 22). Catalan regionalist parties and Socialist ones forged political alliances at the local and state level even before Franco’s dictatorship (Dowling, 2018, pp. 73-77; Soler, 2011). Furthermore, major local nationalist parties in Catalonia and in the Basque Country supported minority governments of both the PSOE and the centre-right-wing PP (People’s Party, *Partido Popular*) in return for concessions of fiscal and legislative powers to their regions (Anderson, 2020, p. 345). However, especially in the last decade, the PP and the PSOE strove “to engineer the trajectory of the territorial model towards a more centralised and symmetrical model” of the state (Anderson, 2020, p. 347). Also, contrasts between Catalan nationalists and the central state were shaped by authoritarian turns in Spanish politics on several occasions (Guibernau, 2004, p. 34). Rajoy’s PP government openly opposed decentralisation and confronted Catalan nationalists through a “non-negotiation policy” (Ferreira, 2022, p. 577). The extreme right party Vox, “founded in December 2013 by former members of PP” (Rodríguez-Temiño & Almansa-Sánchez, 2021, p. 1065), considers local nationalists and left-wing groups as an anti-Spanish alliance and relies on themes of Francoist propaganda (Felipe, 2022, p. 117). Vox’s success in the general elections of 2019 was boosted by voters worried by the Catalan secessionist agenda (Arroyo Menéndez, 2020). Also, centre-right wing C’s (*Ciudadanos – Partido de la Ciudadanía*; Citizens – Party of the Citizenry) built its initial and temporary success on contrasting “long-term regional policies focused on nation-building” in Catalonia (Rodríguez Teruel & Barrio, 2016, p. 590). Other organisations hold a more nuanced position. The anti-establishment leftist party *Unidos Podemos* (Together We Can, or UP) appealed for the right of Catalans to decide on self-determination, whilst opposing independence (Vázquez et al., 2015, p. 35).

Overall, scholars identified a set of key events that paved the way for the Catalan declaration of independence in 2017. First, the end of Zapatero’s second Socialist government in 2011 engendered a new phase in the relations between local nationalist groups and the state. Zapatero promoted the new Catalan Autonomy Statute of Miravet (commonly known as the *Estatut de Miravet*), which was approved by the Spanish parliament, ratified by a local

referendum, and promulgated in 2006. The new Statute would have recognised “Catalonia as a nation within Spain” (Ferreira, 2022, p. 576). In 2010, the PP’s appeal to the Constitutional Court succeeded in redrawing important articles of the Statute so as to nullify the new status achieved by Catalonia. This can be considered the starting point of the *procés*, the process for Catalan self-determination (Ubasart-González, 2019, p. 123). Catalan politics changed dramatically, and autonomists lost about half of their support between 2007 and 2012 (Puhle, 2015, p. 23). Civil society organisations *Òmnium Cultural* and *Assemblea Nacional Catalana* (the Catalan National Assembly or ANC) played a crucial role in the *procés*, forcing major parties to “adopt their uncompromising positions on independence” (Lanz, 2021, p. 36). Whilst the latter was created in response to the rejection of the new Statute, *Òmnium Cultural* has fostered Catalan culture since the 1960s yet has only openly supported independence since 2012 (Lanz, 2021, pp. 30-31). In 2011, Rajoy’s centre-right government (2011-2018) was formed. Corruption among traditional parties was one of the pull factors contributing to the success of both Unidos Podemos (Gómez-Iniesta, 2016) and independentism in Spain. Indeed, the 15-M protests in 2011 and the 10-J mass demonstration in Barcelona in 2010 against the modification of the Statute are considered to share a common background (Ubasart-González, 2019). Disaffection with the two main Spanish parties (the PSOE and the PP) and the unsolved contradictions of the Transition to Democracy played an important role in mobilising citizens. Indeed, the new Spanish democracy did not completely cut its ties with Franco's dictatorship, and the reforms were guaranteed by a compromise between old and new political actors.

Failed negotiations for a fiscal pact with Madrid and massive protests led Catalonia to a more delicate phase (Ubasart-González, 2021, pp. 41-42), whilst the economic crisis catalysed the secessionist process. Also, the media assumed a crucial importance in the confrontation, especially in relation to spectacular events such as the human chain of *La Via Catalana* (Alzamora, 2018; Ferré, 2014; Peracaula Juanola, 2016). In 2012, the traditionally autonomist party *Convergència i Unió* (Convergence and Union or CiU) shifted to openly pro-sovereignty positions and called for a snap election. The new ruling coalition in Catalonia pledged a formal request for a legal referendum on independence in 2014, which was rejected by the Spanish parliament. Eventually, a non-binding popular “consultation” was held on 9 November 2014 and supported by Catalan government (Castelló et al., 2016). The victory of the secessionists was capitalised on by the ruling parties through a new snap election. In 2015, the ruling coalition in Catalonia was made up by CiU and *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* (the Republican Left of Catalonia or ERC), joining forces in the electoral list as *Junts pel Sí*

(Together for Yes or JxS) with the support of the far-left independentist party Candidatura d'Unitat Popular (CUP). The complicated path to independence culminated in the 1-O referendum in 2017. The Spanish government strove to prevent the vote by an exceptional use of force: “images of police brutality travelled around the world” (Ferreira, 2022, p. 578). Proposed and supported by the main pro-independence parties and major civil society organizations, the referendum paved the way for the independence declaration of the Catalan Republic in October 2017. This was suspended shortly after by the President of the *Generalitat*, Carles Puigdemont. Puigdemont called for international mediation from the EU and third countries, but Catalans remained mostly isolated. The secessionists did not receive the international support that new states need in order to survive (Krause, 2022). On 3 October, a massive strike paralysed Catalonia: it was supported by grassroots groups and unions, including anarchists in the *Confederación General del Trabajo* (General Confederation of Labour, CGT) and the *Confederación Nacional del Trabajo* (National Confederation of Labour, CNT) (Gutiérrez & Martí Font, 2023). Subsequent negotiations between Catalan secessionists and the Spanish government failed. The latter applied Article 155 of the Constitution: Catalan self-rule was frozen and prominent figures of the *procés* were legally prosecuted and imprisoned. Puigdemont, the former president, escaped to Belgium and reframed the political strategy of his faction which eventually led to the creation of the *Junts per Catalunya* (JxC or Junts) party. Thenceforth, the Spanish judiciary failed to have him extradited to Spain. In this phase, two terms were used to define the conditions of Catalan leaders: *presos polítics* (political prisoners) and *exiliats* (the exiled). The trial of nine politicians and two civil society leaders involved in the 1-O referendum was an important media event in Spain (Sotelo-González et al., 2020, p. 1631). In 2019, the defendants were found guilty, including ERC leader Oriol Junqueras. Universities, municipalities, and the Catalan Parliament made symbolic declarations of rejection of the sentence (Olivares, 2019, p. 117), whilst protesters blocked Barcelona airport (Bielsa, 2021). As I will explain later, these protests are to be considered a watershed in online mobilisation in Catalonia. *Tsunami Democràtic* (TD) emerged as a new horizontal youth group relying solely on digital channels to organise spectacular actions.

Only a few important sub-statal entities such as Scotland,ⁱ Corsica,ⁱⁱ and Flanders,ⁱⁱⁱ or institutional representatives expressed their sympathy for the Catalan nationalists. Politicians concerned with human rights and sub-statal institutions with regionalist or nationalist agenda helped the Catalan cause thenceforth. The President of the Regional Council of Occitania, Carole Delga, publicly expressed her concerns about political prisoners in Catalonia^{iv}, whilst

the President of the Corsican Assembly, Jean-Guy Talamoni, wrote a public letter to Puigdemont.^v Unrecognized states also expressed their support for or interest in supporting the Catalan cause, e.g., the Republic of Artsakh.^{vi} Although international leaders and parties criticized the way Madrid responded to the Catalan political crisis, the author of this article does not know of any official recognition by a member of the UN. Moreover, representatives of transnational institutions preferred not to openly condemn police violence in Catalonia, considering the Catalan question as an internal political affair (Riitakorpi, 2019, pp. 41-43). Nevertheless, the abuse of force was officially criticized by the Lithuanian parliament and by the National Assembly of Quebec (Riitakorpi, 2019, p. 43). In this regard, the ERC, Junts, and the CUP, together with civil society organisations such as the ANC and the Foreign Friends of Catalonia, lobbied for their cause abroad. They presented their movement as democratic and peaceful, based on the defence of fundamental rights, including free expression and “the democratic ‘right to decide’ their political future” (Bourne, 2021, p. 182). In this vein, Puigdemont and his entourage founded *Consell per la República* in 2018. As I will explain later, it represents “a quasi-government in exile” (Bourne, 2021, p. 183). *Consell per la República* changed its name in 2022 to become CdR. CdR claims to be the first Republican institution established by the declaration of independence: it is legally based in Belgium, where Puigdemont has established his headquarters. The visibility of Junts and Puigdemont in Europe has been strengthened by success in legal confrontations with Spanish prosecutors and by the election of three MEPs in 2019 (Lanz, 2021). However, CdR has not been able to fully attract the CUP and the ERC under its umbrella, and it can be considered as an instrument to compensate for Junts’s lack of political relevance. Indeed, the ERC won the 2021 Catalan elections, advocating for a moderate long-term strategy to gain independence. The ERC views CdR as an untrustworthy entity competing with Catalan legitimate institutions (Palomar i Baget, 2021).

The ERC and Junts developed divergent strategies to manage the aftermath of the 2017 referendum, although they governed Catalonia together between 2018 and October 2022, when Junts left the coalition. The ERC supported the new left-wing Spanish government in 2020 in exchange for structured negotiations between the Catalan government and the Spanish one. These took place in the so-called Board of Dialogue (*Mesa de diàleg*). In 2021, Pedro Sánchez, the PSOE leader and new president of Spain, guaranteed a pardon for politicians and activists convicted in 2018 in relation to the declaration of independence. Conversely, Junts focused on advocating for international support and claimed to be continuing the path to

independence. This strategy included provocative and symbolic confrontations with the Spanish authorities. In this regard, the President of the *Generalitat*, Quim Torra, was suspended by the Supreme Court in 2020. Torra refused to remove yellow ribbons from the Palace of the *Generalitat* during national and local elections in 2019. These ribbons symbolise Catalan political prisoners and the fight for their liberation. Yellow ribbons were considered by prosecutors as political propaganda which was not to be displayed on public buildings during the electoral campaign.

Overall, the Catalan pro-independence movement is a bottom-up phenomenon in which civil society plays a crucial role. However, parties and Catalan elites strove to absorb and contain popular actions that would have jeopardised their leadership (Crameri, 2015, pp. 108-109). This was heavily damaged by the failure to achieve independence in 2017 (Manfredi-Sánchez & Del-Fresno-García, 2020). In this vein, major parties strengthened their links with the civil society groups *Òmnium Cultural* and the ANC. They provided the ERC, Junts, and the list *Junts pel Sí* with candidates on many electoral occasions, and their leaders faced trial for the 1-O referendum, together with political representatives of the major parties. For instance, the ex-ANC leader Jordi Sánchez was elected as a national and Catalan regional MP for Junts, before being suspended in both cases because of his involvement in the 1-O referendum. Also, *Òmnium Cultural* and the ANC have been involved in polemical confrontations between Junts and the ERC:^{vii} The ANC mirrors Junts's strategy, whilst *Òmnium Cultural* is considered closer to the ERC. In this context, new grassroots groups emerged and took over the leading role in mobilisation: TD and *Comitès de Defensa de la República* (Committees for the Defence of the Republic or CDRs).

2. Framing digital nationalism in Catalonia

Digital nationalism represents an emergent subfield of nationalism studies (Ahmad, 2022). The term is used to describe the forms in which nationalism is expressed on digital media and the way the Internet shapes nationalist ideas. It can be considered as a new object of research intersecting with different areas: political theory, media studies, and sociology of the media. States, users, and companies are the main actors of digital nationalism. Indeed, this phenomenon has been studied in relation to authoritarian regimes and their control of the Internet (Epifanova & Dietrich, 2022; Schneider, 2018), especially in China (Plantin & de Seta, 2019; Wu, 2007). However, leaders of ruling parties in democratic countries rely on digital nationalism to support their political agenda (Green, 2021). Studies on Twitter (Lekakis, 2017)

as a political space and Facebook as a tool for diplomacy (Manor, 2019) must also be noted. Digital nationalism has been mainly associated with right-wing and populist movements (Castelló & Mihelj, 2018), whilst research about local and left-wing nationalist groups is scarce.

According to Mihelj and Jiménez-Martínez (2021, p. 333), digital nationalism and nations are qualitatively different from their analogue predecessors, whilst their main features are diversification, polarisation and commodification. Indeed, digital media provided nationalist Internet users with new spaces and means of expression. In this context, Internet users are considered as *prosumers* (Ritzer et al., 2012; Vergani, 2014): they are able to build their own narratives and to negotiate the meaning of content produced by mainstream media. In this sense, Internet forums have become a vital space for extremist ideologies, such as White nationalism (Thompson, 2001). Also, social media algorithms favour interactions between like-minded users and create filter bubbles (Pariser, 2011). These filter bubbles shape ‘algorithmic enclaves’: “groups of individuals, facilitated by their constant interactions with algorithms, attempt to create a (perceived) shared identity online” (Lim, 2017, p. 422). The diversification of participants in public communication has “gone hand in hand with a greater fragmentation and polarisation of national imagination” (Mihelj & Jiménez-Martínez, 2021, p. 333). In this sense, contemporary right-wing populist parties (Boulianne et al., 2020) rely on digital engagement (Gerbaudo, 2020; Lorenzetti, 2020). Perhaps the term “digital populism” may appear excessive and misleading, but the generative relationship between the web and populism is a common opinion among most scholars (Pajnik & Sauer, 2018).

Furthermore, online participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006) plays a crucial role in the way digital nationalism is commodified on the Internet (Van Dijck et al., 2018). Scholars argue that the web offers global and anonymous access to far-right merchandise and facilitates consumer boycotts inspired by nationalist ideas (Lekakis, 2017; Mihelj & Jiménez-Martínez, 2021, p. 441; Ng, 2022), such as in the case of the anti-Lotte movement in China (Liao & Xia, 2022). Also, institutional entities use nationalism in digital spaces for promotional and commercial aims. This is particularly evident when governments invest in producing a certain image of their countries in a process defined as nation branding (Bolin & Ståhlberg, 2010). This process is based on “profit-based marketing techniques of private enterprise to create and communicate a particular version of national identity” (Aronczyk, 2008, p. 42). Governments strive to associate their nation with a specific set of values and narratives to attract foreign investments and tourists, as well as for diplomatic purposes (Jordan, 2014, p. 284). In this regard, digital

media has changed the way of promoting and selling nationhood. On the one hand, governments continue to shape nation branding according to their political agenda on the web, such as in the case of the Spanish *Marca España* (Rius Ulldemolins & Zamorano, 2015, p. 30). On the other hand, nation branding relies “upon both monitoring and mobilizing the populace” (Volcic & Andrejevic, 2011, p. 600) in online spaces. However, governments are unable to control digital citizens (He, 2007; Schneider, 2018, pp. 172-181).

Overall, Catalan digital nationalism does not entirely fit into the categories used above. On the one hand, diversification, polarisation, and commodification shaped the *procés* in online spaces (Balcells & Padró-Solanet, 2016). On the other hand, the institutional actors and ideologies described by previous studies on digital nationalism do not resemble the Catalan ones. In fact, the *Generalitat* articulated a strategy to exercise sovereignty on the Internet, but this was often shared with civil society groups and companies. In this context, the Internet works as a “further” space for freedom of expression, in the same way that it is used by activists against authoritarian regimes (Yang, 2009). Also, sub-statal nationalisms do not have strong ideological ties with right-wing conservative and racist traditions (Paul, 2020). Not even the definition of digital nationalism as “a digitally updated version of banal, everyday nationalism” (Billig, 1995; Mihelj & Jiménez-Martínez, 2021, p. 332) could work in the Catalan case. In the past, banal nationalism in Catalonia has been investigated as a tool of regionalist parties competing with their Spanish equivalents (Cramer, 2000), whilst the Catalan *procés* has been mainly considered as a ‘hot’ nationalism phenomenon (Quiroga & Molina, 2020). In other words, the use of national symbols by Catalan nationalists could not be considered as an institutionalised practice that is reproduced day by day in often unnoticed ways. Conversely, detractors of Catalan separatists claim that nationalists exercised “symbolic violence” intensively (Olmeda, 2018) through a repertoire of symbols, such as the pro-independence flag and yellow ribbons.

The Catalan pro-independence movement included a vast array of different ideologies, but far-right elements did not contribute to the *procés* in an important way. The ideological context did not allow the so-called right-wing “digital populists” (Pajnik & Sauer, 2018) to be involved. Nevertheless, scholars claimed that the major separatist parties adopted a populist rhetoric (Barrio et al., 2018; Cirulli & Gargiulo, 2014), which exacerbated contrasts with the Spanish government and overcame traditional right-left differences. However, the *procés* should be better considered as a form of democratic populism created by civil society (Gamper Sachse, 2018), inspired by the *Indignados* movement (Ruiz Casado, 2020), which promotes

mobilisation and direct democracy. However, academics have highlighted analogies between the Italian Northern League (Bull & Gilbert, 2001) – nowadays considered to be a far-right populist party – and Catalan centre-right parties such as the CiU (Giordano & Roller, 2001; Newth, 2014). Indeed, they promoted xenophobic stereotypes, especially against other regional groups in their countries, mostly southern Italians and Castilians (Newth, 2014, pp. 7-9). Catalan nationalist xenophobia is politically marginal and strongly banned from institutional spaces (Vergés-Gifra & Serra, 2021), whilst the Northern League has relied on the historical discrimination against southern Italians and islanders (Pitroso, 2022) at every level of its political activity (Newth, 2019). Therefore, the Catalan centre-right nationalism and the Northern League have expressed divergent opinions about identity and immigrants (Hepburn, 2009). As in the case of the so-called Scottish civic nationalism (Gunn & Schmidtke, 2015) and the Quebecois one (Franco Guillén, 2017), Catalan separatist leaders promote open identity and inclusion (Kraus, 2021, p. 10). Foreigners have been invited to be part of the *procés* and this is testified by several examples. Immigrants had the right to vote in the 9-N referendum of 2014: EU citizens must have been registered as residents for at least one year, whilst immigrants of third countries must have been registered for at least three years (González, 2016, pp. 188-189). Article 7 of the *Llei de transitorietat jurídica*^{viii} was prepared for the 2017 declaration of independence: it would have given Catalan citizenship to immigrants with five years of documented legal residence in Catalonia. The leaders of the major regionalist and nationalist parties, including Carod-Rovira, Pujol, and Puigdemont, considered all the people who lived in Catalonia and wanted to be part of its community as Catalan (Vergés-Gifra & Serra, 2021).

Catalan institutional involvement in digital nationalism is linked to the use of the Internet for administrative purposes (Albors, 2007) and to the promotion of Catalan culture online. Both elements are consistent with Catalan national communication policies, which aim to create and maintain “Catalan communication spaces” in the media (Fernández Viso & Guimerà, 2012; Guimerà & Fernández Viso, 2014). In other words, Catalan institutions strove to create Catalan-speaking online spaces so as to guarantee the preferential use of the Catalan language and to favour local cultural industries (Gifreu, 1986). However, various examples testify how local institutions also relied on cultural promotion to campaign in favour of independence, at least at the symbolic level. This systemically ignited confrontations between the state and regional authorities. Furthermore, the examples underline how civil society played a crucial role in the institutional digital agenda.

Since the first steps of Catalan digital nationalism, the Catalan institutions have needed the support of civil society. The *Generalitat* and the Catalan Parliament unsuccessfully requested the allocation of the .ct dominion from the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) in 1996 (Atkinson, 2006; Gerrand, 2006a). In 2006, a campaign led by the Fundació.cat obtained the approval of the .CAT (also written as .cat) domain. This was presented as principally tied to cultural and linguistic aims, and as an instrument of inclusion to provide Catalan-speaking territories with common web spaces (McDowell et al., 2008, pp. 8-13), although the Spanish government pressured “Washington to attempt to persuade the U.S. Departments of State and Commerce to block the .cat application” (Gerrand, 2006b). The Spanish government’s worries about this issue underlined the symbolic significance of the Catalan campaign. In 2012, the *Generalitat* promoted DiploCat, a public-private consortium for Internet-based diplomacy, which aimed to improve international awareness of Catalonia in the world. Nevertheless, it was also used to highlight differences between Catalonia and Spain, and to advocate for Catalan independence (Martínez-Sáez et al., 2022). DiploCat was shut down by the Spanish government shortly after the application of Article 155 of the Constitution (Alexander & Royo i Marine, 2020). It was restored by Torra’s government. Before and after the 2017 referendum, the Spanish authorities blocked digital content supporting it. The majority of big companies, such as Google, collaborated with Spanish law enforcement after receiving court orders. Small companies, such as Fibracat, circumvented the shutdown (Sampedro et al., 2022). Fundació.cat provided citizens with a large number of the websites targeted by Spanish authorities (Sampedro et al., 2022, p. 134). The *Guardia Civil* police closed down the Centre for Telecommunications and Information Technology (CTTI) and the Information Security Centre of Catalonia (CESICAT), which were responsible for counting votes. Therefore, the *Generalitat*’s website hosted the universal electoral roll and a digital authentication service, but this was also shut down (Sampedro et al., 2022, p. 135). Subsequently, different organisations such as *Pirates de Catalunya* (Pirates of Catalonia) mirrored blocked websites, including the referendum website, and facilitated voting despite state intervention.

Indeed, digital nationalism in Catalonia involved the multiform alliance of pro-independence movements, grassroots groups, and cyber-activists worried by state repression (Della Porta et al., 2021). However, the digital dimension of the protest became more relevant after the 2017 declaration of independence, when CDRs and TD emerged. Both organisations have a structure based on small groups, relying on social media (especially Telegram and

Twitter) to make spectacular actions of civil disobedience and also to promote left-wing independentism (Della Porta et al., 2019). CDRs were previously called *Comitès de Defensa del Referendum* (Committees for the Defence of the Referendum), and their primary goal was to defend ballot boxes during the 1-O referendum. CDRs are structured as a set of local assemblies; their members are affiliated to different parties and they “increasingly became the target of police repression” (Della Porta et al., 2019, p. 9). In February 2020, CDRs criticised negotiations between the *Govern* and the central state, and also criticised TD for not taking a bold position against judiciary repression^{ix} towards separatist activists. TD is organised online; its membership is secret and it is supposedly leaderless and horizontally structured. Members are younger than those of major civil society groups (Hunt, 2020). Apart from using social media, TD communicates with citizens through an application that provides “timely information on the nearest mobilizations” (Pascal, 2022, p. 7). TD is considered the main organiser of the occupation of Barcelona’s El Prat airport in 2019, “after the sentencing of the Catalan political leaders involved in the failed unilateral declaration of independence” (Bielsa, 2021, p. 396). One can hypothesise that “Tsunami is Òmnium’s clandestine youth wing” (Bielsa, 2021, p. 96), but this is an assumption that does not consider how members of youth secessionist groups may have contributed to this organisation. TD was supposedly created by separatists and exiled politicians abroad (Lanz, 2021, p. 42), and main political figures of Catalan separatism openly supported its launch, including Junqueras and Puigdemont (Pascal, 2022).

In this context, Junts promoted a digital nationalist agenda which replicates all the patterns mentioned above, except for a few novel elements. On the one hand, civil society is strongly linked to the party. On the other hand, Junts’s strategy avoids direct confrontation with the central state. The Digital Republic is presented as an innovative “virtual state”, which relies on “ICT as tools for creating or maintaining state structures amid institutional conflicts” (Sampedro et al., 2022, p. 137).

3. The Catalan Digital Republic

Sources on the Digital Republic are both institutional and non-institutional. The first are tied to the work of Jordi Puigneró as Minister of Digital Policies and Public Administration between 2018 and 2021, and as Minister of Digital Policies and Territory between 2021 and 2022. After President Aragonès sacked Puigneró, Digital Policies became part of the Ministry of Business and Work.^x Puigneró is also the author of the book *El cinquè poder. La República Digital a les*

teves mans (*The Fifth Power. The Digital Republic in Your Hands*) (Puigneró, 2020). In the book, the ‘fifth power’ is presented as society empowered by digital technologies. Although it is not clear which other powers are considered, it can be assumed that they are the three traditional ones – legislative, executive, and judicial – as well as the press. Puigneró theorizes a non-conflictual way to create an independent state online, based on blockchain and e-tools (Puigneró, 2020, pp. 107-130). Nevertheless, the book is not always clear about this strategy, probably due to the potential reactions that bold statements could have provoked among the Spanish authorities. Puigneró claims to have promoted the digital way to self-determination in Junts, and that this has been enthusiastically adopted by Puigdemont (Puigneró, 2020, p. 26). In this regard, Estonian e-democracy (Ernsdorff & Berbec, 2006) is mentioned as the model to imitate. *The Fifth Power* (Puigneró, 2020) is indeed introduced by an essay by the ex-president of Estonia, Toomas Ilves. Estonia developed a complex system of “reconstruction and commodification of the national space through digital technologies” (Tammpuu & Masso, 2018, p. 544), which has been considered as an attempt at building a “virtual state”. In this vein, Estonian e-residency program challenges traditional conceptions of nationhood, citizenship, and territorial sovereignty: it provides residents of other countries with an electronic smartcard that allows them to access Estonian services online. The program focuses on “attracting many foreigners as ‘virtual residents’ or ‘e-Estonians’” (Tammpuu & Masso, 2018, p. 549), especially for business purposes. This aligns with Estonian efforts to create Virtual Data Embassies with the aim of securing the functioning of public services through cloud and remote servers based in other countries (Tammpuu & Masso, 2018, p. 548). Indeed, the Estonian “virtual state” could survive cyber-attacks and territorial invasion, allowing digital citizens to express their rights online, including by voting. In this vein, Catalan nationalists may find the Estonian model useful so as to create their own “virtual state” and to disconnect citizens from Spanish public services.

According to Puigneró, the Digital Republic takes up the mandate of the 1-O referendum.^{xi} In this sense, the project delves into the digital version of elements traditionally associated with sovereign states: the emitting of documents, coinage, and public security. The latter has not been openly associated with the Digital Republic, although it is part of the priorities identified by Puigneró to build a digital nation. Indeed, the Cybersecurity Agency of Catalonia was launched in 2020. The Catalan ID card “IdentiCAT” is presented as an innovative tool that allows citizens to own and manage their personal data.^{xii} IdentiCAT relies on Distributed Ledger Technology to use blockchains to create a personal digital identity. In

this context, the *Generalitat* just works as a guarantor of the tool and does not manage the data. For this reason, IdentiCAT is presented as a form of Self Sovereign Identity (Preukschat & Reed, 2021). However, the use of such technologies was blocked by the Spanish government. Although Royal Decree-Law 14/2019 did not explicitly target the Catalan digital agenda, public opinion perceived it as aiming to “prevent the so-called Catalan Digital Republic” (Boix Palop, 2020, p. 18). The aforementioned law prohibits Spanish public administrations “from using distributed ledger technology (blockchain)” and “cloud-based digital storage services in servers based outside of the EU” (Boix Palop, 2020, p. 19). Also, cryptocurrency could not legally be used by the Digital Republic. Although *The Fifth Power* makes several references (Puigneró, 2020, pp. 37, 119, 129) to cryptocurrency, projects involving this matter were scarcely documented on institutional webpages. A cryptocurrency - that “will soon be created”^{xiii} – was mentioned in relation to the energy market. In this regard, Maria Àngels Chacón, the Minister of Enterprise and Knowledge, promoted the “IoCat” project^{xiv} according to which excess energy produced by citizens would have been paid in cryptocurrency. Also envisioned by Puigneró, the Catalan Blockchain Centre (CBCat) launched the Catalan metaverse “CatVers”^{xv} in 2020. CatVers is presented as a digital space for commercial transactions and social contacts. Also, the “municipality and the regional government are coordinating a data sovereignty strategy with reference to AI” (Calzada, 2023, p. 180) in response to exacerbated inequalities engendered by digital transformations. In this regard, the creation of the Catalan language voice assistant database AINA^{xvi} must be noted. Furthermore, the Digital Republic project also involves physical infrastructure. Puigneró considered investment by local institutions in optical fibre networks as an effective way to build the Republic^{xvii}. He associated the digital empowerment of citizens with the process of building a 21st century nation in the form of a digital republic.^{xviii} In the same way, 5G mobile technology, particularly the 5GMed Corridor, played a vital role in Puigneró’s agenda.^{xix} With regard to digital infrastructures, the Royal Decree-Law 14/2019 outlawed the fully autonomous management of servers by Catalan institutions. Without any support from other EU nations, the development of Catalan Virtual Data Embassies modelled on the Estonian ones is unfeasible.

The Digital Republic is also promoted by CdR. As mentioned above, CdR was created as a Catalan institution in exile, involving major politicians from Junts, including Puigdemont, and relevant actors of the *procés*, such as the ERC. However, CdR has followed a complex path, and it is not commonly recognized as the main institution of the self-declared Catalan

Republic. Conversely, CdR was a matter of discord between Junts and the ERC, as explained above. Although the CUP formally collaborated with CdR,^{xx} it refused to fully legitimise it. Nevertheless, CdR presents itself as a “spare government”. According to its promoters, CdR would become the only legitimate institution for the Catalan people in case of the anti-democratic suspension of local government.^{xxi} CdR is committed to preparing Catalan activists against future repressive actions made by the Spanish authorities, and to organise civil disobedience including tax objection. In this vein, CdR can be considered as an “a-legal institution”, in which “organizers imitate the language, processes and symbols of an institution or institutional process of constituted power” (Hughes, 2019, p. 473). Although CdR’s legal basis is disputed, it presents itself as an authentic institution so as to challenge the commonly legitimised counterpart (Hughes, 2019, p. 475). In this vein, the Digital Republic plays a crucial role for CdR. It offers an ideological framework to two innovative tools of the organisation, the Republican ID system and online voting.^{xxii} The use of such instruments underlines how Catalonia would be a modern, efficient, and inclusive state, whilst implying how regressive Spain is.

The Republican ID aims to disconnect citizens from Spanish public services. It provides citizens with a QR-code that facilitates identification. On the one hand, the ID allows members of CdR to participate in the organisation’s democratic processes. On the other hand, the ID can be used to interact with companies, other organisations, and local institutions that have decided to recognise it.^{xxiii} However, the ID can only be used for administrative procedures that do not require previous identification,^{xxiv} whilst only four municipalities have established agreements with CdR so far.^{xxv} In this sense, the ID has mostly a symbolic value. CdR promotes an open model of citizenship. The online “citizen register” is open to people from all over the world^{xxvi} who can apply to be members of CxR. Biannually, registered citizens elect the Assembly of between 100 and 140 representatives which is entitled to choose its president. The latter decides the members of the government. CdR is open to anyone who can understand Catalan, who can access the Internet, and who is keen to pay at least 5 euro per month.^{xxvii} Although people living abroad represent a slight minority in the Assembly, this process aligns with the Catalan approach towards open identity discussed above and the reliance on online voting.

Overall, the Digital Republic project attempts to create a ‘virtual state’, which can be considered as a ‘surrogate of independence’. Institutional efforts to build the Digital Republic have partially succeeded in developing this ambitious and innovative project, which aims to create *de facto* independence from the Spanish authorities. The Digital Republic may have

provided the Catalan crisis with a technological solution. However, reciprocal distrust between Catalan nationalists and the Spanish government has prevented any further development of the Digital Republic as a political and institutional project. Furthermore, differences between the Catalan parties have also hindered the administrative use of such a project. Conversely, CdR promotes the Digital Republic mainly at the symbolic level. The Internet indeed plays a crucial role in online voting and gatherings. It compensates for the limited mobility of politicians and activists who evaded Spanish law enforcement. Also, the ID promoted by CdR resembles IdentiCAT, but in a far less ambitious fashion. In the context of CdR, Digital Republic is an ideal model to be built through political activities that are supposed to prepare the process of building the “virtual state”.

Discussion

This study provides an opportunity to frame digital nationalism in Catalonia and the Catalan Digital Republic. Overall, this study points out that the Digital Republic is mainly a tool used by a specific faction among the separatist parties. This faction articulates its digital agenda both in institutional and in non-institutional settings. Whilst digital nationalism in Catalonia presents specific features that cannot fit completely into models described in the academic literature, the Digital Republic presents a novel element in this context. Indeed, the Digital Republic is an attempt at building a “virtual state” in order to pave the way for the *de facto* independence of Catalans from Spain. On the one hand, this theoretical model aligns with typical characteristics of Catalan pro-independence movements and Catalan digital nationalism. Institutional regional actors and grassroots groups cooperate to achieve common goals, whilst civil disobedience actions are organised offline and online and are inspired by civic nationalism. On the other hand, the Digital Republic promotes an innovative strategy that could provide regional authorities and civil society with elements commonly associated with a state. Indeed, the Digital Republic relies on technological tools to produce documents, currency, and public online security. Also, the Digital Republic is centred on a collaborative and inclusive partnership between institutions, businesses, and citizens.

Overall, the Digital Republic has failed to achieve its objectives and has failed to avoid replicating the typical paradigms of Catalan nationalism described above. Whilst in the past pro-independence movements have been stopped by law enforcement, the Digital Republic would have offered an instrument for avoiding direct confrontation with Madrid. In fact, it was the Spanish authorities who stopped the Digital Republic, whilst conflicts between the ERC

and Junts resulted in the end of Junts's institutional digital agenda. Besides, CdR strove to develop the project of the Digital Republic outside of institutional contexts. This eventually led to the reduction of the Digital Republic to a symbolic tool, which does not directly affect the Catalan administration. The project also failed to involve the vast array of organisations supporting Catalan independence. Indeed, the central role played by Junts and its leader Puigdemont in both institutional and non-institutional contexts prevented the Digital Republic from becoming a common experiment managed by all the actors involved in the *procés*.

Notes

- ⁱ External Affairs Secretary comments, *Statement on Catalonia*, 27 October 2017. <https://www.gov.scot/news/statement-on-catalonia-1/>
- ⁱⁱ Press statement of the President of the Corse Assembly. https://www.isula.corsica/assemblea/CP-Naissance-de-la-Republique-de-Catalogne_a113.html
- ⁱⁱⁱ *Catalonia crisis: Flemish separatists make common cause*, BBC website, 27 November 2017. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-42023498>
- ^{iv} Berriot S., *Les prisonniers politiques en Catalogne, ce n'est pas tolérable, déclare Carole Delga*, France Bleu Roussillon, 20 April 2018. <https://www.francebleu.fr/infos/politique/les-prisonniers-politiques-en-catalogne-ce-n-est-pas-tolerable-declare-carole-delga-1524217042>
- ^v “Letter for Freedom” to Carles Puigdemont of the president of the Corse Assembly. https://www.isula.corsica/assemblea/Lettre-pour-la-Liberte-a-Carles-Puigdemont_a179.html
- ^{vi} Comment by the Information and Public Relations Department of the Artsakh Foreign Ministry on the Declaration of Independence of Catalonia. <http://www.nkr.am/en/news/2017-10-28/972/>
- ^{vii} ANC. *L'Assemblea no participarà en l'estratègia plantejada pel president Pere Aragonès*. 15 February 2022. <https://assemblea.cat/lassemblea-no-participara-en-lestrategia-plantejada-pel-president-pere-aragones/>
- ^{viii} Generalitat de Catalunya. “LLEI 20/2017, del 8 de setembre, de transitorietat jurídica i fundacional de la República” 08/09/2017. <https://dogc.gencat.cat/ca/document-del-dogc/?documentId=796643>
- ^{ix} CDRenXarxa. “Comunicat 13/02/2020”. <https://www.vilaweb.cat/noticies/comunicat-dels-cdr-no-creiem-en-les-solucions-pactades/>
- ^x Official Gazette of the *Generalitat*. “DECRET 290/2022, de 2 de novembre, de reestructuració del Departament d'Empresa i Treball”, 02/11/2021. <https://dogc.gencat.cat/ca/document-del-dogc/?documentId=941603>
- ^{xi} Govern. “Jordi Puigneró: ‘Catalunya serà digital, i en forma de República, o no serà’”, 13/03/2019. <https://govern.cat/gov/notes-premsa/338222/jordi-puignero-catalunya-sera-digital-forma-republica-no-sera>
- ^{xii} Govern. “President Torra: ‘Amb IdentCAT apoderem el ciutadà, perquè el poder de la ciutadania és al centre del projecte republicà’”, 07/09/2019. <https://govern.cat/gov/notes-premsa/377133/president-torra-amb-identcat-apoderem-ciutadania-al-centre-del-projecte-republica>
- ^{xiii} Govern. “El Govern aprova la primera estratègia de blockchain i es prepara per començar el seu desplegament dins l'Administració”, 18/06/2019. <https://govern.cat/salaprensa/notes-premsa/363897/govern-aprova-primer-estrategia-blockchain-prepara-comencar-desplegament-ladministracio>
- ^{xiv} Govern. “Chacón: ‘Hem de portar la transformació digital a tots els àmbits empresarials, i facilitar que la universitat proveeixi i transfereixi aquest coneixement’”, 12/07/2018. <https://govern.cat/salaprensa/notes-premsa/307123/chacon-hem-portar-transformacio-digital-tots-ambits-empresarials-facilitar-que-universitat-proveeixi-transfereixi-aquest-coneixement>
- ^{xv} Govern. “Presentació del CatVers, el metavers català”, 10/01/2022. <https://govern.cat/salaprensa/convocatories/173116/presentacio-del-catvers-metavers-catala>
- ^{xvi} Generalitat. “AINA”. <https://smartcatalonia.gencat.cat/en/projectes/tecnologies/detalls/article/AINA>
- ^{xvii} Govern. “El Govern desplega la fibra òptica entre el Berguedà i la Cerdanya per arribar a Puigcerdà el 2020”, 29/10/2018. <https://govern.cat/gov/notes-premsa/308770/govern-desplega-fibra-optica-bergueda-cerdanya-arribar-puigcerda-2020>
- ^{xviii} Govern. “President Torra: ‘El Govern i les diputacions desplegarem 4.000 quilòmetres més de fibra òptica en els pròxims tres anys’”, 14/11/2018. <https://govern.cat/gov/notes-premsa/310143/govern-convida-ciutadania-practicar-habits-cibersaludables-primer-campanya-capacitacio-digital>
- ^{xix} Govern. “Jordi Puigneró: ‘El Corredor 5G és una gran oportunitat de futur per al sector de l'automòbil del nostre país’”, 16/06/2020. <https://govern.cat/salaprensa/notes-premsa/385862/jordi-puignero-el-corredor-5g-es-una-gran-oportunitat-de-futur-per-al-sector-de-l-automobil-del-nostre-pais>
- ^{xx} CxR. “Acord del Consell amb la CUP i Junts perquè els membres de la Xarxa Diplomàtica facin d'apoderats a l'exterior”, 18/07/2023. <https://consellrepublica.cat/noticies/acord-del-consell-amb-la-cup-i-junts-perque-els-membres-de-la-xarxa-diplomatica-facin-dapoderats-a-lexterior>

^{xxi} CxR. “El Consell explicat en 10 punts clau”, YouTube channel of *Consell per la República Catalana*, 04/04/2022.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nwYpjEFxrs4&t=3s&ab_channel=ConselldeRep%C3%BAblica

^{xxii} CxR. “Com votar, pas a pas, a l'Assemblea de Representants del Consell”, YouTube channel of *Consell per la República Catalana*, 21/10/2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OskgQVgKD-U&ab_channel=ConselldeRep%C3%BAblica

^{xxiii} CxR. “IDENTITAT DIGITAL REPUBLICANA DEL CONSELL PER LA REPÚBLICA”, YouTube channel of *Consell per la República Catalana*, 07/04/2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JA5UdjcgG3M&ab_channel=ConselldeRep%C3%BAblica

^{xxiv} CxR. “Conveni de col·laboració per l’impuls de bones pràctiques en contractació pública i de la ID Republicana com a mètode d’identificació de la ciutadania”. <https://www.consuminstitucional.cat/>

^{xxv} CxR. Map of municipalities using the Republican ID. <https://www.consuminstitucional.cat/>, consulted on 01/08/2023.

^{xxvi} CxR. “El Consell explicat en 10 punts clau”, YouTube channel of *Consell per la República Catalana*, 04/04/2022. <https://youtu.be/nwYpjEFxrs4>

^{xxvii} CxR. Registration process of *Consell per la República Catalana*. <https://dades.consellrepublica.cat/register>

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