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Catalans Campaigning for Independence March in Barcelona

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More than half a million Catalans marched on Friday ahead of a parliamentary election on Sept. 27 that Catalonia's main separatist parties are presenting as a de facto vote on independence. David Ramos/Getty Images

BARCELONA, Spain — More than half a million pro-independence Catalans on Friday took over one of Barcelona's main avenues, as their separatist leaders began their latest attempt to break loose from [Spain](#).

The march was held on Catalonia's national day, but it was also the start of campaigning for a [regional parliamentary election](#) on Sept. 27 that Catalonia's main separatist parties are presenting as a de facto vote on independence after agreeing to run as a joint list of

candidates.

Speaking here on Friday ahead of the march, Artur Mas, the Catalan leader, said the election was a make-or-break chance for Catalonia to become a new European state. He called on the Madrid government to grant Catalonia the right to secede if separatist parties secure a parliamentary majority.

“We cannot lose this opportunity,” Mr. Mas said during a joint news conference with the other main separatist leaders. “When you take a risk, you can win or you can lose, but if we accept the defeat, we also ask that others accept the victory.”

The Spanish government of Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy, however, insists that a parliamentary election cannot be equated with an independence referendum that [Spain’s judiciary declared invalid](#) last year. Mr. Rajoy’s Popular Party recently introduced an overhaul of the Constitutional Court that would give the court greater powers to suspend from office Mr. Mas and other Catalan officials found to be infringing the Constitution.

Under the Spanish system of proportional representation, separatists could win the most seats without having an absolute majority of votes.

Friday’s kickoff of the election campaign puts the difficult issue of Catalan independence back at the top of the national political agenda, two months before a national election.

For the past four years, Catalans have turned their national day into a separatist show of force, converging on Barcelona from smaller towns across the whole region. [The standoff](#) between Mr. Rajoy and Mr. Mas started in 2012 as a dispute over the tax contribution that wealthy Catalonia should make to poorer regions of Spain. Mr. Mas then turned his frustrated demand for fiscal concessions into a

full-fledged drive for independence.

“I wasn’t asking for independence five years ago, but I’ve come to the conclusion that our situation with Spain can’t improve any other way,” said Esther Puig, the owner of a small cosmetics company, who traveled about 20 miles to Barcelona to join the march.

The protesters formed a giant arrow, to symbolize the direction that Catalonia is taking toward nationhood. “I want to defend my rights, and that includes the right to decide to become a state,” said Jacqueline Tomàs.

If Catalan separatists win a parliamentary majority, they then plan to form a transitional government and set up the tax agency, central bank and other structures required for Catalonia to operate as a new European state within 18 months.

“We’re not asking for the moon. We’re simply asking for what others have,” Mr. Mas said.

Still, even with an election win, a secessionist government would then also have to convince Brussels and other European nations that Catalonia can join the European Union — even without Madrid’s approval. During a recent visit to Madrid, David Cameron, the British prime minister, suggested that Catalonia would have to reapply for European Union membership, joining the end of a list of existing candidates.

Despite such stumbling blocks, Mr. Mas suggested that the European Union would seek to accommodate Catalonia, a region of 7.5 million people that represents 16 percent of Spain’s population and has attracted investments from over 5,000 multinationals, most of them European. “We know Europe will do its best to let us be where we want to be, in the European Union and the eurozone,”

Mr. Mas said.