Redistribution and Regional Independence Movements

by Laia Balcells

The fall of 2014 has arrived with several important events related to secession and regional autonomy in Western Europe. The people of Scotland voted in September to stay in the United Kingdom in an unprecedented independence referendum in the European Union. The regional government of Catalonia is intending to hold a similar vote early in November, although both the Spanish government and the Constitutional Court have denied the possibility of a referendum on independence (Chapell 2014) and thus it is unclear how events will unfold in this region.

The political geography of redistribution, to paraphrase Beramendi (2012), is highly intertwined with demands for independence by ethnic or national groups (Bolton and Roland 1997). At first glance, this might seem less the case of Scotland, a net recipient of redistribution in the United Kingdom, but it is clearly the case of Flanders and Catalonia, which are net contributors in their respective countries. In Catalonia, support for independence has rocketed since 2010, after a Constitutional Court ruling against Catalonia's new regional Constitution (i.e. Statute of Autonomy), which implied further devolution. In Catalonia, grievances related to political horizontal inequality (Cedermann et al. 2011) and unstable federal agreements have met unhappiness for what is perceived as excessive regional redistribution towards other regions. Redistribution motives are nonetheless often hard to distinguish from identity-related factors (Klor and Shayo 2010). In Spain, for example, both the Basque Country and Catalonia, those regions with the most salient