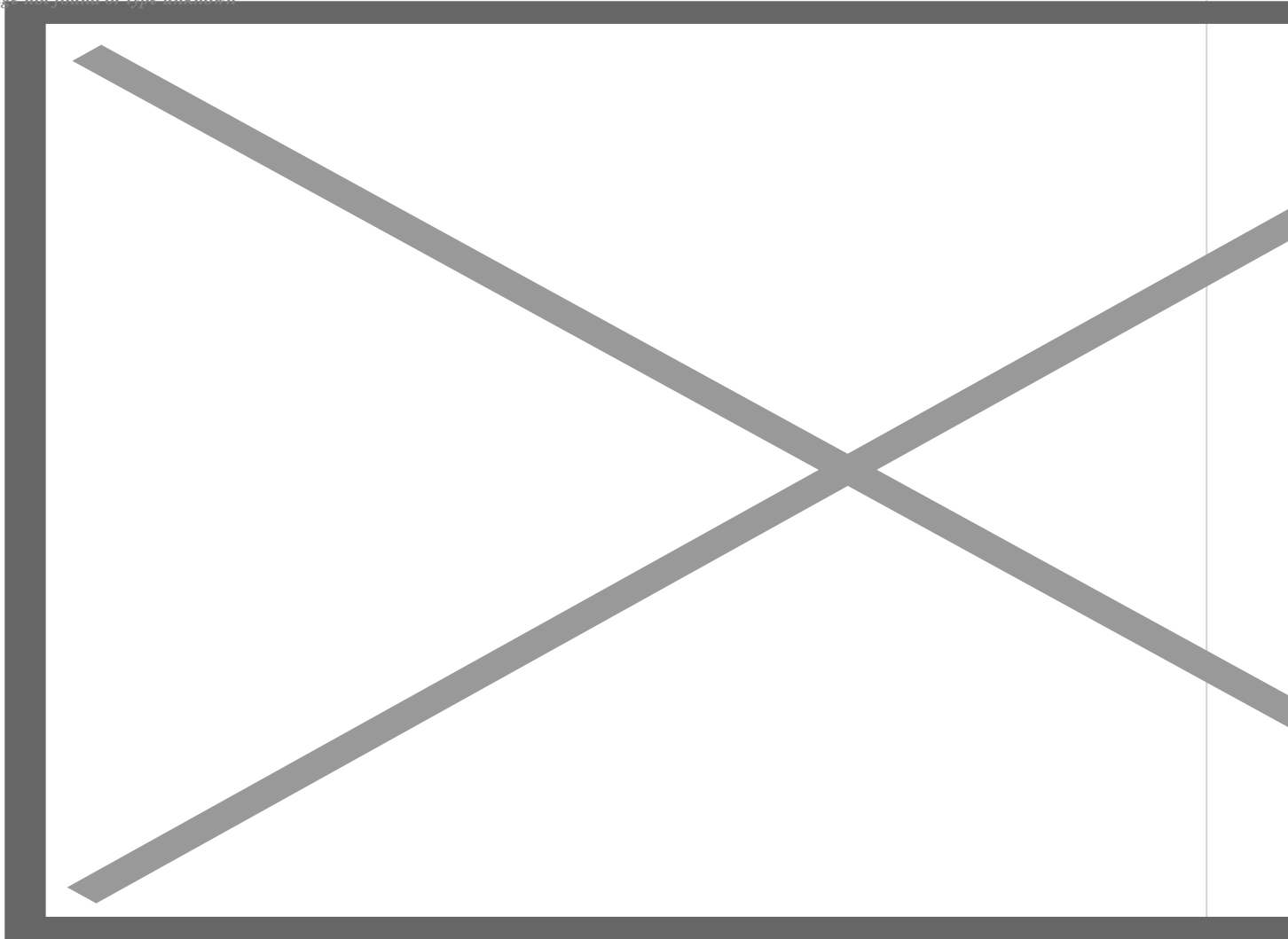


Spain's Catalonia holds key election amid fears over COVID

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Barcelona, February 14 (RHC)-- Polls opened in Catalonia early Sunday morning for an election overshadowed by the coronavirus pandemic and which Madrid hopes will unseat the region's governing separatists more than three years after a failed bid to break away from Spain.

Whether the election is won by the separatist parties now in power in the region or another party such as the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party who lead Spain's central government, it is unlikely to lead to any repeat of the chaotic, short-lived declaration of independence in late 2017. But it will still be an important signal of the separatists' appeal and could affect the political trajectory of the pro-independence movement for years to come.

Opinion polls suggest a low turnout, with voters worried about the risk of a COVID-19 spread at polling stations. In the last election, held months after the failed independence bid, an anti-independence centrist party placed first, but the two main rival separatist parties, the centre-right Junts per Catalunya (Together for Catalonia) and left-wing Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (Republican Left of Catalonia), elbowed it out to form a government.

Tensions have ebbed substantially since then, and the campaign has largely focused on how to tackle the pandemic.

"It is time to reconcile, build bridges, dialogue and seek agreements within Catalonia," Socialist candidate Salvador Illa, Spain's health minister until two weeks ago, told the Reuters news agency. He has ruled out governing with the support of far-right Vox, which could win seats in Catalonia for the first time.

If separatists manage to retain control, a new independence declaration appears very unlikely, as the movement is divided between moderate and confrontational approaches and its top leaders are jailed or fled Spain after the 2017 events.

"We have always maintained that it's better to agree on a referendum with Spain," Pere Aragones, Esquerra's candidate and acting Catalan head of government, told Reuters. He said achieving a combined 50 percent vote share would let separatists push for a referendum from a position of strength, but ruled out any unilateral independence move in the short run.

Polling stations opened at 9 am local time (08:00 GMT) and will close at 8 pm local time (19:00 GMT), with results expected at about midnight.

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