



## **President Mas: "The intervention of Catalonia by the central government is inconceivable and unfair, as no one has done so much to redress the financial situation"**

- This afternoon, the Dutch daily NRC Handelsblad publishes an interview with the head of government
- Artur Mas states that Catalonia's current battle is "to collect our own taxes, to have our own Treasury and to be able to modify the laws in our own Parliament"
- The President stresses that "the present policies give the impression that central government does not have the answers that Europe is asking for"

The President of the Generalitat, Artur Mas, has declared in an interview with the Dutch daily NRC Handelsblad today that **"the intervention of Catalonia to me seems inconceivable, it would provoke a strong reaction of the population"**. In the article entitled "Catalonia goes to battle with Madrid", the president stresses that **"this would be unfair, as none of the autonomous communities has done so much to redress the financial situation"**.

Merijn de Waal, the Dutch newspapers' correspondent, explains that when president Mas took office at the end of 2010 "he discovered that the deficit was substantially higher than his socialist predecessor had claimed". "His government decided to implement co-payment for medication, to increase university fees, introduce a tourist tax and cut public sector wages", he adds.

During the interview, President Mas points out that many autonomous communities do not mind the fact that Spain has **"decentralized spending, but not revenues. Many regions are more comfortable having this administered by Madrid. However, we prefer to collect our own taxes, have our own Treasury and the capacity to modify legislation in our own Parliament"**.



De Waal points out that “the struggle of this rich region has been going on for centuries and is full of historical and political sore points”. The journalist explains that “Spain concluded last year with a deficit of 8.5%; the regions accounted for almost 3%”, and that the Spanish central government intends to intervene those autonomous communities that have a deficit exceeding 1.5%: “Mas’ party, CiU, an alliance between liberal and Christian democratic Catalan nationalists, has reacted forcefully against these threats”, he adds.

Asked about the measures taken by Mariano Rajoy’s government to improve fiscal balance, Artur Mas explains that **“I understand that central government is worried, but in that case it should be taking measures it has failed to take so far”**. In this respect, the Catalan president points out that the European Union recommends **“reforming unemployment benefits, lowering public sector wages, introducing real co-payment in healthcare or increasing VAT”**. **“The current policies give the impression that the central government does not have the answers that Europe is demanding from Spain”**, he states. He further adds that **“socially, it might be desirable to increase pensions”**, but he doubts whether **“financially speaking this can be considered a wise decision”**.

During the interview, Artur Mas suggests that Catalonia may be considered **“the Netherlands of southern Europe”** as it, just like the Dutch, **“has always been forced to fight for its preservation: the Dutch always struggled against water, the Catalans against our powerful neighbours”**. The president argued that a stronger Europe would be **“a federal Europe, with strong central power over certain matters, like the United States”**, but where **“the regions would also acquire additional power”**. Within this kind of EU, **“Catalonia would want to be like The Netherlands or Denmark, enjoying the same rights”**, President Mas explains.

**“As the 28<sup>th</sup> Member State of the EU, Catalonia would be one of the richest Member States. It would no longer have to transfer funds to Andalusia or Extremadura, yet it would have to make transfers to, for example, Bulgaria or Slovenia”**, De Waal suggests. **“Indeed. And we would pay these transfers”**, states Mas. **“Maybe we would not pay as much as Holland, because we are not that rich. But we would pay the required amounts.”** Mas adds, laughing: **“By now we have become quite used to being obliged to pay”**. More seriously: **“We are not a selfish bunch who want to have it all for themselves. We do not seek to fully end the flow of transfers to other regions in Spain, but we do want to make these transfers after having collected our own taxes. In this way, everything will be more transparent”**, he states. He also underscores the need to establish **“a maximum period during which transfers will be paid”**, so that they **“will not last forever”**.



With regard to the autonomy of the Spanish regions, the president of the Generalitat considers that **“if PP and PSOE are of the opinion that decentralization has gone too far, they can reverse it”**. If that happened, he warns however that **“the historical reality of the existing nations in Spain, in particular, Catalonia and Basque Country, should be respected”**. **“Not even the Franco dictatorship was able to erase them. Nor will the present crisis”**, he stresses.

The Dutch daily NRC Handelsblad, published in Rotterdam, is a quality newspaper from The Netherlands, which is also distributed in a part of Belgium. It was started in 1970 after a merger of two longstanding newspapers. The approx. 210,000 copies are distributed in the late afternoon. Since 2006 the same media company published nrc.next, a morning edition of NRC Handelsblad (circulation 80,000).

The Catalan president wanted to make himself heard in The Netherlands, the second net contributor in the European Union, where a lively debate is currently ongoing regarding the continuity and size of its transfers to the EU. As a matter of fact, on January 9<sup>th</sup>, president Mas met with the Dutch prime minister, Mark Rutte, with whom he shared the analysis of the situation in Spain and the views of the Catalan government.

In an additional comment, the Dutch correspondent explains that “after decades of decentralization, due to the insistence of headstrong Catalans and Basques, the seventeen autonomous regions of Spain are now responsible for healthcare, education and social services. It is they who spend most of public money, while the central administration collects taxes. As a result of this, it is complicated for Spain to carry out the fiscal adjustments required by Brussels and the financial markets”.

The interview by the Dutch evening paper NRC Handelsblad is part of a series of interviews conceded by the president of the Generalitat over the past months to various international media aimed at a better understanding of developments in Catalonia. These media are, among others, the Wall Street Journal, the Financial Times, the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Le Monde, La Stampa, The Economist, BBC Television and Bloomberg TV.