



Mapping a Path Towards Catalan Independence

For more than five years, Catalonia has been undergoing a political process to leave Spain and become an independent State. While this process has certain factors in common with the aspirations of other nations such as Scotland, Flanders and Quebec, it has three distinguishing features that make it unique and also, if I may say so, exemplary. It is a movement that is not against anyone, based on the exercise of democracy, whose objective is to provide our country with more tools to progress and offer our citizens greater wellbeing. We are a country that feels profoundly European and wishes to continue being European in the future; not just a member of the European Union but an active player in its construction.

Why do you want to be a small State when you are a part of a much larger one? Why do you want to stop being a part of a State as important as Spain? Why do you want to embark on such a hazardous venture? Will you leave unilaterally? Is this proposal serious? These are some of the questions we are asked and no doubt ones that you have also considered. Hence our determination to explain to you first-hand exactly what we are defending, why we are doing it and how we want to do it. In this respect, I would like to thank The Royal Institute of International Affairs most sincerely for giving us the opportunity to do so.

While it is true that there have always been people who have longed for an independent Catalonia, the movement for sovereignty has really blossomed in terms of its depth, breadth, cross-cutting nature and strength in the last six years. For over 30 years, the majority of the Catalan parties and most of Catalan society upheld the autonomy route – in other words, achieving greater levels of self-government within the Spanish State. Finding a fit that would provide respect for what we are – a nation – with a common path to follow as part of the State. All of this was supported by two factors. Firstly, an intensive exercise in educating, in explaining ourselves, in trying to make people understand what Catalonia means. We believed that if we could make ourselves understood, everything would be easier. And secondly, and as a very important aspect, a very strong commitment was made to contribute towards the stability and good governance of the State. All the major challenges that the Spanish State has had to meet throughout all these years of democracy have enjoyed the support of the party to which I belong. *All* of them.

So what has changed in these last few years to make Catalonia decide to embark on its own path? We need to go back to 2010, when the Constitutional Court of Spain, made up of clearly politicised members of the two main Spanish parties, some of whose mandate had expired, issued a ruling against the 2006 Statute of Autonomy of Catalonia, leaving it completely devalued. Five years earlier, the Catalan Parliament had approved the reform of the Statute of Autonomy, the basic law that controls our self-government. This new Statute was intended to be a renewed bilateral pact between Catalonia and Spain in order to give us more self-government and greater financial capacity. Not without sacrifices, that Statute was subsequently approved by the Spanish Parliament and then ratified by the people of Catalonia in a referendum. Despite this, four years later, as a result of appeals lodged by the



Partido Popular (Popular Party) and the Spanish Ombudsman, – and with the approval of the Socialist Party, which was then in power – the Constitutional Court literally demolished the main elements designed to improve the new Statute of Autonomy. Previously, as it was going through Parliament, the Popular Party, in a very unseemly manner, decided to collect petitions from around the whole of Spain to oppose this improvement in self-government.

How is it possible that something that had been approved by two Parliaments and, above all, by the citizens of Catalonia in a referendum, could be overturned four years later by a discredited and politicised tribunal? The response from Catalonia to such a harsh verdict was a mass demonstration in the city of Barcelona involving one million people taking to the streets under the banner 'We are a nation. We will decide'. That ruling, which a few people within the Spanish Government are quietly admitting was a big mistake, was the definitive sign that a radical change was needed. That the path we had followed up to that point, the attempt to find a fit for Catalonia within Spain, could never be a reality. That Spain had no political will to change. It raised a dilemma: to stop being Catalan, or to go for independence. And a comfortable majority of our citizens decided to embark upon this new path. At that time, there was an emotional disconnect of many Catalans towards the Spanish State. As a result of all this, on September 11th – Catalonia's National Day – in 2012, 2013, 2014 and 2015 around one-and-a-half million people took to the streets each time to demand Catalan independence, in a country of some 7.5 million inhabitants.

I also believe it appropriate to point out that the independence movement has taken on its shape and bulk in the last few years not from a stance of extremism or radicalism but from a central position. The independence project in Catalonia is the most powerful democratic revolution currently taking place in Europe, and to illustrate this, colloquially, I should add that it is also a peaceful revolution, carried out in suit, shirt and tie, with participation from the general public and institutions, the working classes, middle classes and business leaders of the nation. This situation is what most worries Madrid, because it is fully aware that this movement is unstoppable.

It is also worth mentioning that in 2012, Catalonia made a last-ditch attempt to reach an agreement with the Spanish State. Our Parliament approved a draft Tax Deal, a kind of economic pact in the style of the one enjoyed by two other Spanish regions, the Basque Country and Navarre, which allows them to collect and manage all their own taxes. The proposal that came out of Catalonia, with wide-ranging parliamentary and social consensus, was intended to put an end to the fiscal deficit that Catalonia has endured over the last 30 years: every year, on average, a figure equivalent to 8% of the Catalan GDP made up of taxes paid by Catalans, is kept by the State without any compensation.

The Spanish government's response to the proposed Tax Deal was a resounding NO. Not just a NO to the proposal itself, but a NO to even discussing the matter. In view of this new setback and yet another frustrated attempt, in November 2012 early elections were called in Catalonia. The central issue of these elections was the right to decide; in other words, the commitment of the different political powers to convene a consultation or referendum on the political future of Catalonia. And the result was that 107 of the 135 Members of Parliament included this specific commitment in their manifestos. I should point out that, at a sustained



level over time right up to the present day, between 75% and 80% of Catalans support the calling of a referendum, even the voters of parties that are officially opposed to it, irrespective of what they would vote should it be convened.

Thus at the end of 2012, the new Catalan Government was given the mandate to introduce a referendum. On this point, once again, the response from the Spanish government was a refusal to enter into dialogue and a resounding NO. From the Catalan perspective it was clear that with political will, a referendum was, and is, perfectly possible and feasible. There is no need to change the Constitution. There is no legal problem. It is simply a problem of political will.

Faced with the refusal of the Spanish government to do anything, in September 2014, in accordance with the competences enjoyed by Catalonia in respect of non-referendum public consultations, the President of the Catalan Government convened a consultation on the 9th of November that year with the question: Do you believe that Catalonia should be a State? And, if so, do you believe that this State should be independent? Some 95% of the country's town and city councils approved a motion upholding the citizens' right to vote, which demonstrates the cross-cutting nature and strength of this claim. The whole country got completely involved. Once again, however, the Spanish State made clear its absolute lack of willingness to negotiate or even tolerate that the people of Catalonia could be consulted, and called upon the Constitutional Court to suspend the consultation. Immediately, at an unprecedented speed, the Court suspended it. In view of this new hurdle, the President of the Catalan Government announced the organisation of a participative process, also on the 9th of November, asking the same question as the consultation and enlisting the help of volunteers, as a way of getting round the suspension.

This participative process was a huge success. Despite the impossibility of using the official census and its purely symbolic nature, 2,305,290 Catalans cast their vote out of the 5.4 million who were entitled to do so. A few days later, the Office of Public Prosecutions, going against the position taken by Catalonia's own prosecutors, presented a lawsuit against the President of the Catalan Government, Artur Mas, the vice-president of the Government and the Minister of Education, accusing them of the crimes of disobedience, perversion of justice, misappropriation of public funds and the usurping of judicial powers. Two months ago, the Prosecutor sought to extend the lawsuit against the current Secretary General of the Presidency. Can there be any justification for pursuing someone through legal channels who simply wishes to promote democracy? Is it a crime to provide ballot boxes for people to vote? Is it democratic to use the Public Prosecutor and the State apparatus against those who have defended the right of citizens to make their voices heard?

To conclude what has been happening in Catalonia over the last few years, I need to tell you about the elections of the 27th of September last year. On the 9th of November 2014, the Catalans were able to vote and express their opinion, but in order to move forward towards independence, a democratic mandate was required. Given the frontal opposition of the Spanish Government to the referendum option, there was only one alternative open to us, which fortunately only depended on ourselves: to convene early elections and turn them into the plebiscite on independence that we had not been allowed to carry out.



On 27 September, the people of Catalonia expressed their views through the ballot boxes, voting massively with a turnout of 74.9%, the highest ever in the history of elections for the Parliament of Catalonia, sending a clear message as to their preferred way forward. The independence parties achieved an absolute majority of members of parliament. In all, 72 members in favour of independence out of a total of 135. The parties against independence amounted to 52 members. Finally, 11 members belonged to a party whose position is neither in favour of nor against independence per se but *is* in favour of a referendum. In percentage terms, the supporters of independence won 47.74% of the vote and those against it, 39.17%.

A majority of Catalans adopted a position in favour of independence, of embarking on their own way forward, to uphold who we are but, above all, as I mentioned earlier, to progress and to enjoy greater wellbeing. It is true that the result of the vote is quite tight and does not give us the margin we would have liked, but independence is the option that won the elections. We believe we enjoy majority support to instigate a process towards independence, but to get there we need to achieve an even larger majority. This is a task that needs to be addressed over the coming period. This is something that makes us even more motivated, and we are confident we will achieve it.

We stood in the elections with the promise of completing the step towards independence within approximately 18 months. During this time, our commitment is to prepare and have the state structures available that do not currently exist and which are necessary for us to operate as an independent state. Once this process has been completed, it will once again be the turn of our citizens, who will need to decide at the ballot box whether they want to choose a new constituent parliament and move towards a definitive proclamation of independence. We will not take this definitive step without democratic validation.

To finish, I would like to explain how we are undertaking this process and how we hope it will culminate. In short, to explain what this 'Via Catalana' consists of.

First of all, it is a process based at all times of the exercise of democracy. It is a people's movement that has been the main driving force behind this road to independence. At all times it will be the people of Catalonia who express themselves and who decide. In this respect, it is worth asking: who is frightened of democracy? Who is afraid of citizens expressing themselves and deciding for themselves? Is someone who opposes this exercise of basic democracy truly a democrat? I should note here that the legal framework is, of course, fundamental for coexistence and for the exercise of democracy itself. Having said that, the legal framework must be at the service of democracy, and not the other way round.

Secondly, this is a process that has taken place peacefully and with full respect for coexistence and harmony. In Catalonia there are clashes of ideas and political projects, but these are always accompanied by a level of respect and harmony that is exemplary. The cohesion of the country remains intact and, indeed, is one of the most prized assets of our society.



Thirdly, we have always championed dialogue and we will continue to champion it during every stage of the process. We have never renounced it and we will never get up from the negotiating table. We intend to implement this transitional phase through dialogue with the Spanish State, with the European Union and with the international community. We believe that dialogue is the best solution for everyone. I should point out here that there are only two peaceful ways of achieving independence: the unilateral route and the negotiated route. We have opted from the outset for dialogue, negotiation and consensus. This is the most beneficial for everyone, whereas the unilateral option entails negative and inconvenient aspects for all concerned. For this reason, over the last few weeks I have met with the Acting President of the Spanish Government, Mariano Rajoy, and with the leaders of the main Spanish political parties: Pedro Sánchez, Pablo Iglesias and Albert Rivera.

As I explained earlier, the Government I preside over, to which I was elected four months ago, along with its Parliament, have started preparing the State structures and designing all the aspects necessary to be able to declare independence in approximately 18 months. This does not mean that if the Spanish State were to offer us a referendum, we in Catalonia wouldn't accept it. It's not that we are afraid of voting and or accepting the outcome. We are not pushing for it because it makes no sense to go on repeating indefinitely something we have tried to do actively and passively without success, but in any event we are certain that this offer will never be extended. In short, dialogue, however much is necessary. Inaction while waiting for the impossible to happen, no.

I should emphasise that we are not asking the Spanish State to come out in favour of independence; we fully understand that this will never happen. We have no fear of opposing ideas. What we are demanding is that the State allow the Catalan people to vote and that afterwards it respect the outcome and do everything necessary to implement it. At present, what we are seeing is that not only is the Spanish State frightened of the outcome, it is even frightened of asking the question. Having said that, it is logical to think that if the State wanted Catalonia to continue to form part of Spain, then it would make an attractive proposition and do its very best to win us over. This is what we witnessed the British government doing. In the case of Spain, its inability to manage this political conflict and its modus operandi simply motivates us and gives us even more incentive to seek independence.

In the case of Scotland, the response to the political conflict that opened up came from London, from the United Kingdom itself. Regrettably, I very much fear that in the Catalan case we will not be seeing this kind of response. The reaction will not come from Madrid but will need to come from Europe, due to the Spanish State's failure to act. The only response we receive from the Spanish State is a constant legislative invasion of our legal framework by the Constitutional Court, which acts on the orders of the Spanish Government, violating the most elemental separation of powers, which is consubstantial for all democracies. A Court presided over by a former member of the PP, consisting mainly of magistrates with affinities with that party and a minority associated with the PSOE. Catalonia is legally defenceless.



Fourthly, we want to be a new State, and we want to do so within the framework of the European Union. We cannot imagine any other scenario than this in the future. Catalans are and will continue to be Europeans. The European Union is our political family, the place where we feel comfortable and with whom we share common references, values and principles. And looking towards the future, we want to participate first-hand in this project of European construction, from a Mediterranean viewpoint that brings added character. I

Everything that has been built in the last half-century in Europe is a success story with a highly positive outcome, even while we should not forget that there are still shortcomings and things that need to be improved. It is our task to move forward in the right direction to strengthen the project of European integration and create an environment for peaceful coexistence.

Going back to my previous explanation, I would like to make two brief points on the referendum that you will be holding on 23 June on whether to stay in the European Union or not, with all the due care and respect required from the observations of an outsider. First of all, once again it has been demonstrated that Europe is flexible enough to adapt to the political needs of the moment. It always values pragmatism and opportunity above orthodoxy and treaties. I say this because there are people in Spain who insist that an independent Catalonia would be left outside the EU. In the event of a brand new and unprecedented situation, we are confident that a solution that is satisfactory for everyone concerned can be found. Secondly, in the face of those who want to leave the European Union, we would like to solemnly state that we want to stay. It's surprising to be encouraging a Member State to stay that is currently debating on whether it should leave – something I in no way criticise – while wanting to exclude a region that is firmly committed to staying. If the European Union has made reforms to stop the United Kingdom from leaving the EU, then surely it can manage to adapt to allow Catalonia to continue to form part of the EU as an independent state.

Fifthly, we aspire to very close and friendly relations with the Spanish State. The family, affective, social, historic, cultural and economic bonds between Catalonia and Spain are obvious right now and will continue to be in the future when we are independent.

The desire for freedom, to protect our people, to change for the better, to build, to hope, to have ambition, are some of the elements driving Catalonia's political project to become a state. It is a legitimate aspiration, shared with many other countries that have become independent in the last few decades. None of them, incidentally, has wanted to go back to what they were. And now we, too, want our own opportunity and furthermore we want to do it our way, the Catalan way, in an exemplary manner, democratically, with a sense of public spirit and respect, approaching it not as a problem but as an opportunity.

For many years, Catalonia thought that by helping Spain to modernise, to democratise itself and to regenerate, to be, in effect, Spain's spearhead, would be good for the country and help it prosper. This is an era that has now come to an end, and we want to start a new one. And we are convinced that this political process that our country has embarked upon will position Catalonia as an example of a modern democratic process at the heart of the European Union. Thank you all very much for coming today and for your kind attention.