

Embargo until delivery / Check against delivery

## **Speech by the Vice President and Minister of Economy and Treasury, Oriol Junqueras**

*Brussels, 24 January 2017*

Thanks Mr. Romeva, Foreign Affairs Minister. As Vice President and Minister of Economy, now I would like to focus the next minutes on the economic situation of Catalonia:

Europe ventures into 2017 in the context of moderate growth. In spite of the monetary policy measures, triggered by the European Central Bank, euro area economies are making slow progress. There are some exceptions, and Catalonia is one of them. According to the latest macroeconomic forecasts by the Catalan Government, released last November, GDP growth in 2016 stands at 3.4%, the same as in 2015. Looking ahead to 2017, the outlook is for a 2.7% increase -below that of 2016, but still remarkable. However, these positive developments in the Catalan economy are set against the backdrop of international economic uncertainty. Concerns about a sharp downturn in the Chinese economy, lower prospects for growth in the United States and doubts about Europe's course and its resilience to overcome new challenges – Brexit, migration policy, you name it...- show that some risks remain and that we can not take economic recovery for granted.

Let me make a quick overview of Catalonia's economic performance:

First of all let me talk about our exports, which have been one of the drivers of Catalonia's solid growth in the last two years. In particular, high-tech exports are at the forefront of the increase in foreign sales since 2014. Actually, our export per capita figure is the 9th higher in the EU, more than in Sweden, France or Italy.

Regarding our industry: Catalonia has a long-standing industrial tradition dating back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, evolving over centuries and bringing about a solid and varied industry, with a huge capacity for adaptation to fluctuations in the economy. Thus, despite strong setbacks during the recent crisis, the Catalan industry is currently growing above the European average. However, competitiveness of our industry is being limited, for instance, by the high cost of electricity in Spain or by unjustifiable and shameful delays in the Mediterranean railway corridor.

One of our biggest concerns, unemployment continues to decline further quarter after quarter, and the employment rate in Catalonia is on the way to reach levels similar to those of the euro area. As an actor in this complex and changing scenario, Catalonia aims to consolidate an increasingly competitive and innovative economic model based on higher productivity.

A quick word about university: all the international rankings place the Catalan University and Research system among the leading ones in Europe. The main challenge faced by the Government in this field is to keep the quality of the system and to strengthen knowledge transfer mechanisms from the academic to the business world –and especially to Small and medium-sized enterprises, the backbone of our business network.

And last but not least let me talk about tourism: for us an strategic sector. While the number of foreign visitors increased by 3.9% already in 2015, it rose dramatically in the first quarter of 2016, to over 8.3%. Catalonia is the main destination for tourism in Spain with over 17 M people.

Let me focus now on our specific performance as a government:

Regarding the debt we made a huge effort in the past few years in order to slow down the debt growth rate, which went to pre-crisis levels in 2016. Controlling and reducing public debt is certainly one of the biggest challenges of our administration and a huge responsibility towards future generations. To achieve this, we need to keep the current high and sustainable economic growth.

And, we have to bear in mind that this remarkable performance is achieved under an enormous fiscal deficit with the Spanish central administration: which stands above 7% of the Catalan GDP.

We are also working on one of the main inefficiencies of the Spanish tax system: its fiscal benefits. In Spain, all main taxes include important tax exemptions that for the most part do not foster equity. On the contrary, they erode tax collection and greatly hinder tax administration. This is one of the reasons why we are developing the Catalan Tax Collection Agency to a levels of competence as never before, with the goal of being able to collect all taxes in Catalonia within months.

But we don't have only positive news and figures to be proud of. We are also worried...

In spite of our performance, we are worried about the Spanish reserve pensions fund. That reserve fund has been repeatedly used by the Spanish government to pay current expenses. And if this continues like that we will probably see the resource depletion of that fund.

We are also worried, and probably our greatest concern is the level of the Spanish debt, which amounts to 100% of the GDP. And this is not a trivial matter, because the Spanish deficit is still growing over the growth of the Spanish GDP. On the contrary, our economy, the Catalan economy, is growing faster than our deficit, closing last year deficit at -1% of our GDP, a figure that speaks of our deep commitment to budgetary stability.

### **Oriol Junqueras i Vies**

Vice President and Minister of Economy and Treasury of the Government of Catalonia