

Speech by the President of the Government of Catalonia, Carles Puigdemont

Brussels, 24 January 2017

Just as Minister Romeva and Vice-President Junqueras have done, I would like to thank you for being here with us today after a full day of work.

M'agradaria començar la meva intervenció en català –la llengua pròpia de Catalunya, i oficial juntament amb el castellà- felicitant al nou president del Parlament europeu, el senyor Antonio Tajani, escollit la setmana passada. Li desitgem sort i molts encerts per a aquesta nova tasca tan rellevant que li ha estat encomanada. També esperem que doni compliment al compromís que va adquirir per carta amb la majoria d'eurodiputats del nostre país per tal que el català pugui ser llengua oficial del Parlament europeu.

Last September, in a solemn session of the Parliament of Catalonia, I explicitly stated the clear political commitment the Government and the political majority supporting it already had at the time: to hold a binding referendum in Catalonia in 2017 in order to decide whether it wants to become an independent state. Today we are in Brussels, the capital of Europe, and at the headquarters of the institution entrusted with the democratic representation of all EU citizens, therefore also of those in Catalonia, to reaffirm our commitment to call for the aforesaid referendum, as it is the best possible democratic tool to know the will of our people.

You are probably wondering why we have got this far, and why the majority of Catalans do not wish to remain part of Spain anymore. The answer is clear. One reason is because Catalonia is a nation with a strong and clear-cut identity, culture and language; it is a nation that has had its own institutions for centuries □ I am actually the 130th President of an institution that dates back to 1359. It is a nation that has always aspired to be officially recognised. However, this is not enough to fully explain what has happened at the political level in Catalonia over recent years.

The other reason goes back to June 2010 when the Constitutional Court of Spain repealed the Statute of Autonomy of Catalonia, which had been approved by Catalans via a referendum four years earlier, and which had previously been agreed upon with Spanish institutions, not without sacrifices and renunciations. Such an achievement was intended as a minimal bilateral political agreement between Catalonia and Spain establishing the scope of Catalonia's self-government □ a scope that was also agreed upon with Spain and subjected to a referendum. However, most of the key aspects of said agreement were annulled by a Court which should theoretically serve as a neutral arbitrator in constitutional litigations in Spain, but which in reality is just a biased and politicised entity. A Constitutional Court that is currently chaired by a former activist of the People's Party who has increasingly leaned towards the ideas of the People's Party and has blatantly chosen sides.

That ruling from the Constitutional Court in 2010 was of paramount significance. It was a turning point, the end of an era and the moment in which the need to open a new path became clear to the majority of Catalans. Catalonia could absolutely not be part of Spain, and we therefore only had two options: give up on our identity and dilute our nation with Spain as a mere region deprived of individuality and political power, or start a new path as a new State within the framework of the European Union in order to ensure the progress and welfare of all Catalan citizens. That ruling undoubtedly led

many Catalans to no longer see the rationale underlying the union with Spain, and many others have gradually come to the same conclusion over time.

It is worth highlighting that historically, over the last one-hundred years, and particularly since Spain got free of Franco's regime, Catalan Nationalist Parties have always shown great responsibility in dealing with key issues for the Spanish State as well as for the whole of Europe. We had always been on the side of the Spanish Government even when the main Spanish opposition party was not upon the accession of Spain to the European Economic Community, during the integration into the single currency area, when the political stability of Spain was shaken, by the fight against terrorism, as well as during the recent financial crisis, when tough decisions had to be taken to prevent Spain from being rescued... It is evident that our actions were driven by a sense of responsibility and statehood, a stronger one than that of the political party that was at the opposition at the time. What is really painful is that, after almost forty years, all of this support has been matched by such a bitter and disappointing attitude from the State towards Catalonia.

In July 2010, after that tough ruling from the Constitutional Court, and from 2012 on, every 11th of September, on the National Day of Catalonia, over a million and a half people have taken to the streets to demand dignity, decision-making power and eventually to be allowed to decide on their future at the polls. We are talking about very important figures, about one and a half million people in a country of 7.5 million inhabitants.

This has not just taken place once but five times. Such demonstrations have never occurred elsewhere in Europe, not to mention the fact that they have recurred year after year.

This entire mobilisation would not be sufficient or consistent enough if it had not been endorsed at the polls. This is the democratic mandate that we are now delivering. On the 27th of September 2015, elections to the Parliament of Catalonia recorded the highest participation rate in history (almost 75%), and those in favour of independence won 72 out of the 135 seats (48% of votes), which is three seats above the absolute majority, while those opposing independence only got 52 seats (39% of votes). Finally, 11 seats were granted to a party that was neither in favour nor against independence, but that favours calling for a referendum. It is worth noting that in 2010 the Parliament only had 14 members that would have presented a programme for independence.

From 14 to 72 in just five years. I believe that such a substantial growth in this short period of time would require Spain to ask itself what has happened, what it did wrong, for the composition of the Parliament □which reflects what citizens think and want□ to change so significantly in such a short time. This seems like quite a natural question for Spain to pose itself. Europe should equally ask itself, or ask Spain, this same question. The results of the 2015 election show that in Catalonia there is a majority of citizens who want to build a new State that is able to meet their needs, requirements and ambitions for the future, and the Government and the Parliament have been unequivocally assigned the task to make this happen. Henceforth, the work required for Catalonia to become a State has been started and is currently being undertaken. This includes preparing the structures and legislation necessary for a State to act as an independent country which is part of the European Union and the international community since the very first day of its existence. Our purpose is for this transition to take place in an orderly manner, with legal certainty and with the maximum guarantees.

Ours is a quiet revolution which aims at conveying confidence, and whose steps are always firm, reliable and safe.

At the EU level, this entails an internal enlargement process without discontinuities, in particular with regard to the Economic and Monetary Union and the functioning of the Internal Market as well as the freedoms that come with them.

It is clear that in order to be complete this process will require a democratic validation from the citizens. In Catalonia there is a broad consensus that the best way to obtain this validation is through a binding referendum. The demographic data, which is published on a regular basis, invariably show that about 80% of Catalans are in favour of calling a referendum, regardless of what their vote would be. Moreover, it should be noted that 83 out of the 135 Members of Parliament elected in 2015 favour calling the referendum; they represent 61.5% of the chamber, against the 38.5% who oppose it.

The request to hold a referendum in order to determine whether or not Catalonia chooses to become a state is nothing new. It has been a constant request by our country over the recent years. We have repeatedly called for it, and we solemnly submitted a request to the Spanish Parliament in April 2014. They did not even deign to study the application made by a group representing the Parliament of Catalonia. They swept it away within hours without contemplating processing it.

We have defended and will continue to defend that the referendum is legally viable. Thus, the problem lies in the lack of political will. At that time, a team of experts had already proposed five possible legal paths leading to a consultation to be agreed upon with Spain.

We are convinced that a referendum is the most clear, powerful and internationally accepted mechanism to measure the will of a population regarding a decision which is not trivial, but historical. We believe that the best way to know which project would be the most widely supported (Catalonia remaining within Spain, or the creation of a Catalan state) is voting. We are facing a peaceful political conflict between Catalonia and Spain. In this context, it is best that the citizens of Catalonia state their position so that we are able to predict where the majority and the minority stand. This is the democratic way to address differences. This mechanism, of course, is nothing new. It is simply what Scotland peacefully did two and a half years ago and will probably repeat in the future, and the same applies to Quebec.

In this scenario, it should be highlighted that the sole reason of being afraid of voting is being afraid of getting to know the result and not being able to accept it. In this regard, it is significant that those who are in favour of independence are asking everyone to vote and to express their position, while the Spanish State does not defend the no position, but rather argues that there should be no voting and that this should not even be discussed. The conflict is patently clear.

I would like to make it clear that what we want is a referendum to be agreed upon with the Spanish Government, since this is the most acceptable option for everyone. On our side, this proposal for dialogue and search for consensus will be open until the last day. We are willing to discuss everything: the question, the date, the eligibility requirements, and the necessary percentage of the winning option... We are sat at the negotiating table and we will not leave it even if the Spanish Government stands its ground and refuses to negotiate. Our proposal for dialogue is always valid. However, we also want to make clear that we will not give in, should the Spanish government obstinately keep its current position and refuse any negotiations. As I promised to the Parliament last September, in September 2017 at the latest, Catalonia will hold a binding independence referendum. Should this be agreed upon, we will welcome it as that is what we would like. Should this not be the case, we will hold it anyway. Intransigence cannot prevail. This year, the citizens of Catalonia will have the opportunity to finally

decide their future. I am convinced that it is precisely the citizens that will allow the referendum to be valid, as in all referenda throughout the world. It is the citizens that through their participation authorise it. If the citizens take ownership of the referendum, both the referendum itself and its result will be valid.

I would like to insist on the fact that, up to now, the Spanish Government has categorically refused any negotiations regarding the referendum. This means a total refusal, on every side. They refuse to listen. This fact shall be taken seriously. It is irresponsible. But it is even more serious that the only decisions that have been taken thus far are about judicial proceedings on the process, judicializing politics, using part of the judiciary and of the Constitutional Court, in a clear attack on the separation of powers and getting farther away every day from the democratic quality standards of the European Union. A full-fledged persecution of those who do not think like them, to teach them and each of us a lesson. Within two weeks, the former president of the Government of Catalonia, Artur Mas, and two councillors of his Government, Joana Ortega and Irene Rigau, will be judged for having allowed a non-binding consultation on whether or not Catalonia should become an independent state, which was held on 9 November 2014. They face sentences ranging from 9 to 10 years of disqualification from employment in the civil service, which stem from a complaint made by the State Attorney General. Another councillor within Artur Mas's Government, Francesc Homs, will also be judged soon for the same reason; he is equally facing a tough disqualification to hold any office. They are facing this for having allowed ballot boxes to be put up and for having made it possible for more than 2.3 million Catalans to express their opinion.

We believe that day, 9th of November 2014, was exemplary, clearly showing the way we do things in Catalonia, with complete civic involvement. This is something we are very proud of. Unfortunately the scandal does not end here. The President of the Parliament of Catalonia, Carme Forcadell, may be judged soon as well, for having allowed the discussion and vote of the conclusions of a study commission in a plenary session. Clearly, the notion of conventional democracy, which is comparable with the best democracies in the world, and the European Union in particular, and the notion of democracy that Spain appears to have are thus very different. Judge for yourselves if the attitude of the Spanish Government is normal, if it is acceptable, if it belongs to a serious and truly democratic state.

I want to emphasise that the issue at stake here is not independence but democracy, and it does not merely affect those in favour of a state of their own, but every citizen who believes in freedom. I would like to make this point crystal clear here: this is a European problem. And Europe cannot look the other way. Europe should be part of the solution. For the sake of being consistent with the democratic values and principles it is inspired by as well as in order to be pragmatic as it has always been when deep geopolitical changes have occurred: by adapting itself, with the help of political dialogue first, and then with the support of a legal framework.

As mentioned earlier, claiming the right to decide freely to determine our future as a country through voting is something which is extensively spread throughout Catalan society. The proof is that more than 4, 200 economic, cultural, social and civic organisations in the country have expressed their explicit support. To this end, at the end of last year and at the initiative of the government, eighty of these organizations – the most important in the country– together with institutional representatives, drew up the National Pact for the Referendum. That meeting also led to some agreements and to the impetus to promote a signatures campaign to call for a referendum, both internationally and at the Spanish State level. We want to have a say, we want to express our position and we want to make our concerns heard.

In brief, I would like to emphasise that the Catalan proposal for a referendum follows a firmly Europeanist inspiration. First, because if Catalonia becomes a new state, it will do so in the framework of the European Union. The first steps of the Catalan Republic will be taken according to the European rules. We do not consider any other scenario. Political Catalanism, since its inception, more than 100 years ago, has held Europeanism as one of its main values. In fact, Catalonia as a whole is deeply involved in participating in the European project. Europe is the place where we want to be, without a doubt. This is not our desire since 31 years ago, with the entry of Spain into the European Economic Community, but has always been our wish. Historically, from the distant time of Charlemagne, Catalonia has looked towards Europe and has been identified with an idea of common belonging.

Lately, some have decided they want to leave Europe. It is legitimate and necessary to accept it, but we do not endorse it. We could say that we are just at the other extreme. Catalonia is very committed to Europe, our goal is to enhance this shared project. That is, we want to fully exercise our sovereignty and share it with our European partners, in the areas that make us collectively stronger.

Secondly, the Catalan proposal for a referendum is Europeanist since it is rooted in one of its fundamental principles, that is, democracy. In recent decades Europe has seen how new states arise. Unlike other cases not too distant in time, Catalonia aims at achieving independence peacefully, in a civic way, and “armed” exclusively with democracy. We consider our citizens as adults who are responsible enough to freely decide on their future. It is ultimately a process of democratic vanguard that wants to set an example and is connected with what the European project is and should be.

In conclusion, I shall repeat what I said at the beginning and throughout my speech. Rest assured that this year 2017, Catalonia will freely decide on its future by means of a legitimate and legal referendum, with all the effective and binding guarantees offered by democracy.

Again, many thanks for your support and attention.

Carles Puigdemont i Casamajó
President of the Government of Catalonia