



Catalonia and the trial on the referendum: A challenge for the EU

Speech by President Torra

Brussels, 18th February 2019

Dear Ralph, dear Ivo, dear President Puigdemont, dear friends,

Thanks very much for coming here today.

We are in Brussels, but not exactly where we were supposed to meet.

The fight against authoritarianism as the way to build a wall against freedom and rights is also taking place inside the EU institutions

Today Mr Tajani, President of the European Parliament, has carried out one of the most undemocratic and un-European of actions: to violate the principle of freedom of speech of two elected representatives of the Catalan people to give our point of view about the trial and its progress.

According to the article 11 of the European charter of fundamental rights:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers”.

Well, Mr Tajani has violated the right to freedom of assembly, because the EU and its parliament must be, by definition, the common house for all European citizens to meet and discuss everything.

The right to information has also been violated, because we have been prevented from giving our view, data and other elements to enable European citizens to be adequately informed in a variety of points of view.

It is also strange that Mr. Tajani cannot ensure our safety. How can that be possible, when we have visited many Parliaments around the world with no problem at all?

Summing up, President Tajani has taken a political and ideological decision, when, in fact, he should be the President of all Europeans, not only the most radical right-wing.

And he has done so out of fear. Out of fear of our ideas, and out of fear of losing favor with his Spanish masters. Instead of defending the right of all Europeans, Tajani has turned the European Parliament into a puppet of the Spanish right-wing parties and Mr Borrell, the Spanish Foreign Minister, who is always against dialogue with Catalonia. This is a shame for Europe. This is a shame for Europeans. This is a shame for everyone who has fought for freedom for decades in this continent.

The practice of Mr Tajani seems to be inspired by a boycott against Catalonia. Today, while we are here, Mr Tajani has allowed an event on Catalonia by the neo-franquist far-right VOX and has forbidden an exhibition in the European Parliament about the Catalan language.

Why Mr Tajani discriminates against Catalonia?

And it is doubly shameful. We are here to defend the right to self-determination of Catalonia, but also to remember that some of our political and social leaders are right now facing a trial that could put them in jail for decades. Because the only thing they did was to organize a referendum. Their only crime is to have defended freedom of speech!

Among them are Oriol Junqueras and Raül Romeva, former Members of the European Parliament for the Green/EFA group. Many of you will know them personally. Always peaceful, always democratic, always defending the rights of the Catalan people and dreaming about a better Europe. They have been in jail for more

than one year. They are in jail for their political ideas. They are in jail because they have been brave enough to do what they thought was right for our people. And what has Mr Tajani done for them? For former members of the house that he today presides? Nothing! He has silenced them. He has left them behind. He has tried to forget their memory. But we shall not let this happen. And this is why we are here despite their censorship and prohibition. We are here for all the Catalan people that dream of a better future, we are here for all Europeans who believe in democracy and freedom, and we are here for Raul, and for Oriol. For them. And for all the political prisoners, legitimate members of the Catalan government, social leaders, President of the Catalan Parliament. We are here for our exiles, that live freely in Europe but cannot go back to Spain because they would go straight to prison for a crime and violence that they never committed, as the Schleswig-Holstein court stated. We are here for President Puigdemont and the rest of the exiles living in Belgium, Scotland and Switzerland. Because they will not be silenced. Because the trial against them is a trial against every Catalan that believes in self-determination, a right recognized by international law.

I repeat again: the EU should be a bastion of freedom.

And we are not going to remain silent, because we are pro-European, we are democrats, and we will not stand idly while others bring down this project and violate the rights of European citizens.

That's why today I strongly call on all democrats working inside the EU institutions to stand up to it. Not to be silent.

The referendum or the Spanish state on trial?

I was in Madrid on Tuesday when the trial started. I saw them under the scrutiny of Spanish justice. I saw the sham that the Spanish state has organized in order to justify its violent repression of the Catalan movement.

Oriol Junqueras, Carme Forcadell, Joaquim Forn, Raül Romeva, Jordi Turull, Josep Rull, Jordi Sanchez, Jordi Cuixart, Dolors Bassa, Carles Mundó, Meritxell Borràs.

Just seeing them accused as if they were criminals is an attack to democracy, on human rights, and a shame that is improper of Europe in the 21st century, having political prisoners and exiles from an EU country.

They are our social and political leaders, guilty of being democrats who helped to organize and supported the referendum on self-determination of October 1st 2017.

Yes, guilty of being democrats, because everything that we have done has been thanks to our majorities in the Catalan elections and thanks to the agreements reached by the Catalan Parliament where the sovereignty of the Catalan people resides.

Some European politicians keep repeating that they expect a fair trial from Spain. That there is separation of powers. This makes no empirical or historical sense. And I invite them all to follow the trial every day, to how the prosecutor and the state lawyers lie without shame in order to convict our people.

How they admit with their questions that it is a political trial and they are political prisoners.

The coming months are an opportunity for the international community, including international commentators, journalists, politicians and lawyers, to understand the true and real face of Spain. To understand that allowing Spain to do all this is against the values and principles on which the EU was founded.

This is a trial against a referendum, against a democratic movement, but it is also the Spanish state that is on trial. Because democrats from around the world are watching carefully. Will we able to consider Spain a Western democratic country if our people are condemned to many years in prison for having organized a referendum? Can we do so now?

They cannot have a fair trial, for the simple reason that under Spanish law, the unity of Spain is seen as more important than democracy. The unity of Spain is seen as more important than human rights. The unity of Spain is seen as more important than anything else. Mr Lesmes, President of the Spanish Supreme Court, said on the 5th of September of 2017 that the “unity of Spain is the ultimate basis of the rule of law”. How can we have a fair trial under such conditions?

Spain is trapped in its vicious circle of authoritarianism, and Catalonia with it. And the situation is difficult, of course it is! But we are not going to surrender. On the contrary, we intend to go everywhere to accuse the Spanish State of having built a “general cause” against the Catalan independence movement, a movement that is democratic, legitimate and peaceful.

But this is no time for false comparisons between the Catalan and the Spanish side. There is one side who imprisons and another that is imprisoned. There is a side that proposes solutions and a side that rejects them. There is a side that believes human rights and the will of the people are more important than the unity of a state, and there is a side who believes that the unity of the state is more important than human rights. This is no time for the false neutrality among those who prefer to watch how injustice is done rather than justice applied.

All Europeans who support dialogue, who believe in democracy, human rights, fair justice and the right of nations to be free... we call for your support. We need you, and we need you now.

We call on you to speak up. To speak up before it is too late for them, for us, and for Europe.

Today we feel the urgent need to act now.

And we will do so, with all our force and all its consequences.

We will meet more repression with more democracy, more imprisonments with a greater desire for freedom, more threats with more unity among Catalan democrats, higher sentences with more self-determination.

Looking ahead

If the price of defending our freedom, the price of defending the rights of our people and their rights, and the price of defending the right of self-determination is my personal liberty, I will pay the price. In the same manner, our friends are paying the price of prison and exile.

Some will ask us, why are you ready to risk such a high price?

Well, last month, I visited Stanford University and gave a lecture on the situation in Catalonia. I said there that without trust, it is very difficult to build a better society or share a political project.

And that is exactly why independence is the only way forward at this moment.

How can Catalans trust a state that puts its leaders in custody without a trial? That accuses them of invented crimes in order to punish a society as a whole?

How can Catalans trust a state where our leaders, life-long democrats and peaceful leaders like President Puigdemont, are forced into exile in order to maintain their freedom and look for real justice?

How can Catalans trust a state that prefers to force us with violence to remain Spanish rather than convince us of the benefits of their project?

How can Catalans trust a state that systematically treats our language as a second-rate instrument? As an inferior language? That forbids us from using it in Spanish Congress and the European Parliament?

How can Catalans trust a state where we suffer a fiscal drain of 16 billion a year preventing us from providing better education, health, pensions, and infrastructures to our people? A fiscal drain that becomes a social drain that goes against our people who are least well-off and most in need?

How can Catalans trust a state where the leader of the Popular Party, the leader of the so-called liberal party, Ciudadanos, and the leader of the neo-fascist party VOX,

agree to abolish our institutions, the Parliament and the Government of Catalonia, if they win the next Spanish election?

How can Catalans trust a state that, even when ruled by the Socialist Party and Pedro Sanchez does not hesitate to violate our collective and civil rights and abandon dialogue simply because they could not accept the figure of an independent rapporteur or include the word self-determination?

President Sanchez has broken the ongoing dialogue with Catalonia, because he refuses to listen to 80% of Catalans that would like to see a normal, bilaterally agreed referendum as in Scotland.

The time has come to fulfill our right to self-determination, and the process that started some years ago will continue.

I want independence, my government wants independence, and we don't renounce any peaceful and democratic way to achieve independence.

We have offered, and always continue to offer dialogue with the Spanish government in order to find a political way to exercise our right to self-determination always under the strict belief in non-violence. But this is why we need international mediation, the involvement of the international community, in order to sit the Spanish government at the table and have a real negotiation.

Why can't Catalan people hold an agreed referendum as in Scotland? We have the same rights as European citizens.

Unfortunately, as I said, the dialogue with the Spanish government has not moved forward. President Sanchez has not had the courage to confront the right wing and Spanish neofascism, not even the reactionary wing of his own party.

Neither the conservative government of Rajoy nor the socialist one of Sanchez have wanted real dialogue, to listen the voice of the Catalan people. And so, what possible solution do the Catalan people have?

Catalonia is today at the forefront of the fight for freedom in Europe. And we will continue to be.

The referendum on self-determination of the 1st October freed us in our hearts and minds, even if we are still bound by their laws.

In the last year and a half, we have learnt the hard way how difficult and how costly the path to freedom is, as did many other European nations before us. We know the sacrifice that our colleagues in prison and exile have made for us.

No court can judge the idea of democracy. No exile can stop the fight for our civil and collective rights. No sentence is strong enough to stop the will of the people expressed in their ballot boxes.

The proceedings that started last week are not putting me, our former government, or the Catalan pro-independence movement on trial.

Whether you come from the north or the south, the east or the west, the Atlantic or the Mediterranean, what is on trial in Madrid are your civil rights as a European citizen.

The democratic credibility of Europe is at stake in Madrid.

This is not anymore a Catalan crisis, this is a European crisis.

We are here to accuse the Spanish State of violating the most fundamental rights of the Catalan people, of their leaders in prison and exile. We are here to accuse them of violating European values for the sake of a border.

This fake trial shows that every European citizen should stand up and defend the rights of the Catalan people, because the next in line could be you.

We will never surrender. We will always defend democracy and dignity. We are on the right side of history. This is why we appeal to the best quality of humanity, solidarity with just causes around the world.

With your help, with the fraternity of the free people of Europe, the case of Catalonia will succeed.