



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

Speech by President Puigdemont

Brussels, 18th February 2019

Ladies and gentlemen,

Last Tuesday, a political trial against members of the previous Government of Catalonia, against social leaders of the main civil organizations of Catalonia and against the former president of the Parliament of Catalonia began in Spain.

The simple fact that this trial could take place brings shame to Spain and, therefore, to the entire European Union, whose main institutions have chosen to remain silent, when facing such a disgraceful situation where democracy is at stake.

The majority of citizens of Catalonia, as European citizens, cannot understand the silence of the main European institutions, especially from the European Commission, regarding the violence they experienced on October 1st 2017 and which was exercised by the Spanish police, while they were voting in the referendum. And it is still harder to understand their prolonged silence while democrats are imprisoned with impunity.

European courts have shown how miserable it is the preventive jail against our colleagues. The court of Schleswig-Holstein was clear in saying that there was no rebellion. There was no sedition. Catalans provoked no violence.

Our exile in Belgium, our time in Germany, our exile in Switzerland and Scotland, have shown that this is a political trial. That in Western European countries we are considered free because organizing a referendum is not a crime. That what we are living in Spain through is unthinkable in other democratic countries.

The unity of Spain is not worth such violations of human rights.

When we heard from the high representatives of the EU that the Catalan conflict is an internal issue of the Spanish State, they were not aware of the serious mistake they had made. The conflict between Catalonia and Spain is a European affair, because for more than a year the EU has had political prisoners and exiles. The fact is that today we have political prisoners being deprived of freedom in European prisons. What is happening right now in Catalonia, it can happen tomorrow to any other place in the EU. How will we stop this from happening in those countries where authoritarian leaders are on the rise? What will the EU say if it has tolerated such a situation in Catalonia?

The moment has come for European democrats to make their voice heard against intolerance, it is the moment that European institutions act as guarantors of the rights and freedoms of all European citizens and this includes obviously Catalans.

The European Parliament cannot continue to be an institution far from the reality of our time. We demand that it stands as a genuine democratic assembly of representatives capable of finding political solutions when an attack on the dignity of millions of people happens, as in Catalonia. Because the political trial that is taking place in Madrid is not only against twelve people. It is against more than two million Catalans who went to vote in a referendum, against those who voted legitimately in favor of the independence of Catalonia and against those who voted to remain in Spain.

I want to remind you that my country has always been deeply European. And it is also for this reason that we want to fully exercise our sovereignty, in order to be able to share it with our European partners in all those areas that make us collectively stronger. We do not want to raise any borders towards any nation in Europe or anywhere in the world; on the contrary, we want to work to erase them. We are not talking about old-style nineteenth or twentieth century nationalism or Twenty-first century populism, we are talking about a deeply rooted democratic political movement.

I am a free European citizen who has been invited to visit and speak onto the parliaments of Flanders, Finland, Denmark, Ireland, the United Kingdom, Germany, the Faeroe Islands and Bavaria. And this has never been a "threat to security and public order," as President of the European Parliament, Mr Antonio Tajani, argues for vetoing the possibility that President Torra and I could have addressed today the European Parliament.

The European Union cannot continue to support demophobic attitudes such as Mr. Tajani's standing by the Spanish political parties that have supported the repression against Catalonia.

Mr Tajani has imposed a *de facto* gag law on Catalonia.

My Europe defends fundamental human rights. Even if I can understand and the silence of the European Parliament with regards to the independence of Catalonia, I am shocked by the passivity of Europe in front of a political trial that could lead to condemn peaceful and democratic political leaders, accused of rebellion and sedition, to up to 25 years in prison. I ask all MEPs to open their eyes and act as democrats. I remind you that among people in charge, there are two former deputies of the European Parliament: Oriol Junqueras and Raül Romeva.

It is time for the EU to understand that self-determination works in its favors. That borders are not eternal. That a strong defense of democracy is the only way that Europe will remain loyal to its founding values.

It was an American President, Woodrow Wilson, who 100 years ago put the principle of self-determination in centre stage in European geopolitics.

Since 1945 the West, and particularly Europe, has been governed by rule-based institutions that have promoted trade liberalisation and democracy around the world.

Since 1945 global trade has multiplied by 12 and the number of independent states has risen from around 76 to 195. And many are European nations.

Slovenia, Latvia, Lithuania, Croatia, Estonia, Slovakia, Czech Republic, etc. How many European states are now independent thanks to the principle of self-determination? Does anyone really think that the EU would be the EU we trust if these states had not been by the EU itself?

The EU preference for democratic solutions to political conflicts are a fundamental reason why it has become increasingly rational for small nations to have their own independent states.

As an independent nation, Catalonia's economic viability is certain, of course. Catalonia has an economy of the same size of Portugal or Finland, with a GDP of over EUR 200 billion and exports as much as Denmark.

We do not fear the physical and institutional violence of the Spanish state, we reject it as shameful for all Europeans. The censorship that today has driven Spanish politicians to stop us from entering the European Parliament are the same as what brings them to agree that our political and social leaders should remain in jail for

political reasons. It is hate and vengeance before rationality and the main principle of humanity is freedom.

The rational solution for holding an agreed referendum as in Scotland and Quebec has been forcefully rejected. We have proposed it dozens of times, but never has a Spanish government had the courage to face the Catalan case by listening to the majority of the Catalan people: We want to vote, we want to express our will through ballot boxes.

If Spain is really a democratic state, it should listen to the demands of the people of Catalonia. Spain should listen to the courts of Belgium and Schleswig-Holstein. Spain should listen to Amnesty International and the World Organization Against Torture when they call for the release of our political prisoners. Spain should listen to the American PEN club. Spain should listen to the Canadian and American academies of political science. Spain should listen to Human Rights Watch when it says that on the first of October there was excessive use of police violence. Spain should listen to the UN rapporteurs, it should listen to the Nobel Peace Prize winners that call for an end to the repression. It should listen to all the democratic voices around the world that are calling for a political solution to a political problem. If Spain is democratic, it should allow the people of Catalonia to decide freely on its future without people in prison, without people in exile. Without threats.

With the trial and the convergence of the Spanish right-wing into an ultra-nationalist alliance, it is clear that only international mediation will convince the Spanish

establishment that the political solution for Catalonia needs to be based on the democratic will of its people.

Only the power of international pressure will force the Spanish state to sit down at the table and negotiate. International public opinion is going to be crucial in the next weeks. That is the reason we are here, and the reason we will be travelling around the world in the coming weeks.

A Catalan independent state would be an example of how to solve historical conflict in a democratic way and, like Scotland, would also be a partner in the effort to promote a more democratic world, a more European world.

This idea should be at the core of the geopolitical vision of the EU. Democracy, the rights of minorities, self-determination must be the soul of a new Europe, as it has always been in the past.

On January 24th 2017, joined by the mentioned former MEPs Oriol Junqueras and Raül Romeva, then members of my Government and now imprisoned, we addressed the European Parliament to explain what we wanted to do. I quoted literally: *"We will defend the referendum being agreed with the Spanish Government, since it is the most plausible option for all. This offer of dialogue and consensus search will remain open until the last day. We are prepared to talk about everything: the question, the date, the participation requirements, the necessary percentage of the winning option ... We are sitting at the negotiation table and we will not stand until the last day. The offer of dialogue is permanent."* Two years later, despite the repression, despite

imprisonment and exile, despite the censorship imposed by Mr. Tajani to the last two presidents of Catalonia, we are asking the Spanish State, again, a political solution based on dialogue and negotiation, always on the path of non-violence and democracy. The proposal is very simple: a referendum on self-determination agreed, binding and internationally recognized.

Thank you so much for your attention.