

Speech by the President of the Generalitat, Pere Aragonès i Garcia, before the Senate's General Commission of Autonomous Communities

Madrid, 8 April 2024

President of the Commission, fellow presidents, senators,

It all began with a question: do you want Catalonia to become an independent state? This question is the origin of the debate we have here today. The will to carry out a referendum on the independence of Catalonia. A referendum that is legal, possible, and absolutely necessary to resolve the sovereignty conflict between Spain and Catalonia, and that depends only on the willingness to reach an agreement between the parties.

A political issue that has not been addressed politically and democratically, but rather through the criminal code and repression.

Today we are here for the final phase of the approval of an amnesty law that we were told was impossible.

"There will be no amnesty, there will be no self-determination!" shouted Miquel Iceta when he was a minister. The same thing that Salvador Illa has said so many times with "Neither amnesty nor anything like that". We can find many examples: from government ministers, leaders of the PSOE and the PSC, and obviously, from the PP and VOX.

Everyone said it was impossible, that it was unconstitutional, that it had no place in the legal system. And I especially recall when President Pedro Sánchez, two days before the elections to the Congress of Deputies, stated that "The independence movement was asking for an amnesty and asking for a referendum, but they have not had an amnesty and there has been no referendum on self-determination, nor will there be".

Despite the statements, we all know that if we are here today, it is because amnesty, overnight, ceased to be unconstitutional, ceased to be impossible, which is what will happen with the referendum, which sooner or later will be accepted as the way to resolve the sovereignty conflict between Catalonia and Spain.

That's why I'm here. To defend amnesty, to assert that voting can never be a crime. I'm here to defend Catalonia, to denounce the attacks we suffer, the disdain, the constant mistreatment, even the absurdities said about my country. Catalonia is fed up, tired of being a punching bag.

No matter how loudly some of you cry out in outrage, we defend Catalonia and the rights and freedoms of its citizens wherever necessary. Because we will not let ourselves be intimidated, because we do not hide, and we will never hide. On the contrary, it is the duty of a President of the Generalitat to be here and defend my country against hatred and contempt.

The following has also been said of the amnesty: "if it succeeds, soon there will be no Spaniards" and "the greatest betrayal that can be made to a country". President Ayuso.

And that "it puts the Constitution on its knees". President García-Page.

And that it is "the greatest act of corruption in democracy", Santiago Abascal.

A lot of nonsense has been and will be said about it. But no. Amnesty, first and foremost, is a fundamental correction, a response to an unjust verdict, to the illegitimacy of legal and police

repression. It signifies the acknowledgement that enabling citizens to vote, to practice democracy, can never, under any circumstances, be deemed criminal.

The amnesty law is a victory for the free Catalonia that we advocate.

On 1 October 2017, Spain drew international scrutiny when it dispatched police to prevent ordinary citizens from voting, resorting to violent means. The continued judicial repression experienced by many individuals involved in the events of 1 October is a direct result of that disgraceful action, as highlighted by respected international institutions and organisations, which have demanded an end to such repression.

Hence the need for amnesty to end the exiles: of President Carles Puigdemont, Marta Rovira, Toni Comín, and Ruben Wagensberg. The need for amnesty to put an end to the threat of imprisonment and disqualifications, to end the illegitimacy of repression, and to recognise that none of what we did was or is a crime. This is the meaning of amnesty.

And I think that the person who has understood it best in Spain is former President José María Aznar when he said that, "Sedition has been repealed, the crime of misappropriation has been reduced, the illegal calling of referendums has not been reintroduced, and now amnesty will legitimise the separatist coup."

It is exactly that. No one, for their democratic commitment, for their commitment to the rights of the citizens of Catalonia, should have their freedom limited.

That is why it is necessary to rectify an unjust verdict and put an end to an unprecedented judicial persecution through amnesty.

Amnesty is the path to address much of the suffering caused by repression, although we will never forget the police violence and the years of exile and imprisonment that cannot be undone.

However, amnesty is also the path that should allow us to look forward and consolidate the negotiation process to resolve the sovereignty conflict between the Spanish state and the people of Catalonia. Amnesty is a necessary step, but it is not the final one.

Leaving repression behind, we can embark on a new stage of negotiation with the Spanish Government, aimed at addressing the core issue of the conflict with Spain. A new negotiation phase where we can start to make proposals and build agreements that "reflect the broad, cross-cutting and majority will of the citizens of Catalonia as democratically expressed".

This final sentence is taken verbatim from the investiture agreements between the Socialist Party and ERC, as outlined in those agreements.

I am convinced, and the Government of Catalonia is convinced, that what best represents this majority will is a referendum in Catalonia on independence, with possible and feasible paths, such as those we have previously proposed.

For years, we have been advocating for this, accompanied by massive demonstrations, popular mobilisations, and an unquestionable civic commitment from the citizens of Catalonia who want to democratically decide the political future of the country.

Since the ruling against the Statute, every Catalan government – every single one – has underscored the lack of recognition there is in Spain of Catalonia and of its desire to exercise the sovereignty that belongs to us as a nation.

We did so with the Declaration of Sovereignty in 2013, with the consultation of 9 November 2014, and with the referendum of 1 October 2017. These significant milestones demonstrate Catalonia's will to exist and they compel us to persist until all rights of our citizens are recognised and they can freely decide the future of the country.

We will once again be told that it is impossible, that it is unconstitutional, but amnesty was also deemed unconstitutional until we succeeded in changing this perception.

We don't understand the concept of impossible. Catalonia doesn't understand the concept of impossible.

Catalonia aspires to complete freedom, including the right to decide through a referendum, as well as the ability to speak Catalan universally and fully normalise the Catalan language against any attempts to undermine or marginalise it.

In Catalonia, we aspire to provide the opportunities, well-being, and prosperity that our citizens deserve, and to do so immediately, because the chronic fiscal deficit of 22 billion per year is suffocating us. It constrains us and limits our potential, and I refuse to accept a Catalonia that is held back.

In addition to negotiating the referendum, we must establish a distinct financing system for Catalonia because we must never lose sight of the present, on how we can improve the lives of citizens and help our productive fabric thrive until Catalonia achieves independence.

Catalonia must have its own financing system that works in our favour, a unique financing system where we directly manage all the resources we generate. Nothing more, nothing less than that. Managing, collecting, and settling all taxes. Deciding on taxes and adapting them to Catalonia's needs. Negotiating with Spain a contribution for the services it provides and establishing a solidarity quota.

The current financing system is an unbearable burden for Catalonia. Obsolete, opaque, and above all, unjust.

None of you would accept being the third to contribute and the fourteenth to receive. None of you would accept contributing 22,000 million euros annually to the system without any return, when the public services and the productive fabric of Catalonia also have many important needs to cover.

I understand that the job, especially for the current presidents who are here today, is to defend the interests of the citizens of their regions, and mine is to defend the interests of Catalonia. That's why I won't stand idly by in the face of the chronic fiscal deficit. The key to a distinct form of financing, then, lies in a bilateral relationship with the State, a one-on-one relationship, because this is the only way to put an end to a financing mechanism that unfairly treats Catalonia.

Securing a distinct financing where Catalonia has access to all the resources it generates is the top short-term priority because the citizens of Catalonia cannot wait any longer. We need more resources for education, the healthcare system, housing, the railway network, the entire set of social services, to give a new boost to the Catalan language, for energy transition and the fight against climate change, for the infrastructure needed by the productive fabric, and to support the internationalisation of our economy. These are resources that we already generate, but cannot access due to the current financing system.

And I would like to end with a final thought that I believe speaks volumes about everything that has happened in recent years and explains why we are here today.

The Spanish state is one that does not listen to its citizens, that does not respect them, that is incapable of accepting differences, founded on imposition and authoritarianism. It is a very weak state. It is a very weak state built on the obligation to be a part of it rather than the freedom to separate from it, with very weak foundations and poor future prospects.

If you ever want to seduce Catalonia, try to win it over democratically and not by imposition.

Catalonia looks towards the future with hope, far from the commotion we will witness in this chamber today, far from the constant exploitation of Catalonia to garner votes elsewhere in the State. Today, Catalonia looks toward the future with hope, aspiring to be a European nation seeking complete freedom to attain the prosperity, well-being, and quality of life its citizens deserve.

And I conclude, Madam President. Today we know, as well, that no matter how loudly they protest, amnesty is inevitable, just as a distinct financing and the referendum will be. And as the poet Vicent Andrés Estellés wrote in *La rosa de paper*: Despite orders to burn it, the paper rose circulates and will continue to circulate secretly if needed among the people. And we will emerge victorious.

Thank you very much and a very good day to everyone.