

Catalonia, Spain, and Europe are Better Together

By Pedro Sánchez

MADRID – Europe is above all freedom, peace and progress. We must move forward with these values and make Europe the leading model of integration and social justice that protects our citizens. The Europe that we aspire to, the Europe that we need, the Europe we are building is based on democratic stability within our States and it cannot accept the unilateral breach of its integrity. The Europe that we admire has been built against excluding nationalist ideologies and extremism overlapping identities against the principle of equality for all citizens. For this reason, today, the challenge of separatism in Catalonia, devised against and outwith the constitutional framework and silencing the majority of Catalans who are against Independence, is a challenge for Europe and Europeans. Preserving these values in Catalonia today means protecting the open and democratic Europe that we stand for.

In 1978, Spain created and ratified a fully democratic constitution. That historic document was endorsed by almost 88% of voters in a referendum. In Catalonia, support and turnout were even higher: some 90.5% of Catalans backed the new Constitution.

Spain thus escaped the long and dark shadow of dictatorship and laid the foundations for a Social and Democratic State, based on the Rule of Law, comparable today with the long-established democracies of Western Europe. Individual freedoms, fought for and won by Spaniards of differing beliefs and backgrounds, including many Catalans, were restored. And the Constitution of 1978 also provided an innovative and progressive answer to Spain's territorial diversity by treating it as an authentic asset worthy of recognition. Some 40 years later, the Democracy Index, published by *The Economist*, rates Spain as one of the world's 20 full democracies.

Contemporary Spain is Europe's second most decentralized country, and Catalonia enjoys some of the highest levels of regional self-governance on the continent, with wide-ranging devolved powers over crucial sectors such as media and public communication, health, education, and prisons.

Today, however, Catalonia is associated not only with the spirit of creativity and initiative, qualities that are broadly admired around the world, but also with a profound crisis, caused by the unilateral breach of Spain's constitutional order brought about by the region's separatist leaders in the autumn of 2017. Catalonia's leaders reneged on all the requirements and resolutions set out by the Constitutional Court, passed unconstitutional "disconnection" laws from the Spanish state, held an illegal referendum, and declared a purported Catalan Republic.

No state would ever allow the unilateral secession of a territory that forms part of its constitutional order. And no democrat should support the path taken by the separatist leaders, who won less than 48% of the votes cast in regional elections. Their fraudulent independence bid inflamed popular passions and, aided by the deliberate proliferation of fake news, encouraged a profound sense of injustice and confrontation with the rest of Spain. Where was the voice and the vote of those Catalans, the majority, who opposed independence? Where was the voice of those Spaniards who looked on, perplexed, at a direct breach of their Constitution's guarantees?

My government has distinguished itself by putting the expansion of rights and liberties first and foremost. International organizations have recognized the high standards we have set on issues such as gender equality. We would never, therefore, agree to even the smallest restriction of freedom of expression. The president of the Generalitat de Catalunya (Catalonia's regional government) is a radical separatist, but he is neither prevented from

expressing his views freely, nor impeded from defending them publicly, despite the pain and damage they cause to peaceful coexistence in Catalonia.

The same is true for separatist local councils and governments, and for associations that support independence. They may express their opinions as they wish, provided that, they do not promote and encourage criminal acts. All Spaniards are equal before the law, and the Constitution and democracy are inseparable realities.

Under Spain's democratic rule of law, the judiciary is fully independent and allows for the review of rulings by national and international authorities. The government respects and complies with all judicial decisions. This includes the Supreme Court's ruling against nine separatist leaders charged for the illegal acts they carried out in the autumn of 2017. In that case, the Court acted with the greatest transparency: the entire proceedings were televised live.

Reactions to the Supreme Court's ruling have been extremely diverse: while some believe it was too lenient in handing down prison sentences of between nine and 13 years, others have organized demonstrations against the verdict. While some of these protests have been peaceful, others have descended into extreme violence.

The rights to protest and to strike are fundamental pillars of our democracy, and I fully respect those Catalan citizens who have peacefully exercised this right. But the organized and intentional acts of violence that have occurred across Catalonia in recent weeks is something else altogether and in no way represent the region's tolerance and welcoming spirit.

The illegal effort to bring about Catalonia's independence has followed a roadmap that is all too familiar in today's Europe. It leads through a web of lies, spun by fake news and viral messaging, and serves to energize right-wing extremists and enemies of European integration. It is the same route taken by those elsewhere who divide societies by exploiting the rhetoric of reaction to encourage polarization and confrontation.

Recently, leaders of this movement, such as the president of the main pro-separatist association, have stated that violence may be necessary for their cause to receive greater attention. But if we have learned anything from Europe's painful and bloody history, it is that no political ambition can ever justify resort to violence, much less the normalization of violence as a political tool.

My government has responded to this challenge with proportion and control. I firmly believe that restraint is our strength. We reacted with speed to restore peace and stability to Catalonia's citizens, a majority of whom reject the current unstable impasse. We also acted with prudence to minimize the risk arising from moments of tension to the lowest possible level. And we must not forget the exemplary efforts and bravery of the Catalan police, with the support of the national police, in maintaining order at a time when their region's leaders were openly contemptuous of the law.

It is an absurd paradox to witness a president of the Generalitat making light of the violence while denouncing a police force, which acts on his orders, for performing its duty. It is also a grave error. I call on him to condemn the violence fully and clearly, and to launch a dialogue with the Catalan people who do not want independence, and with those parties that are not pro-separatist. He must begin to act as President of all Catalans, not only of those who share his political beliefs.

I will not allow another extreme nationalist outbreak, fueled by false narratives and replete with lies, to undermine the success of Spanish democracy, which our citizens and institutions have worked hard to achieve. In the discussion about the future of Catalonia, only the healing and coexistence of the Catalan people and society, not independence, is

on the agenda. This is our main challenge: to ensure that all understand and accept that a unilateral path toward independence constitutes a direct affront to fundamental democratic principles.

At this moment, restraint and moderation are imperative. We will act with all the firmness needed to defend peaceful coexistence, but with the intelligence to recognize that we have an opportunity to start a new chapter before us. I have never turned away from dialogue if both parties are willing to act within the framework of the Constitution and the law. I do not want to be an us-against-them leader. My job is to serve all Spaniards equally.

There are different areas of dialogue to be explored if the separatist leaders abandon their unilateral path. We can speak and listen to each other without threats or belittlement. I know that there are open wounds, and that there is pain and frustration. But, despite this, there is an opportunity for hope, recognizing what we have achieved together and thinking about what we can do, together, to improve the wellbeing of all our citizens. For this to happen, however, the separatist leaders must return to the domain of the Constitution and respect for the rule of law.

My government has positioned Spain at the forefront of the project of European integration, and on the front line of the fight against our greatest global challenges. We are committed to the strengthening and expansion of rights and freedoms, and to the fight against inequality. These objectives transcend a nationalist vision, and we need Catalonia and Catalan society to help achieve them.

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