

THE STAND-OFF IN CATALONIA



THE CRISIS HAS LED TO SOME SIGNIFICANT DEVELOPMENTS

Citizens support the political prisoners
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To date, a number of people have shown their scepticism about the seven-year long struggle towards Catalan independence - which took off with the infamous Spanish Constitutional Court pruning of the Catalan constitution back in 2010: was it really worth the effort? After all, the latest *tour de force* between Catalonia and Spain has resulted first, in more than 1,000 people injured by the brutality of the Spanish police during the unilateral Referendum of 1st October, later with the Catalan government and Parliament entirely suppressed by Madrid's abuse of Article 155 of the Spanish Constitution, and last of all with half of the Catalan government (six out of eight having been released to date) imprisoned and another half taking the road to exile in Belgium, including Catalonia's President Carles Puigdemont.

All this being true, the Catalan institutions, their political and social leaders, have at least forced Madrid to show the world its true face: that of being an authoritarian state that can only count on the use of violence in order to rule over its most productive and dynamic region. Hence, it is fair to emphasise that without the sheer use of violence Catalonia would hardly have remained part of Spain today. This situation mirrors what happened some 300 years ago during the War of Succession, when the Castilian army brutally crushed and militarily occupied the Catalan nation. Indeed, because of decisive action by the Catalan government, the independence issue has now been placed at the very core of the Catalan and Spanish, and indeed European, political agendas, a fact that would have been unthinkable just ten years ago.

Therefore, with all its setbacks for the local population and for the legitimate Catalan institutions, the October-November crisis has brought about some sig-

nificant developments. On the local level, the Catalan electorate is today basically divided into two sides, those against and those in favour of Catalonia's right to self-determination. At the same time, the international image of Spain and its 'exemplary' democratic transition has been dramati-

cally shattered and, likewise, Madrid's transformation into an authoritarian regime (the 'Turkey of the West?') has been clearly exposed to the world. The instances of Spain's authoritarian drift are many, among the most blatant being the lack of pluralism in the Spanish mass media, the absence of a true division of powers in State institutions and the government's abuse of its authority in order to suppress the Catalan independence movement.

Yet, the pro-independence side has also been forced to face the crude world of real-politik and experience the bitter taste of State power.

There has certainly been some shortsightedness, considering the complexity involved in the process of transitioning

from an autonomous region within an authoritarian monarchy to a republic. This is even truer considering the attitude of Madrid, which has been the complete opposite to that of two real Western democracies that also faced their own secessionist crises, Canada (Quebec) and the United Kingdom (Scotland). All this has taught the Catalan independence movement a compelling lesson: the need to escalate even further its thrust towards the achievement of full independence, in which a foremost issue is that of making all Catalans, of any side and condition, aware of the benefits of independence. It is a realistic challenge, since it is Catalonia that has the most solid foundations, with its richer and more diversified economy, with record exports and foreign investment, with an international heavyweight brand as its capital, and, also, with well-run, transparent public institutions capable of providing state-of-the-art public services, notwithstanding the huge financial constraints from Madrid.