

Spain's Foreign Minister: A Call for a Renewed Dialogue

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Spanish Foreign Minister José Manuel García Margallo. Photo by Spanish Embassy in Bulgaria

Novinite is publishing an article by Spain's Foreign Minister José Manuel García-Margallo, which first appeared in Spanish daily ABC. The piece voices his stance against Catalan independence.

Other parties concerned are encouraged to also voice their positions on the issue.

Pro-independence political forces have declared their intention to use the institutions of the Catalan regional government, the *Generalitat*, to organise a referendum on secession in September 2017. This proposal is yet another step forward on the futile and ineffectual journey begun four years ago, when the President of Catalonia at the time, Artur Mas, decided, in a

serious abuse of power, to use all resources available to him to force the creation of a new state. This undertaking was unfeasible from the start, but no society is invulnerable to the tantalising call to start out anew, especially in times of crisis. Thankfully, the people of Catalonia, and of Spain in general, have proven themselves to be level-headed and have, by and large, resisted the political tension and divisive policies of the *Generalitat*, a public institution that no longer appears to serve the interests of the people as a whole and that has undoubtedly forgotten the meaning of the word "pluralism".

The sovereigntist movement is clearly relentless. Instead of opening itself up to the possibility of reaching fair, common-sense agreements, the movement prefers to use up all of our energy and keep the flame of this process alive, borne on the shoulders of an active and persistent minority—a broad group but still a minority. Faced with this insistence, it is my duty and responsibility to reaffirm that secession is unviable. Firstly, it is unviable from a legal standpoint. No democratic constitution in the world recognises the right to self-determination (except that of Ethiopia and that of Saint Kitts and Nevis, two West Indian islands that form a single state). Despite providing in its treaties for member states opting to leave, the European Union does not recognise the possibility of a region becoming a sovereign state and then automatically a fully-fledged member of the organisation. As a result of the Brexit referendum, we are seeing that EU legislation must be met, with no political shortcuts or legal flights of fancy. Lastly, in international law, accepted doctrine in peace time is that the UN rules regarding self-determination are intended for colonial scenarios and instances of serious abuses of fundamental rights. This premise cannot be applied to Spain, a democratic country with elements of federalism.

The pro-independence movements know all of this, but fantasise about bringing about irredentist situations in which the legislative force of the circumstances bursts over the banks of constitutional, EU and international law. I am sorry to also put these dreams to rest. Spain is a consolidated democracy, with undeniably strong institutions. As a Spanish Socialist Minister of the Interior said, not so long ago, he who challenges the State, loses. Nor is Spain like the USSR or a moribund Yugoslavia, quite the opposite: Spain is a relevant member of the United Nations, NATO, the OSCE and the Council of Europe, and a significant contributor to all of these organisations, as well as being a signatory of the most important international treaties on legal matters and human rights; in short, Spain is a respected country and I would go so far as to say a nation that is well loved around the world. Irrespective of their size, no member of the international community, which in itself already opposes secessions, would favour the recognition of an independent Catalanian state.

Nonetheless, we must not limit ourselves to legal matters. We must also underscore a certain lack of what might be called "democratic morality" in the agenda the pro-independence movement is pushing. It is difficult to accept that it would merely be a case of repeating regional elections and unlawful consultations until the outcome is what the secessionists want. In the twenty-first century, it is not morally acceptable—when all democratic debate centres around how to ensure that differences are taken into account—that the discussion in Catalonia concerns how people can be separated according to their culture, language or feelings of nationhood. As my colleague, the Canadian Minister of Foreign Affairs, the great federalist Mr. Stéphane Dion, has said on numerous occasions, secession is an anomaly in a democracy, as it would force us to decide which of our colleagues, friends and relatives would become foreigners and which would remain part of our own political community. No society should have to suffer such an upheaval.

Therefore, if any *Generalitat*-run body should insist on going back down this path, the Spanish Government will act with the certainty that it is supported not only by the law itself, but also by the democratic morality on which systems of law are based. Spain is indivisible, a democratic community that allows rights to be exercised equally and offers all of its citizens the opportunity of a standard of living commensurate to comparable nations. No party, institution or newly formed body can supplant the sovereignty entrusted to the people of Spain in article 1.2 of the Spanish Constitution: because only the people of Spain may decide their future, through formally established channels. No Spaniard may be stripped of their rights of citizenship in Catalonia and no Catalan may be deprived of their Spanish citizenship.

Even so, in 2017 we should not be inevitably destined to repeat the disputes, tensions and frustrations experienced since 2014. We must therefore call for a renewed dialogue. The Spanish Government, once it is formed and whatever its makeup, will remain open to discussing matters on which agreements may be reached, with tangible results for the people of Catalonia and of Spain as a whole. However, for this change to take place, the *Generalitat* government must abandon its challenges to the democratic rule of law and adhere to the provisions of the Spanish Constitution of 1978, under which Catalonia—and Spain in general—have prospered as never before. What I am proposing, in summary, is to follow the spirit of the verses of the Catalan poet, Salvador Espriu, calling for heartfelt cordial understanding: “*Keep the bridge of dialogue secured / and try to understand and love / the different minds and tongues of all your children*”.

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