

## 21.4.2016 Corsica, Catalonia. A new way forward

On Monday 18 April Gilles Simeoni, President of the Executive of the Corsican regional authority, and Carles Puigdemont, President of the government of Catalonia, held the first official meeting between the Corsican and Catalan Executives at the Generalitat de Catalunya. This marks the start of an era of political cooperation in which we can uphold the rights of our peoples, conduct joint projects in Europe and cooperate in the space that unites us, the Western Mediterranean.

This meeting was proposed during the EFA General Meeting in Aiacciu, during which François Alfonsi was re-elected President of the Europe-wide political organisation. Catalan government member and EFA bureau secretary Jordi Solé – responsible inter alia for European Affairs – took the opportunity to give Gilles Simeoni an invitation from President Puigdemont to pay an official visit to Catalonia.

The meeting took place this Monday. It lasted for almost two hours and was attended by the two Presidents, along with Raul Romeva, head of external affairs in the Catalan government, and Jordi Solé and François Alfonsi who initiated the contacts.

The leaders of the two Executives first reviewed the obstacles, in Madrid and Paris alike, that hamper their peoples' aspirations to freedom within the European Union. The denial of democracy by the French and Spanish governments, against the democratic wishes of Corsica and Catalonia, is the very opposite of the principles that should govern the European project. For many years the pretext of violence fuelled opposition. But how can the systematic refusal to respect the democratic wishes of Corsica or Catalonia do other than re-ignite the violence? Corsica and Catalonia therefore intend to unite their efforts to have their aspirations heard, not least at the European Union level.

Despite their geographical, historical and cultural closeness, Corsica and Catalonia have had few contacts. Developing these is a shared priority for the two authorities, in every imaginable area - economic, cultural, even sporting. Symbolically, Gilles Simeoni gave President Puigdemont a shirt in the "squadra corsa" colours bearing his name. They have agreed to arrange a match between Corsican and Catalan representative teams in the near future, to raise the public profile of this new collaboration.

An area in which Corsica has much to learn from Catalonia is its involvement in the European institutions. The Catalan delegation in Brussels consists of twenty people experienced in influence networks and lobbying expertise. Corsica, whose European political experience has so far been hesitant, has every interest in developing such a lever for action.

But this cooperation hopes to go much further than just bilateral relations. Our vision for the future aims to flesh out a project for organising and developing our shared geographical area, the Western Mediterranean. Catalonia is the indispensable engine for such a project. It already possesses major institutions that are capable of designing and fostering it, such as the European Institute of the Mediterranean which is based in Barcelona. The involvement of Corsica, together with the renewed collaboration with Sardinia and, in the near future, the Balearic Islands, will enhance the political profile of this initiative which will bring together peoples and economic areas which have everything to gain from expanding their contacts.

The meeting in Barcelona will remain a highlight of Gilles Someone's term of office. It offers hopes of renewal for a political situation which, in the sterile discussions with Paris or Madrid, is becoming darker by the day.

A new, fresh and invigorating wind is beginning to blow from Catalonia. It could open up a new way forward!