

05.10.2017 Catalonia Referendum victory!

The “yes” vote stood at 90%, but more than the result, it’s the way it was conducted that counts. Faced with the deliberate strategy of chaos imposed by Madrid, Barcelona responded with the serene strength of democracy. A successful gamble! The Catalan nation will be able to continue on its path towards self-determination.

The Catalan nationalists have won!

Only mobilisation pays off. The mobilisation of hundreds of thousands of Catalans has stymied the most brutal repression of a Spanish state in the throes of its Franco past. Faced with a Guardia Civil with war-mongering orders, the “democratic army” raised by the Generalitat de Catalunya to defend Catalan legitimacy responded in the spirit of non-violence.

Bringing democratic intelligence to oppose brute force, it moved the confrontation into the sphere of the image. And in this sphere, they won hands down.

The referendum took place, supported by more than two million Catalans who turned out to vote despite the risks – almost 900 people were injured by the Spanish police – and despite the many obstacles erected to dissuade them: the closure of dozens of polling stations on the very morning of the vote; the endless delays to the voting procedures caused by attacks on computer systems by the Spanish secret services; the hours of queueing before the first voters could finally cast their ballots; not to mention the media misinformation in a Spanish press that was entirely behind the policy of Mariano Rajoy.

The ingenuity of the referendum organisers commands admiration. Madrid went to great lengths to prevent the ballot boxes from reaching the polling stations. The police trawled Catalonia for weeks on end in an attempt to seize them, but were unable to find a single one, such was the effectiveness and solidarity of the organisation network. The same goes for the ballot papers sent to every polling station, and – a detail that speaks volumes for the degree of organisation – translucent rather than transparent ballot boxes were ordered in order to respect the secrecy of the ballot even if the envelopes were missing.

The public places that were transformed into polling stations, schools for the most part, were threatened with closure and sealing over the weekend. And the people who would have had to break the seals on the morning of the vote were threatened with criminal prosecution. It was the parents of pupils who found a way around this problem, organising “weekend after-school activities”, an educational programme of supporting activities, thus refusing to allow the schools to be closed over the weekend. And on the Sunday of the vote, from five o’clock in the morning, several hundreds of activists were there in front of every polling station, forming a human barrier before the polls opened. In this way, the key polling stations were able to open, in sufficient numbers to welcome all the voters.

The organisation also knew in advance that they would not be able to protect all the polling stations from the repressive actions of the Spanish state. They therefore arranged a system of “computer lists” available in the cloud, so that voters who were prevented from reaching their usual polling station could vote in a neighbouring station. One of these was Carles Puigdemont, President of the Generalitat, whose polling station in Girona was targeted by Madrid at the forefront of its intimidatory actions, and which saw the first serious victims of police repression.

Computerised voting systems were subject to repeated cyber-attacks by specialist services in Madrid, attacks that were repelled by using alternative access codes immediately supplied to polling stations which could then resume voting operations, until a fresh attack brought them to a standstill again. In the polling stations, and in the immense queues forming outside, everyone waited patiently. The atmosphere was good-humoured, purposefully cheerful and calm despite the tensions. When elderly or disabled people came to vote, the queues at once made way so that they would not have to endure too long a wait.

European solidarity.

International observers and visitors were warmly applauded by voters in the polling stations. This was because the referendum organising committee had been dissolved following demented threats of legal proceedings, and was replaced by a committee of delegates from all over Europe and Quebec, members of national parliaments who were beyond the reach of the Spanish courts.

The police violence was intended to prevent voters from going to the polling stations. It is clear that the effect was quite the reverse. Mobilisation redoubled, and images of police brutality were shared around the internet, causing widespread indignation in Catalonia and throughout Europe.

This 1 October, the principle of solidarity which had hitherto tied European capitals to Rajoy showed signs of cracking. The first to express doubts was the Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel*, who denounced “the violence [that] can never be the answer” and called for “political dialogue”. But he was not alone: “I utterly condemn what had happened today in Catalonia,” declared Guy Verhofstadt, leader of liberal members of the European Parliament, followed by social president Gianni Pittella: “it’s a sad day for Spain and for all of Europe [...] the solution can only be political, not police action.”

For its part, the European Free Alliance drew attention to article 7 of the Treaty on European Union, which raises the possibility of the suspension of a Member State that uses armed force against its own population, and called for sanctions against the Spanish government.

Naturally things are a bit different in France, where Emmanuel Macron - the only head of state to comment ahead of the referendum - declared that he had “confidence in the determination of Mariano Rajoy to defend the interests of Spain as a whole.” Whereas Jeremy Corbyn, the leader of the English left, said that he found the violence of the Spanish state “shocking”, urging prime minister Theresa May “to appeal directly to Rajoy to end police violence and find a political solution”; similarly, in Germany SPD leader Martin Schultz said that the “escalation in Spain” was “worrying”, calling for a reduction in tensions and a search for dialogue; in France, it was the mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo, who set the tone for the left: what had happened was “very dangerous for Spain and for democracy. I do not understand why Catalonia should want to leave Spain; I don’t understand this desire for independence which in my view is very dangerous for Europe and for democracy”. The same response came from the right, where Christian Jacob, chairman of the right-wing parliamentary faction, said: “The images are rather worrying, but there is the rule of law, this referendum is illegal so it can’t be allowed to take place normally.”

In short “great Spain” is a democratic model for “la France éternelle”!

The EU’s [shameful] role.

The European institutions, though, are performing an appalling role in the story.

Before 1 October, even with the obvious escalation of the conflictual situation, EU officials kept on maintaining their distance by repeatedly stating that the EU would “not interfere in an internal affair of a MS”. It was only after the images of the brutal police action of the Spanish military police on 1 October went public, by social media and international press, that EU officials felt obliged to break silence.

The first official statement was made by Mr. Margaritis Schinas, spokesperson of President Juncker, who during a press conference on Monday 2 October, repeatedly underlined the illegality of the referendum and only made reference to dialogue between the parts, blatantly avoiding answers to explicit questions by journalists on ECs condemnation of the police violence against European citizens. In the European Parliament, a minority of parliamentary groups managed to put on the agenda of the Plenary session in Strasbourg [Wednesday 4 October] a point on Catalonia, for which Commissioner Timmermans appeared in front of the plenary.

Here again, the Commissioner gave no sign of empathy with brutally smashed European citizens, but repeatedly made reference to the “rule of law” and “dialogue between the parts”.

Sadly, Catalans’ fundamental rights have been utterly violated in front of everybody’s eyes and the EU doesn’t take its responsibility as guarantor of European citizens’ rights. On the contrary, it places itself next to the oppressing MS under the mantra of “defending the rule of law”.

The credibility of the EU is, since years, at stake and the attitude of EU officials in the Catalan case will not help overcoming this legitimacy crisis. Moreover, this irresponsible and disrespectful behaviour of

the EU towards its citizens will feed and exponentially multiply the feeling of discomfort, dissatisfaction and lack of trust of European citizens towards the EU. EU officials will soon realize the huge mistake made but it might be too late for them to remediate the mistake.

This is just the beginning!

The peaceful conduct of the referendum, the good turnout (42.5%, or 2.2 million voters) under the difficult conditions created by the state's continuous harassment of the organisation of the vote, are all positive points for the leaders of Catalonia. The discrediting of Mariano Rajoy and his majority due to the repressive police action also strengthens the political impact of the referendum, which is a 100% success for the Catalan cause.

In Madrid, the Partido Popular/Partido Socialista front is fractured, while Podemos will have to disengage still further from Madrid if it wants to preserve its interests in Catalonia with Ada Colau, the mayor of Barcelona, who took part in the vote.

In Catalonia, a high proportion of the voters who are disgusted by Madrid's attitude will in future shift their votes from the PS or Podemos to the nationalist movement.

As they placed their votes in the ballot box, almost all the voters arranged for friends or family to take a photo. There is no doubt that these photographs will take pride of place in Catalan homes in token of an event that will play a decisive role in shaping the history of their country. They will be able to say to future generations: "I was there!"

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