
BERLIN PROTESTERS DEMAND RELEASE OF CATALAN EX-LEADER CARLES PUIGDEMONT

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An event organizer had critical words for both Germany and Spain when it came to the imprisonment of Catalonia's ex-president. Meanwhile, politicians from Germany's The Left party paid Puigdemont an Easter prison visit.

Hundreds of Catalan independence supporters braved near-freezing temperatures and gray drizzle on Sunday to march through the streets of Berlin and demand that Germany release the imprisoned ex-president of Catalonia, Carles Puigdemont, rather than extradite him to Spain.

The protesters, many waving the yellow, red and blue flag of the Catalan separatist movement, also criticized the Spanish government's handling of the crisis, which recently drew the German judicial system into the fray.

The Berlin demonstration was organized by the German branch of the Catalan National Assembly (ANC-DE), a civil organization advocating for an independent Catalonia. It came six months to the day after a contested independence referendum in Catalonia that the Spanish government had declared unconstitutional and sought to prevent, in part through police force.

An appeal to Germany

"The motto today was 'Free Puigdemont,'" Ferran Cornella, the ANC-DE's secretary, told DW in a phone interview.

It was emblazoned across banners and signs carried by the protesters as they demanded that Puigdemont, a key politician behind the region's independence drive, be freed from a German prison in Schleswig-Holstein. German authorities detained the politician on the basis of a European arrest warrant for rebellion and embezzlement, after he drove into the country one week ago.

After Puigdemont's arrest, pro-independence Catalans also took to the streets of Barcelona to demand his release.

"We want Germany to free our president. He was in multiple European countries and could always move freely," Cornella said. "We find it scandalous that he now steps onto German soil and is arrested."

In the coming week, the German justice system in Schleswig-Holstein is expected to decide whether to proceed with Puigdemont's extradition. The decision hinges on whether the German

legal system recognizes the crime of rebellion as defined under Spanish law.

The German federal government has said it will not interfere in the state court's decision, to avoid any politicization of the affair.

Signs demanded 'Freedom for the Catalan political prisoners' in German. The Catalan text says, 'Long live the republic!'

Cornella had critical words for the government of Chancellor Angela Merkel: "The German government has always said up until now that the Catalan conflict is an internal conflict. And now they arrest our president. Where is this neutrality now?"

The marchers in Berlin used banners to call on the German government not to support the Spanish government's "political justice." Independence supporters use the term to describe the Madrid government's attempt to quell their movement through the courts instead of seeking a political resolution.

"This is a political conflict and it requires a political solution, not repression and imprisonment," Cornella said, adding that this is something the ANC-DE wanted from both the German and Spanish governments.

On Sunday, the Catalan independence supporters reserved their sharpest criticism for Spain. "Spain is not a democracy," some protesters' signs read.

Cornella seconded their sentiment. Spain "is a very autocratic state," he said, more along the lines of Turkey than the EU. "You can only wish for democracy there, right now." At the same time, he said it was good that those Catalans supporting continued union with Spain had demonstrated in the past as well. "That belongs to a democracy," he said, while reiterating that the problem was the criminalization of the independence drive.

The activist estimated that some 500 people joined in the march, "perhaps even a few more," while German police put the number at around 200. Some participants came from as far away as Düsseldorf, Frankfurt and Hamburg, the secretary said, though the majority of the marchers came from Berlin and the surrounding regions.

Two representatives in the Catalan regional parliament, Quim Torra and Aurora Madaula, both of whom are members of Puigdemont's political party, Together for Catalonia, also came to Germany to take part in the march.

The Left shows its support — and alludes to a dictatorial past

Catalan politicians were not the only representatives demonstrating their support for Puigdemont and the Catalan independence movement on Sunday. Politicians from Germany's The Left party also expressed their solidarity with the marchers and the imprisoned ex-regional president.

Andrej Hunko, the European policy spokesperson for The Left, joined marchers as they made their way from the Brandenburg Gate to the Justice Ministry in Berlin. Hunko had previously called Puigdemont's arrest a "shame" and said that: "The criminal prosecution is obviously politically motivated."

Also on Sunday, two other Left politicians, Diether Dehm and Zaklin Nastic, visited Puigdemont in the prison in Neumünster, where the Catalan politician is being held. They had offered Puigdemont advice, Nastic wrote in her blog, and found the ex-regional president was in good spirits.

[Nastic, a demonstrator from Spain and Dehm (L to R) stand with the 'estelada,' the flag of Catalan independence, in front of the prison where Puigdemont is being held (picture-alliance/dpa/M. Christians)]

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Nastic also referenced German-Catalan relations under the Nazi regime in her post. She pointed out that Lluís Companys, the president of a short-lived Catalan state during the Spanish Civil War, had been arrested by the Gestapo while in exile in Occupied France and then extradited by German officials to Spain, where he was executed by the regime of dictator Francisco Franco.

"In light of this event, the German government should not place itself so squarely on the side of the autocratic regime of [Spanish Prime Minister] Rajoy," she wrote.

'A new era' continues

As for Puigdemont, the imprisoned independence leader invoked the October 1 referendum in a tweet and vowed to continue the fight for Catalonia's independence from Spain: "That day of popular dignity and police barbarism was the beginning of a new era from which there is no turning back."

ANC-DE activist Cordella echoed Puigdemont's sentiments after the Berlin march had drawn to a close. The arrests of much of the Catalan independence movement's leadership have not weakened the drive to break away from Spain at all, he said.

"The Spanish government has obviously not understood that this independence process is not being steered by the Catalan parliament. Instead it's the opposite: it comes from the streets," he said. "Our independence process will exist and go on as long as there is pressure from the streets."

As the world watched, Catalonia's parliament voted 70 to 10 for the region to declare its independence from Spain. "Our legitimate parliament has taken a very important step. This is the people's mandate," Puigdemont said after the decision. Dozens of opposition lawmakers from the Socialist Party, Citizens Party and Popular Party had walked out of the parliament chamber to boycott the vote.

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