
CATALAN SITUATION IS 'SURREAL', SAYS BARCELONA DEPUTY MAYOR

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Six months after the Spanish government suspended Catalonia's autonomy, trying to govern Barcelona is "sometimes surreal," the city's deputy mayor Laia Ortiz admitted.

"The Catalan situation has a lot of impact on everyday life. It's really difficult," she told EUobserver in an interview.

Since the government applied Article 155 of the constitution, in reaction to an independence declaration by the Catalan parliament, the region has been ruled by ministries in Madrid under the authority of the deputy prime minister Soraya Saenz de Santamaria.

In Barcelona, Ortiz explained, responsibilities are shared between the city and the 'Generalitat' (Catalonia's government) in four areas - education, health, housing and social services.

Under article 155, Madrid has now taken the Generalitat's role, and Barcelona's authorities have to obtain the ministries' agreement in order to take decisions.

"We have to talk to ministries to solve things in the management of geriatrics," Ortiz pointed out. "Sometimes we have postponed meetings because Madrid didn't say ok. It's a really blocked situation."

"It's really impossible to manage the situation from Madrid," she insisted. "They don't want to make the effort, but also they don't have the tools to govern a region, they don't know how to do it."

"We need a [regional] government," she said.

Ortiz, a Green politician, is a deputy of Barcelona mayor Ada Colau, the leader of a left-wing coalition that took power in the city in 2015.

Responsibility required

But she insisted that the Catalan problem is "a political problem, not a judicial problem."

She put some blame on Spanish authorities for escalating the crisis - by putting separatist leaders in prison, and for not trying to find a compromise solution.

"We have one government, not two," she pointed out, referring to the suspension of the Catalan executive. "It's this government [Madrid] that should be responsible and make a political offer."

Ortiz, however, also put part of the blame on the separatists, by trying to put forward as candidates for president of the government only people who were now in exile, in prison or under investigation.

"The priority is to have a government, we need someone to negotiate," she said, adding that "of course [separatist parties] have to be responsible."

"The situation is getting more tense, very frustrating. We need responsibility of both sides," she insisted.

The showdown over the region's independence also has consequences on the city's politics, with local elections in May next year.

"Some see Barcelona as a place to 'conquer'" to strengthen their position in the debate, Ortiz noted, referring to separatists as well as anti-independence politicians.

"This part of a political strategy is to have only two blocs," she said. "[The independence issue] has nothing to do with the role of the local government."

She said the outgoing mayor would run her re-election campaign on "what people care about, what you can really do as a local government," mentioning housing, environment, public transport and education.

'We need four more years'

The current coalition, which was elected with the support of the radical left Podemos party, has been a poster-child for the Spanish left.

"We have changed the priorities," the deputy mayor for social affairs said. "We showed that a local authority can do more than what its powers are supposed to be."

"One of our priorities was to fight inequality," she said. . explained that the city has tried to expand public housing and to slow the rise of rents caused by funds investing the housing sector.

She revealed that, since last year, a minimum income (linked to various obligations) is being tested in a neighbourhood of the city.

She also said that since 2015, Barcelona has tried to diversify its economy to depend less on tourism - which has a negative impact on housing and living conditions of locals - and to develop the social economy sector and protect industry.

But Ortiz admitted that the coalition, which governs Barcelona without having a majority in the municipal council, has not achieved everything it wanted.

"We need four more years," she said.

Barcelona, through Ortiz, is also trying to push the coalition's agenda at EU level.

Ortiz, who also chairs the social affairs forum in Eurocities, a network of European cities, met EUobserver earlier this month during a visit to Brussels to meet EU social commissioner Marianne Thyssen.

Cities want a voice

"Cities want to have a key role in negotiations and implementation of the European social pillar," she said, referring to the pact signed by EU states last November. "We want to have a voice."

She argued that with some 75 percent of European population living in urban areas, "cities have to deal every day with the most pressing issues", such as unemployment, poverty and access to affordable housing.

"From a local point of view, the increase in inequality is the biggest problem now in Europe," she pointed out, adding that it was one reason for the increase of euroscepticism.

"It cannot be that the commission makes economic plans and doesn't act on the social impact. It's the opposite," she said.

As negotiations about the next EU multi-annual budget are starting soon, Ortiz regretted that institutions and member states "don't talk about social cohesion or at least about increasing the financial support to local authorities."

"If Europe is really worried about its image and about the increase of populist movements, it should do more," she said.

Kaynak/Source: