
PUIGDEMONT RECLAIMS CATALONIA'S LEADERSHIP

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Carles Puigdemont is back.

The former Catalan leader landed in Brussels on Saturday (28 July) from Hamburg, four months after he had left Belgium for a conference in Finland and was arrested in Germany on his return journey.

The Spanish Supreme Court lifted last week the European Arrest Warrant against him, after German judges agreed to extradite him for embezzlement - but not for rebellion and sedition over his role in the Catalan independence referendum and declaration of independence last year.

Puigdemont, who feels vindicated by the judges' decision, is also back on the political frontline, claiming his rights as the legitimate president of Catalonia and overshadowing the region's current leader Quim Torra.

At a press conference on Saturday morning in Brussels, the former leader answered almost all the questions. And at an event in Waterloo in the afternoon, where his house of exile has been nicknamed "Casa de la Republica", he mingled with a crowd of supporters and took selfies like a rock star.

"He's leading the independence movement," Torra told EUobserver while posing himself for pictures on the sidelines.

"We are working to reinstall him in his role as president, so he can replace me," he added. Asked when that should happen, he answered: "as soon as possible".

Puigdemont, who renounced after months of political deadlock the possibility to run Catalonia via Skype, and let Torra, a hardline separatist, be elected by the Catalan parliament, has no official position. But relieved from judicial pressure as long as he stays out of Spain, he intends to be the real power behind the government.

"Leaders lead. You don't need a position for that," a source close to the Catalan government told this website. "Torra consults him, the ministers consult him."

Last week, Puigdemont also strengthened his grip on the region's politics when a close ally, David Bonvehí, was elected leader of his PDeCat party after a more moderate leader stepped down.

'Not the last stop'

The former leader, who first came to Belgium in October after the Spanish suspended the region's autonomy in the wake of the independence declaration, and to avoid being arrested, said that his return was "not [his] last stop".

"This is not the end of the journey," he told journalists. "I will travel to the last corner of our continent in order to defend the just cause of the Catalan people."

"We value the strategy of president Puigdemont to internationalise the Catalan political conflict," said Torra at the press conference, referring to his predecessor's efforts to get EU support against the Spanish government.

Torra's government, which was formed early June, has revived the effort. Last week, he re-opened Diplocat, the region's agency for public diplomacy that had been closed down by Madrid.

It appointed a new head for the Catalan representation in Brussels, where the press conference took place, and intends to re-open offices in Berlin, Paris, London, Geneva and the US in September.

Torra admitted that while the EU is "a club of states", Catalonia is "not right now an official state", but he insisted that Puigdemont's presence in Belgium was "a very great opportunity to internationalise our cause".

Disappointed by the EU

"It is the moment of knowledge, before the recognition," Puigdemont declared. But this time, contrary to his previous strategy, he didn't call on the EU to force Madrid to a dialogue.

He said that he was "very disappointed" by EU leaders' silence when Spanish authorities refused to acknowledge the referendum and imprisoned separatist leaders, but noted that the EU institutions were not speaking for all Europe.

"I'm sure the point of view of the majority of European society about our problem or demands are clearly in favour of the fundamental values of democracy," he said.

Back from Germany, Puigdemont faces, with Torra, a new political situation in Spain. On the very same day that Torra's government was sworn in, on 2 June, the conservative Spanish prime minister and Puigdemont's nemesis Mariano Rajoy was brought down by a confidence vote over corruption cases.

Contrary to Mariano Rajoy, the new prime minister, Socialist leader Pedro Sanchez, has said that the Catalan crisis needed a political solution and not one through the courts, and he has received Torra in his office.

"We are now asking the Spanish government for facts, for having not only the sensation that dialogue has started but also implementing things that we can see and touch," said Torra.

Political prisoners

The Catalan separatists demand in particular that the nine imprisoned pro-independence leaders, who they say are political prisoners, are released and that the charges are dropped.

Torra's government, which considers the result of last year's referendum and the independence declaration as a mandate, also wants Sanchez to discuss an independence process.

Compared to Rajoy's government, Sanchez's government "is nice in form, but it is not delivering," the source said.

Almost a year after the crisis started, Puigdemont, Torra and their allies are ready for a new showdown – counting on the weakness of Sanchez, who has no majority in the Spanish parliament.

"Sanchez is in the hands of Puigdemont," the source argued, taking as an example a vote over the budget that Sanchez lost last week, partly because of PdeCat abstention.

"If he decides to pull back PDeCat's support, the government falls," he said.

No new referendum is planned at the moment, but the separatists, who insist on the right of the people to vote, think that a new showdown would be to their advantage this time.

"The next time, if there is a referendum, there will be no charges," the source said, arguing that the German judges' decision showed that there was no grounds for rebellion and sedition charges.

As for EU support for the independence case, "we'll win it by keeping pushing," he said.

Kaynak/Source: