

German government backs Spain's violent crackdown on Catalonia

Peter Schwarz
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Germany's government has given its explicit backing to the violent suppression of the Catalan independence movement by the Spanish government.

At a government press conference on Wednesday, government spokesman Stefan Seibert stated, "We have a major interest in the stability of Spain, and it is therefore important that everything going on there politically remains within the rule of law." Spain's constitutional court took a clear decision that "this so-called referendum" was not in accord with the Spanish constitution. The Spanish government has the task of "maintaining the constitutional order."

Seibert emphasised that the German Chancellor was not striving for a mediation mission, because the issue at stake is "according to our firm conviction an internal Spanish affair."

Despite repeated follow-up questions from several journalists, the government spokesman stubbornly refused to utter a single word of criticism over the Spanish police's brutal crackdown, which injured up to a thousand participants in the referendum.

Asked why the German government was not responding to the violations of human rights and police violence on Catalonia's streets—"What are you waiting for? What still needs to happen?"—Seibert answered, "I have made the federal government's stance on this absolutely clear. It is focused on the legal reality, on Spain's constitutional reality, just as any future solution to this internal Spanish conflict must focus on Spain's constitution. That is our firm conviction."

As other journalists asked if the police violence had not been jointly responsible for the escalation, Seibert responded, "It is certainly not my job here to evaluate police operations in Spain. For the federal government, the central issue in our considerations is the situation as provided for in the Spanish constitution." The referendum was "a breach of the Spanish constitution."

Similar responses followed. A journalist asked, "Could you inform us at what point you condemn police violence or

police operations? When police violence rules in Russia, you are the first to condemn it, and equally so in Turkey and other countries. Why not now in Spain?" Seibert answered predictably, "The question draws absurd parallels. I deliberately said earlier, in a democratic state, the constitution protects the rights of all citizens. That's why the constitution has to be respected."

The spokesman for Chancellor Merkel sought to avoid answering a question about the appropriateness of the force used by the state, "Spain is a democratic state. In terms of the media, it is also a pluralist state. All necessary discussions are being conducted in Spain. Nobody needs a statement on and an evaluation of a police intervention by a German government spokesman."

A growing number of pieces in the German media are also supporting the Spanish government's militarist crackdown. While some commentaries call for mediation and deescalation, right-wing hardliners are increasingly winning the upper hand.

Spiegel Online published Thursday an angry tirade entitled "This referendum cannot be allowed to succeed" by Markus Becker. He compared the head of the Catalan government, Carles Puigdemont, with "the Kaczynskis, Orbans and Erdogans of the world" and justified this by saying, "He declares himself to be fulfilling the people's will and deduces from this the right to break the law."

Becker could not be more explicit about his opinion of referendums. They are good when they benefit the ruling class, and bad when they don't fit in with its plans. "Referenda can be a valuable instrument of democracy," he wrote. "They can give people the feeling that they are participating directly in the polity ...at least this applies when referenda are used responsibly and for a definite purpose. But in the hands of populists, they are an extremely dangerous tool, which Puigdemont has once again dramatically proven."

Puigdemont has, according to *Spiegel Online*, "transformed the referendum into a political weapon which he is aiming at the heart of the Spanish state and European

Union, and with the help of which he is holding hostage the section of his own people that is against separation.”

Becker employs concepts that are normally reserved for justifying the bombardment of civilians in Aleppo, Mosul and Raqqa. “This purported majority,” he wrote, “is becoming something akin to a human shield in a conflict which in the most extreme scenario could culminate in bloodshed under conditions similar to civil war.” In this way, he leaves no doubt about the fact that he would support a bloodbath inflicted by the Spanish government.

Reinhard Müller was equally forthright in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* on Thursday in a comment entitled “Self-determination does not mean secession.”

Müller wrote, “No doubt: all peoples have the right to self-determination,” and referred to the United Nations Charter and other UN documents. But he went on to add that the right to secede from an existing state only applied in extreme cases. “Because the inviolability of the state is one of the fundamentals of the international community. Every state therefore has the right to oppose separatist strivings within its borders.”

Müller also sought to wrap himself in the Spanish constitution, which explicitly stipulates “that the central government can compel autonomous regions like Catalonia to the ‘forcible fulfillment’ of its obligations.”

Why is the German government endorsing the violent clampdown on the Catalanian referendum by the Spanish state, which 42 years after the fall of the Franco dictatorship, is returning to its authoritarian traditions?

The references to the rule of law and the Spanish constitution are threadbare pretexts, as shown by the German government’s stance in other cases. Whether they support or resist a separatist movement has nothing to do with the legal situation, but rather depends on their own interests. In the 1990s, Germany actively pushed for the fracturing of Yugoslavia and promoted separatist movements in Croatia, Slovenia and Bosnia, which led to a series of bloody wars with well over 100,000 deaths. The first military intervention by the German army since World War II took place in 1999 with the goal of separating Kosovo from Serbia.

The German government is backing the uncompromising stance of Mariano Rajoy because it fears concessions to the Catalan separatists could trigger a chain reaction, weaken the EU and thus undermine Berlin’s plans to rise to the position of an economic, political and military world power on the basis of the EU.

Several European governments fear that Catalonia will be followed by others. Flanders is threatening Belgium with secession, Lombardy is threatening Italy, and in Britain, the danger exists that with Brexit, the conflict in Northern

Ireland could erupt once again. This is also why the EU Commission has adopted an unrelenting stance towards the Catalan nationalists. The Commission has made clear that in the case of secession, Barcelona should not expect to be accepted into the EU, and has even opposed adopting a mediation role, although some who fear the situation will otherwise get out of control are calling for EU mediation.

German EU Commissioner Günther Oettinger (CDU) warned of a dramatic escalation, “The situation is very, very concerning. A civil war in the midst of Europe is conceivable,” he said. “One can only hope that negotiating channels between Madrid and Barcelona are established soon.”

But there is a more fundamental reason why the German government is uncompromising in its approach to the Catalan nationalists. The ruling elite fears that any sign of relenting could encourage mounting opposition to social inequality and militarism. The period in which social conflicts in Europe could be overcome by means of compromise has long passed into history. Millions of workers and young people have been experiencing declining wages, tougher working conditions and worsening career prospects for years. Trust in the traditional parties is eroding.

The ruling classes are responding to this by resorting to authoritarian forms of rule. In France, the long-standing state of emergency is now being written permanently into law. During the German election campaign, the parties sought to outdo each other with demands for more police, surveillance and internet censorship. For the first time since the downfall of the Nazis, a right-wing extremist party is entering parliament.

Berlin’s support for Rajoy’s violent suppression of Catalonia’s independence referendum must therefore be taken as a warning. The German ruling class is preparing to brutally suppress any form of social and political opposition.



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