

Madrid rejects Puigdemont's call for talks in Catalan referendum crisis

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On Monday, Spain's Popular Party (PP) government rejected Catalan Premier Carles Puigdemont's call for a two-month period of negotiations with Madrid after the "yes" vote in the October 1 Catalan independence referendum. With Spanish armored forces and thousands of police preparing for action, Spain is on the brink of martial law and a military crackdown in Catalonia.

After Puigdemont declared on October 10 that Catalonia had won the right to declare its independence, Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy set a deadline of October 16 for Puigdemont to clarify whether he had in fact declared Catalan independence. When Puigdemont did not provide a yes or no answer, apparently trying to avoid a confrontation, the PP escalated the conflict on Monday. Reiterating its threat to suspend Catalan self-government, it jailed Catalan nationalist politicians and denounced the October 1 referendum as a Russian-backed provocation.

In a letter, Puigdemont stated: "When on the 10th of October, due to requests from numerous international, Spanish and Catalan institutions and people, I proposed a sincere offer of dialogue, I did so not as a demonstration of weakness, but rather as an honest response to find a solution to the relationship between the Spanish state and Catalonia, which has been broken for many years."

Calling for a two-month negotiation period, he said, "The priority of my government is, with all our strength, to find a path for dialogue." Criticizing "the brutal police violence exercised on the peaceful people on October 1," he asked Madrid to "reverse the repression of the Catalan people and government."

The PP government, which has given Puigdemont a second deadline of October 19 to say how he intends to obey the Spanish Constitution, reacted with a barrage of threats. In an unprecedented attack on democratic rights, Spanish courts preventively jailed Jordi Sanchez, the head of the Catalan National Assembly, and Jordi Cuixart, who leads Omnium Cultural. Both Catalan nationalist

politicians are accused of sedition, supposedly for encouraging resistance to the Spanish police crackdown prior to the October 1 referendum.

Deputy Prime Minister Soraya Sáenz de Santamaría mocked Puigdemont at a press conference, declaring: "It was not difficult to say yes or no to whether he had declared independence."

Rajoy personally repeated his threat to invoke Article 155 of the Spanish Constitution to suspend Catalan regional autonomy, declaring that Puigdemont "will be the only one responsible for the invocation of the Constitution." Rajoy added, "Prolonging this situation of uncertainty only favors those who seek to liquidate civic harmony and impose a radical and pauperizing project for Catalonia."

Article 155 could be invoked in conjunction with Article 116 to declare a state of siege, suspend basic democratic rights and usher in military rule. Defense Minister María Dolores de Cospedal plans to visit the facilities of the Arapiles Regiment at Sant Climent de Sescebes near Girona, and Bruch, near Barcelona, tomorrow. Last week, *El País* identified these as armored forces that Madrid would mobilize if it launches military operations against the Catalan population.

In another extraordinary and dangerous provocation, the PP's speaker in the European parliament, Esteban Pons, denounced Puigdemont as a tool of Russia. Asking his fellow European parliamentarians to "not believe the national-populist propaganda," he promised to present next week "proof that Russian networks supported Carles Puigdemont and the secessionist movement."

Unsubstantiated accusations of Russian involvement in the Catalan crisis had previously been made in the US media, including *Politico* and the *Washington Times*, and had been echoed in *El País*. However, Madrid had until now explicitly contradicted these allegations in its official statements.

Asked by *Russia Today* last week for a Spanish Ambassador to Russia Ignacio Ibanez Rubio said: “On the contrary, Spain endorses Russia’s official stance. From the very beginning, Russia has recognized that this is an internal affair of our country.” He added that Spain and Russia enjoy “great relations... So we are very pleased with Russia’s stand on the crisis in Catalonia.”

Now, however, without providing any evidence against Moscow, the PP is carrying out a 180-degree turn in its position. The provocative charges Pons is making against Russia have uncertain but potentially explosive implications. If the PP truly believed that Moscow was allying with Catalan separatists to dismember its territory, it could cite this as an aggressive Russian action against Spain and invoke NATO provisions for common self defense to demand joint NATO military action against Russia.

Above all, these charges intensify the accusation of treason leveled against Catalan nationalists by Spanish King Felipe VI in his October 3 address, as well as by Rajoy. It provides Spanish troops in Catalonia with a further pseudo-legal rationale for bloodshed—as the PP government has threatened by comparing the fate of Puigdemont to that of 1930s Catalan regional leader Lluís Companys, who was shot by the Spanish fascist regime of Francisco Franco in 1940.

Workers must be warned: there is real danger of a military crackdown, the likes of which Spain has not seen since the 1936-1939 Civil War and imposition of the Francoite dictatorship that held power until 1978. Washington and the European Union, which are working in coordination with Rajoy, would not intervene to stop such a political crime. Indeed, the unsubstantiated allegations of Pons against Russia have all the earmarks of a political operation to provide the US media a pretext to support a crackdown in Barcelona and a turn to military rule.

The only force that can prevent mass repression is the working class—mobilized independently of and in revolutionary opposition to the entire ruling establishment. While Madrid’s immediate target is Catalonia, the broader target is the entire Spanish and European working class, under conditions of an international breakdown of capitalism unprecedented since the 1930s.

Class tensions are reaching explosive levels after a decade of deep austerity and economic crisis. With tens of millions of workers jobless, large majorities of youth in countries across Europe told the EU’s Generation What

politics, year that they would support a mass uprising against the existing order. Measures like France’s state of emergency and Spain’s turn toward military rule are part of a preemptive turn to authoritarian rule being carried out by the European bourgeoisie against the danger of a revolutionary mobilization of workers and youth across Europe.

The responses of the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) and Podemos underscore that the plans of Rajoy and the EU for a crackdown and military rule face no opposition in the ruling elite. PSOE General Secretary Pedro Sánchez told *El Diario* that between the PSOE and the PP, “the relationship is fluid and constant in our joint answer against the separatist challenge.”

The PSOE is increasingly converting itself into a political appendage of the PP, making even more explicit statements in support of military action against Catalonia than Rajoy’s party. The PSOE spokesman Oscar Puente declared, “Mr. Puigdemont’s non-reply is completely unacceptable... With his attitude, we wonder if Mr. Puigdemont leaves another way out other than the implementation of [Article] 155.”

Puente added that Article 155 would be invoked in an “agreed and negotiated” way, apparently implying that the PSOE and PP are coordinating closely on its invocation.

While Podemos criticized the PSOE-PP position on Puigdemont’s statement today, it is continuing to signal that it will adapt itself to a crackdown. Podemos organization secretary Pablo Echenique said Puigdemont had made “clear again” that there had been no unilateral declaration of Catalan independence. He complained that between the PSOE and the PP “a decision has been taken a priori” to escalate conflict with Barcelona.

Nevertheless, Echenique left open the possibility that the application of Article 155 and the holding of snap elections in Catalonia at gunpoint could resolve the crisis. Calling this outcome “neither bad nor good,” he said he hoped new elections could produce “better negotiating partners than Rajoy and Puigdemont.”



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