

Deposed Catalan regional premier Carles Puigdemont arrested in Germany

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Mass protests have erupted against the arrest by German police of Catalonia's former regional premier Carles Puigdemont.

The arrest warrant was requested by the Popular Party (PP) government of Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy. But the PP's repression has the full support of the Socialist Party (PSOE) opposition. PSOE leader Pedro Sánchez said of Puigdemont's arrest, "We live in a social and democratic state governed by the rule of law in Spain and in Europe. Nobody is above the law. [We] Respect judicial decisions and support our security forces."

Puigdemont's arrest, carried out on the basis of a European Arrest Warrant issued Friday by Spain's Supreme Court, saw tens of thousands assemble in the centre of Barcelona, Sunday. Between cries of "Puigdemont, our president", "This Europe is a shame" and calls for a general strike, the protesters cut the traffic lane for vehicles going down the city's main avenue in Las Ramblas and four other highways.

The Catalan National Assembly convened a demonstration in front of the EU headquarters in Barcelona to march to the German consulate. Protests have also been called in Girona, Lleida and Tarragona. Protesters clashed with riot police, leading to numerous injuries.

Puigdemont has been living in exile since October, when he fled to Belgium along with four other regional ministers after declaring Catalan independence. In response, Spain's right-wing Popular Party government invoked Article 155 of the Constitution, dissolving the Catalan government, implementing direct rule from Madrid and imposing snap elections.

Fearing sedition and rebellion charges that led to the imprisonment of three deputies, including vice-premier Oriol Junqueras (Republican Left of Catalonia, ERC), Puigdemont remained in self-imposed exile in Belgium.

Last Friday, Spanish Supreme Court Judge Pablo

Llarena reactivated an international arrest warrant for Puigdemont when he was visiting Finland for talks with lawmakers. He also jailed five leaders of Puigdemont's deposed government without bail as they await trial.

In total, 25 Catalan leaders are to be tried for rebellion, misuse of public funds or disobeying the state. Convictions could result in up to 30 years in prison.

The whole case is built around spurious grounds that the Catalan secessionist movement has used violence to achieve independence, therefore justifying the charge of rebellion, which according to Spain's penal code may apply only to those who "violently and publicly" try to "abrogate, suspend or modify the Constitution, either totally or partially".

According to sources of online newspaper, *eldiario.es*, the police operation resulting in the detention of Puigdemont was led by Spain's National Intelligence Centre (CNI), in coordination with the General Information Office of the National Police. According to the same sources, Puigdemont's movements have been monitored at all times since he left Belgium.

Puigdemont was heading to Belgium to surrender to the judicial authorities, according to his lawyer in Spain, Jaume Alonso-Cuevillas, when he was intercepted. According to German news magazine *Focus*, the Spanish intelligence services informed the German Federal Criminal Police Office (BKA)—responsible for national and international terrorism—that Puigdemont was moving towards the German border. The BKA then informed the State Criminal Police Office (LKA) of Schleswig-Holstein which arrested Puigdemont.

The decision to arrest Puigdemont in Germany is significant. The German Criminal Code punishes the alteration of the constitutional order and attempts to secede from Germany with a sentence of up to life imprisonment. This is indicated in Article 81 of the German Criminal Code, in the section, "High treason

against the Federation,” which states, “Whosoever undertakes, by force or through threat of force, to undermine the continued existence of the Federal Republic of Germany; or to change the constitutional order based on the Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany, shall be liable to imprisonment for life or for not less than ten years.”

German law is closer to Spanish law than the existing statutes in Belgium, facilitating Puigdemont’s transfer to Spain.

According to sources of *El País*, the police had assessed whether to call for his arrest in Finland or Denmark, but this “was ruled out having the conviction that the former regional premier was going to continue his journey by land into Germany. This country is considered by Spain one of the EU states with which there are better relations of police collaboration.”

Last November, the German government expressed its full support for Madrid following the detention of eight former Catalan ministers over their role in the region’s independence drive.

Government spokesperson Steffen Seibert told reporters, “From the federal government’s point of view, Spain is of course a state governed by the rule of law and as government spokesman I see no reason at all to comment on decisions made by Spanish courts. We continue to support the clear position of the Spanish prime minister Mariano Rajoy”, adding that “What’s important to us is that the unity and constitutional order of Spain are maintained.”

The role played by the German government again exposes the politically bankrupt efforts of the Catalan nationalists to promote the illusion that the European Union and its members states would intervene in the Catalan crisis to preserve “democratic values” by brokering a deal with the Popular Party government in Madrid. Instead, the EU and government leaders in Germany, Britain and France have repeatedly backed PP Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy and insisted he is the only person with whom they will negotiate.



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