

Italy arrests ex-Catalan regional Premier Puigdemont for extradition to Spain

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Yesterday, an Italian judge ordered the release of former Catalan regional Premier Carles Puigdemont after his sudden arrest on Thursday evening, as he arrived at the airport at Alghero on the Italian island of Sardinia. Puigdemont faces an extradition hearing on October 4, although Italian press reports say charges will not be pressed if he leaves Italy before then.

In 2017 he fled to Belgium after Madrid's brutal police crackdown against the Catalan independence referendum he had organised. The crackdown left over 1,000 peaceful voters injured. This was followed by threats to impose a state of emergency on Catalonia, the detention of top officials of Puigdemont's regional government, and a show trial which condemned a dozen of them to a decade in jail for sedition. If extradited, Puigdemont faces decades in jail on trumped-up charges of sedition, rebellion and misuse of public funds.

The current leader of the right-wing Popular Party (PP), Pablo Casado, who was in government at the time, vowed that Puigdemont would end up "like Companys." Lluís Companys was the Catalan regional premier who declared independence in 1934. Exiled at the end of the Spanish Civil War in 1939, Companys was captured by the Nazi Gestapo in occupied Paris in 1940 and handed over to the Spanish fascist regime of Francisco Franco, who had him in tortured, beaten and shot.

The arrest, flowing from the most reactionary political interests, was a flagrantly anti-democratic operation of Europe's police-state machine, apparently carried out behind the back of the Italian government, and was rapidly exposed as having no legal basis.

Puigdemont was arrested by Italian *Carabinieri* police as he stepped off the aircraft as he arrived in Sardinia to attend Adifolk, a Catalan cultural festival in Alghero.

The Barcelona daily *La Vanguardia* wrote: "Members of the Puigdemont team who were in Alghero waiting at the airport saw an unusual deployment of *Carabinieri* and

already warned of what could happen. Two plainclothes officers proceeded to ask for his identification and took him first to the airport police station and then as a detainee to [Alghero's] police station. Italian police sources explained that the arrest was carried out by the Sardinian Border Police." He then spent the night at Bancari prison, before being released by the Court of Appeal of Sassari yesterday.

Italian police reportedly detected Puigdemont's arrival via the integrated Passenger Name Registration (PNR) system and the Schengen Information System (SIS). The first collects passenger information, which is transferred to police authorities of EU Member States to screen for criminals. The second, the SIS, is a large-scale information system to facilitate cooperation between national border control authorities, customs and police in Europe to deny entry to a person or search and arrest a person for whom a European Detention Order has been issued.

Puigdemont reportedly has a data sheet in the SIS registering the arrest and surrender order issued in October 2019 by Spain's Supreme Court Judge Pablo Llarena. This order was suspended, however, though Llarena told the Sardinian judge the order had never been "de-activated."

Llarena's argument does not hold water, however, having been explicitly rejected even by Spanish authorities themselves.

Puigdemont's immunity as a Member of the European parliament was stripped last March in a vote sponsored by the Spanish fascist Vox party's European Conservatives and Reformists group and supported by liberals, conservatives and social democrats. He appealed the decision, but in a ruling at the end of July, the EU's general court said there was no immediate risk of arrest, as the detention order was suspended. The state attorney representing Spain at the European Court, Sonsoles

Centeno, said last July, “There is no procedure for executing the aforementioned arrest warrants.”

Arguing that Puigdemont was not subject to imminent arrest, the European Court of Justice denied his appeal. Since July, he has travelled freely in Europe—to Switzerland, Germany, the Netherlands and France. In France, he rented a summer house and went to the National Assembly in Paris, where he gave a press conference and met publicly with various deputies of the French National Assembly. He was never arrested, let alone questioned.

Moreover, attempts of Spain’s Supreme Court to secure the extradition of Puigdemont and two of his former regional councillors, Antoni Comín and Carla Ponsatí—who also fled Spain, and are also MEPs—have previously failed. Belgian, German and Scottish courts, and the Court of Justice of the European Union have all rejected extraditing Comin, Ponsatí and Puigdemont.

After the *Carabinieri* arrested Puigdemont, the Italian government’s ruling parties denounced the decision, making clear they had not been consulted. Former far-right Interior Minister Matteo Salvini of the Lega opposed the arrest, saying, “Italy does not lend itself to the vendettas of others.”

Democratic Party Senator Tatjana Rojc said, “The arrest on Italian soil of a Euro-deputy who should be able to travel freely is shocking: handcuffs on Puigdemont are a serious act and an image unbecoming to a country with the rule of law.”

This underscores that Puigdemont’s arrest appears to have been an operation of unelected forces in the police-state machine. According to the far-right news site OKDiario, the arrest took place because Spain’s National Intelligence Center (CNI) was alerted to Puigdemont’s travel by the SIS, after which Spanish authorities contacted Italian police. A security source told OKDiario: “what a country that detects [a fugitive] has to do is to notify the police of the country that ordered his capture and alert the police of the country that is the fugitive’s destination.”

This fascistic arrest of Puigdemont provoked mass anger in Catalonia. In Barcelona, thousands of protesters gathered outside the Italian consulate to demand his release. Catalan regional Premier Pere Aragonès issued an official statement calling for “freedom for President Puigdemont and all those facing repression.”

Significantly, however, Spain’s Socialist Party (PSOE)-Podemos government endorsed the police-state operation against Puigdemont. Prime Minister Pedro

Sánchez appeared on Friday at a press conference, stating that Puigdemont “must be brought to justice,” and “stand trial.” Sánchez added that the Spanish government “respects all judicial proceedings whether opened in Spain, in Europe or in this case in Italy, and will comply with any judicial decisions that may be taken.”

Puigdemont’s arrest is a reactionary attack on democratic rights, revealing the vast police-state machine that the ruling class is building up across Europe as it shifts rapidly to the right. His Catalan nationalist politics themselves are bankrupt and reactionary, working to divide workers inside Spain along national and linguistic lines. However, the principal target of the fascistic forces pursuing Puigdemont is the working class.

Vox, the army, and the rest of the Spanish political establishment including the PSOE-Podemos government have all supported the EU’s “herd immunity” policy of allowing the virus to spread during the COVID-19 pandemic. This has led to over 1.2 million confirmed COVID-19 deaths across Europe, and over 100,000 excess deaths in Spain during the pandemic. Over 10 percent of Spain’s population is confirmed to have been infected with the coronavirus.

After mass strikes broke out across Europe in March 2020, as workers demanded the right to shelter at home to stop the contagion and mass deaths in the early weeks of the pandemic in Europe, the far-right forces leading the anti-Catalan campaign were appalled. Broad sections of the officer corps and of the Vox party leadership began agitating for a coup to crush domestic opposition. In December, WhatsApp chats were leaked to the press in which Spanish Air Force officers declared they were “good fascists” and wanted to kill “26 million people” in Spain.

It is critical to mobilize the working class across Europe in defence of democratic rights and against the ruling elites’ fascistic and anti-scientific policies on the pandemic. This requires advancing the call for Puigdemont’s immediate release and his freedom to go where he pleases.



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