

## **The Referendum for Catalan Independence and its Aftermath: A Personal Account**

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### **Abstract**

This account does not claim to be academic in nature – though all of the events described and statements reported can be found online on media websites – but is, rather, a personal description of the extraordinary events which occurred in Catalonia from September 2017 to January 2018. It includes digressions describing the significance of football, road networks and other regions in Spain, but above all it provides eyewitness testimony of a people's wish to express themselves freely and democratically at the ballot box. The Spanish government's brutal response has led to the country's gravest crisis for decades, with the monarchy seriously questioned, the constitution beset and Europe glowering disapprovingly from the north.

The situation is by no means resolved with ten members of the Catalan government and two independence lobbyists now on trial for rebellion, sedition and misuse of public funds, and six members of the Catalan government in exile in Belgium, Scotland and Switzerland.

**Key words:** Catalonia, referendum, political prisoners, exile

## Protest

Deeply fearful that the Catalan referendum on independence would go ahead, on September 20, 2017, Madrid ordered the *Guardia Civil* to raid a number of Catalan government offices and arrest senior civil servants. One of these government offices was the Catalan Finance Ministry. As a consequence, 40,000 people gathered outside the building. I was one of them. I heard the news on the radio in Sabadell, where I live, twenty kilometres to the northwest of Barcelona. I immediately went to the railway station and took a train to the centre of Barcelona. From their conversations, it seemed that everyone on the train was doing the same. Some had flags, but most looked as though they had done as I did; heard the news, left their homes, and caught the train.

Protesters made no attempt to enter the building but over the course of the day the two Land Rovers in which the *Guardia Civil* had arrived, and were left outside the ministry building, were vandalised. Towards midnight the leaders of the independence lobbies *Omnium Cultural* and the *Assemblea Nacional Catalana*, Jordi Cuixart and Jordi Sánchez, managed to convince most of the peacefully demonstrating crowd to go home but despite guarantees from the Catalan Police that they would be safely escorted from the building the *Guardia Civil* decided to hunker down for the night in the now deserted offices. That evening mass demonstrations took place all over Catalonia. We had a crowd of 6,000 in Sabadell. The *Guardia Civil* finally emerged to a virtually empty street at around 6 o'clock the next morning.

On the same day, elsewhere in the city, Spanish Police attempted to enter the headquarters of one of the independence parties in search of independence campaign material. They tried to do so without a search warrant or any other judicial document and were refused entry. MPs, party members and sympathisers gathered in front of the building and there was a standoff throughout the day with the people resolutely refusing to respond violently to police provocation. Serious questions arise: Why did the Spanish police attempt to raid a political party headquarters without the appropriate authorisation? Why did they remain there all day in full riot gear including guns for firing rubber bullets, which are illegal in Catalonia? Is it a coincidence that they chose to besiege the most radical of the independence parties' headquarters?

Two days later the Spanish government hired three ferryboats at a cost of 300,000 euros a day to house 6,000 *Guardia Civil* and Spanish Police drafted in from all over Spain. Many of them had been given rapturous send-offs from their hometowns throughout Spain by people waving the Spanish flag and yelling "A por ellos" which means "Go get them". Meaning go get us, the Catalans.

That weekend I went with my wife to Perpignan in France, where we visited the village of Elna and its famous maternity hospital where pregnant Spanish women, fleeing from the Spanish civil war, were given refuge and a safe place to give birth. There were quite a lot of Catalan tourists there as it was a holiday in Barcelona on the Monday.

## The Referendum

Meanwhile, the Spanish government, and the then Spanish prime minister, Mariano Rajoy, insisted the referendum would not happen. They claimed that all the ballot papers and all the ballot boxes and all the referendum publicity had been confiscated. But referendum posters

kept appearing, and more and more flags and stickers distributed. It was then announced that all of the polling stations would be sealed up by the police on the Friday night and through the weekend until Monday, to prevent the referendum taking place. As polling is usually held in schools, these were occupied on the Friday by parents, teachers and children who stayed there until voting began on Sunday morning. Our polling station, where I live in Sabadell, was in the Youth Council building. We occupied it on Friday evening, but I didn't stay the night either Friday or Saturday as there were hundreds of people there and I like a comfortable bed. But I got there at 5 am on Sunday morning, along with about 100 other members of the *Comité de Defensa del Referendum*. These committees, made up of local people, sprang up spontaneously all over Catalonia, to prevent polling stations from being closed down by the police.

At half past seven a car slipped into the car park and a couple of young men quietly brought large, rectangular black objects wrapped in plastic into the polling station. The ballot boxes and the ballot papers had arrived. Shortly afterwards a couple of Catalan police – the *Mossos d'Esquadra* – came to visit. “Are you holding an Autumn festival,” they asked. They then told us that the referendum was illegal and wanted to know who was in charge. “We all are,” we replied. Then they wandered off and stood guard about 100 yards away for the rest of the day. Polling opened at 9.00 by which time there were hundreds of people waiting, and then the news came in of the attacks on polling stations in Girona, Barcelona and one of the polling stations near ours, in Sabadell, where the Speaker of the Catalan Parliament, was due to vote.

Within an hour about 2,000 people were lining up to vote just at our polling station. I don't know how many were on the electoral roll, but I suspect about 90% in our area voted, a good third in response to the violence perpetrated by the Spanish police. Later in the morning some of us went to visit the polling station attacked by the police. It was a primary school and the police had smashed the glass entrance to get in. They left empty-handed because the people inside had had time to hide the ballot boxes on the roofs of neighbouring buildings. By the time we got there the international observers had turned up and were taking photographs. They were absolutely shocked by what they had seen in Barcelona and Sabadell.

Back at our polling station, at about two o'clock we were suddenly ordered to gather around the entrance as the Spanish police were on their way. I was standing near the front with my daughter next to me. My heart was beating furiously. But either the police decided to move on, or thought we were too numerous and they left us alone. They left many of the places they attacked during the day empty-handed, unable to get through the crowds of people peacefully defending their ballot boxes, hands in the air, despite being bashed with batons, shot at with rubber bullets or sprayed with tear gas.

Everyone was following events across Catalonia on their mobile phones. There were images of the *Mossos d'Esquadra* remonstrating with the Spanish police; the firefighters, in their red uniforms and yellow hard hats stood, as they had promised, between the attacking police and the peacefully protesting public, taking baton blows to the head and body, but not fighting back. A senior fire chief said that the task of firefighters was to protect life. He had thought, he added, that that was the police services' mission, too.

As the afternoon wore on, sporadic raids on polling stations continued in Barcelona but then we heard that the Spanish police were fanning out across the Catalan countryside and attacking isolated villages. They smashed up polling stations, beat up villagers and made their

getaway with ballot boxes containing handfuls of votes. According to the Catalan Department of Health, 1,066 people needed medical attention, 23 of whom were over 79 years old. One man lost an eye (Benito, 2017).

When the polling stations closed at eight o'clock everyone expected the attacks to be renewed, but nothing happened – we have learnt recently that a shocked Angela Merkel telephoned Mariano Rajoy, the Spanish prime minister, and told him to stop the police violence (Corporació catalana de mitjans audiovisuals, 2018). After the count the ballots were taken by car to the town hall where the town council had organised a party and installed a massive screen broadcasting Catalan television as the count was announced. There were 2.2 million votes cast, about 43% of the electorate, 91% of which were in favour of independence. About a third of polling stations didn't open and an unknown number of votes were lost to police action. Spanish Prime Minister, Mariano Rajoy appeared on television to say the referendum had not taken place and that the police had acted with great restraint.

In the week following the referendum we learned that the ballot boxes had been kept hidden in the village of Elna, in France, in the Maternity hospital (*ara.cat*, 2017). No wonder there were so many Catalans there that weekend – they were picking up the boxes and distributing them around Catalonia where they were kept hidden in churches and people's homes. We also learned that the then Catalan president, Carles Puigdemont, when he left home to vote, was pursued by a Spanish police helicopter so his security team drove him under a bridge where he switched cars and managed to evade his pursuers in the sky.

The Catalan police, the *Mossos d'Esquadra* were furious at the Spanish police, describing them as drug-crazed and out of control. The Spanish police, meanwhile, accused the *Mossos d'Esquadra* of disloyalty and failing to obey orders. Their complaints against the *Mossos* have been taken up by the Spanish courts and their chief, Major Trapero, already a Catalan folk hero for his handling of the terrorist attack in Barcelona in August 2017, is now being prosecuted for sedition and leading a criminal gang (i.e. the *Mossos d'Esquadra*). It is now known that the imam responsible for the terrorist group was an intelligence asset of the Spanish secret services, a fact they kept to themselves.

October 2. The news is full of stories showing how the ballot boxes had been protected from the police; some contained nothing but empty envelopes. In one town they filled the boxes with bags of macaroni. In another town the counting of the ballots took place during mass, with the priest and the congregation singing patriotic Catalan hymns (Catalunya Religió, 2017).

### **General Strike**

October 3. A one-day general strike is called, probably the most successful in Catalan history as it had the support of everyone from the unions, to the Catalan government, to the heads of business and industry. In Sabadell we were asked to gather in front of our polling stations and then march to the town centre where 25,000 of us converged at midday. With a population of 200,000, it was the biggest demonstration ever seen in Sabadell. The local forestry and rural agents converged on the town in their yellow vehicles, lights flashing and sirens blaring to join the demonstration in support of the strike. The firemen brought along their biggest tenders with their telescopic ladders extended into the air as high as possible. The crowd cheered them after their defence of voters during the referendum and the speaker of the Catalan parliament, Carme Forcadell, who lives in Sabadell, turned up to thank them

personally. The demonstration was repeated in the evening in the squares and streets surrounding the town hall. There were massive demonstrations in every town and university campus in Catalonia.

That night, King Philip VI of Spain made a speech in which he exclusively addressed those opposed to Catalan independence: “I know very well that in Catalonia there is also much concern and uneasiness with the conduct of the regional authorities. For those who feel that way, I tell them that they are not alone; that they have the support and solidarity of the rest of Spain, and the absolute guarantee of our Rule of Law in defence of their freedom and their rights.” This was interpreted as the monarchy’s approval of the police violence on October 1st against the Catalan people. In the following days a number of the biggest businesses in Catalonia announced that they were moving their headquarters to other parts of Spain, in response to threats and promises by the Spanish government. Like a lot of people we decided to boycott those businesses and change our bank accounts and utility companies to those which have remained in Catalonia. The workers’ committee at the Seat car factory in Martorell, a town to the south west of Barcelona, announced that the company had received threats from the Spanish government, including a telephone call from Philip VI, urging them to move their headquarters out of Catalonia. Being a subsidiary of Volkswagen, they weren’t particularly bothered by blustering from Madrid and refused to move.

October 16. The two leaders of the main independence lobbies, Jordi Sánchez and Jordi Cuixart, are imprisoned without trial and without bail for their actions on September 20, when 40,000 people protested outside the Catalan Finance Ministry as it was being raided by the *Guardia Civil*. They are accused of “inciting a tumultuous uprising intended to impede by force or other illegal means the application of the law.” Documentary evidence, however, clearly shows the two Jordis (Sr Alone, 2018) not only restraining the crowd, but eventually getting them to disperse. We now know that the two Jordis acted as intermediaries between the *Guardia Civil* and the protestors (and one of the reasons they became so anxious to clear the street was because, quite late in the day, the *Guardia Civil* revealed they had left a number of firearms in their unlocked vehicles (Sr Alone, 2018, from minute 32). The Jordis are, nevertheless, on trial for rebellion. As far as is known, no disciplinary measures have been taken against the *Guardia Civil* for leaving weapons unattended and it is assumed they were acting on orders with the intention of deliberately provoking an incident in which the guns would be used by the crowd, thus justifying a military occupation of Catalonia by the Spanish armed forces.

The response to the Jordis’ imprisonment was a loud session of saucepan banging from windows and balconies across the country and the next day there was a stoppage at 12 o’clock and then a silent demonstration in the evening in Barcelona. 200,000 turned up, but other silent demonstrations were held all over Catalonia, including in Sabadell where I stood silently, candle held aloft, together with my daughter, and a friend of hers and several thousand fellow Sabadellencs. Unfortunately, the wax from the candles at the Barcelona vigil dripped in such quantities onto the tarmac that the streets had to be closed to traffic for nearly 24 hours as the city authorities cleaned it up.

## **Independence**

October 27. The Catalan Parliament votes for independence. We went to Tarragona that night. The *castellers* (human castles) and *diables* (firework-wielding devils) were out, and the national anthem, “Els Segadors” was sung, and we all celebrated our independence.

Tarragona was beautiful, a UNESCO world heritage site with squares and streets filled with bars and restaurants. The tourists took pictures of the locals having their Friday night fun. We all knew it was only for a few hours. By 10:00 pm Rajoy had announced direct rule. In Barcelona neo-fascists attacked a school, children ran away screaming, a teacher was punched in the face, Radio Catalunya had its windows smashed by Spanish nationalists.

Rajoy also announced that there would be a Catalan parliamentary election on December 21st. He is convinced that the independence parties will lose their majority and sense will return to the Catalan people through the election of a loyalist, unionist pro-Spanish government.

October 29. *Societat Civil Catalana*, an extreme right wing unionist group, calls a demonstration. 300,000 turned up according to the police, though the organisers and the Spanish press claimed there were a million people there. Thousands were bussed in from all over Spain, many of them members of neo-fascist organisations. Immigrants were attacked, Franco's anthem, "Cara al sol", was sung along with fascist salutes and shouts of "Viva Franco". A pitched battle broke out in Plaça Catalunya between rival neo-fascist football fans – the chairs from Bar Zurich, a well-known gathering point for tourists, flew thickly through the air. The resurgence of Spanish fascism has become quite serious, with outbreaks not just in Catalonia, but also in Valencia and Madrid.

### **Prison and Exile**

October 30. It has been announced that Catalan president Carles Puigdemont and ministers Clara Ponsatí, Toni Comín, Meritxell Serret and Lluís Puig have gone into exile in Belgium.

November 2. Those who stayed behind are summoned to Madrid and summarily locked up: Catalan Vice president and finance minister Oriol Junqueras, and ministers Carles Mundó, Jordi Turull, Josep Rull, Raül Romeva, Joaquim Forn, Dolors Bassa and Meritxell Borràs were sent to prisons in the Madrid region. Carles Mundó and Meritxell Borràs were later released on bail, but the speaker of the Catalan Parliament, Carme Forcadell, was later imprisoned. They are accused of rebellion, sedition and misuse of public funds. They have been refused bail and have not yet been brought to trial.

November 5. Catalan President Carles Puigdemont and the four Catalan ministers exiled in Brussels appear before the judge in response to Spanish demands for their extradition. The Belgian official who released the news that the five would have to give themselves up to the Belgian police before appearing before the judge was left speechless by the Spanish reporter who hoped they would all be handcuffed. "No," the official finally replied, "we only do that with dangerous prisoners in this country." It turns out that the nine members of the government who were sent to prison in Madrid were handcuffed, placed in a police van without seat belts, and then driven off at high speed in order to bounce them around in the back of the vehicle.

Spain's then chief prosecutor/grand inquisitor, José Manuel Maza, later argued that if the jailed politicians had immediately renounced their heretical views on independence, they would have been let out on bail. In other words, they are in prison for their ideas, and not for any crime they have supposedly committed. Should they swear allegiance to the Spanish flag and constitution they may hope to be released.

Meanwhile, back in Brussels, the five testified for six hours and were then allowed to go free, pending further deliberations, on condition they remain in Belgium.

## Resistance

The saucepan banging continues every night at ten o'clock, and there are sporadic demonstrations and road blocks and the closure of railway lines across Catalonia. Meanwhile the extreme right is gaining in confidence secure in the knowledge that the Spanish authorities will do nothing to check them. On Saturday night neo-fascists marching in Mataró, a town up the coast from Barcelona, beat up a young man as he walked out of his building. He had refused to shout "viva España". He was taken to hospital.

November 8. Today there is a general strike. It is the beginning of a nation-wide civil disobedience movement organised by the CDRs. The *Comitès de Defensa del Referèndum* sprang up spontaneously on September 28 after the Spanish government threatened to close the polling stations on October 1. The *Comitès*, made up of local residents, organised the occupation and defence of the polling stations and were key to ensuring that the vote went ahead. They were also essential to the success of the October 3<sup>rd</sup> general strike. After the Declaration of Independence, they became *Comitès de Defensa de la República*. They have managed to bring Catalonia to a standstill by blocking sixty major roads and railway lines. They've organised this in complete secrecy and the police have once again been caught wrong-footed. As a consequence of the complete breakdown of the road network the police are unable to send in reinforcements to break up the roadblocks. So much, once again, for the Spanish secret services, already in disgrace for failing to discover the whereabouts of the ballot boxes prior to the referendum. All of the major roads and motorways around Sabadell have been closed down and so, predictably, it is chaos all over town as the municipal police direct the traffic round in circles. I went with my daughter on our bicycles to the motorway to join in the roadblock but by the time we got there they'd moved on and occupied the Sabadell-Barcelona railway line. Not that it mattered much; the students from the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona had also cut off the motorway just a few kilometres further down. In the west of Catalonia, the farmers are out with their tractors again and have brought Lleida to a standstill.

## Demonstrations

November 10. Tonight it is Sabadell's turn to host a demonstration by *Societat Civil Catalana*, the extreme right-wing Spanish unionist lobby. They've taken to calling demonstrations in towns which have a large number of people born outside of Catalonia and who came here in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s to find work, mainly in the textile industry; at one time they made up nearly half of the Catalan population. Many of these workers, now retired, strongly identify with their roots and see themselves as Spanish rather than Catalan. Some don't. Their children and grandchildren increasingly don't.

The protestors began attacking members of the media. At independence demonstrations you see no law enforcement; unionist concentrations are different. There were nearly as many municipal and Catalan police in the town hall square as demonstrators, and rightly so, as it turned out. A woman from a German news agency was specifically picked on because the crowd mistook her for a reporter from Catalan television. She was very distressed, though, and the police decided to evacuate the press rather than risk further incidents.

November 11. A major demonstration in Barcelona is called in support of those in prison. We caught the train from Sabadell at 3:50 pm; it was packed. I've never been on a train so full, it must have contravened railway regulations. I had to haul my daughter aboard before she was left behind, but we kept packing them in as we proceeded towards Barcelona. No-one complained; we were all there for the same purpose. In recent years the local services of the Spanish national railway company RENFE have been managed from Barcelona but with direct rule from Madrid this is no longer so. Consequently, no extra trains were laid on.

The police say there were 750,000 – it was probably double that (Vilaweb). The independence organisers no longer bother to announce a head count of their own as the demonstrations are so self-evidently enormous. We were on a very wide boulevard – Marina – three kilometres long, packed like sardines – I've never been on a demonstration before where we were jammed so close together. But even if there were only 750,000 of us, that's over 10% of the entire Catalan population. When it began to get dark there was a spontaneous decision to turn on mobile phone lights. This is a response to the embarrassing incident in Barcelona on October 16, when the streets of Barcelona became covered in candle wax. Hundreds of thousands of mobile phone lights all shining together makes a very impressive sight.

### **The Threat of Martial Law**

Friday 17. Marta Rovira, acting head of the political party *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* (Catalan Republican Left) while Oriol Junqueras languishes in a Madrid gaol, has claimed that various sources warned the Catalan government that if it continued on its march towards independence there would be blood and deaths, real bullets would be used rather than rubber ones, and the military would be deployed. She argues that this was the reason they did not resist the imposition of direct rule and did not call on the people to defend the Parliament. Madrid has been quick to deny this – Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy, government spokesman Íñigo Méndez de Vigo and Spanish government representative in Catalonia, Enric Millo, have all described Rovira's words as “filthy lies” while at the same time admitting that they would not be taking her to court for defamation. Apparently one of the sources – confirmed – is the Catalan Ombudsman, Rafael Ribó. Another – unconfirmed – is Íñigo Urkullu, lehendakari (president) of the Basque Country. Other sources, such as Luis González Segura, a lieutenant expelled from the army in 2009 for reporting his superiors for corruption, argues that Rajoy and the Madrid government have been so repressive towards Catalonia in order to *avoid* a military coup – indeed they may well have warned the Catalan government of military intervention not as a threat, but because they knew they wouldn't be able to stop it. According to González Segura, the military gained enormous power, especially over the monarchy, after the failed coup in 1981 in exchange for not supporting the uprising. As a consequence, rather than being purged of Francoist elements and ideology, these have remained, mainly to enrich themselves through corruption.

### **Direct Rule**

November 30. Direct rule is becoming ever more invasive. The so-called third sector is not receiving any funding leaving many people in desperate need without any support. At a more ludicrous level the PP has managed to get the colour yellow banned, it being the colour of the ribbons worn to remind us of the political prisoners. The big display fountains below Montjuich in Barcelona are no longer allowed to be lit up with yellow – though other colours are permitted.

The Spanish parliament has voted by a large majority not to authorise a judicial investigation into the police violence on October 1 as they claim the whole thing was falsified by the Catalans who “led the police into a trap”. It now emerges that the Spanish government fed images of violence from other incidents to its tame media in order to then point out that they were false. By extension, they are saying, all such images are therefore false. Presumably, this is only really for Spanish domestic consumption as so many people, press agencies, and the foreign observers, saw the violence at first hand.

## **Belgian Justice**

December 4. The Belgian magistrate deciding whether to extradite the Catalan government-in-exile has postponed his decision until December 14. Meanwhile, the Catalan media has been banned from using the following expressions: *government in exile*, *ministers in exile*, *ministers in prison*, *president in exile*, *vice-president in prison*. The argument being that with the imposition of direct rule from Madrid the Catalan government no longer exists and so it is misleading to use expressions that suggest it still does. Consequently, every time there is an item on Catalan television news about the government in exile or in prison a statement is read out explaining that they have been censored and are not allowed to refer to “government in exile, ministers in exile, ministers in prison, president in exile or vice-president in prison.”

Tuesday, December 5. In Brussels, following the Belgian judge’s postponement of his decision until December 14, defence lawyers are increasingly confident that the decision will go their way as the authoritarian and partisan nature of the Spanish judiciary becomes daily more evident. Consequently, this afternoon, Supreme Court judge, Pablo Llarena, has dropped the request for extradition but retained the Spanish arrest warrant. He will simply arrest President Carles Puigdemont and ministers Toni Comin, Lluís Puig, Meritxell Serret and Clara Ponsatí if they ever return to Catalonia. Llarena claims that the extradition request was made before he took over the case and it is perfectly normal for changes of this kind to occur. Actually, it is a very obvious and public rap on the knuckles from Brussels.

## **Yellow**

Persecution against the colour yellow continues. Police raided a number of Catalan ministries in search of Christmas trees decorated with yellow ribbons. In the ministry for the environment workers replaced the confiscated ribbons with signs saying “there was a yellow ribbon here.” The police later returned and removed the signs. In protest the workers finally decided to shroud the tree in black plastic.

Inevitably the confiscation of yellow ribbons has led to a mass ribbon-tying all over the country. The bridges crossing the motorway which runs past Sabadell were absolutely covered with them last Sunday and the CDRs (*Comités de Defensa de la República*) which have sprung up in Catalan ex-patriate communities around the world have covered bridges much, no doubt, to the annoyance of the local authorities.

Wednesday, December 20. The concern now is whether yellow ribbons can be worn by voters on polling day. The electoral commission has banned their use by those overseeing the voting at polling stations (selected from among the electorate by lot), but it remains unclear whether voters can wear ribbons or even wear the colour yellow at all. I suspect this may cause some problems tomorrow depending on the ideology of the people selected to manage the vote in each polling station.

## Catalan Parliamentary Elections

December 22. The three independence parties, *Junts per Catalunya* (34), *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* (32) and the CUP (4) won a combined total of 70 seats yesterday which gives them an absolute majority in the 135 seat Catalan Parliament and the likelihood that they will repeat the alliance they had before. The *Partido Popular* managed to get four seats in the election – down from eleven. This puts them in rather an embarrassing position given that they are still maintaining direct rule from Madrid. They are resolutely denying that their election fiasco has anything to do with it; apparently the two things are entirely unconnected.

Neither the unionist opposition nor Madrid are planning on going quietly, though. Today a Madrid judge fined Santiago Espot 7,200 euros for “offending the king and outraging Spain” during the 2015 cup final between FC Barcelona and the Basque team Athletic de Bilbao. The Spanish cup is called the King’s Cup and so the monarch turns up every year to watch the final. If either Barça or Athletic are in the final their fans whistle during the national anthem. If both teams happen to meet in the final there is twice as much whistling as normal. However, you only hear the whistling if you’re at the ground or tuned in to the Catalan (and, I assume, Basque) media. The Spanish media does not broadcast the whistling. Poor Santiago Espot, who was not even at the match, was found guilty of encouraging people to whistle on social media. The same year the Spanish government also managed to pressure UEFA into fining Barça 30,000 euros because the *estelada* (Catalan independence flag) had been exhibited in the crowd during the Champions League final between Barça and Juventus in Berlin. The following year UEFA fined Barça 40,000 and 150,000 euros for allowing fans to display the *estelada* during Champions League matches. Barça appealed to TAS (*Tribunal Arbitral de Sport*) in Switzerland and UEFA backed down recognising that flag flying was all part of the game – no-one has complained, for example, that Real Madrid has managed to annex the Spanish flag for itself and encourages its fans to display it at matches. The final was finally played in Madrid between FC Barcelona and Sevilla. Skips were placed at the various entrances to the ground and Barça fans were forced to take off any yellow clothing, including shirts and blouses, and throw them away. Bags were searched and any yellow items found were also confiscated.

## A Trip to Bilbao

It was with some trepidation that we drove across the border into Aragón on December 28, *dia dels Sants Innocents*, destination Bilbao. This was the fourth time in two years that I had been to Aragón but it was the first time I had seen it decked out with the *rojigualda*. There were whole streets of balconies covered with the Spanish flag demonstrating the extraordinary upsurge in Spanish nationalism that the Catalan crisis has triggered. We had coffee, bought our wine, kept our heads down, and got back on the road. Before long we were past Osca and heading into the Pyrenees. The motorway was excellent, well-paved, with almost no traffic and, above all, free. Unlike Catalonia, most motorways in Spain are either toll-free or very cheap. The reason usually given is that Catalonia was the first region to build motorways – logically – because it is the gateway to the Iberian Peninsula and the route for both lorries and tourists as they head south and west. Back then, in the 1960s, there was insufficient state money to pay for their construction and so they were privately built. Although they are now decades old and, in theory, they were paid off years ago, they remain the most expensive in Spain. If you complain to a Spaniard about this you will get the instant reply: “Typical Catalans, always after more money.” This argument obviously ignores the

fact that it's mainly the Catalans who have to pay the tolls, but there is some truth in it as the roads were built with private Catalan capital and the franchise was regularly updated during the *Convergència i Unió* years with the excuse that money was needed for maintenance and new roads. Salvador Alemany, president of Abertis, the private company which manages most of the Catalan motorways, was Artur Mas's closest and most influential advisor when he was president of Catalonia. When, not so long ago, it was revealed that the new network of motorways surrounding Madrid, and partly built by Abertis, was running at a serious loss because it was needlessly built alongside already existing two and three lane *autovies*, which are free, it was proposed that the tolls be raised on the Catalan motorways to compensate for the loss. Catalan motorways do not have *autovies* running alongside them, just ordinary roads. The loss of life in Catalan towns and villages from articulated lorries avoiding road tolls has been a serious issue for years.

As we climbed higher into the Pyrenees it began to snow harder and harder until it started to settle on the road. The temperature dropped to -1°C. Fortunately, we descended into Navarra before getting caught and we all breathed a sigh of relief. Navarra is, officially, bilingual – Spanish and Basque – and we felt the tension ease. Navarra and the Basque Country are the two regions of Spain which have a special constitutional deal with Madrid. They are described as “foral” communities which gives them a great deal more autonomy than any other region of Spain – they were the first to have their own police forces, but most importantly, they enjoy a large degree of economic independence. They are required to pay a fixed contribution to the common Spanish exchequer (army, diplomatic corps, etc.) but retain control over both the raising of taxes and their own expenses. In exchange they are less likely to receive any special or extra payments from Madrid but given that they are the two richest regions of Spain, they don't really mind. All of the other regions, including Catalonia, pay their taxes directly to Madrid and are then given back what the government deems necessary. It is in this way that Madrid has been able to squeeze Catalonia (population 7,523,000) to subsidise the poorer parts of Spain while at the same time holding back money in retaliation for the Catalan independence process. One of Catalonia's demands has been that it should enjoy the same fiscal system as the Basques (population 2,190,000) and Navarrese (population 640,647) but this is seen as deeply selfish by the rest of Spain. Last year, Rajoy's minority government was unable to pass the 2018 budget and so offered the Basque country – Spain's richest region per capita – a 4,245 million euros bribe in exchange for Basque Nationalist Party (*Euzko Alderdi Jeltzalea-Partido Nacionalista Vasco*, EAJ-PNV) votes. I obtained this figure from the Galician newspaper *La Voz de Galicia*. What particularly annoys the Galicians (population 2,719,000), one of the poorest parts of Spain, is that the bribe amounts to half their own annual allowance from Madrid. The Basques were getting 4,245,000 euros on top of the 11,486,000 euros they had already budgeted. The deal was set to go ahead but then on October 1st scenes of Spanish police bashing up old ladies in Catalonia hit the screens (Basque TV showing a different version from Spanish TV). The current Basque *Lehendakari*, Iñigo Urkullu, was no longer able to support Rajoy given the Basques' sympathy for the Catalan cause and the budget remains unpassed. The Spanish government justified the attempted bribe by explaining that this was how a well-behaved region was rewarded by the central government, unlike the disloyal and disobedient Catalans whose income was already being curbed by Madrid in the spring of last year just as the Basque bribe was being mooted.

We saw our first *estelada* (Catalan independence flags) in Navarra, but the Basque country was covered in them. In fact, there were more Catalan flags and *estelades* than either *ikurriñas* (Basque flags) or Athletic de Bilbao flags. Athletic de Bilbao football club is the

Basque equivalent of FC Barcelona but with an important difference – all its players must be Basque. Like FC Barcelona, it is not a corporation, but is owned and run by club members. As we travelled around Bizcaia (province of Biscay) we saw more and more Catalan flags and *estelades* and, of course, the total absence of the Spanish *rojigualda*. This was all very heart-warming, of course, but over 800 people were murdered by the Basque terrorist group ETA between 1959 and 2006, including 21 shoppers at the Hipercor supermarket in Barcelona in 1987 and six policemen in Sabadell in 1990. I remember them both very clearly. In June 1987 we'd gone to Andorra for the weekend and read about the bombing in *El Periódico* the following day (June 20, 1987): "ETA nos masacra" said the headline. "ETA is massacring us." It was the shock that ETA would do that to us, the Catalans. We were supposed to be on their side. And then in 1990, we were playing cards at home. Gin rummy. I heard a bang and said to my wife: "Something's happened." Almost immediately afterwards we heard sirens coming from every direction. They went on and on. The policemen had been in a van setting off to provide security at a football match at the Nova Creu Alta, Club d'Esports Sabadell's ground, about two kilometres from where we lived at that time. The frequently repeated demand from Madrid in those days was that there could be no negotiations while the violence continued.

As we drove back from the Basque country the scenery changed from lush Atlantic vegetation to the semi-desert of Navarra and Aragón. Both Euskadi (the Basque Country) and Catalonia are oases between Spain and France. North of the Basque country in France, les Landes in Aquitaine, was historically sandy, marshy moorland – now reclaimed – while the region north of Roselló, or French Catalonia, is bleak, windblown and sparsely populated. What are now the cross-border countries of Euskadi and Catalonia, both divided between north and south by a Spanish-French frontier, were once communities united not simply by their common languages, but by their isolation. For many, the Pyrenees are the eternal, natural frontier between Spain and France. Historically this is anything but the truth. The 1985 European Union Schengen agreement to which both Spain and France are signatories abolished the frontier separating the two countries and the local communities are rapidly growing together once again as the example of the Catalan village of Le Perthus/El Pertús demonstrates. Perched on the Pyrenees next to the motorway, they cater to the passing trade and it is quite impossible to know where one country begins and the other ends. The Spanish say that Catalan independence will lead to the building of walls as indeed will happen if Spain vetoes Catalan membership of the European Union. But Catalonia wishes to remain part of the European Union and to be a signatory of Schengen. Only Spain talks of building walls.

### **Post Script**

July 12. The German court rules that Catalan President Carles Puigdemont cannot be extradited for rebellion since a rebellion did not occur. He may possibly be extradited for misuse of public funds since a referendum did occur, and must have been financed somehow.

July 19, 2018. Spanish Supreme Court judge, Pablo Llarena withdraws, for a second time, the euro-orders requesting the extradition of President Carles Puigdemont (in Germany) and ministers Clara Ponsatí (in Scotland), Meritxell Serret, Toni Comín, Lluís Puig (in Belgium) and Marta Rovira (in Switzerland). The reason is, that if extradited for misuse of public funds only – a relatively minor charge – they cannot be tried for anything else related to the case. This would lead to the ludicrous position of trying the six Catalan ministers, Oriol Junqueras, Jordi Turull, Josep Rull, Raül Romeva, Joaquim Forn, Dolors Bassa, the speaker of the

Catalan Parliament, Carme Forcadell, and the two independence lobbyists Jordi Cuixart and Jordi Sánchez for rebellion, but not the President and the other ministers.

February 2019. The trial of Jordi Cuixart, Jordi Sànchez (in prison since October 16, 2017), Oriol Junqueras, Joaquim Forn (in prison since November 2, 2017) Jordi Turull, Josep Rull, Raül Romeva, Dolors Bassa, Carme Forcadell (in prison since March 23, 2018), Santi Vila, Carles Mundó and Meritxell Borràs (released on bail) has begun.

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