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Chaos in Catalonia

Catalan MEP Javi Lopez on why violence will get the Spanish government nowhere

In early October, the northern Spanish region of Catalonia staged a referendum on independence – against the wishes of authorities in Madrid. Both supporters and opponents of independence including the EU, have been highly critical of the Spanish government's violent response.

Catalan President Carles Puigdemont signed a declaration of independence on Tuesday 12 October, but asked the Catalan parliament to suspend the results of the disputed referendum, which Spain deems illegal. Spain's prime minister Mariano Rajoy has since told Catalonia to clarify its position, and he's refused to rule taking direct control of the region of 7.5 million people.

Catalan MEP Javi Lopez, who opposes independence, spoke to Lea Hemetsberger about what should happen next.

The Catalan Socialist Party, of which you are a member, opposes independence in Catalonia. Why?

> We in the Catalan Socialist Party understand that we're facing huge challenges in Catalonia and Spain. Over the past few years a combination of factors – the economic crisis, a crisis of representation in Spain's political system, discontent on the streets, and the continual lack of respect the government of Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy and his People's Party show to Catalonians – have bolstered those pushing for independence.
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> But as Catalan socialists, we believe that breaking off from Spain wouldn't actually benefit Catalonia at all. We strongly believe that the improvements and social progress Catalonia needs can only be delivered through a new framework of relations with the rest of Spain. That means being part of a full federal state that recognises its own diversity, identities and cultural richness.

Should the EU – and the European Parliament in particular – offer to mediate between the various factions?

Spain is a sovereign country, where democracy and the rule of law function in accordance with international standards. The central government and the regional government are perfectly capable of engaging in constructive dialogue, without needing someone else to step in. But in order for that dialogue to happen, both institutions have to respect our current laws and regulations.

The terms that each side decides to set during the negotiations can only be within the competences they have already been given. In other words, the Catalan government can't give itself the power to split off from Spain, as according to both the Constitution and the Catalan Statute of Autonomy it doesn't have that power. The European institutions were very clear about that when they warned that Spain's laws and norms must under no circumstances be violated. If the current government in Spain isn't capable of leading this dialogue, its ministers should resign and give other representatives and public servants a chance to engage with the Catalan independence movement.

Rajoy's come under a lot of fire for his hard-line stance, especially for the way police used excessive force in the run-up to the referendum and on the day itself. Should the Spanish central government have allowed the referendum to take place as a legally binding vote?

No democrat can be happy about the horrific images we saw at some of the polling stations on 1 October. The excessive force the police used against voters and protestors was completely inappropriate. In any case, the event itself was more like a peaceful demonstration than an actual referendum with guarantees the result would be respected, since the 'referendum' was illegal.

The process by which this 'referendum' was approved violated every single law regulating plebiscites: from the Spanish Constitution to the Catalan Statute of Autonomy. Even if it had taken place with no police or government interference, the result would still have had no legal implications.

The Catalan Socialists and the Spanish Socialists want a vote on an inclusive deal that would be acceptable to a majority of the population – for example, a reform of the constitution that allows for greater devolution of powers.

Thousands of people on both sides of the debate have taken to the streets in Catalonia and other parts of Spain. What needs to happen to bring these tensions down?

The politicians in both governments that are dealing with this crisis need to make an effort to sit together and engage in honest dialogue.

People need to see their representatives taking responsibility. It shouldn't be down to those on the street to resolve the conflict. Ultimately, it is the politicians who brought on this situation and it is they that must resolve it. They have to realise the danger of letting the cracks in Catalan society widen. Only by both recognising our differences and respecting each other's opinions will we see the current tensions dissipate.

Rajoy has refused to rule out invoking article 155 of the Spanish constitution to take direct control of Catalonia. Should he do so?

Approaching this issue with prudence and restraint is a deliberate choice, and not a mistake. Rajoy's government will only make a decision on how to respond after Puigdemont makes clear whether he has declared independence or not. His current stance is ambiguous.

Puigdemont's decision not to make a unilateral declaration of independence, and Rajoy's decision not to invoke article 155, has left open the option of dialogue, and the possibility we will find a positive solution and a new framework of coexistence.



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Javi López is a Member of the European Parliament for the Group of Socialists and Democrats for the PSC-PSOE since 2014, and was elected Vice-President of the European Parliament in 2024.