

# Frequently Asked Questions about Catalonia



[WithCatalonia.org](http://WithCatalonia.org)

Here are some answers to some of the typical questions about the Catalan sovereignty movement. In fact, rather than questions, they are misunderstandings. Some are even deliberately promoted lies aimed at undermining support for the Catalan movement.

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## 1 “The independence movement is just a bourgeois thing”

False.

80% of the Catalan population— and thus a large proportion of the working people of Catalonia — defend the right to decide in a referendum.

This 80% includes people who want to maintain the status quo and others who want a federal relationship with Spain, but most of them support independence.

The individuals and groups who are in favour of independence are socially very diverse. They include farmers, firefighters, dockers, teachers and many other sectors. These people have demonstrated their support for independence through massive demonstrations and, above all, with their votes.

In contrast, Catalan big business feels comfortable within the Spanish state. The main bosses’ organisations in Catalonia — such as Foment del Treball or the Cercle d’Economia — reject independence and even opposed the referendum. Foment del Treball called the referendum law a “legal coup d’etat”.

Because of this attitude, two thousand companies took advantage of the special measures introduced by the right wing People’s Party (PP) to encourage them to transfer their official headquarters outside of Catalonia, to escape “the threat” of independence. (Needless to say, the PP, with its defence of a united Spain, does represent the Spanish bourgeoisie.)

## 2 “The struggle for independence is a manoeuvre by Catalan elites to cover up their corruption”

False.

The struggle for independence has been pushed by mobilisation from below and by Catalan civil society organisations.

It became a massive movement in 2010, in response to Madrid’s blocking of the 2006 Statute of Autonomy that was promoted by the then Socialist President, Pasqual Maragall, governing in coalition with Esquerra Republicana and Iniciativa-EUiA. In summer 2010, the Constitutional Court, acting on accusations of unconstitutionality brought by MPs from the right wing People’s Party, struck down

important parts of the Statute. This Statute had already gone through the Spanish Congress (which had severely cut back the text agreed by 80% of the Catalan Parliament) and had then been approved by referendum in Catalonia.

In response to the partial annulment of the Statute, the Catalanist association Òmnium Cultural called a demonstration with the slogan: “We are a nation. We decide”. More than one million people took part. It was the first of a series of huge protests with up to 2 million participants.

This movement dragged a reluctant *Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya* (Democratic Convergence of Catalonia, “*Convergència*”) towards independence, thus destroying its decades long coalition with *Unió Democràtica de Catalunya* (Democratic Union of Catalonia, UDC),

Jordi Pujol, with his *CiU* coalition made up of *Convergència* and UDC, governed Catalonia for more than two decades. Throughout this time, this coalition acted exclusively within the framework of autonomy. The different accusations of corruption against the Pujol family did not lead to any move towards independence. Only from 2010 onwards, and under the mandate of then President Artur Mas, did *Convergència* commit itself to the sovereignty process.

If *Convergència*’s aim in supporting independence was to protect itself from accusations of corruption, it must be said that it failed miserably. At this moment, many members of the Pujol family face court cases. The same Catalan Parliament that promoted the independence consultation on 9 November 2014 also carried out a thorough investigation into corruption.

## 3 “If the struggle for independence was progressive, the Spanish left would support it”

The Spanish left has a decent record on international solidarity and in defence of national minorities. Its support for popular movements in Latin America and its mobilisations against wars in the Middle East are good examples of this. But sadly, with a few worthy exceptions, it does not apply the same criteria to the Catalan case.

This is not a new or isolated problem. Much of the French left turned its back on the Algerian independence movement, and most of the British

left never supported the Irish Republican movement.

It is clear that the parties of the Spanish left find it harder for to give support to a national struggle close to home, which directly affects the state in which they live and where they aim to win votes, than to a struggle far away. They have difficulties when the very conception of the country they live in is put in doubt. The struggle for the Catalan Republic poses the question: “what is Spain?”

However, sooner or later they will have to recognise that the Spanish government’s all out assault on the Catalan people’s democratic right to self-determination will harm the interests of all progressive forces in Spain.

## **4 “Every nationalist movement is right wing and racist by nature”**

The struggle for the national rights of Catalonia has very clearly gone hand in hand with the promotion of social and environmental justice. The Catalan Parliament, with a pro independence majority, has approved a whole series of progressive laws... that have been struck down by the Spanish State. Much of the Catalan pro sovereignty movement has also taken a firm stand against racism and in favour of welcoming refugees. An example of that was its contribution to the 300,000 strong demonstration for refugees on 18 February 2017.

It is too simplistic to call the Catalan movement “nationalist”. It would be more correct to speak of a pro-independence movement, or better still, a movement for the democratic right to decide.

We should also point out that not all “nationalisms” are the same. Some nationalisms want to impose an oppressive and/or imperialist state; others struggle against these states and show solidarity with other pro sovereignty movements around the world. A state nationalism, like that practiced by the Spanish government, is not the same as the national feeling that is an important factor for many people in the Catalan movement for self-determination.

In no way can Catalonia’s desire for self-determination be defined as right wing or racist.

## **5 “It’s not fair to impose schooling in Catalan on Spanish-speaking families”**

Schooling in Catalan was a demand driven by working class Spanish-speaking families in the 80s. These families saw that with just a few hours of classes a week, their children weren’t learning Catalan properly. There were private schools in Catalan, but it was precisely the Spanish-speaking community that demanded public education in Catalan.

Thanks to these struggles, the language immersion system was started at the Rosselló-Pòrcel primary school in Santa Coloma, in the outskirts of Barcelona, in the academic year of 1983-84. Over the next decade, and given its success, the model was extended to schools throughout Catalonia.

Schooling in Catalan does not harm any group of pupils. On the contrary; immersion allows for real bilingualism, which improves language skills in general. According to reports by the Higher Council for the Evaluation of the Educational System: “pupils in Catalonia move on to secondary education with an effective and similar domain of both official languages.” In addition, “students who have a good level in one language generally also obtain good results in the other”.

To summarise, schooling in Catalan is not something imposed on working class Spanish-speaking families. It is rather a successful model achieved largely thanks to their struggles.

## **6 “They should have agreed a referendum with the Spanish government”**

There is a long list of attempts to agree a referendum with the Spanish government. It is estimated that since 2012 this government has rejected 18 proposals for dialogue. The attempts to negotiate have come not only from most of the Catalan parties but also from Basque and Galician parties.

On 8 April 2014, three representatives of Catalonia — Jordi Turull of Convergència, Marta Rovira of ERC and Joan Herrera of ICV— jointly requested, in a special session at the Spanish Congress, the right to call referendums, making use of article 150.2 of

the Constitution. Rajoy's government refused, as always.

More than two-thirds of the seats in the Spanish Congress are held by parties that completely reject the right to decide. Therefore, those who say they would accept a referendum if it was agreed with Madrid are actually being quite cynical. Rather than being a real attempt to achieve the right to decide, this attitude is more an excuse that avoids facing up to the reality of a veto on the part of the Spanish government and the parties that support it.

## 7 “The referendum is not constitutional”

The unionist parties insist: “it doesn't depend on us, the right to decide has no place in the Spanish Constitution”. But they themselves knocked this argument down decisively in 2011. In the summer of 2011, the PSOE government, with José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero as President, agreed to amend the Spanish Constitution, in record time and with no referendum.

The amendment was designed to meet the demands of the European Union — represented by Angela Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy — to make budgetary stability a part of the Spanish Constitution. Austerity was set in stone for all the institutions of the Spanish State, from the central government, through the autonomous communities, to town councils.

Leaving aside the fact that “zero deficit” is part of the neoliberal dogma and very dubious as a government strategy, they confirmed what was already known. When they want to amend the Constitution, they can. The constitutional argument is an excuse, not a real reason.

In addition, 600 legal experts in Catalonia — including Mercè Barceló, Professor of Constitutional Law at the Autonomous University of Barcelona and Enoch Albertí i Rovira, Professor of Constitutional Law at the University of Barcelona — signed a manifesto insisting that it is possible to hold a referendum under the current Spanish Constitution. Again, it is not a legal or constitutional problem, but a political one.

## 8 “The Balkans showed us how these things end up: we don't want to see that happening again”

This argument is based on the idea that any conflict that has to do with the national question will lead to a civil war and ethnic cleansing, but there are hardly any similarities between the Balkan conflict and that of Catalonia and Spain.

Historically the Balkans have been a crossroads between the Ottoman, Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires. There are several religions — Catholicism, Orthodox Christianity, Islam... — and other minorities, such as the Roma people. And while there are areas with a greater presence of one nationality, culture or religion than others, all are mixed up. There are towns and cities with different majorities and minorities very close to each other. That is why the attempts to create more or less homogeneous nation-states in the Balkans have always involved war and ethnic cleansing.

The situation in Catalonia is very different. A recent survey reported in the newspaper *El País* — no friend of Catalan independence — showed that a mere 3% of the population of Catalonia felt only Spanish; another 5% felt “more Spanish than Catalan”; 90% felt equally or more Catalan than Spanish. In short, these figures show that in Catalonia there is a very strong sense of belonging to the country, blended with a quite widespread feeling of Spanish identity.

In recent years, Catalonia has become a much more diverse country, with many people from different parts of the world, both from other European countries and from all five continents. This has enriched the country culturally, but in no way has it brought social fragmentation.

In Catalonia today, the majority of people have plural identities — combining national feelings for Catalonia, Spain and a hundred or more other countries from around the world. But alongside that there is a broad consensus around the fact that the country we live in is Catalonia.

The Balkan tragedy was the product of a mosaic complex of national identities, driven into confrontation by unscrupulous politicians.

A similar violent outcome is not at all likely in Catalonia. To make it completely impossible, we must stop giving free reign to unscrupulous politicians and open a dialogue on how to respond

to the democratic demands of the people of Catalonia.

## 9 “We need less borders, not more”

The Catalan struggle really has more to do with overcoming borders than with creating them. In contrast, the brutal state repression against the pro sovereignty movement has the objective of maintaining the current Spanish borders, with Catalonia inside them.

Internationalism has always been strong in Catalonia, at least since the rise of syndicalism over a century ago. Following the Seattle protests, in the early 2000s, Catalonia was a reference point for the global justice movement, misnamed “anti-globalisation movement”. In 2003, Catalonia was a key part of the mass worldwide movement against the illegal Iraq war, waged by José María Aznar’s government, among others.

Today, one reason for wanting to break with the Spanish State is the wish to open the borders to the refugees that the Spanish government has refused to accept... thus failing to comply with international law, humanitarian principles and also its own commitments.

It’s the defenders of the status quo that want to strengthen the borders between people, and they do so with hypocritical arguments. It seems that the only border that bothers them is that of a future Catalan republic. It doesn’t even cross their minds to remove the razor-wire fences from the current borders of the Spanish State, much less to eliminate these borders completely.

## 10 “It’s all about money: Catalans are richer than the rest of Spain”

The Catalan economy is strong, but Catalonia is not the richest autonomous community in Spain. In terms of GDP per capita, Catalonia exceeds the national average by 19%. It is fourth in the list of autonomous communities, just after Navarra and before Aragon. The first in the list, almost 37% above the average, is the community of Madrid.

That said, whether in Catalonia or in Madrid, the overall statistics always hide more than they reveal. According to the 2016 Living Conditions Survey,

13.2% of people in Catalonia were at risk of poverty (in Madrid, 18.2%) and 32.3% of households in Catalonia had difficulties or serious difficulties in making ends meet (in Madrid, 29.7%).

## 11 “Catalonia doesn’t want to help the poorer parts of Spain”

Some sectors of the Catalan independence movement focus on tax questions and complain that “we pay too much to Madrid.” But the criticism is aimed against the Spanish government and not (except for a small and unrepresentative xenophobic fringe) against the people of Andalusia or Extremadura. In these autonomous communities, GDP per capita is half that of Madrid. This difference has hardly changed over the last 20 years. It is obvious that the taxes collected by the Spanish government don’t get spent on “solidarity”, on investments to bring economic improvements to the poorer regions.

In fact, the groups that block the measures that would improve conditions in Andalusia and Extremadura — agrarian reform, economic development, social justice... — are the same ones that block the right to decide in Catalonia. And the forces that want a real change to the south — such as the Andalusian Workers’ Union, SAT — also support Catalonia’s democratic rights.

## 12 “Why do they want independence? It doesn’t mean much in today’s globalised world”

With all their limitations, national states still have some ability to influence things. It’s obvious that the enemies of independence don’t want to lose even a part of the Spanish State and still less would they accept its disappearance. Why is that, if states are no longer important?

Despite the devolution of some responsibilities to the autonomous communities, many things are still directly controlled by Madrid. For all the talk about globalisation it’s the central government that decides where to invest in infrastructure and in many other fields. And it does so from a centralist viewpoint, not taking into account the needs of people in the different territories. In one very clear example, the residents of Murcia have been holding daily protests for more than six months demanding

that the new high speed train line through the middle of their city goes through an underground tunnel, as in many other cities, instead of being at ground level, thus cutting it in two.

The right to decide includes decisions about people's own economic and social life.

In any case, everyone is free to theorise about nation states and globalisation, but the decision on the independence of Catalonia must be made by its inhabitants, not a few theoreticians.

## 13 “The struggle for independence provokes the rise of fascism”

This argument is false and dangerous. Fascism and authoritarianism are growing across Europe and the world, with a strong institutional and electoral presence in many countries. Obviously this is due to diverse factors that have nothing to do with Catalan independence.

However, fascist groups feel emboldened by the anti-Catalanism promoted by the central government and the establishment right wing. The reason is not the struggle for the right to decide, but the long and concerted campaign of insults and accusations against Catalan society (see above, “Catalans don't want to help poorer areas”, etc.). The Spanish government uses Catalonia's demands as a smoke screen to cover up cuts in social services, their own mismanagement and widespread corruption.

Thanks to this propaganda, the repressive state measures against the exercise of the right to decide have not inspired large solidarity protests throughout the Spanish State. The impunity of police actions on September 20 and especially on October 1 gave confidence to the pro Spanish far-right. And the impunity given by the authorities to the first far-right aggressions acted as a green light for them to intensify their violence.

There will need to be a strong and united struggle to stop fascism. This must bring together the convinced pro independence sectors and the large democratic majority of those who are unionist or constitutionalist.

It is precisely the right wing lies and distortions against the pro sovereignty movement — as well as against other social and political movements — that give oxygen to fascism.

## 14 “The political prisoners are really criminals”

Neither Jordi Cuixart and Jordi Sánchez, who have been in prison since 16 October 2017, nor the rest of the prisoners have been convicted of any crime. The “crimes” they are accused of are non-existent and/or political.

They are accused of sedition, which the official Spanish dictionary defines as a “collective and violent uprising against authority, public order or military discipline, without reaching the gravity of a rebellion.” None of the prisoners used or proposed violence.

The (currently) 9 prisoners are in prison for their ideas and their political acts, not for any crime or anything that is not legitimate and democratic. If the PP and the courts say that what they have done is illegal, that says more about their laws and their lack of respect for democracy than about these prisoners.

The truth is that authoritarian governments and their not very independent judicial systems never recognise the existence of political prisoners. They always say they are mere criminals.

Lluís Companys, Catalan President during the civil war, was accused under the “laws” of the Francoist regime in 1940 and judged in a supposed court, with a defence lawyer and everything, for a series of “crimes” that could easily have included the “sedition” of which the current Catalan political prisoners are accused. No democratic person today can deny that his trial and execution — in fact assassination — were political.

The dictatorship introduced the “Decree-Law of 18 April 1947 concerning the repression of crimes of banditry and terrorism”: once again, political actions and opinions were being prosecuted as crimes.

Nelson Mandela was tried for political actions (which included, unlike the current prisoners, acts involving violence). But he was sentenced as a criminal and spent 27 years in the prisons of apartheid South Africa. At that time, Margaret Thatcher, then British Prime Minister, called Mandela a “terrorist”, but no democrat denied that he was a political prisoner.

All this — despite the many differences — applies to the Catalan political prisoners now.

## 15 **“If you become independent, you will end up outside Europe”**

Catalonia has strong external relations, both with Europe and with the whole of the Mediterranean region. This will not change, whatever the institutional situation of the country. People from abroad who want things from Catalonia — industrial products; food and drink; culture... — will continue to want them, and vice versa.

Concerning the European Union (EU), it remains to be seen what happens. Some people will want an independent Catalonia to be part of the EU. Others have always been much more critical towards that institution (remember that on 16 March 2002, half a million people demonstrated in Barcelona against “the Europe of capital and war”).

The EU’s anti-democratic imposition of austerity on Greece and other countries, and now the fact that they have supported the Spanish government in its repression and attacks on the democratic rights of Catalonia, reinforce this critical attitude. People know that Iceland, Norway and Switzerland are not inside the EU and they aren’t doing so badly.

In any case, we must see what the people of Catalonia want and what the European states — not only the Spanish state — want when we go from the current hypotheses to the reality of 7.5 million people in the middle of Europe that want to maintain solid and respectful economic and social relationships with the rest of the continent.

## 16 **“Catalonia is already an autonomous region: isn’t that enough?”**

The current system of autonomous communities was created in the aftermath of the Franco regime, when the generals were still threatening to bring back the dictatorship. The existing structure was designed to limit the capacity of self-government of Catalonia and the other stateless nations.

What has happened since then has confirmed these limitations, with the application of article 155 — the suspension of Catalonia’s self government— as the cherry on the cake. Now it is undeniable that the current system limits the capacity of the Catalan people to live as they want; both in the national aspect and with regard to social rights. That is why support for independence has grown.

In addition, as has already been said, one can comment on all these questions but in the last instance each nation must be able to decide its own future. If the majority of the population of Catalonia wants independence, no-one has the right to force it to remain within the autonomous structure; a structure, in any case, that the Spanish right wing wants to change to further limit the powers of the different nations that currently make up the Spanish State.