Absurdistan

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It’s the 1976-77 Christmas holidays and I’m travelling by Interrail with a friend. This is my first time in Spain and Catalonia. Franco is dead and buried and our boycott of the dictatorship is over. We want to go all the way to Morocco, which is as far as we can go with our passes.

Other people are riding with us in the compartment. At one station, three Spanish civil guards board the train. A man next to us becomes very nervous and we all help him hide under the seat. The heavily armed guards enter the compartment and ask for passports. After we show them our Swedish passports and, even though we don’t speak a word of Spanish, they sit down to chat with us. In the 70s, travelling with a Swedish passport is considered advantageous, but young Swedish women are also considered legitimate – and cheap – prey. It was a while before we got rid of them.

This wouldn’t be my only encounter with the *Guardia Civil* in the next few years. One day I was woken by a knock at the door. Outside a guard was pointing his automatic weapon at me. He was the same one who had questioned me about my sexual habits the week before at a petrol station. Of course, I refused to open it.

That first trip to Spain was the beginning of my more than forty years of close ties with Spain and Catalonia. I lived in Catalonia during the first years of the transition to democracy, and during the 1981 military coup. I also married a Catalan, so my children are Catalan too.

For an 18-year-old coming from Sweden, a peaceful country of many personal freedoms, going to such an authoritarian country, with all the institutions of the Franco era and an active terrorist organisation, was a huge culture shock. It was all very bizarre. I soon learned never to park in front of a police station (a very safe thing to do in Sweden). *They’re the first to be blown up. The civil guards shoot first and ask questions later*. Many of my friends spoke Catalan, but wrote only in Spanish. Some spoke in Spanish, others in Catalan, but we all understood one another. The people in the town where I lived could hardly speak Spanish – even though Catalan had been forbidden for forty years – so I learned Catalan. On the road to my house there was a village with only two residents. They had fought on

different sides during the civil war and were still not talking to each other.

In Sweden, the image of Spain was clearly a two-sided one. The ‘glamorous’ side: charter tourism, sun and sand, barbecues, cheap alcohol and discos. The ‘dark’ side: the dictatorship and the death penalty. I clearly remember when the socialist head of the Swedish government, Olof Palme, in a famous speech, said that Franco was a murderer and how harshly he criticised Swedish trade union members who had taken a charter trip to party there.

At school I learned that the only developing country left in Europe was Spain and that Spanish was spoken there. I was one of the many Swedes who refused to go to Spain while Franco was still alive.

Today, everyone seems to have forgotten the dark side of the Franco regime. At most, we learn that Spain was a dictatorship for 40 years and is now a full-fledged democracy. But transitions from dictatorship to democracy take time, especially when institutions remain fundamentally unchanged. The Spanish transition to democracy has often been held up as an example by northern Europeans, especially after the king intervened during the failed coup of February 1981. And with Spain’s entry into the EU in 1986, I thought things couldn’t go wrong. Spain and the other members of the European Union would be bound together by common values: democracy, human rights and the rule of law. With Spain in the Union, the rights of minorities and their languages would also be guaranteed.

So, the Spanish government’s use of force during the 1 October 2017 referendum was a rude awakening for the outside world. Photos showed the police and civil guards indiscriminately beating up the young and old as they queued at the polling stations. The media even began to report about the conflict in a new way.

Despite strong opposition from the Spanish state, the Catalan government made great efforts to explain why they wanted a referendum on independence, but the image in the media was often that of rich nationalists wanting to leave the poorer classes behind. This was certainly not a welcome message to Europe, where what counts is solidarity between countries. Also, the word ‘nationalism’ brought to mind fascism and right-wing extremism. But, how did it get to the point that Catalans felt forced to hold the referendum and the Spanish government felt obliged to ‘break the uprising’? Why didn’t they sit down and talk? Why didn’t they reach an agreement before things had gone this far?

In Stockholm, the Spanish embassy often asked me what we would do if Scania, for example, wanted to become independent. I always said that I was convinced that our head of government would go to Scania, talk to the people there and find a solution acceptable to both parties. Most EU countries expect democracies to behave like democracies, even the young ones.

Over the centuries, the relationship between Catalonia and the Spanish state has not changed much. At regular intervals the Catalans have tried to free themselves from Spain and on each occasion the state stopped the revolt by force, not dialogue and consensus. This continued lack of dialogue is very difficult to understand.

Many territorial conflicts have been resolved through dialogue and consensus. When Norway wanted to become independent from Sweden, the issue was resolved by consensus. The Baltic countries are also peaceful examples. In Quebec and Scotland, citizens got to vote and chose to stay. The Spanish government, led by the People's Party (PP), claimed to represent the silent (unionist) majority in Catalonia that did not support independence. Why, then, did the independence parties grow stronger while the PP saw itself eliminated as a political power in Catalonia? Why didn't the PP allow the referendum? Why didn't it get involved in the anti-independence campaign like the British government did? In that had been the case, the anti-independence vote would have had a great chance to win, especially if, at the same time, the PP had tried to resolve at least some of the many problems between Catalans and the Spanish state.

Instead, the central government pretended there was no conflict and never mentioned it – *hear no evil, see no evil*– and managed to fool the rest of the world remarkably well because what happens in Spain rarely makes headlines in the European press. The pretence went so far that, when King Philip VI spoke before the European Parliament, he never mentioned the conflict in Catalonia. Such a denial from the head of state, a person who should intervene and mediate between the different sides at such a difficult time for the country, truly is remarkable.

The conflict between the Spanish state and the autonomous communities requires a totally different kind of dialogue. It is not enough for the central government to propose that the pro-independence members can express themselves in the Senate, where the PP has an absolute majority. And it is unacceptable for the Spain to refuse help from external mediators, both before and after the referendum.

Meanwhile, the Catalan government understood that holding a referendum would

be seen as an act of defiance against the central government, but not even in their wildest imagination would anyone have imagined that the police of an EU Member State would use so much violence against defenceless voters. One can't help but wonder whether there was any opportunity to backtrack when all attempts at dialogue failed. There is popular support for independence and the pressure on elected officials has been and continues to be very strong. It is not at all about Spanish speakers against Catalan speakers, as many have tried to make out. Both groups include people for or against independence.

The central government could not escape the pressure, internal or external. For many years the PP – the heirs of the Franco era – was the only right-wing party but, after major corruption scandals, they were under attack from all sides. A new party – *Ciudadanos*– was formed to fill the void. They demanded changes in language laws, wanted greater 'Spanishisation' of Catalonia and succeeded in cementing the image of Catalan speakers versus Spanish speakers. Even further to the right was the Falange, whose support and votes had kept the PP on the far right. The absence of extreme right-wing parties in Spain surprised the rest of Europe, but such a party wasn't really missing. The government was already moving further right and closer to the Falange, pursuing some of their policies so as not to lose votes.

Despite these disturbing trends over the last few years, foreigners' general perception of Spain is still sun and sand, and that Spain is a full-fledged democracy which King Juan Carlos I saved from returning to a dictatorship. In 2015, the Spanish parliament passed the notorious Law to Protect Citizen Security, dubbed the Gag Law (*Ley Mordaza*). Since its enactment, criticising God, the king and the government is penalised. Filming a police officer striking a protester and posting it on Facebook can lead to fines, as can other peaceful actions, including participating in a sit-in in front of a nuclear power plant. Since 2015, various actors, musicians, and others have been fined, imprisoned or forced into exile for what they have said or written.

In other countries, it seemed crazy and was hard to believe that the colour yellow couldn't be used during an election and that *Ciudadanos* was spending so much time and energy cutting down yellow ribbons all over Catalonia. Equally absurd was that, until recently, taxes were being used to pay for a huge monument to honour the former dictator, and that many of those who fought against him are also buried there, but in mass graves – against their families' and, supposedly, their own wishes. Franco's supporters call it 'reconciliation'. One of the most absurd examples for me, a Swedish citizen, was the minister of the Interior who honoured a police

officer for distinguished service by giving the award to the Virgin Mary, the patron saint of the police. Remember that this is in an age of democracy, in a country of the European Union, and not in a dictatorship.

People from other countries usually don't know that Spain is the second country in the world, after Cambodia, with the most unopened mass graves and that not a single war criminal has been convicted in the courts. Nor do they know that the same minister of the Interior refused to revoke the honours awarded to one of the most notorious torturers of the Franco era, the so-called *Billy el Niño*(Billy the Kid). Thanks to the tabloids, it is well known that political corruption on the right and on the left is widespread, including in the Royal Household, but people seem to accept that the same thing probably happens everywhere.

One of the main problems I see is the 1978 Constitution, adopted during the transition to democracy, and largely based on former institutions, including a powerful military. The constitution has provided the grounds to prosecute representatives of the Catalan government and leaders of civil society and sentence them to as many as 13 years for insurrection. And the president of the Catalan parliament was convicted for **allowing a debate** on independence. Isn't a parliament the very place where that should be debated? Here, too, denial has been the rule: there are no 'political prisoners' in Spain; they are called 'imprisoned politicians' (and treated as criminals). The central government also denies there has been any political conflict with Catalonia. Until recently, it was forced to call it a 'conflict of coexistence' when it needed support from one of the Catalan independence parties to form a government, approve budgets and pass other proposals. When the constitution was adopted, an amnesty law was also enacted, making any discussion of what happened during the dictatorship unlikely. As a result, no reconciliation of any kind has been sought or taken place in Spain.

Many European politicians are aware of the situation and closely monitor developments in Spain, but European interest in getting involved has been negligible. The EU is an organisation of member states; dialogue takes place between it and each member. If a particular region within a country asks for assistance, it is treated as an internal matter. The EU cannot provide it unless the Member State explicitly requests it. That is why Catalonia's case cannot be on the agenda. In my opinion, this is wrong.

Reading the basic principles for EU membership, as expressed in Article 2 of the EU Treaty, I am honoured to be part of this Union. *"The Union is founded on the values*

of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail." When I see how little this article is respected, however, and not only in Spain, am I ashamed.

The Catalans I spoke with before the referendum on 1 October 2017 were convinced that the EU would defend them if Spain used violence. They expected the EU to apply Article 7 of the Treaty, which can be used to deprive a Member State of certain rights – such as the right to vote in the Council – if it violates the core values set out in Article 2. For this to be possible, however, the Council must declare unanimously that the Member State in question has failed to meet its obligations under the Treaty. But how can the Council reach unanimity on an issue of such importance when Spain is not the only country to disregard Article 2?

And why didn't the EU threaten to trigger Article 7 against Spain, as it did against Poland and Hungary, when Spain adopted the 'Gag Law' or used force in the referendum? Or when it became clear that the Spanish courts were not independent and that Spain's actions were not in accordance with the constitution? Can you be a member of the EU without meeting its conditions? In Poland, Article 7 was applied in response to laws that threatened the independence of the courts, and in Hungary to serious violations of, among other things, freedom of the press. It's important to remember that, at the time of the referendum, all the EU's top representatives (in the Commission, the Parliament and the Council) were from the EPP Group (European People's Party), which was also the ruling party in Spain. Commission President Juncker, and even Parliament President Tajani, who had once praised Mussolini in a speech in Italy, received honorary awards from the Spanish state during this time. Europe is certainly afraid of Catalonia becoming a Pandora's Box. Depending on how Catalonia is dealt with, latent conflicts in several other European countries might emerge.

Being a full-fledged democracy means more than citizens voting every four years. The foundations of democracy are free elections, respect for human rights and the principles of the rule of law, which cannot prevail over human rights. Everything goes together. Laws govern what we can and cannot do, but laws that fail to respect human rights, such as the Gag Rule, should never be enacted. In a state of law, courts must be independent. During the trial of the political prisoners, however, it became clear that that was not the case in Spain.

In a democracy, I expect political conflicts to be resolved through dialogue, not violence; through the courts, not politics. In a democracy, it is unacceptable for politically appointed judges to sentence political opponents without proper legal support to long prison terms. In a democracy, it is unacceptable to use security forces to persecute and spy on political opponents in exile without the approval of the other country. In a democracy, it is unacceptable to judge musicians in a court of law because of their song lyrics. In a democracy, it is unacceptable to… The list goes on and on.

Regrettably, after closely following developments in Spain for more than 40 years, my image of the Spanish state is very tarnished. I have gone from hoping that the country was actually progressing, step by step, towards a full-fledged democracy to wondering if it was all a lie, from beginning to end. How can it be a democracy when the spirit of Franco – with the help of the more conservative sectors of the Catholic Church – still holds sway under a constitution that seems impossible to modernise? The state and its institutions, including the judiciary and the army, give me the growing impression that fascism never really went away. This is a challenge for all democrats – fortunately, there are many – in all the Spanish autonomous communities.

My image of the EU has also changed. In 1986 I was hopeful about Spain’s entry into the EU. I was convinced that the EU would guarantee the rights of minorities and that Spain, as a Member State, would never again use violence against Catalans and Basques. Seeing the EU close its eyes and, essentially, repeat the message the Spanish government wants to convey, I have lost that hope. The European Parliament was not even allowed to hold a debate on the events surrounding the referendum.

I don’t know what the future holds. All I know is that it is hard to compare the way things work in the north and the way they work in the south. Perhaps this is the mistake we make when we analyse events in other countries. Our histories are totally different, as are our ways of relating to neighbours. I do ask, though, that we all abide by the rules if we voluntarily belong to the same club (the EU). And, seeing what is happening today in Spain and in other countries of the Union, I know we have failed completely. It is time for the EU to assume its responsibility as guardian of the treaties and play an active role in resolving internal conflicts of the Member States, to help them get back on the road to democracy and comply with Article 2 of the Treaty.