

Europe Says “No” to Artur Mas

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Eurocrisis in the
Press

By [Víctor Andrés Maldonado](#)

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Diplomacy has its own codes. It is imperative to know these in detail to avoid being exposed to difficult situations and putting one's credibility at risk when defending one's interests. Apparently simple things, such as having a meeting with a foreign political leader, shaking hands with him or her in public, or making a declaration, require a deep knowledge of the traditions both of the host country and of foreign relations in general. It is not enough to have the determination to do something, or to present one's own views and interests properly. It is also necessary to know how to read an interlocutor's position and to select the right moment to act.



However, this all seems to have passed by those in charge of foreign relations at the Generalitat of Catalonia, from the Counsellor of the Presidency Francesc Homs to the new Delegate of the Generalitat in Brussels Pere Puig, whose pro-independence enthusiasm tends to lead them to breach one of the golden rules of diplomacy: not to expose one's political leaders to a public failure. This year, Artur Mas made two visits to Brussels ([one in April](#) and the other [in September](#)) to explain to EU officials the ongoing self-determination process in Catalonia, presumably to try to convince them of its benefits. The terminology involved has clearly changed (compared with the beginning of this year) to make it more acceptable to European leaders: instead of the “internationalisation of the conflict” we now have the “process of the right to decide”. The first term combined two elements that Europe tries to avoid at all costs: “conflict” (no EU policymaker wants to hear of a new conflict, as Europe already has plenty of problems to deal with and has no interest in adding yet another one) and “internationalisation” (which means trying to pass the problem to one's neighbours instead of trying to find a solution on one's own). In contrast, the “right to decide” sounds on first hearing very democratic, for who will doubt that citizens have every right to express themselves and decide their own future?

As expected, the EU response has been clear. As much as the press release of the Generalitat is endeavouring to present it differently, the reading in diplomatic terms is of a clear failure, which in turn is putting into question the credibility of Artur Mas and of the self-determination process itself. The evidence is clear: on his first trip to Brussels in March 2011, Mas met the European Commission President, José Manuel Barroso, and in June 2011 the European Council President, Herman Van Rompuy, which was appropriate considering his status of President of an autonomous Spanish region. However, this year Mas [has not been received by either of the two](#), but by various Commissioners, i.e. people at ministerial level (without even a photo session during the April visit). The EU has also expressed its “concern” about the possibility of the independence of Catalonia (which is the traditionally used diplomatic formula to provide a clear warning of disagreement and an indication that this is not the way to go). Moreover, the spokesperson of the Commission has made it clear that in case of independence, Catalonia would be excluded from the EU and, therefore, [have to negotiate its accession as a new member state](#). In other words, Europe has said “no” to Artur Mas regarding the self-determination process.

Another proof of failure is the different treatment granted to the Basque Country President Iñigo Urkullu during his visit, also in April, just days after Mas'. [He was received by both](#) José Manuel Barroso and by Herman Van Rompuy (photo included!), as befits his rank. I am convinced that this situation would not have occurred if the previous Delegate of the Generalitat in Brussels, Joan Prats (a reputed diplomat with long experience in the EU), had continued inpost. But of course, he lacked the necessary pro-independence credentials. Apparently, the only person who has officially acknowledged this failure and warned of the dangers of being excluded from the EU is Josep

Antoni Duran (leader of the Democratic Union of Catalonia and President of the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the Spanish Parliament), but he has no pro-independence convictions either.

But why has Mas not been received at the presidential level and why has the [EU expressed its “concern”](#) about the ongoing self-determination process, when all it is about (at least according to Catalan nationalists) is giving a voice to the Catalans, allowing them to decide their own future?

First, in the EU, disobeying the rules of the game and showing disrespect for the rule of law (understood as enforcing democratically passed laws and respecting and enforcing court judgments) always raises eyebrows among European leaders. At the end of the day, it goes against the very heart of the EU's core values: respect of fundamental [human rights](#) and the rule of law. As we have heard from Mas and Oriol Junqueras, the main drivers of the self-determination movement, either a [referendum](#) will take place even without the consent of the government of Mariano Rajoy (as required by Spanish law) and under the legal cover of the future Catalan law on referenda, or via early elections convened specially for this purpose; all on the basis of a supposed democratic legitimacy or “the will of the people”. Arguments about competing legitimacies (democratic versus legal) are unacceptable to the EU, where the only legitimacy comes from the procedures used for the passing of legislation (which are seen to be democratic and respectful of basic human rights) and subsequent compliance.

Second, because of the danger of instability that the whole process could generate within the EU itself, not only in terms of economic uncertainty (when Europe is still fighting the worst crisis since the Second World War), but also in political terms (the creation of a new state in the heart of old Europe and its inevitable exit from the EU) and, in extreme cases, also from a security perspective. Even if a similar situation to what happened in the Balkans seems impossible (the trauma of the Balkans is still very present, including the disastrous way the breakup of the former Yugoslavia was handled, when the U.S. had to intervene to solve the situation), problems arising from an unstable political situation cannot be ruled out completely (e.g. civil disobedience from parts of the population, increased organised crime, etc.).

Third, the risk of proliferation of similar cases in other EU countries, which a successful secession could generate, would undoubtedly increase the degree of instability in Europe.

Víctor Andrés Maldonado is an ex-EU official (first of the Court of Auditors and then of the European Commission) and has published articles in *La Voz de Barcelona* and [Crónica Global](#), as well as on the blog [Clave Ciudadana](#).

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Euro Crisis in the Press blog, nor of the London School of Economics.