

INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES

The unequivocal Europeanist vocation of Catalonia

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Concentració en favor de l'acollida de refugiats a Barcelona

The European construction process is currently facing a set of challenges that are severely jeopardising its future. The Brexit, the rise of populism, the paralysis of governments due to the migration crisis, the aftermath of the economic crisis and the cast into doubt of the liberal democracy model are some notable examples. The last European Parliament elections have shown how, given these multiple challenges, European voters have stepped away from traditional parties and have supported political options that clearly break with the statu quo. In this regard, and as predicted, the so-called 'populist' and anti-European voting forces have achieved further levels of representation. On the other hand, however, so have those parties that are committed to a federal European Union, stronger, more social and closer to the citizenry.

In Catalonia, Euroscepticism has not become entrenched, neither among the population nor among the parties, and, once again, the historic vocation of the Catalans has been reflected in the urns, both regarding the high levels of participation and the Europeanist symbol of the political options chosen. Nevertheless, the convulsive political situation we are experiencing, along with the aforementioned challenges, have generated some misgivings and criticisms towards an increasingly questioned European Union.

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inequality or the climate change? Has this referential Europe —cradle of values of dignity, freedom and human rights— done enough to deal with the setbacks in the field of human rights and political and civil rights?

Two future scenarios

While Europhiles and Eurosceptics answers on such questions differ, in any case the reality is stubbornly more complex than the most striking diagnoses. In this sense, and in view of these multiple challenges, two alternative futures open up to both European and Catalan society: one in which the European Union is history and is past, or another with a European Union that has reinvented itself to become a Europe for everyone. As the urns have recalled, the option discarded by citizens is that of the club of states clinging to the *statu quo*, to the business as usual.

In the first scenario, the larger nation-states make and unmake, while the rest of us sit on the sidelines. It is a Europe that keeps going behind the citizens, intensifying its legitimacy crisis and the population estrangement towards a discredited project.

The second scenario is that of a Europe that has recognised that global challenges are also local and, therefore, encompasses a new multi-level governance in which all parties involved –stateless nations, regions, cities and cross-border macro-regions– are an active part of the decision-making process and implementation of the public policies that affect them. In short, it is a Europe in which participatory democracy goes hand in hand with representative democracy.

Faced with choosing between a European Union that is the past or one that is everyone's future, the Government of Catalonia reaffirms its commitment and willingness to contribute and work for the second option: for a European Union that must be the future, and to make Catalonia one of the drivers of this change. This determination to participate actively in defining the future of the EU is not something new, but has become visible in the great episodes of European construction.

Historical calling

In this sense, Catalonia's Europeanist vocation comes from afar. Thus, for example, long before the restoration of democracy in Spain in 1977, numerous city councils in Catalonia approved resolutions and declarations supporting the incorporation of our country into the European Communities.

Subsequently, Catalonia became an active party in the negotiations for Spain's accession to the European Communities, with a twofold aim: on the one hand, to defend the interests of Catalan society and economy and, at the same time, to plan well in advance the transition to a future accession. Out of this double objective came the *White paper on the repercussions in Catalonia of Spain's accession to the EEC* (1982); the founding of the 'Patronat Català Pro Europa', in 1982, by the city councils of Barcelona, Girona, Lleida and

Tarragona and the municipalist entities of Catalonia, the Chambers of Commerce and the Catalan universities; and the establishment of a delegation of this public consortium in Brussels (1986), precursor of the Government Delegation in the EU, today affiliated to the Ministry of Foreign Action, Institutional Relations and Transparency.

After those earliest moments marked by hope and enthusiasm for the new project, the commitment of the Government of Catalonia in the process of constructing Europe has also been present in difficult times.

In the early 2000, the failed experience of the process to adopt a European Constitution led to one of the deepest institutional crises in the Union. However, the deep and wide-ranging causes of the crisis highlighted the uneasiness of a large part of the population and the political class towards a project that had been initiated from an intentionally technocratic point of view but which, with the approval of the Single European Act and the Maastricht Treaty, had exponentially increased its powers and fields of action with no similar increase in the participation of citizens.

In this context, aware of the challenge and the feeling of the citizens, the Parliament of Catalonia wanted to contribute to the debate on the constitutional project by adopting in 2001 a *Resolution on the promotion of the participation of all Catalan citizens in the definition of the Europe of the future*.

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As a result of this Parliament mandate, the 'Catalan Convention for the Debate on the Future of the European Union' was drafted, which, through the 'Patronat Català Pro Europa', and after almost a year and a half of work and the participation of more than 300 representatives of social and economic entities, academic research centres and civil society in general, transferred the conclusions to the Convention on the Future of Europe, responsible of drafting the proposed European Constitution. These conclusions demanded the politicisation of an EU that increasingly had more decision-making power, and a greater role and participation of the regions -with legislative capacity- in the decision-making system of the European Union. In addition, the conclusions also called for the official status of the Catalan language, an EU with a key role in the world and the express inclusion of the Charter of Fundamental Rights in the future European constitutional text.

Rejected the proposal for a European Constitution in the referendums held in France and the Netherlands, in June 2007 a new partial reform of the treaties is launched to collect part of the *non-nata* European Convention. The Government of Catalonia also wanted to contribute on this occasion and, in July 2007, adopted its own position, which was

presented to the Spanish Government. Among other issues, the Catalan Government's position called for preserving the importance of objectives, values and fundamental rights in the constitutional text. The document also called for respect for regional and local autonomy, as well as for the cultural and linguistic diversity of the European peoples; for the commitment to economic, social and territorial cohesion to be maintained; for the provisions on participatory and representative democracy to be respected; and for the extension of the principle of subsidiarity to the regional and local levels to be preserved.

Current demands

Today, more than a decade after these critical episodes in the process of European integration, the outlook shows us that the warning signals already being sent out by the citizens of Europe at that time were not properly heard and that the efforts to renew the Union bore very limited fruit. We continue, as repeated many times, with a 'non-politicised political entity,' a feeling further exacerbated by the management made in the wake of the last economic crisis.

In this sense, although it has often been pointed out that the Union is being forged precisely through crises, it does not appear to have been strengthened in this case. Quite the contrary, far from presenting itself as the actor that was able to protect the so-called European model of social protection, citizens have associated the Union with the imposition of austerity measures and economic prescriptions. Faced with this public perception, aggravated by a feeling of lack of real alternatives and capitalised by populism, there has been a proliferation of voices which, perhaps initially in favour of reform, are now defending an amendment to the entire European project.

In this context of crisis of identity and legitimacy, and coinciding with the 60th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome, the Member States decide to renew their commitment to the process of European integration and to initiate a reflection on a Union capable of tackling the European and global challenges of the forthcoming decades.

Also this time, in accordance with Catalonia's historic European vocation, the Generalitat wanted to promote its own reflection on the future of the EU in order to contribute with a Catalan voice to the current debate. On this occasion, the Government, through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Institutional Relations and Transparency, is defining its own vision through the so-called Europe Plan.

This initiative was conceived with the double objective of affirming the presence and influence of Catalonia in Europe and of involving and promoting the participation of citizens in the European project.

The Green Paper on this Europe Plan was presented in November 2018, setting out the government's preliminary vision of the major European debates. The Government's starting point is to defend a Union with citizens at the centre of its policies and to promote its founding values as a way of achieving a Europe united in its diversity.

According to this approach, the process of defining the Europe Plan has been articulated around citizen participation and mobilisation, conversations and dialogue. In this sense, the presentation of the Green Paper opened the door to a second phase: a process of citizen participation and a series of debates to gather the reactions of citizens, entities and institutions of civil society to the initial positioning of the Government. As a result of the contrast between the Government's visions and the contributions collected, the preparation of a White Paper is currently being completed, which will contain the set of political positions and specific proposals that will guide the future actions of the Government of Catalonia towards the European Union.

As a result of these months of dialogue and exchange of ideas, and the multitude of contributions collected, it is possible to identify, at least by way of example, some recurrent messages:

- **Catalonia's willingness to assume the obligations and take advantage of the opportunities** deriving from EU membership, guaranteeing the application of EU rights and working to increase Catalan attraction and participation in European funds.
- The **willingness to continue actively participating in the consolidation of the European Union**, claiming Catalonia's role as a reference interlocutor in certain areas, actively participating in the EU's decision-making system and influencing relevant political and legislative initiatives.
- The present moment does not require institutional or procedural changes, but **political vision**, a break with the inertia of the past and the decision-making that strengthens the European Union and guarantees its future viability.
- Challenges such as the management of migratory waves or the economic and financial crisis highlight the urgency of **providing the Union with the necessary tools to meet major challenges**.
- The increase of populism and of the voices that question the process of European construction are a call **to reflect on the relationship that the European Union wants to have with its citizens**, the ultimate source of its legitimacy and an essential ingredient for its long-term survival.
- The path towards an **economic, monetary and political union** must be continued, providing the Union with the necessary tools to deal with systemic crises, improving democratic control of its action and strengthening the political component in decision-making processes that reflect the reality of existing multi-level governance.
- It is also essential **to strengthen the social dimension of the European Union**, promoting employability —especially of the most vulnerable groups— promoting equal opportunities for women in all areas, promoting accessible and quality health care and improving social protection and inclusion.
- It is imperative **to give fresh impetus to a transformative neighbourhood policy**, reaffirming the central value of the Mediterranean, and adopting a model of neighbourhood solidarity that recognises the roles of the actors who, from all levels, participate in the design and implementation of policies.
- Finally, it is necessary to work for a **European Union committed to global agendas, capable** of reorienting and aligning its policies and actions with the

Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals 2030; **determined** to lead, by example and through its external action, the fight against climate change; **committed** to the new urban agenda and **firm** in the defence —within and beyond its borders— of the democratic principle, human rights, peacebuilding and development cooperation.

These are some of the values that Catalonia wishes to bring to Europe in order to contribute to the current phase of the European construction process.

The Government is aware that the European project is not something finished but in a constant process of mutation. This fluid nature, at the same time, presents risks and opportunities: a project under construction may evolve for the better or for the worse. It can be strengthened, enriched and attract a growing enthusiasm of the population or it can be progressively dissolved and more and more sectors of the citizenry alienated.

But just as important or even more: apart from risks and opportunities, an EU project entails, above all, responsibilities. Precisely because the design phase is never over, everyone, from institutions to citizens, has (or can have) a role to contribute to shaping a better EU. To abdicate this responsibility —despite the challenges and frustrations of an imperfect project— is to yield to the guardians of the status quo and to those who seek its progressive collapse.

This conviction guides the Government's firm commitment not to stop working, hand in hand with the citizens of Catalonia, for a more effective, more social and more committed European Union that guarantees the future of a European construction project at the service of people.



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