

## ***Catalonia's lockdown mirage***

On the 10th of April, the *New York Times* published: 'Spain, the only European country hit harder than Italy by the pandemic, will allow some nonessential employees to return to work on Monday. WHO has warned that "now is not the time to relax measures".'

For those of you with little information on the Spanish crisis over the COVID19 worldwide pandemic, this may get you in surprise. And although the criteria held to present numbers and percentages seem not to be quite uniform amongst all the countries, the bulk numbers are there and the dramatic Spanish situation cries out for itself.

Many may wonder how did Spain get into such horrific scenario after the data thrown many weeks before by Wuhan and Lombardia? For many international medical experts the data was clear enough so to strongly advise all governments to get properly equipped with medical devices to attend the large numbers of patients expected, protective suits for all hospital staff sensitive to the contagious virus, from doctors to cleaning personnel. The groups of risk were also very well defined from the beginning, our beloved elderly were the most vulnerable target for this new COVID. We learnt about herd immunity, and listened to not so experts discussing if the answer was a draconian Chinese method with the danger of putting in risk some civil liberties on the go, or, whether to adopt the liberal 'herd immunity' based on some sort of natural selection: getting all infected would quickly do its best entrance and exit from our societies with minimum economical impact.

Amongst the fast growing popular anxiety -fulled by the rapidly increased death toll- many of us were led to defend the closest position to a 'management' based on pragmatic criteria: avoid to collapse the hospitals.

Catalan experts as Dr. Clotet and Dr. Mitjà, both internationally accredited epidemiologists specialists, were since February making public demands to the Spanish government to lockdown Madrid, which has been the Spanish state's first and main focus of infection since day 1. In fact, Lombardia was isolated, Bavaria was isolated, but of course, Madrid, was not isolated. On top of that, not only they failed to lockdown the most vicious focus of COVID19 but their inhabitants decided to take the car, train and planes to go to their coastal house with the automatic complaint of the presidents of el País Valencià, Murcia, Andalucía and, of course, Catalonia, all demanding Madrid to stop propagating the infection in such irresponsible manner. Irresponsibility though has been a constant aspect in the Spanish government, to such extent that what they call 'the most progressive government in Europe' declared the 'state of alarm', yes, you read well. The army taking all the protagonism, dressed in their uniforms they were doing the press conferences: 'no news on the front line' was the first sentence said by them, with war expressions being used every 30 seconds. Spain has sent their army and paramilitars to patrol the cities of Catalonia, Mallorca, Euskal Herria, etc and, of course, they could not help themselves and gifted us with the hymn of the Spanish monarchy out loud from their lorries and vehicles, nor did they miss the opportunity to fine those Catalan drivers answering them in Catalan when stopped in their particular road controls, yes, fined them for speaking Catalan. Unbelievable. Or maybe not, 'Spain is pain' says one of those popular sayings, so what to expect?

Along with the military parades, came the recentralisation of duties, and of course, the confiscation of material. All health safety goods were to be sent to Madrid and from there decide where and when to send them first. Just today, TODAY, we

received 1.714.000 masks. Yes, you read well, 1714. The devil is in the detail, isn't it that right?

During all this precious time, Spain lost two planes, no joking, few days after they said they found them, bought millions of defective tests, and kept all territories opened with thousand of people travelling from Madrid to Barcelona with no control whatsoever, and although Spain has closed its frontiers with France and Portugal, when it comes to Catalunya Spain's answer is 'the virus does not know about territories, we need to be united' negligent Spanish nationalism vs rigorous responsible approach, in line with WHO's advice stating that territories inside a given state can have different degrees of confinement and at different times.

In Catalonia we had a moment of sincere relieve, when President Torra announced in an official press conference that he demanded/ordered for the lockdown of Catalonia's perimeter limits and an internal total confinement (but, of course, first need services). However, and as it's being usual in Catalan politics, it didn't last much, as few hours later he stated: 'only if allowance from Madrid is given'. Catalans were living again a similar situation as per the official referendum of 2017, the Catalan government was flaming up the heart and mind of Catalans citizens with bold speeches and dramatic and fearful scenarios to later on pour a bucket of icing water on us when announcing that we, actually, were meant to put up with it.. Once again, the official message is 'Spain is pain, and we are here only to remind you that', really? Being right is not enough when the life of people is on risk, you need to act, be consequent. At the moment, in Catalonia the consolation prize is to win the argument to Spain, but unfortunately that doesn't save lives or make us better.

No wonder why the manifest *Tanquem Catalunya*, promoted by the political grassroots movement of *Primàries Catalunya* is being so successful with 100.000 signatures in only 5 days, being now 3 weeks later on almost 250.000 signatures and growing. The main objective is to give all support to the Catalan government and president Torra to implement what he announced to be the will of the Catalan government:

'We strongly urge the Government of Catalonia to take the necessary measures and provide the appropriate tools so that the citizens of Catalonia can comply with the total confinement orders of the country (..) Therefore, we urge the Generalitat of Catalonia to materialize its critique of the irresponsible decisions of the Spanish State in decrees and measures that not only confine Catalonia but also assume the closure of the country, as other European countries, such as Germany or Denmark, responsibly decree.'

All major crisis always takes us back to the underlying clash of national sovereignties and to question up to which point each generation of politicians are prepared to go to solve it. The first point comes with no surprise to no one, the second part is really what brings internal disconformity and added frustration.

Coming back to the **NYT** news, Spain decides to start de unlock, 'too soon' the experts alarm, but not only the medical experts, legal experts raised their complaint when the state decided to officially publish a non-guilty non-responsability disclosure just in case the workers, who are the most exposed after this economical driven decision, decide to take legal action against them. In fact, weeks ago the Catalan association of legal experts Atenes issued a demand of precautionary measures against the Spanish state to the European courts for the violation of the Right to life.

It's time for great decisions, the medical top experts, the Catalan municipalities governments and the popular manifest signed by such a really significant number of

catalans, have explicitly declared to be ready to support the catalan government in case they decide to lockdown Catalonia, It is a matter of Just Cause, protecting the life of our people in such obvious dramatic reality ought to be politics dearest priority.

In fact, in 2017, President Puigdemont and Marta Rovira justified not to implement the independence based on the threats of the spanish state 'to cause blood and deaths on the streets of barcelona' in case they did. 'Saving lives' they declared 'is our priority'. Well, being under the command of the spanish state has not prevented thousands of deaths in overflowing hospitals, life is again the main issue, this time for real, and for the same reasoning of protection should be the reason why to implement the independence now. Which are the threats this time to not do so?

On the meantime, Catalans have proved once again an extraordinary capacity to self-organise themselves in order to produce what needed: starting to 3D print the pieces needed to create respiratory devices to help the outstanding shortcome of equipment in the hospitals, organising neighbourhood assisting networks, to produce thousands of masks for medical staff and citizens in general, etc, etc and amongst all this frenzy activity the political grassroot movement of Primaries Catalonia has not only promoted a manifest and written political texts but got their elected municipal representatives involved in towns and villages in some of the most succesful initiatives. This is the case of the local government of the village of Alcoletge where Primàries Catalunya governs with an absolute majority. Let us also explain the good, the inspiring side of all this nightmare: the people, the solidarity, the love for life and people.

### **Local context. The reaction of the people.**

This is the story of how the inhabitants of a small village in the west of Catalonia, called Alcoletge, has generated a true chain of favours to produce (as at the date of this article, April 2020) more than 2000 face masks to confront coronavirus COVID-19.

This action is one among so many, where numerous people and entities from different villages of Catalonia have driven, in a voluntary and altruistic way, with the aim to generate different materials, utensils or instruments to fight the effects that has caused this cursed virus.

The village of Alcoletge has approximately 3500 inhabitants. Located to the west of Catalonia, in the last years, its population has been creating an own identity. This identity has been derived from identifiable and unique characteristics, that have their origins in aspects linked with its history, culture and socioeconomic profile. The village have also created synergies with nearby villages, especially with Lleida.

An interesting fact reflects this idiosyncrasy: since May 2019, the municipal authorities are formed by a group of people that do not belong to any of the big political parties of Spain or Catalonia. In the last municipal elections, a group of people decided to organise an independent municipal candidature, under the umbrella of a new emergent political movement that fights for a political regeneration, the so-called "Primaries Catalonia", out of the

established political framework. On the election day, this group obtained the absolute majority, showing that there are always options to do things differently and reach the success.

Just to contextualize a bit more, I would simply mention that agriculture and services are the main economic sector of the village. Regarding the agriculture, the main crops are fruit trees, particularly pear and apple trees. The service sector centres especially on food provision.

Returning to the chain of favours, we are about to explain a very particular experience that, once again, shows that when the citizens organise themselves, they are unstoppable.

This story begins when Teresa, an Alcoletge neighbour that, in an individual and voluntary way, begins to do face masks at home, with the idea to deliver them to whoever needs them.

One day Teresa has a brilliant idea. If she can make masks at home, maybe other people can do the same. With this simple hypothesis, she decides to address to the Town Hall, convinced that with its help and involvement the idea will be attainable.

Said and done, the local councillor of Welfare and Health immediately takes up the idea. She starts to work and study how they can materialize the project. They need a pattern to make face masks, thick cotton material, someone who can sterilize the face masks, elastic bands, etc.

Find the pattern was simple. With a small search for internet, plus Teresa's recommendations, they made a model that guided how to make the face masks.

The second part is to find the material with the necessary characteristics and elastic bands. The rumour began to spread and people started to mobilise by calling companies, individuals, a friend of a friend that knows someone who may have the material.

After some negotiation failures, and some small crises, we obtained information regarding two small companies, one based in Alcoletge and another one based in a little village close by, Vilanova de la Barca. Both of them had the material we needed. They offered the material for free. In addition, they agreed to cut it and prepare the necessary packages for the people who will sew the face masks.

Simultaneously, the owner of a little shop in Alcoletge contacts a supplier who can provide elastic bands. Similarly, they are provided for free.

Next, we needed to find volunteers to sew the face masks. This milestone is achieved quickly, and in few days, more than 30 volunteers offered their expertise to make face masks at home. One by one, their postal addresses of this small army are added to a list, necessary to distribute the packages.

Regarding distribution, it is necessary to take into account that everybody is confined at home, and that it is necessary to avoid the contact between people. For this reason, it was decided that only one person will be in charge of moving the packages. The person selected was the municipal watchdog of Alcoletge. He would go to a workshop to look for the packages of material and would deliver them house by house. He also would recollect the face masks and store them. Eventually, he would deliver the face masks to those who need them.

Finally, to complete the chain, it was necessary to find someone who could sterilize the face masks (disinfecting and cleaning them to high temperatures). After several contacts, a dry cleaning shop in Lleida agreed to do this part of the work. They did not accept any type of payment to do this either.

This is how, going back to what we said at the beginning, an inner village of Catalonia has made more than 2000 face masks with the solidarity and the implication of the people, showing, once again, that the empowerment is a basic tool to grow and move forward.

#### Some reflections.



Two ideas to conclude.

The first idea. As you can see in this example, Catalonia is an unstoppable country, with an own identity that can do everything it endeavours to do. The country is full of people that, like Teresa of Alcoletge, have brilliant ideas which, thanks to everyone's collaboration, many times can be materialised.

However, the same capability to work and organise itself has converted the country, paradoxically, in a double-edge sword. The own rulers of Catalonia, for many years, have used (and use) this creativity and push to turn it into self-complacency. With this strategy, Catalans "accept" to live under the Spanish ruling power thinking that, in a sense, Catalans have a "presumed" moral superiority towards this Spain.

This is our reality. With the control of media, Spanish rulers have convinced Catalans that we are the most supportive, those that have the best sense of the humour, the most hard-working, etc. In the meantime, Spanish rulers continue ruling the colony to the service of Spain (and, obviously, enriching its pockets and those of its political organisations).

The second idea. In moments of crisis like the one we are living today, it is when one realises human weakness. Nowadays, essential things take importance: farmers, cleaners, doctors and nurses, sewers, etc. In addition,

we realise about the importance of values like solidarity and altruism. These are the important elements of our lives. The ones that we have to think about and promote, now that we are in the middle of the storm, but especially when we return to the calm.

Thank you and keep safe Flemish friends!!

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