

Germany and UK collude with Spanish extradition warrants against Catalan leaders Puigdemont and Ponsatí

By Steve James and Paul Mitchell
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On Monday evening, a court in Neumünster, in the German state of Schleswig-Holstein extended the arrest of Carles Puigdemont, the former Catalan premier who was detained by German police on Sunday.

Puigdemont was arrested after a pursuit by up to 20 Spanish secret service agents who had placed a tracking device on his car before he drove from Finland back, via Germany, to Belgium.

Puigdemont has been living in exile since October's declaration of Catalan independence. He was arrested after Spain reactivated an international arrest warrant Friday charging him with sedition, rebellion and embezzlement for his role in the bid for independence. If extradited, he could face up to 30 years in prison.

Puigdemont's lawyer Alonso-Cuevillas expects him to be detained in Germany for two to three months before a final decision is made.

A spokesperson for German Chancellor Angela Merkel said the extradition decision was up to the German courts but that the government expected it to go ahead, saying, "Spain is a democracy where the rule of law exists." During the crisis in Catalonia, Germany has "supported Spain's effort to guarantee the law and constitutional order," the spokesperson added.

In Brussels, a European Commission spokesman said that the issue was about "judicial cooperation between two member states" and that it had "no comment to make." The Commission's position was that the Catalan crisis is a Spanish "domestic issue."

Demonstrations on Sunday against Puigdemont's arrest left nearly 100 injured in Barcelona. An attempt to reactivate Puigdemont's investiture as Catalan president has been made by the region's three separatist parties—Puigdemont's Together for Catalonia (JxCat), the Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC) and the Popular

Unity Candidacy (CUP). They have called for an emergency session of the Catalan regional parliament on Wednesday to "adopt all the necessary means to guarantee" that Puigdemont and two colleagues, Jordi Turull and Jordi Sanchez, can be considered as candidates for president of Catalonia again.

Spanish Deputy Prime Minister Soraya Saenz de Santamaria declared that only a president who is "within the law and out of a cell" would be acceptable.

Late last week, in addition to four already incarcerated, the Spanish Supreme Court jailed another five separatist leaders and re-activated European Arrest Warrants for five more, including exiled Catalan government minister and academic Clara Ponsatí.

Ponsatí is one of 25 Catalan leaders targeted by the Spanish state in its efforts to behead the movement seeking independence of Catalonia from Spain.

In 2016, 61-year-old Ponsatí was appointed the director of the School of Economics and Finance at the University of St Andrews, Scotland, relinquishing the post in July 2017 to take office in the Catalan regional assembly.

The UK's Conservative government of Prime Minister Theresa May is cooperating fully with the EAW against Ponsatí, who took refuge in Scotland after fleeing through Belgium, and resumed her previous position. More striking, however, is how the First Minister in the devolved Scottish Parliament and leader of the Scottish National Party (SNP), Nicola Sturgeon, is washing her hands of the fate of Ponsatí.

Sturgeon this week insisted that her government and ministers "have no powers to intervene" and "will not comment further at this stage."

When Ponsatí returned to St Andrews to resume her academic role, she told the BBC, "Every democratic government that thinks of itself as such should condemn

that there are political prisoners in Spain. It's a democratic outrage that in Western Europe we have people in prison for their political opinions."

She warned the *Independent*, "I don't see the situation improving if there is not more respect for what Catalans have decided with their vote. As long as we are under the threat of having hostages being used to blackmail political decisions, it is going to be very difficult to move on."

Ponsatí's lawyer, Aamer Anwar, currently the rector of Glasgow University, told the BBC, "My instructions are that this is a political persecution—a systematic attempt to criminalise the desire for independence." Anwar continued, "We believe that if she is sent back to Spain then she will suffer inhumane and degrading treatment and that the independence of the judiciary in Spain cannot be guaranteed."

St Andrews University's Principal, Sally Mapstone, also defended Ponsatí, stating, "In the current circumstances, we believe there are legitimate arguments that Clara is being targeted for standing up for her political beliefs."

Ponsatí's fate is generating considerable popular outrage and a number of demonstrations are being held over the next few days in Edinburgh and St Andrews.

However, Sturgeon made clear that while she opposed the "arrest and imprisonment of independence supporting politicians," she had no intention of taking any steps in defence of the exiled academic. Hiding behind UK law, she said, "Under the Extradition Act 2003, Scottish Ministers have no role in the determination of European Arrest Warrants. Our police, prosecution service and courts are independent and are legally obliged under this UK legislation to fulfill their responsibilities. Scottish Ministers have no powers to intervene in this process."

"The legal process includes the right of any individual subject to proceedings under the 2003 Act to oppose their extradition in the courts and it is vital that the integrity of this process is protected," she continued. "For that reason the Scottish Government will not comment further at this stage."

This is a fraud. The SNP could mobilise considerable resources and influence to cause the Spanish and British governments as much embarrassment as possible. But the SNP's much vaunted fraternal solidarity with their fellow separatists counts for nothing when this threatens the orientation to the European Union that lies at the heart of their perspective of securing an independent capitalist Scotland.

This demands that the SNP does nothing to alienate

major European powers, including Spain, Italy and Belgium, who are concerned with the development of separatist movements in their own countries.

After the independence declaration last year, Catalan ministers were locked up, stripped, faced with spurious charges with rebellion, sedition and misuse of public funds, but the SNP restricted itself to encouraging a "process of dialogue" and emphasised that it had pursued its demand for independence within a legal political framework.

The SNP has also distinguished itself in recent weeks by its uncritical embrace of the British government's anti-Russian provocations.

The SNP, a long-standing NATO supporter, has endorsed the May government's assault on press freedom targeting Russia's state-funded RT TV channel. It attacked its own former leader, Alex Salmond, who started his own show on RT in November. Sturgeon and the SNP went further over the poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal in Salisbury, England. With no evidence whatsoever having been presented, Sturgeon declared, "It is very clear that Russia cannot be permitted to unlawfully kill or attempt to kill people on the streets of the UK with impunity."

The SNP's leader in the House of Commons, Ian Blackford, insisted that it must be made "clear to the Russian authorities" that the UK will "not tolerate activities which infringe international law..." "On this matter, I commit my party to working constructively with the government."

Blackford's comments were seized on by Tory MPs to attack Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn for expressing reservations over blaming Russia. "That's how you do it," they yelled.

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