

## Nationalist Instrumentalization of Universities in Catalonia

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We are now witnessing a new nationalist attack in Catalan public universities. Coinciding with the beginning of the trial of Catalan separatist activists and politicians related to the illegal referendum held on 1 October 2017, institutional declarations in support of the defendants have proliferated on Catalan campuses. In one instance, this support has been complemented by the request that the Spanish national holidays of October 12 (National Day of Spain) and December 6 (Constitution Day) be eliminated on university campuses. Such requests are offensive and disrespectful with non-secessionist, constitutionalist members of the staff whose sensibilities are utterly disregarded.

These pronouncements by the governing bodies of Catalan universities are reminiscent of the asphyxiating campaign promoted by separatist groups during last Autumn 2017, when faculty and other staff members received massive institutional emails with statements clearly aligned with nationalist thesis regarding the illegal referendum and plagued with fallacies. (A detail account of these episodes can be read in chapter ten of the report “Nationalist Instrumentalization of the Educational System in Catalonia: the case of October 1” jointly prepared by the Education section of Catalan Civil Society (Societat Civil Catalana) and Assembly for a Bilingual School in Catalonia (Asamblea para una Escuela Bilingüe). However, astonishing as it may seem, no declarations were issued concerning the coup to democracy that took place in the Parliament of Catalonia the unfortunate days of September 6 and 7, 2017.

This is a persistent strategy by Catalan nationalism already articulated in the obscene Program 2000 propagated by the Catalan nationalist political party Democratic Convergence of Catalonia (Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya), the predecessor of one of the leading separatist parties today. This strategy consists of assuring that like-minded secessionists take control of the governing bodies of organizations, professional associations or public administrations so that, when the right time comes and from their vintage positions, these officers and administrators can convey a false sense of ideological uniformity involving all members. Doubtless, such institutional control is an effective way to corner discrepancy.

As a response to the nationalist strategy described above, in October 2018 a large group of more than one hundred professors from Catalan public universities organized as Academics for Coexistence (Universitaris per la Convivència) signed the declaration, “A Plea for Coexistence and Freedom of Expression,” whose leitmotiv is the defense of institutional neutrality for universities and ideological freedom for students, faculty and administrative staff. It has become an imperative to raise one’s voice to confront those who misrepresent our institutions and the political beliefs of their members by using our names in their unsolicited political pronouncements.

Faculty members of Catalan universities participating in Academics for Coexistence have been requesting that the governing bodies of their respective home institutions cease producing

political statements. They argue that there are two fundamental reasons for supporting their plea:

1.- Public administrative bodies (in this case, educational administrative bodies) are not entitled to freedom of expression since this is a fundamental right corresponding exclusively to individuals, as it has been repeatedly shown in the constitutional jurisprudence (e.g., sentences 254/1993 of July 20; 14/2003 of January 28 and 244/2007 of December 10).

2.- The council members of public universities, through their various governing bodies, have not been elected for their political ideology, and therefore they are not legitimated to express their political ideas in the name of those whom they represent. On the contrary, by doing so they violate their ideological freedom, particularly that of those who do not share in their nationalist views, and also the legal provisions mentioned above.

Raising our voices repetitively is also necessary to prevent these wrongful practices from suppressing students' opinions and exacerbating their fear of isolation, which, in turn, contributes to increase the spiral of silence. Many students feel betrayed by their home institutions that publicly and unapologetically proclaim political ideas and/or maintain political positions they do not share. Furthermore, they feel powerless and afraid to react.

Fortunately, more and more critical voices are heard in the public arena against the existing situation. Recently, and joining efforts with Academics for Coexistence, a group of constitutionalist students have beginning to organize in an extraordinary and pioneer effort to oppose the separatist uncontested creed on campuses and expose the abuse they suffer for defending their rights and the rule of law. With their new organization S'ha Acabat! (Enough!) they have gone public demanding the neutrality of universities and have requested that the three largest Catalan universities, the Autonomous University of Barcelona, the University of Barcelona and the Polytechnic University of Catalonia, "withdraw their declarations in favor of the acquittal of the prosecuted separatist politicians and those who fled from justice."

In short, these are brave and peremptory initiatives that bring some hope to a stunned and numbed Catalonia and indicate that the spiral of silence is beginning the break. The future of ideological freedom in our universities will depend on how many of us believe in taking risks to protect it.