

OPEN LETTER TO  
COMMISSION PRESIDENT JUNCKER AND EUROPEAN COUNCIL  
PRESIDENT TUSK

cc. First Vice-President Frans Timmermans

**UPHOLDING THE RULE OF LAW IN THE EUROPEAN UNION**

3 November 2017

Dear President Juncker, dear President Tusk:

We are scholars, politicians, public intellectuals and members of the European Parliament writing to you with the following concern:

The European Union has proclaimed the Rule of Law principle and respect for fundamental rights and freedoms to be binding on its Member States (Articles 2 and 6 of the Lisbon Treaty). The EU's leadership has been a staunch protector of these fundamental norms, most recently in countering the Polish government's attempts to undermine the independence of judges as well as the Hungarian government's actions to limit civil society and media freedoms.

However, we are deeply concerned that the EU's governing bodies are condoning the violation of the Rule of Law in Spain, in particular regarding the Spanish central authorities' approach to the 1 October referendum on Catalan independence. We do not take political sides on the substance of the dispute on territorial sovereignty and we are cognizant of procedural deficiencies in the organisation of the referendum. Our concern is with the Rule of Law as practised by an EU Member State.

The Spanish government has justified its actions on grounds of upholding or restoring the constitutional order. The Union has declared that this is an internal matter for Spain. Issues of national sovereignty are indeed a matter of domestic politics in liberal democracies. However, the *manner* in which the Spanish authorities have been handling the claims to independence expressed by a significant part of the population of Catalonia constitutes a violation of the Rule of Law, namely:

1/ The Spanish Constitutional Tribunal banned the referendum on Catalan independence scheduled for 1 October, as well as the Catalan Parliament session scheduled for 9 October, on grounds that these planned actions violate Article 2 of the Spanish Constitution stipulating the indissoluble unity of the Spanish nation, thus rendering secession illegal. However, in enforcing in this way Article 2, the Tribunal has violated Constitutional provisions on freedom of peaceful assembly and of speech – the two principles which are embodied by referendums and parliamentary deliberations irrespective of their subject matter. Without interfering in Spanish constitutional disputes or in Spain's penal code, we note that it is a travesty of justice to enforce one constitutional provision by violating fundamental rights. Thus, the Tribunal's judgments and the Spanish government's actions for which these judgments provided a legal basis violate both the spirit and letter of the Rule of Law.

2/ In the days preceding the referendum, the Spanish authorities undertook a series of repressive actions against civil servants, MPS, mayors, media, companies and citizens. The shutdown of Internet and other telecom networks during and after the referendum campaign had severe consequences on exercising freedom of expression.

3/ On referendum day, the Spanish police engaged in excessive force and violence against peaceful voters and demonstrators – according to Human Rights Watch. Such disproportionate use of force is an undisputable abuse of power in the process of law enforcement.

4/ The arrest and imprisonment on 16 October of the activists Jordi Cuixart and Jordi Sànchez (Presidents, respectively, of the Catalan National Assembly and Omnium Cultural) on charges of sedition is a miscarriage of justice. The facts resulting in this incrimination cannot possibly be qualified as sedition, but rather as the free exercise of the right to peaceful public manifestation, codified in article 21 of the Spanish Constitution.

The Spanish government, in its efforts to safeguard the sovereignty of the state and indivisibility of the nation, has violated basic rights and freedoms guaranteed by the European Convention on Human Rights, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as well as by Articles 2 and 6 of the basic law of the EU (the Lisbon Treaty). *The violation of basic rights and freedoms protected by international and EU law cannot be an internal affair of any government. The silence of the EU and its rejection of inventive mediation is unjustifiable.*

The actions of the Spanish government cannot be justified as protecting the Rule of Law, even if based on specific legal provisions. In contrast to rule-by-law (rule by means of norms enacted through a correct legal procedure or issued by a public authority), Rule of Law implies also the safeguarding of fundamental rights and freedoms – norms which render the law binding not simply because it is procedurally correct but enshrines justice. It is the Rule of Law, thus understood, that provides legitimacy to public authority in liberal democracies.

We therefore call on the Commission to examine the situation in Spain under the Rule of Law framework, as it has done previously for other Member States.

The EU leadership has reiterated that violence cannot be an instrument in politics, yet it has implicitly condoned the actions of the Spanish police and has deemed the actions of the Spanish government to be in line with the Rule of Law. Such a reductionist, maimed version of the Rule of Law should not become Europe's new political common sense. It is dangerous and risks causing long-term damage to the Union. We therefore call on the European Council and Commission to do all that is necessary to restore the Rule of Law principle to its status as a foundation of liberal democracy in Europe by countering any form of abuse of

power committed by Member States. Without this, and without a serious effort of political mediation, the EU risks losing its citizens' trust and commitment.

The crisis has in the meantime developed further (the Catalan government was detained, arrest warrant was issued against Mr Puigdemont). We follow closely the situation with the interests of democracy in Catalonia, Spain and Europe in mind, as they cannot be separated, and we insist all the more on the importance for the EU to monitor the respect of fundamental freedoms by all parties.

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*On the initiative of Albena Azmanova (University of Kent) and Barbara Spinelli (writer, Member of the European Parliament)*

Co-signatories (in personal capacity):

*Etienne Balibar, université Paris Nanterre and Kingston University London*  
*David Gow, editor, Social Europe*  
*Kalypto Nicolaidis, Oxford University, Director of the Center for International Studies*  
*Mark Davis, University of Leeds, Founding Director of the Bauman Institute*  
*Cristina Lafont, Northwestern University (Spanish citizen)*  
*Ash Amin, Cambridge University*  
*Yanis Varoufakis, DiEM25 co-founder*  
*Rosemary Bechler, editor, openDemocracy*  
*Gustavo Zagrebelsky professor of constitutional law, University of Turin*  
*Antonio Negri, Philosopher, Euronomad platform*  
*Costas Douzinas, Birkbeck, University of London*  
*Robert Menasse, writer, Austria*  
*Dimitrios Papadimoulis, Vice President of the European Parliament (GUE-NGL)*  
*Ulrike Guérot, Danube University Krems, Austria & Founder of the European Democracy Lab, Berlin*  
*Judith Butler, University of California, Berkeley and European Graduate School, Switzerland*  
*Philip Pettit, University Center for Human Values, Princeton University (Irish citizen)*  
*Josep-Maria Terricabras, Member of European Parliament (Greens/EFA)*  
*Hauke Brunkhorst, University of Flensburg*  
*Judit Carrera, Centre for Contemporary Culture of Barcelona*  
*Gabriele Zimmer, Member of European Parliament (President, GUE/NGL)*  
*Philippe Schmitter, European University Institute, Florence*  
*Bart Staes, Member of European Parliament (Flemish Greens)*  
*Jón Baldvin Hannibalsson, former minister for foreign affairs and external trade of Iceland*  
*Diana Wallis, former Vice President of the European Parliament*  
*Craig Calhoun, President, Berggruen Institute; Centennial Professor at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE)*  
*Jane Mansbridge, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University*  
*Josu Juaristi Abaunz, Member of European Parliament (GUE-NGL)*  
*Alyn Smith, Member of the European Parliament (Greens/EFA)*  
*Thor Gylfason, University of Iceland and Research Fellow at CESifo, Munich/former member Iceland Constitutional Council 2011*  
*Jordi Solé, Member of European Parliament (Greens/EFA)*

*Judith Revel, Université Paris Nanterre*  
*Seyla Benhabib, Yale University; Catedra Ferrater Mora Distinguished Professor in Girona (2005)*  
*Arjun Appadurai, Institute for European Ethnology, Humboldt University, Berlin*  
*Susan Buck-Morss, CUNY Graduate Center and Cornell University*  
*Ramon Tremosa i Balcells, Member of European Parliament (Alde)*  
*Anastasia Nesvetailova, Director, City Political Economy Research Centre, City University of London*  
*Nancy Fraser, The New School for Social Research, New York (International Research Chair in Social Justice, Collège d'études mondiales, Paris, 2011-2016)*  
*Jill Evans, Member of the European Parliament (Greens/EFA)*  
*Regina Kreide, Justus Liebig University, Giessen*  
*Jodi Dean, Hobart and William Smith Colleges, Geneva NY*  
*Tatjana Zdnoka, Member of the European Parliament (Greens/EFA)*  
*Wendy Brown, University of California, Berkley*  
*Roberta De Monticelli, University San Raffaele, Milan.*  
*Sophie Wahnich, directrice de recherche CNRS, Paris*  
*Christoph Menke, University of Potsdam, Germany*  
*Tanja Fajon, Member of the European Parliament (S&D)*  
*Robin Celikates, University of Amsterdam*  
*Eric Fassin, Université Paris-8 Vincennes - Saint-Denis*  
*Paul Molac, Member of the French Parliament (écologiste)*  
*Alexis Cukier, Université Paris Nanterre*  
*Diogo Sardinha, university Paris/Lisbon*  
*Luke Ming Flanagan, Member of the European Parliament (GUE-NGL)*  
*Dario Castiglione, University of Exeter*  
*Hamit Bozarslan, EHESS, Paris*  
*Frieder Otto Wolf, Freie Universität Berlin*  
*Gerard Delanty, University of Sussex*  
*Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Coimbra University and University of Wisconsin-Madison*  
*Sandro Mezzadra, Università di Bologna*  
*Camille Louis, University of Paris 8 and Paris D*  
*Philippe Aigrain, writer and publisher*  
*Yann Moulier Boutang and Frederic Brun, Multitudes journal*  
*Anne Querrien and Yves Citton, Multitudes journal*  
*Bruce Robbins, Columbia University*  
*Michèle Riot-Sarcey, université Paris-VIII-Saint-Denis*  
*Zeynep Gambetti, Bogazici University, Istanbul (French citizen)*  
*Andrea den Boer, University of Kent, Editor-in-Chief, Global Society: Journal of Interdisciplinary International Relations*  
*Moni Ovadia, writer and theatre performer*  
*Merja Kyllönen, Member of the European Parliament (GUE/NGL)*  
*Guillaume Sibertin-Blanc, Université Paris 8 Saint-Denis*  
*Peter Osborne, Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy, Kingston University, London*  
*Ilaria Possenti, University of Verona*  
*Nicola Lampitelli, University of Tours, France*  
*Yutaka Arai, University of Kent*  
*Enzo Rossi, University of Amsterdam, Co-editor, European Journal of Political Theory*  
*Petko Azmanov, journalist, Bulgaria*  
*Etienne Tassin, Université Paris Diderot*  
*Lynne Segal, Birkbeck College, University of London*  
*Danny Dorling, University of Oxford*  
*Maggie Mellon, social policy consultant, former executive member Women for Independence*

Vanessa Glynn, Former UK diplomat at UKRep to EU  
 Alex Orr, exec mbr, Scottish National Party/European Movement in Scotland  
 Bob Tait, philosopher, ex-chair Langstane Housing Association, Aberdeen  
 Isobel Murray, Aberdeen University  
 Grahame Smith, general secretary, Scottish Trades Union Congress  
 Igor Šoltes, Member of the European Parliament (Greens/EFA)  
 Pritam Singh, Oxford Brookes University  
 John Weeks, SOAS, University of London  
 Jordi Angusto, economist at Fundació Catalunya-Europa  
 Leslie Huckfield, ex-Labour MP, Glasgow Caledonian University  
 Ugo Marani, University of Naples Federico II and President of RESeT  
 Gustav Horn, Scientific Director of the Macroeconomic Policy Institute of the Hans Böckler Stiftung  
 Chris Silver, journalist/author  
 François Alfonsi, President of EFA (European Free Alliance)  
 James Mitchell, Edinburgh University  
 Harry Marsh, retired charity CEO  
 Desmond Cohen, former Dean, School of Social Sciences at Sussex University  
 Yan Islam, Griffith Asia Institute  
 David Whyte, University of Liverpool  
 Katy Wright, University of Leeds  
 Adam Formby, University of Leeds  
 Nick Piper, University of Leeds  
 Matilde Massó Lago, The University of A Coruña and University of Leeds  
 Jim Phillips, University of Glasgow  
 Rizwaan Sabir, Liverpool John Moores University  
 Pablo Ciochini, University of Liverpool  
 Feyzi Ismail, SOAS, University of London  
 Kirsteen Paton, University of Liverpool  
 Stefanie Khoury, University of Liverpool  
 Xavier Rubio-Campillo, University of Edinburgh  
 Joe Sim, Liverpool John Moores University  
 Paul Molac, Member of the French Parliament  
 Hannah Wilkinson, University of Keele  
 Gareth Dale, Brunel University  
 Robbie Turner, University of St Andrews  
 Will Jackson, Liverpool John Moores University  
 Louise Kowalska, ILTUS Ruskin University  
 Alexia Grosjean, Honorary member, School of History, University of St Andrews  
 Takis Hadjigeorgiou, Member of the European Parliament (GUE-NGL)  
 Paul McFadden, York University  
 Matthias E. Storme, Catholic University of Leuven  
 Phil Scraton, Queen's University Belfast  
 Oscar Berglund, University of Bristol  
 Michael Lavalette, Liverpool Hope University  
 Owen Worth, University of Limerick  
 Ronnie Lippens, Keele University  
 Zoë Dingwall, political adviser EFA (European Free Alliance)  
 Andrew Watterson, Stirling University  
 Steve Tombs, The Open University  
 Emily Luise Hart, University of Liverpool  
 David Scott, The Open University

*Anders Eriksson, bureau EFA (European Free Alliance), European Parliament*  
*Bill Bowring, Birkbeck College, University of London*  
*Sofa Gradin, King's College London*  
*Michael Harrison, University of South Wales*  
*Ana Manzano-Santaella, University of Leeds*  
*Noëlle McAfee, Emory University*  
*Peter J. Verovšek, University of Sheffield*  
*Peter Dews, University of Essex*  
*Martin Matušík, Arizona State University (Czech citizen)*  
*Camil Ungureanu, Pompeu Fabra University, Barcelona*  
*Dafydd Huw Rees, Cardiff University*  
*Patrick Le Hyaric, Member of the European Parliament (GUE-NGL)*  
*Martin Beck Matušík, Arizona State University*  
*Hans-Peter Krüger, University of Potsdam*  
*Loren Goldman, University of Pennsylvania*  
*Federica Gregoratto, University of St.Gallen*  
*Rurion Soares Melo, Universidade de São Paulo*  
*Pieter Duvenage, Cardiff University and editor, Journal for Contemporary History*  
*Chad Kautzer, Lehigh University*  
*Peter A. Kraus, University of Augsburg*  
*David Ingram, Loyola University of Chicago*  
*Alain-G. Gagnon, Université du Québec à Montréal*  
*Peter Bußjäger, Institut für Föderalismus, Innsbruck*  
*Nelly Maes, Former Member of the European Parliament, former President of European Free Alliance*  
*Nicolas Levrat, University of Geneva*  
*Helmut Scholz, Member of the European Parliament (GUE/NGL)*  
*Michel Seymour, Université de Montréal*  
*Simon Toubeau, University of Nottingham*  
*Georg Kremnitz, Universität Wien*  
*Keith Gerard Breen, Queen's University Belfast*  
*Alan Price, Swansea University*  
*Fernando Ramallo, Universidade de Vigo*  
*Nicolas Levrat, University of Geneva, Director of the International Law Department*  
*Jordi Matas, Professor of Political Science, University of Barcelona*  
*Simon Toubeau, University of Nottingham*  
*María Pilar García Negro, University of Coruña*  
*María do Carme García Negro, University of Santiago de Compostela*  
*Francisco Rodríguez, writer*  
*Carme Fernández Pérez-Sanjulián, University of Coruña*  
*Patrice Poujade, Université de Perpignan*  
*Colin H Williams, Cardiff and Cambridge University*  
*Nicolas Berjoan, Université de Perpignan*  
*Joan Peitavi, Université de Perpignan*  
*Alà Baylac-Ferrer, Université de Perpignan*  
*Guglielmo Cevolín, University of Udine, Italy*  
*Robert Louvin, Professor of Comparative Law, University of Calabria*  
*Günther Dauwen, Secretary General of the Centre Maurits Coppieters*  
*Bart Maddens, Catholic University of Leuven*  
*Alan Sandry, Swansea University*  
*Justo Serrano Zamora, Bavarian School of Public Policy*  
*Ivo Vajgl, Member of the European Parliament (Alde)*

*Alberto Aziz Nassif, Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social, México*

*Sandrina Antunes, University of Minho, Portugal*

*Pablo Beramendi, Duke University*

*Nico Krisch, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva*

*Miguel Urbán Crespo, Member of the European Parliament (GUE/NGL)*

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