

EUROPE

General Strike and Violent Clashes Paralyze Barcelona

Friday marks fifth and largest day of demonstrations since jailing of independence leaders



Protesters from all over Catalonia gathered in Barcelona on Friday, on the day that separatists have called a general strike and a mass rally. PHOTO: ALEJANDRO GARCIA/EPA/SHUTTERSTOCK

By Margherita Stancati and Pietro Lombardi

Updated Oct. 18, 2019 5:01 pm ET

BARCELONA—Hundreds of thousands of protesters converged in Barcelona for a general strike, paralyzing the city as violent clashes erupted and forcing the shutdown of its famed Sagrada Familia basilica amid renewed calls for Catalonia to secede from Spain.

The latest wave of unrest, triggered by the jail sentencing of separatist leaders earlier this week, has made the longstanding issue of Catalan independence once again central to Spain's political debate as the country heads to parliamentary elections on Nov. 10.

Mass demonstrations starting out from different parts of Catalonia streamed into the regional capital Barcelona on Friday, blocking major boulevards amid heavy police presence. So far, 58 flights have been canceled.

Outside the city's best-known monument, artist Antoni Gaudí's Sagrada Familia, hundreds of protesters draped in pro-independence flags gathered to call for the release of their political leaders, chanting "Our sentence is independence!" and other slogans. In response to the rally, the basilica's management said it would close for the day.



Protesters shout slogans as they gather in Via Laietana, a major road in Barcelona. PHOTO: PAU BARRENA/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

In the evening, the protests in central Barcelona turned violent when riot police clashed with masked protesters who erected makeshift barricades and set trash cans on fire, using slingshots to hurl rocks and debris. Police responded with tear gas and rubber bullets.

Friday marked the fifth and biggest day of protest since Spain's Supreme Court on Monday sentenced nine Catalan separatist politicians to between nine and 13 years in prison for their role in an illegal 2017 independence referendum.

Former Catalan leader Carles Puigdemont, meanwhile, turned himself in to Belgian authorities after Spanish authorities issued a Europe-wide warrant for his arrest. He was released pending a decision by Belgian authorities on Oct. 29 on whether to extradite him. Last year, a Belgian court declined a similar extradition request from Spanish authorities. Mr. Puigdemont fled to Belgium after the 2017 vote.

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Barcelona has seen acts of violence and vandalism all week, with dozens of trash containers and cars set on fire and protesters hurling rocks and acid against police. Authorities say around 400 people have been injured and 128 detained

since Monday across Catalonia.

“Condemning our political leaders because they called a referendum is outrageous,” said Elisenda Paluzie, the leader of Catalan National Assembly, a separatist group that helped organize Friday’s marches. “They want to stop us from achieving independence.”

Catalonia, a region of 7.5 million people, is Spain’s wealthiest and has long harbored separatist sentiment. It has its own language and a significant degree of autonomy on health care and education. The region also manages its own police force.

The renewed calls for independence are testing the approach to the crisis of acting Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, whose Socialist party supports dialogue with Catalonia’s separatists. In response to the latest wave of unrest, Mr. Sánchez said the Spanish state would defend the right to demonstrate peacefully “but will not tolerate the imposition of violence.”

Catalonia’s pro-independence regional government has also condemned the violence, blaming it on infiltrators. The region’s leader, Quim Torra, said he would call for a second referendum on Catalan independence if other Catalan parties agree. In an interview with The Wall Street Journal on Friday, he said he wanted more concessions from Madrid on Catalan self-determination.

“I think Spain has to listen to this outcry for justice and freedom and has to make a political proposal,” the Catalan president said. “It is absolutely necessary that the new Spanish government that emerges from the elections realizes that without listening to Catalonia’s voice, Spain can’t be governed.”

The Supreme Court’s verdict has rekindled tensions surrounding Catalonia’s separatist aspirations, which culminated in an unrecognized declaration of independence following 2017’s illegal referendum. Madrid responded by directly ruling the region for several months—an option supported by right-leaning opposition parties.

“We don’t just want independence—we want justice,” said Oriol Puj, an 18-year-old university student from Barcelona, who has participated in protests daily since the verdict.

—*Adrià Calatayud contributed to this article.*

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