
English Scots for YES

International Visitor Mission Report

Wednesday December 13 2017



Table of Contents

Preamble	3
Background to the Referendum and Official Briefings	4
Polling Day	5
Interruptions to Voter Register website	6
Transparency	7
Civic involvement	7
Environment around polling stations	7
Count	8
Evaluation & Conclusions	9
Appendix	10

International Visitor's Report on the Catalan Referendum for Self-Determination

By

English Scots for Yes

Preamble

In late August, our group was made aware by contacts in Catalonia that the Catalan Government was going to request International Visitors & Observers to be present on October 1st, to witness the proposed vote, and help ensure its validity. Our group made the decision to form a team of suitably qualified people to send to Catalonia.

The assembled team included former elected politicians, a translator, and two individuals with extensive experience as polling clerks & election officials who travelled to Catalonia on Friday 29th September 2017 with a base in Vilassar de Mar, around 25km north-east of Barcelona. In the week prior to travelling there was an increasing amount of difficulty communicating with organisations in Catalonia due to Spanish authorities closing websites and servers relating to the referendum.

Background to the Referendum and Official Briefings

Prior to the referendum, the team studied the situation in Catalonia. For background, in 2015, a pro-independence alliance, “Junts Pel Si” (English: Together for YES”) was elected to the Catalan parliament with 62 seats out of 135 seats, meaning they lacked a majority in which to form a government; a deal was made with the pro-independence CUP (English: Popular Unity Candidacy), who garnered 10 seats, giving the government 72 seats. Following a period of long negotiations, eventually a government was agreed, with a new leader, Carles Puigdemont as President.

In 2017, following the manifesto commitments made in 2015, a referendum was announced for Catalan independence. The opposition parties in Catalonia were strongly against this, and their party leaders in Madrid vowed to stop the vote with whatever means necessary.

Following the passage of a bill to allow for the referendum, the Spanish Constitutional Court declared the vote illegal, suspended the bill enacting it, and issued orders to the Policia Nacional & Guardia Civil (English: National Police & Civil Guard) to prevent the vote and detain certain members of the Catalan government & civil service. Numerous arrests and police actions took place, including raids on printing shops alleged to be conducting the printing of ballot papers. In addition, a large number of armed paramilitary Guardia Civil troops were brought into Catalonia and billeted on a chartered cruise-liner docked in Barcelona.

Following threats to close polling places, various civic groups such as the ANC organised to occupy these locations (mostly schools) from close of business on Friday afternoon through until Sunday to ensure Spanish police could not empty and secure them.

The team, on arrival in Barcelona on Saturday 30th September, presented ourselves at the Generalitat de Catalunya for a briefing hosted by the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Raül Romeva, where a summary of the foregoing was presented, as well as instructions on polling places, interactions with police & polling clerks etc.

There was a second briefing session by ICEC (International Commission for European Citizenry) in the early evening which we also attended. Between the two briefing sessions the team took the opportunity to exchange contact details with other International Visitors and to deal with various logistical matters. During this time we were struck with the number of people who seemed to recognise the ID passes that were issued to the International Visitors and approached us to express their gratitude at our presence as well as their desire to have the opportunity to vote.

Polling Day

For election day the team had a plan to view the opening of a polling station in Vilassar de Mar, then move north-east along the coastal towns before travelling inland to Girona, finally heading south-east to Vilassar de Mar via inland rural communities. The intent was to visit as many polling stations, covering as many demographic profiles as possible, to witness the polling process at each location, question the local polling officials in relation to turnout, problems encountered, and to verify that voting was carried out in a free and fair manner. The above was very quickly made irrelevant by events on the day.

We were able to verify the opening process at La Bressoleta and witness the beginning of the polling process. Upon leaving this polling station we had first reports that there was trouble at polling stations in Girona and a decision was made to travel directly there. We visited the polling station at Sant Julia de Ramis, which had been closed by the Guardia Civil with all polling related materials removed. At the Escola Eiximenis in Girona local activists, including off duty firemen, were co-ordinating the flow of voters, some of whom had been redirected from polling places in northern Girona that had been closed by police actions. One of the firemen escorted us to Centre Civic Barri Vell-Mercadal which was operating as normal, and then on the Casa de Cultura de Girona where we were informed that the ballot boxes were intermittently being hidden. We were then directed to Escola Verd which had been closed in the morning, but as the election officials had been able to hide the ballot materials effectively thus preventing the police from seizing them, was able to reopen after a break of 1 – 2 hours. The police had been particularly violent at this polling station and we were offered the opportunity to visit the local hospital where casualties were being treated, which we declined as we did not wish to impede the work of the medical staff or intrude on the privacy of the injured.

As there were no new reports of police raids we decided that we would try to return to our original plan of visiting polling places in different setting and travelled to La Bisbal d'Empordà. This polling station was very quiet and had had no trouble, however, by this time news of the violence in other areas had been widely disseminated and as a result the election officials were quite anxious. We then visited Museu del Suro de Palafrugell, before moving on to Escola Villa Roma in Palamòs, and then returning to Vilassar de Mar for the closing of the polls and the count.

Interruptions to Voter Register website

At La Bressoleta the polls were a little late opening (about 5 mins) as the officials were having difficulty accessing the voter registration database. Once they were able to get a connection the polling officials tested the system by casting their own votes. This also allowed us to see the process that was used for validating voter IDs and the way that cross checking was done. We had been able to see that prior to the officials casting their votes the ballot boxes were empty and that all official seals were in place. Once the doors were opened the polling place quickly became a mass of people but despite the overwhelming numbers the vote proceeded smoothly and the officials were calm and efficient in allowing ballots to be cast quickly. All the polling stations in Girona reported that there were problems throughout the day with the electronic system and although we had no direct confirmation, we were hearing reports that people gathering at some polling stations were being asked to switch their mobile phones into airplane mode. This was to enable polling officials to use mobile internet to access the registration site. At La Bisbal D'Empordà the connection was so intermittent that the staff gave up on the electronic register and reverted to manually checking on a paper copy. As this was a small community it did not pose too many problems and allowed the vote to proceed uninterrupted. A similar situation was reported at Palamòs .

Transparency

At every polling station the election officials were welcoming, eager to show us how they were dealing with the situations that they found themselves in, and answered any questions we had as fully as they could.

Civic involvement

We were impressed with the level of community involvement in the election at all levels. Due to the threats of buildings being closed so that they could not be used as polling places many local groups organised round the clock events and sleep overs. The four polling places that we visited in Vilassar de Mar on the night before the referendum had an impressive array of events, from all night film shows, musical concerts and in one location a basketball tournament. Members of the community provided food and drinks at the polling places and the events were noteworthy for their inclusive family friendly atmosphere. We spoke to a number of people and found that the voting intention was split between both Yes and No voters. Indeed at Institut Pere Ribot one activist told us that the result of the referendum was of secondary importance to the right to be able to hold the vote unimpeded.

On polling day we also saw a large numbers of people staying at polling stations to protect the venue from interference, providing refreshments to those waiting to vote, assisting the elderly, mobility impaired and those with children to access the polling station.

Environment around polling stations

The atmosphere around polling stations changed over the day. In Vilassar de Mar before polling was open long queues formed with some people having arrived as early as 5 am and the mood was friendly and relaxed. Once we were in Girona the mood, although still friendly had a degree of anxiety. In the polling stations that had been attacked by the police the people were shocked, angry and determined that the news of the attacks should be made public and that polling should continue.

Count

We chose Museu – Gliptoteca Enric Monjo in Vilassar de Mar to observe the count. Upon arrival one of the counting officials approached us and immediately said that there had been an incident but that he would explain once the poll had closed. Whilst waiting for this explanation we speculated on what may have happened and we could see on one ballot box the official seal had been broken. After the close of the polling station it was explained that they were aware of police activity in neighbouring towns and that the movement of the police suggested that the polling station was going to be raided. The officials made a decision that they would open the ballot boxes to put the cast ballots into bags and hide them in another location within the building. The bags were well sealed and the officials signed across the tape as a security measure. The officials were well aware that this would, under normal circumstances, be unacceptable. Whilst we were disturbed by the course of action taken, and after further questioning of the officials, we understood that the intent was an attempt to save ballots that might otherwise be seized and that the officials believed that they were acting to maintain the integrity of the ballot. The officials counted the contents of the bags separately from the votes in the ballot box. We noted that there was proportionately slightly more ‘no’, ‘null’ and ‘blank’ votes in the boxes than the bags but the number of votes cast after the interruption was so small that it’s difficult to make a meaningful statistical analysis. The voting pattern was, however, consistent across both polling points. Whilst we are reasonably confident that there was no manipulation of the vote, we cannot make an absolute judgement on this matter.

In terms of administering the count, the process was carried out in a fair and open manner and notwithstanding the issues noted above, we can say that the result posted was a fair and accurate reflection of the votes that were presented at the count. It is unfortunate that we cannot explicitly confirm the integrity of the votes presented.

As the count of ballots proceeded another team began processing turnout on the voter registration system, which had been done manually due to the connection issues already mentioned.

Evaluation & Conclusions

We cannot in all honesty say that this was a free and fair election. The levels of interference, intimidation and violence that was meted out by the Spanish Government makes it difficult to say that the result is the definitive will of the Catalan people. Despite this we commend the officials in the way they worked with calm efficiency, despite the ongoing barriers, threats of potential prosecution and in some cases real physical danger. Whilst the result of ballots cast was an overwhelming vote for independence it should be noted that many who would have voted 'no' stayed away from the polls, a large number of people were unable to vote due to polling stations being closed and a large number of ballots were seized by the Guardia Civil and Policia Nacional before the polls were closed. Adding to this the number of people who were injured by State sponsored violence, some of whom may not have had the chance to vote, and the effect this violence may have had in deterring people from turning out to cast their vote, it is safe to say that the result was detrimentally affected under direct order of the Government in Madrid.

Subsequent to the Referendum there has been continual and concerted actions from the Spanish authorities to undermine the elected officials in Catalonia, including imprisoning pro-independence activists, confiscating the passport of the Head of Mossos (the Catalonian police force) and demanding his resignation, and threatening members of the Catalan Parliament with imprisonment of up to 30 years. Whilst the Catalan Parliament held off making a formal Declaration of Independence requesting dialogue with Spain and even offering to hold elections, Madrid has steadfastly refused any discussions, instead threatening to impose direct rule and continuing spurious legal actions against pro-independence politicians in Catalonia. Subsequent to the declaration of independence and the formation of an independent Catalan Republic on 27th October 2017, the Spanish government, via a legal mechanism known as Article 155 of the Spanish Constitution, have unilaterally deposed the Catalan Government & Parliament, arrested and held members of it without trial outside Catalonia, and are seeking the arrests via a European Arrest Warrant of the President, Carles Puigdemont and some of his cabinet & staff. In addition, the Spanish government have declared elections will be held in December 2017 for a new Catalan Parliament. There have also been statements by Spanish Ministers that pro-independence parties may not be able to stand in such elections. We have concerns that any elections that are called in Catalonia under these conditions would be unduly influenced by the government in Madrid and we would recommend that any such elections be placed under intense international scrutiny.

Appendix

List of Polling Places Visited

Saturday Evening, 30th September

- 1 Museu – Gliptoteca Enric Monjo, Vilassar de Mar
- 2 Escola Perez Sala, Vilassar de Mar
- 3 Escola del Mar, Vilassar de Mar
- 4 Institut Pere Ribot, Vilassar de Mar

Sunday, 1st October

- 1 Museu – Gliptoteca Enric Monjo, Vilassar de Mar
- 2 La Bressoleta, Vilassar de Mar
- 3 Pavelló Poliesportiu Municipal, Sant Julià de Ramis
- 4 Escola Eiximenis, Girona
- 5 Centre Civic Barri Vell-Mercadal, Girona
- 6 Casa de Cultura de Girona, Girona
- 7 Escola Verd, Girona
- 8 Institut Formacio Professional, La Bisbal d'Empordà
- 9 Museu del Suro de Palafrugell, Palafrugell
- 10 Escola Villa Roma, Palamòs
- 11 Museu – Gliptoteca Enric Monjo, Vilassar de Mar