

Article 155: Spain to impose direct rule over Catalonia as deadline passes

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Madrid will press ahead with suspending autonomy on Saturday after Catalan leader refuses to abandon independence push.

The Spanish government is to suspend Catalonia's autonomy and impose direct rule after the region's president refused to abandon the push for independence that has led to Spain's biggest political crisis for 40 years.

The announcement of the unprecedented measure came after the Catalan president, Carles Puigdemont, threatened a unilateral declaration of independence if the Spanish government did not agree to talks on the issue.

In a letter to the Spanish prime minister, Mariano Rajoy, sent on Thursday morning – the deadline set by Madrid for the region to abandon its independence plans – Puigdemont said discussions were the only way to resolve the crisis.

The Catalan president accused Spanish authorities of seeking to repress the independence movement after two of its leaders were denied bail by a national court judge this week, and he said using article 155 of the 1978 constitution to impose direct rule from Madrid would force his hand.

“The suspension [of the independence declaration] is still in place. The [Spanish] state is entitled to decide to apply article 155 if it secures the senate's approval,” he wrote.

“But despite all our efforts and our desire for dialogue, the fact that the only reply we have been given is that autonomy will be suspended suggests that you do not understand the problem and do not wish to talk.

“If the [Spanish] government persists in hindering dialogue and continues with its repression, the Catalan parliament could, if it deems appropriate, proceed to vote on the formal declaration of independence.”

In a statement on Thursday morning, the Spanish government said Puigdemont had again not confirmed whether independence had been declared, adding: “At an emergency meeting on Saturday, the cabinet will approve measures to be put before the senate to protect the general interest of Spaniards, including the citizens of Catalonia, and to restore constitutional order in the autonomous community.”

It criticised Catalan authorities for “deliberately and systematically seeking institutional confrontation, despite the serious damage it's causing to coexistence and Catalonia's economy”.

According to article 155, which has never been used, the Spanish government will need to lodge a formal complaint with Puigdemont, then submit its proposals to the senate for debate and approval.

As a result, it will be at least a few days before concrete steps are taken.

This week, a Spanish government spokesman said article 155 had been designed not to remove Catalonia's autonomy, but ensure its autonomous government adhered to the law.

"We have envisaged a range of scenarios and will apply 155 accordingly," he said. "It's not a question of applying it in its entirety or of taking over every government function or department. Clearly the Catalan government would lose many of its powers, though not all. It's a case of using a scalpel, not an axe."

In theory, its application could still be avoided if the Catalan government were to call a snap regional election without a confirmation of independence. However, the Catalan foreign minister, Raül Romeva, speaking in Brussels on Wednesday, said: "Elections from our perspective are not an option."

Although Puigdemont has claimed that the unilateral independence referendum held on 1 October, in which 90% of participants opted for independence, gave his government the mandate to forge a sovereign state, he has ignored Rajoy's demand to clarify whether or not independence has been declared.

He has instead proposed that the effects of an independence declaration be suspended for two months while both sides open dialogue aimed at resolving the standoff.

On Wednesday, Rajoy issued a last-minute call for Puigdemont to calm the situation and act in the interests of all Spaniards and Catalans. Speaking in parliament, he asked Puigdemont's colleagues to persuade him "not to make any more problems" that would "oblige the government to make decisions that would be better never to make".

Tensions in the already fraught impasse rose further this week after a judge at Spain's national court denied bail to two prominent Catalan independence leaders who are being investigated for alleged sedition.

Jordi Sánchez, the president of the Catalan national assembly (ANC), and Jordi Cuixart, the president of the Catalan association Òmnium Cultural, are accused of using huge demonstrations to try to prevent Spanish police officers from following a judge's orders to halt the referendum.

Their detention prompted large protests across Catalonia on Tuesday. On the same day, Spain's constitutional court announced that it had annulled the Catalan law paving the way for the referendum, saying the right to "promote and enact the unilateral secession" of a part of the country was not recognised in the Spanish constitution.

According to the Catalan government, about 2.3 million of Catalonia's 5.3 million registered voters (43%) took part in the referendum. It says 770,000 votes were lost after Spanish police stepped in to try to halt the vote.

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P.S.

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<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/18/spain-direct-rule-catalonia-deadline-direct-rule>