

Ex-Catalan separatist leader Carles Puigdemont slips out of Barcelona after avoiding arrest



Catalonia's exiled separatist leader Carles Puigdemont arrives to deliver a speech on stage as his hardline separatist

Barcelona, August 9 (RHC)-- Catalonia's former separatist leader Carles Puigdemont has left for Belgium a day after briefly appearing at a rally in Barcelona and evading a massive manhunt and an arrest warrant in Spain.

Puigdemont's lawyer Gonzalo Boye told Catalan radio on Friday that his client had fled abroad again without giving details.

His Junts party's general secretary, Jordi Turull, told RAC1 radio that Puigdemont had arrived in Spain on Tuesday night and left on Thursday evening to head back to his home in Waterloo, where he has lived for seven years in self-imposed exile since leading a failed bid for Catalonia's secession in 2017.

The 61-year-old former leader delivered a speech to thousands of supporters gathered in Barcelona near parliament on Thursday and then disappeared. A top Spanish judge demanded explanations from police and the government about how Puigdemont was able to return to Spain and vanish again without arrest.

Judge Pablo Llarena asked the Ministry of Interior for details of its plan to arrest him at the border as well as "the orders that were issued" to capture the politician "after his escape", according to documents made public by the Supreme Court.

Llarena asked for the names of "the agents responsible for the design of the operation, those responsible for its approval and those who have been entrusted with its execution or operational deployment".

Reporting from Barcelona, Al Jazeera's Bernard Smith said there had been "a lot of head scratching" around the separatist leader's unexpected reappearance. "It's the first time that Puigdemont has been spotted on Spanish soil since he left in 2017 just after he declared Catalan independence," Smith said.

Catalonia's regional police said they have arrested two of their officers, including one who owned the car used by Puigdemont to leave the rally.

The police force, Mossos d'Esquadra, which launched a manhunt, denied there had been any collusion with Puigdemont's entourage and insisted officers had planned to arrest him "at the most opportune time so as not to generate public disorder".

"I don't trust what politicians have said about him leaving Spain," he said Sallent.

Puigdemont was the head of the regional government when a referendum on Catalan independence was held on October 1, 2017. The vote in favor of independence was declared unconstitutional and suspended by the Spanish Constitutional Court.

"While an amnesty was passed by the Supreme Court in May for the leaders behind that referendum, Puigdemont and two others were not eligible, and that's why their arrest warrant still stands," Smith said.

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