

RESPONSE TO THE OPEN LETTER “UPHOLDING THE RULE OF LAW IN THE EUROPEAN UNION”, of 31 October 2017

Media summary: An open letter published on 31 October, signed by a number of scholars, intellectuals and Members of the European Parliament, claimed that following the “referendum” held in Catalonia on 1 October, the Spanish authorities had seriously violated basic rights of members of the Catalan pro-independence movement, contravening European standards protecting the rule of law. This denunciation occasionally shows a serious lack of familiarity with the facts, omitting an important part of the account of events, and displaying a worrying ignorance of Spain’s institutional system and its constitutional guarantees. We therefore wish to exercise our right to respond, and to offer the European and international public a more accurate version of how, and by whom, citizens’ rights have been violated in Catalonia, and of the democratic system of laws with which the Spanish equipped themselves in 1978. The ideological affinities that separatist aspirations may arouse cannot be a pretext for portraying Spain as a dictatorship, nor as a country in which political and legal arbitrariness thrive. Were this to occur, we would be the first to denounce it: but it is not the case.

LETTER

Dear President Juncker, dear President Tusk,

The open letter published on 31 October, addressed to you and signed by a number of scholars, intellectuals and Members of the European Parliament, denounced the alleged actions of the Spanish authorities before and after the illegal referendum that took place on 1 October. The signatories included certain figures who, for different reasons, are very well known, such as Gustavo Zagrebelsky, Judith Butler, Philip Pettit, Nancy Fraser, Toni Negri, Étienne Balibar, Arjun Appadurai, Boaventura de Sousa Santos and Yanis Varoufakis.

This letter reveals appalling lack of knowledge regarding the issues it addresses, including serious ignorance of Spain’s Constitution and Spanish law. Additionally, it contains numerous factual errors and, as a result, inevitably arrives at conclusions that are far removed from what is really happening in Catalonia and in Spain. Due to the high standing of the signatories, and due to the falsehood—in certain cases, unquestionably, unintended—of their accusations, we consider it appropriate to provide you with the following clarifications.

I

The very first paragraph contains an statement that is inadmissible from any minimally reasonable perspective: “...we are deeply concerned that the EU’s governing bodies are condoning the systematic violation of the rule of law in Spain, in particular regarding the Spanish central authorities’ approach to the 1 October referendum on Catalan independence”.

On this point, what would concern the signatories, if they were fully informed of the matters on which they are commenting, would be, at least, the following four key issues.

Firstly, this so-called referendum did not agree with the most basic democratic guarantees according to European standards of the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe: the electoral roll was not known until an hour before the voting commenced, the staffing of the polling stations was not made public in advance, and there was no electoral administration or court scrutiny. All of the above are absolutely essential to ensure that a referendum is worthy of such a name and that its results can be trusted.

Secondly, the Act that regulated this most unorthodox vote had been approved three weeks earlier, on 6 September, in a less than a day's sitting of the Catalan Parliament. In said session, opposition parties had only two hours to amend the bill presented, and parliamentary minorities were stripped of the most basic rights of participation recognized in Spain's Constitution. It must also be added that the Bureau of the Catalan Parliament, by majority decision, ignored not only the rulings of the Constitutional Court but also those of the Council for Statutory Guarantees (an internal body of the Catalan regional government—the Generalitat—which issues legal opinions) and the reports of the Catalan Parliament's own legal counsel.

Thirdly, the purpose of the Referendum Act was to regulate “Catalonia's right to self-determination” —a right, formulated as such, whose very existence is not supported, either by Spanish or international law. Moreover, in its first few articles, the Referendum Act affirmed the sovereignty of the Catalan people and the hierarchical superiority of this Act to the Spanish Constitution, to Catalonia's Statue of Autonomy and to Spain's entire legal system.

Fourthly, the Parliament of Catalonia, the legislative chamber of the Autonomous Community, does not have the power to regulate, and the regional premier of Catalonia does not have the power to call, a referendum whose results necessarily and directly affect the Spanish people as a whole. To achieve the intended purpose of this referendum, what would be required, given that Spain is a democratic State governed by the rule of law, would be a constitutional reform. As indicated in a recent ruling by the Constitutional Court, such a reform is always possible given that the Spanish Constitution, unlike those of other European States, does not include any clauses prohibiting its total reform and, as a pluralistic democracy, parties and ideologies that are against the Constitution are legal and with representatives in Parliament. That said, given that Spain is also a constitutional democracy, such a reform would need to follow the specific procedures detailed in Title X of the Constitution.

Therefore, if the “the Spanish central authorities' approach to the 1 October referendum on Catalan independence”, as the letter claims, is supposedly a very important fact demonstrating that there is a “a systematic violation of the rule of law in Spain”, it is clear that this statement is entirely unfounded. In contrast, the Act passed in Catalonia—which was immediately suspended by the Constitutional Court, pursuant to Article 161.2 of the Constitution —does in fact conspicuously violate not only Spain's Constitution, but also the fundamental principles of democracy and rule of law. We are disappointed that the signatories of the letter did not familiarize themselves with the form and content of this irregular legislative process, before deciding to sign.

II

The signatories of the open letter are also mistaken when they allege that the Spanish authorities, including judges and courts, as well as the Constitutional Court, have violated the fundamental rights set down in international treaties.

Sound supporting arguments should be given for an accusation of this severity. However, surprisingly, the letter does not provide any specific facts, merely mentioning general considerations without going into detail, to allege that Spanish legislation has violated fundamental rights. As regards the application of this legislation over the past few conflictive weeks, to assert that the Spanish authorities—both the government and the judiciary—have violated freedom of peaceful assembly, the right to peaceful public manifestation, freedom of expression and the right to political participation, as the letter states, is to flout the truth.

Firstly, the demonstration of 20 September that the letter mentions, due to which Mr Sánchez and Mr Cuixart have been remanded in custody, as a precautionary measure, was in no way peaceful:

three Civil Guard patrol cars were attacked, while the officers were executing a court order to search a building used by the Catalan Public Administration; the court clerk who observed the search on the judge's behalf to ensure that it was performed lawfully was prevented from leaving the building for several hours; furthermore, the officers from the Civil Guard were prevented from leaving the building by the protesters—led by Mr Sánchez and Mr Cuixart—until 7am the following morning, 23 hours after they entered. Therefore, the demonstration, which lasted almost a whole day, was not peaceful in any way, and in fact violated the rights of those who, in fulfilment of a court order, were performing their duties as judicial police.

Secondly, to state, as the open letter does, that in the days running up to the referendum [sic] of 1 October, the Spanish authorities “undertook a series of repressive actions against civil servants, MPs, mayors, media, companies and citizens” is entirely incorrect. The actions were not “repressive” in any way; they were adopted with all of the constitutional guarantees offered by the High Court of Justice of Catalonia, applying the ruling of the Constitutional Court, which suspended all provisions and actions whose purpose was to hold a referendum—regulated by a law that had already been suspended and therefore did not apply, and which was unanimously ruled unconstitutional a few days later. An allegation that a measure adopted by a judge is “repressive” can only be upheld if it is proved that the decision is arbitrary, unlawful or, naturally, a violation of the fundamental rights recognized in international law. None of this has been demonstrated, or even argued, in the open letter.

Thirdly, as regards the events of 1 October, a decisive factor is not mentioned in the letter: pursuant to the powers set down in Catalonia's Statute of Autonomy, the police force that was responsible for preventing the illegal referendum was the regional Catalan police (*Mossos d'Esquadra*), to whom instructions were accordingly issued by the presiding judge. But this regional police force did not comply with the court order—their chief officers are now under investigation—making it necessary to urgently replace them with the National Police, a nationwide force. Consequently, the National Police were subjected to a veritable ambush, causing difficult situations in which it proved necessary to use some physical force, as it often does during demonstrations.

Nonetheless, contrary to what the figure of 900 persons injured provided by the Catalan Generalitat might suggest, the truth is that the use of physical force was very limited. The proof of this is that only four people went to hospital: two were discharged immediately, a third suffered a non-fatal heart attack—a condition for which the police cannot be held responsible—and the fourth person had an eye injury from a rubber ball fired by the police, and was treated at a medical centre. Of the images that circulated on social networks over the following days, many proved to be from previous police operations or other situations (as media outlets such as the *The Guardian*, *Le Monde* and *El País* discovered), and did not depict 1 October. This is a telling reflection of the dishonesty of the news items, which formed part of the propaganda campaign orchestrated by Catalan pro-independence organizations, in collusion with the Catalan Generalitat.

Therefore, it cannot be stated, as it is in the open letter, that “the Spanish police engaged in excessive force and violence against peaceful voters and demonstrators”, nor that the use of force was disproportionate and abusive. If that had been the case, there would be no explanation whatsoever for the claim that approximately two and a half million Catalans were able to vote (a 42% of the Catalan citizens), according to figures provided by the organizers, the truth of which is impossible to verify due to the lack of electoral guarantees.

III

However, what is most surprising about the open letter—which purports to be concerned about the rule of law in Spain—is the fact that at no time does it refer to the Catalan Parliament's and Catalan

Government's repeated and flagrant non-compliance of Spain's Constitution, of Catalonia's Statute of Autonomy, and of all other provisions in Spain's legal system, not to mention of court rulings. Specifically, it can be affirmed that during the months of September and October, the authorities of the Autonomous Community of Catalonia acted in open contempt of the Constitution, of prevailing legislation, and of court decisions: on numerous occasions they defiantly announced that they did not intend to abide by the laws or comply with court rulings. It is also striking that the letter does not express any concern whatsoever for the well-grounded suspicions that the Catalan authorities have engaged in corrupt activity by using the Generalitat's public funds to finance all of these partisan pro-independence activities against a ruling of the Constitutional Court. For this reason, some of the prosecuted politicians are being accused, among other offences, of misappropriation of public funds.

For all the above, it is ludicrous for the letter to accuse the central government and the courts of acting outside the legal standards in the European Union as guaranteed in the Treaties of the European Union and in the European Convention on Human Rights, when, in fact, the ones acting outside the law—including Catalonia's Statute of Autonomy and the Catalan Generalitat's own laws—have been the Catalan authorities.

Indeed, since January 2013 the Catalan authorities have been defying Spain's rule of law on a great many significant occasions, which are impossible to summarize here, but which are very well known. It all led, in September 2017, to the approval of the Referendum Act and of the Legal Transition Act both by a majority of the Catalan Parliament (72 out of 135 members), which replaced the constitutional order in Catalonia with a new and different order, which had no democratic legitimacy whatsoever. Faced with this, the Spanish Government, with the support of the political parties Popular Party, PSOE (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party) and Ciudadanos—i.e. an overwhelming majority in Spain's Congress of Deputies—not only filed court appeals, especially before the Constitutional Court, but also gave the Catalan Parliament and Government several opportunities to rectify their actions. Since they did not do so and, on 27 October, they declared—evidently with no legal effects—Catalonia's independence, Spain's Senate approved the central government's proposal to adopt extraordinary measures (214 out of 266 members), pursuant to Article 155 of the Constitution, dissolving the Catalan Parliament and calling elections for 21 December. Obviously, both this decision, together with any others that may be adopted pursuant to said Article 155 of the Spanish Constitution, are subject to the corresponding judicial scrutiny.

In conclusion, notwithstanding any ideological affinities that may be aroused by the secessionists' aspiration to fracture Spain's territorial integrity, we consider that by restoring constitutional order in Catalonia through application of Article 155 of the Spanish Constitution, the Spanish authorities are also guaranteeing the rule of law in the EU. Naturally, should illegal or disproportionate acts that violate fundamental rights and democratic principles be committed in the future, we will not hesitate to denounce such arbitrary actions by the public authorities that constitute a threat to citizens' freedom and equality. But this has not occurred.

For all these reasons, we consider the arguments set forth in the open letter to be unfounded and biased. Therefore, we are responding, both with an account of the facts and with their legal grounding, based on Spanish, European and international law. As Public Law scholars, we feel it is our public duty to respond, to provide you with a clarification of the situation.

This letter has been launched by Francesc de Carreras and Josu de Miguel, both professors at the University Autonomous of Barcelona. The following signatories (in personal capacity) adhere to it:

- Manuel Aragón Reyes, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Catedrático.
- Pablo Pérez Tremps, Universidad Carlos III, Catedrático.
- Tomás Ramón Fernández Rodríguez, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Catedrático.
- Santiago Muñoz Machado, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Catedrático.
- Roberto Luis Blanco Valdés, Universidad de Santiago, Catedrático.
- Paloma Biglino, Universidad de Valladolid, Catedrática.
- Francisco Sosa Wagner, Universidad de León, Catedrático.
- Joaquín Tornos, Universidad de Barcelona, Catedrático.
- Araceli Mangas Martín, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Catedrática.
- Luciano Parejo Alfonso, Universidad Carlos III de Madrid, Catedrático emérito.
- Teresa Freixes, Autonomous University of Barcelona, Professor and Jean Monnet Professor ad personam.
- José Esteve Pardo, Universidad de Barcelona, Catedrático.
- Luis Jimena Quesada, Universidad de Valencia, Catedrático
- Javier García Roca, Complutense, Catedrático.
- Javier Corcuera Atienza, UPV/EHU, Catedrático jubilado.
- Antonio Jiménez-Blanco, UPM, Catedrático de Derecho Administrativo.
- Joaquín Varela Suanzes-Carpegna, Universidad de Oviedo, Catedrático.
- Alfonso Ruiz Miguel, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, catedrático.
- Ricardo Alonso García, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Catedrático.
- Albrecht Weber, Universität Osnabrück, Catedrático.
- Javier de Lucas, Universidad de Valencia, Catedrático.
- Allan Brewer-Carías, Universidad Central de Venezuela, Profesor emérito.
- Ramón Parada, UNED, Catedrático.
- Miguel Revenga Sánchez, Universidad de Cádiz, Catedrático.
- Miguel Sánchez Morón, Universidad de Alcalá, Catedrático.
- Mercedes Fuertes, Universidad de León, Catedrática.
- Luis Aguiar de Luque, Universidad Carlos III, Catedrático.
- Joan Oliver, Universidad de las Islas Baleares, Catedrático.
- Juan Antonio García Amado, Universidad de León, Catedrático.
- Ángel Gómez Montoro, Universidad de Navarra, Catedrático.
- Raúl Canosa Usera, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Catedrático de Universidad.
- Francisco J. Bastida, Universidad de Oviedo, Catedrático.
- Antonio Torres del Moral, UNED, Catedrático.
- Antonio Bar Cendón, Universidad de Valencia. Professor and Jean Monnet Professor ad personam.
- Ángel Sánchez Navarro, Universidad Complutense, Catedrático
- José Ramón Montero, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Catedrático.
- Juan María Bilbao, Universidad de Valladolid, Catedrático.
- Benito Aláez Corral, Universidad de Oviedo, Catedrático.
- Antonio Porras Nadales, Universidad de Sevilla, Catedrático.
- Alfonso Fernández – Miranda Campoamor, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Catedrático.
- Ignacio Villaverde, Universidad de Oviedo, Catedrático.
- Francisco José Llera-Ramo, UPV/EHU, Catedrático.
- Luis Martín Rebollo, Universidad de Cantabria, Catedrático.

- Miguel Beltrán de Felipe, Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha, Catedrático.
- Johann-Christian Pielow, Universität Bochum, Universitäts professor für Öffentliches Recht und Europarecht.
- Ángel Menéndez Rexach, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Profesor.
- Carlos Fernández de Casadevante Romani, Universidad Rey Juan Carlos, Catedrático.
- Leopoldo Tolivar Alas, Universidad de Oviedo, Catedrático
- Raúl Bocanegra-Sierra, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Catedrático.
- Antonio Fanlo Loras, Universidad de La Rioja, Catedrático.
- Avelino Blasco Esteve, Universidad Islas Baleares, Catedrático.
- Javier RUIPÉREZ Alamillo, Universidad de La Coruña, Catedrático.
- Vicente Álvarez García, Universidad de Extremadura, Catedrático.
- Javier Tajadura, Universidad del País Vasco, Profesor Titular.
- Carlos Ruiz, Universidad de Santiago de Compostela, Catedrático.
- Ascensión Elvira Perales, Universidad Carlos III, Catedrática.
- María J. Roca Fernández Universidad Complutense, Catedrática
- Miguel Satrústegui Gil-Delgado, Universidad Carlos III, Profesor Titular.
- Juan Ramón Fernández Torres, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Catedrático
- Manuel Contreras, Universidad de Zaragoza, Catedrático.
- Patricia Rodríguez-Patrón, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Profesora titular.
- Patricia Jiménez de Parga Maseda, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Profesora Contratada Doctora.
- Luis I. Gordillo Pérez, University of Deusto, Profesor Titular Associate Professor.
- Ricardo Chueca, Universidad de La Rioja, Catedrático
- Eduardo Vírjala Foruria, Universidad del País Vasco, Catedrático.
- José Tudela Aranda, Universidad de Zaragoza, Asociado.
- Carlos Garrido López, Universidad de Zaragoza, Profesor titular.
- Alberto Pérez Calvo, Universidad Pública de Navarra, Catedrático jubilado.
- Antonio Cidoncha Martin, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Profesor contratado doctor.
- Francisco Javier Matia Portilla Universidad de Valladolid, Catedrático.
- José Manuel Sánchez Saudinós, Universidad Carlos III de Madrid, Profesor Titular.
- Ángel Rodríguez, Universidad de Málaga, Catedrático.
- Ignacio Fernández Sarasola, Universidad de Oviedo, Profesor Titular.
- Daniel Sarmiento, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Profesor Titular.
- Antonio López Castillo, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Titular (acred. Catedrático).
- César Aguado, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Profesor Titular de Universidad.
- Ignacio Astarloa Huarte-Mendicoa, Universidad Pontificia de Comillas, Profesor Asociado.
- Roberto Viciano Pastor, Universitat de Valencia, Catedrático.
- Ignacio Gutiérrez Gutiérrez, UNED, Profesor Titular.
- Beatriz Tomás Mallén, Universitat Jaume I, Profesora Titular.
- Cristina Pauner, Universitat Jaume I, Profesora Titular.
- Rosa Ruiz Lapeña, Universidad de Zaragoza, Profesora titular.
- Miguel Presno, Universidad de Oviedo, Profesor Titular.
- Enrique Belda, Universidad Castilla – La Mancha, Profesor titular.
- Juan Fernando Durán Alba, Universidad de Valladolid, Profesor Titular.
- Ángel Sánchez Blanco, Universidad de Málaga, Catedrático.
- Miguel Azpitarte, Universidad de Granada, Profesor Titular.

-Josefa Ridaura Martínez, Universidad de Valencia, Profesora Titular.

-Rafael Bustos Gisbert, Univ. Salamanca/Escuela Judicial, Prof. Titular (acreditado a catedrático).

-María José Carazo Liébana, Universidad de Jaén, Profesora titular.

-José Luis García Ruiz, Universidad de Cádiz, Catedrático.

-Alejandro Torres Gutiérrez, Universidad Pública de Navarra, Catedrático de Universidad.

-Rosario García Mahamut, Univ. Jaume I, Catedrática.

-Jorge Lozano-Miralles, Universidad de Jaén, Catedrático.

-Pablo De Lora, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Profesor Titular.

-Jesús Prieto, UNED, Catedrático.

-Alicia González Alonso, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Profesora Contratada Doctora.

-Eloisa Carbonell Porras, Universidad de Jaén, Catedrática

-Marcos Vaquer, Universidad Carlos III de Madrid, Catedrático.

-Alfonso García Figueroa, Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha, Profesor Titular.

-Luis Rodríguez Abascal, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Full Professor.

-Eva Desdentado Daroca, Universidad de Alcalá, Catedrática.

-Tomás Quintana López, Universidad de León, Catedrático.

-Miguel Jerez - Mir, Universidad de Granada, Catedrático.

-Mariano Bacigalupo UNED, Profesor Titular.

-Juan Francisco Mestre Delgado, Universidad de Valencia, Catedrático.

-Ricardo García Manrique, Universidad de Barcelona, Profesor Titular.

-Pablo Nuevo, Abat Oliba CEU University, Professor of Constitutional Law

-Alberto Oehling, Universidad de las Islas Baleares, Profesor Contratado Doctor

-Juan J. Guardia, Universitat Abat Oliba CEU, Profesor adjunto.

-Leyre Burguera Ameave, UNED, Profesora Ayudante Doctora.

-Ignacio Álvarez, Universidad de Valladolid, Profesor Ayudante Doctor

-Ignacio García Vitoria, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Contratado doctor.

-Mónica Arenas Ramiro, Universidad de Alcalá, Profesora Contratada Doctora.

-Enriqueta Expósito, Universidad de Barcelona, Profesora titular.

-Fernando Simón, University of Navarra, Profesor.

-José Julio Fernández Rodríguez, Universidad Santiago de Compostela, Profesor titular.

-José Andrés Rozas Valdés, Universidad de Barcelona, Profesor acreditado a cátedra.

-María Reyes Pérez Alberdi, Universidad Pablo de Olavide, Profesora Contratada Doctora.

-Esther Mitjans, Universitat of Barcelona, Profesora Titular.

-Germán M. Teruel Lozano, Universidad de Murcia, Profesor ayudante doctor.

-Pablo González Saquero, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Profesor.

-José Javier Olivas Osuna, London School of Economics and Political Science, Associate to the Conflict and Civil Society Research Unit.

-Albert Sánchez-Graells, University of Bristol Law School, Reader in Economic Law.

-Mauricio Suárez, Complutense University, Catedrático.

-Esa Díaz-León, Universidad de Barcelona, Investigadora Ramón y Cajal.

-Federico A. Castillo Blanco, Universidad de Granada, Catedrático.

-Ana Gemma López Martín, Universidad Complutense, Professor.

-Joaquín Cascon, Universidad Castilla-La Mancha, CEU.

-José Antonio Perea Unceta, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Profesor contratado doctor.

- María Asunción García, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Profesora titular.
- Javier Chinchón, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Profesor Contratado Doctor
- Manuel García-Carpintero, Universidad de Barcelona, Catedrático.
- José Luis Villar Iglesias, Universidad Pablo de Olavide, Profesor Asociado.
- Manuela Heras García, Universidad de Alcalá de Henares, Profesor.
- Josep María, Universidad de Barcelona, Catedrático.
- José Luis Bermejo Latre, Universidad de Zaragoza, Profesor titular.
- José Carlos Perales Universitat de Barcelona, professor.
- José Joaquín Fernández, Universidad de Cádiz, Profesor Titular.
- Pedro Martínez Ruano, Universidad de Almería, Profesor Titular.
- Amelia Pascual, Universidad de La Rioja, Profesor Titular.
- Ignacio González García, Universidad de Murcia, Profesor contratado.
- Joaquín González Ibáñez, Universidad Alfonso X el Sabio, Profesor Asociado.
- María Fraile Madrid, Universidad CARLOS III, Lecturer
- Federico de Montalvo Jaaskelainen, Universidad Pontificia Comillas, Profesor agregado.
- Aldo Filomeno Farrerons, Czech Academy of Sciences, Institute of Philosophy, Postdoctoral researcher.
- Felicidad Rodríguez, University of Cadiz, Professor.
- Daniel Fernández, Universitat de Lleida, Profesor asociado.
- Tomás Bastarache, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Profesor ayudante doctor.
- Ildefonso Soriano López, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Profesor Titular.
- Alejandra Boto, University of Oviedo, Professor.
- Rosario Serra Cristóbal, Universidad de Valencia, Profesora Titular.
- Isabel Molina, Sorbonne University, Postgraduate.
- Noé Cornago, Universidad del País Vasco/Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea, Profesor Titular.
- Alfonso Valero Aguado, Nottingham Trent University, Principal Lecturer.
- Enrique Orduña, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Profesor Asociado.
- Isabel Álvarez Vélez, Universidad Pontificia Comillas, Profesora Propia Ordinaria.
- Miguel Díaz y García, Universidad de León, Catedrático.
- Luis Míguez Macho, Universidad de Santiago de Compostela, Catedrático.
- Antonio Domínguez Vilaislas Universidad de la Laguna, Profesor titular.
- Pedro Escribano Collado, Universidad de Sevilla, Catedrático.
- Francisco Manuel García Costa, Universidad de Murcia, Profesor Titular.
- Pedro T. Nevado-Batalla Moreno, Universidad de Salamanca, Profesor Titular.
- Oscar Muñoz, Universidad de Valladolid, Profesor Titular.
- David Martín Herrera, UNED, Profesor Máster.
- José Cuesta, Universidad de Jaén, Profesor titular.
- María Acracia Núñez, UNED, Profesora contratada doctora.
- Oscar Márquez, Universidad de Vigo, Profesor Titular.
- Marta Román, University of Vigo, PhD student.
- Manuel Fernández Salmerón, Universidad de Murcia, Profesor Titular.
- Juan José Ruiz Ruiz, Universidad de Jaén, Profesor Titular.
- José Luis Barros Justo, Universidad de Vigo, Titular de Escuela Universitaria.
- Manuel Sánchez de Diego Fdez. de la Riva, U. Complutense de Madrid, Profesor Titular.
- M^a Aránzazu Moretón Toquero, Universidad de Valladolid, Profesora contratada doctora.
- Enrique Cebrián Zazurca, Universidad de Zaragoza, Profesor Contratado Doctor.

- Annaïck Fernández Le Gal, Universidad de Córdoba, Profesora Ayudante Doctor.
- Blanca Rodríguez, UCM, Profesora contratada doctora.
- Paul Palmquist Barrena, Universidad de Malaga, Catedrático.
- Francisco Beltran, University of Toronto, Lecturer.
- Alberto Valín, Universidad de Vigo, Profesor titular.
- José Carlos López Vázquez, Universidad de Vigo, Profesor Titular.
- Francisco Pérez Jiménez, Universidad de Córdoba, Catedrático.
- Fernando Rodríguez de Fonseca, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Profesor titular.
- Alfredo Marcos, Universidad de Valladolid, Catedrático.
- Elia Marzal, Universidad Ramon Llull, Profesor contratado doctor.
- Antonio Arroyo Gil, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Profesor Ayudante Doctor.
- Juan Luis Manfredi Mayoral, Universidad de Sevilla, Full professor (profesor titular).
- Marta Zubiaur, Universidad de León, Profesora Titular.
- Pura Sánchez Zamorano, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Associate Professor.
- Fernando Puzzo Rende, Università della Calabria, Professore aggregato.
- Guillermo Andrés Morales, Universidad de Navarra, Doctorando.
- Manuel Escamilla-Castillo, Universidad de Granada, Profesor Titular.
- Víctor Cuesta, Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Profesor Contratado Doctor.
- Vicente Jesús Navarro Marchante, Universidad de La Laguna, Profesor Contratado Doctor.
- Antonio Manuel Peña Freire, Universidad de Granada, Profesor Titular de Universidad.
- Mercedes Iglesias Bárez, Universidad de Salamanca, Profesora Contratada Doctora.
- José J. Jiménez Sánchez, Universidad de Granada, Profesor Titular.
- David Parra Gómez, Universidad de Murcia, Profesor.
- José Luis Colomer, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Profesor Titular.
- Adolfo A. Díaz-Bautista Cremades, Universidad de Murcia, Profesor ayudante doctor.
- Francisco Piqueras, Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha, Catedrático.
- Santiago González-Varas Ibáñez, Universidad de Alicante, Catedrático.
- Enrique Guerrero, Universidad de Navarra, Professor.
- Nuria Torres Rosell, Universidad de Granada, Profesora Titular.
- Dionisio Fernández de Gatta Sánchez, Universidad de Salamanca, Profesor Titular.
- Daniel Berzosa López, Complutense University of Madrid, Professor of
- Manuel Izquierdo Carrasco, University of Cordoba, Catedrático.
- María Rosario Alonso Ibáñez, Universidad de Oviedo, Catedrática.
- Miguel Agudo, University of Córdoba (Spain), Professor.
- Ángel Manuel Moreno Molina, Carlos III University, Full Professor (Catedrático).
- Josefa Cantero Martínez, Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha, Profesora Titular.
- José María de Areilza, ESADE, Universidad Ramón LLull, Profesor ordinario.
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