Catalonia's Cultural Diplomacy – A Story of total liquidation or a new beginning?

Temanummer: Kulturdiplomati

Catalonia's para-diplomatic apparatus was hit hard when the Spanish government took control of the regional administration in the wake of the independence referendum of 2017. Since then, what was regarded by many as a successful model has mutated into a low-profile accommodating structure that is trying its best to steer through a storm

of cumulative fines and pending legal cases while it avoids taking a central stage in national and international politics. The next two years will be key to see whether Catalan diplomacy retakes its place as a very particular international player trying to push a self-determination agenda or if it dissolves in a more mundane regional strategy.

On 27 October 2017, the Catalan Parliament adopted Catalonia's declaration of independence. Following some weeks of a political standoff between Barcelona and the national government, Madrid's first reaction was to pass "Article 155". This refers to an article in the Spanish Constitution that allows Madrid to "take the measures necessary in order to compel the [autonomous community] forcibly to meet said obligations, or in order to protect the (...) general interests" (Spanish Constitution, 1978). This intervention entailed the arrival of a number of government officials, dubbed "men in black" by some Catalan press.¹

When the *men in black* entered Catalonia's Ministry of Foreign Action² in the heart of the Gothic Quarter in Barcelona, the first thing they did was to ask for a list of all the "embassies" staff; the delegations Catalonia had opened in a number of countries since the late 2000s. Most Spanish media had consistently portrayed these "embassies" as black holes of embezzlement.³

Officials at the Ministry of Foreign Action printed out a sheet of paper with about twenty people and handed it to them. The emissaries from Madrid glanced at it and said, "No, not from an embassy. We want a list of all the embassies!" Then they were told that this was the list of *all* the workers of *all* embassies, not just one. After a quick moment of doubt, the men in black replied back, "Ah! And the chauffeurs? Where are the chauffeurs?"

There were no drivers, the delegates traveled in their own car, by public transport, or by bicycle. And on occasions, as I had the opportunity to witness, some officials even paid some expenses from their own pocket.

Catalonia is a rare case within Europe, as it fulfills most characteristics in scholarly literature to be considered a nation.⁵ Yet, it remains unrecognized as

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such in legal terms, as the Spanish Constitutional court ruled in 2010 that even though the regional parliament had called Catalonia a "nation", such proclaim lacked any "legal effectiveness" (Tribunal Constitucional, 2010). This lack of recognition sets Catalonia apart from Scotland, which is indeed recognized as a nation and has legal assurance that the UK Parliament will not normally legislate with regard to devolved matters in Scotland without the consent of the Scottish Parliament. It even sets Catalonia apart from the Basques within Spain, as the Spanish Constitution recognizes the "historic rights" of the *foral* territories of the Basque Country and Navarre.

Catalonia's foreign action: activities, structures and budget before 2017

San Eugenio, Ginesta and Xifra (2017) argue that "Catalonia is faced with the challenge of persuading international public opinion that it should become a state in its own right." Since as early as 1982, in order to try to convince the world, the Catalan government set out to construct a para-diplomatic apparatus via a public-private consortium called Patronat Català Pro Europa, thus planting the seed of what would in 2004 become the delegation of the government in Brussels (Criekemans, 2010).

In the decade that led to the referendum of 2017, the Parliament of Catalonia passed a Law of Foreign Action and Relations with the European Union in 2014. Eventually, this bill was also ruled as unconstitutional by the Spanish Constitutional Court in 2016. The judges adopted a very strict definition of public diplomacy as "a set of activities with external impact, (...) whose targets can be States and international organizations as subjects of international law" (Tribunal Constitucional, 2016).

Yet, despite all legal challenges the Catalan government kept its international plan in motion. In short, the most relevant branches of Catalonia's "diplomacy" until 2017 could be summarized as follows (Gyimesi, 2017):

Hard diplomacy: The aforementioned Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its foreign delegations, which were granted a 35.5 million euro budget in 2017.8

Public diplomacy: The Catalan Institute of Public Diplomacy (Diplocat).

Cultural diplomacy: The Ramon Llull Institute (IRL).

Out of those, the Diplocat would become the most well-known para-diplomatic structure. It was established in 2012 with the declared aim of "promoting initiatives to allow direct knowledge of Catalonia in the international environment." It quickly became a powerful tool to influence foreign public opinion in relation to Catalonia's will of self-determination. Torras-Vila and Ferández-Tapia (2018) demonstrated that international correspondents who had established prior contact with Diplocat came to have a positive perception of Catalonia. This consortium was granted a 2.5-million-euro budget in

2017,¹⁰ 2.1 of which was included in the aforementioned budget of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

As Foraster (2020) describes it, the stated purpose of Catalan diplomacy was to cultivate trust, which is "what distinguishes public diplomacy from its more sinister cousin, propaganda." Prior to its closure in 2017, Diplocat organized academic events to discuss both internationally relevant topics within Catalonia with international guests and the Catalan independence process in universities around the world. Examples of these events include debates in Lisbon, Utrecht, Oslo, Cambridge, Princeton, Sciences Po Paris, Stockholm and Tokyo (Gyimesi, 2017).

Diplocat also organized public events in Catalonia itself. For example, Diplocat invited economist Jeremy Rifkin to talk about how Catalonia could implement the third industrial revolution 12, and also co-hosted with the Barcelona City Hall an international forum about reception and integration of refugees in the European Union. The forum sparked controversy because the Spanish government was not invited due to the ruling party PP's hard stance on migration and refugees in particular. 13

Besides these very public activities, Diplocat also contacted MPs from selected countries to invite them over to Catalonia for a few days in order to introduce them to business, cultural, civic and political leaders. Occasionally, I was called to attend lunch or dinner as part of the program. In those meals, a group of three or four foreign MPs would be introduced to a group of academic and/or civic leaders, typically half of them being sympathetic to independence and the other half against.¹⁴

The Ramon Llull Institute, a changing partnership

The IRL is particular in this context as it was established as a partnership between the governments of Catalonia and the Balearic Islands in order to project the cultural heritage and production of these two territories who share Catalan as a common language (Villatoro, 2012). In 2017, this bi-governmental consortium was granted a budget of 8.3 million euros¹⁵ (of which 40.000 euros came from the Catalan Ministry of Foreign Affairs budget).

The biggest success in the IRL's history has undoubtedly been to participate in the 2007 Frankfurt Book Fair as the "guest culture" of the year, which – under the slogan "Catalan culture, singular and universal" – marked an exponential rise in translations of Catalan writers and authors (Villatoro, 2012).¹⁶

Even before 2017 though, the IRL did not escape political controversy (see table 1). The Institute was founded in 2002 as a partnership between the Catalan and Balearic governments when the governing parties were the centre-right Catalan nationalist Convergència i Unió (CiU) in Catalonia and a centre-left coalition that included the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) and left-wing nationalists Socialist Party of Mallorca (PSM) in the Balearic Islands. However,

elections in 2003 changed both governments. As a result, a center-left coalition of the Spanish Socialists PSOE, pro-independence Republican Left ERC and left-green party ICV obtained power in Catalonia and center-right Spanish People's Party (PP) did so in the Balearic Islands. The new PP government took an issue with the IRL as part of its policy of detaching the islands from Catalan influence and in 2004 quit the institute altogether.¹⁷

Table 1: The institutional configuration of the Ramon Llull Institute and the Ramon Llull Foundation, 2002-21

Institution	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017*	2018*	2019	2020	2021
Catalan Government																				
Ramon Llull Institute	Balearic Government Bale			Balea	Balearic Government						Balearic Government									
Barcelona City H								Hall												
ıtion							Catalan Government													
Founda							Andorra Government													
Ramon Llull Foundation								Pyrenées-Orientales General Council, Alghero City Hall and Ramon Llull Valencian cities network												
Ran									В				Barcelona City Hall							

Source: Author. From October 27 2017 until June 2 2018 the intervention in the Government of Catalonia by the Spanish Government via article 155 of the Spanish Constitution was in effect.

In the 2007 regional election, the Spanish People's Party lost its absolute majority in the Balearic Parliament and a new coalition government took power, including the Spanish Socialists, PSOE, and a number of smaller nationalist parties (Bloc per Mallorca, Unió Mallorquina, Eivissa pel Canvi, and PSM-VERDS). This new government soon rejoined the IRL consortium as part of its new cultural diplomacy approach of strengthening ties with Catalonia. This would not be the last shake-up of the IRL consortium though.

When the Spanish People's Party won an absolute majority again in the Balearic Parliament in 2011, one of the central points of new president José Ramón Bauzá was to get rid of the Catalan language "imposition" so it is only natural that the Balearic Government left the IRL soon after, citing the Catalan pro-independence drive pressed by the new CiU-led Catalan government as one main reason for the decision. To counter-balance the delicate

financial situation created by the PP, the CiU-led Barcelona City Hall came to the rescue and entered the consortium in 2014.²¹

Again, a new election in the Balearic Islands would change the islands' attitude. In 2015, the PP lost its majority and a new government was formed including PSOE and left wing nationalists MÉS. The new administration quickly formalized its re-entry to the IRL consortium.²²

In order to separate this ongoing political quarrel between Catalonia and the Balearic Islands from the institution itself and other partners, the Ramon Llull foundation was established in 2008, initially as a partnership between the government of Catalonia and the government of Andorra, both of which were joined in 2009 by the General Council of the Pyrenées-Orientales region in France, the City Hall of Alghero in Italy and the Ramon Llull Valencian Cities Network association from the region of Valencia.²³

Article 155: The Spanish government takes control of Catalonia's foreign action apparatus

Despite all these political skirmishes, the most significant shake-up of Catalonia's diplomacy came into being with the Spanish Government's intervention after the 27 October declaration of independence when applying Article 155 of the Constitution. According to the investigation report commissioned by the Parliament of Catalonia, the State intervention affected the Catalan Ministry of Foreign Affairs and institutions like the Ramon Llull the hardest. Quoting the report, "in some cases, the need to have the signature of the [Spanish] Minister, not only caused an increase in bureaucracy and the consequent slowdown in the action to be carried out, but even its paralysis" (Parlament de Catalunya, 2018: 44-5).

All delegations of Catalonia abroad were closed. In the opinion of the central government, the so-called Catalan "embassies" exceeded the powers that autonomous communities have to promote themselves abroad and were intended to serve as embassies for the future Catalan state. The agency Diplocat, believed to be an instrument to internationalize the Catalan conflict, was also abolished. In practice, based on these measures, 250 senior officials were dismissed, particularly in the regional Departments of Foreign Affairs and Tax (Garcia Morales, 2018), while Gil (2019) lowers the number down to 234.

The representatives of the Government of Catalonia in Madrid, Brussels and the rest of eleven heads of delegations around the world were amongst the first to be laid off, as soon as on the 27 October via the urgent Royal Decree RD 945/2017. Hence how important officials in Madrid believed this structure to be, and how quick they believed it had to be dismantled (Alexander and Royo i Marine, 2020).

Spain's pushback did not end with the application of article 155, however. A little later, different branches of the Spanish judiciary also took the matter in

their own hands. Former Catalan Minister of Foreign Affairs Raül Romeva was sentenced to 12 years in prison because he "assumed the Government's foreign strategy to legitimize the referendum internationally" and "tried to convince [foreign institutions] of the feasibility of the construction of a Catalan Republic" (Tribunal Supremo de España, 2019a: 310).

The Supreme Court also validated the dissolution of Diplocat as it defines it as an "instrument at the service of secession" and therefore concludes: "it is not disproportionate to suppress it when it is the survival of the Constitution itself that was at stake" (Tribunal Supremo de España, 2019b: 9).

In the meantime, the Spanish Tribunal de Cuentas (Court of Accounts) prepared a thorough report on how much money was spent on foreign action by the Catalan Government between 2011 and 2017, taking issue upon the total cumulative budget of Diplocat (15.8 million euros) and the foreign delegations (27 million euros) with the sole goal of making "known, promote, encourage, promote, publicize and try to get international support" for the pro-independence plan (Tribunal de Cuentas, 2019: 74).²⁴ The process is still under way but fines in the millions are expected to be set for about 30 officials that used to work for the Catalan foreign, public and cultural diplomacy apparatus.²⁵

Post 155: avoiding conflict

Performance of the three branches of Catalonia's foreign action since 2018 has been discrete, at most, and tarnished with scandal, at worst. The first Catalan minister of Foreign Affairs appointed after Article 155, Alfred Bosch, resigned in March 2020 when he was involved in allegations of sexual harassment within the Ministry.²⁶ His successor, Bernat Solé, was criticized for not speaking fluent English nor having any previous international experiences²⁷ and his term ended abruptly in January 2021 when he was sentenced to a fine and special disqualification for the exercise of public service due to his engagement with the 2017 referendum when he was mayor of the town of Agramunt.²⁸ After the February 2021 election, which renewed the pro-independence parties' majority in the Catalan Parliament, a new minister has been appointed, Victòria Alsina, former Catalan representative to the United States and director of the Center for Urban Science & Progress at the University of New York. In her first interview, Alsina stated that unilateral resolutions do not help in gaining international sympathies, apparently disavowing the referendum and declaration of independence of 2017²⁹.

In this same line of avoiding conflict, many senior positions within the Ministry have been filled with party insiders with no relevant experience in international affairs. For instance, Gerard Figueras, former secretary of Sports, has been appointed secretary of Foreign Action and European Union. Mr Figueras used to be the president of the youth branch of his party and councilman at his town of Vilanova i la Geltrú. Montserrat Vilalta, also a longstanding party

member and former director-general of wholesale trade, has been appointed as director-general of Foreign Action.

Diplocat has for the time being also opted for avoiding politics. This seems clear when analyzing its front page news and comparing them to what they were broadcasting back in 2017 (pictures 1 and 2).

Picture 1: Front page of Diplocat on 14 June 2021

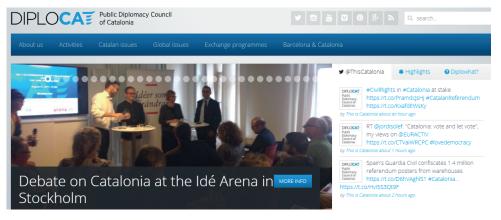


Source: Retrieved by author.

More information

which will take place next Thursday, 17 June

Picture 2: Front page of Diplocat on 19 September 2017



Source: Internet Archive Wayback Machine, retrieved on 14 June 2021, https://web.archive.org/web/20170919125631/http://www.diplocat.cat/en/

We have sorted the number of news stories featured on the Diplocat website according to whether they are related to the push for self-determination or to other issues, such as culture (Table 2). It is clear upon comparison that pre-referendum Diplocat seemed to be more active and that post-2017 Diplocat has – for now – avoided touching upon the issue of Catalonia's self-determination.

Table 2: Sorting of news stories on the Diplocat website according to theme

Date	Related to self-determination	Not related to self-determination				
19 September 2017	22	9				
14 June 2021	0	8				

Source: Author.

In addition, Diplocat's current secretary-general Laura Foraster is a much more discrete person that has avoided interviews and, in general, intervening in public affairs. This can be seen in her Twitter profile³⁰, where she mostly simply retweets Diplocat's messages and never gives a personal opinion, resulting in a mere 906 followers whereas former secretary-general Albert Royo has 3,665 followers. Also, an advanced search using Twitter's engine reveals that Ms Foraster has never used the words "self-determination" or "independence".

The operational budget of most branches of Catalonia's foreign action apparatus has also been affected. In table 3, we compare the 2017 budgets with the current ones. It is interesting to note that budgets for *hard* diplomacy remain mostly flat (18.2 million in 2017 and 19.4 million in 2020 once international cooperation for development is taken out of the equation), the Diplocat's public diplomacy budget gets a 40 pct. reduction and the *cultural* diplomacy budget is increased, albeit it is mainly due to an increase in the Balearic Islands' participation, that was symbolic in 2017 and reaches 900.000 euros in 2020. Numbers remain low when compared, for instance, to the budget of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, totaling over 2.000 million DKK or over 270 million euros.³¹

Table 3: 2017 and 2020 budgets for three Catalan diplomacy branches (in million euros)

Institution	Budget in 2017	Budget in 2020				
Secretary of Foreign Affairs*	35.5 (of which 17.3 to cooperation)	48.6 (of which 29.2 to cooperation)				
Diplocat	2.8	2.0				
Institut Ramon Llull	8.3	10.1				

^{*} The Ministry of Foreign Affairs also coordinates transparency efforts within the government. This is why we've included the budget granted to Foreign Affairs and cooperation only. Sources: Author, based on the Catalan government's budget for 2017 and 2020.

A senior official in the Catalan government told us in a private conversation that most of the administration apparatus is living in fear of legal action by the Spanish judiciary, which in turn leads to self-censorship.

Conclusion: What now?

Throughout this article, we have touched upon the Catalan *hard* and *soft* diplomacy apparatus structure and performance through dramatic times for the institution and for Spain's constitutional framework as a whole. As a conclusion, we believe that:

- 1. Catalonia's *diplomacy* fared well in the years leading to the 2017 referendum in terms of placing the Catalan self-determination debate in the European arena, as existing literature acknowledges and both pro-independence and anti-independence state and court documents agree.
- 2. Catalonia's diplomacy was most affected by the Spanish government's intervention, not only because it dismantled institutions and dismissed hundreds of officials, but also because it paralyzed the remaining organs and put a distinct effort into scrapping all of Catalonia's foreign projection tools. Besides that, the Spanish courts continue to crack down on Catalan officials related to foreign action, with a number of processes still under way that could result in fines totaling millions for dozens of individuals.
- 3. Three years after restitution, Catalonia's *diplomacy* remains half-dormant and avoiding openly talking about the Catalan conflict within the Spanish constitutional framework, both in terms of budget and activities. Additionally, human resource choices seem in some cases to have been made in order to promote loyal party insiders rather than to put the diplomatic machine back in motion, and new appointments are being slow which might indicate the existence of fears of provoking a reaction from the Spanish state across the board. This strategy seems aligned with the current Catalan government's vow of promoting dialogue with Madrid instead of confrontation.

It remains to be seen how effective this strategy will be in the mid run, especially with so many court cases still pending. Anyhow, we can expect Catalan diplomacy to follow the same low-profile pattern for the next two years, which is the time Catalan leaders have given to the dialogue with Madrid strategy. Depending on the results of said strategy, we may see a new shift in gears.

In addition, two external factors may scramble the table again: First, new Spanish elections will be called in 2022 or 2023 and so far the moderate left PSOE in power is trailing the center-right PP in the polls. If PP wins the next general election and forms a new government with help of far-right Spanish nationalist party Vox, which is also on the rise, dialogue with Catalonia will be over in favor of a heavy-handed approach similar to that of Mariano Rajoy in 2017.

Second, the legal cases relating to the 2017 referendum are making its slow way to the Court of Justice of the European Union and the European Court of Human Rights and sentences are expected to start coming out in the com-

ing years. A validation, even partial, of the pro-independence camp demands would give a new impulse to Catalonia's diplomacy and perhaps a new sense of security and trust to defend their ideas.

Notes

- 1. See Fuentes, A. (2017), "El dia a dia dels funcionaris després del 155", *El Periódico*, 18 November, www.elperiodico.cat/ca/economia/20171118/article-155-generalitat-efectes-funcionaris-aplicacio-6414817 and Martí, P. (2017), "L'Estat prepara els seus «homes de negre» per intervenir Catalunya", *Nació Digital*, 22 October, www.naciodigital.cat/noticia/140913/estat-prepara-seus-homes-negre-intervenir-catalunya
- 2. The official name in Catalan does not use the word "Ministry" but rather "Department", although it does use this name in English and French (https://exteriors.gencat.cat/en/inici/index.html)
- 3. See Mondelo, V. (2017), "El Govern duplica el gasto en 'embajadas'", *El Mundo*, 17 January, www.elmundo.es/cataluna/2017/01/17/587e4a3122601dad1a8b45f0.html) and Antena3 (2017). "Cataluña mantiene 11 'embajadas' en el extranjero y la Generalitat invirtió 40 millones de euros en ellas en 2017", 25 October, www.antena3.com/programas/espejo-publico/noticias/cataluna-mantiene-11-embajadas-en-el-extranjero-y-la-generalitat-invirtio-40-millones-de-euros-en-ellas-en-2017_2017102559f0926c0cf2abf2387ecf0f.html
- 4. Partal, V. (2021), "Albert Royo? El Diplocat? Però on són els xofers?", *Vilaweb*, 6 May, www.vilaweb.cat/noticies/albert-royo-el-diplocat-pero-on-son-els-xofers/
- 5. According to Guibernau (2014) a nation is "a human group conscious of forming a community, sharing a common culture, attached to a clearly demarcated territory, having a common past and a common project for the future, and claiming the right to rule itself."
- 6. This principle is quoted in Section 28/8 of the Scotland Act of 1998, added in 2916: www. legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/46/section/28
- 7. Such recognition and protection are stated in Constitución Española (1978): Disposición addicional primera, https://app.congreso.es/consti/constitucion/indice/titulos/articulos.jsp?ini=1&fin=4&tipo=3
- Generalitat de Catalunya (2017): Projecte de Pressupostos de la Generalitat de Catalunya 2017: http://aplicacions.economia.gencat.cat/wpres/AppPHP/2017/pdf/VOL_P_MEX. pdf
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- 10. From Diplocat, Gestió Econòmica, retrieved in 2021: https://diplocat.cat/ca/qui-som/gestio-economica/
- 11. Laura Foraster i Lloret was executive director of Diplocat since its inception, and was appointed secretary-general after the 2017-2018 hiatus.
- 12. Pi, J. (2016), "Jeremy Rifkin, el gurú de la nueva economía verde, invitado del Diplocat", *La Vanguardia*, 14 july, https://www.lavanguardia.com/politica/20160713/403185690514/jeremy-rifkin-guru-economia-verde-diplocat.html .
- El Nacional (2017), "Barcelona celebra un forum de refugiats al marge del govern espanyol",
 May, https://www.elnacional.cat/ca/societat/barcelona-forum-refugiats-marge-govern-espanyol_102565_102.html
- 14. We would later know that these discreet meetings were closely monitored by the Spanish *Guardia Civil*, as my name was included in the investigation for being invited to those meals, as I made it public in this tweet from December 22, 2017: https://twitter.com/AdriaAlsina/status/944220749962907648
- 15. From Institut Ramon Llull, Pressupost 2017, retrieved in 2021: https://llull.cat/IM-AGES_22/pressupost-2017.pdf
- 16. You may browse the special website set up for the occasion on http://www.frankfurt2007.cat/.

- 17. Corporació Catalana de Mitjans Audiovisuals (2004), "El govern balear abandona l'Institut Ramon Llull per diferències amb l'executiu català", 7 May, www.ccma.cat/324/el-govern-balear-abandona-linstitut-ramon-llull-per-diferencies-amb-lexecutiu-catala/noticia/65018/
- 18. Vilaweb.cat (2008), "El govern balear formalitza el retorn a l'Institut Ramon Llull", 23 December, www.vilaweb.cat/noticia/3231982/20081223/noticia.html
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- 22. Agència Catalana de Notícies (2015), "El govern balear anuncia el reingrés de les Illes a l'Institut Ramon Llull", *El Punt Avui*, 10 July, www.elpuntavui.cat/cultura/article/875587-el-govern-balear-anuncia-el-reingres-de-les-illes-a-linstitut-ramon-llull.html
- 23. Fundació Ramon Llull (retrieved in June 2021)."la fundació", www.llull.cat/monografics/fundacio/fundacio.cfm
- 24. It is worth mentioning that the report was passed by the court with one vote against it, a vote that openly questions the court's impartiality (Tribunal de Cuentas, 2019: 463) and that the Tribunal de Cuentas members are appointed directly by the Congress and Senate majorities, a system which has also been put into question by the NGO Hay Derecho, grounding their claims in the fact that the court has never fined a political party for corruption (Eldiario.es (2017), "La fundación "¿Hay Derecho?" pone en duda la "independencia real" del Tribunal de Cuentas" www.eldiario.es/economia/corrupcion-genera-infelicidad-naciones_1_3376877.html).
- 25. Vázquez, A. (2021), "El Tribunal de Cuentas cita a Mas, Puigdemont y Junqueras por el gasto del Diplocat en el 1-O", *El Periodico*, 23 April, www.elperiodico.com/es/politica/20210423/tribunal-cuentas-puigdemont-junqueras-diplocat-1-o-11677410
- 26. Corporació Catalana de Mitjans de Comunicació (2020), "Alfred Bosch sabia que hi havia assetjament sexual al seu departament", 27 August, www.ccma.cat/324/alfred-bosch-sabia-que-hi-havia-assetjament-sexual-al-seu-departament/noticia/3043721/
- 27. *La República* (2020), "[Vídeo] Aquest és el macarrònic anglès del conseller d'exteriors de la Generalitat", 18 July, www.larepublica.cat/noticies/politica/internacional/video-aquest-es-el-macarronic-angles-del-conseller-dexteriors-de-la-generalitat/
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