

Carousel



SPAIN

An amnesty, a shooting and a new coalition

by LUCAS LAURSEN

On Thursday November 9, Spain got a new government. On that same day, in Madrid, the far-right commentator and Vox party co-founder Alejo Vidal-Quadras was shot in the face, and nobody quite knew what to make of it.

The next morning, I was in Bar Toñi, in the working-class Madrid neighbourhood of Arganzuela. A middle-aged man wearing a football hoodie and baseball cap was stirring his coffee and watching the silent news presenter on the TV. If the Catalans wanted independence, he said to the barman, they can have it and get the hell out of Europe. They can pay us everything we put into their infrastructure on their way out and then see how they like it, he added.

At Bar Toñi, the newspaper at my table was *El Mundo*, the centre-right mainstay, but with an independent streak. The headline across the front page denounced the caretaker prime minister Pedro Sánchez, of the Socialist and Workers Party (PSOE). The day before, he had included an amnesty for Catalan separatists in his new coalition government pact. That amnesty was proving controversial. The second story in the paper was about the shooting of Vidal-Quadras. He had survived the attack and was now claiming that the government of Iran was responsible.

After their morning coffee and perhaps some *churros*, the patrons of Bar Toñi went off to work, where they'd probably avoid politics.

Sánchez first proposed the idea of an amnesty for Catalan separatists on November 3, and since then hundreds



Police officers in Madrid cordon off the area where the ex-leader of the Popular Party of Catalonia and co-founder of Vox, Alejo Vidal-Quadras, was shot on November 9
Photo: Diego Radames/Europa Press/Getty

and some nights even thousands of protesters have surrounded the PSOE headquarters on Calle Ferraz. At around 8pm, the time when families are still strolling around with prams on their way home to supper, peaceful protesters have been gathering to chant slogans denouncing the amnesty and accusing the PSOE party leader and Sánchez of selling out the country.

A couple of hours later, protesters wearing face coverings, throwing fascist salutes, and bearing Franco-era flags arrive. They are more violent. By midnight, the violent protesters are throwing rocks at police and pushing over barriers. The police respond with teargas canisters and charges.

So long as local businesses and neighbours know and abide by this

schedule, they can live a more or less normal life alongside any of Madrid's political flashpoints. On late Friday morning, the day after the shooting, street cleaners swept the pavements, as if on any other day. Television crews set up across the street from the PSOE headquarters to film footage for the afternoon news. Next to the TV crew stood a middle-aged man, wearing a chest-sized sign around his neck, reading "Amnesty = Coup d'état = Sánchez coupist" and a look that invited journalists to interview him.

Meanwhile, on Calle Nuñez de Balboa, in the posh neighbourhood of Salamanca, there were more journalists than at both party headquarters put together. They were all queuing up, waiting their turn to get a clear picture of the pavement

where, a day before, a man had shot Vidal-Quadras in the face at around 1.30pm. There were no signs of blood, though a knot of police tape still fluttered from the door of a nearby vintage clothing shop. A worker came in and out of a building site next door, and as she did so, she entered and exited the pictures being relayed by TV cameras, emptying bags of debris.

The scene was more upbeat at the opposition People's Party (PP) headquarters on Calle Génova. There, almost a dozen volunteers were handing out fliers inviting people to a Sunday protest against the amnesty in Madrid's central square, the Puerta del Sol, where scheduled protests are allowed. Party leaders will have plenty of political ammunition during their next stint in opposition.

SARDINIA

Buying a house for one euro (almost)

by JANE WHYATT

Excited by the prospect of buying a house in Sardinia for one euro, I tell all my friends about it.

Their reactions are like a cold shower. Some look at me with pity, as though I had just fallen in love with an online scammer who promises eternal love in return for my bank account details. Others are mildly intrigued. All are sceptical.

What do you get for one euro – a ruined pigsty? Who wants to live in a village in Sardinia? It isn't even on the coast... How much is it really going to cost?

I inform them that Bonnanaro is not a village but a town, well known (locally at least) as the City of Wine. Its heritage dates back to the Bronze Age. A matriarchal civilisation ruled by warrior princesses established the first settlement there, 2,000 years before Boudicca led the Iceni and the very first Essex Girls into battle against the invading Romans in Ancient Britain.

The house is a bit decrepit-looking, that's true. But the local council regeneration officer, Signor Soro, assures me that it has a solid roof, floors, an electricity supply and running water. And potential...

Still – how much is it really going to cost? That is a fair question. For the answer I call Maurizio Berti. He's written a book about Italy's one-euro houses.

He congratulates me on my choice of Sardinia, explaining that houses are also available for one euro each in villages across Sicily and the mainland. "Sardinian people are not like typical Italians. They are more reserved, closed. It's not easy to befriend them," he explains. "But when you buy a house there, they will treat you like a queen. In Sicily, the local people will be very friendly at first. But then later, the trouble comes." He does not say the word Mafia, but it hovers in the air between us.

Quickly, I change the subject and quiz him about the costs, and the potential income. I foolishly mention that I have in the past achieved an Airbnb Superhost badge, and enjoy offering accommodation to travellers and holidaymakers.

The point of the one-euro house



project is not to turn the whole Italian countryside into a gigantic Airbnb, he snaps. It is to bring new life into abandoned villages, to provide employment. To give a new meaning to the village...

Of course Maurizio, sitting in his office on the mainland, cannot possibly estimate how much it would cost for me to renovate my three-storey house in Bonnanaro. Still, some prices must be fixed. What about the legal fees – how much would he estimate for conveyancing?

I imagine I would have to hire lawyers and notaries from Sassari, the nearest large town, and pay them to drive up the motorway through the sun-scorched mountainous landscape. Possibly they might need to make several visits. Do they charge by the hour, as in England?

Well, explains Maurizio, people in the old days lived off the land. The house stayed in the family, handed down. They would sleep on the first floor, all together, and that would be the kitchen and living room too. Downstairs, they kept the animals – donkeys, sheep, maybe a cow. Like the Nativity, he explains. The birth of Jesus Christ.

My days of re-enacting the Nativity ended when I left infants school several decades ago, and I don't follow his train of thought here....

When a baby was born in the family, he continues, they would simply add a new room to the house for the next generation to have their own space. These additions were not

registered as part of the original house... And many people could not read or write. They signed the documents with an X.

Now I begin to understand. The whole property with all its rooms might have more than one owner. They might be difficult to trace, since Maurizio informs me that after the second world war, 24 million people left Italy and only six million returned.

Crestfallen, seeing the dark clouds of bureaucracy massing on my sunny Sardinian horizon, I ask him to guess how much might I have to pay in legal fees? Two thousand, maybe three thousand euros, he replies.

The new price for my one euro house – three thousand and one.

FRANCE

Fighting for third place in France

by GREGOR THOMPSON

It took until the penultimate game of the tournament for me to make it to a Rugby World Cup match. A friend decided he couldn't care less whether Argentina or England won bronze and offered me a couple of tickets.

There had been organisational problems at the beginning of the tournament, so we arrived at the Gare de Nord at 7.45pm to make sure we would make the 9pm kick-off.

My vigilance, it turns out, was unnecessary. The train was on time and we were in our seats by 8.15.

The only time-consuming part was getting through security. We were patted down on three separate occasions, but considering what had happened in France over the past three weeks, this provided reassurance more than frustration.

The first time I realised the situation in Israel and Gaza might aggravate divisions in France was on October 13. A colleague of mine who's got a friend in the Interior Ministry sent a message in the work chat group warning about an elevated terror risk. She advised us to avoid the Métro.

Later that same day, a philosophy teacher named Dominique Bernard was killed and two other people were critically injured in an Islamist-motivated stabbing at a school in Arras.

In the hours following the attack, the French government called for "immediate" reinforcement of security in schools and the country

was placed on *Urgence Attentat* (Attack Emergency) – the highest of three levels in France's national security alert system.

This was not an ideal atmosphere for an international sporting competition that involved nearly 100,000 people descending on Saint-Denis, the suburb just north of Paris where the Stade de France is located, twice a week for eight consecutive weeks. The November 2015 terrorist attacks, that killed 130 people, started at Stade de France.

A frightening rise in antisemitism, the banning of certain pro-Palestinian protests and a spate of false bomb alerts across the country – which included nearly 20 different airports, the Château de Versailles and the Louvre – did nothing to settle nerves.

All of these details were clearly not enough to dissuade international fans. The match I attended, maybe the least meaningful of the tournament, was at near capacity with nearly 78,000 spectators. One suspects the language barrier and a blanket of rugby fever kept many foreign visitors blissfully unaware of the mood during their visits to Paris.

Over dinner, a Kiwi friend staying in the Marais did express some disquiet after one of his evening strolls coincided with some political violence. Not exactly sure where he was at the time, he witnessed a column of pro-Palestinian protesters, one of whom was thrown to the ground no more than five metres away from where he stood.

"The teargas is appropriately named, it really does make you cry," he told me, adding that despite this, he never felt unsafe, in the streets or the stadiums.

This feeling of security in the stadiums was echoed by people I spoke to at the match. The Frenchman behind us in the stands had no time for my questioning. He was too busy giving his son a lecture on how "horrible" and "shameful" he thought the English rugby strategy was.

Fortunately unable to understand him, a group of Geordies in front of me were chuffed to have downloaded an app that allowed them to order beers directly to their seats. Everyone else in our vicinity thought they were geniuses. Asked whether the headlines were making them uneasy, the eldest of the group said there was a bit of talk around the quarter-finals, but that she felt "the French were looking after them."

French officials presumably breathed a collective sigh of relief waking up the morning after South

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