

# PROXY OBSERVER

INFORMAMOS A LA COMUNIDAD INTERNACIONAL

## Spot Report: Police Repression Fails to Instil Fear in Madrid

Prepared for:

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### INTRODUCTION:

The following report contains details and facts relating to a recent protest which took place in Madrid in the wake of increased police repression against Spanish social movements.

The report outlines the reasons for the protest, describes the event itself and gives important background details, as well as a brief summary of the organisers' manifesto reading. Our report will conclude with some recommendations for the OSCE / ODIHR to consider.

### LOCATION & DATE OF PROTEST

The location of this protest was the capital, Madrid. The agreed meeting point was a touristic square known as the *Plaza de España*. From there, the route would lead us to the very heart of Madrid, to an area known as *Puerta del Sol*, the birthplace of Spain's civic movements.

Unlike other protests of this kind which normally start in the evening, this event was scheduled for twelve noon, making it easier to control the flow of traffic.

### EVENT ORGANISERS:

A fairly ample collective of social movements and local civic groups were behind the organising of this event, which was promoted entirely on social networks like *Twitter* and *Facebook*. The hashtag used was [#NoTenemosMiedo12A](#) and the names of the organising groups appeared on the

event poster which can be seen [here](#).

In addition to the organisers, numerous other groups and collectives took part in the event, including: ***Madres contra la represión*** (Mothers Against Repression), CGT (workers' union), *Alfon Libertad*, UHP (Spanish republicans), CNT (union), PAH (anti-eviction group), *Izquierda Castellana*, *Solidaridad Obrera* and at least one LGBT collective.

## **BACKGROUND TO THE PROTEST:**

This protest forms part of a continuing campaign by Spanish social movements to highlight the increase in political repression taking place in Spain, against a backdrop of high unemployment and failing economic policies.

The most visible aspects of this repression are the government's new gag laws, including a restrictive security law (*Ley Mordaza*), changes to the civil code and an Orwellian style anti-terrorist law.

However, other less visible forms of political repression, in terms of media exposure, include police raids on social centres, and multiple arrests of free-thinking activists.

Examples of such raids include ***Operation Piñata***, which resulted in dozens of politically motivated arrests and imprisonment without trial of several young activists with no previous police records.

## **POLICE PRESENCE:**

Spanish riot police (UIP) continue to regard ordinary citizens who wish to participate in democratic life, as a threat to their own political power base. Police chiefs have long since given up any pretence that the job of the UIP is to "protect" demonstrators, and now openly refer to civic movements as "the enemy".

This dangerous attitude was very much in evidence at this protest, with an ominous armed police presence throughout, contrasting sharply with the relaxed nature of the event.

The UIP's contempt for the public's right to protest is such, that no less than six police vans and four patrol cars menacingly awaited our arrival at the meeting point in *Plaza de España*.

An additional six police vans were stationed in ***Callao***, where the protest was due to pass through, as had been previously agreed between the government delegation in Madrid and organisers.

An hour before the event was due to kick off (11am), we observed in *Plaza de España* how Spanish riot police (*antidisturbios*) eagerly put on their bullet-proof vests, as if to go to war, ensuring that their ID numbers were neatly hidden

from view. Some UIP officers, even jokingly tried on terrorist-style balaklavas, to the amusement of their fellow police officers and to the dismay of foreign tourists.

### **POLICE INTIMIDATION:**

By 12pm, when the protest march was due to set off from *Plaza de España*, no trace of the huge police presence remained. Just an hour earlier, the area which was to serve as the meeting point for the event, was literally surrounded by police vans and armed riot police.

Then suddenly, they were gone. Some vans apparently headed towards *Callao*, but we have no confirmation of this, or a clear explanation for this strange change in police tactics.

One possible explanation, as mentioned in previous spot reports, is that the authorities were hoping to deter people from taking part in the event by intimidating them with a massive show of police strength.

This idea is not so far fetched. UIP police units have used both this tactic and random ID checks (which often result in fines), to deter protestors from participating in protests in the past.

### **THE EVENT:**

Half an hour after the scheduled time for the start of the event, we finally set off towards *Puerta del Sol*. At the head of the march, a group of activists held a banner which read: "*No Tenemos Miedo*" (We are not afraid). A clear message to Madrid authorities that government attempts to limit basic rights by instilling fear, are not working.

Three police vans led the way up Madrid's famous main shopping street, the *Gran vía*. We moved at a brisk pace, as there was hardly any traffic, chanting along the way: "*Basta ya de Montajes policial*" (No more police set ups).

Among the crowd, there were children and ordinary *madrileños* (inhabitants of Madrid) who feel strongly that the level of state repression is damaging democracy and basic freedoms in Spain.

Along the route we were accompanied by UIP officers who, for once, did not have their faces covered. It is also worth mentioning, that unlike the riot police with bullet-proof vests, those accompanying us on the short route had their ID numbers clearly visible and did not go into "attack mode" by putting on their helmets.

We stopped frequently for a pause, as the route towards the *Puerta del Sol* is short but entirely uphill. Young activists stuck stickers on lampposts to raise awareness of Spain's Draconian gag law which barely gets a mention on TV channels.

Tourists and locals looked on, curious to know why we were protesting. Finally, we reached *Callao* and the march stopped.

### **POLICE DENY ACCESS:**

In *Callao* we waited and waited. It soon became clear that despite having agreed on the proposed route beforehand, the delegation in Madrid would not allow us to proceed towards the *Puerta del sol*.

When we asked the organisers why the march had been diverted by the police, we were told that the UIP were claiming that a different protest was already taking place in Sol. The OSCE / ODIHR should know that our sources confirmed that no such protest was taking place.

We ourselves have no idea why the police should want to divert the march at such short notice, suddenly changing the agreed route. We are however, absolutely convinced that the reason given by police was inaccurate. Several people who split from the main march to check on the information given by the police, confirmed there was no rival protest in *Puerta del Sol*.

### **A PRE-PLANNED TRAP?**

Given that the police had denied march organisers access to the agreed destination (*Puerta del sol*), the organisers continued walking past *Callao* towards Madrid's red light district, as instructed to do by police, towards a street called *Montera*.

Once there, Spanish police suddenly disappeared at 1:45pm. The event organisers proceeded to calmly read out their manifestos, among loud calls from some of the younger participants that the march should continue down *Montera* street towards *Puerta del Sol*.

*Proxy Observer* immediately sent a member of our team down *Montera* Street towards the *Puerta del Sol* and discovered dozens of police vans hidden in side streets, and a huge police presence waiting at the entrance to the local police station in *Montera*.

Had the organisers taken the decision to head down *Montera* Street towards *Puerta del Sol*, as some of those present were demanding, we are absolutely sure the event would have ended in serious violence.

The question as to whether this incident was a pre-planned "trap" by the police, is for the OSCE / ODIHR to decide. However, it does seem odd to us as observers that the march was diverted in *Callao* under a questionable pretext and that we should end up being taken to a heavily policed area just yards from the *Puerta del Sol*. Thankfully, the organisers took no risks.

## **MANIFESTO READING:**

As this protest was organised by a collective of several social groups, representatives of each organisation read out their own manifesto. The emphasis of each of the manifestos, was on the reasons behind the noticeable increase in political repression, and the response to this by the different groups present at the event.

All agreed that there appears to be a genuine attempt by the authorities to criminalise certain political groups, including anarchist organisations. This was attributed to the fact that the Basque separatist group ETA (Basque Homeland and Freedom) is now effectively defunct.

The absence of this traditional foe, has forced the ultra conservative government in Madrid to seek new political enemies, and if necessary to invent them.

The consensus was that with the disappearance of ETA, normality would return to Spanish political life, with citizens openly participating and questioning the many privileges that corrupt government ministers enjoy. Hence the recent need to distract and control the population with dramatic headlines to instil fear once again.

The manifestos all ended on a positive note, calling for the release of political prisoners from Spanish jails and promising to continue with the peaceful struggle towards a freer, more democratic society.

Additionally, the organisers called on the government to end their campaign of criminalising opposition groups, promising more street protests in future, despite Spain's authoritarian gag laws.

## **MEDIA PRESENCE:**

The almost total absence of mainstream media at this event, surprised many of those taking part. The usual TV crews were conspicuous by their absence with only *La Sexta* (a progressive Spanish TV channel) making a brief appearance.

The remaining photographers were all independent, alternative photographers who now have to deal with the difficulties posed by the government-introduced gag law with severe restrictions on photographing and distributing images of the police.

## **ARRESTS AND INJURIES:**

No arrests or injuries were reported either by the organisers, the police, or the Spanish press, demonstrating once again the peaceful nature of the majority of social protests. With only 1% of protests in Spain ending in violent scenes, it is now more than apparent that Madrid's undemocratic gag laws are totally out of

place in Spain. A point made by *The New York Times* which called on the *European Commission* to intervene against these laws.

### **SECRET POLICE & INFILTRATORS:**

"*Secretas*" (Secret police) are an ever present feature at these political events. Despite being accompanied by uniformed police from start to finish, it is likely there were secret police and infiltrators among us.

It was noticeable, for example, that upon arriving in *Montera* Street some protestors began shouting in unison that the march should continue on to *Puerta del Sol*. The whole thing seemed almost rehearsed and smacked of infiltrators in action.

### **ID CHECKS AND SEARCHES:**

As far as we know, there were no intimidating ID checks carried out, either before, during, or after the protest. Indeed, as previously mentioned in this report, UIP police vanished immediately once we reached *Montera* Street, leaving the organisers to read out their manifesto and conduct press interviews.

### **THE AUTHORITIES:**

Spanish authorities still demonstrate a tendency to over-react in their preparation for these events. The sheer number of police vans and police *Puma* units borders on the ridiculous, considering the low level of recorded violent incidents at these events.

The OSCE / ODIHR should ask themselves why Spanish authorities should act like so. Exaggerated police "protection" generates public anxiety and is inevitably counter-productive.

At this protest, Madrid authorities positioned mounted police in the *Puerta del Sol*, while dozens of heavily armed UIP officers with bullet-proof vests hid in the surrounding streets.

All, without a single incident taking place, demonstrating once again that the delegation in Madrid deliberately ups the stakes in order to generate tension and make it impossible for Spanish citizens to exercise their democratic rights safely and with guarantees.

### **REPORT CONCLUSIONS:**

Our conclusion as stand in observers at this event, is that all the ingredients for a disaster were present at this protest, but that the wise decisions and quick thinking of the organisers prevented a potentially violent police baton charge in *Montera* street. The organisers' decision to ignore calls to go to *Puerta del Sol*, demonstrates maturity and a responsible attitude.

Spanish police, on the other hand, should explain why they placed participants in this potentially dangerous situation in the first place. The delegation in particular, needs to clarify their reasons for unjustifiably diverting the protest towards the red light district of *Montera*, where massive numbers of riot police were waiting hidden in narrow side streets.

Perhaps they could also explain why their officers were given the order to put on their helmets in anticipation of trouble.

## **REPORT RECOMMENDATIONS:**

We ask the OSCE / ODIHR to invite the Spanish government to comment on the assertion that political repression is being used to divert attention from high unemployment figures and failing economic policies.

We urge the OSCE / ODIHR to ask Madrid to explain the reasons behind the increasing number of raids on social centres, and whether these form part of a campaign of repression.

We urge the OSCE / ODIHR to raise with Spain the issue of current whereabouts and health of those political prisoners arrested during *Operation Piraña*.

We suggest the OSCE / ODIHR clarify with Spanish authorities the true function of Spain's forces of law and order, and whether these are compatible with civil servants in democratic nations.

We recommend the OSCE / ODIHR seek confirmation from Madrid, that the number of police officers deployed during the April 12 protest was exaggerated, unnecessary and counter-productive.

We suggest the OSCE / ODIHR ask Madrid to confirm whether army-style balaklavas are now standard issue for UIP police officers during demonstrations.

We urge the OSCE / ODIHR to ask the government delegation in Madrid, to comment on the unusual practice by Spanish police officers of hiding their ID numbers underneath bullet-proof vests.

We urge the OSCE / ODIHR to raise the issue of police intimidation at the start of political events, with a huge, and apparently unnecessary, police presence.

We ask the OSCE / ODIHR to confirm with Madrid whether the government accepts that attempts to instil fear by limiting rights, has failed in its objective.

We recommend the OSCE / ODIHR ask Madrid to comment on the rumours of police set-ups, and whether these are damaging democracy and basic freedoms.

We urge the OSCE / ODIHR to seek an explanation from Madrid, with regard to the denial of access to *Puerta del Sol*, and the sudden change of previously-agreed plans for a route.

We ask the OSCE / ODIHR to invite Madrid to comment on allegations that the reasons given by UIP police to divert the protest were false.

We strongly urge the OSCE / ODIHR to clarify with Madrid, whether there was an attempt on April 12th, to create a situation in *Montera Street* which would have resulted in a police baton charge.

We suggest the OSCE / ODIHR ask Madrid to explain the presence of huge numbers of police vans and *Puma* units, in the back streets of *Montera Street*.

We ask the OSCE / ODIHR to raise the issue of increased police repression against legal organisations, and whether this is an attempt to criminalise political movements.

We recommend the OSCE / ODIHR invite Madrid to comment on the conclusion by social analysts that the Spanish government is attempting to manufacture new political enemies, in order to distract the population from news of widespread corruption.

We ask the OSCE / ODIHR to seek confirmation from Madrid that the government in Spain intends to release all political prisoners as requested by the event organisers.

We suggest the OSCE / ODIHR ask Madrid whether they share the organisers' goal of a freer, more democratic society, or whether the government has other intentions which may explain the introduction of the *ley Mordaza* (gag law) on July 1<sup>st</sup>.

We urge the OSCE / ODIHR to clarify with Madrid how the government intends to deal with photojournalists who violate Spain's new gag law, and continue reporting freely during demonstrations.

We ask the OSCE / ODIHR to invite Spain to comment on the assertion that the new gag laws are totally unnecessary, as only 1% of protests end in violence.

We suggest the OSCE / ODIHR invite Madrid to comment on the *New York Times* editorial which urged the *European Commission* to intervene against Spain's new gag law.

We ask the OSCE / ODIHR to clarify with the delegation in Madrid, the true function of "*secretas*" (Secret police) at demonstrations.

We suggest the OSCE / ODIHR ask Madrid to comment on assertions that Spanish police over-react in their preparation for political events, and may even generate public anxiety with their armed presence.

We ask the OSCE / ODIHR to confirm with Madrid whether they agree that the peaceful outcome of this protest demonstrates the point that the UIP are out of touch with reality, and that such levels of security are totally unnecessary.

We urge the OSCE / ODIHR to invite Madrid to comment on the accusation that the level of police presence at these events, has an intimidatory effect which generates fear and makes it difficult for citizens to exercise their rights safely.

We recommend the OSCE / ODIHR invite the delegation in Madrid to praise the organisers of the April 12 event, for their wise handling of the situation and their responsible attitude towards public safety.

We urge the OSCE / ODIHR to invite the government to comment on the less than responsible handling of the situation by Spanish police.

Finally, we ask the OSCE / ODIHR to obtain a detailed explanation from Madrid, to explain the sudden and inexplicable decision to divert the protest in *Callao*, towards the red light district where hundreds of armed UIP units awaited our arrival.

**Report date: 18 September 2015**

## **RELEVANT VIDEOS & PHOTOGRAPHS:**

VIDEO summary of protest

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?t=166&v=2Fg7dmfhPGA>

Tweet confirming the blocking of route by police

<http://goo.gl/OEPzYP>

Official poster of event

<http://goo.gl/mRauHO>

Photographs and background information on this protest

<http://proxyobserver.weebly.com/represion2.html>

**For more reports on past and future protests**

<http://proxyobserver.weebly.com/informes.html>