



Interview with Josep Duró ▶ The owners of unoccupied land value the growth model and urban expansion



A. BELIS
Josep Duró, at the association's office, right after the interview.

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President of the APTA

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Former mayor of Ordino, Josep Duró is president of the Association of Andorran Land Owners (APTA), an organization that was created in 2007 and that has recently wanted to give his opinion about the current growth model based on construction and urban expansion. Right now, there are more than 70 owners, who represent 75% of the unoccupied land (without buildings), where there is still livestock and agriculture.

–Why do you decide that you have to come out and give your opinion?

–The question is interesting. We leave after a work of reflection with the members of the board, which has parish representation. It is not a political concept, but a defense of heritage. We have realized that it is not just a legal problem, but a puzzle that must be tackled with all the elements, economic, social, sustainability and well-being, what is possible or not in our small dimension. Many people have the feeling that the country is very big, and it is very small. In addition, you should know that more than 85% of the land is owned by the Administration, especially the municipalities and very little by the Government. Only 15% remains, of which much has been built and others cannot be built on due to natural hazards. Thus,

there is very little land left, especially if you want to maintain the vision of livestock and farming. For us, it is not just a housing problem, but a certain stability must be maintained in order to offer the best possible to the citizen. We have to think that the country's economy is very fragile, and trade must be taken into account, but also nature in summer, and snow in winter. We believe that we cannot do what we want, we have to start knowing how many people we can live there, if the existing infrastructure is sufficient, if we can support out-sized increases and if we can provide more jobs.

–I see that you completely amend the country model, don't you?

–Totally. To be surer of everything we say, we consulted with a person from outside, Swiss and competent in the matter. We went looking for matching elements with other mountain countries, because we realized that the mountain cannot be treated in the same way as the plain, we have a particularity, the geography is different. We can build, but then we have to increase road infrastructure, health and schools. There is also the problem of municipal and state powers. I have been a consul, and I have defended the powers of the parishes, but nowadays it is not possible for each municipality to take its own path when there should be a whole. It

will be necessary for the Government to find solutions to the effect of the increase in the population of each parish. Thus, a planning law is needed and for the municipalities and the Government to sit down and analyze the current problem, with our help, if they want.

–Your argument coincides quite well with the Concordia political movement. How do you see it?

–We don't have opinion, but many of the points they say correspond to the reflection we have done over the last three years. Not all, but there is a part that we agree on concerns, for example on population density. From here, I see that there is a global will, both from the parties and also from the people in the street, that this cannot continue in this way, because we are heading for total chaos.

–Someone might think that you report this situation because you feel your property is threatened. Is it like that?

–Right now we have no legal security, and this puts small, medium or large estates in danger, since the current law is outdated. Rather, it encourages people from outside to come and do their business here, and that worries us, because many owners have their difficulties. That's the way things are, depending on who can come and make an interesting offer also worries us, because we would like

to maintain this identity.

–So, in the end it is in their hands not to sell.

–In 2012 an economic opening was made. Now a gentleman can set up a company with 3,000 euros and then the doors are opened for him to make an investment. On the other hand, a resident will want to build and will have huge problems. With this situation many people have come for the tax advantages, not just for the mountains. Business is business. Other countries also have this problem, but they have fixed it.

–I understand that you do not see well the economic openness to foreign in-



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vestment and the association agreement with the EU.

–I would still like to see what is in the association agreement, but it will be complicated in the Andorran context. And of course, when we see that 80% of foreign investment has gone into the real estate sector, such a sensitive area, this cannot be. There could be investment in other sectors that are more necessary or that do not exist. We have not said that we do not want investment, but that the extremes disorient property and administrations, which collect more taxes. This is how debt problems are solved, but we can't close our eyes either and we have to take responsibility.

–Do you think that the successive Democratic governments have taken a harmful way for Andorra?

–There are tools to avoid an even more chaotic situation. We learn from what doesn't work, and from there we must determine which country model we want and try to get the rulers to commit to a permanent dialogue with economic and social actors. We can't keep turning a blind eye, we have to step forward to create something constructive. In the countries we have analyzed, we have seen that politicians make the decisions, but there is a more participatory idea. In other words, before deciding, they try to involve the economic and social actors and also the population in

general. People must know that we will not be able to live here 100,000 people. It scares me because I find it very difficult. Thus, we need to know how many inhabitants we can be, since we have a very fragile economy.

-In the last decade, the population has increased by 14%.

-Years ago the survival of families depended on some of the children going to live abroad. Now we have a different context, but can we give quality of life to people with a figure of 100,000 inhabitants?

-With this reality, there are two options: either the workforce lives abroad or the growth model is changed and does not depend on the increase in the workforce. Which option do you bet on?

-One of the mandates of the Administration is to manage and control, and currently this is not controlled. Cross-border workers are a reference model in countries such as Monaco, Luxembourg, Liechtenstein or San Marino, but it seems that this is nonsense. There are now 1,700 workers from Alt Urgell who come to work here and many Andorrans live in La Seu. We should study whether it is possible or not, and negotiate it with the neighboring states.

-But if we fill up La Seu, doesn't the problem move there?

-Do you mean we have to keep building and building? Or the issue of rents, only in Andorra do we have this problem? I would be very worried if it was just here. So we build, but who will pay? If bigger countries don't make low-priced apartments, it's because it's a supply and demand problem, and there's no government that has control over that.

-To be clear: do you defend a model like that of Monaco in which a significant part of the population lives outside the country?

-No, we say that the aspects involved must be examined to see which is the best situation for coexistence. In the current situation it is not possible. Ordino was a nice town, but soon there will be no more fields with the latest projects that have been authorized, like in Escaldes-Engordany. Is this what we want? How do you want to convince individuals to build homes if there is no profitability? If they don't do it, who should, the Government? Are the Government and the municipalities willing to act as real estate agents? They have land to build apartments at an affordable price, but they may not know what the needs are because they have not been stu-



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died. I think it is very good that they are done, there are many people who have buildings and they have not increased the prices or very little.

-You want to preserve the natural heritage so that people can live off the land and as an attraction for tourists. Is this only in the hands of the land owners?

-The other sites have also found the system. There are farmers and owners who not only do not build, but have bought land to have more grass and more crops. A compensatory policy is needed so that the new generation of farmers can live properly. The reality is that if there were no tobacco, which we don't know how many years it will last, many properties would be abandoned. This is our concern, and a preventive policy is needed. That is why the Government, whoever it is, if they want to maintain the agricultural holdings for the livestock farmers, will need to give them security.

-Should you enjoy subsidies?

-There are several solutions. Some give subsidies, others monitor the work they have done and, depending on this, give a supplementary salary so that they can live with dignity. There are solutions to this issue, and that is why we will have to raise the budget.

-So, will taxes have to go up?

-It is the same case as the building. When a socialist party says there must be 35 million euros for this concept...

-But they already say that taxes must be raised.

-I think all this is very good, but we must be aware that we will not be so attractive. What cannot be is raising retirement, healthcare and taxes. We want affordable prices but everyone is raising taxes. We only have tourism, so who will pay for all this? I'm surprised if you raise wages, everything goes up and inflation is a problem. I like making people dream, but we have to say what is happening and above all we have to help. A small country like ours must help people who need it. Free public transport sounds great to me, but this will affect the overall budget. The question is: how long can we play the accordion?

-What do you think of the towers of Escaldes-Engordany?

-I respect what they have done, but I think it is not our model. Some countries have had it and had to slow it down. While the people who live here make the country work, those who buy but don't live there pay nothing. Elsewhere, they have decided that these people pay more taxes. ≡



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