



Interview with Foreign Minister ► Balance sheet on refugee reception, association agreement



EL PERIÒDIC
Foreign Minister
Maria Ubach in her office.

Maria Ubach

Minister of Foreign Affairs

«This is the first time we have welcomed more than 200 people and we are giving a full response»

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The covid-19 pandemic and the current crisis of Ukrainian refugees are probably the most complex issues that the Government has had to address in this legislature and, very especially, and in both cases, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The head of the portfolio, Maria Ubach, gives an overview of the role that Andorra plays in the international context, with the association agreement with the European Union and the relationship with Latin American countries as the epicenter.

–What are the important issues currently facing the Ministry of Foreign Affairs?

–We have different goals. One of them is to support the denial process with the European Union (EU), which is the Government's top priority, and we do this through a bilateral relationship with the Member States. As an example, I can say that

in May we will travel to the Czech Republic, which will be the next country to hold the presidency of the Council of the EU, together with the Secretary of State for European Affairs, to publish Andorra and explain first-hand how we are conducting the negotiations.

We are also monitoring the presidency of Andorra during the Ibero-American Summit, which was the first time we organized an event of this magnitude and, despite being hybrid due to the pandemic, lasted two and a half years and it has allowed Andorra to reach this region of the world, where until now we were strangers.

–Another point that I suppose is very important is the reception of Ukrainian refugees.

–We have 231 people who have applied to benefit from the law on temporary and transitional protection for humanitarian reasons, 90 of whom are minors. In addition, the register of Foreign Affairs for

persons from Ukraine contains 297 registrants. The decree states that the limit is 250 people, because we want to be careful and aware that Andorra can not absorb a very large number of displaced people, because it is essential that we can take care of them in the best possible way, being aware that our means are limited. We have set up a working group between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Social Affairs, Education, Culture and Home Affairs and Justice, which meets once a week with the Honorary Consul of Ukraine and the President of the association of Ukrainians in Andorra to create a link between the Administration and the direct actors. What is the difficulty? Accommodation, because, although the vast majority of people who have arrived have a bond with someone who already lived in Andorra before the conflict broke out, some have nowhere to stay, so I take the opportunity to make an appeal to citizens who can temporarily offer a space, being



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aware that the goal is for all of them to be able to return to their country when the war is over.

–Is Andorra doing all it can in terms of reception?

–I think so. It is a new experience for us, because it is the first time we have to deal with a reception situation of more than 200 people. However, we have all mobilized: the Administration, especially Education so that all children are in school and Culture that promotes the Catalan language, which is fundamental for integration, as well as civil society with large amounts of humanitarian aid. Andorra has done no less than any other country and, given our size, the percentage of visitors is very high. The situation demands it and we have been able to respond in full.

–In the last Foreign Affairs Committee, both you and Minister Jover said that the situation of Ukrainian refugees is different from that

of Syrians. What's the difference?

-Well, managing a dozen people is not the same as 250. Syrian refugees arrived in Andorra through the humanitarian corridor of the Community of Sant Egidí. Although in both conflicts all the victims are fleeing the war, it should be borne in mind that the Ukrainians are within Europe and their mobility is much easier; they have been able to travel by plane or private car and have been able to cross the whole continent without visas.

-Was it essential for Andorra to join the sanctions against Russia?

-Yes. This has been a very important and necessary decision because we could not stay out of the EU and it has been a very strong signal of how Andorra wants to align itself in this international crisis.

-The association agreement said that it is one of the most important issues. Where is it?

-Negotiations have progressed slowly over the last two years, with obstacles such as the pandemic and Brexit. But the dialogue between the Andorran negotiating team and the EU has been maintained and the meetings, although telematic, have continued to be held and we are now at a time when the Foreign Action team, who was driving the negotiations, changes and the European Commission will be responsible and, therefore, we have new interlocutors.

-What's the next step?

-Now come the more sensitive political issues. Negotiation is a very complex exercise. In recent months, France has held the European presidency and this has allowed the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) to come to Andorra and know first hand our reality, which will help them to make a very important report of conclusions on the relationship between the country and the EU. Then come the presidencies of the Czech Republic and Sweden, with which we will work bilaterally to teach them about our conditions. And in the second half

of 2023, Spain will have the presidency and, therefore, what we anticipate is then to be able to finalize the negotiation, taking into account our good neighborly relations and the support it provides us in this process.

-What role has your ministry played during the pandemic?

-This, together with the arrival of refugees from Ukraine, is the main challenge we have had to face. During the pandemic, we kept in touch with the neighboring states, as many problems arose, such as the movement of people or the repatriation of Andorrans who were all over the world. There may not have been many in absolute numbers, but each case was a different and equally important case, and the Consular Affairs team and the embassies in Madrid and Paris did a tremendous job so that everyone could return home as soon as possible. We also assisted in the return of temporary workers from Argentina so that they could return to their country. All this has allowed us to have a much more practical diplomacy and to have the direct, close and fast contact of all the ministers.

-What happened to the Winter Olympics, in which Andorra has gone from being an «essential partner» to a dormitory country? Has Andorran diplomacy failed?

-The initiative for the 2030 Olympic Games is in Spain and the Spanish Olympic Committee (COE). We have always spoken with the Spanish and Catalan Olympic authorities to offer the possibility of Andorra being part of this project, which we believe to be important in which we have much to contribute to it. Minister Riva has been in contact with her counterpart and the President of the COE and has done a great job of making us available. Also, from the ministry we spoke with the ambassador in Andorra and with the Catalan authorities, but the work of this candidacy has to be elaborated by Spain with its autonomous communities. I would not say that it has been a failure, we have gi-



«Spain will hold the European presidency in 2023, and we hope to be able to conclude negotiations [with the EU] then»

«The pandemic has allowed us much more practical diplomacy and direct contact with all ministers»

«I would not say that [the Winter Games] is a failure. It is up to the COE to decide because it is their project, not an overall one»

ven all the elements and it is up to the COE to decide, because it is their project, it is not a joint project.

-I say this because, if we remember the conflicts with the county confinements during the pandemic, Catalonia has already made different blunders in Andorra. Isn't the relationship good enough?

-Relations with Spain are good. Last year we had visits from the President, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the kings, who visited Andorra for the first time. And with Catalonia, the same. Just two months ago, the President of the Generalitat came and we extracted a roadmap of collaborations that, in fact, already existed, but that want to be strengthened in all areas: culture, education, environment ...

-How is the creation of the Generalitat's office in the Principality?

-This is an issue that we are still evaluating on a legal scale to specify the form that we could give it, as it would not be under the agreements of embassies or a similar body.

-You spoke before the Ibero-American Summit. Was there a before and an after?

-Yes. It was a multilateral exercise on the theme of sustainable development innovation in pandemic issues, but it has had a bilateral effect with all the countries involved and, for example, last September a minister of Foreign Affairs of Chile came to history for the first time. This is just one of the benefits that the presidency of the summit has brought us, as well as the fact that Andorra has also been able to organize major events and that it has given great confidence to the Andorran administration.

-Are you planning other initiatives?

-A few days ago we presented a decision to Unesco to promote the path of peace, which consists of offering an umbrella for projects to promote tolerance, intercultural dialogue, etc. About 70 states supported us. This shows that, little by little, Andorra's activity in inter-

national organizations is making its way, even though we are small. And I think that in this sense, the experience of the Ibero-American Summit has been key.

In addition, this year is the International Year of Sustainable Mountain Development, a United Nations resolution that we co-sponsored and voted for. We have set up an inter-ministerial working group with the Environment, Research and Innovation, Tourism and the Mountain Alliance, which reports to the World Food Agency, to celebrate activities as a mountain country that we are. The launch will be on April 28th and will put us at the center of international events.

-How is the public survey on the 2030 Agenda going?

-Well, this is one of the priorities of the ministry: coordinating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, which includes the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). We are in charge of the voluntary report that must be a photograph of the way in which Andorra implements the SDGs. In July of this year, we will present the evaluation that will come out of the survey, which has been answered by more than 400 people so far, and which allows the population to give their opinion or advice on the subject. The survey is open until April 30th and is open to everyone.

-The first round of presidential elections in France was held on April 10th. What can Emmanuel Macron or Marine Le Pen mean for Andorra?

-We follow closely the policy of our two neighbors and we know that the French elections are important because that is where one of our co-princes comes from. There will be a second round on April 24th and it will be a very important day, as will the June legislative elections and it will be interesting to follow up because it could mean a significant change for the next five years. We follow it with great interest.

-And with concern?

-With interest. ≡

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