

# Podemos defends push to change Spain's controversial 'gag law'

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## Leader calls legislation 'greatest blow to civil and political liberties' since return to democracy

The leader of Spain's Podemos party has defended the coalition government's push to change its predecessor's "[gag law](#)", calling it "the greatest blow to civil and political liberties" since the country's return to democracy.

Ione Belarra, who serves as the minister for social rights in the Socialist-led minority government, said the public security legislation had eroded basic democratic rights since it was introduced by the conservative People's party (PP) six years ago.

The so-called gag law – which has been [criticised by UN experts, journalists](#) and [human rights groups](#) – allows authorities to fine journalists and media organisations who distribute [unauthorised images of police](#), sets strict limits on when and where protests can be held and imposes hefty financial penalties on offenders.

The PP, the far-right Vox party and dozens of policing groups are opposing the changes, claiming they will impede officers' ability to do their job and tilt things in favour of criminals.

Speaking to the Guardian, Belarra said change was long overdue and suggested the legislation had been deliberately engineered by the PP to clamp down on dissent as Spain endured the socioeconomic effects of [the 2008 financial crisis](#).

"I think it's certainly the greatest blow to civil and political liberties since the transition [to democracy], and I don't think that's an exaggerated view," she said. "It's also clear that the People's party undertook this reform during a brutal economic crisis and that it was done specifically to stop people protesting against ... measures such as the cuts to public services."

Belarra acknowledged that the Unidas Podemos alliance – the junior partners in the coalition – would have liked the amendments agreed with the Spanish Socialist Workers' party (PSOE) to have gone further, but said the bloc was satisfied with the deal. One area of disagreement – the [contentious issue](#) of the pushback of migrants and refugees – was left out of the reforms.

"There are measures in the amendments that are good news: you don't need to give notice of [spontaneous] demonstrations, and they're going to reduce the fines and base them on people's different economic capacities so as not to deter people from exercising their civil and political rights on financial grounds," she said.

"And people will no longer be punished for taking and sharing images, which has really limited freedom of information in [Spain](#) and seen the repression of journalists who were doing their jobs legitimately and legally."

But the proposed changes have received short shrift from many rank-and-file officers and from the Spanish right. According to the Jupol union, they will leave officers “having to face violent people with their hands tied”.

The PP leader, Pablo Casado, joined police at a protest in Madrid on Wednesday, as did Santiago Abascal, who leads Vox. Another demonstration is due to be held in central Madrid on Saturday.

Casado said he would take the matter to Spain’s constitutional court if the changes were passed. “We’re not going to put up with this outrage when it comes to protecting those who protect us,” he said. “There’s no freedom without security and the Policía Nacional and the Guardia Civil are the ones that guarantee our freedoms. If the reforms in this law go through, they’re going to end up being totally sold out to the criminals.”

At least one police union – the [ARP](#) (Police Reformist Group) – has thrown its weight behind the changes and announced it will not participate in any of the protests.

Belarra said the police were well within their rights to demonstrate, but added the reforms backed by the government were intended to redress the PP’s wrongs.

“Everyone – and all these organisation and associations – are free to express any opinions they have about the legislation we’re bringing in,” she said. “Having said that, I think the gag law actually upset the necessary balance between the rights of the people who protest and the rights of the state security services who also obviously need protection.”

Belarra, who succeeded [Pablo Iglesias](#) as Podemos leader in June, admitted there had been [tensions](#) with the Socialists, but said disagreements and different approaches were only to be expected in a coalition.

“But I think things are stabilising and people are working together well,” she said. “People need to understand that it doesn’t matter if we don’t agree on everything or if Unidas [Podemos](#) ministers say something different to PSOE ministers.”

Belarra said the fact the government had won approval in congress for its 2022 budget “allows us to send a clear message that there’s stability and that the government’s moving forward in the direction it has chosen”.

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