



ETA violence *and the* Basque Country: Does federalism *offer a* solution?

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The Spanish system of regional autonomies has had very positive effects for the Basque Country. The progress made over the years in the recovery of Basque identity has been very significant. The system, however, has been unable to solve the 'Basque problem'. The conflict between Basque separatists and Spain has left hundreds dead, and has caused untold suffering.

Today's conflicts between the Basque region and the Spanish government are chiefly, although not exclusively, based on three aspects: distribution of powers, territory, and the right to self-determination.

Distribution of powers

The Spanish Constitution of 1978 established a system whereby power is distributed among seventeen autonomous communities. It is a hybrid that stands mid-way between regional

and federal models of government. Its complex and ambiguous nature is a constant source of clashes between the federal and community governments.

Rather than a list of powers, the Constitution establishes a distribution of functions. In many areas, the Constitution qualifies the functions of the autonomous regions with phrases such as 'in the frame of' or 'according to' (other authorities). The upshot is that the federal government has established regulations, directives and controls that have led to a real reduction in the powers of the autonomous regions.

The regions have very few possibilities for participating in overall federal government activities. The Senate—which is theoretically representative of the different territories—is, in fact, dominated by national political parties.

The problem of territory

The Basque region is located geographically in Spanish and French territory. Traditionally, the strategic aspiration of Basque nationalism has been to establish an independent State that covers the whole territory.

Not only is the division between France and Spain a contentious issue, but there are also problems regarding the territorial boundaries of the Basque region inside Spain.

The Autonomy Statute identifies the provinces of Alava, Guipuzcoa and Vizcaya as comprising the Basque region, and also mentions Navarra, giving it the choice of joining this region. Basque nationalism holds that Navarra is an integral part of the Basque homeland.

Basque nationalism, however, is very weak in Navarra. As a result, Navarraese

The Basque Country, divided between Spain and France from the Bay of Biscay to the Pyrenees, comprises approximately 2.5 million people.

Basque-speaking people lived in the region at the time of the Roman incursion into the area, but it is possible that their ancestors had lived there as far back as the time of Cro-Magnon habitation in the area.

The Basque language, Euskara, is unique and scholars have been unable to show any connection between it and any other language group. Euskara is a key component of Basque nationalist identity.

During the Middle Ages, Basques were the majority group in the Kingdom of Navarre. After the dissolution of Navarre in the 1500s, the Basques lived under Spanish and French rule. In Spain, the Basque Country was afforded a significant measure of self-rule under a system of *fueros*—local laws and customs guaranteed to be free from state interference. After the Carlist Wars (1833-39 and 1874-76) the *fueros* were abolished.

During the Spanish Civil War, Basques put up strong resistance to the Fascists, and suffered greatly after the victory of Franco's forces. Franco's centralizing and homogenizing regime

cancelled all Basque autonomy and persecuted those who sought to keep the Basque language and culture alive. In 1978, after Franco's death and the advent of democracy in Spain, the Spanish government adopted a new constitution. It stated that the Spanish state is indivisible, but it also established a system of autonomous regions. Two of these regions are: the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country (the provinces of Alava, Guipuzcoa, and Vizcaya); and Navarra.

The Basque Autonomous Community has an elected parliament with legislative powers, an elected President, and its own police force. It has taxing powers, and the Basque parliament appoints representatives to the Senate of Spain.

A number of Basque political parties and organizations reject the 1978 constitution and argue for full political independence for the Basque Country. Most important among these is the military group ETA (acronym for Basque Homeland and Freedom), and its political wing Herri Batasuna (Popular Unity).

Since 1968, the ETA has perpetrated terrorist attacks such as assassinations and bombings to further its ends, resulting in approximately 800 deaths. The year 2000 was particularly violent—nineteen people were killed in violence related to the conflict.

politicians decided not to join the Basque Country, but instead to have their own autonomous community.

These are just some of the problems surrounding how the Basque territory is defined.

The right to self-determination and the European Union

From the standpoint of Basque nationalists, the main political problem is the demand for recognition of the Basque people's right to self-determination. Even though this right could theoretically take the form of very different political options – autonomy, federalism, confederation, an independent state, etc.—Basque nationalism has traditionally identified self-determination with the right to an independent national state.

Yet globalization is quickly doing away with the classical conceptions of borders understood as lines of separation, and replacing it with a new concept, where borders are understood as privileged meeting points for international cooperation. This challenges the classical concept of sovereignty.

International relations are no longer the exclusive concern of nation-states, since they now extend to many other institutions and organizations. Outstanding among them are the regional institutions, which are acquiring great importance in this new emerging Europe.

In light of all these changes, what form and content will the right to self-determination take in the 21st century? Can the idea of an independent sovereign Basque state be replaced with one that would permit the Basque region to maintain its own identity within the European Union?

This new idea would signify the inclusion of Basque society in Europe, rather than its separation, as often implied in radical nationalism. As well, a policy to include an adequate institutionalized presence of the Basque region in the European Union could easily be adopted by nationalist and non-nationalist political forces alike.

In this way, a definitive solution to the 'Basque problem' could be closely linked to the evolution of the institutions of the European Union. Adequate Basque participation in the process of building

Europe could defuse some of the most serious conflicts.

Some European States, such as Germany, Austria, and Belgium, have been able to solve similar problems through formulae adapted to the circumstances. In Germany, where a perfectly symmetrical federalism exists among various homogeneous Länder, decisions are made through multilateral and symmetrical relations between the government and the Länder. In Belgium, where there are virtually two 'nations' in a single state, relations are bilateral.

Turning to Spain, it must be kept in mind that the establishment of the Spanish autonomous communities had two main causes: regionalism and nationalism.

Regionalism is based on the principle of organizational efficiency—the distribution of powers among administrative units.

Nationalism's objective is to demand or guarantee the principle of 'difference'.

To ensure efficiency, you need to institute multilateral or symmetrical relations among constituent units.

To guarantee 'difference', it is sometimes necessary to establish bilateral, asymmetrical relations among the various autonomous groups.

In Spain's case, to do both it would be necessary to establish an asymmetrical federal system that would combine multilateralism with some bilateral relations.

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Nationalism and political independence have gone hand-in-hand in modern history. However, from the perspective of the new millennium and a new Europe, nation states are undergoing a sweeping process of change leading to a gradual shift of power in favour of new supra-national power structures.

The Basque region has two possible alternatives. One, the traditional alternative, is to demand an independent state. The second is to demand that local territorial collectives, such as the Basque region, be included alongside states in building the new Europe.

The Basque region is split at present into various political divisions (Autonomous Basque Community in Spain, Navarra, and the Basque region in France). Today,

Key Dates in the Basque Conflict

- 1937 *Francisco Franco occupies the Basque Country, cancelling Basque autonomy and persecuting Basques*
- 1959 *ETA founded*
- 1968 *First ETA political killing*
- 1973 *Spanish PM Admiral Luis Carrero Blanco assassinated by the ETA.*
- 1975 *Death of Francisco Franco*
- 1978 *Spanish government approves a new constitution providing for regional autonomies.*
- 1978 *Herri Batasuna, ETA's political wing, established*
- 1979 *Spain passes the Statute of Autonomy, which sets out the provisions of Basque autonomy.*
- 1995 *Failed attempt to assassinate opposition leader (now PM) José Maria Aznar*
- 1997 *ETA kills a Basque counsellor, sparking widespread protests in Spain against ETA violence*
- 1997 *23 members of Herri Batasuna are jailed for collaborating with the ETA.*
- 1998 *ETA announces indefinite cease-fire*
- 1999 *Spanish Government and the ETA meet for the first and only time*
- 1999 *ETA ends 14-month cease-fire*
- 2000 *19 people killed in violence related to the conflict.*

it is impossible to demand the integration of Navarra or the unification of the Spanish and French regions. It is much more appropriate to establish instruments for cooperation designed to solve mutual problems (in such spheres as economics, culture, or technology), based on mutual respect and autonomy.

In fact, there has been excessive reliance on political solutions to problems, while social, economic and simply human aspects have been neglected. The development of a country, however, does not come solely from the exercise of political power. Social, cultural, and economic relationships also determine the character of a country. The emerging Europe offers new, unheard-of-before opportunities for the Basque region and other communities looking to have greater control over the factors that affect their lives. ☺