

The EU and the Basque conflict

opportunities for engagement?

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Written from a Basque nationalist perspective, this article outlines certain aspects of Basque nationalist approaches and proposals to end the Basque conflict, focusing on the potential role of the EU and major contemporary developments such as the announcement by Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) in September 2010 of its decision ‘not to carry out offensive armed actions’.

In particular the article explores whether EU initiatives for cross-border social and economic development have relevance to the Basque question, such as the PEACE programme that has been used to help regenerate the Irish border [see *page 31*]. From a Basque nationalist perspective, cross-border relations may be perceived as a further step in Basque nation-building – although most non-nationalists would see these more as functional tools for regional and local development. As this paper makes clear, no EU instrument can have an impact without the political will of two powerful EU member states most directly involved in the conflict: Spain and France. Any chance of progress is reliant on the Spanish and French governments being convinced that ETA violence and the ‘armed confrontation’ is over for good.

From the 1990s the Basque nationalist movement’s various approaches to the Basque conflict have focused on recognition of the existence of the ‘Basque Country’ (Euskal Herria) as a distinct political entity. The Basque Country that is the focus of Basque nationalism comprises seven provinces currently in three distinct administrative units: the Basque Autonomous Community (BAC) and Navarre in Spain, and the western part of the *département* of Pyrénées-Atlantiques in France. Although the French-Spanish border is not contentious between Madrid and Paris, the Basque ‘problem’ spans it.

Batasuna, the Basque nationalist political party that is the main engine of the *Izquierda Abertzale* (Abertzale Left – a leftist Basque nationalist movement), is illegal in Spain and is also included on the EU terrorist listing, along with several other organisations of the Abertzale Left. Batasuna is still legal in France, although in November 2010 France accepted the extradition to Spain of a French Basque Batasuna militant, Aurore Martin, following the validation of a European arrest warrant. An appeal on the case was still pending at the time of writing.

Spain does not accept the existence of a Basque ‘conflict’, but understands the situation exclusively in security terms, seeing ETA as a terrorist organisation. Spain considers the ‘autonomous community’ model that it adopted following the post-Franco transition as adequate to meet Basque demands over status. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that ‘Spain’ is not monolithic and can be analytically disaggregated: the Spanish government; the state apparatus; the justice administration; the security forces; and the political parties, which are highly regionalised in Spain.

France sees the conflict as a Spanish security ‘problem’ related to criminality and terrorism. Within the French political system, the distinct *Abertzale* parties and movements constitute an active and influential minority. The French institutional counterpart of the Basque Autonomous Community has not been the French Basque country, but rather the *département* of Pyrénées-Atlantiques in the region of Aquitaine. Since the mid-1990s, however, the French Basque Country has started to be institutionalised through the Council of Development and the Council of Elected Officials, and the Autonomous Community is now the main point of Basque solidarity.



When compared with the Spanish Basque region, French Basque mobilisation is low. But civil society dynamics are strong in the French Basque country, where sectoral demands – for instance on language, agricultural policy, economic development or academia – have coalesced into wider aspirations for French Basque territorial recognition. Distinct political and social voices, going beyond the nationalist spectrum, ask for a ‘*Département Pays Basque*’ as a first official step. There is considerable uncertainty, however, over the specific institutions of the French Basque country given ongoing decentralisation in France.

Basque nationalist plans and proposals

In 2004 the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV), a Christian-Democratic nationalist movement, tabled the *Ibarretxe Plan*. It recognised the existence of the Basque nation and its right to self-determination, but its spatial application was limited to the three western provinces that make up the Basque Autonomous Community. The plan was supported by an absolute majority in the Basque Autonomous Community’s parliament, but was rejected by the Spanish parliament.

In 2007 Abertzale Left presented two proposals called *Anaitasuna* and *Uztaritze*. The former proposed autonomy for the four provinces of the western territory – the Basque Autonomous Community and Navarre; the latter for the three continental provinces – Lapurdi, Lower Navarre and Zuberoa.

Both proposals accepted *de facto* administrative autonomy within Spain and France, and stressed the importance of public consultation; but both required acceptance of the right to self-determination. But until now these proposals have been rejected by Spain and France, whose interpretation of the political conflict as a security problem has, from a Basque nationalist perspective at least, reduced the scope for resolving the dispute by making it solely a matter for the police and intelligence services. From the point of view of this paper, it is ironic that French and Spanish cross-border security cooperation has been exemplary!

Stand up Basque Country!

In February 2010 *Abertzale Left* launched a new proposal: *Zutik Euskal Herria* (‘Stand up Basque Country!’). *Zutik Euskal Herria* tries to develop a democratic process to move the Basque confrontation from the armed to the political sphere, where Basque nationalism considers itself strongest.

Its key innovation is to require a complete absence of violence. Internal debates on the use of violence have historically provoked some splits within *Abertzale Left*, in BAC and in Navarre, and between French Basque nationalists. Batasuna itself has also gone through an important internal process since the turn of the 21st century, including appeals to cease violence. Two previous ETA ceasefires, in 1998 and 2006, also generated debates and currents within the nationalist and



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non-nationalist political spectrum and civil society, even if the processes ultimately failed.

Zutik Euskal Herria proposes building a broadly-based grassroots movement to defend human, civil and political rights. It publicly and unilaterally commits to continuing to campaign by exclusively civil and political means, reinforcing this latter commitment by undertaking to respect the ‘Mitchell Principles’ within the framework of the negotiation process. The Mitchell Principles refer to recommendations set out by US Senator George Mitchell in relation to the Irish peace process; in particular not to use force, or the threat of force, to influence the course or result of multiparty negotiations, nor to try to modify any agreement that results from the talks.

Zutik Euskal Herria was welcomed by a number of prominent international personalities in the March 2010 ‘Brussels Declaration’, which was signed by a number of prominent international personalities, including F. W. de Klerk, Desmond Tutu, John Hume, Betty Williams, Albert Reynolds and the Nelson Mandela foundation. The declaration commended the reiteration of the commitment to exclusively peaceful and democratic channels, and supported dialogue and negotiations among parties, asked all actors, including the Spanish government, to achieve a situation where Basque citizens could take their own decisions about their own future, and called on the international community to accompany this process. It appealed to ETA to declare a permanent, fully verified ceasefire.

ETA responded to *Zutik Euskal Herria* through a series of public statements during September 2010 stressing that since March that year it had held firm on its decision not to engage

in military offensives, and announcing that it was willing, along with the signatories, to study the steps to be taken in order to open up a pathway to a final end to armed conflict. In September 2010 ETA made its ceasefire announcement. Spain immediately rejected the announcement.

A role for the European Union? The EU PEACE programme

Below, the authors explore models among various EU instruments for cross-border cooperation with potential application to the Basque Country. Cross-border EU policy is not aimed at resolution of ethnic conflicts, but to regional socio-economic development. But Basque nationalists see a potential nation-building function in some cross-border EU cooperative tools applicable to their case. Of course, any EU engagement is dependent on a major shift in attitude from Spain and France.

Potential EU cross-border instruments include ‘communities of collaboration’ and the ‘Euro-regions’. Both of these relate to relations between provincial administrative units in different but neighbouring EU member states, and refer to a common cultural, linguistic or historical identity as the basis for building economic or social relations. These structures now sit within a new European legal framework established in 2007, the European Grouping for Territorial Cooperation (EGTC), which is intended to promote cross-border, transnational and inter-regional cooperation among regional and local authorities from different EU member states, in order to deliver joint services.

EU cross-border and inter-regional cooperation programmes are designed to help resolve problems among adjacent communities across borders that are deemed ‘neutral’. So

their application to the Basque instance appears limited. They do not carry any political power and cannot generate new administrative entities. Managing these instruments requires the involvement of governments as well as local and provincial authorities, and there is little chance that the will of constituted states will bow to the aspirations of stateless nations to grant them recognition. Also the institution of Euro-regions has been interpreted very differently in different cases.

Euro-regions and similar structures proposed within the legal framework of EGTC are, on paper at least, capable of preparing, implementing and managing cross-border community programmes within the EU. Cross-border activities developed by local and provincial authorities are seen as important, since by using scarce economic resources they generate added value.

The establishment of the EGTC for the first time provides a legal framework for cross-border, inter-regional and transnational cooperation. It can act to implement cross-border cooperation programmes and can legally recognise authorities and public entities established under it. The advantage of the EGTC over previous instruments is that it can increase both the degree of responsibility for cooperative entities, and the demand for financial transparency concerning the management of common resources. But from a Basque nationalist perspective, a key question is whether EU instruments can move beyond economic development into the political sphere, and so contribute to resolving the Basque issue – and in particular its cross-border components.

Some Basque nationalists have been looking to the EU PEACE programmes which have been used to support state and inter-state conflict resolution policies for Northern Ireland. Through directly-invested funds, the PEACE programmes have sought

to foster renewed economic activity, local development and regeneration strategies in borderland communities, as well as cross-border cooperation and social reconciliation throughout Irish territory. In September 2010 PNV made statements in Brussels (notably to the European Democratic Party) about the introduction of a 'PEACE Euskadi' programme. Although underdevelopment has not been a major problem in the Basque regions, which are an industrial zone, some in the region have been concerned with the implications of the economic and financial crisis since 2008.

The application of EU inter-regional or cross-border cooperation instruments have yet to be engaged in resolving the Basque conflict. But the Irish case suggests their broader conflict resolution applicability to help resolve cross-border disputes. European institutional instruments cannot override the will of powerful member states, and in the Basque case they do not define Spanish and French political positions. Nevertheless, they could serve to enhance steps being taken by Basque nationalist movements to resolve once and for all the political and armed conflict that has held the life of this small European nation in its grip for decades.

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