

The newly elected Basque government may be tempted to use the lure of secessionism as a diversion from the region's economic problems.

by Blog Admin

Last week saw the first elections to be held in the Basque Country since the end of ETA's armed separatist campaign last year. [Alejandro Quiroga](#) reflects on the results of the election, which saw the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV) gain the largest number of seats in Parliament. Although the PNV's leadership do not view a referendum on Basque independence as a priority, they may be tempted to promote secessionism as a solution to the Basque Country's economic problems should the current crisis deepen.



On 21 October 2012, Spanish Basques went to the polls to elect a new regional parliament. Everybody knew that the elections were exceptional. For the first time since the return of democracy to Spain in the late 1970s, Basques could vote without the threat of ETA's violence hanging over them. Last year, the armed group transformed Basque politics when it decided to end four decades of terrorism. The results of the elections, however, proved far from extraordinary. As with all elections in the last thirty years, the moderate, right-wing Basque Nationalist Party (PNV) pipped the other parties to the post. The PNV secured 27 seats in the 75-member regional parliament. The separatist coalition EH Bildu came second with 21 seats; the Socialist Party (PSOE) followed with 16; and the conservative People's Party (PP) trailed in fourth place with 10. Following three years of socialist government in the Basque Country, the PNV looks set to return to power.

The polls showed a sharp fall in the socialist vote, as a result of both the erosion produced by three years of leading the Basque government and the general discrediting of the PSOE across Spain. Many still blame former socialist Prime Minister José Luís Rodríguez Zapatero for the crisis that has rocked the Spanish economy since 2008. Conversely, the radical nationalists of Bildu achieved almost 25 per cent of the vote. Bringing together members of ETA's political wing (previously banned from running by Spain's constitutional court) and peaceful separatists, the coalition has reaped a peace dividend, a situation similar to Sinn Fein's rise following the IRA's permanent ceasefire in Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, the possibility of a PNV-Bildu coalition government that could pursue a pro-independence agenda seems, at this moment, remote, as the moderate nationalists are fully aware of the fact that part of its electorate is reluctant to embrace outright separation from Spain. Moreover, both the so-called constitutionalist parties (PSOE and PP) and a broad range of PNV supporters still associate Bildu with ETA and its gangster-style politics. ETA declared an end to its armed struggle in October 2011, but the legacy of decades of violence is bound to exercise a long term political impact.

The elections also demonstrated that the Basque Country remains a politically plural society. Iñigo Urkullu, the PNV leader, has been deliberately ambiguous when discussing his eventual government. He is reluctant to reach an agreement with Bildu, as he fears the radical nationalists would force the PNV to call for a pro-independence referendum, an issue Urkullu does not currently consider a priority. The alternatives are either a PNV minority government or a coalition PNV-PSOE. The PNV ran coalition governments with the socialists in the 1980s and 1990s, but the decline of the PSOE may counsel Urkullu to opt for a minority government. In any case, the PNV will have to manage one of the worst recessions in the history of the Basque Country. The conservative nationalists have put forward rather conventional austerity measures to overcome the situation of “national emergency”. Recipes based on cutting public spending, however, have failed all over southern Europe, deepening the economic recession and forcing poverty to unprecedented levels. Applying further austerity measures is highly unlikely to improve the situation in the Basque Country.



It is precisely the eventual scenario of a deeper economic crisis which could lead Urkullu to opt for an independent Basque Country, much in the same manner as right-wing Catalan nationalists have [recently done](#). In the last two years, the governing Convergència i Unió has implemented a policy of severe cuts in the Catalan public sector with the support of the People's Party in the regional parliament. As a result of the austerity policies, the Catalan economy is in tatters, with record unemployment levels and rising social inequality. In late August 2012, the Catalan government formally applied for a £4 billion bailout to the Spanish government to cover deficit spending and refinance existing debt. But despite the dramatic economic situation, or perhaps because of it, the Catalan president, Artur Mas, has blamed the central government for the region's problems, accused 'Madrid' of fiscal exploitation and proposed a referendum for an independent Catalonia.

Separation, the conservative Catalanists claim, will provide the solution to the region's economic problems. To be sure, the situation in Euskadi is different to the one in Catalonia. The Basque Country enjoys extensive fiscal autonomy and unemployment is considerably lower than in Catalonia, but, as the economic crisis bites further, the possibility of a PNV 'separatist turn' à la Artur Mas should not be ruled out. After all, recession has resulted in an increasing number of Europeans supporting secessionist movements in Belgium, the UK and Spain. In the midst of a brutal crisis, the creation of new nation-states is seen as the panacea to economic maladies.

If the PNV is to extol the virtues of an independent Basque Country, this would add to the current problems of the People's Party government in Madrid. This sort of challenge, though, could also be welcomed by the Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy, as he uses confrontation with regional nationalists to divert attention from the dramatic situation of a country suffering from a deep recession, an unemployment rate of 25 per cent and constant protests in the streets. Crucially, a hypothetical secession of the Basque Country from Spain would pose a number of problems to the European Union too. Would an independent Basque Country be part of the EU? Could Spain veto the entry of the Basque Country into the EU? How would the Basque economy be affected if Euskadi was to stay outside of the EU? Whatever the future political framework of Euskadi, Urkullu has made very clear that he does not contemplate the Basque Country outside the European Union. Yet the price of secession could be imposed isolation.

In a southern Europe devastated by the economic crisis, the revival of pro-EU stateless nationalist movements is somehow paradoxical. But finding in nationalism the solution to all sorts of problems in times

of crisis is an old European recipe.

Please read our comments policy before commenting.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

Shortened URL for this post: <http://bit.ly/EleBas>

About the author

Alejandro Quiroga – *Newcastle University*

Alejandro Quiroga is a Reader of Spanish History at the School of History, Classics and Archaeology in Newcastle University and a Ramón y Cajal Fellow at Universidad de Alcalá de Henares (Spain). His research interests include Spanish history and politics, twentieth-century European history, nationalism and ethnic conflict.

