

While attention is focused on Catalonia, the debate over the Basque Country's status within Spain remains on hold

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03/09/2014

In October 2011, the Basque separatist group ETA announced the cessation of its armed activities. **Teresa Whitfield** writes that while this constituted a notable achievement, a lack of engagement from the Spanish government has prevented any further settlement over the disbanding of ETA. It has also contributed to delaying agreement amongst Basque nationalists on new proposals for the status of the Basque Country, while fuelling demands for self-determination. In the short term, the future of the Basque Country is likely to be framed by events in Catalonia, where the Catalan government is proposing to hold a referendum on independence in November.

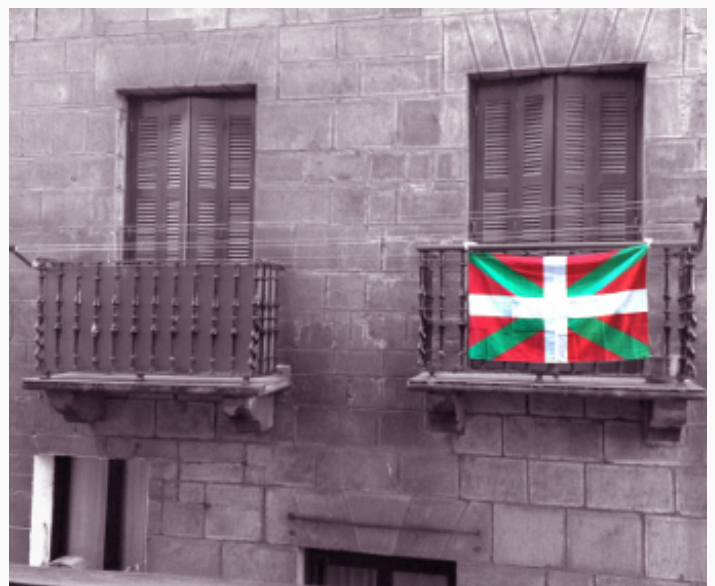


It has been nearly three years since the Basque separatist group **ETA** (*Euskadi ta Askatasuna*, Basque Homeland and Freedom) declared an end to its armed activities in October 2011. ETA proved true to its word, and the end of terrorist violence that had claimed some 830 victims represents a signal achievement in Spain's contemporary history.

The Basque political process since that time has been anything but straightforward. And as Spain readies itself for a complicated autumn marked by secessionist demands from Catalonia – Catalans will be **demonstrating** in great numbers on their national day, the *Diada*, on 11 September for the third year in a row; Artur Mas, the president of the Catalan government, promises a referendum in November that the Spanish prime minister, Mariano Rajoy, has vowed to oppose in the courts – Basque nationalist aspirations might appear curiously muted.

The outward calm does not mask considerable turmoil within Basque politics. Nor can it long obscure the stark reality that Basque demands to exercise what the nationalist majority in the Basque parliament claims as a 'right to decide' are likely to become more pressing over time. The Catalan secessionist switch, as the Basque analyst Ramón Zallo wrote in 2013, may be firmly 'on', but the Basques are in the wings, 'on standby'.

The reasons for this anomalous situation are first and foremost economic. The Basque Autonomous Community has long enjoyed a high degree of fiscal autonomy enshrined in an arrangement called the *concierto económico*. This gives Basques a capacity to raise and spend their own taxes, while paying a quota of just over 6 per cent of Spain's national expenditure to Spain for centralised services such as defence, foreign affairs and social security. Basques do not share with Catalonia the mobilising narrative of 'plunder by Madrid'.



Flag of the Basque Country Autonomous Community of Spain, Credit: Iñaki Queralt (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

But the relative quiescence of the Basques is also intimately related to ETA. The existence of Basque terrorism was for many years used by the Spanish political parties to demonise even the peaceable aspirations of Basque nationalism. Internally, the persistence of ETA contributed to the polarisation of Basque politics; differences over the

management of the process since the end of its violence have continued to complicate Basque political life.

ETA's October 2011 declaration followed an appeal made of it by international peacemakers at a conference held in San Sebastián. It could be attributed to the increasingly effective counter-terrorism of the Spanish and French security forces, but also to widespread rejection of ETA's violence by Basque and Spanish society and an unusual peace process that found its critical moment after the collapse of negotiations with ETA pursued by Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero between 2005 and 2007.

Leaders of [Batasuna](#) – the banned political party that had long been ETA's surrogate – embarked on a unilateral effort to move ETA away from violence. With discreet international help they established a channel to the Zapatero government and agreed a confidential 'road map' that gave ETA sufficient assurances to bring its violence to an end. The details of this 'road map' have never been made public, but they included commitments to address some of demands of the hundreds of Basque prisoners widely dispersed across Spain and France and an agreement that ETA's leaders would travel to Norway, from where they hoped to be able to engage with the Spanish government to agree the modalities of the group's disarmament and eventual dismantling.

None of this was to be. The general elections of November 2011 brought Rajoy to the head of a Popular Party government buoyed by an absolute majority. His government has not moved prisoners closer to the Basque Country and he has flatly rejected every opportunity to engage with ETA directly or through third parties. Rajoy has also repeatedly slighted the efforts of Iñigo Urkullu, leader of the moderate [Basque Nationalist Party](#) (PNV) and from 2012 the Basque president, to develop a joint strategy to bring about ETA's dissolution.

Rajoy's immobility is attributable to distinct factors, and radically different interpretations. Most immediately it reflects the extent to which the Popular Party has become beholden to victims' organisations and other sectors who oppose any recognition that the fact that ETA has stopped killing demands a change in the anti-terrorist policies designed to achieve this goal. More broadly, many Spaniards have been shaken to discover that the 'defeat' of ETA's terrorism long pursued from Madrid has not inflicted a similar defeat of its political goals. On the contrary, ETA's former political surrogates have returned to legal political life and flourished.

Their new political party, [Sortu](#), is the most powerful member of a pro-independence coalition, [EH Bildu](#), which commands some 25 per cent of the Basque vote and threatens the PNV as the most powerful political party in the region. These two political forces have traded blame for the lack of progress towards ETA's end and become mired in the dynamics of electoral competition. But each is also aware that it will need some sort of accommodation with the other to achieve its goals.

Rajoy's immobility has certainly contributed to pressure exerted upon ETA from all sectors of Basque society. As a result of the engagement of Basque social forces and international actors, ETA has announced its readiness to begin disarmament and that it has dismantled the internal structures that gave it an offensive capability. But immobility has also impeded practical steps towards addressing the demands of the prisoners – including those that could be met within existing Spanish law – as well as the organisation's dissolution. And it offers no provision for the future of the explosives and weapons still at ETA's disposal.

Immobility has also fostered resentment. On 21 August a small group demanding the release of those Basque prisoners who are ill burned five buses in Loiu, outside Bilbao. The incident was immediately condemned by Sortu, which claimed that such actions only benefit 'those who want to perpetuate the conflict'. Police reports confirmed that those responsible were not connected to ETA. However, this was the worst single incident in the past three years of the violent sabotage, or *kale borroka*, that long took place in parallel to ETA's attacks, and therefore a cause of some concern.

In the long term, Rajoy's immobility on an issue of central importance to Basques – in a poll conducted this May by the highly regarded Euskobarómetro, 83 per cent of Basques favoured negotiations between the Spanish government and ETA to facilitate the latter's end – is also short-sighted with regard to the relationship between the

Basque Country and Spain. The same poll found that the Spanish Constitution enjoys a lower level of support amongst Basques than at any period in the nearly four decades since its adoption. While Basques will be paying close attention to the evolution of events in Catalonia, support for their own 'right to decide' is growing. In June some 150,000 Basques formed a human chain across the 76 miles between Durango in Vizcaya to Pamplona in Navarre to press this claim. Euskobarómetro reports that 59 per cent of Basques now favour a referendum on independence, up 5 per cent since late 2013.

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