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*Noe Cornago**Academic Foresights*

## Basque Conflict



### *How do you analyze the present situation of the Basque conflict?*

Even the most critical observer would admit that, in spite of the current economic crisis, the situation of the Basque Country never has been better in more than fifty years. After decades of conflict - with a balance, beyond its many other implications, of more than 820 people killed directly by ETA in terrorist attacks, and a number close to 120 died either in shootings between ETA activists and police corps or in the hands of state sponsored paramilitary groups and torture - the declaration of 'definitive end to armed activity' launched in October 2011 by ETA (1), by way of a short video broadcasted in exclusive by the BBC apparently ended a painful era of violence (2). It has spread in addition a new sense of hope but also self-complacency amongst Basque population – since each side proudly but unilaterally claims to have been key in shaping the basis for this new context - as well as a renewed confidence in the potentialities of democratic political processes, that even those most sympathetic to ETA are enthusiastically embracing.

### *In your opinion, how will the situation likely evolve over the next five years?*

Certainly, many of the petitions included in ETA's declaration, aiming first the 'territorial reunification' of the Basque Country and then its transition to full independence - such as the 'call to the governments of Spain and France to open a process of direct dialogue which has as its aim the resolution of the causes of the conflict and thus the conclusion of the armed conflict' - can be considered as unrealistic. But it can be arguably said that in view of the current situation, and despite Spanish and French governments immobilism, it is difficult to foreseen a step backwards by the side of ETA, which remains undissolved, or a possible return to the old strategy of terror. Quite the opposite, after more than a decade of institutional ostracism as result of the controversial and consecutive banning – later validated by the

ostracism as result of the controversial and consecutive banning – later validated by the European Court of Human Rights - of various political parties belonging to the radical nationalist left because of their alleged complicity with ETA – such as the historical coalition Herri Batasuna and others– ‘peace dividends’ have been particularly fruitful for Bildu, the new political coalition which successfully gathered in the last elections the support of an important part of the Basque population whose political options were excluded of the available choice in various previous elections, receiving the significant support of a fourth part of the Basque population.

Real expectations amongst Basque nationalism for a successful secessionist process from Spain and France - inspired in the Scottish referendum scheduled for 2014- have not substantially improved. But Bildu access to power in the province of Gipuzkoa, the city of Donosti-San Sebastian, and many other municipalities, as well as its important presence as the second political force in a Basque Parliament in which the ruling party, the moderate Basque Nationalist Party, lacks of absolute majority, has produced a new era of complex multiparty arrangements, and disputed parliamentary deliberations with uncertain outcomes. Paradoxically, however, this is resulting in a sort of normalization of the Basque political process, which is facilitating the rapid integration of some seemingly radical or anti-system political forces into the wider institutional realm provided by the three layers –local, provincial, and regional- in which the Basque Autonomous Community is nowadays formally organized.

This course of events has nonetheless provoked very different reactions. In one hand, some associations of victims of terrorism denounce that through the formal participation of Bildu as ruling party or necessary partners for the institutional stability and effective governance of the Basque Country, ‘former terrorists’ were now enjoying impunity whilst democratic political parties would be entering into complicity with them. In the other hand, other sectors less inclined to accept that ETA passing to history will not produce other additional achievements –including greater international attention - that the end of terrorism itself, still presenting the case as one which would require a greater and more generous commitment by the side of both the Spanish and French Governments, in terms of some political concessions –in topics such as the situation of ETA members in prison, or the retirement of the Spanish security forces from the Basque Country, amongst others - to be negotiated with the help of the so-called International Contact Group (ICG). This is a group of international personalities lead by South African lawyer and professional ‘peace-maker’ Brian Currin, which accepted –under quite unusual conditions not coherent with prevailing standards in global peace-making - the mandate formulated by a select group of social and political

organizations more representative of the various sensibilities within Basque nationalism that of the wider diversity of the Basque society, for acting as the 'ultimate verifiers' of ETA's commitment with the end of violent actions, despite opposition to this expressed by both the Socialist Party and the Popular Party, who denied them any legitimacy as mediators (3).

The coincidence of these events with the serious economic and institutional crisis that Spain is now experiencing –including the crisis of the monarchy and the exacerbation of Catalan feelings of alienation from Spain - have also produced a new political climate more favourable to recognize the necessity of negotiating an ambitious constitutional reform of the State of the Autonomies. But here again the positions are extremely polarized. Some political forces, such as the centre-right Popular Party, are now advocating for a re-centralization of the Spanish political system, whilst others, such as the Socialist Party and others, including moderate ethno-nationalist forces and other left-groups, suggest that the best solution would be the federalization of Spain. But none of these solutions look as feasible or able to crystallize within the coming five years.

### *What are the structural long-term perspectives?*

Beyond the diverse modulations and intensity that the various expressions of disagreement by the side of Basque political groups of alternative political sign may acquire, and the changing institutional morphologies that the Basque political landscape may adopt in coming legislatures, my impression is that nothing will significantly modify the current situation. Or at least, nothing coming from the Basque political process itself, in the extent in which the political forces supposedly more inclined to fostering significant changes, namely Basque nationalist parties from the moderate Basque Nationalist Party to the more radical Bildu, have important incentives for accommodating themselves to the current 'zone of comfort', delaying once and again any risky secessionist move, in a context in which separatist feelings although possibly endorsed by a single majority of the population are far from being unanimously shared by the whole Basque society.

In sum, in the long-term, the future of the Basque conflict will more depend of the evolution of some structural variables such as demography, migration, economic growth and employment, or the sociocultural dynamics related to the reality bilingualism, than in the possible outcome of any political bargaining or political design, as

formulated from the narrow perspectives of either ethno-political narcissism or obsolete Spanish nationalism. But beyond this, even more important for the transformation of the Basque conflict will be the fate of Spain within the wider European post-sovereign context.

**Notes:**

(1) See the full text at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-15395157>.

(2) See 'ETA announces 'definitive cessation of armed activity'', <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-15396691>.

(3) See <http://icgbasque.org/mandate/>.

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