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Policy report on the case of the Basque Country

A policy report for EUROREG
Funded under Sixth Framework Programme
(Priority 7: Citizens and governance in knowledge based society)
[Contract number: FP6-506019]

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November 2006

Executive summary

1) The impact of the European integration process may be summarized in two main points. Firstly, it can be said that **economic funds and also the recently human rights conditioning policies have had a little impact on the empowerment of the Basque minority and in the conflict over the political accommodation of the Basque nation.** Secondly, where **European integration** has really affected the Basque Country is in its **capacity to assure a political stability and minimum guarantee of democracy and civil rights** –what was certainly important for the successful transition to democracy–, and facilitating a political environment very dynamic which fosters changes in nationalist discourses and strategies.

2) There exist great differences among the parties in the way they approach to the issue of the Basque development. **For nationalists, self-government and the fostering of their own identity is an essential tool for developing their country, while Spanish parties stress more the belonging to a wider State as a guarantee of development and identity.**

Below this picture of tension, there are two elements of cohesion that act as social glue. First, the Basque Country is a relatively well-developed one, with a generous amount of wealth, and it is easier to manage this kind of country than other with serious problems of development. For years there existed a transversal government managing the country (Basque Nationalist Party and Socialist Party). These two parties managed a broad social consensus over the model of development.

Second, it has never existed in the Basque Country any clear discrimination implemented on national divisions. This has helped to minimize the social impact of the political conflict.

In any case, self-government demands are huge in the Basque Country, as was showed in the previous reports, with only 24 per cent of the population supporting the current State of the Autonomous Communities' model, and 32% demanding the independence and other 38% claiming for a truly federal State which clearly acknowledges the Basque nation. That is, 70% of the Basque population demands much more level of self government and national recognition than the currently existent.¹

3) It can be said that **cross border ties** are actually neither very strong nor important in quantitative terms. **Their importance comes from the symbolic and ideological domains for the nationalist forces**, who see how this is the only legal and pragmatic way for the **visualization of the entire Basque national territory.** In any case, the Basque nationalism has learnt some lessons after a first stage of very explicitly ideological and nationalist approach to CBC, and is increasingly developing a more pragmatic, medium-term oriented and related to ground approach. This permits to avoid main reluctant positions in French counterparts and implement more concrete projects which, improving real conditions and welfare, will surely foster more solidarity and even a deeper Basque common feeling.

In spite of several institutional channels for this kind of cooperation (both European INTERREG and the own funds promoted by the Basque government) the sense of

¹ Figures extracted from the last Euskobarometro (November 2005), an opinion survey made twice per year. The figures of the precedent survey (May 2005) were: independence (37%), federal option (34%), and autonomic model (26%). Font: www.ehu.es/cpvweb/pags_directas/euskobarometroFR.html

common solidarity is still low, and mainly concentrated on the physical border, with only more clear national component on the inner area of the range, where the Basque language is more extended.

Finally, more research is needed about the **Euro-region project**. After interviewing several officials and politicians, opinions vary a lot about this issue. While some state that it is a mere discourse, others affirm it will be an important project for the development of the entire Basque Country, a mean for building a more cohesive and political relevant country in Europe. For them the Euro-region will be the way for too small a country to increase its size and lead a new economic and political space, inserting so in the European and world markets and politics. The main idea is to build on the ancient Basque culture **the political core of a new space**, able to use the strategic position of being in between the Atlantic axis and the European route from Portugal, through Spain and France, to central Europe.

4) **People in the Basque Country feel mainly Basques**, with complex relations among three national identities in conflict: Basque, Spanish and French, variable in each territory (feeling mainly Basque in the Basque Autonomous Community with appreciable compatibility with Spanish identity in a wide sector; mainly Navarrese in Navarre, again compatible with Spanish one but with a minority but geographically concentrated Basque national identity in the north; and wide feeling of Basque identity, but under prime French identity in the northern part of the Basque Country).

5) **The change in the Spanish government, with the arrival of the Socialist party, and the cease of fire of ETA, opened up interesting possibilities and permitted to start a peace process**. This process has been contested and criticized by the conservative Popular Party in the opposition, what has really created many problems to the process and breaks up the classical attitude of the party in the opposition following and backing the policies of the government on this important issue. It is equally true that the other parties, seeing the position of the conservatives, have involved more actively in the process and talked among themselves a lot for trying to reach an agreement.

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Introduction

Basque identity is ancient and explicitly nationalist, in a modern sense, since 1898 or so. From this point of view, European integration transformed the context of the conflict, not created its political opportunity structure.

Accordingly to many studies and statistical data, interviewed actors affirm a **very strong Basque identity**. A majority of them channel this through nationalist ideas and political expression, but even those who do not, feel strongly (basically) Basque and think Basque people should decide on her own affairs. This is seen as something compatible with other identities (European and Spanish/French) in a lot of cases. What can be said about this is that civil society seems to be more sophisticated than actual political channels or agenda.

Every actor thinks Europe has been a very positive mechanism for consolidating the democracy in Spain, but almost all express their reserves about its role on the Basque conflict. In this way, it can be said that European structural funds are not important for the political agenda (in part because the Basque Country GDP rises above the EU-25 average and, then, it has no access to the main part of these funds). However, all the interviewed actors dream with a much better accommodation of Basque nation into the European Union (and perhaps into a federal or confederal plurinational Spain – while others hope to get their own State).

Here, the possibilities offered by European integration with its opening of the borders due to the internal market and the **Cross-Border Cooperation (CBC) programmes are very promising for the visualization of the Basque homeland**. Now, many Basques think, it is possible to go throughout the entire country without crossing (physical) borders and this makes a difference for reinforcing social, cultural and political ties. This explains the interest of Basque institutions – governed by a nationalist majority – for this kind of cooperation, even creating their own Fund for cooperation (inspired in the European ones).

Other interesting project related to the CBC is the recent idea of launching a so-called Euro-region formed by the Basque Country Autonomous Community and the regions of Aquitaine in France and Navarre (in Spain) with the Basque identity as its core, leading this economic and political initiative. This idea tries to insert the (entire) Basque Country, showing its national territory (with the symbolic importance and physical possibility for the quotidian cross-bordering and intensified social relations), into the European economic and political spaces, with very important post-national and post-sovereign features. It is a new approach to identity and nation building, only possible in

the new conditions created by the European market and the political re-launching after Maastricht. In this sense, as we will show, both in the Southern Basque Country – redefining traditional nationalist ideologies – and in the Northern provinces of France with new and challenging development strategies for the development of the region the European integration process has been a key factor explaining the new approaches, concepts and strategies of the Basque nationalist forces.

These changes have a good opportunity for being developed in Spain, where the **Socialist party governing since 2004 March has opened a new political opportunity structure** with much more dialogue and political will than previous conservative Popular Party did. ETA has reacted to this change declaring a **permanent cease of fire**. What is more interesting, everybody think now that there is a great opportunity for solving the Basque conflict, and people are relatively optimistic. But, as true as this is, a lot of these actors think this is probably the last opportunity for Spain to solve democratically this conflict and go on with the Basque Country inside the Spanish State (here the **39% of independent supporters** are a very real and menacing indicator). After writing the last report some evidence menace the peace process, but in any case, from a general point of view, both the social and political commitment for getting the end of the violence and a truly political approach to the conflict, seems to be stronger.

European integration support in the Basque Country

Basque population has always been very supportive of the European integration process. **In November 2003 about three out of four Basques (74%) thought membership to the European Union was positive**, and only 5% saw it as something negative. This European feeling is much higher than European (48%) or Spanish (62%) average.

Relating to the own Basque Country's affairs, a majority of Basques (52%) thought integration is good for their country. However, this figures obtained by the Basque Observatory of the European integration were not coherent with Basque results in the last **referendum on the European constitutional treaty. Only 38'4% voted (65'3 yes; 34'6 not)**. ¿What could explain this apparently strange electoral behaviour? The reason was twofold: the social model, too much nearer to neoliberalism than to the so called European social model; and, even more important, the misrecognition of national and regional entities, and their subsequent accommodation, in the European political structure designed by the treaty.

The misrecognition of the nations without States and regions' accommodation in the constitutional treaty was explained, among other factors, because of Aznar's role on the development of the negotiation (even menacing with a veto on the entire treaty). Lamassoure's proposals for creating an 'associated status' of the political regions, which was very well receipted by nationalist forces across Europe (and in the Basque Country too), was radically vetoed by the Spanish head of government. **This inability of EU to recognise and accommodate the Basque Country, understood as an aggression to the own identity and political power (self-government), explained the Basque indifference and opposition to the treaty. This pattern of behaviour is very similar to what Basques did with the Spanish Constitution in 1978:** assuring first not

to stop the democratic advance, they showed their important opposition to the chart and its lack of legitimacy with a very low degree of participation in the voting.

A general feeling, basically inside the Basque nationalist majority, is that European Union seems to be only a matter of States, and everybody knows these (Spain and France) are precisely who they are fighting against. In this sense, there is a certain loss of confidence in the opportunities for the solution of this conflict opened by the European integration in 1986, with the entry of Spain in the European Communities. Much of them think Europe is losing its opportunity to be legitimate in the (for a long time) very pro-European Basque society.

Cross-Border Cooperation

EUROREG has focused a lot on the role played by the Cross-Border Cooperation programmes, and their impact on the Basque conflict. For pursuing this objective we have worked with bibliography and done several interviews. The main findings about this issue are the following:

The funds offered by this European programme are not very high, and the need of approval of the Spanish and French States, forces a non-nationalist approach to this kind of cooperation. This point has been stressed by many officials and participants in the funded projects. Contrary to some opinions and hypothesis proposed by political scientists, **the CBC has not usually been used for explicit nation-building**. While it has been used in the official discourse of the nationalist parties for this purpose, the approach on the ground has been very different, more based on concrete cooperation than on rhetorical uses.

As the amount of money of the CBC programme was very scarce, **the Basque government, influenced by these European Funds, created its own Fund for the Cross-Border Cooperation with Aquitaine** (the French region just at the other side of the border with France). Again with a scarce amount of money, this Fund has served for financing many little projects, so creating social and informal ties crossing the border. The basic **problems of the CBC** are: the language, with few people in the northern side knowing Basque, the common language; the lack of homogeneous statistical data for making comparisons and strategic projects across the border; the inequality of power in the hands of the local and regional authorities on both sides of the border: while in the Spanish side these have a lot of power and economic resources, the French authorities have not and need the direct involvement of Paris for everything, what means important delays in the decision-taking process and constant political problems, because central authorities simply don't know neither the needs nor the priorities of the region (only one more periphery among many for Paris).

If there is no much money for it, and the CBC has many problems for launching ambitious projects, the incentive must be in other site. The main goal of this kind of cooperation for the Basque government has been to help to visualize the national territory and foster social cooperation and links. It is a long-time approach, a structural one, without expecting a short-term reward. In *Iparralde*, the Basque territory in France, the cooperation with the Southern industrialized neighbours is seen as their best option for developing the region.

In coherence with this, appears the **Euro-region** project, **trying to create a new economic and political space beyond borders, adapted to the scales and challenges of both the European integration and globalization**. Not been a nationalist project, it is obvious that the Basque government aspires to lead this enterprise. In any case, this is more a project than a reality, and more research is needed on this issue.

European integration and the Basque Country: Human Rights and democracy

The impact of the European integration process may be summarized in two main points. First, it can be said that **economic funds and also the recently human rights conditioning policies have had a little impact on the empowerment of the Basque minority and in the conflict over the political accommodation of the Basque nation**. Second, where European integration has really affected the Basque Country is in its capacity to **assure a political stability and a guarantee about democracy and civil rights** –what was really important for the successful transition to democracy–, and facilitating a political environment very dynamic which fosters changes in nationalist discourses and strategies.

The transition from Franco's dictatorship to democracy in Spain was marked by the tense accommodation between demands for democracy and the real power of established elites (political, economic and –increasingly less important– military). For every democrat, European Communities were seen as a real guarantee of rights, democracy and economic welfare (this last point supported too by the military regime, which tried unsuccessfully to entry several years before the transition). If the goal of integration was expressed by main democratic forces (with the exception of some radical leftist groups), this was especially important for Basque nationalist parties. A nationalist high ranked informant assured that only after the Spanish main parties (centre-right governing party –UCD– and socialist –PSOE) guaranteed the objective of **integration** as soon as possible, Basque nationalism accepted it **as a democratic minimum** for the pursuing of their political goals in the future. In consequence, the approved Constitution, without fully recognizing the Basque nation, was neither explicitly supported nor absolutely refused. The main Basque nationalist force did not vote it, trying to visualize their annoyance, without menacing the ratification referendum (and therefore assuring its approbation). The most radical nationalist faction, supported ETA's diagnostic of strong limitations of the nascent democracy and voted no to Constitution. Both positions (strongly questioning the democratic transition) expressed the deep doubts of main Basque sectors. So **the Constitution obtained more positive votes than negative, but with a huge abstention**, being it a remarkable fact if compared with results in the rest of the State and what eroded heavily the legitimacy of this political cornerstone.

This politically conscious and reasoned abstention marked the Basque reception of the Spanish Constitution, and questions the very fundamentals of Spanish democracy. In this way, any purely legal argument used by the Spanish parties for opposing to nationalist demands is immediately contested arguing that it is the very framework which is being questioned and challenged. This brute legitimacy argument has been recently developed by nationalist parties, which now talk on the need of a 'second transition'. They argue that the so-called 'transition' was only the **first wave of**

democratization of the Spanish State, affecting individual rights and formal democracy, needing now to launch the **second wave**, related to collective rights, mainly the **full recognition of the national, cultural and linguistic plurality of the State**.

This challenge is not only a Spanish affair, but a very contemporary issue, a real key-problem of current Europe. Thus, this challenge inserts itself into the main one of articulating a truly European democracy with the participation of all its institutional levels (multilevel polity) and cultural diversity (historical territory-rooted one and the increasingly coming from overseas).

European integration has strongly forced and favoured the changes in the political discourse of national minorities, including the Basque one, as was seen in previous reports. In this way, the nations without State assume, at least their main sectors, that classical State and sovereignty is no more real. Derived from this point of view, they try foremost to rethink the political relations among national communities and want to contribute to the building of **a new, more complex and respectful, multilevel polity**. Due to its little size inside the State, they have learned the need to think and act in a different way, more innovative. **The nations without State, at least their elites, have learned too the need to assume their nations' own diversity, and therefore are trying to redefine the very ideas of nation, identity and even power**, proposing new ways to respect and assure own powers, as well as new mechanisms for coordinate themselves and with the centre.

This doesn't invalidate the continuity of traditional nationalist State-seeker doctrine in some still powerful groups.

There is no doubt, as several of our interviewed stand, that **European integration has had a great influence on these changes**. This is why is true that European Union both lesser secession costs as well as foster new patterns of collaboration among actors of each level and between institutional levels.

The peace process in the Basque Country

Just after the end of the interviews, ETA declared a cease of fire, opening the window to a peace process. The Socialist party accepted the challenge and expressed its desire to abolish the violence in the Basque Country. President Zapatero got the approval of the Spanish Parliament for starting conversations with ETA once confirmed that the group really stopped any violent or coercive manoeuvre.

Batasuna, the banned Basque party, close to ETA and seeking Basque self-determination, stated two years ago that the violence should be pushed out from the streets and a double table should be established: the first formed by ETA and the Spanish government, for reaching an agreement about the end of the violence and solving the issue of the Basque prisoners; a second one, formed by all the political parties and territories for debating a new accommodation of the Basque nation.

Now the government is trying to be sure that ETA has definitely abandoned the arms, and the parties are waiting for the output of this first table to seat down in the second and debate about the political core of the conflict.

In this context, it is interesting to note that **‘Europe’, what was a central part of the discourses and debates some years ago, is a marginal issue now. Every actor has assumed that are the Basques, with the Spaniards (and with the French State too), who must solve their problems.** Most Europeanist parties still hope some help for Europe, but only to a certain degree and with certain conditions (without violence, after reaching a wide agreement among Basques, etc.).

In this sense, the Council of the Union, the Commission and the European Parliament have welcomed the cease of fire and the attempts to reach an agreement in the Basque Country.

Opportunities to be explored

1) In coherence with the findings of the field work, the parties more committed to the European integration are the Basque Nationalist Party, and the Socialist party (probably more the central government than the Basque branch of it). These parties did lead the supports in the European Parliament for approving the declaration in favour of a peaceful and political end to the Basque conflict.

2) The CBC could be used, after reaching a first agreement in Spain about the basics of the Basque question, for creating a solid political framework among Spanish and French sides of the Basque Country. This framework should foster the cross-border cooperation, including the creation of entities with capacity for contracting and implementing common policies. This has been experienced before in other places and should not create problems once abolished the violence in the South. It would permit to develop the northern Basque Country, now too much away from Bourdeaux, and to link it to its natural economic pole, the line from the port and airport in Bilbao to Donostia, a connection until now cut by the old border.

3) This could improve a lot the self-confidence of Basques, diminishing the perceived risk of losing their national identity, of blurring their national homeland and territory, and helping to design a coherent national development planning, including the lost brothers in the north. For those Basques who don't feel this national sentiment, it would don't change too much their actual status or rights, but it would make a real difference for the nationalist majority.

4) Finally, it is difficult to say whether the Spanish should change their constitution or not for accommodating the Basque claims; but what emerges clearly from the interviews and literature is that Basques demand a wider degree of political power, and a real recognition of their national status. And both of them should be not at the free disposal of the Spanish government in turn. One of the most usual claims in the Basque Country is that ‘Madrid’ can change the relationship with them on a unilateral basis, and they consider this as something unacceptable. In fact, this was what really started the Basque conflict, when the central government changed the terms of the accommodation among Basques and the Spanish State in the 19th Century. In this sense, it is once and again the same question.

But here appears other –and usually forgotten– issue: the European dimension of any possible political agreement, that is, for reaching a compromise acceptable for both sides it will be very important how the Basques will be associated to the European decision-taking process. Examples such as the German or Belgian, associating members of the sub-State level to the national representation on Brussels, or making possible to these communities to participate in the debating and bargaining processes, may be very helpful. **The European dimension will be a key point of the final agreement, due to the increasing importance of the European political dimension (a key foreign aspect of their ‘internal’ powers), and its ability to help in the symbolic domain, both related to the ‘international’ recognition of the Basques as a nation, and assuring a ‘European’ recognition of their language** (what has been started by the present Spanish government as a good faith move, and has been very welcomed by wide Basque sectors).