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# NATIONALISM IN SPAIN: THE CASES OF CATALONIA AND THE BASQUE COUNTRY

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*Nationalism in Europe represents a historical phenomenon in constant evolution that has affected most of the countries in the region in one way or another. Spain is not the exception, and it has had to deal with pressures from two distinct autonomous communities, Catalonia and the Basque Country, who have continuously asked for improved mechanisms of self-government, but facing strong negative responses from Madrid. Such clashes have prompted part of the population in both regions to take either political or violent approaches in order to achieve their self-determination goals, actions that have created cleavages in the social and political spheres of Spain. This article will attempt to address the current situation of nationalism in Spain in the context of two major events that occurred in the past two years—the unilateral declaration of independence made by the Catalan government in 2017, and the announcement of the final dissolution of the Basque terrorist group ETA in 2018—in an effort to establish the main causes for the call for independence that have made the conflicts escalate through history, as well as the role the supranational institutions like the European Union could play in strives of such nature.*

*Keywords: Spain, Catalonia, Basque Country, European Union, Independence, Self-Determination*

The nature of nationalism in Europe has been constantly evolving, and it has managed to make a shift from the interstate to the intrastate sphere, which entails that the existence of multi-ethnic states has challenged in some way the ability of central governments to address nationalist demands in the past few decades. In such context, this paper will offer an overall look to the ongoing conflict between Spain, Catalonia, and the Basque Country, taking into consideration that several actions made by all three sides—including acts of terrorism, sanctions, and protests—have favored the escalation of hostilities in different historical periods.

The first section of this paper provides a brief historical background in order to understand how the conflict has reached different breaking points in time, which have led to non-violent acts—like unilateral declarations of independence—and highly violent ones—like terrorist attacks. The second section establishes the main reasons why Catalonia and the Basque Country have, at some point in history, demanded their independence from the Kingdom of Spain, which range from economic discontent to self-determination claims. The third section establishes the position of the main actors in the dispute and how their actions have influenced the development of the conflict, as well as the actions carried out by the Spanish government to manage the conflicts. The fourth section will explore the role the European Union has played in both conflicts, and finally, as a conclusion, there will be a brief reflection regarding the future of Spain and its integration, along with the involvement of the EU in struggles of this nature.

## **What is happening in Spain?**

### ***Catalonia***

The citizens of the region consider that Catalonia has the right to be a separate state from Spain due to several cultural, linguistic and historical motives. Since approximately the early twelfth century—before the County of Barcelona joined the crowns of Castile and Aragón in the late fifteenth century—the region known today as Catalonia already was already respected and recognized for its distinct language, institutions, and rich culture. The most severe period of repression came during the dictatorship of Francisco Franco in the mid twentieth century, when the Catalan language was strictly forbidden throughout the country, and venerable regional institutions—like courts, tribunals, and municipalities—were abolished by the central government. To ensure that these measures would not be violated, several Catalan political activists and scholars were either persecuted, shot or exiled.

Following Franco's death in 1978, Spain returned to a democratic path and established a new constitution that divided the country in 17 autonomous communities, Catalonia being one of them. Even though they were granted significant levels of autonomy, complete sovereignty of these communities was completely ruled out. This decision would be upheld by the government during the rest of the twentieth century and the first years of the twenty-first.

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By 2006, the Catalan Parliament proposed a new statute of autonomy with a novel financing model, which was received by the Constitutional Tribunal in Spain for its approval. However, in 2010 the Tribunal modified the text in manner largely similar to the previous 1979 Statute, meaning that Catalonia would not be allowed to manage its own tax system or have inherence in tax distribution for the region. This reversal fueled protests on the streets of the region. Catalan citizens demanded better responses and management from the central government.

In 2014, a referendum to poll Catalans on the issue of separation from the Kingdom of Spain was carried out. Despite being denounced by the government of President Mariano Rajoy, 2.25 million voters—around a one-third of the regions 7.5 million people—expressed their desire to become independent from Spain. 81 percent of the votes cast in the 2014 referendum were in favor of separation.<sup>1</sup> After Catalonian nationalist forces under the leadership of Carles Puigdemont won the elections in Catalonia in 2015, the struggle for an independent state intensified culminating in a new referendum carried out on October 1, 2017. This time 42 percent of the population of Catalonia participated and 90 percent voted for independence.<sup>2</sup>

As a result of the referendum, on October 27, 2017 the Catalan Parliament approved a declaration of independence without the consent of national authorities, further escalating the conflict. The Spanish government responded by enforcing Article 155 of the Constitution, which establishes that “if an Autonomous Community does not fulfill the obligations imposed upon it by the Constitution or other laws, or acts in a way seriously prejudicing the general interests of Spain, the Government (...) may (...) take the measures necessary in order to compel the latter forcibly to meet said obligations, or in order to protect the above-mentioned general interests”.<sup>3</sup> Using this article, the national government dismissed the regional Catalan government as well as the regional police chief, and called for snap elections to be held on December 21, 2017.

### **Basque Country**

A brief comparison to Basque country can further illuminate Catalonian nationalism. Similar to Catalonia, the Basque Country, or Euskadi, has a long

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1 Erin Fuchs, “81% of Catalans vote for independence from Spain in symbolic referendum”, *Business Insider*, November 9, 2014, <http://www.businessinsider.com/81-of-catalans-vote-to-secede-from-spain-in-symbolic-referendum-2014-11>

2 Camilo Baquero, “Un 90% de ‘sies’ con 2,2 millones de votos y una participación del 42%, según el Govern”, *El País*, October 2, 2017, [https://elpais.com/ccaa/2017/10/02/catalunya/1506898063\\_586836.html](https://elpais.com/ccaa/2017/10/02/catalunya/1506898063_586836.html)

3 Spanish Constitution, Chapter 3, Article 155. [http://www.congreso.es/portal/page/portal/Congreso/Congreso/Hist\\_Normas/Norm/const\\_espa\\_texto\\_ingles\\_0.pdf](http://www.congreso.es/portal/page/portal/Congreso/Congreso/Hist_Normas/Norm/const_espa_texto_ingles_0.pdf)

and rich history that can be traced back to the first centuries of the Roman Empire. It is considered by many that Basques are one of the few nationalities that have managed to stand the passage of time and the numerous invasions of European history.<sup>4</sup>

During the Middle-Ages what is known today as the Basque country was known as the Kingdom of Navarre. When it was incorporated to the newly established Kingdom of Spain in the late sixteenth century, the Spanish monarchy allowed the region to keep self-governance institutions and organizations. This limited autonomy came to an end in the seventeenth century when Spain eliminated the regions rights of self-governance, transforming Navarre into another province of Spain—the Basque Country.

Despite losing their autonomy, Basques continue to defend their identity and several nationalist movements began to form, some of them promoting independence from the Kingdom of Spain. Similar to Catalonia during the dictatorship of Francisco Franco, Basque nationalists were violently persecuted as both language and cultural diversity were strictly forbidden in Spain. The use of Basque language as well as any other sign of national identity would be sanctioned by the state.

It is in this context of extreme repression that the nationalist group *Euskadi ta Askatasuna*, better known as ETA, was born. In the early 1960s ETA performed nonviolent acts as small scale campaigns and mobilizations in the region, promoting the independence of the Basque Country. While there was initial active support from the Basque population given the repression of Franco's regime, as the acts of violence escalated so did the rejection to the group.

ETA opted for violence as their main tool, performing several terrorist attacks in Spain, which continued even after Franco's dictatorship ended. ETA obtained financial resources to organize its armed campaign from nationalist political parties, associations, and private enterprises, using extortion as one of its main strategies.<sup>5</sup> Eventually, after more than 40 years of struggle and numerous peace talks with the Spanish government, ETA declared in 2011 the complete termination of their armed activities and made a public announcement in 2018 of the final dissolution of the group.

### **Reasons for the Calls for Independence**

While cultural and linguistic motives are part of the key factors in this ongoing conflict, these seem to have evolved into issues related to regional economic

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<sup>4</sup> Paddy Woodworth, *The Basque Country: A Cultural History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)

<sup>5</sup> Mikel Buesa Blanco, "Financiación del terrorismo", *Revistas ICE*, no. 893 (November-December 2016):

independence. The claim for self-determination is only the first of two reasons fueling Catalanian nationalism. The second reason is economic discontent.

Catalonia accounts for almost 20 percent of Spain's total GDP as well as almost 25 percent of the total amount of taxes collected in Spain, making it one of the wealthiest regions in the country, however public investment in the region is considered by residents to be unequal.<sup>6</sup> Should Catalonia become independent, it "would come with a GDP of \$314 billion" and its "GDP per capita would be \$35,000", according to calculations made by the OECD.<sup>7</sup> This would make Catalonia one of the 40 largest economies in the world<sup>8</sup> and as wealthy as countries like South Korea (Per-capita GDP of \$38,335 in 2017).<sup>9</sup>

The reluctance of the Spanish government to modify Catalonia's statute of autonomy, and the general economic crisis in Spain have prompted not only the main (nationalist) political parties in the region, but also an increasing part of Catalonia's population, to believe that Catalonia can and should function as an independent state.

The case of the Basque Country is similar, as it also represents a dynamic economy in with a considerable amount of specialized industrial activity, as well as dozens of important SMEs.<sup>10</sup> In 2015 the Basque Country had the highest salaries of all Spain, €1950 per month<sup>11</sup>, as well as a Human Development Index similar to countries like Canada, and the second lowest rate of unemployment of all Spain, 10.6 percent.<sup>12</sup>

One of the main arguments used by the nationalist forces in both regions is that their right to self-determination is being denied, and, therefore, their claim for independence is fair.<sup>13</sup> The claim to this right has a couple of implications and its application is still quite unclear according to international law.

6 Josep Desquens, "Europe's stateless nations in the era of globalization: The case for Catalonia's Secession from Spain", *The SAIS Europe Journal of Global Affairs*, April 1, 2003, <http://www.saisjournal.org/posts/europe-s-stateless-nations-in-the-era-of-globalization>

7 Harriet Alexander and James Badcock, "Why does Catalonia want independence from Spain?," *The Telegraph*, October 10, 2017, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/0/does-catalonia-want-independence-spain/>

8 GDP (current USD\$), World Bank Group, accessed October 20, 2018, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD>

9 GDP per capita, PPP (current international \$), World Bank Group, accessed October 20, 2018, [https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.PP.CD?year\\_high\\_desc=true](https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.PP.CD?year_high_desc=true)

10 Alberto Uriona, "Euskadi cuenta con 58 pymes y líderes mundiales en sus negocios", *El Diario*, June 28, 2013, [https://www.eldiario.es/norte/Euskadi-cuenta-lideres-mundiales-negocios\\_0\\_148035508.html](https://www.eldiario.es/norte/Euskadi-cuenta-lideres-mundiales-negocios_0_148035508.html)

11 Susana Alcelay, "País Vasco paga los mejores sueldos (1.950 euros al mes) y Extremadura, los peores (1.334)", *ABC Economía*, September 26, 2017, [https://www.abc.es/economia/abci-pais-vasco-paga-mejores-sueldos-1950-euros-y-extremadura-peores-1334-201605050904\\_noticia.html](https://www.abc.es/economia/abci-pais-vasco-paga-mejores-sueldos-1950-euros-y-extremadura-peores-1334-201605050904_noticia.html)

12 "EPA del País Vasco", Datos Macro, accessed June 15, 2018, <https://datosmacro.expansion.com/paro-epa/espana-comunidades-autonomas/pais-vasc>

13 R. Ridderhof, "Catalonia's referendum for independence", *Bibliothèque du Palais de la Paix*, September 29, 2017, <https://www.peacepalacelibrary.nl/2017/09/catalonias-referendum-for-independence/?lang=fr>

The Declaration on the “Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples” – United Nations Resolution 1514 (XV) of 1960 – indicates that “All peoples have the right to (...) freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development,”<sup>14</sup> Invoking this norm, the independence of Catalonia and the Basque Country may seem a natural exercise of international law.

This Declaration was written under the context of decolonization, and was intended for use where people were oppressed, faced military occupation and massive violation of human rights.<sup>15</sup> While it is true that the population in both regions suffered from years of repression under Franco’s regime, today’s reality is different. Catalonia and Euskadi represent autonomous communities that have been granted high levels of self-governance, whose people are not oppressed nor prosecuted and whose cultural and linguistic expression is recognized by the nation state. This complicates an appeal to international law. However it is considered by part of the population in both regions that the denial of an independent state represents a subsequent denial in the exercise of the development mentioned in the UN Resolution 1514.

Although nationalist sentiment has been a key driver in the claims for independence for both regions, the truth is that, as time has gone by, the original ideals seem to have combined with concerns regarding economic turmoil, especially after the economic crisis of 2008-2009 that left Spain in a precarious situation. Given that repression and the denial of Catalan and Basque identity have not been an issue since the end of Franco’s dictatorship, the application of international law in these cases of claim for independence is still unclear.

## **Conflict Escalation and Management**

### ***Catalonia***

The two referendums carried out in 2014 and 2017 have provoked a level of tension not experienced in decades in this region. There are two key positions which are worth noting in this section: the Catalan government—led by Carles Puigdemont—and the Spanish government—represented at that time by Mariano Rajoy.

14 General Assembly resolution, 1514 (XV). *Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples*, A/RES/15/1514, December 14, 1960, <http://www.un-documents.net/a15r1514.htm>

15 “Cataluña en España. Por la convivencia democrática”, Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores y de Cooperación, accessed June 15, 2018, <http://www.exteriores.gob.es/Portal/es/SalaDePrensa/Multimedia/Publicaciones/Documents/Porlaconvivencia/POR%20LA%20CONVIVENCIA%20DEMOCRATICA.pdf>

As for the Catalan position, in an interview with Al Jazeera<sup>16</sup> President Carles Puigdemont stated that this is not a social conflict, but a political one, since the Spanish state “does not understand Catalonia is a nation with the right to decide and that is tired of the state not complying”. In his opinion, “it is not a matter of national pride, but a matter of dignity”, and even though the government has granted certain power to the autonomous communities, “this autonomy has been eroding with time, and the Spanish government is trying to recentralize these powers”. In this sense, the Catalan President stresses the fact that there have been clear and unsolved political tensions with the Spanish government, and that Catalan sentiment goes far beyond mere lines in a Constitution.

On the other hand, the basic position of the Spanish government is that the calls for a referendum—and the subsequent declaration of independence—are illegal and that its only intention is to preserve national unity, a governmental obligation under Article No. 2 of the Spanish Constitution, according to which the division of the territory is not permitted, stating a clear intent to protect the rule of law and preserve territorial integrity. Furthermore, the Spanish Constitution recognizes the autonomous communities’ self-governance and guarantees the exercise of autonomy in the management of their interests (particularly in financial matters), granting them the power to manage, through their own regulations, their budgetary matters.<sup>17</sup>

It is also important to note that as Prime Minister Rajoy’s Popular Party (PP) was one of those opposing the reform to the Catalan statute of autonomy in 2006, alleging it was unconstitutional and initiating a long process that ended in 2010 with the removal of several articles regarding financial administration by the Catalan government.<sup>18</sup> This action prompted the present struggles between the regional and national governments after Rajoy became president in 2011.

### **Basque country**

In the Basque Country the conflict has escalated to levels of extreme violence that included terrorist acts performed by ETA in both Spain and France for over 40 years—including assassination and bombing in public spaces. Since the end

16 “Puigdemont: What goes for Scotland, goes for Catalonia”, Al Jazeera, last modified April 1, 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/talktojazeera/2017/04/puigdemont-scotland-catalonia-170401095538077.html>

17 “Cataluña en España. Por la convivencia democrática”, Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores y de Cooperación, accessed June 15, 2018, <http://www.exteriores.gob.es/Portal/es/SalaDePrensa/Multimedia/Publicaciones/Documents/Porlaconvivencia/POR%20LA%20CONVIVENCIA%20DEMOCRATICA.pdf>

18 María Peral, Joaquín Manso and Eva Belmonte, “El deber de conocer el catalán no puede ‘equivaler’ al de conocer el castellano”, *El Mundo*, July 9, 2010, <https://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2010/07/09/barcelona/1278675524.html>

of Franco's regime and the transition to democracy, the Spanish government attempted to establish talks with ETA to achieve the disarmament of the group, struggling to find common ground.

ETA demanded from Spain: a) complete amnesty for its members, as well as the legalization of all nationalist political parties in the Basque Country; b) the removal of the National Police and the Civil Guard from the Basque Country; c) the adoption of measures to improve the living standards and conditions of the working class in the region; d) the recognition of their national sovereignty, declaring Euskara as its official language, as well as the establishment of their own police and military forces; and e) the granting of enough autonomy to develop economic, social and political structures to determine their own progress and wellbeing.<sup>19</sup>

In 1976, the Spanish government had a meeting with ETA representatives in Geneva, where they proposed a truce in exchange for the liberation of imprisoned members, as well as the return of those exiled.<sup>20</sup> ETA established that any negotiation with the government would be preconditioned on the right to self-determination, a condition that the government was not willing to accept.

In 1987, the Spanish government started intense negotiations—known as the Algiers Process—with ETA's second in command, Eugenio Etxebeste, to address the normalization of the Basque Country, the possibility of carrying out a political transformation in the region, measures for dealing with members' arrests, and the end of violence in Spain.<sup>21</sup> Several new ceasefires were established during these rounds of talks, but the truce was broken in 1989 after ETA returned to violence, assassinating a civil guard officer. This prompted the Spanish government to end another failed attempt of negotiation with the group. Acts of these nature would last for almost ten more years.<sup>22</sup>

In 2005 the Spanish government—led by Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero—approved a resolution to reopen dialogs with ETA under the condition that they lay down their arms.<sup>23</sup> The brief contacts with the terrorist group during that year were unfruitful and in 2006 ETA members planted a car bomb

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19 "Los habituales contactos con ETA se intensificaron en los dos últimos años", *La Vanguardia*, accessed June 15, 2018, <http://hemeroteca.lavanguardia.com/preview/1988/01/31/pagina-16/33032928/pdf.html>

20 Ana M. Concejo, "Historia de ETA: Negociaciones, diálogo con la banda y treguas", *Cadena SER*, May 2, 2018, [http://cadenaser.com/ser/2018/05/02/politica/1525285117\\_723532.html](http://cadenaser.com/ser/2018/05/02/politica/1525285117_723532.html)

21 "Algiers process and its failure", Basque Peace Process, accessed October 20, 2018 <http://www.basquepeaceprocess.info/history/negotiation-attempts/the-algiers-process-and-its-failure/>

22 Richard Gillespie, *Spain and the Mediterranean: Developing a European policy towards the south* (New York: St. Martin's Press Inc., 2000).

23 Teresa Whitfield, "The Basque conflict and ETA. The difficulties of an ending", *United States Institute for Peace*, December, 2015, [https://cic.nyu.edu/sites/default/files/whitfield\\_basque\\_conflict\\_eta\\_dec2015.pdf](https://cic.nyu.edu/sites/default/files/whitfield_basque_conflict_eta_dec2015.pdf)

at the Madrid's Barajas Airport, after which the government suspended all attempts at dialog with the group.

In 2010, as a result of the initiative of representatives from Basque left-wing political parties to carry out a diplomatic transition to peace, around 20 representative international mediators specialized in peace processes and conflict resolution signed a document known as the Brussels Declaration, in which they requested ETA to establish a definitive ceasefire and encouraged the Spanish government to engage once again in a peace process with the terrorist group.<sup>24</sup> ETA finally agreed to a complete, permanent and verifiable disarmament in order to continue their campaign for self-determination with a non-violent and democratic approach.<sup>25</sup> In the past two years (2017-2018) ETA made a unilateral announcement of the definitive termination of their armed activities, providing French authorities the location of their remaining armament and, eventually, making a public declaration of the dissolution of the group in May 2018.<sup>26</sup>

### The European Union's Role in the Conflicts

The inability of the Spanish state to achieve peace and the existence of independence-movement related conflict may lead some to question if supranational organizations like the European Union can and should act to assist in solving this type of situation.

In the case of Catalonia the EU has maintained its distance from the conflict, partly because it has no mechanism to solve this kind of disputes, and partly because Article 4.2 of the Treaty on European Union states that the EU shall respect the member states' "essential State functions, including ensuring the territorial integrity of the State."<sup>27</sup> In this case in particular the EU would be unable to dictate the actions of its member states regarding their territorial organization.

The only scenario in which the EU could intervene would be in the case of the existence of an actual negotiation between the Government of Spain and the Government of Catalonia. Given that this type of agreement does not exist,

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24 "Mediadores en conflictos y políticos irlandeses piden a ETA un alto al fuego", *El País*, accessed June 15, 2018, [https://elpais.com/elpais/2010/03/29/actualidad/1269850623\\_850215.html](https://elpais.com/elpais/2010/03/29/actualidad/1269850623_850215.html)

25 Jorge A. Rodríguez and Luis R. Aizpeolea, "ETA anuncia un alto al fuego 'permanente, general y verificable'", *El País*, January 10, 2011, [https://elpais.com/elpais/2011/01/10/actualidad/1294651023\\_850215.html](https://elpais.com/elpais/2011/01/10/actualidad/1294651023_850215.html)

26 David Guadilla and M. J. Tomé, "ETA anuncia su disolución en una carta", *El Correo*, May 2, 2018, <http://www.elcorreo.com/politica/anuncia-carta-disuelve20180502150353-nt.html>

27 Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union, Title I: Common Provisions, Article 4, OJ C 326, October 26, 2012, p.18, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A12012M004#document1>

the EU has maintained its position of ruling the conflict as an internal matter that needs to be solved by Spain.<sup>28</sup>

Following the unilateral declaration of independence in October 27th 2017, EU representatives have stated their support for the Spanish government over the Catalan one. European Council president Donald Tusk stated that the declaration changed nothing in the political arena, and that they will continue to deal only with the Spanish government. The EU refused to recognize Catalonia as an independent actor.<sup>29</sup>

This represents a contrast with the way in which the EU has regarded the conflict in the Basque Country, which it has viewed in security terms given the decades of violence experienced in the region. In this case, it is possible to identify two key actions taken by the EU to address the conflict in the Basque Country. The first one is the Council Common Position 2001/931/CFSP, which included ETA in the EU's list of terrorist organizations in 2001 after a wave of bomb attacks in Spain. This resolution not only established the fight against terrorism as a crucial goal for the European Union, but also highlights the compromise of all member states to take the necessary measures to tackle terrorism based on the United Nations Security Council's Resolution 1373.<sup>30</sup> The second is a show of its support for the peace process in the region initiated by the Spanish government in 2006 under the leadership of ex-Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero. The European Parliament approved—with a total of 321 votes in favor, 311 votes against and 24 abstentions—a resolution which “supports the fight against terrorism and the peace initiative in the Basque Country undertaken by Spanish democratic institutions within the framework of their exclusive competences.”<sup>31</sup> While this action does show the desire of the EU to achieve peace and security on the continent, it's difficult to show that it had a substantial effect on the future peace processes.

It is vital to note that the involvement of the European Union in regards to the Basque conflict has taken place only in the context of the terrorist acts carried out by ETA throughout the years as they represent a threat to the internal security of one of its member states. The EU has not discussed the issue of the Basque Country's independence or territoriality, relying on

28 Natalie Nougayrède, “The EU has tied its own hands. It cannot intervene in Catalonia”, *The Guardian*, October 3, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/oct/03/eu-catalonia-brussels-spain>

29 Catalan crisis: EU leaders rule out involvement in crisis, *BBC News*, last modified October 19, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-41683390>

30 Security Council unanimously adopts wide-ranging anti-terrorism resolution; calls for suppressing financing, improving international cooperation. UNSC SC/7158., *United Nations*, accessed June 15, 2018, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2001sc7158.doc.htm>

31 Richard Freedman and Jack Blackwell, “EP supports peace initiative in Basque Country and expresses solidarity with victims”, *European Parliament*, October 20, 2006.

the same arguments used to address Catalonia's case. Some experts believe that most representative states in the EU will not be willing to support the self-determination processes as that could stimulate independence intentions other European regions and, eventually, hinder the integration process of the EU.<sup>32</sup> Therefore it is important to note that supranational institutions like the EU at this time can play at best a limited role in cases related to the internal administration of its member states.

### **Conclusion and Future Prospects**

It is important to recognize that both Catalonia and the Basque Country represent autonomous regions with a long and rich history that make them stand out from the rest of Spain and fill their citizenry, at least to a degree, with ideas of independent nationhood. These claims have been based on both economic reasons— given that both represent wealthy regions that have experienced some economic issues with the central government—and legal motives—appealing the right of self-determination under the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples.

The development of the two conflicts has been strikingly different. In the case of Catalonia, the main actors have been the Catalan and Spanish governments, who have opted for taking a more political approach, but in the Basque Country the process has been characterized by a wave of terrorist attacks performed by ETA for a period of almost 50 years. Finally, the European Union has played a relatively distant role to address both conflicts, mainly based on the absence of a mechanism to intervene in the internal affairs of its member states.

In this respect, it is also important to note that there have been mistakes on all sides that have heightened the level of tension. The obstacles imposed and the constant denials by the central government to both Catalonia and the Basque Country of more autonomy— particularly in economic and social affairs— have fueled a slow but steady discontent toward the Spanish government. It is possible that conciliatory measures from Madrid granting better economic concessions to the regions could decrease the urgency for independence and promote the integration of Spain.

On the other hand, the Catalan nationalist government has rashly carried out two referendums deemed illegal under the Spanish Constitution ignoring the claims from Madrid and executing a declaration of independence after a referendum in which less than half of the electorate voted.

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32 José Luis Barbería, "¿Es viable una Euskadi independiente?", *El País*, March 31, 2002, [https://elpais.com/diario/2002/03/31/domingo/1017549692\\_850215](https://elpais.com/diario/2002/03/31/domingo/1017549692_850215)

In Basque Country the extreme violence carried out by ETA for decades hindered the resolution of the conflict and has diminished the legitimacy of Basque political parties in the eyes of the Spanish government, making it more difficult to engage in talks regarding their autonomy. While this conflict seems to have ended with the dissolution of ETA in 2018, it is important to note that this fact does not necessarily mean that nationalist sentiment has been completely eliminated from the region. In 2017, 33 percent of the population still preferred to be independent and 59 percent have stated that they would support a call for a referendum to solve the dispute.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, it is worth noting that the Spanish government should work toward establishing policies that foster the integration of the region in order to reduce the levels of discomfort experienced at local level and, in turn, avoid the future rise of a successor group to ETA.

These are conflicts where several factors like politics, national identity, economic power, and historic grievances converge,<sup>34</sup> and create starkly divergent points of view among the main actors, making it difficult to find a common ground in their interests. Even though the EU has hesitated to get involved, it is possible that its guidance could signify a first step into tackling the core causes of this dispute. As a supranational institution, the EU can ensure a neutral ground for the parties to present their demands and find a way to reduce the level of tension in the region, especially after the dissolution of ETA, which represents a key step in the process.

Nationalism in Spain remains in a state of tension and uncertainty, and the upcoming years will be of crucial importance, not only for Spain, but for the rest of Europe as well, and will be determined by the decisions made by the leaders of all sides.

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33 Maxi Vega, "Desciende cinco puntos el apoyo a la independencia de Euskadi y el 59% quiere un referéndum", *El Mundo*, December 7, 2017, <http://www.elmundo.es/pais-vasco/2017/12/07/5a2929dce2704e0b308b45a1.html>

34 "The deadlock between Spain and Catalonia can only be solved through dialogue", *The Independent*, October 22, 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/editorials/catalonian-spain-independence-referendum-talks-needed-a8013991.html#>