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# Renegotiating Sovereignty: Basque Nationalism and the Rise and Fall of the Ibarretxe Plan

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**ABSTRACT** Many minority nationalist movements in Europe are abandoning the search for independent statehood, embracing European integration, and adopting a ‘post-sovereigntist’ stance, emphasizing shared sovereignty and divided powers. This provides a promising way of escaping the classical difficulty of aligning nations with states. Basque nationalism has evolved in this direction, drawing on earlier traditions. The Ibarretxe Plan, approved by the Basque parliament in 2004 but subsequently rejected by Spain’s national parliament, was presented as an effort to formulate such a third way between separatism and unionism. Yet ironically its effect was in large part to reaffirm actors’ language of traditional sovereignty. This is partly thanks to the political context, but also to the power of doctrinal, ideological and symbolic issues related to sovereignty, the nation and boundaries. National self-determination may have entered a new phase but it still faces great difficulties in principle as well as in practice.

In December 2004 the parliament of Spain’s Basque Country approved a controversial proposal for a ‘New Political Statute’ for the region, the so-called Ibarretxe Plan, involving the creation of a Basque State ‘freely associated’ with Spain. This development was primarily of symbolic, rather than practical, significance, given the opposition to the proposal by Spain’s central government. It nonetheless created a new political dynamic in the region, by forcing not only politicians but also ordinary citizens to take a position on a series of issues relating to nationality, sovereignty and democratic representation. The statute was put forward by the three parties in the ruling coalition, the Basque Nationalist Party (Partido Nacionalista Vasco or PNV)<sup>1</sup> of Christian Democrat persuasion; Eusko Alkartasuna (EA), a 1980s breakaway from the PNV with similar nationalist aspirations but a more centre-left orientation; and the post-communist United Left (Ezker Batua or EB). The Plan—named after Juan José Ibarretxe, PNV president of the regional government—was an attempt to resolve political conflict in the Basque Country by reassessing the relationship between region, state and Europe and re-examining notions of national and civic identity.

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The Plan was presented in September 2002 as the fruit of exhaustive reflection on Basque sovereignty involving a wide array of civil groups, regional unions, associations and political parties not represented in the regional parliament. Although not calling for secession from Spain,<sup>2</sup> it challenged the basis of Spanish state sovereignty as enshrined in the constitution of 1978 by claiming the right for residents of Euskadi to vote on their relationship with the Spanish state. Dismissed by Spain's two principal political parties, the Socialist Party (Partido Socialista Obrero Español or PSOE) and the conservative Popular Party (Partido Popular or PP), as unconstitutional and therefore non-negotiable, the Plan was rejected by the Spanish parliament, or Cortes, on 1 February 2005. Following Basque regional elections in April 2005, in which the PNV–EA coalition lost votes, the Plan went into limbo.

The questions that it raised are still open, however, and the debate that it engendered offers important insights into issues of nationalism and identification that lie at the heart of any plurinational democratic polity. These concern sovereignty and self-determination; nationality and identity; and borders and boundaries. Each of these issues has been reinterpreted in recent years to allow greater pluralism and diversity; yet these new interpretations compete with traditional monist doctrines about the combination of sovereignty, identity and borders in the nation-state. The Ibarretxe Plan, like other 'post-sovereignist' ideas about resolving nationality conflicts, offers a set of concrete proposals mostly in a spirit of pragmatic compromise. Yet the debate on it focused on often highly abstract, doctrinal, ideological or symbolic issues in the three fields. We argue that these ideological and symbolic issues should not be dismissed as second-order matters ('mere' ideology or symbolism). In politics the ideological and the symbolic are often shorthand for more complex substantive issues that cannot otherwise be addressed. This is particularly so in the realm of nationalism, where they are often summary indicators of fundamental questions about identity and the location of political authority. Examining the rise and fall of the Ibarretxe Plan is important for the light it sheds on these deeper questions.

### **State Transformations, Europe and the Nationalities Question**

The Ibarretxe Plan's proposals for a semi-independent Basque entity linked loosely with Spain resemble attempts by other nationalist movements to resolve nationalities questions through a 'third way' between classic statehood on the one hand and devolution within the state on the other. In Canada the Parti Québécois has undertaken repeated experiments with formulations of 'sovereignty-association' or partnership with the federal government, now under the economic framework of the North American Free Trade Agreement. In Europe stateless nations have been encouraged by the twin phenomena of globalization and the transformation of the nation-state to use the emerging European order as a framework for new forms of shared and divided sovereignty (Keating, 2001a; 2004). Within this 'third way' a number of strands is combined, which vary according to the specific cases.

The first is the idea of post-sovereignty, referring not to the end of sovereignty, but to its transformation through detachment from the state. In the new thinking there is not one point of sovereignty, the state, but rather there are multiple points, including the state, the EU and the stateless nation (MacCormick, 1999; Tierney, 2004). Seeing the EU as a realm of shared and mixed sovereignty enables nationalists to embrace European integration not as an infringement of sovereignty but as an opportunity for enlarging it. This has the additional political advantage of allowing the proponents to fend off

accusations of separatism and insularity and to portray themselves as more cosmopolitan than their adversaries among the state elites. They can point out that their nationalism is a dynamic one in which different forms of identities are recognized under the umbrella of a larger European identity backed by European institutions (Keating, 2001c). In this way minority nationalism integrates itself into a new order, adapting its language to that of Europe's to negotiate its own demands for concessions. It is not only a matter of looking to the future, but also of reinterpreting the past, as in the case of the many nationalist movements that have discovered a 'usable past' of divided sovereignty from earlier periods (Puig, 1998; Keating, 2001a).

This new conception of sovereignty competes with traditional understandings in which there can only be one locus of ultimate authority (Walker, 2003). While the traditional understanding does not mean that competences cannot be redistributed among different levels of government and entrenched in a constitution, it does mean that all powers must emanate from that constitution. This doctrinal or ideological point often then becomes the main focus of debate, quite aside from any proposed redistribution of actual powers. Again, we see the effect in Quebec. At the time of the 1995 referendum there was relatively little difference between the powers proposed by the sovereigntist side on the one hand and those proposed by the more decentralist wing of the Quebec Liberal Party on the other, but there was a massive doctrinal difference about the seemingly abstruse question of whether the Quebec people were or could be sovereign.

A second strand is the idea that citizens can have multiple political identifications (with the nation, the state and Europe) which are not necessarily in conflict with each other. As ethnographic and anthropological studies have shown, citizens, in their construction of collective notions of identity, identify with different ideas, symbols and collectivities at different moments in time. They may, for example, identify with an idea of the nation, in this case, the Basque nation, and adopt as part of their expression of their identity certain symbols, such as the Basque language, in one set of contexts. In other contexts, however, they may identify with other notions of belonging, for example French, Spanish or European, with a corresponding adoption of another range of relevant symbols. In such cases not only is identity fluid but the boundaries resulting from the use of markers expressing cultural, territorial or political differences can be interpreted differently by different individuals (Bray, 2004).

Under such circumstances, of course, nationalists will tend to privilege identification with the nation, regarding the other identifications as more instrumental. Yet the game is not necessarily zero-sum and attachments may reinforce each other. Minority nationalism may serve to legitimate Europe, by serving to mediate the European project and give it a local meaning which the state cannot supply. Indeed, Europeanism may even be assimilated as an integral part of the nationalist ideology itself (McCrone, 1998; Guibernau, 1999). The new context may also enable citizens of a territory to express their different and changing degrees of identification, so allowing a certain flexibility in nation building and tolerance of diversity. In this way political projects based on symbolic boundary drawing can remain appropriately loose, allowing for a free interpretation of their implications on the part of those who are called upon to accept them or participate in them.

A third strand derives from the adoption by a growing number of nationalist movements of 'new regionalism' (Keating, 1998) in which territorial systems of action are constructed around a model of development combining the economic, the social, the cultural and the political in different ways (Keating *et al.*, 2003). Regions after this manner are

constructed, first, as systems of action and then, sometimes, as actors themselves within new networks of para-diplomacy, without the need to become states. Such systems of action are territorial, but without the fixed cultural, political and institutional boundaries with which territory has been endowed in the past. Rather, citizens can adopt slightly different territorial imaginations, and social systems can have slightly different boundaries, so that the cultural nation may not entirely correspond to the administrative jurisdiction or the economic region. This is not to advocate the 'end of territory' thesis or to herald the advent of non-territorial self-government: rather, it reflects the complex and open-ended conception of territory common in modern political geography (Paasi, 1996). Within the developing European polity such territorial restructuring has given rise to a debate on the Europe of the Regions or 'multilevel governance' (Hooghe & Marks, 2001; Jeffery, 2000; Bache & Flinders, 2004).

Such opportunities, while falling short of the aspirations of nationalist movements for a real role in the European polity, provide support for the concept of the asymmetrical state, reconfigured as a union of nations (or nations and regions). This represents a major doctrinal challenge to the nation-state, based as it is on the notion of uniformity, if not necessarily centralization. The plurinational state is multinational not only in the sense of hosting several national groups (Keating, 2001a). It is a state in which the meaning of nationality differs from one part of the territory to another: in the central, or dominant, regions there may be a single identity combining state and nation, while elsewhere the nation may be nested within a state, which may or may not itself be a nation. A permissive definition of nationality will allow these discrepant conceptions to coexist. Asymmetry within the state may be accompanied by asymmetry in external policy, with some parts of the state given a special place in European institutions, or allowed a wider range of para-diplomatic activities.

To sum up: while nationalism has traditionally been about fixing borders, it is now precisely the general recognition of state borders in contemporary Europe, ironically, that enables an imaginative and functional loosening of territory and the permeability of those borders. Initially the Ibarretxe Plan presented a challenge to conceptions of sovereignty in Spain as part of a wider process of state transformation in the EU context. It sought to challenge boundaries, both physical and symbolic, introducing, for example, new concepts such as a Basque nationality of equal status with Spanish nationality. In doing so, however, it did not attempt to change physical borders. Instead, it attempted to change their *significance*, thereby shifting the locus of sovereignty and re-situating the debate at a wider European level. In such a context, cultural and political boundaries no longer need to correspond to fixed physical borders or states.

The Ibarretxe Plan has elements in common with the Northern Ireland Good Friday Agreement, which provided inspiration for the Basque process (Mees, 2003). As in Northern Ireland's repeated efforts at bridging the issue of sovereignty, however, it has come up against those who have an interest in reinforcing boundaries, including both Spanish state elites and those responsible for the terrorist violence that is the hallmark of the extremist group ETA. Despite the initial expectations of the Ibarretxe Plan's promoters, it has become increasingly evident that the European avenue is not a fruitful one for the sort of aspirations that it embodies. This leaves negotiation at the level of the Spanish state as the only practical channel for their advancement. While similar efforts on the part of nationalists in Catalonia to obtain recognition for a differentiated national status seem at the time of writing to be making greater progress, in part because of the absence of the

terrorism that marks the Basque Country, these too have sparked opposition from entrenched state elites. How Spain eventually resolves these issues is likely to prove influential, not only in other European countries but at a broader level world-wide.

### **Nationalism in the Basque Country**

Basque nationalism has been subject to a lot of stereotypical comment, often focusing on its supposed separatist, extremist or exclusivist nature. In fact, it is an extremely complex movement and tradition which cannot be fully understood without an understanding of its diverse strands (Gurrutxaga, 1996).

One of these strands is the *foral* tradition, based on the historic rights (*fueros*) of the Basque provinces within the kingdoms of Castile and then Spain, which successive monarchs had to swear to maintain. Most of these were abolished in the course of the 19th century following dynastic conflicts, although some survived into the 20th century, notably the *concierto económico*, under which the provinces of the Basque Country raise their own taxes and pass on a share to the Spanish state. While Franco suspended these *fueros* in Vizcaya and Guipuzcoa, he allowed them to continue in Alava and Navarre (which had supported the insurgents in the civil war). Some of these rights were restored with the return of democracy, although a debate continues as to whether they represent original and inalienable rights or are the gift of Spain's 1978 Constitution. The *foral* tradition emphasizes limited sovereignty and negotiation. It has often been condemned as inherently conservative but in recent years a literature has appeared restating the case for historic rights in a democratic polity (Herrero de Miñon, 1998; Herrero de Miñon & Lluch, 1998).

Another tradition is of radical separatism. Basque nationalism bloomed in a time of major economic and social change provoked by the rapid industrialization of the province of Vizcaya and the resulting clashes between tradition and modernity, between rural and urban life, and between localism and the global economy. Sabino Arana, the founder of the PNV, in line with ideas of his time, evolved from a foralist position to an uncompromising nationalism dedicated to preserving the purity of the Basque race. Though not opposed to industrialization as such, Arana was determinedly anti-modern in his politics and hostile to many of the effects of industrialism, notably the influx into the Basque Country of workers from other parts of Spain. This exclusive and separatist doctrine, despite being moderated from an early date when a section of the Basque industrial and commercial bourgeoisie adhered to the party, has left its mark on Basque nationalism. The ideological tension survives to the present, within the PNV and the wider nationalist movement.

From an early stage some of this ambivalence was managed through support for various forms of European integration. The PNV has always had a strong Catholic ethos. From the 1930s onwards it was increasingly influenced by Christian Democratic ideas. José Antonio Aguirre, leader of the autonomous Basque government under Spain's Second Republic and in exile, was active in Christian Democratic circles, and the PNV was a founder member of the Christian Democratic International. This envisaged a Europe of nations and peoples in which the Basques of both Spain and France could find their place. Following Spain's post-Franco transition to democracy the PNV has consistently taken a pro-European stance, while remaining ambivalent on independence. It refused to accept the 1978 Spanish constitution because the latter identified the *fueros* as privileges

conferred by the constitution, rather than as original (pre-constitutional) rights. Its insistence on the *fueros* represents a re-adoption of the notion of partial or shared sovereignty, historic rights and negotiation, in implicit contradiction to radical separatism. Party leaders have often recognized the practical impossibility of independence, given the division of Basque society between nationalist and non-nationalist poles, which provides strong incentives to search for a third way. Polls regularly show voters, when forced to choose, dividing equally between nationalists and non-nationalists.

The PNV has nonetheless been forced to maintain a level of pro-independence rhetoric because of competition for votes from EA, which favours independence in the long term as part of a Europe of the peoples and from radical nationalism linked to the armed group ETA. These separatist nationalists of left-wing inclination are grouped in a movement of extreme complexity, of which the most prominent element is the now-outlawed political party called Batasuna (originally Herri Batasuna), the political wing of ETA. Members of this community represent a different notion of Basqueness, based not so much on primordial links but rather on ideology, and anyone who adheres to left-wing notions of Basque independence is a member of this Basque community. Thus it becomes irrelevant that a person may have origins outside the Basque Country and no Basque ancestry: what is important is adherence to left-wing separatist ideas and engagement with Basque culture, for instance by learning the Basque language.

Against this background the Ibarretxe Plan can be seen as a re-engagement with the *foral* tradition of divided sovereignty, this time in the new context of Europe and globalization. Yet Ibarretxe also seeks to embrace separatists in the political process by impressing on them the limitations of sovereignty in the modern world, so as to reunite the diverse strands of nationalism.

### **Identity and Political Orientation in the Basque Country**

The political complexities of the Basque Country are a reflection of mixed and conflicting identities in the region, marked by divisions of nationality, class and locality. An estimated one-third of the population are working-class immigrants from other parts of Spain or with at least one immigrant parent. Voting is a function both of origin and of class. Both PNV and the PP appeal to the middle class right-of-centre electorate (Llera, 1994). While the PNV tends to attract native-Basque voters, the PP is largely supported by incomers from the rest of Spain. The PSOE and EB appeal to a sizeable segment of the immigrant working class, as well as to many former left-wing Basque nationalists who shifted to PSOE and EB after Spain's return to democracy during the late 1970s. Batasuna, as well as smaller left-wing separatist groups such as Aralar, which unlike Batasuna condemns ETA violence, appeal to a left-wing electorate that is both autochthonous and second to third generation immigrant. Among native Basques, the division between nationalists and non-nationalists is often a matter of family tradition. Voting behaviour tends to be stable over time, with only small shifts between nationalists and non-nationalists and within the nationalist camp. Strong identification with the Basque language plays a central role in nationalist sentiment. In the left-wing separatist camp a self-referential sub-culture reinforced by a culture of victimhood is sustained and reinforced by the theme of ETA prisoners and demands for them at least to be allowed to serve their sentences in the Basque Country. Ethnicity in the Basque Country is thus constructed of a complex array of elements, including origin, family tradition, attachment to the Basque language, political

conviction and class. The terrorist violence of ETA and the street violence (*kale borroka*) provoked by its supporters can be seen in large part as an effort to construct a hard boundary between 'real Basques' (defined as intransigent nationalists) and others.

As in other cases, we cannot simply read off support for different constitutional options from different identity configurations. Surveys have shown a core of separatist supporters as well as a group of staunch supporters of Spain, with another substantial group of people whose position is more ambivalent (Moral, 1998). These latter interpret and identify freely with various options at different moments in time and consequently feel more comfortable with political discourses that do not attempt to fix identity boundaries. Thus, differences in the wording of the question can produce varying degrees of support for independence, with a tendency for support to rise when it is presented as something short of 'separation' (Keating, 2001a). Asked about individual issues, Basques, like other peoples, often give answers suggesting that they reject the traditional state model and allocation of competences. So while surveys show roughlyly one in two inhabitants of the Basque Country favouring a Basque passport, only around one in four favours independence (Moral, 1998; CIRES, 1991–96). Most inhabitants of the Basque Country support the idea of self-determination, but only one in three thinks that this is the same as independence (García Ferrando *et al.*, 1994; Moral, 1998). Such an open attitude to the meaning of self-determination can also be found in Catalonia, but not in other parts of Spain. It suggests that Basque and Catalan voters have grasped the post-sovereignty idea that self-determination, while potentially falling short of statehood, can make room for free multiple collective identifications which reflect far better citizens' life experiences. Yet it also suggests, in the case of the Basques, that they are not quite ready for a definitive resolution of the issue.

### **The Origins of the Ibarretxe Plan**

Over the past decade there have been several attempts to resolve the Basque conflict, some of them consciously modelled on the peace process in Northern Ireland, despite the important differences of context (Keating, 2001b). Between 1987 and 1997 the PNV governed in coalition with the Basque branch of the PSOE, known as EE (Euskadiko Eskerra), thus combining both nationalists and non-nationalists in the executive. Under the Pact of Ajuria Enea of 1988 the democratic parties, both nationalist and non-nationalist, jointly pledged to fight terrorism. This arrangement broke down during the late 1990s as the PNV sought to bring HB into an alliance. In 1996 the Pact of Lizarra between PNV, EA, HB and EB demanded more self-government, and in 1998 the declaration of Lizarra-Garazi by the three nationalist parties and EB called for self-determination. The Socialists quit the Basque government and, following the Basque elections of that year, ETA declared a ceasefire, in effect permitting a nationalist front to replace the alignment of Ajuria Enea (Mees, 2003). This nationalist front was in turn shattered when ETA ended its ceasefire and resumed violent action in 1999, but the PNV continues its efforts to bring the left-wing separatists into the political process.

At the central government level the PP, which came to power in 1996 without a majority, was initially dependent on a pact with Basque and Catalan nationalists, and so followed a relatively moderate line. After gaining an absolute majority in Spanish national parliamentary elections in 2000, however, the PP veered to the Spanish nationalist pole, dragging the Socialists in its wake. The PNV went alone into the regional elections of

2001, against the PP and the Socialists, who made clear their intention of forming an anti-nationalist coalition to govern in the Basque Country. In the event the PNV gained seats, attracting disillusioned HB voters as well as moderate nationalists, and formed a coalition with EA and EB, albeit without a majority. Herri Batasuna was declared illegal both by legislation and by judicial intervention, as a result of the new climate at central government level. Nonetheless, the president of the Basque parliament refused to dissolve the parliamentary group formed by elected HB representatives, leaving them as a potential spoiling force in Basque politics. It was in this polarized context that Basque Prime Minister Ibarretxe produced his Plan for breaking the stalemate by offering, for the first time, a concrete proposal as the basis for negotiating with Spain. We would argue that it was the context as much as the content of the Plan that set the terms for the subsequent debate.

The Ibarretxe Plan, as it was presented to both the Basque regional parliament and to the Spanish Cortes, claims the right of self-determination for the Basque Country, starting with the three provinces of the Autonomous Basque Community of Euskadi, but with provision for Navarre and the three Basque provinces in French territory to come in by their own decision. It provides for a Basque Community 'freely associated' with the 'Spanish state', with the possibility of further change in the future according to the principle of self-determination. Basque citizenship, based on Spanish citizenship rules, would be open to all residents of the Basque Country and to people of Basque ancestry outside, with a provision that nobody would be subject to discrimination on the basis of identification or non-identification with the Basque nation. The Community would be bilingual, with equal respect for Spanish and Basque. It would have its own court system, and a special section of the Spanish Constitutional Court would deal with interpretations of the bilateral relations between the governments of Spain and the Basque Country. A bilateral commission would deal with other matters of contention. The King of Spain would remain as head of state.<sup>3</sup>

The Plan allocates administrative powers and responsibilities in a rather confusing manner (as the Spanish Constitution also does). Powers reserved to the central Spanish state authority are listed as Spanish nationality; defence and the armed forces; arms and explosives; currency; customs and tariffs; merchant marine and air navigation; and international relations, without prejudice to the Basque Country's ability to project itself abroad in areas where it has constitutional responsibility. The Spanish state would be able to pass framework laws in criminal law; commercial law; civil law, except for *foral* law and family law; intellectual and industrial property; and weights and measures. The Spanish national police force would enforce Spanish state laws.

All matters not so reserved are deemed to belong to the Basque Country, although the Ibarretxe Plan also lists a series of exclusive Basque competences, covering domestic policy fields. Shared areas of responsibility include social security; this at the insistence of the PNV's coalition partners EB, who wanted a continued link with state-wide insurance, state enterprises and property rights. The *concierto económico* would continue as the basis for funding. There is provision for 'direct' Basque representation in the institutions of the EU, although it is not clear exactly how this would work. In the critical matter of the Council of Ministers, the Basques would participate in the Spanish delegation, with the policy line presumably decided in bilateral negotiation.

This project, as presented, certainly amounts to a 'third way' proposal stopping short of secession and retaining the Spanish state framework for a number of crucial issues.<sup>4</sup> Like the Northern Ireland agreement, it allows for differential interpretation by nationalists and

unionists, and for individuals to express different identities according to their preferences, so overcoming the fundamental division between the two groups. The allocation of areas of responsibility, while it may not be entirely clear, is presented as a basis for negotiation rather than a final settlement. Yet the ambivalence of parts of the Plan means that it can be used either as a basis for convergence on new understandings of community, boundaries, sovereignty and autonomy, or as a stage on which to rehearse traditional and conflicting understandings.

### **The Debate around the Ibarretxe Plan**

The responses of the political parties to the Ibarretxe Plan illustrate the complexity of identification processes in the Basque Country.<sup>5</sup> In presenting the Plan the PNV used increasingly nationalist language in order to win the support of radical left-wing Basque nationalists and so claim that the Plan represented all Basque nationalists. The Plan was a demonstration that the PNV is as much concerned with Basque nationhood and sovereignty as Batasuna, but with a more pragmatic and realistic strategy. In this way, however, it exposed itself more to the accusations of non-Basque nationalists that the Ibarretxe Plan is exclusivist.

Supporting the PNV but with more outspoken pro-independence rhetoric, EA described the Ibarretxe Plan as a “unique opportunity for the normalization of politics in Euskadi” and a step towards the final objective of independence for the Basque Country. The third partner in the ruling coalition, EB—whose supporters describe themselves as “a bridge between the nationalists and the non-nationalists”—backed the Ibarretxe Plan as a project for self-determination in Euskadi within the context of a federal Spain. Through negotiation with the PNV and EA, EB introduced various amendments, which softened the nationalist tone of the text in favour of a more federalist approach. It justified its support as a move away from the ‘veto politics’ of the PP, PSOE and Batasuna which, according to EB, blocked constructive debate about new understandings of sovereignty: “such an obsession with state supremacy is obsolete in today’s European reality”.

The Basque regional branch of the Socialist party, EE, by contrast, condemned the Ibarretxe Plan as “a unilateral project, made by [Basque] nationalists and for [Basque] nationalists” and as a “deliberate halfway step towards independence”. Dismissing the Plan as exclusive and sectarian, EE refused to engage in Basque parliamentary discussion. Its leaders insisted that the current statute of autonomy of Euskadi, within the Spanish constitution, is a sufficient basis on which to work for more autonomy. In December 2004 EE presented a document explaining the steps necessary for reforming the statute of autonomy and introducing a new term into the political vocabulary by defining Euskadi as a ‘national community’ within a ‘plurinational Spain’. Determined to prove that “we are as Basque, if not more Basque than the nationalists”, EE leader Patxi López insisted that this proposal would “make Euskadi a welcoming country in which everyone may be integrated”. López also warned that the Ibarretxe Plan, by its disruptive nature, threatened the economic stability of Euskadi.

The PP, meanwhile, rejected the Plan as illegal because it implied a rupture with the Spanish state. Pointing out that there is no such thing as a freely associated state, the PP dismissed the Plan as separatist. In line with its strategy of painting all nationalists as the same, it branded the scheme “the Plan of ETA”, “anti-Basque” as well as “anti-Spanish”, and based on “racist discrimination”. In the PP’s view the Spanish constitution

gives Euskadi adequate powers and if there are still areas where the Basque authorities are yet to exercise full responsibility, this is only because of “the Basque government’s lack of loyalty to the central state”.

Finally, on the left-wing separatist front, Batasuna criticized the Ibarretxe Plan on the grounds that it failed to defend Basque culture and fell short of independence, being simply another statute reform in disguise. Its leaders questioned the “genuineness” of the PNV’s commitment to the “Basque cause”, accusing the PNV of deliberately maintaining the Basque Country in a state of submission to Spain and France as a means of holding on to power. This, in turn, prompted Aralar to accuse Batasuna of snubbing a project which in its view went as far as was reasonably possible towards further self-determination, simply because it “isn’t theirs”.

The tactical positions of the parties as the Plan made its way through the Basque and Spanish parliaments reflected these differences. Arguing that the Plan is unconstitutional and so should not be a subject for discussion, the PP and its local branch, the PPE, sought to stop the Basque Parliament debating it at all. When it was nonetheless approved by the Basque Parliament and transferred to Madrid, the PP sought to prevent a debate taking place there. The Socialist Party was less rigid, raising no objection to the Plan being debated in the Basque Country or in Madrid. Prime Minister Zapatero, however, made it clear that he regarded the Plan as unconstitutional, threatening that it would be blocked if necessary by the constitutional court.

Batasuna’s tactical position was crucial, since the votes of its six representatives in the Basque Parliament could determine whether the Plan was accepted there or not. In the event Batasuna cast three votes in favour of the Plan and three against it, allowing its acceptance in a move which the party explained thus: “Three votes for the plan signified a ‘yes’ to self-determination, to a popular consultation and to an agreement, while the three votes against the Plan signified a ‘no’ to a re-introduction of the autonomous statute, to a Plan which does not resolve conflict and to another fraud”. By letting the Plan go through, Batasuna could avoid accusations of standing in the way of an initiative designed to allow a popular referendum. By expressing its disapproval of the Plan, it could maintain its claim to be the only ‘real’ Basque party, not totally buying into the political project of the other, more compromised, Basque nationalist parties.

### **The European Dimension**

In the early stages of discussion strong emphasis was placed on the European context. At one stage the Plan’s proponents invoked a proposal by the French politician Alain Lamasource (a Basque non-nationalist based in the French Basque Country) for regions to become partners of the Union, disregarding the fact that this had been intended as a mechanism of administrative decentralization rather than semi-independence. The PNV, as a partner of the European Free Alliance, was one of a group of stateless nationalist parties which proposed that the European Constitution recognize a right of ‘internal enlargement’ by which territories within EU member states could accede to the Union. During the elaboration of the proposal, however, the European route gradually closed off, leaving only the bilateral Spain–Basque Country route. This was partly because of a realization of the limits of the Europe of the Regions, but it also reflected disillusionment with the proposals of the Convention on the Future of Europe (see below). As a result, the Ibarretxe Proposal is framed largely in a bilateral context of Spain and the Basque Country.

Spain, rather than Europe, is attributed competence in monetary policy, tariffs and defence. Despite longstanding PNV demands for direct representation in Europe, access is acknowledged as continuing to be mainly via the Spanish state.

The parliamentary debates on the Ibarretxe Plan coincided with the referendum campaign for Spanish ratification of the draft European constitution. Yet the linkage of the two became more difficult to maintain as drafting of the European constitution advanced. Indeed, the draft constitution became a matter of greater contention in the Basque Country than in other parts of Spain, precisely because of its failure to address the Basque question; it did not recognize stateless nations as possibly having a role in the EU decision-making process, nor did it recognize the Basque language.

After initial vacillation the PNV nonetheless decided to support a 'yes' vote, with PNV leader Imaz calling the European constitution "a step in the right direction. Each step in favour of Europe implies less Spain and less France." The draft constitution was interpreted as being open to the Ibarretxe Plan as it left it up to states to define the statutes of their autonomous regions. When a statement from the EU Commission spokesperson confirmed this, Imaz was able to call for the PP and the Socialists to "stop mixing up issues of internal sovereignty with the EU".

EA, by contrast, came out against the draft constitution on the grounds that it did not provide for stateless nations. This enabled EA to project itself as a protector of the Basque nation to the same degree as Batasuna, without altogether surrendering the pro-European space to the PNV. As a member of the European Free Alliance in the European Parliament, EA president Begoña Errazti asserts the party's defence of a 'Europe of the peoples'. EB branded the draft European constitution 'anti-democratic', principally on the grounds of the text's allegedly neoliberal principles. Like EA, it criticized the constitution's failure to recognize linguistic and cultural diversity, saying that it "legalises the violation of linguistic and cultural rights of millions of European citizens".

Batasuna assumed a position similar to that of EB. While it acknowledged "the importance of Europe" for a "united fight" against environmental pollution, social inequality and poverty, Batasuna members were encouraged to vote against the text on the grounds that it legitimated the attempt to "reinforce an anti-democratic and anti-social nucleus", having been written predominately by conservative leaders and without consulting other representatives directly elected by "the European peoples".

On the statist side, EE supported the draft European constitution, in spite of its "lack of more social values", as a means of going "forwards rather than backwards. Europe is work in progress." Like the PNV, EE linked the draft constitution to its own domestic constitutional preferences, but drew the opposite conclusions. According to EE general secretary Patxi López, the Europe of the future would be "one of citizens represented by the state and shared sovereignties, and not by exclusive sovereignties such as that evoked by the Ibarretxe Plan". In an attempt to link an alternative debate to the Ibarretxe Plan on Basque autonomy with Europe, the slogan in EE's campaign for a yes vote in the referendum on the European constitution was "more Europe, more Euskadi". The Socialist minister of Defence, José Bono, a noted opponent of plurinational ideas, added that "there is no state in Europe which considers the possibility of drawing up new frontiers in their territory".

As for the PP, it supported the draft European constitution, but with reservations. During its second term in power, from 2000 to 2004, the PP had become somewhat Eurosceptical, re-emphasizing Spanish national sovereignty. The PP saw the draft European constitution as based on a notion of Europe as a plural unity but only headed by states, in which regions

would have a subordinate role with no place for proposals such as the Ibarretxe Plan. An independent Basque Country, the PP suggested, could be expelled from the EU.

The paradoxical result of these debates on the Plan and on Europe, which might have provided the opportunity to open up new ideas about community, boundaries, sovereignty and self-determination, was thus to reinforce existing positions and traditional attitudes. Instead of focusing attention on the middle ground, it reified differences between the Basque and Spanish poles. The Ibarretxe Plan was interpreted following traditional conceptions of identity as firmly circumscribed with clear and coinciding cultural, political, social and territorial boundaries. So while the proposal for a Basque citizenship is presented as an inclusive measure, affirming officially that all residents in the territory are Basques irrespective of origin as well as reaching out to the diaspora, opponents can portray it as creating a new division between Basques and Spaniards. Others again may argue that it is meaningless, since it is not clearly related to rights or obligations. The freely associated state is interpreted as separatism on one side and as selling out to Spain on the other. Self-determination is presented as a basis for coexistence and compromise on one side, and a secession on the other. The external support framework in an evolving and plural Europe similarly dissolved in the debate over the constitution.

### **Popular Attitudes to the Ibarretxe Plan**

We have noted above that Basque public opinion on questions of power and sovereignty is rather open and fluid, providing a market for new ideas and proposals. There is consistent evidence that a substantial majority of Basques wish for a negotiated political solution to the impasse, bringing in all strands of opinion. A survey in 2002 conducted on behalf of the Basque Government (Gabinete de Prospección Sociológica, 2002) showed overwhelming support for the underlying principles of the Plan. Around 90% assented to the propositions that Basque society had the right to decide its own future; that nobody should be excluded; and that there should be guarantees that the relationship of the Basque County to Spain could not be changed without the consent of both sides. Seventy-three per cent agreed that the Basques are a people of Europe with its own identity. Large majorities also supported an extension of competences and the right to hold a referendum. The only freely divisive issue was over recognition of dual Spanish and Basque citizenship, supported by 52%.

When the Ibarretxe Plan was introduced by name, however, partisan differences appeared. Two-thirds of respondents hoped that the Plan would succeed, but this included around 90% of the PNV and EA voters but fewer than half of Socialist voters, while the majority of PP voters hoped that it would fail. This polarization was tracked in a series of polls from Euskobarometro, a survey supported by the Basque government but conducted independently at the University of the Basque Country. In November 2004 only 31% considered themselves well informed about the Plan, a figure that had actually dropped in the course of the year. Opinions over whether it was opportune to introduce it at this moment were divided equally (37% on each side), corresponding closely to nationalists and non-nationalists. Large majorities, including among nationalists, considered that any reform should be on the basis of consensus. Most nationalists saw the Plan as a reform of the statute of autonomy, while non-nationalists, especially supporters of the PP, tended to consider it as a rupture from the constitution. Thirty-six per cent wanted Ibarretxe to persist with the Plan, against 19% who wanted him to withdraw it and 34% who

thought he should negotiate it with the Socialists. Thirty per cent said they would vote Yes in a referendum and 21% No, again dividing on party lines (Euskobarometro, 2004). In May 2005, after the Plan was rejected in the Spanish Parliament, regional support for it had fallen, with only 28% wanting Ibarretxe to persist. The percentage of people claiming to be well informed about the Plan did not increase over this whole period. Yet nearly two-thirds supported a reform of the statute of autonomy, with more powers granted (Euskobarometro, 2005).

Euskobarometro evidence shows that Basques did not make the sort of connection between Europe and the Ibarretxe Plan which the PNV would have liked to achieve. More than half the Basque population felt itself ill informed about the draft European Constitution. Among those who considered themselves well informed, twice as many thought that its impact on the Plan was unfavourable as those who thought the reverse (Euskobarometro, 2003). When the referendum on the European constitution was held in February 2005 a majority of voters at the state level voted in favour (76.72%), with the least enthusiastic region proving to be Euskadi, with a yes vote of 62.11%. The yes vote was even lower in the strongly nationalist province of Guipuzcoa, adjoining the frontier with France, at 55.7%.

Post-referendum research indicates that many citizens voted not so much in relation to the actual content of the constitution but rather on the basis of their opinion of the EU as a whole and their perception of political parties' stances towards it (Eurobarometer, 2005). Earlier studies have shown that Basques are less enthusiastically pro-European than people in other parts of Spain and much less so than Catalans (Keating, 2001a). From this, one can conclude that the EU is not seen by voters in Euskadi as the best forum within which to explore new ideas of Basque sovereignty. Nationalist energies are primarily being invested in the debate underway in Spain on the future model of the state, and in the new explorations in constitutional law that are accompanying it.

Ethnographic research on identity construction and expression in the Basque Country sheds light on the complex patterns of identification there and explains the sometimes contradictory survey results, as mentioned above, which provide the context for the Ibarretxe Plan's emergence and subsequent shelving. We observe that attitudes are often recomposed on emotional lines, reflecting the political rhetoric evoking a polarisation and hardening of boundaries. In informal interviews and participant observation carried out for this article some inhabitants of the Basque Country defended the Ibarretxe Plan as a logical solution to longstanding cultural tensions between Basques and Spanish: "The Ibarretxe Plan clarifies things", said one. "With self-determination, we would know more clearly where we stand and be able to develop ourselves more freely". Another supporter of the Ibarretxe Plan noted how "I have always felt myself quite different from other Spaniards. And I don't feel I really had a say in how I would have liked our country to be organized, not even during the democratic transition in the early 1980s. I know a lot of people who feel this way, who feel we are still too dominated by Spanish mentality, culturally and politically. Why can't we people simply have our say?". The Plan is here perceived as responding to the legitimate aspirations of a people misunderstood and despised by a Spanish ruling majority.

By contrast, other respondents criticized the Plan as a biased political and cultural strait-jacket. One person who was the victim of an ETA bomb attack for her criticism of left-wing separatist nationalism and who, in the past few years, has shifted her political allegiance from PNV to EE, lamented that "there was little discussion between all the parties

in the writing up of the Ibarretxe Plan. It is not based on consensus and only involves half of society.” Because of its nationalist stance, the Plan excludes the possibility of future change, according to this person: “while today there is a majority in parliament that is nationalist, this might not be the case in the future. So, every time the majority changes, will we have another Plan? Now the Ibarretxe Plan, next the López Plan, the X Plan? Where are the different people in Euskadi supposed to find themselves with this?”. Thus, for this person, “the Ibarretxe Plan provides little real substance. All this talk about people having the right to decide is just sentimental. It perpetuates this invented idea of a Basque people apart. . .” According to her, the Ibarretxe Plan did not reflect the plurality of Basque society.

Another person felt that the Ibarretxe Plan excluded people like him who do not identify with Basque nationalism from the possibility of identifying themselves as Basques. “Ibarretxe’s plan is only for nationalists. It has merely succeeded in radicalizing the community, making it impossible to talk in terms of a Basque civic nation. It pitches Basques against Basques. During the Franco years, we were accused of being anti-Spanish, and now in Ibarretxe’s Basque Country, they tell us we are anti-Basque.” Another respondent agreed with this shift of categories: “now I feel we are being sacrificed for the pretensions of a homogeneous society. . .and even worse with the surrender to the blackmail of terrorism.” Yet another person saw the Ibarretxe Plan as having created “a new *demos*, that of Basque against Spanish”.

Such negative reactions reflect an interpretation of the Ibarretxe Plan as an attempt to freeze the boundaries between Basque and Spanish. The cause of such negative reactions appears to be the emphasis on the notions of identity and belonging in the debate concerning the Plan. All these comments do not consider the content of the Plan. Rather the traditional boundary is reinforced not only by the fear-mongering of parties against the Plan but by the traditional nationalist stance of some of its defenders who all, in their own way, deny the reality of changing and freely interpretable boundaries according to individuals’ notions of identity.

As it is drafted, the Plan translates existing emotional tensions into plain language by providing definitions for the concepts of citizenship, nationality and sovereignty, and offering a solution in the form of a declaration in favour of specific action. It requires inhabitants of Euskadi to have an opinion, to define who they are and what they want in relation to their identification with Spain and/or with the Basque Country, all matters which until now have remained comfortably abstract and hypothetical. Such decision making may for many people entail sacrificing their other identifications. The different arguments and interpretations of the concepts of sovereignty, Spain, the Constitution, Europe, democracy and identity put forward by the different political parties, together with the use of a language of fear, have the effect of polarizing identifications in a way that is not necessarily experienced in everyday life (Bray, 2002).

From the evidence of the varying responses cited above, we can conclude that attitudes to the Ibarretxe Plan, and in particular whether or not it is seen as provoking the solidification of the Basque/Spanish boundary, depend on the individual’s viewpoint and on differing understandings and uses of boundaries. The conflict around the Plan is illustrative of the problems raised by these different interpretations of boundaries and reactions to them. Supporters and opponents of the Plan are equally responsible for the emotionalization of the debate, because of the possibility that it can be perceived as setting up more fixed boundaries.

In our review of party positions we observed that none of those opposed to the Plan respond directly to what it actually says. Debate has focused on the legitimacy of nationalism and the different understandings of sovereignty and self-determination. This has involved, on the part of opponents, a rallying around the Spanish constitution, presented as a text consecrated by the ultimate democratic authority of a referendum and hence not open to modification. Heated discussion has focused on Basque identity as a cultural and emotional right for all who wish to claim it, with the 'Spanish' parties claiming that this right has been hijacked and polarized by Basque nationalism. Just as the PNV in the past drew on essentialist notions of identity to promote Basque nationalism, opponents of the Plan have used references to such notions as identity, people, blood, race and terrorism, in which the concepts of nationality and citizenship are intermingled, to justify criticism of it as undemocratic. Opponents are not alone in using such terms, however, as the PNV, as we have seen, is also often a strong proponent of this kind of essentialist discourse. All parties are involved in attempts to appropriate Basque symbols for their own use, while displaying different understandings of the boundaries for which these symbols serve as markers. The PSOE and PP, in their effort to keep political and territorial borders unchanged, insist on Spanish cultural symbols to defend this aim. The PP is the most rigid in this, adhering to old-fashioned concepts of the state and frontiers. Recently there has even been talk of sending in the army to restore order in Euskadi.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, the coalition partners in the Basque government challenge these fixed political and territorial borders by drawing on values based on Basque cultural symbols. Finally, these different practices draw on different visions of Europe.

## **Conclusion**

The Ibarretxe Plan was intended to find a new way between the old alternatives of restricted autonomous self-government within a larger nation state and full-blown independence, and thereby to provide a basis on which the various parties within the Basque Country could engage in a dialogue about the future. If it has failed in this objective, it is not so much because of its intrinsic content or the division of powers that it proposes. In fact, there has been rather little debate about the details of the Plan. The problem, rather, lies in the context in which the Plan has been presented and the way in which it has been instrumentalized by the various parties to reinforce their own interpretations of reality and of the motives of their opponents. Its origins in a nationalist front inevitably rendered it suspicious to non-nationalists and encouraged its use as a mechanism to entrench rather than overcome differences. Although it forms part of broader efforts at a global level to transform old understandings of sovereignty by showing how sovereignty can be shared and divided, it has sparked a confrontation on the symbolic and ideological basis of sovereignty and identity rather than a rethinking of its substance.

The European context might have saved the Ibarretxe Plan from such a fate, had it been linked to a coherent programme at the European level. However, the debate on the draft European constitution, despite taking place at the same time, veered off in another direction, closing rather than opening opportunities and pushing the Basque debate back into the binary mode in which it had long been blocked. Just as the political parties fight over identification with Basqueness, so they also wrangle with each other over identification with Europeanness, each with their own understandings of what these two concepts signify. We see the political parties talk about the Ibarretxe Plan and the draft European

constitution with varying interpretations of the concepts of democracy, identity, sovereignty and the EU. Both the Ibarretxe Plan and the draft European constitution are referred to in an abstract form, around which the political parties situate themselves. The theme of the EU appears as an escape clause in that it forms part of a wider discourse in which symbolic boundaries can be rearranged to serve different political self-interested definitions of 'us' and 'them'.

In the traditional European state system boundaries took the form of physical borders which kept people in and out and served to delineate coinciding systems for politics, institutions, identities, culture and functions. European integration represents in principle an erosion of such fixed borders, allowing different systems to find their own boundaries. Objectively the Ibarretxe Plan is consistent with this. It is not a proposal to set up a territorial and institutional frontier which concretizes the cultural one, but rather an effort to provide people with different ways of living out their identity within the Basque autonomous region, and to redefine the relationship of this region to the Spanish state and, to some degree, the other Basque provinces. Of course, the Ibarretxe Plan may not be the best way to achieve these objectives, but it is an effort to reformulate the problem for discussion and negotiation in an emerging debate on new ideas of sovereignty and constitutional law. The Spanish debate on the relationship between the state and its component nationalities now under way will be an opportunity to see how different cultural, political and territorial boundaries continue to be negotiated. Within this context, Europe, instead of providing a forum where new ideas such as sovereignty can be discussed, is being utilized as a conveniently malleable concept for backing quite different political visions and ambitions.

More broadly the case illustrates the critical importance of symbolism and political boundaries in a world where physical borders are becoming less important. We could point to the Northern Ireland case, where agreement on basic constitutional principles and powers, and even a certain suspension of belief in sovereignty, was not enough to secure a stable settlement, with the various parties continually seeking symbolic issues over which to draw new lines. In Quebec a settlement is prevented not so much by disagreements over details of the division of competences, but by a lack of agreement on how to give symbolic representation to such core concepts as sovereignty and nationhood. The debate on the EU constitution in France, The Netherlands and other countries provides a parallel experience, in which an effort to formulate ideas about sovereignty and the shifting focus of political authority and loyalty provoked an outburst of traditional state sovereignty discourse, thereby providing an opportunity for a myriad social and political oppositions unrelated to the issue at hand. As these and other examples show, the classic nation-state formula has not worked and will not work in areas of contested nationality, whether in the Basque Country or in other parts of Europe. If we believe the ultimate evidence of surveys, the Basque people are, in principle, open to new thinking better able to reflect their life experiences. Yet getting from here to a workable alternative involves more than constitutional engineering.

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## Notes

1. Known in Basque as Eusko Alderdi Jeltzalea (EAJ).
2. While principally focused on Euskadi, the Ibarretxe plan, as an expression of Basque national identity, also considers the French Basque Country and the autonomous region of Navarre in Spain as part of Basque territory. Thus participants in the discussions on the Ibarretxe Plan also included political parties and associations from these other regions.
3. This seems a striking concession for nationalists to make, but the PNV has never been republican in principle. The *foral* tradition recognizes the monarch as a contractually bound overlord. It may also be easier to cater for complexity and plurality in monarchies than in republics, with their equal citizenship.
4. Although in customary Basque nationalist manner, it refuses to speak about Spain, insisting on the term 'Spanish state'.
5. Citations are taken from personal interviews and press sources.
6. This drew on Article 8.1 of the Spanish Constitution, which states that one of the missions of the Armed Forces is to defend Spain's 'territorial integrity'.

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