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# **The Madrid bombings in the domestic and regional politics of Spain**

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## Introduction

The terrorist attack perpetrated on March 11, 2004 in Madrid received a great deal of attention in the international media. Among other impacts, it dramatically brought people's memories back to the events of September 11, 2001 in New York. This time over 200 people were killed as a consequence of the railway bombings. The victims were mostly workers and students who were commuting from their towns of residence around Madrid to the Spanish capital city.

Many analyses have focussed on the international implications of the Madrid massacre. This presentation reflects on some of the consequences the attack has had for both Spanish national and regional politics, with a special reference to the long-standing conflict in the Basque Country. In the first section, an examination is carried out on the apparent direct influence the attack had in the outcome of Spanish General Election held on March 14, 2004 --and which meant the electoral defeat of the government party (*Partido Popular*, PP) by the main opposition party (*Partido Socialista Obrero Español*, PSOE). After reviewing developments in the general process of regional decentralization in Spain, the final section of this paper concentrates in the situation in the Basque Country, where the action of the terrorist ETA highly conditions future political scenarios.

### A change of direction in Spanish politics

The non-Spanish press attributed the loss of confidence in José María Aznar's party (PP) almost exclusively to the events that had taken place only three days prior to the General Election of March 14, 2004. However, simple explanations are frequently misleading. In fact, the usual behaviour of electors in times of crisis generally translates into rallying around the incumbent government. On this occasion the effect was just the contrary. Let us remind that in one of the largest electoral turnouts since 1977 (the year of the first democratic elections after the demise of Franco's dictatorship), a majority of Spaniards voted for a change of government and gave the Socialist Party (PSOE) a relative majority in Parliament (see Table 1).

In the days which followed the terrorist attack, many Spaniards felt that the Government of the Popular Party under the leadership of José María Aznar was not providing reliable and updated information about the responsible terrorists. Immediately after the bombings, the PP blamed ETA,<sup>1</sup> a position it maintained even as information soon began suggesting that the attack was instead the work of Islamic fundamentalists. The political dilemma of the PP was twofold:

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<sup>1</sup> *Euskadi ta Askatasuna* (Euskadi and Freedom) was born in the summer of 1959 as a paramilitary group which sought independence for the Basque Country by means of an armed struggle strategy of action-repression-action.

Firstly, announcing that an Islamist organization<sup>2</sup> had perpetrated a terrorist attack in Spain was going to make PP's unpopular decision to support the American military intervention in Iraq a damaging issue in an election it was fully expecting to win. In many people's minds the horror of the March 11 bombings would not have occurred if Aznar had not been so eager to sustain his alliance with George W. Bush and Tony Blair. Survey polls carried out at the time of Spain's involvement in the war coalition in Iraq revealed that the vast majority of the Spanish population were against such a governmental decision.<sup>3</sup>

Secondly, by hinting at ETA, the PP Government attempted to endorse its hard line towards Basque nationalism.<sup>4</sup> There was an effort by the Spanish government to blame ETA, something which was perceived to be a move for political advantage.<sup>5</sup> A popular reaction against the interpretations given by government officials translated into an unexpected swing of votes to the main opposition party (PSOE). Large sections of the electorate among young voters and former abstainers mobilised with their votes against the PP and made possible the victory of the PSOE.

Beyond the accuracy and wrongness in the interpretation of the referred-to facts, it is undeniable that the perceptions of a majority of Spanish voters were out of tune with the Government's intentions. As a result of it, the Socialists were voted back to government after eight years in opposition. Soon after having been elected primer minister, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, fulfilled his explicit electoral pledge of pulling the Spanish troops out of Iraq. He also took initiatives which made effective the realignment of Spain's foreign policy with that of its traditional European allies, France and Germany in particular.

## **Regional politics and decentralization**

Nearly 25 years after the approval of the first regional constitutional laws or Statutes of Autonomy (Basque Country and Catalonia in 1979), the process of

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<sup>2</sup> Europol confirmed before the Spanish parliamentary Committee investigating the bombings of March 11 that the threats by Osama Bin Laden against Spain in November 2003 were "direct and concrete" ('Europol sostiene que la amenaza a España de Bin Laden en 2003 fue "directa y concreta"', *El País*, 4 November, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> According to a Gallup survey poll carried out during 17-26 February, 2004, only 20% of the respondents agreed with the presence of the Spanish troops in Iraq. Up to 67% of the population expressed the view that there was no real motive to initiate the Iraqi war ('El 80% rechaza la permanencia de las tropas en Irak en las condiciones actuales', *El Mundo*, 18 March, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> Following the bombings, the PP Government promoted a UN Security Council resolution condemning the attack and referring explicitly to ETA. Later the Spanish UN Ambassador apologized publicly ('El embajador español en la ONU se disculpa por impulsar una resolución contra ETA el 11-M', *El Mundo*, 27 March, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> According to Iñaki Gabilondo (a popular anchorman of SER, the radio network with the largest audience in Spain), government officials called media editors to let them know that ETA was responsible of the bombings. Later on, Gabilondo was accused by the PP of undermining the electoral chances of the government party by his insistence in questioning the 'official version' the days before the General Election of March 14 ('Yo no soy ni me siento nacionalista', *El País*, 29 August, 2004).

decentralization of powers to the *Comunidades Autónomas*<sup>6</sup> in Spain has achieved a high degree of popular support largely transcending past patterns of internal confrontation.<sup>7</sup> Transferring of powers and services from the central state to the regions, together with fiscal federalism arrangements, have allowed the public budgets of the *Comunidades Autónomas* to grow very considerably. If public spending is to be identified as a good indicator of the level of regional autonomy, then it should be concluded that the Spanish *Comunidades Autónomas* enjoy a much higher degree of self-government as compared to federated units in other formally established federations in the world (see Table 2).

The Spanish 1978 Constitution does not include the word “federal” in any of its provisions, or in any subsequent legislation. However, since the beginning of the 1980s the dynamics of the *Estado de las Autonomías* (State of Autonomies) are characterized by a latent federalization.<sup>8</sup> The *Estado de las Autonomías* has not unfolded explicitly into a formal federation or federal-like system of government because of a less-developed shared rule in the general governance of the country.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, the persistence of political terrorism in the Basque Country has highly conditioned inter-party negotiations for an eventual constitutional reform and formal federalization.

Regional political terrorism in Spain has been present in the two other ‘historical nationalities’. Terrorist groups seeking to achieve independence by violent means were active in Galicia (*Exercito Guerrilleiro do Pobo Galego Ceibe*) and Catalonia (*Terra Lliure*). Both organizations tried to follow the strategies and methods of ETA but never achieved the support and results of the Basque terrorists.

In Galicia, the terrorist group, *Exercito Guerrilleiro do Pobo Galego* (‘Guerrilla Army of Galician Free People’) became active as a splinter group from the Galician Proletariat’s Party, which advocated a strategy of armed struggle and which was deactivated around 1990-91. In Catalonia, *Terra Lliure* (‘Free Land’) was founded in 1979 but decided to abandon the armed struggle and dissolved

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<sup>6</sup> Regional Spain is composed of 17 *Comunidades Autónomas* (Autonomous Communities), three of which are recognised by the 1978 Constitution as ‘historical nationalities’ (the Basque Country, Catalonia and Galicia). In these nationalities, Basque, Catalan and Galician are regional languages with full legal status alongside Castilian (or Spanish as is usually refer to elsewhere), which is the official language of the whole Kingdom of Spain. Approximately a fourth of the Spanish population of 40 million is bilingual (Luis Moreno, ‘Decentralization in Spain’, *Regional Studies*, 36 (4) (2002), 399-408).

<sup>7</sup> In 2002, public assessment of the setting-up of the *Comunidades Autónomas* was considered ‘positive’ by 67 per cent as compared to 51 per cent in 1994. Those who had a ‘negative’ opinion decreased from 19 to 13 per cent, while the same 11 per cent of the surveyed expressed neither ‘positive’ nor ‘negative’ views. Cf. Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, *Estudio 2.286* (Madrid, 1998), and Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, *Estudio 2.455* (Madrid, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> Luis Moreno, *The Federalization of Spain* (London, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> Nationalists in the Basque Country, Catalonia and Galicia have insisted on the idea of a ‘shared sovereignty’ within the Spanish State. On 16 July 1998, the ‘Declaration of Barcelona’ was signed by the Basque *Partido Nacionalista Vasco* (PNV), the Catalan *Convergència i Unió* (CiU), and the Galician *Bloque Nacionalista Galego* (BNG). They have claimed the establishment of a confederal model of political accommodation in Spain.

in 1991. As was the case of the Galician 'Guerrilla Army', *Terra Lliure* mainly attacked property and symbols which the separatists considered to be emblematic of the Spanish/Castilian domination. Its political aim was to establish an independent state comprising the *Països Catalans* or 'Catalan Countries'. This is the expression used by pan-Catalanists to denote the Principate of Catalonia, the Kingdom of Valencia, the Balearic Islands, and the Rosselló (Roussillon), in southern France, where Catalan language is also spoken.

The cases of the French Basque Country, Navarre and the *Països Catalans*, exemplify the difficulties in setting clear boundaries in certain Spanish regions. For radical Basque separatists, not only the French Basque districts, but also Navarre is an integral part of *Euskalherria*,<sup>10</sup> which can never be given up. This claim has been frequently reiterated by ETA. However, it is quite clear that a majority of the people of Navarre<sup>11</sup> believe that the old Navarran kingdom has more than enough right to its own constitution as a *fuero*, or local statute that protect the integrity of their customs and ways of life.

### ETA and the Basque Country

The most prominent materialisation of the Basque nationalist extremism is terrorism.<sup>12</sup> ETA is one of the most long-lived terrorist organisations in the Western world, with more than forty years of existence, more than thirty years of personal attacks, and about a thousand homicides.<sup>13</sup>

The situation in the Basque Country has been highly conditioned by political violence and, in particular, by an intensification of the terrorist strategy carried out by ETA at the time of the transition to democracy.<sup>14</sup> Such a course of action followed the action-repression-action spiral first deployed by ETA during late Francoism, and which aimed at consolidating a counter-state and a counter-society --the latter of some numerical significance-- operating with their own

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<sup>10</sup> For radical Basque nationalism, *Euskalherria* is a nation made up of the Spanish 'historical territories' (provinces) of Araba, Gipuzkoa, Biscay, as well as Navarre (all of these located in Spain) and the French districts of Labourd (Lapurdi), Soule (Zuberoa) and Lower Navarre (Behenafarroa) in the French *département* of the Atlantic Pyrenees.

<sup>11</sup> According to González Navarro, "Navarre is also a nation...[The Navarrans] refuse to be confounded with the Aragonese, those inhabitants of the Rioja, or the contemporary Basques" (Francisco González Navarro, *España, nación de naciones. El moderno federalismo* (Pamplona, 1993:173-4).

<sup>12</sup> Enric Martínez-Herrera, Enric, 'Nationalist Extremism and Outcomes of State Policies in the Basque Country', *MOST, Journal of Multicultural Societies*, 4 (1) (2002), [www.unesco.org/most/v14n1martinez.pdf](http://www.unesco.org/most/v14n1martinez.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> According to Ernest Lluch, Minister of Health in the Socialist Government after 1982 and who was killed by ETA in 2000, the first homicide by the Basque terrorists occurred in 1961, when a baby died in an explosion of a device placed at a train stop. ETA assumed in 1968 its first killing of a policemen (*guardia civil*) (Martínez-Herrera, 2002). Cf. also Fernando Reinares, *Terrorismo y antiterrorismo* (Barcelona, 1998) and Florencio Domínguez Iribarren, *¿El final de ETA? De la negociación a la tregua* (Madrid, 1999).

<sup>14</sup> A third of all the assassinations by ETA occurred during that critical period of transition to democracy (1978-80).

laws and code of conduct.<sup>15</sup> As a reaction to this strategy of violence, a Basque democratic inter-party platform in search for consociational solutions to achieve peace was articulated. During the period 1988-98, all major democratic parties operating in the Basque Country set up the *Pacto de Ajuria Enea* with the aim of co-ordinating their policies against terrorism. This platform came to an end when the *Pacto de Lizarra* was signed in 1998 among nationalist parties and organisations. The main claim of the Lizarra Pact was to articulate a political negotiation with the Spanish central state on issues of political sovereignty, territoriality and self-determination. The Pact was signed a few days prior to the declaration of a unilateral truce by ETA, a fact which clearly correlated both events.<sup>16</sup>

After the Lizarra Pact, political dialogue and negotiation among the Basque political forces themselves, and these with the central government, has proved to be difficult. Meanwhile, the results of the 1998 produced a somewhat stalemate political situation. The ceasefire declared by the Basque terrorists in September 1998 was unilaterally revoked fourteen months later. Such an announcement opened up a new situation of political instability and tension for both political parties and citizenship at large. Shortly after, there was an increase in ETA terrorism with outright killing of representatives of the non-nationalist parties, mainly the PP and PSE-EE (PSOE).

Since the 2001 Basque Elections were held the level of tension between the two blocs (nationalist and non-nationalist)<sup>17</sup> has not been significantly reduced. Before the Madrid bombings and the 2004 General Election, José María Aznar had made it clear that there was no place for self-determination outside the constitutional procedures established to reform the Basque Statute of Autonomy and the provisions of the 1978 Spanish Constitution. From a different standpoint, some nationalist leaders had insisted on an alternative *a la irlandesa* ('Irish via') in a rather voluntaristic manner. Such an option ought not to ignore the many dissimilarities between the case of the Basque Country and Northern Ireland.

On September 27, 2002, the *lehendakari* (President) of the Basque Government, Juan José Ibarretxe, made a statement before the Basque Parliament which galvanised public debate about the feasibility of a new Pact for Cohabitation (*Pacto para la Convivencia*) to be based on the free association and co-sovereignty between the Basque Country and Spain. According to Ibarretxe's proposal, the citizens of the Basque Country are

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<sup>15</sup> Francisco Letamendía, 'On Nationalisms in Situations of Conflict (Reflections from the Basque Case', in Justo G. Beramendi, Ramón Máiz and Xosé M. Núñez (eds.), *Nationalism in Europe. Past and Present* (Vol. I, Santiago, 1994), 247-275, and Daniele Conversi, *The Basques, the Catalans and Spain. Alternative routes to nationalist mobilisation* (London, 1997).

<sup>16</sup> Luis Moreno, 'Divided Societies: Electoral Polarisation and the Basque Country', in Adrian Guelke (ed.), *Democracy and Ethnic Conflict. Advancing Peace in Deeply Divided Societies* (New York, 2004), 29-51.

<sup>17</sup> The 2001 Basque Election had a high turnout of 79% of the registered electorate. The nationalists obtained 53.2% and the non-nationalist 46.8%.

entitled to self-determination<sup>18</sup> and to decide in a popular referendum the future of its political status and the sharing of its sovereignty within a plurinational Spain.

In electoral terms, the support to ETA's strategy declined sharply in the 2001 Basque Elections.<sup>19</sup> Such results were interpreted as a political statement against the sectarian killings carried out by ETA. They also seemed to validate the rejection by a large majority of Basques of ETA's strategy of terrorism in order to achieve the goal of independence and their desire to avoid a societal fracture that could lead to civil confrontation.<sup>20</sup>

After the 2004 Spanish General Election, one of the first political move made by the new Spanish Prime Minister Zapatero was to meet with the *lenhendakari* Ibarretxe, who right after the attacks stated had condemned such actions in the assumption that they could have been carried out by ETA. Indeed, there was a general repulsion to the killings of hundreds of innocent people. The attacks were of a different magnitude from those that ETA typically does.<sup>21</sup> However, they put into evidence the kind of consequences the Basque terrorists would face if they were to carry out an action of similar proportions. In June 2004 the Basque terrorist had planned to explode four car bombs in different locations in Madrid but discarded the idea due the great popular outrage provoked by the attacks of March 11.<sup>22</sup> Since then ETA has kept a very low profile and has suffered a major setback with the arrests of its top leaders by French police in October 2004.<sup>23</sup>

## Concluding remarks

Besides its wide impact in the international context, the Madrid bombings of March 11, 2004 have had deep repercussions in both the domestic and regional politics of Spain. A direct cause-effect relationship between the corollary of the attack and the defeat of the government Popular Party in the General Election held three days later cannot be mechanically drawn. However, it is more than plausible to believe that sectors of young voters and left-wing abstainers

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<sup>18</sup> Let us remind that already on February 15, 1990, the Basque Parliament voted in favour of the right to self-determination by an absolute majority of its members (38 out 75) and without the support of Herri Batasuna (ETA's political arm).

<sup>19</sup> The representation in the Basque Parliament of *Euskal Herritarrok (EH)*, the coalition sponsored by the ETA, was reduced by 50 per cent (from 14 MPs in 1998, to 7 MPs in 2001). The popular vote for EH dropped dramatically from 17.8 per cent, in 1998, to 10.1 per cent, in 2001 (Moreno, 2004: 45).

<sup>20</sup> Gurutz Jaúregui, *Entre la tragedia y la esperanza: Vasconia ante el nuevo milenio* (Barcelona, 1996).

<sup>21</sup> Despite attempts by members of the PP to establish a connection between ETA and Al Qaeda concerning the Madrid bombings, there has not been evidence in the reports released by the Spanish Ministry of Interior to support such allegations ('Los informes de Interior pedidos por el PP descartan la relación entre ETA y Al Qaeda, *El País*, 29 September, 2004)

<sup>22</sup> 'ETA suspendió su estrategia de atentados y secuestros tras los acontecimientos del 11-M', *El Mundo*, 9 October, 2004.

<sup>23</sup> Among the 19 terrorists detained, the suspected No. 1 in ETA, Mikel Albizu Iriarte, alias 'Mikel Antza', was arrested with his partner Soledad Iparraguirre, alias 'Anbotu', at Salies de Bearn in south western France. The latter has been accused of involvement in at least 14 murders.

mobilised against what was perceived as an informative manipulation of the Aznar's Government concerning the blaming of the terrorists responsible of the attacks. Such an electoral mobilisation greatly explains the unexpected change of government and the victory of the Socialist Party (PSOE).

In the general pattern of consociational practices and agreements which has facilitated the process of democratization and federalization in Spain since the approval of the 1978 Constitution, ETA terrorism has highly conditioned not only the achievement of peace and stability in the Basque Country, but has also interfered in the general climate of inter-party agreement inside and outside the Basque Country. Let us remind that consociational practices between nationalists and non-nationalist parties to accommodate the various Spanish idiosyncrasies and identities were also the pattern for political agreement for most of the period of Basque home-rule since 1978.

There is no doubt that political uncertainty in the Basque Country remains highly conditioned by ETA's terrorism. In September 2004, ETA issued a statement reiterating its commitment to carry on 'its fight' although it was also prepared 'to negotiate'. Weeks later, Arnaldo Otegi the leader of *Batasuna* --political arm of ETA--, declared that "ETA has a total disposition to keep weapons quiet".<sup>24</sup> Such a statement was made days after six veteran militants of ETA signed a letter criticising the continuation of the strategy of armed struggle. Certainly, the deep shock produced by the Madrid bombings and the change in the Spanish government may have produced the least propitious political and societal circumstances for the maintenance of political violence and terrorism in the Basque Country.

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<sup>24</sup> 'Otegi asegura la "total disposición de ETA a que las armas callen"', *El País*, 10 November, 2004.

**Table 1: Spanish electoral results (Chamber of Deputies, 1977-2004)**

	1977		1979		1982		1986		1989		1993		1996		2000		2004	
	% vote	seats																
<b>PSOE</b>	29.3	118	30.4	121	48.1	202	44.1	184	39.6	176	38.8	159	37.5	141	34.2	125	42.6	164
<b>AP/PP</b>	8.2	16	6.0	9	26.4	107	26.0	105	25.8	106	34.8	141	38.9	156	44.5	183	37.7	148
<b>UCD/CDS</b>	34.4	166	34.8	168	9.7	13	9.2	19	7.9	14	1.8	----	----	----	----	----	----	----
<b>PCE/IU</b>	9.3	19	10.8	23	4.0	4	4.6	7	9.1	17	9.6	18	10.6	21	5.5	8	5	5
<b>REGIONAL PARTIES</b>	5.2	21	8.5	26	7.8	24	9.2	34	11.1	37	10.4	32	10	32	10.6	33	10	33
<b>OTHERS</b>	13.3	10	9.5	3	4.0	----	6.9	1	6.5	----	4.6	----	3.0	----	3.7	1	3	----
<b>TURNOUT</b>	78.8		68.0		80.0		70.5		70.0		76.4		77.4		68.7		77.2	

Source: Own elaboration on data from the Spanish *Ministerio del Interior*.

PSOE: Spanish Socialist Party (Socialist International)

PP: Spanish Popular Party (Christian Democrat International)

UCD: Centrist coalition which disappeared after the 1982 General Election

CDS: Centrist party created in 1982 (Liberal International)

PCE/IU: Spanish Communist Party/Coalition of PCE, radical socialists and independent leftists (European United Left)

#### REGIONAL PARTIES:

CiU: Centre-right Catalan nationalist coalition (CDC-Liberals and UDC-Christian Democrats).

PNV: Centre-right Basque nationalist party (Christian Democrat International).

HB: Basque independentist coalition and political arm of ETA secessionists.

EE: Basque socialist party which merged with PSE/PSOE in 1993.

EA: Breakaway party from PNV. Centre-left nationalists.

PA: Andalusian nationalist party.

PAR: Aragonese nationalists.

UV: Valencian nationalists.

CC: Multi-party regionalist coalition in the Canary Islands.

ERC: Catalan independentist party.

BNC: National Galician Block (Coalition of left-wing independentists)

**Table 2: Territorial Distribution of Public Expenditure in Spain (%)**

	1981	1984	1987	1990	1993	1996	1999	2002
CENTRAL	87.3	75.7	72.6	66.2	58.3	58.9	56.2	48.7
REGIONAL	3.0	12.2	14.6	20.5	25.8	26.9	28.2	35.5
LOCAL	9.7	12.1	12.8	13.3	15.9	14.2	15.6	15.8

Notes: (a) During 1999-2002, strong regional increases corresponded to the decentralization of education and health powers to all 17 *Comunidades Autónomas*.

(b) Spending on social insurance pensions has not been taken into account as it would introduced a bias were it to be included as a Central government matter.

Source: MAP (Spanish Ministry of Public Administrations), *Estudio sobre reparto del gasto público en 1997 entre los distintos niveles de administración* (Madrid, 1997) and MAP, *Estimación del reparto del gasto público entre los subsectores de administraciones públicas (1982-2002)* (Madrid, 2002).