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Pro-European nationalist parties and EU negativity: The place of Europe in Basque and Catalan sovereignty politics

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Summary

Catalonia and the Basque Country are the two main autonomous communities of Spain where nationalist governments have been advocating some form of sovereignty. These initiatives not only imply changes to the configuration of the Spanish state but also seek more direct Basque and Catalan representation in Europe and recognition by the EU that these territories are more than simple 'regions'. Developments within nationalist parties are conditioned partly by considerations of whether existing institutional frameworks are open to regionally-based proposals of a kind that would allow the specificity of Basque and Catalan interests to be represented. The main Basque and Catalan nationalist parties have received some rebuffs from the EU but have not recoiled into Euroscepticism. They will continue trying to contribute to the transformation of Europe.

Highlights

- The main Basque and Catalan parties—the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV) and Democratic Convergence of Catalonia (CDC)—favour a federal Europe, but hope to see an eventual institutional reform of the EU to give direct representation to minority national communities, beyond the existing consultative regional arrangements.
- While CDC is closer to the Scottish National Party in wanting to see the creation of new member states in Europe, the PNV is more hesitant in this respect and is seeking to return to a relationship of cooperation with central government in Madrid.
- While the PNV values the possibility of increasing Basque representation in Europe incrementally, Catalan nationalists refer to the impasse in their relations with central government since 2012 and see no readiness on the part of Madrid-based parties such as the PP and PSOE to take decentralization in Spain any further.
- Only a minority of pro-independence forces in Catalonia and the Basque Country reject the European project, and in practice they defer to the pro-European mainstream and do not express public criticism of the EU.

Landmarks

- PNV involvement in the European Movement goes back more than 70 years. The party showed its pragmatism quite early in its history by reluctantly agreeing to take part in the Spanish section of the movement when this was founded in the late 1940s on a state by state basis. It would have preferred to have been represented directly.
- CDC, a party created in 1974 by former president of Catalonia, Jordi Pujol (1980-2003), had no qualms about subordinate affiliation. During the latter part of the last century, it—along with the two-party Convergence and Union (CiU) federation which it led—envisaged Catalonia progressing in a Spanish and European context, uncomplicated by adherence to the right to self-determination which the PNV still tended to assert.
- The PNV never shared Pujol's enthusiasm for a 'Europe of the Regions', hopes of which were disappointed by the Treaty on European Union, which created only the weak, consultative Committee of the Regions. Frustration over regionalization of the EU led CDC to begin making more 'nationally' based demands in Europe, both for political representation and cultural recognition.
- The European Convention on a Constitution for the EU, which met in 2002-03, represented a more direct rebuff for Catalan and Basque nationalists, whose proposals were ignored. This experience helped lead to an evolution within CDC towards more sovereignty-based thinking, influenced by debates in Catalan society that were not possible in a Basque Country still afflicted by political violence.
- The possibility of CDC voting 'no' in the Spanish constitutional referendum of 2005 was used by leader Artur Mas (then leader of the CiU opposition in Catalonia) to help persuade the new Zapatero minority government in Madrid to involve autonomous communities in Spanish representation in the European Council of Ministers and to request recognition of Catalan in the EU.
- Both the so-called Ibarretxe Plan, involving a proposal for Basque co-sovereignty with Spain, and the more recent independence initiative headed by Artur Mas in Catalonia have received negative responses from EU officials. They have suggested that such formulas would take the Basque Country and Catalonia out of the EU, at least for a period of time. Others believe that more pragmatic EU and Spanish responses would prevail, but only if pro-sovereignty forces can first win a convincing public mandate, such as Mas is seeking through a Catalan election scheduled for 27 September 2015.

How does Europe feature in nationalist party debates?

Traditionally, the project of European integration was seen by minority nationalist parties as something that would lead to the breakdown of nation-state dominance, allowing Basques and Catalans along with other stateless nations to take part more directly in European-level decision making. At the same time involvement in a common market would leave the Basque and Catalan economies less reliant on the Spanish market, and thus enhance the prospects of political autonomy.

CiU and the PNV have governed the autonomous communities of Catalonia and Euskadi respectively for most of the last 35 years. The reassertion and consolidation of member-state pre-eminence in the European Union in recent years has left them with strategic dilemmas:

- Should they persist with efforts to obtain national recognition and direct representation through lobbying Spain to decentralise its representation and by participating in campaigns for EU institutional reform (including a role for regions and minority nations in a reformed European Parliament)?
- Or should they decide that such efforts have been in vain and thus the only road to direct representation would be through the creation of new states and their accession to the EU?

In practice, the dilemma is overshadowed by different Basque and Catalan nationalist party perceptions of what their communities have achieved in Europe since Spanish accession in 1986.

- While both nationalist and non-nationalist Catalan governments have used Spain's EU membership to build trans-regional forms of cooperation, the predominance of CiU in regional governance has not prevented Catalonia from slipping behind Madrid in GDP per capita regional comparisons in recent decades. Meanwhile, the degree of EU usage of the Catalan language remains limited, leaving nationalists disappointed in terms of their cultural aspirations.
- The fiscal competencies vested in Basque regional and provincial institutions and a record of periodic successes in their interventions in Europe on economic and fiscal matters have left the PNV with a greater sense that there is still some potential for securing greater representation within EU institutions as part of Spain (see Gray, *EvoNat Research Brief No. 2*).
- The fact that Euskadi weathered the global financial crisis and the great recession better than Catalonia and the rest of Spain has reinforced a Basque nationalist belief that they have an economic model that should be of interest to the rest of Europe and could be used to attract recognition of Basque distinctiveness.
- Basque nationalists retain an option on the possibility of pressing for statehood within the EU if accommodationist strategies vis-à-vis Madrid fail to deliver. However, another constraint on PNV behaviour is its desire to cultivate good relations with political leaders and officials at the European level.
- The more pragmatic Basque approach is also a result of a different regional political party configuration. While the PNV is now defending its political dominance by rebuilding a traditional though intermittent alliance with the PSOE-affiliated Basque Socialists, CDC is cooperating with other pro-independence forces, chiefly the Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC), and is unconstrained by alliance considerations in making demands for Catalonia to become a new EU member state.

Whether governing nationalist parties can again exert leverage vis-à-vis central government in Madrid, as they did during periods of minority Spanish government in the past, is now more uncertain in view of the more crowded party system that is expected to emerge following this year's general election. The PNV is certainly trying to position itself for a collaborative role.

Why no Euroscepticism?

Despite the recent evolution of the EU in a more intergovernmental direction and its discouragement of successive Basque and Catalan sovereignty-based initiatives, the mainstream nationalist parties remain strongly committed to the European project, for several reasons:

- There is still an historical overhang from the Franco period, when opposition groups in Spain and in exile saw the EEC as a major external ally in the struggle to achieve regime change.
- Many nationalists believe that they would not have been able to get so far with their sovereignty-oriented initiatives had it not been for the existence of the EU as an indirect constraint upon Spanish reactions.
- The experience of European integration is seen in some respects—such as the single market, the Euro and common security and defence policy—as representing progress towards a federal Europe, still viewed as key to the future viability of more autonomous or independent Basque and Catalan entities. Despite the problems of the Eurozone, there remains the hope that post-recession Europe will regain dynamism and may be open to further institutional reform at some point in the future.

- Notwithstanding what some EU officials have said about separatism, there exists considerable uncertainty about how Europe would actually respond if a sovereignty bid in either Catalonia or the Basque Country were to obtain a convincing public mandate.

Not all Basque and Catalan independence forces are pro-European. Radical parties such as Sortu (heir to the banned Batasuna) in the Basque Country and the Popular Unity Candidatures (CUP) in Catalonia reject what they see as the irredeemably neo-liberal capitalist nature of the EU and invest no hope in its transformation. But these parties do not actually campaign against the EU in the way that Eurosceptic parties in other European countries do. Of fundamental importance to them is the cause of independence, for which they have demonstrated a desire to collaborate with other pro-sovereignty parties, including the PNV and CDC. Thus they tend to avoid entering into controversy with them over EU-related issues.

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