

IN DEPTH

## From total confrontation to “normally conflictual” relationships

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Political violence in the Basque Country, during the long years of ETA violence, caused political and social polarization. Given the complexity of the analysis that social confrontation demands – one that is much more nuanced and much more detailed – it is unwise to state that a process of polarized confrontation occurred between two communities. However, political polarization was much more evident and that is what we are going to refer to exclusively in the lines that follow.

The end of violence in the Basque Country has defused the existing political polarization and today it has declined significantly in regard to the confrontation between political parties. But let us first look at how things worked in the times of violence.

Both in discourse and in parliamentary debate the extent of, and reasons for, radicalization were not the same for every political party in the political arena. Political groups that were linked to, or were part of, the Ezker Abertzalea (Basque nationalist left; henceforth EA) generally used an exclusive, discriminatory and simplistic discourse. Additionally, in particular, and to the extent that EA tolerated, legitimized, supported (choose the most appropriate verb or verbs) the violence of ETA, it was *forced* to articulate a discourse *analogous* to the exercise of that violence. In other words, it found itself compelled to develop a discourse of denigration of “the other,” of the other parties – as well as the State – which was sufficiently all-inclusive to *compensate* its justification (or tolerance) of violence. The argument worked something like this: violence could be negative but should be understood and even tolerated since it was no

worse than the evil of the other parties that condemned it. The assignment of that absolute evil with its *compensatory function* was articulated through two fronts.

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The first front had a more essentialist character. The other parties, by definition, – including the other Basque nationalist parties – always implement negative policies in all areas: social, cultural, economic, etc. Therefore, their congenital evil delegitimized their criticism, including criticism of ETA's violence. The second discursive strategy was more instrumental. Those parties – again, including the Basque parties – support, tolerate and legitimize the oppressive and criminal antiterrorist policies of the Spanish government. Therefore, these parties also lack legitimacy to criticize ETA's violence since they participate in those other violent repressive policies: at the same time, the repression of ETA's violence justifies it or at least makes it understandable.

Interparty confrontation during the years of violence was absolute. On the part of the Abertzale Left vis-à-vis the other parties. But if the degree of denigration of EA in order to achieve the compensatory delegitimization of the other parties was very strong, the response of those parties to EA was similarly forceful and denigrating. The rejection and thorough criticism of all contents and proposals from EA were based on the *contamination strategy*. Everything that the Abertzale Left proposes and demands – without exception – is and must be negative and reprehensible as it comes from an organization that justifies violence.

But also, because of the violence, confrontation was radicalized within the other parties. The constitutionalist parties – the Socialist Party and the Popular Party – systematically and consistently denigrated the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV) for not being forceful

enough in condemning the violence of ETA and supporting political and police measures to eliminate it. Although perhaps more moderately, the same contamination strategy that was applied to EA was used regarding ETA's violence.

Violence also provided an argument for total ideological confrontation. Basque nationalism in general was demonized, and was declared reprehensible and contemptible, inasmuch as violence was the inevitable expression thereof. Similarly, the PNV, without distinction or exception, denigrated the constitutionalist parties using the argument of violence; in this case, the radical nature and excesses in the repression on the part of the constitutionalist governments.

**“ With de definitive cessation of violence,  
confrontation and debate among the parties is  
carried out without prior absolute denigration ”**

This polarization enters a phase of decline with the definitive cessation of violence by ETA – definitive cessation, not disbandment, which requires a brief reflexive digression. At this point the continuity of ETA is very difficult to understand. It seems that the only reason for this continuity is that ETA still believes that it can negotiate its self-disbandment in exchange for a release of its prisoners, which for many years has proven to be absolutely unfeasible and which, once again, suggests that ETA lost all sense of the surrounding reality many, many years ago.

Undoubtedly, this polarization crisis is due to the fact that not even the Abertzale Left needs its analogous and compensatory discourse, nor do the other parties need the aforementioned political strategy of contamination. Consequently, confrontation and debate among the parties is carried out without prior absolute denigration. It is relevant to note that the very use of nationalist discourse has entered a deactivation phase. We have indicated that the accusation against Basque nationalism incorporated the accusation of being in favor of, tolerant with, or a facilitator of violence. Contamination was absolute. Now that is no longer the case. However, what is interesting to note is that

not only is the contaminating anti-nationalist argument disappearing, but also that a remarkable moderation and decline of the nationalist call for independence is being generated. It is as if the disappearance of violence not only defuses the virulence of nationalist demands but also reduces these demands.

Today the debate among parties is articulated around the particular social and cultural proposals that each party formulates. So the chances of agreement (in some cases stable) among the different parties increase significantly and, as a result, we enter a stage of normalized political confrontation.

Where there is still a certain degree of polarization is in the consequences of the violence. We are referring to ETA prisoners; the disbandment of ETA; reparations for the harm caused, and the need for reconciliation processes between groups particularly affected by the violence. Let us make another digression to clarify that we are not referring to a process of confrontation derived from an inconclusive or unsatisfactorily concluded peace process. It is important to bear in mind that, regardless of the rhetoric, the end of ETA's violence is not a result of any peace process or agreement – or anything like that. It is the result of a unilateral decision without any compensation.

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This means that in the current political debate clashes sometimes arise which, in a certain way, increase polarization only on how to resolve the issue of these consequences. The position of the Abertzale Left is weak because it cannot argue in favor of certain compensatory measures for the cessation of violence – prisoners, for example. And this weakness is used by the other parties in their confrontation with EA. At the same time, demonizing continues as does the use in part of the contamination

strategy of the previous scenario since it is considered that the absolute recognition of the error and harm caused by EA with its support of ETA is the only way it can participate in the political debate on equal terms. So there is still a tendency to denigrate any proposal or demand coming from the radical nationalists, since their political organizations continue to legitimize that historical violence, indirectly, by default.

From the other side, from the discourse of EA, the possibilities of denigration using the issue of the consequences are less useful. Now it is unhelpful for its strategy to refer to a congenital evil of political parties – of the other parties – for not dealing with these consequences of violence because today it is clear that, except for the Popular Party and its government, the other parties are trying to implement the processes of settlement of the consequences.

In short, we can say that the end of ETA's violence resulted in a significant decrease in the process of interparty polarization that was occurring in the Basque Country. It has gone from the existence of a scenario of total confrontation to one of *normally conflictual* relationships. Only some debates on the consequences of the violence have resulted in the persistence of certain focal points of polarization.

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