

MUGARIK EZ! RITUAL NEGATION OF THE BORDER IN THE BASQUE COUNTRY

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The Basque Country is a good example of how the policies of nation-states can contradict EU policies, particularly in a Europe now nominally 'without frontiers', as in the case of the maintenance of borders despite their official shut down. Borders are far from disappearing in the Basque Country. Not only do they continue to have major symbolic significance, but control over the border area remains an important issue for adjacent nation-states, which have still in recent times periodically closed border posts. At the same time, the actual porosity of the border, based on the maintenance of historical ties across it and on the recent increase of cross-border projects, *compromises any attempt at control*. In this paper I argue that borders still are contested places, frontiers in the original sense of the word, front-lines where nation-states battle for their maintenance despite European integration, and where nations divided by such frontiers, as the Basque Country, struggle for their disappearance, not only in a discursive way, but also through symbolic actions.

Claims to Basque Country by Basque nationalist movements draw on specifically territorial notions of the Basque nation. Even though since the 1960's basque nationalism can not any longer be considered as a homogeneous movement, the different nationalist parties agree on the idea of the geographical extension of the Basque Country. In this perspective, the

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Basque Country is considered to be a territory divided by the political-administrative international border between France and Spain comprehending six provinces or historical territories, Lapurdi, Behe Nafarroa and Zuberoa on the Northern part of the border and Gipuzkoa, Bizkaia, Araba and Nafarroa on the Southern part². With some 20.000 km², the whole territory is similar in extension to Belgium.

In this context, the border becomes a contested place where symbolic events and political actions are performed either to emphasize the political border, or to deny it. Many of these negation rituals attempt to subvert the political border by challenging the partition of the Basque Country between two states. Such rituals have identifiable political aims, and advance agendas of radical political change. I argue that the importance of the border is not solely a concern of nationalist movements leading often *subverting rituals*. It is also a main concern for both states which, through a variety of actions, stress the role of the border as a marker of their territorial sovereignty.

Now that the European Union has enforced the disparition of internal borders, particularly since the European Single Act and the Maastricht Treaty, and more recently with the

² In the last years Behe Nafarroa and Nafarroa tend to be considered to be one province, spanning over the border. The border determinates the division of Euskal Herria in Iparralde, the Northern part and Hegoalde, the Southern part.

signing of the Schengen Treaty, such symbolic, and often real battles do not seem to make much sense. But the fact is that since the frontier was officially shut down, the border has become a major space of contestation. Since Spain's incorporation into the European Market first and later into the European Union, the spanish-french border has known an increasing number of demonstrations and protests held in the border. Most of the times and until very recently, those demonstrations intending to cross the border uniting symbolically both parts of the Basque Country, were not allowed to do so. Either one or both states have at different times closed the border in order to prevent such actions. Coinciding with the 1986 largely diffused slogan "a Europe without frontiers", nationalist movements have incorporated similar slogans in their various campaigns. Slogans like "Ez da mugarik" (there is no border), "mugarik ez" (no to the border) or "mugak apurtu" (eliminate borders) have become common in the basque nationalist political agenda.

These slogans refer to the border as *muga*. *Muga* is the usual basque term designating any kind of boundary or limit, both in its spatial and/or temporal dimension, even though the former is much more usual than the latter. Nowadays, *muga* has included the political border acception among its referents. This concept is particularly meaningful in the traditional society, where the *muga* was rarely imposed, but resulted from negotiation. The location of the *muga* and the subsequent *mugarri*, boundary stone, had to be approved by the parties involved. According to historians, the *muga* between villages was decided by the councils of both villages and thus had to be respected by both communities. As the fueros, customary laws specific to each of the Basque

territories point out, removing *muga* boundary stones was a serious offence, even punishable with death. Many myths stress the importance of the *muga* limits in the past.

It would appear, as many scholars have pointed out, that the actual political border resulting from the Pyrenees Peace of 1659 overlaps *muga* limits previous to the establishment of the inter-state border. Today, the international border is currently referred to as *muga*. Despite its correspondence with other accepted limits such as the province and village limits, the border, because of its political significance, results in a highly contested place.

THE BORDER AS A SPACE OF CONTEST

Attempts to the disparition of the border have been quite common and popular before the abolition of the border controls. In the last decades, attacks to the state sovereignty through its territorial limit markers have been quite frequent. Most of the time they have consisted in sabotage actions of symbolic dimension, such as the systematic erasing of road signs displaying "France" or "Spain" and painting out and spraying of "E.H" initials that stand for Euskal Herria, the Basque name of the Basque Country, or the corresponding province name³. In other cases, state territorial demarcations have been destroyed. The border-stone sculpture by Oteiza in the very middle of the Santiago-Saint Jacques international bridge

³ These actions have to be considered as part of a broader campaign led by different organisations at various levels demandind the displaying of Basque place names and their correct spelling at the place of the Spanish/French versions.

over the Bidasoa has been pulled down several times. For a long time, and until it was roughly repaired, it was nothing but a stone reduced to pieces. Nowadays, it stands in its original landmark, tied with wire, the mention of France and Spain painted out and the name of the province spray painted in red on it. Border check points and customs have been a main target for armed groups in the North Basque Country. Such actions intend to redefine the territory, denying the international border and reshaping a Basque territory according to the nationalist conception. Recently, the destruction of some twenty boundary stones in 1997 arouse again the role of the border in the European integration context. In the words of one of the activists caught in fraganti, it consisted in "a symbolic action against the border dividing our country in two."

MAKING UP ONE FROM TWO: THE SYMBOLIC UNIFICATION OF THE BASQUE COUNTRY

In 1992, *Bai Independentziari* (Yes to independence), a large platform gathering most of the basque nationalist parties (with the exception of PNV) and many social movements from both Iparralde and Hegoalde called what has been considered the first united National Day since the 1936 Civil War. This *Aberri Eguna*, "day of the Basque Nation", was to be held at both sides of the Bidasoa, the river which forms the border, in Hondarribia and Hendaia. The main event of this day was to be a demonstration in Hondarribia in the morning and a political meeting in Hendaia on the afternoon. The scheduled program went on with the peculiarity that the border had been closed since very early that morning. The

closing of the border generated a spontaneous reaction amongst people gathered on both merges of the Bidasoa. Songs, *irrintziak* and slogans were shouted from one side to the other, establishing communication over the closed border. The climax was attained when traditional rowing boats crossed the river and met at the very middle.

Four years later, in 1996, after the signing of the Schengen Treaty by Spain, the *Aberri Eguna* was again to be held in the borderland, called by the south left independentist party HB and the north nationalist coalition *Abertzaleen Batasuna*. This time though, the main event consisted in the very crossing of the border. A huge demonstration gathering thousands of people crossed the border from Hendaia to Irun. It was the first time a demonstration crossed the border without major problems.

Big size emblems of the six historic territories conforming the Basque Country followed by an enormous *ikurriña*, the basque flag, marched at the head of the demonstration. As the demonstration was getting closer to the international bridge where the Spanish police had taken position, tension grew. Expectation about crossing the border could be felt since very early in the morning. Until then, both states, in turn or together, had prevented demonstrations from crossing the border. As Del Valle points out in her study on the *Korrika*(1988), these moments were particularly meaningful. Various protest actions including that of *Korrika* were denied crossing the border, but nevertheless were not stopped by it. Most of the times, as in the *Korrika* case, a relay system was organized so that the rallies could symbolically transcend the border. Because of that, the 1996 border crossing of the

demonstration was perceived by the demonstrators and by the political leaders who spoke in the meeting held afterwards as a "historical event".

The following year, and as a continuity of the 1996 experience of bringing together Hegoalde and Iparralde, there was a united call for the National Day. This time, the *Aberri Eguna* was not to cross the border in an effective way, but in a symbolic one, as it was to be held at two different places, in Baiona (Iparralde) and in Iruñea (Hegoalde). Despite the idea was not new, the PNV having formerly organised such double events in north and south, the organizers aimed to physically bring together people from both sides of the border. The celebration of the National Day was part of a larger campaign of cooperation between nationalist parties and movements across the border. Because of the distance between the two cities, about 140 kms, a bus link between the two cities had been organised from Iruñea to attend the afternoon demonstration in Baiona. The unexpected founding of the corpse of an activist of ETA dead in strange circumstances the day before the *Aberri Eguna*, led to the modification of the scheduled programme.

THE REIFICATION OF THE BORDER: OPENING AND CLOSING POLICIES IN A "EUROPE WITHOUT FRONTIERS"

Now that the European Union through several actions has stressed the need of opening the economic and politic borders in order to achieve European integration, the role of borders and the significance of territorial boundaries would seem to be overwhelmed.

Nevertheless, and despite the official integration discourse, states will to maintain their borders, emphasizing the limits of their territoriality through specific actions and rituals.

Every two years an official revision of all the boundary stones of the border line takes place in the whole Pyrenean border. Authorities from both sides of the border meet in order to check together the state and correct situation of the boundary stones. In the last decade state representation has been delegated onto the village mayors, in a movement that could be very much considered as part of the European trend of the regionalization of politics. It must not be forgotten though, that these rituals reinforce the presence of the state through its physical markers.

Together with these specific rituals, the presence of the state at its border becomes evident at particular dates, when specific events significant to the basque nationalist agenda are to take place in one or the other side of the border. In such occasions, and without giving any consistent explanation, main border crossing roads may be closed for some hours or even for the whole day. Minor border crossing routes are also affected by these measures as various police controls at the border or in the nearby area ensure the control over border crossing. This is the case when demonstrations intended to gather people from both Iparralde and Hegoalde are called. In such occasions, the border can be closed by either or both states. One of the most significant dates for border closing occurs every year, since 25 years now, the day of the *Herri Urrats*, a festival to raise funds for *ikastolak*, basque schools in Iparralde. Thousands of people from the southern

provinces willing to join the festival are stopped at the checking points, collapsing the border.

When such controls are set, the closing of the border affects everyone intending to cross it. It must be reminded that the border points most frequently closed form one of the two main crossing ways between the France and Spain - the other being in Catalunya- as well as the main road for Portuguese traffic back and forth to Europe. In such occasions, commercial and private traffic is compelled to stop at the border and wait for the opening and regularisation of the situation.

To conclude, I would like to stress the fact that this is a case of contest on an internal border of the EU. As such, it brings out the question of European integration and the role national states and nations have to play in it. In the Basque case, states' action rather than reassuring integration - reinforced through official discourse - stresses the difficulty of states to accept supra-national structures. On the other hand, such actions contribute to enhance the critical position of most basque nationalist movements towards the European Union.

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