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Euskadi

A negative evolution

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IV has received the following brief report on the evolution of the Basque conflict and the main initiatives that are being carried out in the last area where there is politically motivated violence in Western Europe, with the aim of constructing a peace process.

[https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/13_euskadi_sit-down.jpg]

The author of this report is the social movement for dialogue and accord in the Basque Country, Elkarri, which aims to promote the end of violence, respect for human rights, and political dialogue as the means of transforming the current situation. More information on the activities of this organisation is available on its website: www.elkarri.org

Recent evolution of the Basque conflict

In general terms, the evolution of the Basque conflict has been very negative since the end of the ceasefire by ETA in late 1999. ETA continues its campaign of attacks against members of the security forces, politicians, intellectuals or journalists. This armed activity has led to an unacceptable situation from the human and political point of view. In addition to people's suffering from the consequences of these attacks, other infringements of human rights take place, such as threats or, on the other hand, the policy of dispersion of political motivated prisoners, and cases of torture in police stations (denounced by organisations such as Amnesty International).

In the political sphere, the Spanish government is against opening up a space for dialogue that could develop a peace plan, and it concentrates its efforts on banning the pro-independence political party Batasuna. It considers that the present level of Basque autonomy is the maximum that the State can offer, and rejects the need for a political debate aimed at increasing the level of consensus on the legal and political framework. The Basque political parties, for their part, find themselves immersed in a scenario of distrust and lack of communication.

Meanwhile, the majority of Basque society continues to manifest itself against violence, regardless of different political opinions and feelings of identity, and at the same time it calls on all the players involved in a process of dialogue to transform the current situation into one of a peace process.

The main players

ETA and the Basque independence movement:

Since the end of its ceasefire ETA has continued its campaign of violence against different sectors of Basque and Spanish society. Through its communiqués it reiterates that it will continue to carry out attacks until the right to self-determination of the Basque people is recognised.

In May 2001 the pro-independence political party Batasuna received 10% of the votes in the regional elections despite losing half of its members in the Basque Parliament. This is due, according to the majority of political analysts, to the fact that many of its voters did not agree with the way the party pronounced itself regarding the different expressions of violence.

A negative evolution

In the last few months the Spanish government has promoted the banning of Batasuna for its alleged structural links with ETA. After major controversy on whether the so-called 'Act of Political Parties' is constitutional or not, it was approved in the Spanish Parliament despite being rejected by the Basque Parliament. This Act facilitates the legal changes needed to bring about the banning. While Spanish public opinion generally supports this process, all the opinion surveys indicate that the majority of the Basques reject the banning of Batasuna. At the same time, a High Court judge has declared the activities of this political party to be illegal, which effectively gives a part of society the status of 'clandestine'.

Several Basque and Spanish political parties have announced that they will appeal against this Act to ban Batasuna to the Spanish Constitutional Court and the Human Rights Court in Strasbourg. In this context there are no signs that ETA is considering declaring a new ceasefire in the short term.

The Spanish government:

The Partido Popular (PP), which has an absolute majority in the Spanish Parliament, is the main defender of the police option as the only way of solving the Basque question. Like the Partido Socialista, its members suffer the direct consequences of the activities of ETA, and hundreds of political representatives need to have 24-hour bodyguards.

On the political front the PP defends a 'firm hand' strategy, and rejects any process of dialogue while at the same time accusing Basque nationalist parties as a whole of a certain degree of responsibility in the persistence of the violence.

At present it hardly maintains communications channels open with the Basque Government and it does not consider a peace plan or a political agenda for the Basque territories to be necessary. Its main initiative in this area is the above-mentioned banning of the pro-independence political party Batasuna. This initiative represents a total change of scenario in Basque social and political life.

The Basque Government:

The Basque Government is made up of three political parties, two moderate nationalist parties and one non-nationalist. Its stance on this matter is a total rejection of the violence of ETA and the defence and promotion of a process of dialogue between all political formations and the Spanish government. This debate should revolve around the level of self-government, and compliance with the Statute of Autonomy of the Basque Country and its updating on the basis of the demands of Basque society.

The Basque Government has recently announced that, after twenty years of negotiations, if the Statute of Autonomy is not fully implemented in terms of pending powers and functions to be transferred by the State, the parties that make up the Basque government will find themselves obliged to reconsider the present framework of relations. This initiative has led to a lively debate on the reform of the Statute of Autonomy and will have a considerable influence on the political agenda during the coming months.

At the heart of this debate is the failure of the sense of 'pact' with the State that the Basque Government has historically attributed to the Statute of Autonomy. If the central government does not respect the will of the majority of Basque citizens they will defend the negotiation of a different framework of relations.

The Socialist party:

The Socialist Party is the main Opposition party in Spain. It directly suffers the threat of violence by ETA and finds itself in mid-stream between the opinion of the central government and that of the Basque Government. On one hand, it supports the measures to illegalise Batasuna, but also is in favour of a process of dialogue between the Spanish Government and the Basque Government, and also between the political parties.

Other players:

The controversy that has arisen over the last few months between the central government and the Spanish church is worthy of mention. It is important to point out that the Church plays a major role in Basque and Spanish social life, and acted as a mediator between ETA and the Spanish government during the ceasefire.

As well as condemning the violence of ETA, the Basque bishops have stated serious reservations regarding the intention of the Spanish government to ban Batasuna. This led to the strongest criticisms by the Madrid government and the main conservative media. In response to the demand by the Partido Popular that the Spanish Church and the Vatican should rectify the opinion of the Basque bishops, the latter defended the right of the bishops to express their opinion on matters that affect the Basque dioceses.

Social initiatives: the Peace Conference

In such a complicated situation, the social movement for dialogue and agreement in the Basque Country, Elkarri, decided to set in motion an initiative that would offer an alternative to the spiral of conflict. Taking the basic demands of non-violence and political dialogue as a starting point, an unprecedented experience of construction of peace from the heart of society has been generated.

More than 50,000 people in a community of less than 3 million people signed a petition for dialogue without exclusion of political parties, and at the same time donated 10 euros to finance the Peace Conference project.

In the political arena a system of indirect dialogue was set up between most of the political formations. This led to a draft agreement on the principles and procedures for a peace process. At present this draft is being analysed by experts in the handling and transformation of conflicts from the University of Columbia, Harvard, South Africa and Northern Ireland.

Finally, when all the contributions are received the aim is to present the conclusions of the project in the last week of October this year.

Future prospects

We find ourselves in a context of serious and gradual deterioration of the situation. A situation in which the protagonism is held by the most extreme positions. These players accentuate and intensify their ability to block, while showing their total inability to resolve the underlying problems: violence and peaceful co-existence. In this context, a major brake is being applied to the dialogue and mediation option.

This dynamic of confrontation could lead us to a major increase in the levels of violence over the next few months, and also to an even greater social and political polarisation.

An alternative to this situation

What has been described so far is not everything that is happening in the Basque Country. For many decades now, the majority demand of society for non-violence and dialogue without exclusions has been consolidated. This is a demand that goes right across the board, regardless of political opinion or affiliation, and has become the main factor in favour of a peace process.

From this perspective, and despite all the obstacles and threats, there is scope for opportunities in the present context that can and should be developed. Basically, this is the only viable alternative to the present situation. This model is none other than the driving of a process of dialogue between all the political groups that can lead to an agreement with a greater level of consensus than at present. An agreement that can be presented to society for its opinion developed in a context of non-violence.

To achieve this objective, and taking into account the difficulties that will have to be overcome, it will be very important to be able to call on the support of the international community. International institutions, governments, human rights organisations and universities can make a major contribution in favour of a peace process in the Basque Country. Another Basque reality is possible through our combined efforts.