

Original article

ETA's terrorist activities – historical background and contemporary times

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ABSTRACT

Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) was a terrorist organization fighting for the independence of the Basque Country from under the rule of Spain. It was created in 1959 by members of the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV). The terrorist attacks carried out by it were directed against the representatives of the authorities and law enforcement officers, but many civilians were also killed as a result of armed conflicts. The organization's activity was financed mainly from extortion money, which was collected from entrepreneurs under the threat of death. Acts of violence have become everyday life for Spanish citizens. For this reason, the initially supported organization began to arouse reluctance and induce waves of protests against the methods it used. The Spanish government tried to negotiate and sign the ceasefire with the organization, however, it proved ineffective. The organization has repeatedly announced the suspension of fighting, and then carried out subsequent acts of terror. In 2011, ETA announced the end of military activity, and in 2017 its members finally gave up their arms. Most of the organization's activists are currently in jail. ETA has killed 829 people since its inception.

KEYWORDS

ETA, Basque Country, terrorism, independence, threat

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Introduction

The object of the considerations taken up in the article is the terrorist activity of the organization Euskadi ta Askatasuna (ETA) (*English*: Basque Homeland and Liberty). ETA is a name known all over Europe. It is associated with terrorist attacks, bomb attacks and executions – often on representatives of public authorities. A full understanding of the nature of the organization and the purpose of its operation requires learning about the history of the Basques – the ethnic group from which ETA derives. Therefore, the

basic objective of the study is to present the motives behind the organization and the legitimacy of its functioning.

Historical background of the Basque Country

The Basques are a nation that lives on both sides of the Pyrenees. The land that is inhabited by them comprises four provinces belonging to Spain and three belonging to France. Territories located in the north-east of Spain are considered the real Basque Country. These include the following provinces: Alava (the capital in Victoria), Guipuzcoa (the capital in San Sebastian), Vizcaya (the capital in Bilbao) and Navarra (the capital in Pamplona). The Basque region covers 7200 square kilometers and is characterized by high population density. Approximately 2 million people live there [1, p. 91].



Fig. 1. The territory of the Basque Country
Source: [2].

According to K. Boronska, the Basques are the oldest ethnic group of the Pyrenean Peninsula. This is the only people in Europe whose ethnicity remains undiscovered. It was Greek historians who first used the names of Vascones to determine the name of the population living in today's Basque Country [3, p. 40]. These people, as the only one unlike other inhabitants of the Iberian Peninsula, did not undergo Celtization or Romanization. The Basques maintained their culture and tradition during the conquests of the Roman Empire. During the Spanish-Muslim wars (700-800 CE), the Basques adopted Christianity. In 824, they defeated the French and formed their own state – the Kingdom of Navarre, which gave them many years of independence and separateness. In 1200, Asturias merged with Castile. As part of this union, the Basques obtained numerous laws of the so-called Fueros, among others having its own parliament, the judiciary and the monetary system [4, p. 141]. In 1512, the Kingdom of Navarre was conquered by the rulers of Castile and Aragon, as a result of which it became

part of the United Kingdom of Spain, as well as France [3, p. 40]. From the 17th century, due to the fear of competition in the governing of the overseas provinces, the process of limiting the rights of the Basque Country by the kings of Castile [5] began.

In 1760, the Basques's privileges were restricted by eliminating local parliaments, and in 1789 the autonomy of provinces inhabited by the Basques in France. In 1814, King Ferdinand VII abolished the liberal constitution, hence they lost their legal autonomy also in Spain. The final division took place in 1841, when France and Spain divided the Basque provinces among themselves. At that time, Labourd, Soule and Lower Navarre came under French rule, while Guipuzcoa, Alava, Vizcaya and Upper Navarre remained under Spanish rule. In those times, the slogan of unification began to be put forth – “Seven in unity” [6, p. 253]. It was not until 1876 that the Basque autonomy was officially annulled, which became the beginning of the rise of Basque nationalism. Its initiator was Sabino Policarpo Arana Goiri, who in 1890 published the “Form of essential principles of Basque nationalism”. He started issuing the magazine “Euskadi”, in which he called for the creation of own state consisting of Spanish and French provinces. It was he who designed the flag and the national colors of the Basque Country. At the initiative of Aran, the Basque Nationalist Party (*Spanish*: Partido Nacionalista Vasco [PNV]) was formed, which is still the main political representative in the region [1, p. 93].

The next period on the way to sovereignty was the establishment in 1931 of the Second Republic, which was more favorable towards national minorities. The Republicans allowed the provinces of Spain to set up their own government, parliament and tax policy. The creation of the independent Euskadi Republic in the capital of Guernica on December 7, 1936, became a historic moment [4, p. 141-4]. The joy of Basque freedom did not last long. The city of Guernica was bombed by the Nazi air force in April 1937. Nearly 1,500 civilians died on its streets, and the historic oak tree was destroyed, which became a symbol of this tragedy and the national liberation movements of the Basque Country [7, p. 50].

In the past, the Basques had autonomy within the Spanish state. However, they lost it when General Franco came to power [8, p. 48]. He began to apply various repressions to the Basques. He limited the rights and privileges in those provinces that did not support him in the civil war [4, p. 145-6].

In the first decade of the 21st century, the Basque Country had the greatest autonomy from all regions of Spain. It had its own flag and a parliament consisting of 75 deputies represented by three Basque provinces. The Basque Country had its own tax system, health service, police and education. The Basque language alongside Spanish was the official language. In addition, it enjoyed full autonomy in the areas of industry, trade, transport, agriculture, environmental protection, tourism, insurance and the workforce. The Basque culture, from the media to traditional art, was entirely autonomous. All foundations, associations or cultural objects belonged exclusively to the Basque jurisdiction. Only such areas as the armed forces, international politics, international trade, social welfare, the judiciary and ports and airports were subject to Spanish law [9, p. 41].

Establishment of the organization ETA

Regaining independence has always been the main goal of the Basque nationalists. In the 1950s, the PNV party began to criticize students. In 1953, they founded the magazine "Ekin", and then formed a secret student association of the same name. Because of the program differences, the youth party left the PNV party, which in July 1959 merged with the Ekin sympathizers to form the organization Euskadi Ta Askatasuna ETA [1, p. 94]. Its members were united the slogan of creating an independent state encompassing all provinces in Spain, as well as those belonging to France. They fought for the creation of a socialist state with respect for and protection of the interests of the workers' party [10, p. 103-4].



Fig. 2. A group of masked ETA fighters

Source: [3].

At the beginning of its activity, ETA was a political organization whose activity was aimed at fighting the government of General Franco. The organization did not want the civilians to suffer in consequence of its actions, since at that time it was to be regarded by them as a defender of the working people and the opponent of the regime [12, p. 83]. ETA tried to act so that ordinary people would not perceive it as a terrorist organization that strove to achieve its goals at the expense of innocent citizens.

From the very beginning, ETA was divided into two strands: the independence one, which undertook an uncompromising fight with the authorities of Spain, and the moderate one – advocating for autonomy [8, p. 48]. In 1963, ETA published the main assumptions of the eight-year plan, which included a range of tasks, including recruiting members, preparing the staff with the right profile, collecting resources and equipment for terrorist attacks and preparations for a small war throughout the country. Despite the efforts a small war never happened, and ETA did not become a nationwide organization. In the period of the highest intensity of terrorist attacks its ranks amounted to about 500 people [13, p. 177]. In 1963, the organization established cooperation with the Basque national movement Enbata, which operated in France. The

result of the collaboration was the assembly at which the provision was adopted, which claimed, "On this day of our feast, we the Basques gathered around a young oak tree from Guernica declare that we are the only nation through the land, origin, race, institution, and we declare our decision to realize the continuation of life of the united Basque nation (...)" [14, p. 72]. Initially, ETA undertook rather bloodless activities, such as destroying the symbols of Frankism, hanging out the Basque flags, and bank robberies [15, p. 195]. However, over time, its representatives came to the conclusion that this kind of fight did not work. When the subsequent repressions by the governments of General Franco became unbearable, terrorist attacks and abductions of prominent persons started to be carry out in order to trigger specific reactions. The following years brought divisions in the organization because there was no unity about the goals and methods of the fight for freedom. The information about the death of General Franco in 1975 gave hope for the improvement of the Basques' situation. The power was assumed by Juan Carlos, who initially announced the implementation of many demands of the organization. However, the government was headed by the conservative Arias Navarro, who continued the policy of the Frankists [5, p. 174-5]. The situation between the parties was exacerbating day by day, resulting in Juan Carlos dismissing Navarra. He entrusted this function to Adolf Suarez, who led to the commencement of negotiations. In 1977, the restoration of autonomy to the Basque provinces was announced, the Spanish provinces were given the opportunity to form their own government. In 1978, the constitution of the Basque Country was ratified after a referendum. This constitution, following modifications under the Guernica Status, introduced many privileges in the Basque Country. The Autonomous Community with the possibility of including Navarre with the consent of its citizens was created from three historical Spanish provinces. Basque became the official language, and the power in the country was to be held by a government composed of 75 representatives (25 from each province). The Parliament was to be elected for a period of four years with the right to elect a president. Ministries to manage, among others economy, finance, culture, police, prisons and the judiciary were planned to be established. What is important, the status introduced the concept of the Basque nation so that it could formally appear on the international arena [1, p. 98]. Such large rights and privileges did not convince ETA members. They believed that they were contrary to the Basque interests. Another difficulty with which ETA met in its struggle for independence was the POSE party (the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party) coming to power in Spain. That was when Felipe Gonzalas, whose main goal was to fight ETA, took over power in Spain. In 1983, he called the Antiterrorist Group of Liberation GAL (Grupos Antiterroristas de Liberacion) to life. GAL was known for torturing and detaining suspects for cooperation with ETA. It was not until 1991 that attempts were made to mediate and peacefully resolve the conflict with ETA. Even then, its representative Rafael Vera said that although mediation is the only way to resolve the conflict, he could not declare the cessation of terrorist attacks. In such a situation, the government was forced to discontinue peace talks. After Jose Marie Aznar took power in 1996, the peace process was resumed. He eased the financial policy towards the Basque Country. It did not have to pay taxes to the central budget for alcohol, cigarettes or gasoline [1, p. 99]. In

2002, the law was adopted in Spain to allow criminalizing organizations that support terrorism. The law was directed mainly towards Batasuna, a party that never objected to the activities of ETA. In 2003, the Supreme Court of Spain finally banned the Batasuna party for its links with ETA [1, p. 101].

Over the years, the ETA's situation in the Basque Country weakened, although it carried out several significant terrorist attacks. On March 22, 2006, ETA officially announced a permanent ceasefire. This situation did not last long because it carried out another coup, which broke the agreement lasting only nine months [16, p. 8]. The Spanish government did not give up and continued to try to fight this activity. As a result, many arrests of activists of the organization took place.

In January 2011, the organization announced another ceasefire. This announcement, however, did not mean a complete cessation of terrorist activities, because ETA did not solve its structures and did not liquidate military resources. On October 17, 2011, during an international peace conference in the city of San Sebastian in Spain, ETA was called to end the conflict and start a dialogue with the governments of Spain and France. On October 20, 2011, the organization announced the definitive end of armed struggle and finally committed itself to stop using violence. The decision made by ETA was mainly due to the decline in public support for the methods it used, the lack of effects of the year-long struggle for independence of the Basque Country, as well as the weakening of internal structures through the activities of military services and the police. The decision to cease military activity in the context of the upcoming parliamentary elections, however, suggested that ETA would continue to attempt to form an independent Basque state, this time as a political organization. However, the Spanish Government took account of the possibility that ETA members might not comply with the decision to stop using terror [17].

On April 8, 2017, six years after the cessation of violence, the terrorist organization, according to previous announcements, gave up the weapon. Selected mediators received information from ETA about 12 weapon magazines that were hidden in France. The Ministry of Internal Affairs of Spain informed that officers took over 3.5 tons of weapons, of which 2,875 kilograms were explosives, 120 hand weapons and 25,700 projectiles. The ETA leadership, however, claimed that it would continue its operations in order to gain independence of the Basque Country without using arms and violence [18].

According to experts, approximately one hundred ETA members have remained at large. Arnaldo Otega, a former member of the organization, and currently a spokesman for the separatist Basque party Bildu, says the separatists will soon start a debate about the future of ETA and this will either be a self-dissolution or the transformation of ETA into a civilian organization. 829 people have been killed since the beginning of ETA. At present, there are 339 Basque terrorists in prison [19].

ETA's methods and effects of its activities

ETA terrorism began in 1968, when two policemen were killed in the incidents provoked by this organization. A police commissioner who was known for torturing politi-

cal prisoners was killed as well. At the beginning of its activity, the main enemy of ETA was the regime of General Franco. The activities of ETA mainly consisted in destroying and putting small bomb loads on monuments and other symbols of the regime. The organized attacks aimed at the Spanish government and state institutions. The organization tried to avoid attacks on the civilian population in order to have its support in the struggle for independence of the Basque Country. ETA strove to present its nationalism in the Frankist era as a struggle for peace for the good of the entire nation. The civil war meant that their activities were socially justified. In Spain, as well as abroad, the organization was perceived as unattainable in the struggle for freedom for the country, while its fighters were called heroes. However, along with the radicalization of Franco's activities against ETA, the organization began to carry out bloodier attacks. In 1972, it kidnapped a businessman who was freed after meeting the organization's demands, i.e., re-employment of the dismissed workers, increasing their salary, and enabling them to co-manage the enterprise [12, p. 83]. ETA began to raise means and funds for the purchase of weapons that allow them to operate more effectively. In the years 1962-1975, the Spanish government declared the state of emergency nine times, including three times in the whole country [12, p. 84].

Over the years, the activities of ETA were increasingly negatively affecting the development of the Basque Country. Entrepreneurs began to give up investing money in this region. The reason for this situation was the tribute taken from companies to the organization under the threat of death. In order to avoid paying further extortion money, the entrepreneurs were forced to close factories. ETA, to raise funds for its activities, resorted to beatings, kidnappings, assassinations and bank robberies. Funds from the "revolutionary tax" were paid into the organization's Swiss accounts. In the years 1968-1975, 47 people fell victim to the ETA bomb attacks [15, p. 195].

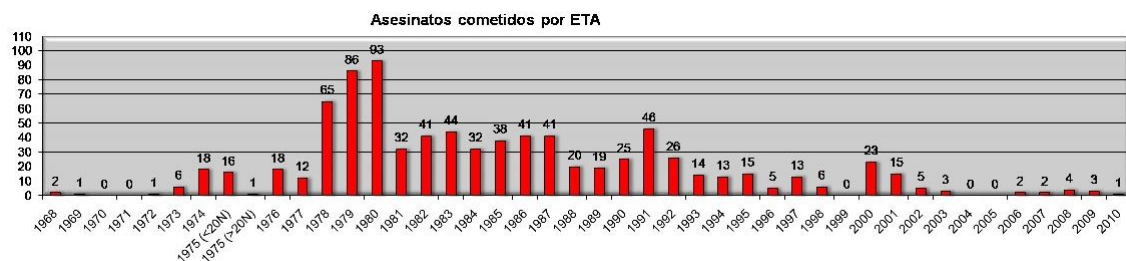


Fig. 3. Number of fatalities as a result of ETA's activities

Source: [20].

Another act that aroused general condemnation was the murder in 1977 in Guernica. His victim was Augusto Uneeta Berreneche, the chairman of the Legislative Assembly of the Basque province of Vizcaya and two his associates. The situation was fueled by the fact that the attack took place the day after ETA declared to cease using terrorist attacks. The activity of ETA aroused the opposition of most Basques, who found the autonomy offered by the Spanish government sufficient. In 1984, ETA murdered socialist senator E. Casas. The increasingly violent struggle of the radical faction of ETA caused the government to introduce "death squads". Their activities were also far from the methods used in democratic countries. However, this also did not help in reducing the attacks conducted by ETA [21, p. 343].

The organization planned its attacks mainly against the police, armed forces and politicians of the Socialist and People's Party. In the party's local premises throughout the country, bullet-proof glass was put in windows to increase safety. With years, journalists, writers, social activists and academic teachers opposed to the activities of the organization were the victims of ETA. Some of them, in fear for their lives, moved in bullet-proof vests and were assisted by bodyguards. An attack on people outside public institutions occurred in 1986. On the square of one of the Basque villages, a former activist of the group Maria Dolores Katarina was shot in the head. The woman was murdered when she was walking with her son. The reason for this attack according to ETA was her leaving the ranks of the organization, caused by the opposition to the use of acts of terror as a method of fighting for independence [22, p. 44-5].

The first attack on the civilian object was made in 1989. It was an attack on a supermarket in Barcelona. Twenty-one random people died then [21, p. 343]. To regain the favor of the Basques, the ETA began to direct attacks against the immigrant population. The Basque Country was the most industrialized, therefore many people came there because of the ease of getting a well-paid job. This situation contributed to changing the main goal of the fight, that is the retention of cultural and linguistic identity [12, p. 89-90].

P. Kostka notes that up to 1993, about 750 people died in the terrorist attacks carried out by ETA. The author also emphasizes that the end of the 1990s was a difficult period for the organization. The lack of funding meant that the organization began to collect tribute from business and trade representatives, who called it "a revolutionary tax". The terrorist attack on the United States in 2001 and numerous abductions and black-mails in Western Europe led to reluctance for ETA activities, also among the Basque community. The organization was suspected of attacking a suburban train in Madrid on March 11, 2004, in which 200 people died. Al-Qaeda claimed responsibility for the attack, however, the analysis of one of the unexploded ordnance suggested that ETA could have been somewhat involved in the attack [23, p. 131-2].

On December 30, 2006, ETA made another terrorist attack. ETA members detonated a trap car, which was unloaded with a huge amount of explosives, at Madrid's Barajas airport. Two people were killed and forty-one injured [16, p. 8]. In March 2008, the politics of the socialist party Isaias Carrasco was killed by ETA on the eve of the elections. However, on December 3, 2008, members of the organization killed Uria Mendizabla, a construction entrepreneur in San Sebastian, with headshots. Uria Mendizabla's company was involved in the construction of a high-speed railway line that was to connect Madrid with the Basque cities of San Sebastian, Bilbao and Victoria. ETA disagreed with the project's plans and therefore bombed it under the headquarters of the companies implementing this investment [22, p. 44-5].

Another similar incident took place in July 2009. As a result of the explosion of a car-trap in the city of Burgos, sixty-four people were injured in north-west Spain. The car was unloaded with 200 kilograms of explosives. The explosion caused a part of the front wall of the Civil Guard barracks, in which officers with their families were sleeping, to collapse onto the street [24].

Conclusions

After presenting the history and terrorist activity of ETA there is no doubt that the organization was established so as to win the full autonomy of the Basque Country. However, the scale of terror and violence that it used was unacceptable both by the Spanish government as well as the local and international community. It is estimated that as a result of the armed activities carried out by this organization since 1968, 829 people were killed, including 482 military and police officers, but also 343 civilians. In the past, the society supported the work of ETA because it acted in defense of the Basque people in the name of freedom. However, later the population strongly distanced themselves from the activities of the organization due to its terrorist, ruthless nature. Given all the above facts, the activities of ETA as a terrorist organization should be condemned. Nowadays, any actions aimed at inducing deep social and political changes using acts of terror, regardless of the motives and objectives, are unacceptable to modern civilized society by virtue of their amoral, illegitimate and destructive nature.

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Conflict of interests

All authors declared no conflict of interests.

Author contributions


All authors contributed to the interpretation of results and writing of the paper. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Ethical statement

The research complies with all national and international ethical requirements.

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Działalność terrorystyczna ETA – rys historyczny i współczesność

STRESZCZENIE

Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) była organizacją terrorystyczną walczącą o niepodległość Kraju Basków spod rządów Hiszpanii. Została utworzona w 1959 r. przez członków Baskijskiej Partii Narodowościowej (PNV). Przeprowadzane przez nią zamachy terrorystyczne wymierzano przeciwko przedstawicielom władzy oraz stróżom prawa, jednak w wyniku walk zbrojnych zginęło także wielu cywilów. Działalność organizacji była finansowana głównie z haraczy, które pobierano od przedsiębiorców pod groźbą śmierci. Akty przemocy stały się codziennością dla obywateli Hiszpanii. Z tego powodu, popierana początkowo organizacja zaczęła budzić niechęć i wywoływać fale protestów przeciwko metodom, jakie stosowała. Rząd Hiszpanii podejmował próby negocjacji oraz podpisania rozejmu z organizacją, jednak okazywały się one nieskuteczne. Organizacja wielokrotnie ogłaszała zawieszenie walk, po czym dokonywała kolejnych aktów terroru. W 2011 r. ETA ogłosiła zakończenie działalności zbrojnej, a w 2017 r. jej członkowie ostatecznie oddali broń. Większość działaczy organizacji przebywa obecnie w więzieniach. Od początku swojej działalności ETA zabiła 829 osób.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE ETA, Kraj Basków, terroryzm, niepodległość, zagrożenie

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