

Mugarik ez! Subverting the Border in the Basque Country

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In what could be considered a paradox in the present globalisation era, political borders, frontiers and boundaries in general, have become more than ever a point of interest and research focus of an increasing number of scholars, as the extensive and burgeoning literature on the topic highlights (Alvarez 1995, Donnan and Wilson 1999, Pujadas 1999). Now that national structures seem to be overwhelmed by the enforcement and consolidation of all kind of supranational structures and organisations, economic and political among others, talking about borders as sovereignty limits would not seem to make much sense. However, states are not as eager to relinquish their grip on territory and control on its borders as could be expected. This article aims to point out how borders can be considered significant places in the political arena, stages at which divergent representations of sovereignty and territoriality are performed.

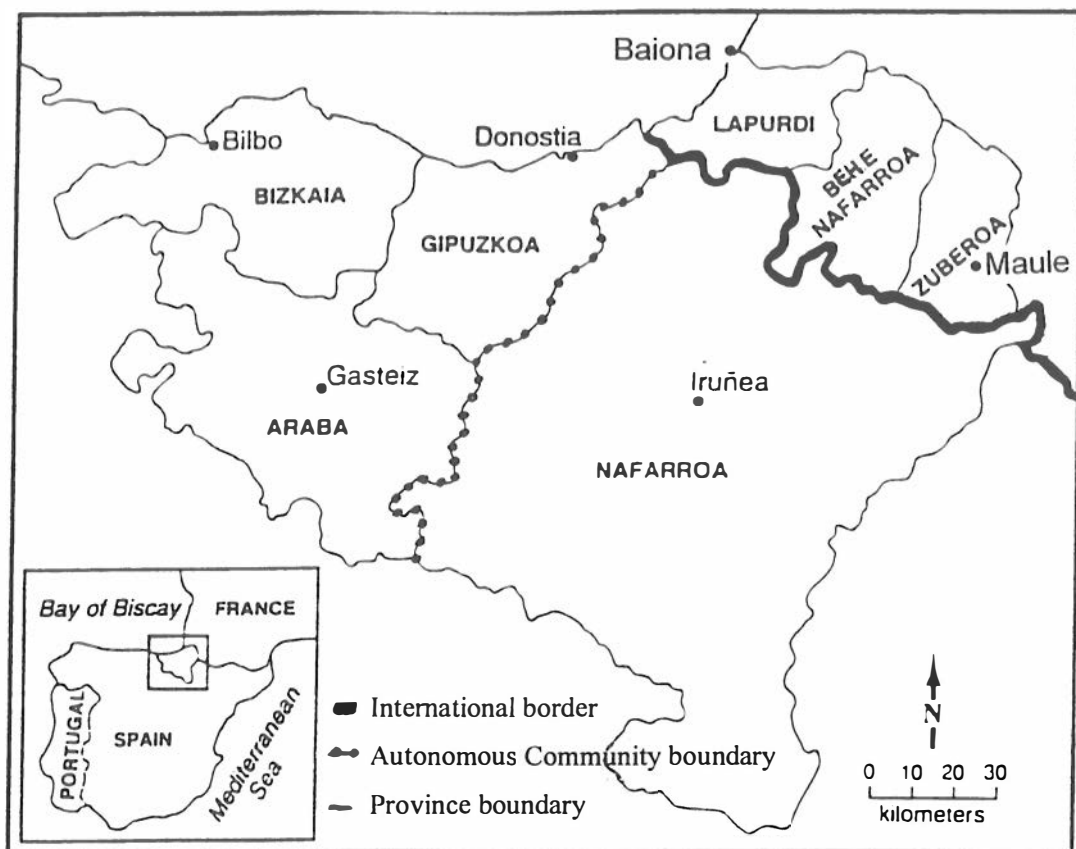
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The Basque Country is a good example of how state policies can contradict EU policies, particularly in a Europe now nominally 'without frontiers', as in the case of the maintenance of borders despite their official shut down. This territory of 20. 864km², approximately the size of Slovenia, is divided since the 17th century by the state boundary setting apart France from Spain.¹ As will be discussed below, borders are far from disappearing in the Basque Country. Not only do they continue to have major symbolic significance, but also control over the border area remains an important issue for adjacent states, which still continue to close border posts at particular dates. At the same time, the actual porosity of the border, based on the maintenance of historical ties across it and the important increase of cross-border local or EU promoted projects and initiatives, 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 in the

Basque case, struggle for their abolition, not only in discursive ways, but also through symbolic actions.

Mugarik ez!

Coinciding with the 1986 widely diffused slogan "a Europe without frontiers" nationalist movements have incorporated similar slogans in various campaigns aimed to strengthen the notion of national unity despite and above the border. Slogans like "*mugarik ez*" (no to the border), "*ez da mugarik*" (there is no border), or "*mugak apurtu*" (dismantle the borders) have become common and recurrent in the Basque nationalist political agenda. Referring to the border as *muga*, these slogans point out the complexity of this concept and its meanings (Leizaola 1996). *Muga* is the usual Basque term designating any kind of boundary or limit, encompassing among others both spatial and/or temporal meanings, although the former is much more usual than the latter. In the traditional society, this concept is particularly relevant. *Muga* designates both the location where some-



Borders and boundaries in the Basque Country.

thing ends and its limits. It refers to the linear division separating two territories as well as to the physical elements marking those limits. As many scholars have noted (Del Valle 1988, Descheemaeker 1946, Barandiaran 1972), the *muga* was rarely imposed, but resulted from negotiation. In contemporary Basque, *muga* includes the notion of “political border” among its meanings. Furthermore, nowadays, when no other precision is given it refers explicitly to the interstate border in the Basque Country. *Muga* is one of the few words Spanish has borrowed from Basque.

In the past, the location of the *muga* and of the *mugarri*, boundary stone, had to be approved by all the parties involved. According to historians, the councils of limiting villages decided the setting of the *muga* and this had to be respected by the communities involved. The location of limits and the setting of landmarks

marking the boundaries between villages had thus to be approved by each of the limiting units. Removing *muga* boundary stones was a serious offence, formally defined as such by customary laws, and even punished with death² at certain periods. Many myths too, refer to this conventional aspect of the *muga* and to the fatal consequences of removing them without permission, such as the wandering of the soul of the remover until the *mugarri* was returned to its original location (Barandiaran, 1972:173–175). Boundaries were thus to be highly respected.

As many scholars have pointed out (Del Valle 1988, Descheemaeker 1946, Gómez-Ibáñez 1975), the present political border resulting from the Pyrenees Peace of 1659 and the demarcation of the mid-19th century overlaps *muga* limits previous to the border. In contrast with other Pyrenean regions such as Catalunya, the state boundary in the Basque area was drawn

along the old inter-communal lines (Gómez-Ibáñez, 1975:49). Although some exceptions are to be noted in parts of the borderland disputed in the past, such as the Kintoa, this could be considered as a rule in this part of the Pyrenees. Hence, some boundaries happen to be at the same time limits between villages, region or province boundaries, and even autonomous region boundaries and, in the bordering area, inter state boundaries. It is common to have various territorial markers at the same spot. This overlapping is reflected in language too, as it has been referred previously. Referring to the border the term *muga* may be ambiguous because of the multiple meanings this words conveys. Playing with that multiplicity of meanings, explicit reference to the border can be somehow blurred when using the term³. The interstate frontier concept, with its administrative and political dimension shades off and the idea of boundary comes out. This is particularly noticeable when using the Basque word in a Spanish speaking context: in appearance, the border becomes a boundary like any other.

Drawing the Line. Landmarks and Territoriality

The present political border between France and Spain, said to be one of the most stable borders in the political map of Europe, was defined as a result of the Treaty of the Pyrenees (1659) putting an end to the long-lasting confrontation for the control of the oriental area of the Pyrenees (Sahlins 1989). The boundary line was not demarcated until the middle of the 19th century, though. In 1856, the signing of the Treaty of Bayonne set down the border's definite delimitation, drawing an imaginary line between France and Spain at which the sovereignty of each of the states ends. This boundary line is since marked out with tall granite stone landmarks. Starting from the most occidental point of the border at the very mouth of the Bidasoa river, to the most oriental one on the Mediterranean coast, 602 numbered landmarks, deeply buried on earth stand up at a certain distance one from another drawing an imaginary line.

Situated strategically on one of the two main entrances from the North of Europe to the Iberian peninsula, on the way to Portugal and the North of Africa, the Basque Country has a long tradition of being a passage region. As such, this land has known all throughout history non-stop flows of people and cultures crossing it in both directions. Following the course of European history, the imposition of a state boundary with all the structures and control paraphernalia it entails affected not only local people, specially borderlanders' life, but also population movements in a broader sense, mainly economic migration flows, as well as other population transfers. Particularly during the 20th century, the border area became one of the gateways of a European version of Eldorado for thousands of migrants willing to enter France and Northern Europe – Portuguese workers in the 60s, and later, labour from Maghreb and other areas of Africa – as well as the shelter for political refugees and Resistance fighters at different historical moments.⁴

All through this last century, and particularly due to the recent history of Spain, the border became, as in other areas of Europe, a highly controlled and militarised area. From the first years of Franco's dictatorship and for more than three decades, the border was formally closed, preventing the exit as well as the entrance of many Spanish nationals, namely all those considered to have lost the 1936 war, republicans, partisans of nationalist movements in Spain (Basques, Catalans and Galicians among others), anarchists etc. This highly militarised control of the border was temporarily intensified by the German border patrols during the occupation of France in the Second World War. Crossing the border was not free and it entailed a long bureaucratic process to obtain the papers to leave the country, which were denied in many cases. Limited in time, one-day permits were nevertheless frequent in the borderland area. Even if the opening of Spain to tourism in the 1960s signified a certain loosening in border control, the revitalisation of nationalist movements and independence claims together with the emergence of ETA were accompanied by the strengthening of control on the border area.

The Front Line. The Border as a Space of Contest

The dismantling of borders has frequently been analysed as part of the weakening of state sovereignty resulting from the consolidation of supranational structures all over the world. Over the last decades, scholars had somehow predicted such an evolution together with the fall of nationalism as a consequence of globalisation. Paradoxically, at least in the case of Europe, together with a significant rise of nationalisms, not only the reinforcement of supranational structures, such as the European Union, has not signified the end of internal borders as anticipated. It has also led to the creation of real "border states", states that practice borders' main functions all over their territory, as Spain in the EU or Mexico in the North American context. This is particularly relevant concerning immigration control. Spain has become one of the main gateways to the EU, mainly for African migrants willing to reach Europe but also for South American migrants that choose Spain, "*la Madre Patria*" as their first and often final destination in the Old World. Trying to prevent this non-stop and increasing affluence of illegal migrants, border controls have been stepped up, particularly all over the Mediterranean coast. Here too, following Anzaldúa's words (1987:2–3), the border is an "open wound", a wound that bleeds taking away every year the life of hundreds of people.

Applied to the Basque context, the metaphor of the wound takes another nuance and strongly renders a conception of the border shared in nationalist spheres and not unknown to borderlanders. Although in many cases it has contributed actively to the strengthening and maintenance of various links astride the border, the frontier is conceived as a dividing line, a line splitting up a unity, putting it apart. The slash is then a source of pain, one of the recurrent representations of the border in Basque contemporary imaginary. As the *bertsolari* Otaño, a well-known oral poet of the turn of the 19th century, put it in improvised verses, the Basque Country is "the cloth of seven sisters, cut in the middle"⁷⁵, the border being the scissors setting apart the seven provinces or "sisters". Consid-

ered one of the most beautiful and meaningful metaphors of the Basque Country, it represents an idea of the Basque Country based on shared cultural and linguistic grounds.

Claims to the Basque Country by Basque nationalist movements draw on specifically territorial notions of the Basque nation. Although since the 1960s Basque nationalism can not any longer be considered as a homogeneous movement, territoriality as a concept is largely agreed upon. Nevertheless, the various nationalist projects have specific political goals as well as differing ways of implementing political action. Despite a shared representation of the extension of the Basque Country, concrete proposals and policies are not applicable to the whole territory. For some, the present administrative and political frame is the basis and the setting for political action, while for others territoriality constitutes one of the major goals of political action. Thus, for those whose project is the independence of the whole Basque Country, the present political frame has to be substantially changed. This later representation calls into question Spanish and French states' territoriality, and as such, it is considered as a direct attack on their sovereignty. The state boundary is one of the most representative places where these differing and opposed conceptions of territory are to be materialised.

In this context, the border becomes a contested place where symbolic events and political actions are performed to deny the political border. Considering borders as "meaning-making and meaning-carrying places" (Donnan and Wilson, 1999:4), special attention will be paid to rituals highlighting the border as a place of contest. Many of these rituals challenging the partition of the Basque Country, attempt to subvert the state border, mainly denying its legitimacy. Such rituals have identifiable political aims, and advance agendas of radical political change. I argue that the importance of the border is not merely a concern of nationalist or pro-independence movements or other political organisations challenging state sovereignty and legitimacy and leading such subverting rituals. It also concerns the states, which in response, by different means, emphasise the role of the border as a marker of territorial sovereignty.

Now that the European Union has encouraged the dissolution of internal borders, particularly since the Single European Act and the Maastricht Treaty, and more recently with the signing of the Schengen Treaty, such symbolic, and too often real battles do not seem to make much sense. However, the fact is that since the border was officially shut down, it has become a major space of contest. Besides the frequent protests of truck drivers who in the last years have chosen border areas as one of the main scenes for their road blocking, the border has become a particularly meaningful arena for demonstrations and protest actions. Since Spain's inclusion first in the European Market and later in the European Union, the Spanish-French frontier has known an increasing number of demonstrations held in the border. Location and symbolic value of space have to be considered when dealing with demonstrations (Raento 1997:199), especially when the place is as symbolically meaningful as the border. However, far from being a simple scene of protest, the border is explicitly called into question through these examples of political activism. Hence, the frontier is a terrain of resistance and in most of the cases it is at the very core of the political mobilisation's *raison d'être*.

This is the case of demonstrations or marches willing to cross the border and thus unify symbolically both parts of the Basque Country. As will be discussed further on, most of the times and until very recently, they were not officially permitted to do so. Either one or both states have closed the border at different times in order to prevent such demonstrations from crossing the border. Border checkpoints at which until recently states materialised in the form of customs and police posts constitute the favourite frame for these political rituals. Nevertheless, as Douglass (1998) pointed out, the borderland is far from being a homogeneous area all along its layout and whilst some spots in the border are the scene of major contest actions, other areas are rarely concerned. Most of the protest actions and rituals aimed at subverting the political boundary are performed at three checkpoints, the busiest of the whole French-Spanish border⁶. The traffic is extremely heavy and chaotic at Behobia and specially at Biriatu,

on the highway, as the main bulk of truck traffic transporting goods not only to and from Spain, but also to Portugal and Morocco crosses the border at one of these points. Seasonal traffic is important too, as this is the route thousands of Portuguese and Moroccan migrants choose to cross the peninsula every year to spend the summer holidays in their countries. All this explains the fact that Biriatu is considered one of the places in Europe to have the heaviest road traffic. Hendaia, remains a crossing point frequented by more local and occasional traffic.

Border landmarks and other markers, such as customs houses, frontier posts or even traffic signs, convey a particular meaning, they represent the state at its limits. As such, they are comparable to monuments, "the most conspicuous concrete manifestations of political power" (Hershkovitz 1993:397). However, in the case of border markers, their meaning is directly linked to space, to the location where they are placed. Because of the symbolic weight of the border as evidence of state imposition, the frontier and its markers have deliberately been attacked several times. Among other various actions, attacks on state sovereignty through its territorial limit markers constitute the most visible example of subverting the border. Attempts to eliminate the border have been quite common and popular before border controls were officially dismantled after the Single European Act and the Schengen Treaty came into effect. Attacks have been quite frequent in the last two decades. They recall similar destructive actions against monuments and the symbols they represent, as in the case of the Nelson pillar in Dublin dynamited by the republicans in the 1960s (Johnson 1995:62). Mostly they have consisted of symbolic sabotage, such as countless erasing of road signs displaying "France" or "Spain" and spraying of "E.H", standing for Euskal Herria, the Basque name of the Basque Country, or the corresponding province name. These actions have to be considered as part of a broader movement including campaigns led by different organisations at various levels demanding the displaying of Basque place names correctly spelled instead of the Spanish/French versions.

In other cases, state territorial landmarks have been totally destroyed. The case of the

border-stonesculpture by the well-known sculptor Oteiza in the middle of the Santiago-Saint Jacques international bridge over the River Bidasoa which has been pulled down several times is particularly meaningful. For a long time, it was reduced to nothing more than a pile of rubble until it was roughly repaired. After it was returned to its original landmark, tied with wire, the engraved mention of France and Spain was painted out. Instead, the name of each of the bordering provinces, Gipuzkoa and Lapurdi were spray-painted in red on it. Today, the boundary stone is non-existent and there is nothing left on this site other than some scarcely visible marks of its previous emplacement. Similarly, border checkpoints and customs have been a main target for armed groups in the North Basque Country.

Protest is not always violent though. Following these last years ever increasing trend to think up innovative ways of protest and denunciation, a spectacular action was recently carried out against the border. Calling to rebellion against French and Spanish states, two people tied themselves with a rope hanging from the Santiago-Saint Jacques international bridge.⁷ It took some time until the police were able to free both of them without letting them fall into the river. Such actions intend to redefine the territory, denying the border, giving place to a reformulation and reshaping of Basque land according to nationalist conception.

Other dimensions apart from the ones presented above have to be taken into account, too. The destruction of some twenty boundary stones in 1997 aroused the border issue in the context of European integration. At the time, the MLNV⁸ had launched a broad campaign to raise public awareness about territory and one of its major repercussions was the questioning of the legitimacy of the border and the role of the *muga* in the Basque territory definition. Related to this, a group of youths from both sides of the border decided to undertake the systematic destruction of state boundary stones to protest against an "imposed and artificial border".⁹ Many of those landmarks are situated in not easily accessible spots, on the top of mountains, as the boundary line follows the crest line. Local people from a village north of the border reported

the sabotage and the French gendarmerie took charge of the issue, patrolling the border area, specially the boundary stone emplacements. Some days after the first actions were reported, four young people from the North were caught red handed, hammer in hand as they tried to smash into pieces one of the 276 boundary stones in the Basque area. As one of the activists explained some months later during the trial, the sabotage was conceived as "a symbolic action against the border dividing our country in two." This event did not provoke any substantial reaction from local authorities who did not even present a complaint to superior authorities. Surprisingly enough, France was the only country to feel involved by the attack and to present charges against the activists who were taken to court and lightly charged, while Spanish authorities did not mention a word about it – even if the landmarks are under their jurisdiction too. The incident came quickly to public notice though: a picture of one of the smashed boundary stones was later used as a poster displaying a slogan explicitly referring to the dismantling¹⁰ of the border and claiming the unity and sovereignty of the Basque Country.

Making Up One from Two: Unifying the Basque Country Symbolically

In 1992, *Bai Independentziari* "Yes to independence", a large platform gathering most of the Basque nationalist parties¹¹ from both North and South called what was considered the first united National Day since the 1936 War. This *Aberri Eguna*, literally "the day of the Basque Fatherland" was to be held that year on both sides of the border. Two villages on the banks of the Bidasoa River, Hondarribia and Hendaia, were the setting of the commemoration. Organisers had been careful to acknowledge prominence to both sides of the border, and the main events of the day were a demonstration in Hondarribia in the morning and a political meeting in Hendaia in the afternoon. The scheduled programme went ahead despite the fact that the border had been closed since very early that morning preventing any circulation across the frontier. The border closure generated a spontaneous reaction amongst the crowd gath-

ered on both banks of the Bidasoa and resulted in a dialogue-like shouting of slogans from each side of the river. Songs, *irrintziak* – loud, long and joyous yells – and slogans were shouted from one side to the other, establishing communication over the closed border. As two traditional rowing boats crossed the river and met at its centre, where the border line streams into the sea and pulled up their oars in a symbol of victory, the climax was reached. Slogans for independence, against the border and the French and Spanish states were vigorously shouted from both banks.

Four years later, in 1996, in the same year when Spain signed the Schengen Treaty, the *Aberri Eguna* was once again to be held in the borderland. This time, it was a common call by the South left pro-independence party *HB* and the North nationalist coalition *Abertzaleen Batasuna*. This was the first visible result of advanced concrete cooperation efforts for the implementation of a common policy for the whole Basque Country. The scene chosen for the celebration of the *Aberri Eguna* was to be again the Bidasoa area. This time though, the main event was not to be held on both sides of the border, but consisted in the actual crossing of the border itself. A huge demonstration of several thousand people from North and South crossed the border from Hendaia to Irun. It was the biggest march in the borderland, comparable to the so-called “national demonstrations”¹² usually taking place in the main cities.

From the last decade of Francoism to the present, popular mobilisations occupy a prominent place in politics, as the demonstration culture that has flourished in the Basque Country highlights. Apart from some exceptions (Chaffee 1988, Raento 1997), scholars have paid little attention to street campaignings. However, mass protests have become common in the political arena and street mobilisations play an important part when considering political stakes. Demonstrations and counter-demonstrations are thus considered a way both to measure forces and to challenge the status quo. As part of this protest tradition and following a practice that has become usual in the last twenty years, many people arrived to the borderland by bus. Coming from towns and cities as far as almost

three hours drive, the buses, organised for the occasion, stopped before the border as a precaution, fearing that they would not be allowed to cross the international bridge. Some hours before the demonstration, the Spanish police in riot gear had taken up position at the abandoned customs checking point on the demonstration route. The French police, more discreet, guarded the other side of the bridge. People from the South thus crossed the border on foot choosing an adjacent bridge to avoid the main border post under extraordinary police surveillance.

From the Town Hall of Hendaia, the demonstration made its way towards Irun, the first town on the other side of the border. The increasingly elaborate icons carried in mass protests and presenting a carefully prepared setting, the demonstration was spectacular. An impressively huge *ikurrina*, the Basque flag, carried by dancers in traditional dress followed close behind by big size emblems of the six historical Basque lands or provinces (Behe Nafarroa being represented by the coat of arms of the kingdom of Nafarroa) marched at the head of the demonstration. Immediately behind, the main banner, with the slogan *Euskal Herriak, Askatasuna* (Basque Country, Freedom) was carried by politicians of the organising parties and coalitions. As the demonstration was getting closer to the international bridge, tension grew. Since very early in the morning, because of previous unsuccessful experiences and above all because of the police in assault uniforms, there had been a lot of expectation about crossing the border. Anticipation of crossing the border was the main topic of conversation among the demonstrators. Suspicion and fear about whether the border crossing would be peaceful was evident among the crowd. As the demonstration passed the border controls, tension dissipated. Enthusiastic comments like “this is a historical moment”, “we got it”, could be heard at the very moment of the crossing. The political leaders who spoke at the meeting giving an end to the march in Irun described the demonstration as a success and defined it as a “historical event”. In fact, never before had such a demonstration succeeded in crossing the border.

There had been several precedents prior to the 1996 *Aberri Eguna*, though. Both states in turn or together had prevented any demonstration from crossing the frontier either by closing the border, or by firing plastic bullets against the demonstrators. As Del Valle (1988:122) points out in her study on the Korrika, a popular footrace for Basque language speakers all through the Basque Country, the border crossing is particularly meaningful. Through the ritualisation of crossing, the border is transcended materialising symbolically the metaphor of Basque unity. For years, various protest actions, including that of Korrika had systematically been denied crossing the border. Even the funeral procession marches accompanying the transfer of the corpses of *political refugees*, ETA militants living in the North were blocked. As Aretxaga reports in her study of funeral rituals in Basque radical nationalism, border crossing is particularly meaningful. The territorial unity symbol for which the militant has struggled and died becomes significant as the mortal remains are returned to the family on the other side of the border (Aretxaga 1988:47). At this very moment is enhanced another strong and recurrent metaphor of the border, that of the divided family – present in Otaño's verses. Although the funeral cortege, wife and children, friends and militants are not permitted to cross the state boundary, the border does not stop the funeral procession. Frequently, as in the Korrika case, a relay system is organised, the border being the end and starting point of a divided demonstration. Slogans and songs would unite people – and family – astride the borderline, symbolically transcending it.

The following year, and as a continuation of the 1996 experience of bringing together North and South on such a special day, there was again a call for a united National Day. The celebration of the *Aberri Eguna* was part of a large campaign of co-operation between nationalist parties and social movements astride the border. The celebration had two different settings, Baiona, provincial capital of Lapurdi and the main urban centre in the North, and Iruñea, an emblematic city of high symbolic value, capital city of the former Kingdom of Nafarroa in the South. Although the idea was not new – the

PNV for instance had organised double events of this kind before – the aim was to bring together people from both sides. Because of the distance between the two cities, about 140 kilometres, organisers had foreseen that people would mainly join one of the two events. Nevertheless, responding to the unity idea of the call the celebration was organised to make it possible to attend both. That way, demonstration traditions of North and South were respected too: as in previous years, the demonstration in Iruñea was scheduled in the morning and that in Baiona in the afternoon. Hence, a bus link was to operate between the two cities. However, the unexpected finding of the corpse of an ETA activist found dead in strange circumstances the day before the *Aberri Eguna* disrupted the scheduled programme.¹³

The Reification of the Border. Opening and Closing Policies in a “Europe without Frontiers”

Until the present, borders have been highly significant all through the process of state formation. Examples taken not only from the European context, but also in other settings show the importance of the frontier concept worldwide in the definition and consolidation of states at different periods. Now that the European Union has stressed the need to open economic and political borders in order to achieve European integration, the meaning and role of borders and territorial boundaries in general, seem to have altered radically. I will argue, though, that states still manifest their willingness to maintain and even emphasise their territorial jurisdiction as a means of sovereignty. To do so, rituals and specific actions are again activated. The most visible one is without any doubt the presence of police corps at former checkpoints despite the closing down of frontier posts.

Other visible examples of border maintenance are related to space and to the inscription of memory through monuments. As in other cases that have deserved special attention, particularly the war monuments to the dead as a way to embody national identity through the highest sacrifice to the Nation, the location of the monuments remains an outstanding mat-

ter. Johnson points out the relation of space and more particularly territory, defining it as "as intrinsic to memory as historical consciousness in the definition of a national identity" (1995:55). The location of monuments is rarely left to the whims of fate. Rather, it responds to an often previously well planned conception of space and its meanings. However, it can be seen in the case of border markers sabotage, monumental space becomes social property and can thus be "used in ways that are different from and even contrary to the uses to which their builders or "owners" intended they be put" (Hershkovitz, 1993:397). This raises again the issue of place and monument location. Some months before the formal abolition of customs and traveller controls, twelve huge pillars were erected at the Biriatu no man's land, between the border post and the highway toll barrier. Apparently, the pillars had no special function or purpose. They had no name either. Their emplacement was significant though: if borders were to disappear together with the paraphernalia signalling them, the pillars would be a visible outstanding mark at the very location of the former border.

Apart from maintaining the border icons, states still actively emphasise their role at the borderline. One of the less known rites reasserting the border is the reconnaissance every two years of all the boundary stones on the Pyrenean borderline. Through a ritual recalling very much the *muga* reviewing, quite frequent nowadays in many Basque villages and towns, authorities from both states meet at a pre-fixed date in order to check together the condition and correct situation of the landmarks. As can be noticed from the analysis of reports at the municipal archives of bordering villages where fieldwork was conducted, this ritual has evolved. Since the 80s, state representation is not any longer ensured by state agents and officials, such as the *préfet* for the French side, or the *gobernador* for the Spanish one. Even the police, which in the past witnessed the operation, are no longer present. In a movement that could be very much considered as part of the actual European trend towards regionalising politics, states have delegated their representation to village mayors.

Too often, though, states continue to hold control of the frontier in what could be easily understood as a way of publicly displaying that they still master border matters. As it happens in the case of subverting rituals, states are aware that "political understandings are mediated through symbols" (Kertzer 1988:79). The border becomes thus one of the most visible and concrete symbols of power legitimacy and control. As has been described in the case of the National Day celebrations and other protest events, the presence of the state at the border becomes more than evident on particular dates. On dates significant to the Basque nationalist agenda, control measures are reinforced and police return to the abandoned border posts and to checkpoints that no longer exist. On such occasions, and without giving any consistent explanation, main-crossing roads – even the highway – can be closed for some hours or for a whole day. Other minor routes are also affected by these measures. When the border is not totally closed, despite the free circulation agreements, people are stopped at the border. Police start what is known as "filter operation": crossing is controlled and can be refused. The consequences of border closing affect anyone wishing to cross the border on these dates. That means that on such occasions commercial and private traffic is stopped at the border and compelled to wait for the opening and regularisation of the situation. This situation provokes above all important traffic jams. No mention is ever made of the fact that these actions go against one of the main bases of the Single European Act. As a matter of fact, most of the time the media consider it only as locally relevant news.¹⁴

However, border closing does not affect only events specifically linked to Basque nationalism. Cultural events and other kinds of celebrations are also touched. For the last 25 years one of the most significant dates for border closing is the *Herri Urrats*, a festival to raise funds for *ikastolak*, Basque schools in the North. Because of the frequency of controls and the difficulty of crossing the border, border crossing has become part of the day's program for thousands of people from the southern provinces willing to join the festival. Due to this, drivers plan the trip thinking of alternative routes and taking

extra time as a precaution against possible disturbances and objections.

When "national demonstrations" are called in the North, the border is very likely to be closed by either one or both states. It may occur too, when protest actions are scheduled in France as happened on 10 November 1995. That day France closed the border to prevent 22 buses from crossing the border on their way to Paris. Almost 1,500 people from the South were in the buses to take part in a demonstration the next day in Paris to protest against a case involving 80 people, Basques and Bretons, charged with collaboration with, or membership in the armed group ETA. The border in Behobia remained closed from late afternoon until the next day, under the surveillance of the French army. This year, on the 11 March 2000, the day before the general election in Spain, a huge demonstration was called in Baiona "to claim the right of political prisoners to take part in the political process". The border was again the object of intense control by both Spanish and French police. Buses were diverted and cars stopped. Carrying out orders from the French Ministry of Interior and appealing to the second article of Schengen, the French police corps closed the border some hours before the beginning of the demonstration. More than 200 French police in riot gear, shields in hand, had taken up the Biriatu crossing point, forming a real front line, a human frontier.

Blurred Borders?

More than ever, as the Basque case shows, borders are being continuously transcended particularly in recent decades. The variety of examples stresses however, that this transcending is not exclusively related to the Basque nationalistic cause. While local co-operation astride the border has increased, to the extent of establishing formal agreements between several political institutions, states too have felt the need for co-operation more than ever. This has resulted mainly in ensuring an active co-operation policy between French and Spanish authorities concerning terrorism matters. To achieve this, both states have evoked at different times the European integration, stressing

the need of implementing the necessary means to bring an end to the "Basque problem". However, both states have too quickly silenced their responsibility in border transgression issues such as the GAL¹⁵ affair. During the 1980s paramilitary forces co-ordinated by the Spanish state carried out on French soil countless bombings, killing about 30 people, most of them Basque refugees. As it has been recently proved during the criminal proceedings against former Spanish government ministers and high ranking military and police officials, Spanish police members and mercenaries had crossed the border several times during that period to operate with total impunity on French soil. Significantly, France never reported any formal complaint nor undertook any measure to prevent those attacks, although some of the victims were French citizens.

Paradoxically, in the present times, France seems very much concerned by events on the other side of the border. When dealing with the Basque department claim, a demand supported by the vast majority of the population in the North Basque Country, nationalists and non-nationalists alike, the French government appealed to unexpected arguments, more concerned by the neighbouring state than by the demands of its own citizens. As Mr. Chevenement, the French Interior Minister announced in the meeting with the local councillors, representatives of the movement for the department, "the Basque department could weaken the unity of Spain" (*Euskaldunon Egunkaria*, 2000-03-10). The issue, once again, raises the question of the legitimacy of borders and the way they are conceived, used or subverted depending on the interests at stake. Thus, the Basque example, a case of contest on an EU internal border, is particularly interesting as it points out not only the difficulty which states have in relinquishing their grip on borders but also the strategies used by Basque nationalists to subvert a border non recognised as such. It also highlights their contradictions and ambiguities, particularly concerning EU related conceptions and their application, a subject that needs to be deepened and deserves further analysis.

Notes

1. Further administrative divisions complicate the map: south of the border, two Autonomous Communities, the Basque Autonomous Community (Araba, Gipuzkoa and Bizkaia) and the Foral Community of Navarre. North of the border, the Basque provinces (Lapurdi, Behe Nafarroa and Zuberoa) lack any decision taking institution and are included in the Atlantic Pyrenees Department. For simplicity, Basque toponyms will be used throughout the text. Similarly, to ease the reading, the terms South and North will be used instead of the Basque terms *Hegoaldea* and *Iparaldea*, when referring respectively to the Spanish and to the French side of the border.
2. The *fueros*, or charters specific to each of the Basque territories, give clear indications of the offensive nature of such actions and the punishment that they incurred. For more details, see Leizaola 1996:95.
3. There are other cases of avoiding explicit reference to the border. One of the most interesting to analyse is the use of the phrase "the other side", either in Basque, Spanish or French when talking of the border, where the state boundary is euphemistically mentioned.
4. Even though most of the references emphasise the role of the borderland as a "sanctuary" for ETA militants (Douglass 1994:48), it must not be forgotten that during 1936 and later during the Second World War, the borderland was a relatively secure shelter.
5. The whole poem highlights the central role of the border as a dividing line (the original is in Basque, the translation is mine): "Cloth of seven sisters cut in the middle, three dresses in one side, four others left on the other. Even if cut with scissors, each of them apart, it is known that all seven are dressed with one same cloth. Consider Basque language the cloth, the Bidasoa river the scissors, it is a mere stream compared to the sea. All seven are close from each other, the border is called Pausua – the passage. Why can not we be a single family?".
6. It is significant too that the N1, the main Spanish national road heading to Madrid, starts precisely at the very border, in Behobia. Straddling the Bidasoa river marking the international boundary, Béhobie-Behobia is a clear example of border influenced development.
7. *Euskaldunon Egunkaria* 04-03-2000.
8. The MNLV, the Basque National Liberation Movement, through some of the organisations under its patronage, mainly the political party Herri Batasuna, launched in the mid-90s the campaign "This is not France nor Spain" to condemn the present political frame - the non recognition of the Basque Country as a nation - as well as to increase public awareness on territoriality.
9. Interview, June 1997.

10. Even though the poster was not signed by any particular organisation, the message, "*Above all borders, the Basque Country. No to the border. This is not France, nor Spain. It is the Basque Country*", recalls the motto of the mentioned IIB. Following an ever spreading trend since the 90s in this kind of alternative mass communication and willing to target not only local population, but tourists too, the last two sentences were written in five languages: Basque, French, Spanish, English and German.
11. There were significant exceptions, though: the PNV, the main nationalist party in the South did not join in.
12. The so-called "national demonstrations" are major protest actions taking place in the main cities gathering many thousands of people from all over the Basque Country called by political parties or organizations, defined as left-independents.
13. Following one of the main traditions of the radical or left nationalist movement (for more details, see Aretxaga 1988), a political homage organised in the activist's home village that afternoon attracted most of the demonstrators concentrated in Iruñea.
14. This is not the case, for instance, when the border is blocked by truck drivers. The way the media deal with these two new events is completely different. The road-blocking is treated as national or international news, while on the rare occasions when the border closing has been mentioned on the TV daily news, it is considered as local information.
15. GAL stands for Antiterrorists Groups of Liberation. It is the most known of the many paramilitary groups (AAA, BVE...) that emerged after the end of Franco's dictatorship and carried out terrorist attacks against Basque activists.

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