

# ETA: Rise and Fall of Ethno-Nationalist Terrorism in Spain

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## ABSTRACT

Over the past four decades, discontented ethnic groups have employed political violence to express their grievances and pursue their political goals for separation, autonomy, and independence. This case study aims to explore Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA), one of Europe's most prominent ethno-nationalist terrorist organizations that operated within Spain's Basque region between 1959 and 2018. The research uses a case study approach to examine ETA's ideology, organizational structure, political violence, public support, and Spain's counterterrorism measures to better understand the group's rise and fall. The qualitative analysis of secondary data includes academic articles, research reports, and international policy publications. The research contributes to the literature on ethno-nationalist terrorism in Europe, highlighting the role of political and social changes and the state's counterterrorism measures in shaping the development and downfall of such groups. This study illustrates how shifts in political and social areas combined with effective counterterrorism strategies can significantly influence the lifecycle of ethnonationalist terrorist organizations.

**Keywords:** Terrorism, Euskadi Ta Askatasuna, Spain, discontented ethnic groups

## Introduction

Ethnicity has significantly driven political violence over the past four decades. Distinct cultural differences often establish the foundation for ethnic movements in historic communities with shared heritage and

cultural similarities (Smith 1979, 22). Such conflicts can lead to the formation of ethnic terrorist groups aiming for independence or autonomy. Often, the state is the source of ethnic communities' grievances, leading to the establishment of factions that address these issues through various actions (Pluchin-

sky 2006, 36). This research focuses on Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) in Spain's Basque region. ETA is one of the leading ethno-nationalist groups in Europe, and it originated from the struggle for Basque nationalism in the nineteenth century. Multiple factors, including industrialization, loss of autonomy, immigration, and increased centralized power, influenced its emergence (Woodworth 2001, 4). These developments affected Basque areas, changing local traditions and language dynamics and raising concerns related to cultural identity. The Basque people felt that their national identity was in danger. During the Franco dictatorship (1939–1975), the government portrayed the country as a homogeneous society centered around Catholicism and Castilian ethnicity. It regarded the Basque nationalists as “separatists” who did not fit the regime's idea of the Spanish homogeneous identity (Molina 2010, 250). The regime recognized the Spanish language as the only official language. The Basque language and the manifestation of ethnic identity were outlawed (251). From 1968 to 2010, the United States classified the group as a terrorist group (Martin-Pena and Opatow 2011, 135). The group declared a ceasefire in 2011 and formally disbanded in 2018. This study investigates ETA's ideology, organizational structure, political violence, public support dynamics, and counterterrorism activities. It can enrich our knowledge of ethnonationalist groups, enabling us to introduce effective measures for combatting terrorism.

The research question guiding this study is: “How did ETA's rise

and fall deepen our understanding of ethno-nationalist terrorism and counterterrorism effectiveness?” The hypothesis is: “ETA's fall shows that socio-political changes, targeted counterterrorism measures, and leadership shifts are critical factors that can lead to the dissolution of ethno-nationalist terrorist groups.” The purpose is to investigate ETA, an ethno-nationalist terrorist organization in Spain's Basque region that operated from 1959 to 2018. By analyzing ETA's ideology, organizational structure, political violence, public support, and counterterrorism measures, the study seeks to understand the factors behind ETA's rise and fall.

## **Literature Review**

**A**nalysis of the evolution and dissolution of ETA requires a comprehensive examination of various aspects. This literature review is focused on exploring scholarly sources that provide insights into these critical aspects and are organized across selected themes and variables relevant to ETA's context: (1) ideology, (2) organizational structure, (3) political violence, (4) public support, and (5) effectiveness of counterterrorism measures.

### ***Ideology***

Ideology refers to a system of beliefs and principles that guide and form a person's outlook on the world. It assigns a specific context to political conduct (Lindberg 2010, 3). Drake (1998) suggests that ideologies can be founded on anarchism, separatism, religion, communism, fascism, or single-issue causes

and may incorporate elements of history and myths. Ideology offers motive and structure for actions (55). Ideology plays a fundamental role in leading people to terrorism and is instrumental in legitimizing attacks against civilians or committing suicide operations for the cause (Lindberg 2010, 3). Ideological disagreements and differing assumptions can lead to vastly different proposals for human behavior, as each ideology assigns a specific structure to political action (4). Ideological categories can also reflect a combination of two ideologies (Rapoport 2004, 56). For example, Hamas' ideology represents religion and separatism (Drake 1998, 55). Ideology shapes terrorists' conduct and defines the "enemies" of the group to measure the "guilt and innocence" of individuals and institutions. An individual or institution is a legitimate target if it acts against terrorists' ideological beliefs (Drake 1998, 56).

### ***Political Violence***

According to Hoffman (2017), terrorism is where politics and violence intersect to achieve significant political change (254). Terrorism causes substantial costs, such as physical, political, economic, and psychological. Terrorist groups employ violence, pushing the state to its resistance limits to compel the government to give up the contested territory or agree on self-government (Sánchez-Cuenca 2007, 294). Targets are selected based on ideology. Merari (1999) argues that indiscriminate targeting is characteristic of groups engaged in national or ethnic struggles

(57). Such groups frequently see themselves as battling an entire population. For example, Palestinian terrorists carried out random attacks on the Israeli public because they perceived Israel as their enemy rather than targeting specific segments of Israeli society (58).

### ***Organizational Structure***

Organizational capacity and skills are essential characteristics of terrorist groups. The lifespan of any movement depends on the effective management of its human resources and assets. Leadership is crucial in selecting, incorporating, and managing tasks and responsibilities in organizing attacks, resource mobilization, and providing logistical support, communication, and transportation (Lindberg 2010, 6). Group cohesion is one of the primary tasks of the organization. Internal divisions or disagreements can arise from policy differences over the use of violence or leadership conflicts (Merari 1999, 57). Disagreements over strategy and policy can lead to divisions within a group or result in "intra-ethnic" violence, whereas one faction can attack the other as its rival. For example, during 1970–1980, the Palestinian terrorist groups killed their internal competing rivals in Lebanon (Pluchinsky 2006, 38).

### ***Public Support***

Terrorists rely on public support to offset the superior resources of governments. Justifying violence through discourse is a fundamental aspect of terrorists' strategies (Martín-Peña and Susan Opatow 2011, 144). Any use of violence, such as

attacking, killing, or injuring the civilian population, can negatively impact the terrorist group's image, diminishing any existing public support for its cause. However, there may be situations when the group's strategic position within the targeted state or changes in political conditions lead it to prioritize publicity, even if negative, over public sympathy (Pluchinsky 2005, 41). Discriminative terrorist targeting against detested individuals or groups may also increase popular support. For example, Al-Qaeda gained some level of popularity in its fight against the West in the past (Lindberg 2010, 5). Crenshaw (2005) argues that groups must be mindful of the threshold of public support and avoid overstepping their "tolerance limits"; otherwise, it can lead to the alienation of supporters and disagreements within the organization (8).

### ***Counterterrorism Measures***

#### **Political**

Governments are under immense pressure to act when faced with terrorist attacks. In response, they implement various interventions to end terrorism, including political negotiations, autonomy grants, and military crackdowns. For example, the South Tyrol Province was granted greater autonomy after the talks with the Committee for the Liberation of South Tyrol. In the late 1960s, the ethno-nationalist group was strongly supported by the Austrian government, the neighboring country (Marone 2017, 480). Enders and Sandler (1993) highlight governments' active and passive measures to fight terrorist groups.

Active responses imply retaliatory acts, preemptive strikes, group infiltration, and covert operations. Passive measures include adopting restrictive laws and increasing the severity of punishment, employing innovative technologies, and enhancing international cooperation (829). Governments increase the likelihood of apprehension and enhance the severity of punishments as deterrence measures (Lafree and Dugun 2009, 7). Marone (2017), for example, describes Italy's counterterrorism strategies as a combination of "stick" (repressive measures) and "carrot" (political initiatives) approaches (480).

### **Laws and Policies**

There are two primary models for countering terrorism: (1) the criminal justice system and (2) the military "war" model. Liberal democratic states use the criminal justice system to combat terrorist groups. For example, Spain prosecutes terrorism as a separate crime within the criminal code (Benavente and Porto 2013, 271).

#### ***Military "War" Model***

Chalk (199) highlights that most democratic states avoid using the war model to counter terrorism in a civilian context, given that it may impact civil liberties and human rights. Military resources are deployed in case of emergencies (377). While combating terrorism, states may face risks of abusing power, leading to violating fundamental rights, such as the right to due process and fair trial. For example, Italy (1969–1974)

and Spain (1983–1987) circumvented the principles of the rule of law in their antiterrorism efforts (378).

### ***Theoretical Framework***

Literature on ethno-nationalism terrorism stems from studies on terrorism, offering diverse theoretical frameworks to analyze the origin of this phenomenon. Scholars (Khatami 1997; Martín-Peña and Susan Opatow 2011; Molina 2010; Muro 2004, 39; Smith 1979) propose various theories, including social identity theory, rational choice theory, theory of internal colonialism, and ethnic separatism theory, to explain the political violence of ethnonationalism movements, including ETA.

### **Social Identity Theory**

**T**errorism develops in a social environment that firmly separates the group (ingroup, “us”) and those outside (outgroups, “them”). In such circumstances, outgroup members are usually branded “enemies” (Schwartz et al. 2009, 542). Usually, individuals who belong to a minority group may experience discrimination from a majority or more powerful parties, leading to a sense of anger and moral supremacy over an opposing group (543). According to Schwartz et al. (2009), the concept of threat plays a fundamental role in comprehending group dynamics. This threat does not necessarily involve danger; cultural threats can be just as significant. For example, the conflict between Israel and Palestine involves political, phys-

ical, ideological, and cultural threats. These factors can accelerate opponents’ depersonalization, triggering violence to combat the threat and re-establish equality (543).

Social identity theory can be used as a roadmap to understand the rise and fall of ETA by investigating how shifts in social identities, relationships between the group and the public, organizational dynamics, and societal transformations influenced the group’s weakening and eventual disbandment.

### **Gaps in Literature**

**W**hile researching the data, several gaps were identified. Assessing the shifts in ETA’s public support, especially during the transformation of Spain’s political system, proved difficult due to insufficient chronological data. Additionally, accurate information on ETA’s organizational structure, including leadership conflicts and decision-making processes, was hard to find, particularly following the split between its political and military divisions. Addressing these gaps is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of ETA’s dynamics and the broader context of ethno-nationalist terrorism.

### **Methodology**

**T**his qualitative research employs a case study approach to obtain an in-depth analysis of the research question and examines it from various angles to capture the situation’s complexity. It utilizes qualitative analy-

sis using secondary data from academic articles, research studies, international policy publications, and other relevant open-source materials. These sources are selected based on their relevance to understanding Basque nationalism, ETA's establishments, the group's ideology, organizational structure, political violent actions, public support, and Spain's counterterrorism measures. Secondary sources offer significant advantages, such as saving time and costs associated with primary data collection (Baxter and Jack 2008, 554). A possible disadvantage is that these materials may contain the biases of the scholars (George and Andrew 2004, 2).

## **Analytical Framework**

**T**his analytical framework will be used to investigate the rise and fall of ETA and assist in exploring the various factors related to the group's lifecycle. This framework will concentrate on specific variables attributed to the group and focus on the following five variables: ideology, organizational structure, political violence, public support, and counterterrorism measures.

### ***Ideology***

Ideology is an important variable that plays a fundamental role in motivating people to terrorism, forming its goals, and legitimizing attacks against civilians for the cause (Lindberg 2010, 3). Ideology shapes terrorists' conduct and defines the "enemies" of the group to measure the "guilt and inno-

cence" of individuals and institutions (Drake 1998, 56). ETA's ideology is based on the Basque ethnonationalist movement, which advocates for independence from Spain. The group possesses a combined ideology representing components of Basque nationalism and Marxist-Leninism (Khatami 1997, 396). The research will explore the influence of Basque nationalism on ETA, including the role of Sabino Arana, the founding father of Basque nationalism, and the influence of Franco's regime. It will also analyze how the group's ideology progressed and how those shifts were reflected in its decisions and acts.

### ***Organizational Structure***

The structure of the organization has a critical impact on the group's organizational capacity and its lifespan. The lifespan of any movement depends on the effective management of its human resources and assets. Leadership is crucial in selecting, incorporating, and managing tasks and responsibilities in organizing attacks, resource mobilization, and providing logistical support, communication, and transportation (Lindberg 2010, 6). The research will analyze ETA's organization, leadership, and internal dynamics and assess the sources of the group's financial resources, such as criminal activities and the diaspora's funding.

### ***Political Violence***

Terror groups routinely employ political violence. The research will concentrate on ETA's types of violence, its initial targets, such as state security forces

and political officials, and the gradual expansion of the list, killing public officials, representatives of the court, and media. It will examine how ETA legitimized its political violence, explaining its tactics and targets.

### ***Public Support***

Public support is crucial for any terrorist group and directly impacts its life cycle and sustainability. It ensures human and financial resources and provides legitimacy and recognition. Shifts in public support can explain why ETA's popularity rose or declined. The research will explore ETA's popular support under Franco's authoritarian regime and through Spain's transition to democracy. It will also analyze significant incidents that contributed to ETA's decline in popular support.

### ***Counterterrorism Measures***

An assessment of Spain's counterterrorism measures can help shed light on what measures were effective in countering the group. The research will explore the government responses, including political negotiations and democratic reforms. It will analyze Spain's legislative and judicial measures against ETA and its supporters. The research will also explore how Spain's international cooperation with a neighboring state contributed to the disruption of ETA's operations.

This framework will guide my analysis of the factors that led to ETA's rise and fall. Analyzing ETA's ideology, organizational structure, political violence, public support, and counter-

terrorism measures can help identify various factors related to the group's lifecycle to provide insights into developing strategies to mitigate ethnonational terrorism.

## **Findings**

### ***Ideology***

Ideology mirrors political, economic, and social issues in the country. Two aspects contributed to ETA's emergence and ideology: (1) Sabino Arana's nationalist doctrine, viewing the Basque region as an occupied territory, and (2) Franco's dictatorship, enforcing this occupation (Muro 2007, 7). Since 1876, the Basque ethnonationalists have perceived their ethnic identity as being threatened by Spain's discriminative policies (Khatami 2008, 397). Arana's nationalism derived from the myth of the Golden Age, where all Basques were once equal and independent and were eventually occupied by France and Spain (Muro 2004, 147). Franco's repressive measures, such as restricting political pluralism, banning the use of the Basque language, and suppressing freedom of expression, deepened these perceptions of threats, accelerating the rise of ETA and the ethnonationalism movement in the Basque region (Woodworth 2001, 1). Students established ETA in 1959 to achieve Basque independence from Spain (Muro 2007, 10; Woodworth 2001, 5). The group became instrumental in rebuilding the identity of the Basque people, choosing violence as a pathway for its end goal (Molina 2010, 251).

ETA's ideology represents a mixture of Marxist-Leninism and nationalism (Khatami 1997, 396). ETA drifted between a nationalist and socialist ideology in the 1960s. "Marriage" of these two components resulted in the group's division thrice in 1966, 1970, and 1977 (Muro 2007, 15). The group incorporated new concepts into its ideology, shifting from Arana's race, language, and religion tenets. The group propelled the separation of church and state, mainstreamed socialist ideas, and diverged from viewing language as the critical component of the nation (148). The group chose a socialist stance to integrate a more significant segment of the population and increase the number of followers.

ETA portrayed Spain's capitalist system as its enemy, viewed the Basque capitalist class as allies of the Spanish central power, and blamed them for erasing Basque cultural identity. In contrast, the group viewed the Basque proletariat as the true advocates of Basque identity (Khatami 1997, 397). In 1968, the group began employing an "action-repression-action dynamic" to trigger government retaliations, which would then be used to justify further actions and win public support. Basque people considered the ETA's attacks as a response to the government's repressive measures and as an assertion of their identity concerning the "Basque issue" (Molina 2010, 251). During its lifespan, the group killed 829 people (Ballesteros 2018, 9).

## Political Violence

### *Justification of Violence*

Leaders can inspire their audience to use violence, claiming that their social identity is under threat. ETA launched a national liberation campaign asserting that the Basque region was governed by foreign forces (Douglass and Zulaika 1990, 244). ETA justified the use of violence as (1) legitimate and unavoidable, (2) an instrument to strengthen Basque ethnicity, and (3) an approach to strengthening the group's solidarity and cohesion (Muro 2007, 8). ETA employed a strategy of attrition and violent campaigns until the twenty-first century, when those strategies lost their effectiveness and public support (Murua 2016, 100).

### *Tactics*

The group's tactics involved bombings, assassinations, and hostage takings (Ballesteros 2018, 9). ETA successfully conducted its first terrorist act in 1968 by killing a chief of police, Meliton Manzanas (Sullivan 1999, 35; Woodworth 2001, 6). The government responded with several arrests, imprisonment, and ill-treatment of ETA's followers, enforcing the State of Emergency in the Basque region. ETA brutally retaliated with multiple attacks (Sullivan 1999, 35). Peixoto, one of the group leaders, claimed that a nation could only be built by "blood and time," not by a "law." ETA highlighted that Cyprus, Ireland, and Israel built their states not due to foreign support but by sacrificing their nationalist youth (Muro 2007, 7).



## ***Targets***

The group's attacks were both targeted and indiscriminate in nature. ETA employed indiscriminate tactics in malls and public places in the central cities. Ballesteros (2018) argues that ETA targeted state officials, including State Security Forces and Bodies members, at its inception. In 1987, it carried out its operations in Barcelona's shopping center and Zaragoza's Guardia Civil Barracks, resulting in many deaths. The group continued its terrorist operations after Franco's death (1975) and the adoption of the new Constitution (1978), ensuring autonomy to the Basque regions (9). As Spain's democracy advanced, the group's casualties significantly rose. ETA killed 29 individuals between 1968 and 1974, while 240 individuals were killed between 1977 and 1981 (Ubasart-Gonzalez (2021). Molina (2010) argues that the escalation of political violence between 1977 and 1981 transformed Basque nationalism into a popular movement that brought together nationalists and non-nationalists, who demanded the release of Basque prisoners, the recognition of the Basque flag, and the language (252). When several ETA leaders were arrested and imprisoned in the 1990s, the group adopted a new strategy known as "Socialize the Suffering." This strategy aimed to make the entire society share the pain of ETA's imprisoned members. The group broadened the scope of its "justified targets," using violence against local political figures, representatives of justice institutions, civil society organizations, and media professionals (Woodworth 2001, 6).

Sullivan (1999) argues that the state's comprehensive counterterrorism interventions in the mid-1980s made ETA select easy targets. During 1997–1998, several municipal councilors representing the conservative Partido Popular were killed (35). In 2004, the government accused ETA of a terrorist attack on a train station, killing around 200 civilians in Madrid. The same day, one of Al-Qaeda's branches claimed responsibility, demanding that Spain withdraw its forces from Iraq (Schmitt et al. 2024, 1). Muro (2008) suggests that this incident prompted ETA to modify its tactic, implementing an advance notification warning to inform police of explosive locations, allowing them to discover and diffuse them to avoid civilian casualties (45).

## ***Organization's Structure***

### ***Internal Dynamics and Split***

ETA functioned in a hierarchical structure and was composed of ETA "political-military" (pm) and ETA "military" (m) (Ubasart-Gonzalez 2021, 919). In 1974, Adolfo Suarez, the new Prime Minister and ETA-pm branch negotiated and agreed to a ceasefire. ETA-pm split from the organization. ETA-pm formed its political party and participated in the parliamentary elections in 1977 (Sánchez-Cuenca 2007, 292; Sullivan 1999, 35). In 1983, ETA-pm disbanded with the implementation of Basque autonomy status and the group's participation in the political processes. Scholars (Ballesteros 2018, 9; Douglass and Zulaika 1990, 251; Lindberg 2010, 7) argue that the ETA split

due to internal disagreements related to the group's political strategy and the use of violence to achieve its objectives. ETA-m, without its political branch connected to its armed operations, became more marginal and less popular (Mees 2001, 811). ETA-m branch continued its political violence, refusing to negotiate with the government unless the law guarantees the self-determination right. Woodworth (2001) suggests that Basque radical nationalists believed that only complete independence could preserve their culture, language, and national identity (8).

In 1979, ETA-m established its political party, Herri Batasuna (Sullivan 1999, 35). According to Crenshaw (1996), the most damaging factor in the discontinuation of terrorist groups is the loss of support from their base rather than the decrease in public support (264). During 2005–2007, ETA-m and Herri Batasuna drifted apart due to the ETA-m's continuous use of violence and multiple failures of negotiations with the state. Herri Batasuna advocated for ETA's dissolution and the promotion of political dialog. Herri Batasuna's stance was supported by most of the left-wing Basque nationalists, who opposed ETA's military operations (Murua 2016, 97). With the democratic changes, the Basque people gradually changed their opinion on the legitimacy of ETA's violence. Disputes grew among the left-wing Basque nationalists, who were against ETA's violent campaigns (Murua 2016, 99).

## **Sources of Funding**

The organization's primary source of funding was derived from its criminal activity. It also received funds from the Basque diaspora in France. ETA-m continued its criminal activities after ETA-pm separated (de Mesquita 2005, 14). ETA was involved in kidnapping, bank robbery, blackmailing, and racketing the Spanish businesses. ETA-m's youth branch deadly attacks known as "kale borokka" (street violence) polarized Basque society (Woodworth 2001, 6).

One gap identified was the difficulty in finding accurate information on ETA's organizational structure, including leadership conflicts and decision-making processes, particularly following the split between its political and military divisions. Additional research revealing these specifics could better inform how these dynamics impacted and contributed to ETA's division and eventual dissolution.

## ***Public Support***

The authoritarian regime of Franco led to the radicalization of the Basque people. Multiple "states of emergency" were enforced by the regime between 1956 and 1975, strengthening the Basque's perception that they were surrounded by enemies who mistreated and humiliated ordinary people while searching for them at checkpoints (Molina 2010, 251). Franco's violent state repressions resulted in the solidarity of Basque nationalists and non-nationalists along with Spanish left-wing groups and liberals. ETA increased its followers by

portraying its armed struggle as a quest for an independent state. This narrative enabled the group to mobilize a broad network of civil society organizations, including newspapers, youth groups, and private businesses, which provided crucial financial support (Ballesteros 2018, 10).

ETA's followers regarded the group's attacks both as revenge for Franco's repressive measures and a strong declaration of identity that the "rebellious Basques remained there" (Molina 2010, 251). In 1976, the Basque public condemned ETA's use of violence, particularly after kidnapping and murdering industrialist Jose Maria Berazadi for ransom. This act undermined public support and intensified internal disagreements within the organization, whereas the "Pertur," moderate leader of ETA-pm, disappeared. ETA-pm believed ETA-m killed him (252). In 1972, ETA assassinated Prime Minister Admiral Carrero Blanco in Madrid (Woodworth 2001, 5). Douglass and Zulaika (1990) suggest that ETA's popularity increased among the Basque population, who supported this violent act (251). During the truce, the group reached its peak of popular support in the 1980s and 1999 (Sánchez-Cuenca 2007, 301). Many innocent people lost their lives during ETA's indiscriminate attacks in Barcelona's shopping center and Zaragoza's Guardia Civil Barracks, sparking widescale demonstrations against the violence in 1987. Muro (2007) highlights that the public's hostility reached its apex when ETA killed a town councilor in 1997 (16). As Crenshaw (2005) points out, the groups must be careful

not to overstep "tolerance limits"; they lose support both from the public and within the organization (8). Basque people perceived that ETA no longer represented their interests, becoming disconnected and distant (Pluchinsky 2005, 45).

One gap identified was the ability to assess the shifts in ETA's public support during the transformation of Spain's political system due to insufficient chronological data. Additional research in this area can focus on what specific action or combination of actions had the most significant impact on public support.

### **Government Counterterrorism Interventions**

Spain's counterterrorism strategy against ETA consisted of two key components: (1) dismantling the group through detentions and legal proceedings by the criminal justice law; (2) undermining the group's popularity and its ability to mobilize public support by arresting civil society organizations, activists and private businesses (radio stations and media outlets) associated with ETA (Ballesteros 2018, 10). In 1978, the government killed ETA's key leader in the military branch, Benaran Ordenara (Sullivan 1999, 35). These measures significantly affected ETA's operations, resulting in a loss of financial resources and a notable decline in followers (Ballesteros 2018, 10). Ubasart-Gonzalez (2021) argues that the Egin newspaper and the Egin Irratia radio station were shut down based on the "suspicion" that both media were influenced by ETA's ideology (580).

## ***Political Measures***

Spain underwent a political transformation by adopting a new Constitution, holding democratic elections, and granting autonomy to the Basque region. Spain granted amnesty to demilitarized ETA members and established an independent legislative body and law enforcement in the Basque region. The government delegated control over education, media, and language to the Basque regional authority, officially recognizing its flag and anthem (de Mesquita 2005, 12). According to Muro (2007), Spain's political system was democratized *de jure* and *de facto* by the 1980s. The government consistently implemented the European Economic Community's requirements (16).

During 1987–1988, the government signed three anti-ETA pacts to unite all democratically elected forces to isolate Herri Batasuna, the ETA-m political body. The elected parties jointly pressured ETA to negotiate (Muro 2004, 209). The state banned Herri Batasuna's activities for supporting ETA's political violence in 2003 (Ubasart-Gonzalez 2021, 580). ETA-m detached itself from Basque society by consistently rejecting political negotiations (Khatami 2010, 398). The IRA ceasefire inspired ETA and the government to renew negotiations in 1998 (Sullivan 1999, 35). ETA was called multiple times, including in 1998, 2006, and 2011. The group announced its final dissolution in 2011 (Murua 2016, 96–104).

## ***Laws and Policies***

In 1989, when the third round of negotiations with ETA failed in Algeria, Spain introduced a comprehensive antiterrorism intervention based on criminal justice law. According to Benavente & Porto (2013), the 1978 Constitution of Spain allows suspending an individual's fundamental rights if a person is suspected of terrorism (270). Criminal law permits the State Security Forces and Services to access the property of individuals suspected of terrorism without a prior judicial warrant. An individual guilty of terrorism may face a prison term of up to 40 years in cases of multiple criminal offenses. The government criminalized several conducts, including membership, collaboration, providing financial and material support, distribution of provocative messages, supporting terrorists, and propaganda of terrorist crimes (271). A suspect can be detained "incommunicado" during the ten-day preventive arrest (280). Benavente and Porto (2013) argue that while the state combats terrorism within the criminal justice system lawfully, its measures during the criminal justice process, including detention, arrest, and prosecution, are repressive and preventive (286). Spain was the first state in Europe where the fundamental rights of detainees during the investigation process were legally violated in accordance with the Constitution of 1978 (Ubasart-Gonzalez 2021, 575).

The government arrested ETA's key figures, deported and extradited members, and dispersed convicted ETA members and supporters across

Spain's various prison establishments (Argomaniz and Vidal-Diez 2017, 11; Ubasart-Gonzalez 2021, 920). The dispersal of ETA prisoners across the country was supposedly introduced for security reasons in 1990 (Ubasart-Gonzalez 2021, 926). Benavente and Porto (2013) argue that this policy aimed to detach ETA members from terrorist groups (271).

### ***International Cooperation***

France's support in countering ETA was significant (Argomaniz and Vidal-Diez 2017, 11; Benavente and Porto 2013, 272). Recognizing the political transformation of Spain's system, France expanded its collaboration with the Spanish government within the Schengen agreement (Muro 2007, 16). The Spanish government targeted the group's resources outside of Spain. ETA lost its safe haven in France, which was critical for the group's logistics and operations (Murua 2016, 95). In 1986, the first international cooperation between Spain and French police authorities led to the arrest of several ETA members, recovering weapons and explosives in Hendaye, the French Basque province. In 1992, ETA's executive leadership was arrested in southern France, in Bidart (Argomaniz and Vidal-Diez 2017, 11).

### ***State-sponsored Paramilitary Actions and Inhuman Policies***

Some of Spain's counterterrorism interventions were violent and inhuman. The government of Felipe Gonzalez established the Grupos Antiterroristas de Liberación (GAL), a paramilitary death

squad, adopting a "dirty war" strategy to counter ETA in 1983 (Chalk 1998, 381; Woodworth 2001, 7). GAL was comprised of French and Portuguese mercenaries contracted by the Spanish authorities. Between 1983 and 1987, GAL was involved in assassinations, bombings, and abductions in the Basque regions and southwestern France. GAL killed 27 individuals, including ETA's top leaders. Many innocent victims had no affiliations with ETA (Woodworth 2001, 7). In response, ETA heavily retaliated against the government's unlawful extrajudicial killings. GAL was dismantled in 1986 (Sullivan 1999, 35). GAL had a crucial backlash effect, severely damaging Spain's reputation by reinforcing people's perception that its democratic system was abusive and repressive toward Basque people (Argomaniz and Vidal-Diez 2017, 13; Martin-Peña, Javier, and Susan Opatow 2011, 137). Woodworth (2001) suggests that GAL's "dirty war" ensured the "generational reproduction" of ETA, sustaining its membership in the 1990s (8). In 1997, Spain convicted high-level officials and law enforcement authorities associated with GAL's criminal acts, including the Minister of Interior (Chalk 1998, 382; Woodworth 2002, 8).

Human rights organizations heavily criticized Spain for implementing dispersal measures among 500 ETA convicts in various prisons across the state. That policy put extensive hardship on ETA's families. Woodworth (2001) argues that this measure turned many Basques against the government (9). Chalk (1998) emphasizes that the government of Felipe Gonzalez lost pop-

ular support due to its repressive measures, leading to the end of the Prime Minister's power in 1996 (382).

## **Conclusion**

**T**his case study attempted to evaluate how ETA's rise and fall deepened our understanding of ethno-nationalist terrorism and counterterrorism effectiveness. It also tested the hypothesis that socio-political changes, targeted counterterrorism measures, and leadership shifts are critical factors in leading to the dissolution of ethno-nationalist terrorist groups such as ETA.

A combination of historical context and the interplay of political, economic, and social conditions directly contributed to the rise of ETA. Historically, Spain's central government subjected Basque people to ethnic discrimination by restricting their political, social, and cultural rights, thereby fostering resentment and fomenting ethnic separatism. While promoting the Spanish national identity, Franco's authoritarian regime and its centralized overt discriminative policies threatened the existence of Basque ethnic identity, leading to ETA's struggle for independence. A complex of critical factors led to ETA's fall: multiple internal splits, a significant loss of public support, the loss of safe haven in France, and the support of the Basque left-wing nationalist groups combined with comprehensive government counterterrorism measures. Spain's democratic transformation, political and social measures,

and international cooperation effectively dismantled ETA.

The findings support the arguments of Schwartz et al. (2009) that terrorism grows in a social environment that strongly divides groups (ingroup, "us") and those outside (outgroups, "them"). ETA constructed "ingroup" and "outgroup" identities by framing the Spanish government as an enemy (outgroup "them") that denied Basque society (ingroup, "us") their cultural and linguistic rights. These findings also align with Merari's (1999) statement that indiscriminate targeting is a characteristic of groups engaged in national or ethnic struggles. While mobilizing the movement, ETA used a concept of threat to Basque collective identity against Spain, targeting anyone associated with the state through indiscriminate attacks. The research validates Crenshaw's (2005) assertion that the group must not overstep "tolerance limits" to ensure support from both the public and the internal. ETA lost both kinds of support due to its continuous violent campaigns and refusal to negotiate. ETA's inability to integrate into Spain's political landscape and its diminished influence led to the group's end.

The research could be expanded by assessing how international collaboration contributed to dismantling ETA, offering insights into the effectiveness of cross-border counterterrorism cooperation. Understanding those insights can help formulate strategies for dealing with other transnational terrorist groups. The findings could serve as a roadmap for developing international

policies and agreements to combat terrorism, including legislative and diplomatic protocols to enhance global security.

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