

SPAIN AND ITS TRAUMA: 40 YEARS OF ETA TERRORISM AND THE POWERLESSNESS OF POLITICS

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In 2008, Spain commemorates a sad anniversary. The ETA has been killing people for 40 years now. In 1968, the Basque terrorists committed their first murder, shooting dead a policeman in broad daylight. Since then, a total of 823 people lost their lives by this extreme-left underground organization. The attacks usually aimed at political and administrative representatives of the Spanish state, among them politicians, policemen, and military officers. Yet ordinary civilians also fell victim to their actions again and again.

Under a virtual 'ETA system', the people in the Basque region must live in fear every single day. Intimidations, threats, and racketeering are part of their everyday life. Moreover, it is 'nothing out of the ordinary' for local politicians of the conservative PP and the socialist PSOE to travel with bodyguards at all times. Even after four decades, a solution of the ETA problem seems far away. Spain continues to be the only state in the European Union where the democratic system is continually threatened by the deadly violence of a separatist terror group. In the past, political responses to this threat differed, depending on the government. Even though the PP and the PSOE always agreed on the common objective of putting an end to terrorism, they never resolved their dispute about which course to pursue. Following in the tradition of the government of José María Aznar, the conservative People's Party insists on winning a 'victory' over the ETA, while the PSOE led by Prime Minister José Luis Zapatero talks about intending to put an 'end to terrorism'. Thus, the rhetoric of the People's Party clearly aims at confrontation with the terrorist group, while the socialists continue to leave the doors open for negotiations.

Mr Zapatero's first legislative period was marked by a sharp conflict about anti-terror policy which divided Spain's society. Political observers from various backgrounds are agreed that Spain cannot afford another legislative period with such a high degree of polarization. One of the most important questions, on which the hopes for a more harmonious social climate depend, is that of how future political parties will deal with ETA terrorism. Will it be possible to unite all democrats behind one common anti-terror strategy? Or will Mr Zapatero's second legislative period bring a continuation of the painful disputes of the last few years?