

Versione Italiana

An intense series of elections is beginning in Spain. Sunday, April 21st, voting took place in Basque Country, on May 12th in Catalonia, and then the European polls will be in June. The two local elections are also critical for balances at the national level. Euskadi and Catalunya, two historical nationalities (the other being Galicia) which are recognized as such by the Spanish constitution because they had already had a constituent process before the Second Republic, and two historical nationalisms that have reached a turning point, diverging like they never have before. Let's look, therefore, at the next Basque vote.

Here, the change appears evident. It is summed up in the polls which more or less unanimously describe a Partido Nacionalista Vasco (PNV) seriously undermined by EH-Bildu, a coalition of the Basque nationalist pro-independence left. Even the last [survey by 40dB for El País and La Ser](#), taken before the week of pre-election suspension of polling, signaled this overtaking. Whether it happens or not, Bildu's result signals a change of era. It is Basque democracy after the end of ETA terrorism: we'll be back.

The PNV won all of the Basque democratic elections except in 1986, when it was surpassed by the PSE in absolute votes but not in seats. Only from 2009 to 2011 did it remain in opposition, when the socialists, coming in second in the elections, agreed with the PP to elect Patxi López president. Whatever happens, the PNV will continue to govern. Even if it were to come second it would still renew the agreement with the Basque socialists of the PSE - Partido Socialista de Euskadi - Euskadiko Ezkerra, which is federated to the PSOE - however, what is taking place is a profound change.



PNV candidate Imanol Pradales: source [EAJ-PNV](#)

The sign of change is also visible in the candidates for *lehendakari*, the president of the Basque government. Both the PNV, with Imanol Pradales in place of Iñigo Urkullu, who has led the government for three legislatures, and Bildu, with Pello Otxandiano, express more than a generational change, albeit with different nuances.

For the PNV it is also about the strength of a structured party that is capable of expressing strong leadership without ever giving in to 'leaderism', to disintermediation, or the subordination of the structure to the leader. To address critical issues, above all the deterioration of the healthcare system, it is time to present new faces that can better respond to the electorate's concerns than those who bear responsibility for the current management.

For Bildu it is a question of leadership that knows how to express the new phase. Pello Otxandiano arrives at the end of an era, that of Arnaldo Otegi, now incapacitated due to convictions for apologia of terrorism and always a virtual candidate of the Abertzales. Otegi was the protagonist of the caesura between the Basque nationalist left and the armed struggle, as also recognized by José Luís Rodríguez Zapatero - who as head of government led the process of abandoning weapons and dissolving the armed groups - but he still represents a bygone time. At this point he is only coordinator of the space and has suggested his imminent retirement from active politics. Otxandiano's candidacy breaks the usual patterns of the Abertzale left. Forty years old, a communications engineer who carried out his studies and career abroad, particularly in Sweden, he summarizes the program that the coalition has set itself as follows: "The challenge is to

advance and build the country in its differences”. The country is the whole of Spain – a epochal change – and here we return to Basque democracy after the end of the ETA, the new era without the burden of terrorism.



“It’s time to change”, is the translation of the electoral slogan of Pello Otxandiano, in the photo in the center with Arnaldo Otegi to his right: source [EH-Bildu](#)

Otxandiano brings back a social democratic culture of radical reformism from his Scandinavian experience, one that has led Sánchez to support Madrid for the defense of healthcare and welfare, as well as a wall against the centralist nationalist right. In the elaboration of its historical inadmissibility, independence, on a path already begun by the PNV, unlike the Catalan nationalists who are still agitating for it, becomes a fact of ideology-identity inserted into a praxis; radical, yes, but reformist. This praxis is now well established and is moving forward in the coalition’s structured political experience of government and union. It’s a turning point that includes content from Otxandiano himself, who developed Bildu’s economic program before his candidacy, carefully working to build relationships with the trade unions, the economic-entrepreneurial and social world of the Basque country.

Bildu's indirect support for Pedro Sánchez resulted in a backlash from the PP, according to which Bildu is "the terrorists of ETA" - even if they also made some agreements in the Basque country - and Sánchez is "the traitor". The entire electoral campaign of July 2023 was built on this basis, summed up in the slogan "¡Que te vote Txapote!" — you are voting for Txapote, an ETA terrorist convicted for bloody crimes — directed at Pedro Sánchez.

It didn't go very well. Sánchez is still head of government, never mind working in Euskadi. Healthcare, housing and work are the primary concerns of the Basques. Ironically, while the People's Party is limiting itself to a minimum level of reference to the issue, it is the PSE that is relighting the fuse of ETA in the electoral campaign. In an **interview with Cadena Ser radio**, Otxandiano didn't define ETA as terrorists but as an "armed group". The socialist candidate Eneko Andzueza accuses him of "tremendous moral weakness".

Although the Basque nationalist left's choice of the democratic field as the only stage for political conflict appears irreversible, and its new leadership led the rejection of terrorism in that political-social field, cultural customs and tics remain. The difficulty of following the repulsion of terrorism in solidarity with the victims, or of taking the collective reception of prisoners from that gang, transferred to the Basque Country from remote prisons as a sign of the end of the emergency, mark a difficult path forward.

Zapatero and Otegi took care of lowering the tension between the PSE and Bildu. The socialist, in an electoral initiative alongside Andzueza, said that "we must call things by their name. For us it is clear: in July 1936 there was a coup d'état, Francoism was a horrible dictatorship and terrorism was terrorism." "We are convinced - he added - that those who have difficulty calling things by their name will learn to do so. Let them do it as soon as possible, please, without wasting time, Euskadi, coexistence and the victims deserve it." Otegi, equally committed to building bridges, said: "Degrading the political debate is to disrespect the people", he said, inviting them to "not import the worst style of Spanish politics" and calling for calm.

And when apologies arrive from Otxandiano, who asks the victims' forgiveness for "hurting their sensibilities", Pedro Sánchez also reminds Bildu that "ETA was a terrorist gang that was defeated by democracy".



José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero and Eneko Andzueda, last Wednesday at Baracaldo (Vizcaya): source [Socialistas](#)

Election illusions are in motion. Bildu also attracts votes from socialists and PNV but above all its growth comes at the expense of the left of Podemos and Sumar, which, once again divided, risks not obtaining parliamentary representation. For that electorate, Bildu is more authoritative and Otxandiano is better-known than its own candidates, Miren Gorrotxategi (Elkarrekin Podemos) and Alba García (Sumar). Vox is a little further ahead, and should exceed the 3 percent barrier. The PP, with Javier de Andrés as a candidate, is aiming to maintain the six seats it picked up last time, when it presented itself in a coalition with the now defunct Ciudadanos, and is measuring its race on its ability to win back voters who had gone to the extreme right of Santiago Abascal. The People's Party has hammered the PNV, accusing it of being "a social democratic party" now, bent to the needs of its socialist partner. The PSE underlines that healthcare management has not been up to it, that its proposals have been rejected, and has claimed the social policies brought into the majority while pushing to the left. It is unable to do otherwise due both to the sign Sánchez has given to the party and in an attempt to win back voters lost with Podemos, who are now looking to Bildu. The PSE is certain that it will decide who will govern, even if it excludes the possibility of agreements with Bildu, but it must maintain its ten deputies. The PNV electorate appears to be

the least mobilized. The nationalists are trying to defend their primacy by motivating their electorate, in an effort to give themselves time to overcome the difficult moment and produce a new political project.

This vote also marks the current difference between Catalan and Basque nationalisms. While the Northeast was lost in the pro-independence drift, the Northwest practiced responsibility. And it continues to do so. The electoral tensions between socialists and Abertzales, in a fruitful dialogue in Madrid, have been promptly dampened. While Carles Puigdemont - from French Catalonia, where he has positioned his electoral headquarters for the next Catalan elections, safe from Spanish uniforms - moves forward, signaling to the socialists how the external support of Junt for the Gobierno of Madrid will be questioned in case the votes of the Catalan socialists are needed for a future Government of the Generalitat. But they will vote in May in Catalonia and will return. The importance of the Basque polls, like the next Catalan elections, speaks of the Spain that is a "nation of nations", as per the constitution; of how finding a plural balance for the country and overcoming nationalistic conflicts is necessary to protect its interests. The fact that 70 percent of the next Basque parliament will be the expression of independent nationalist parties does not contradict this path which, indeed, passes through the recognition of differences. The PP also knows this and will hardly be able to return to the helm of the country if it fails to overcome the nationalist clash with the Catalan and Basque center-right, so that it can make agreements in the national parliament. An overwhelming pro-independence majority is arriving at a moment when independence is at the tail end of the interests and concerns of the Basque citizenry. It is a change of era that is evident in the Basque Country, and underway throughout Spain.

Cover image: the logos of the main parties running for the next Basque elections.

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