

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Balkan Spain

Are Europe's oldest nation states immortal? Spain will soon test this supposition. Basque nationalists late last month put the country's unity in unprecedented jeopardy.

José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, the prime minister, is contending with probably the worst political crisis since Spain restored democracy almost three decades ago. The outcome will provide useful hints for the future of Europe's other multiethnic states.

The Basque parliament, by a narrow vote of 39 to 35, on Dec. 30 passed a measure to create a Basque state "freely associated" with Spain, "sovereign" and able to run its own foreign policy, even mint its own currency. So, in all but name (for now), independent.

The Spanish parliament will reject the plan, probably by next month. But Basque leaders say they don't give a whit about the Spanish constitution or the national legislature and promise to call a referendum on the measure this spring. The Basques say they can leave Spain on their own; the rest of Spain disagrees. The potential for a clash is obvious.

Short-term political considerations may help explain Basque motivations but they don't mitigate the danger. Juan José Ibarretxe, the Basque premier, pushed the "autonomy" plan to galvanize nationalist voters ahead of regional elections due this spring. In Madrid, Mr. Zapatero was slow to respond, but last week got around to denouncing the Basque move. The ruling Socialists have assumed that their soft line on separatism would secure Basque cooperation, but this approach has evidently failed. Spain now needs strong leadership. In both foreign and domestic policy over the last 10 months, Mr. Zapatero has inspired little confidence on that score.

In Europe, local nationalism isn't unique to the Basque country. A growing number of smaller communities have claimed or fought for statehood. Twenty-three new states have been born in Europe since 1989. So why can't the Basque country, or for that matter Corsica, Sardinia or Flanders, *inter alia*, join them?

Whenever a smaller nation within a larger state wants out, support for self-determination needs to be gauged freely and then reconciled with established constitutional norms. It isn't easy but it's doable; Slovakia and the Czech Republic managed an amicable split a decade ago. In any national divorce, the means determine the ends. The Basque nationalists stand at an extreme in Europe, willing to tolerate methods that deprive their struggle of democratic legitimacy.

Spain provides clear legal avenues for its 17 regions to expand their already broad autonomy. The Catalans are pressing for similar

goals as the Basques, but unlike them, the Catalan nationalists abide by the constitution and reject violence. Mr. Ibarretxe last week spat on

the constitution, claiming that his "people" were a higher power. How convenient, since the

Basque premier can't legally call a referendum or split his region off on his own.

The constitution isn't merely academic. It's a living contract across generations. When all of Spain agreed to form a new sort of union in 1978, the constitution gave the Basque territories broad powers of self-government. In exchange, along with the rest of Spain, they accepted limits on their right to break away. Abrogating such a contract unilaterally amounts to anarchy.

The Basques certainly have every right to agitate for constitutional changes—by constitutional means. A four-vote majority in a local parliament hardly gives them the green light to act by fiat. For the sake of all Spaniards, Madrid can't afford to let these local politicians hijack the Spanish constitution. If it does, Spain as a country will be history.

In response, the Basque nationalists invoke popular democracy. That's a sham. Why? In a word, terrorism. The persistent political violence of the past 35 years does not allow room for free choice, nor does it augur well for the future political rights of Basque voters if their politicians somehow succeed in their secession effort.

Since 1968, ETA terrorists have murdered more than 800 people who don't share their views. A crackdown by the previous Aznar government weakened the terrorist group, but didn't put it out of business. Uncounted thousands have fled the Basque country. In this climate, no open debate is possible. So no one can honestly say that the Basques really want more autonomy or independence. Opinion polls in fact show large majorities in the three Basque territories opposed to splitting up Spain. The borders of any future state also would be in dispute. Álava, one of three provinces, wants no part of the Ibarretxe plan—nor do Navarre or the French Basque regions that nationalists are eager to claim as their own. The financial settlement in any divorce with Spain would be tricky, too.

Faced with all these insuperable hurdles, Mr. Ibarretxe and his pals are instead trying to steamroll over Spain's nearly three-decade-old democracy to get their way. Mr. Zapatero needs to wake up to the existential challenge to the Spanish state posed by the Basques. This crisis can be resolved quickly and peacefully. But if Spain's Socialists try to compromise with Basque strong-arm tactics they will risk the future not only of their country but constitutional democracy throughout Europe.

*Basque nationalists
want a messy divorce.*