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## **A battle of narratives - Spanish victims organisations international action to delegitimise terrorism and political violence**

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### **Abstract**

Spanish victims groups have provided a visible contribution to European terrorist violence prevention efforts. Instrumental and knowledge transfer motivations partly explain this interest but a separate driver that requires more attention is their opposition to the international narrative that legitimises ETAs violence promulgated by the political movement of the Basque Patriotic Left. This has resulted in a ‘battle of narratives’ played out at the international level in order to shape the future of Basque politics where victims are challenging a discourse that frames the past in a way that justifies terrorism and that leaves the door open to a future return to violence.

## Introduction

Governments increasingly understand that a crucial element in both the response to and the prevention of terrorism is the need to confront the narratives espoused by militants.<sup>1</sup> These sets of interrelated stories are ‘powerful resources for influencing target audiences [...]which can be used to interpret and frame local events and to strategically encourage particular kinds of personal action’.<sup>2</sup> Narratives are seen as part of the process of radicalisation due to their ability to frame local, national and global events in a simplistic in-group-outgroup dichotomy drawing on the notions of victimisation and grievance. Furthermore, given that the narratives emerging from radical organisations offer a *solution* to this victimisation through violent action, reinforced by sophisticated religious and moral justifications for violence, they serve as stirring and compelling messages that resonate among potential terrorist recruits.

It is argued that effectively fighting the appeal of these messages requires the crafting of both counter-narratives and alternative narratives.<sup>3</sup> The former are attempts at refuting the rhetoric that groups such as ISIS or Al-Qaeda construct to justify their actions and the latter are understood either as alternative explanations for the grievances leveraged in violent propaganda or as messages that espouse opposite values and norms to the ones adopted by violent extremists (i.e. tolerance, plurality, democracy, respect for human rights...). Government, community groups, human rights NGOs, religious organisations and special interest groups all play a role in the construction and delivery of alternative and counter narratives, some more visibly than others.

One community is increasingly active in this fight against violent extremism; this community is comprised of the survivors and the families of victims of terrorism. The origins of the involvement of families and survivors in countering violent extremism (CVE) is the belief that victims' testimonies can act as moral counter-narratives 'by exposing the immorality of killing in the name of a political cause'. In addition, testimonies can provide alternative narratives given that these testimonies, as exemplars of adherence to the rule of law and can demonstrate the 'promot[ion of] democratic values and resilience'.<sup>4</sup> Crucially victims' testimonies are based on real lived experience and may influence an audience based on their potential empathic appeal. Through their stories, victims can, in other words, 'make a powerful contribution to the awareness of the danger and effects of radicalisation and terrorism. Victims can share their experience with a broader public, creating a story that people can relate to.'<sup>5</sup> Such testimonies can play a vital role primarily due to the strength of the moral message being transmitted in the recalling of their personal tragedy, but also due to the credibility and trust-worthiness of the messenger as an innocent victim of terrorism.

Although it is easily understood why political actors aim to involve victims of terrorism in counter-narrative work, it is less apparent why victims groups themselves would want to be part of international counter-radicalisation efforts, especially those who represent survivors of domestic terrorism. In those cases, given that victims' views on violence are irremediably shaped by the context from which it emerges<sup>6</sup> and that the audience they seek to engage with is domestic –and, in certain contexts, a divided society–, a number of interesting questions arise. Questions such as: What moves these organisations to act at the international (as opposed to the domestic) level in violence prevention and CVE measures? What has been their contribution and how do

they see their work making a difference? Who is their audience? And to what extent it is possible to assess the potential effectiveness of their activities?

In an effort to address some of these issues, this article focuses on the experience of Spanish victims groups. The Spanish case is interesting because despite the emergence of two important organisations following the March, 11, 2004 (11-M) Atocha attacks<sup>7</sup>, victims' associations were born and grew mainly as a reaction to campaigns waged by domestic groups (primarily the Basque militant organisation ETA). As we will see, however, Spanish victims' groups have carried out significant work on violent prevention in the international arena. In trying to explain this apparent contradiction, this article is structured in the following manner: firstly it will account for the international activities carried out by Spanish victims groups and related political foundations. Subsequently it will examine the rationale behind these groups' international activities and finally address the impact of and existing challenges to this work.

The two main methods employed to address the questions mentioned above were documentary analysis of material generated by victims groups and semi-structured interviews with representatives of seven victims associations and political organisations with an interest in victims' issues.<sup>8</sup> The sample was selected following an initial analysis of media and academic sources and exchanges with other experts in this area.<sup>9</sup>

### *International preventative action*

What quickly emerged during the fieldwork conducted for this paper was the fact that international action -that is to say, activism carried out at the international level- is conducted by relatively few victims organisations in Spain. Overwhelmingly, Spanish victims associations

have focused on the local, regional and national spheres. Moreover, the international work that is currently underway began relatively recently; the majority of these organisations were established during the 1990s or earlier, but international work started only in the mid-2000s.<sup>10</sup>

It must also be noted that the international activism of victims associations' has not been directed entirely towards the prevention of violent extremism. Activism at the international level seeks to pursue a variety of goals: the promotion of the legal rights of victims of terrorism, the creation of international structures of support for victims, ensuring recognition for victims as a distinct political community, as well as seeking the development of an international statute for victims of terrorism while lobbying for terrorism to be considered a crime against humanity.<sup>11</sup>

Looking more specifically at the field of prevention of terrorism, Spanish victims' groups have prioritised the dissemination of testimonies to the widest possible audience. This process aims to fulfil psychological, political and social functions for the group members. First and foremost, telling their own life stories is perceived as a cathartic process for the victims themselves and is in many cases seen as a measure that can support their personal recovery.<sup>12</sup> In addition, giving voice to victims and their families ensures the memory of their loss is publicly acknowledged, a key aim of many Spanish victims' organisations. Equally, these stories fulfil other important social goals: they raise awareness about the victims' experiences and highlight their existence as a coherent community, they provide a focus for joint action and they create an oral history of the impact of terrorism. As a record of history, these testimonies act as an alternative to (and an enhancement of) the politicised government and paramilitary rhetoric surrounding terrorism; in effect they personalise the story of the violence and put the victims at the centre of the narrative.

Victims' organisations do therefore regard these stories as an important element of their narrative against violent extremism.

As mentioned Spanish victims' organisations work hard to ensure that the testimonies of victims reach a wide audience, nationally and globally. English translations of interviews with victims of terrorism have been –or are in the process of being - added to the webpages of some of these groups. For instance the Fundación Fernando Buesa and the former Basque peace organisation Bakeaz, included translated testimonies on the online platform 'Zoomrights'<sup>13</sup> also the Fundación Gregorio Ordoñez has translated parts of their online audio-visual archives.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, many testimonies are shared with partner organisations in Europe<sup>15</sup>, presented at international conferences and workshops and distributed via media outlets globally. For example at the 2014 Global counter-terrorism forum in Abu Dhabi COVITE presented the findings of the project 'El Mapa del Terror- The Map of Terror' an online platform that documents the events surrounding the more than 600 terrorist killings committed in Basque Country between 1960 and 2010. COVITE has described the online platform as a mechanism to keep the memory of the victims alive and to challenge the voices that support political violence now and in the past.<sup>16</sup>

Another effective way of attracting international attention to their cause has been through cultural initiatives in the hope that the experiences of the victims of terrorism in Spain can be conveyed without the need for a shared language and that the visual impact of these images raises awareness amongst young people.<sup>17</sup> An especially fitting example is the 'Europa contra el terrorismo. La mirada de la víctima / Europe against terrorism. Glance of the victim', the first European photographic exhibition focused on the experiences of victims of terrorism. Organised

by Fundación Miguel Angel Blanco in partnership with the Association Francaise des Victimes du Terrorisme and the Associazione Italiana Vittime del Terrorismo, the project '[brings] the glance of the victims as an agent of social awareness and deradicalisation and [helps to] build the memory of European terrorism victims in their search for justice'.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to their own individual initiatives, Spanish victims associations have participated in international schemes run by other actors. This includes TerRa, a platform funded by the European Commission for the exchange of best practices and provision of guidance to practitioners throughout the EU in order to 'reinforce the positive role victims and former terrorists can play in relation to the prevention of radicalisation'.<sup>19</sup> The target groups include journalists, police officers, government officials, religious leaders and NGOs staff. Indeed, the Association to Help the Victims of March 11<sup>th</sup> (AVV11M) is a founding partner of this platform.<sup>20</sup>

With a similar remit of facilitating the exchange of knowledge between and amongst academics, practitioners, governments and NGOs, the European Commission's Radicalisation Awareness Network is also an important forum for Spanish victims' groups. The aim of the RAN is 'to stop people from getting involved in violent extremist or terrorist activities in the first place, or to convince them to turn away from such ideas and methods'.<sup>21</sup>

Most relevant is the work of the RAN unit labelled 'Remembrance of Victims of Terrorism (RVT) Working Group'. The goal of RVT is 'to maintain the network of organisations of victims of terrorism and to organise remembrance ceremonies' and more relevant to the matter at hand,



‘transmit the voices of the victims of terrorism as part of prevention efforts to counter radicalisation’.<sup>22</sup>

Importantly, Spanish groups such as the AAVV11M, FVT, FMAB or COVITE have had a presence at the VVT -most often to display the results from particular initiatives<sup>23</sup>- and the Asociación de Víctimas del Terrorismo (AVT) is a RAN permanent member, even if by their own admission they have not had a continuous participation due to staff shortages.<sup>24</sup> The groups who participated in this study have a broadly positive (but not uncritical) opinion of the RAN. One of its greatest strengths is said to be that it involves individuals from different spheres: policymakers, academics and practitioners. Another positive feature is that it helps to bring different European victims’ groups together and to build a network of contacts. This strengthens the ties of solidarity and can potentially lay the foundations for closer collaboration between European groups.

### *Explaining international action*

When explaining the rationale behind the Spanish victims organisations international violence prevention efforts it is useful to start by referring to Hoffman and Kasupski’s important distinction between victims associations focused on assisting, informing and supporting the recovery process of survivors and families, and those that prioritise influencing public policy.<sup>25</sup> Most victims organisations in Spain either fall under the first category or follow both objectives. The minority who concentrate solely on advocacy and lobbying are generally political foundations named after a high-profile victim who are concerned with a range of issues in addition to the protection of the rights of victims of terrorism. Because they work in the defence

of human rights, democratic values and/or a culture of peace, they have naturally gravitated to international efforts toward preventing violent extremism. So it is not surprising to find these category of organisations over-represented in this work. However, it must be noted that the boundaries between these two categories can become blurred as victims' groups have also occasionally collaborated in the past in initiatives related to the promotion of peace and reconciliation in addition to their work meeting victims' individual needs.

Hence the organisation's original aims are a good predictor of involvement in international preventative action. This is evidenced by the fact that the AVT –by far the largest association in the country- has a lesser international profile than one might expect given their predominant position within the Spanish victims' community. As was explained to this researcher, this comes down to the fact that while the AVT has acted internationally, their focus remains fixed on providing individual assistance (psychological, medical, financial) to victims at the domestic level.

For advocacy groups having a recognisable international CVE presence or not comes down to whether this area of activity is prioritised by the group's leadership. This is confirmed in the case of COVITE, an activist Basque terrorism victims organisation. As an important change in their strategic direction, COVITE recently began to emphasise the international dimension of their counter-radicalisation work and it is now one of the most active Spanish organisations at this level.

Nonetheless, even for those groups who have worked in international CVE campaigns, the national setting still takes precedence and it is viewed as the most important venue for these

efforts. In fact one of the main findings from this research is that a common motivator for their international work is the drive to confront narratives that glorify and romanticise ETAs violence. As will be later explained, challenging pro-ETA international discourses in order to prevent potential future violence is neither a short-term endeavour nor especially relevant to other international contexts. In contrast, its impact would be mostly local, felt in the Basque context alone.

Before we discuss this theme, it should be noted that Spain has experienced many forms of terrorist violence over the past four decades. The majority of the Spanish victims in this period result from ETA's ethno-nationalist campaign of violence<sup>26</sup>, but a sizeable minority were created by jihadist, extreme right, radical left and state acts of terrorism. Clearly public authorities, non-governmental organisations and civil society more broadly, have amassed much expertise in dealing with politically motivated violence. Victims' representatives themselves were eager to share the accumulated repository of knowledge gathered over the years:

*'Unfortunately terrorism is a phenomenon that is globalised. Therefore our goal is to contribute with the experience we have from all we lived through in Spain and thanks to the professional background by our own staff I believe we have much to contribute in Europe. Unfortunately, we have an experience that other countries don't have'<sup>27</sup>*

There is an expectation amongst victims' organisations in Spain that the hard learned lessons and the pioneering work the groups have carried out should be seen as relevant in the case of jihadist radicalisation and terrorism

*'This is the work we are carrying out: to ride the coattails and to contribute in the fight against radical islamism but always leveraging the experience that unfortunately this country has on the fight against radicalisation'* <sup>28</sup>

A firmly-held belief is that the Spanish experience might serve to transmit the message to others that violence is both costly and ineffectual and that civil society can react to the terror challenge through non-violence and respect for the rule of law and democratic values:

*'[we] have as a goal to prevent radicalisation within international society in order to pre-empt future hotspots of violence and radicalisation. [...] Therefore, [we] promote the transmission of democratic and constitutional values. Victims of terrorism through different activities bring to the most vulnerable [to radicalisation] sectors in society the principles of non revenge, of not turning to hate but to advance the respect for the rule of law.'* <sup>29</sup>

In essence, for the participants in this study, the outcome of the Basque experience is seen as an ethical and pedagogical model that can inform responses to terrorism in other contexts. At the same time, other participants recognise that the process must be bi-directional as the reciprocal sharing of best practises could help Spain to confront its own problem of extremist radicalisation:

*'our message could be beneficial to strengthen ties, to collaborate, not only to contribute but also to learn because Europe in other areas and historical contexts has suffered terrorism and we also need to learn from the experiences in other contexts [...]* <sup>30</sup>

In sum, representatives from the participant groups appreciate the opportunity to disseminate their own extensive experience in preventing radicalisation but also to learn from the experiences of others in leveraging victims' testimonies for the broader benefits to society.

Alternatively, there are instrumental and organisational reasons behind these groups' decisions to move into the international arena that relate to the severe economic crisis that has affected the country since 2008 and has had a serious negative impact on the groups' finances. In practice victims associations in Spain rely for most of their work on public subsidies from either local, regional or national authorities, and the severe cuts have forced many to reduce their budget, slash costs, downsize, and/or seek other funding sources. Some organisations have even been forced to call on their members' support for their survival.<sup>31</sup> As a result many groups have greatly reduced their levels of activity and a majority now rely on the work of unpaid interns and volunteers. A few presently find themselves inactive, in 'stand-by' or seriously considering closure.

Therefore, in the current environment, participation in international initiatives has the potential to sustain the organisations' visibility, which can also be potentially translated into a funding lifeline. However, even though the groups find themselves in a precarious financial position, , the connection between this situation and their motivation to participate in or lead international projects funded by international bodies went unsaid.

What it is explicitly recognised more often however is that ETA's definitive ceasefire declared in 2011 has aggravated this funding crisis since vigorous social opposition to terrorism has quite predictably become a lower priority for the Spanish government. So, as a reaction to ETA's

indefinite ceasefire, some actors-such as the renowned peace organisation Gesto por la Paz- have opted to dissolve, whereas victims associations have remained active, chiefly because they consider the psychological and financial support for the victims as a long-term goal. For the groups whose agenda is focused on policy reform however, ETA's slow end and the fact that, following decades of advocacy work, victims now finally enjoy political recognition of their rights, mean that the priorities of the organisation need to change in order to remain relevant in this new political climate. So shifting attention towards the delegitimisation of violence, reconciliation and the strengthening of a peace culture becomes an obvious strategic choice. So for victims' groups, given this change in political context, we have witnessed a reorientation of priorities and, for some, a growing involvement with international peace work:

*'it is true that following ETAs definitive ceasefire in 2011, the scenario changes and we are forced to work in the field of the prevention of radicalisation in addition to all the other areas we were already working on: memory, justice and dignity'<sup>32</sup>*

On balance however, one of the most important motivators for victims' groups continues to be domestic politics. That is, a fundamental factor explaining these groups move towards international activism is the need to confront the narratives promoted abroad by the *Izquierda Abertzale* (the Basque Patriotic Left, henceforth BPL), the socio-political movement that share a common root with ETA. The Basque Patriotic Left comprises of a number of heterogeneous political organisations; political parties, a trade union, youth groups and a network of organisations superficially devoted to social issues (i.e. feminism, environmental, social justice and more) but that in essence function to serve the radical nationalist goals of the movement.<sup>33</sup>

Similar to ETA, their political goal is to achieve independence for the Basque Country. Regardless, not all these actors have always fully agreed with ETA about the strategic utility of violence or its targets. Hence, although for decades the BPL was represented by the political party *Herri Batasuna* (Popular Unity), since 2011 their former members and voters coalesced around *Sortu* (To Create) which is part of *Bildu* (To Build), a coalition of four political parties that have renounced violence and currently operate within the boundaries of mainstream politics.<sup>34</sup>

In the worldview of the Basque Patriotic Left, ETA's campaign is merely a reflection of a larger, primordial conflict between the Basque nation and the French and (especially) the Spanish state. Under this perspective, ETA's violence was merely a reaction to the perceived repression that the Basque people suffered for centuries at the hands of the Spanish state; such thinking is encapsulated in the following extract from a 2012 statement by the ETA Prisoners Collective (EPPK):

‘The present conflict has violated the rights of our nation. Now is the 500th anniversary of the occupation of Basque Country and the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the bombing of Guernica. France and Spain continue with their repression’.<sup>35</sup>

This statement is merely a continuation of the traditional discourse that ETA has espoused in its public communiqués: the notion that they were forced to engage in an armed struggle as a response to political repression, absence of freedoms and other similar justifications. As Domínguez emphasises, in ETA's discourse ‘murderers become victims, even the primary victims, because they are forced into doing something they do not want to’.<sup>36</sup>

Furthermore ETA's attacks are regarded by the BPL as simply part of a continuum of violence that involves the actions of both state and non-state actors and each party is perceived as being equally responsible for the conflict.<sup>37</sup> The use of the term 'conflict' is far from neutral and highly contested as it implies that the state did not act in a legal and democratic manner as evidenced by the state-sponsored activities of the GAL terrorist group in the 1980s. Importantly, the framings of the 'conflict' and the 'moral equivalence of all violence(s)' provides not only an a-historical pretext to ETA's actions but are leveraged politically to justify ETAs violence. Indeed, an essential implication of these claims is that the only effective tool to resolve such atavistic 'conflict' between Spain/France and the Basques was political negotiations between government and ETA.<sup>38</sup>

On the contrary, victims and peace groups have long argued that the BPL generates such rhetorical frames in order to justify and legitimise ETA's violence. As an illustration, one participant criticised the BPL's tactic of describing ETA inmates as 'political prisoners' or 'Basque prisoners' as a barely disguised attempt at creating a mental association in which members of the terrorist organisation are implied to be in jail not due to their involvement in violence but merely by being Basque or by espousing certain ideology.<sup>39</sup>

They also criticise the attempt by the BPL to blur the boundaries around who can be considered a victim by creating an all-encompassing category that includes all individuals impacted by the violence, meaning not only those who suffered police abuses and state terrorism but ETA members convicted by the Spanish judiciary. By defining ETA prisoners as 'victims of the conflict' the BPL blurs the distinction between *innocent* victims and perpetrators, and for the



victims groups in Spain, this results in re-victimisation leading to further suffering for victims and their families.

The process can be described as one of competitive victimhood, a common theme in this special issue.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, the notion that ‘members of groups involved in violent conflict seek to establish that their group has suffered more than their adversarial group’ is very relevant here.<sup>41</sup> Whereas the work of Spanish victims associations acts as a reminder of the suffering caused by militant organisations within the country, BPL members contend that they themselves represent a victimised community. Their claim is that the Basque people, a nation whom they claim to represent, have suffered unjustly from centuries of Spanish repression and, as such, little has changed from the transition from the Francoist dictatorship to a democratic government. As they regard themselves as having suffered equally or more than ETA’s targets they are less likely to experience and display empathy towards the victims of their own violence.

Participants in this study contend that there is an absence of self-criticism within the BPL; there is still no honest ethical and moral renunciation of ETA’s violence. At most, such violence is seen as tactically counter-productive but not morally wrong since it was justified as a response to the Spanish and French states’ counter-terror policies, which they described as repression. Hence, the BPL is described as now seeking to achieve their political goals through a change of tactics, with no reflection on the violence used in the past.

Most importantly for the subject of this analysis, in order to push its own narrative the Basque Patriotic Left has engaged since the 1990s in high-level international mobilisation. This includes several meetings with political groups at the European and national parliaments (including

Westminster), international party conferences and intense propaganda work online in influential websites such as Wikipedia.<sup>42</sup> In these exchanges ETA militants have been described as ‘freedom fighters’ and the Spanish government as anti-democratic and at war with the Basque Country. Furthermore the BPL has, over the years, built strong relationships with paramilitary groups’ political wings, such as the Sinn Fein and the Kurdish BDP. This relationship involves exchange of knowledge and resources between actors, as well as engagement around negotiation options with governments and the rights of prisoners.<sup>43</sup>

The BPL has engaged in this international effort to construct credible narrative frames reinforced through external validation, but also to pressurise the Spanish government into negotiations with ETA, resulting in what they hope will be a dignified end for what can reasonably be described as an exhausted and unpopular militant organisation. These three elements are closely inter-connected since describing ETA’s violence as a reflection of an ethnic conflict between Basques and Spanish –a claim that waves away the fact that the vast majority of the Basques traditionally reject ETA’s violence- strengthens the case for the use of negotiations that would provide ETA with a last chance to snatch political gains in spite of the failure of their military campaign.

The actions of victims and political groups in their attempts to challenge the narrative of ETA and associated groups on the international stage, are described by the participants in this study as counter narrative and violence prevention initiatives. Their intention is to promote a discourse about ETA that is understood and shared internationally and for that it is essential to dismantle the romanticised view that exists of ETA as freedom fighters in a legitimate bi-directional conflict.

*'The account that the victims associations want to deliver in the international sphere is that this 'conflict' has never existed, the victims are innocent people who have exercised their freedom of expression and due to the fact that their views did not coincide with the political tenets of the terrorist organisation ETA, they have been murdered, they have been extorted... Therefore , rather than using the freedom of speech that the Spanish Constitution guarantees, they [ETA members] have resorted to violence to prevent innocent citizens from exercising their own rights.'*<sup>44</sup>

*'Since 2002, 2003, even before the 11-M [...] we realised that it was necessary to leave Spain to tell the testimony of the victims of terrorism and to play them off against existing distortions and a mythology that existed in certain contexts about what terrorism, the history of terrorism and terrorism victimisation meant'*<sup>45</sup>

It is also important for them to challenge facile comparisons that exist between the Basque and Northern Ireland contexts:

*'[At one academic event that the group organised] we invited experts on the fight against terrorism from Northern Ireland. We tried to establish a link with Northern Ireland because the BPL continuously tries to match the Northern Irish process with the terrorism suffered in Basque Country even if they are complete different realities.'*<sup>46</sup>

They remind others that unlike Northern Ireland, ETA's violence in the Basque Country is not part of a broader conflict and, also in contrast to Northern Ireland, this did not occur in a divided society. Victims of ETA's violence refused to radicalise in response to their experience, and point out that they rejected individual retaliation whilst supporting the rule of law. They also

contend that ETA was a minority project and that the large majority of Basque society mobilised first against Franco and then ETA, in support of the existing democratic system.<sup>47</sup> So rather than a fight between Basques and Spanish, the roots of the violence are in the actions of a militant group supported by a movement pursuing a political project rejected by a large majority of the Basques. It was the Basques themselves who suffered the violence first hand and it was the Basque people who opposed the violence in a peaceful manner all the while acting in support of the existing democratic system. As a result, victims groups are resolutely against negotiations between the Spanish government and ETA since such a move would ultimately reward and legitimate ETA's past actions.

Essentially, in the case of Spain what we are witnessing is a 'battle of narratives' played out at the international level but for fundamentally domestic reasons. The battle of narratives described here is a struggle to determine which of the two competing frames becomes predominant internationally. In it, victims and peace groups have recognised the importance of challenging a discourse that advocates for a specific framing of the past that justifies violence and does so in order to shape the future of Basque politics; simultaneously the discourse focuses on the personal identity of victims of terrorism and how this is understood both nationally and internationally.

### *Effectiveness and future challenges*

Crucially, and despite the persistence and innovation demonstrated by victims groups in Spain, they believe that they are losing the battle to control the narrative.

In part this is because, according to members of these associations, Spanish political authorities are either unaware of the problem or refuse to address it. Jihadist radicalisation has become a

priority and producing an accurate counter narrative that challenges the legitimacy of the violence carried out by ETA has been largely ignored by the Spanish government. Despite the best efforts of victims and associated advocacy groups in Spain,<sup>48</sup> the lack of substantive political action by Basque and Spanish political parties is regarded as having facilitated the international spread of the BPL's message. As a result some victims organisations explain their involvement in violence prevention and counter narrative work as means to fill in the gap that the absence of institutional action has created.

Victims' representatives also believe that the successes achieved by the BPL in pushing their own narrative benefits from a lack of detailed knowledge abroad regarding the Basque Country's violent past. The problem is that a glorified view of ETA still persists in some places and their actions become more abstract the further the observer resides from the violence and its effects.<sup>49</sup> Some worry that this view is so entrenched that it is now very hard to change.<sup>50</sup> This was evident in the views of international rapporteurs who have approached the problem from the vantage point of the BPL discourse: '*when the human right rapporteurs arrived at the Basque Country they came with an attitude very biased towards ETA*'.<sup>51</sup>

In explaining their opponents' success, participants also highlight the fact that the BPL is much better resourced to push their own message outside their borders than they themselves are. In short, there is a massive gap between the financial resources of one side and the other. Whereas the BPL can divert for this purpose the generous public funding that comes from being a political party, associations must rely on shoestring budgets.

So, when asked about how to narrow the existing gap between the BPL and the victim groups, some interviewees emphasised the importance of public funding. Although this is qualified by noting that their international action does not in fact require substantial injection of money, there is a shared perception that much could be achieved with few resources. At the same time, it is often argued that they should be allowed to work independently without interference by political parties. There is a call for greater political will but at the same time a reminder that that their work should not become politicised and distorted by established political parties' interests.

Interestingly, greater and closer collaboration amongst victims associations is not generally seen as a mechanism that would improve their effectiveness in this battle of narratives. This is puzzling given that pooling resources seems a potential avenue for addressing the problem of limited funding that exists across the board. Such reluctance might be due to a number of factors: differences in perspectives or strategies, personality clashes amongst leaders or even competition for ever-shrinking funding. Although the above is speculative at this stage, we do know that all of these issues have existed in the past and although victims' groups have generally presented a common front on important questions and they do broadly share a common discourse, it is also a heterogeneous community and ideological differences exist between -and even within- associations.

A related problem is that, on the one hand, the portrayal of ETA's terrorism as a 'national liberation struggle' is a long-term strategy single-mindedly pursued by the BPL over four decades. In contrast, the view that ETA's terrorism was morally wrong has been traditionally shared by a large majority of Basques citizens,<sup>52</sup> ranging from politically moderate nationalists to

conservative and leftist non-nationalists. Such ideological heterogeneity amongst ETAs opponents does however tend to hinder common discursive action even if the rejection of ETA's legitimacy is amply shared:

*'They [the BPL] have resources, they have a strategy and they have a goal. We don't have resources nor strategy and no permanent objectives. They work tightly together because they are more sectarian, they have a clear vision. We ourselves must deal with the existing democratic plurality and shared interests'<sup>53</sup>*

It has been mentioned in the previous section that, following their permanent ceasefire, ETA ceased to be a key priority for the Spanish government. This is also true for Basque citizens themselves, whose main concerns at the time of writing are a weak economy and unemployment. Amongst some of the interviewees there is the perception that Basque society as a whole is too passive because most Basques are relieved about the end of ETA's violence and now simply desire to move on:

*'the rest of society, who obviously never supported the violence or the BPL, is not bothered, it is not a priority. They turn the page, as we say, without reading it. [...] 80% of the population can't be bothered'<sup>54</sup>*

The BPL, a highly mobilised, radicalised minority who supported the perpetrators in the past are opposed by another activist sector (victims groups) but this occurs amongst the compromising apathy of a silent majority:

*'My own view is that people wish to turn the page, live a quiet life and not to be bothered with this. This is a struggle between specific socio-political actors in which we the victims want memory, justice and truth and other actors wish to justify certain acts to get the etarras quickly out of jail, close the chapter and gain power, no? That their bloody past would not stain their present and future. That is the struggle, no? And in between there is a society who does not feel nor suffer [...] society is just waiting to see who wins. As always.'*<sup>55</sup>

They worry that the haste in which Basque society wishes to turn the page on the past may have consequences for the future:

*'It appears that ETA is not active any more, even if it still exists, and that all this is in the past and people want to turn the page but what we say is that some people want to turn the page without reading the book. And I believe that the page needs to be turned after reading it well and to close this as it should be closed.'*<sup>56</sup>

The priority, in other words, is to avoid the temptation to turn to the future too fast whilst failing to engage in a critical analysis of the past.<sup>57</sup> The pernicious consequences that may result from the BPL successfully framing ETA as a liberation movement are yet to be seen. From the perspective of the victims, the truth needs to be told to prevent future generations glorifying ETA's violence.

The victims see it as essential to educate the public about the pain and suffering that ETA caused in order to produce a cautionary tale for Basque youth on the futility of terrorism. This concern is far from unfounded: a 2009 report by the Basque Parliament Office of the Ombudsman reported that 15% of the Basque youth either justifies or refuses to condemn ETAs violence.<sup>58</sup>



In effect, the struggle for memory is therefore seen as a mechanism to construct a better, more peaceful society: *'We do this for the future generations [...] We are building the memory [...] and a dignified peace that is built on the principles of memory, truth and justice'*<sup>59</sup> That their activism is not for their own benefit but for Basque society as a whole can be expressed with the concept of 'altruism born of suffering'; the idea that individuals who have been victimised may devote themselves to help others 'not only despite their difficult experiences but precisely because of them'.<sup>60</sup> Such pro-social behaviour can be manifest in political campaigning and transformative efforts aimed at social change as evidenced in the social movements literature.<sup>61</sup> Clearly, and as noted in the introduction, a victim-perpetrator cycle is not universal: victimhood can be channelled instead into peace efforts and the promotion of non-violence.

Thus, the victims support organisations' argument is that, by bringing the past to the present with a strong emotional underpinning, memorialisation has the potential to represent not only an effective counter-narrative by de-mystifying political violence but also an alternative narrative as it reinforces democratic norms and values against intolerance and fanaticism. Memorialisation can therefore be a foundation for peaceful coexistence because it promotes ethical and moral principles and the respect for individual human rights. In a 2013 publication, the head of Fundación Fernando Buesa himself further elaborated on this claim:

*'an end to terrorism without memory, without ethic, social, and political delegitimation, and with a subculture of fear and fanaticism that still survives in some sectors within Basque society means the preservation of the embers that would rekindle the flames of the past with a strong*

*wind in times of drought. This is what is at stake these days: the future, not of this generation, but future ones*'.<sup>62</sup>

In summary, for the victims groups, a strong democratic coexistence is founded on, firstly, an ethical memory serving as a response to intolerance and, secondly, a conscious effort to delegitimise violence that is integral to the broader objective of the protection of individual rights and the strengthening of a culture of peace. In this respect, international activities are merely a continuation of those carried out within Basque Country, embodied in the plan for a Victims Memorial Centre. As argued in its expert committee report:

‘The Memorial Centre will have as mission not only to promote justice, dignity and the memory of the victims of these barbaric acts but also a democratic culture that examines the “ideological” roots of terrorism and its illegitimate violence to unmask its moral or theoretical trappings and delegitimise it ideologically [...] Only by highlighting past injustices, we can build a less unjust present, only emphasising past violence we’ll build a future without violence’.<sup>63</sup>

## ***Conclusion***

As evidenced in the analysis above it is clear that a number of Spanish victims’ associations have worked tirelessly to give a voice to the victims of terrorism and broadcast their testimonies (*‘el relato’*) to national and international audiences. These groups believe that the stories and insights of the victims can illustrate the human costs of terrorism and, by appealing to the emotional instincts of their target audiences, become an essential tool to challenge and counter extremist propaganda that promotes violence.

The present international context of global jihadism and the prioritisation of terrorism prevention by Western governments as a response has opened a window of opportunity for Spanish victims organisations to contribute to efforts organised by international actors. These programmes have provided a lease of life, another *raison d'être* and/or a renewed sense of direction for those groups whose primary aims are political.

Yet even if these initiatives have been presented in a changing international landscape under the framework of CVE, much of this work has a domestic focus. Indeed, a key goal behind this drive has been to challenge the international legitimisation of ETA; testimonies by their victims can turn the spotlight on the dramatic costs that their acts have had on the constituencies they claim to represent. In doing so these associations have engaged in a battle of narratives with the Basque Patriotic Left as they confront the BPLs long-term strategy of exporting their own discourse. As we have seen, such a battle of narratives is rooted in competitive notions of victimhood.

For these groups, it is essential that a skewed view of the past does not take hold: the concern is that if ETA becomes idealised as a national liberation movement, it would transmute into a myth fabricated to encourage future generations to take up arms. This consideration is supported by existing academic work on how romanticised fantasies about terrorist organisations facilitates recruitment and helps to sustain involvement in their activities.<sup>64</sup>

As such, this is violence prevention through delegitimisation. On the one hand, testimonies that demonstrate civilian suffering at the hands of militants can work as a counter-narrative to deconstruct and de-mystify extremist messages. In addition to de-glamorising terrorist attacks perpetrated against ordinary civilians, victims' messages can act as an alternative narrative: there

is a strong belief within these groups about the importance of educating the youth on democratic values and tolerance to prevent a recurrence of violence. The ultimate aim thus is to challenge the glorification of violent extremism through memorialisation of the victims and education for the youth on democratic values; by laying out the historical consequences of politically motivated violence the victims organisations believe that these aims can be achieved.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> On this question, see for instance the 2011 EU Counter-terror Coordinator discussion paper on radicalisation available at: <http://www.statewatch.org/news/2011/oct/eu-council-radicalisation-14348-11.pdf>(accessed 7 May 2015).

<sup>2</sup>Steven R. Corman, “Understanding the Role of Narrative in Extremist Strategic Communication,” in *Countering Violent Extremism: Scientific Methods and Strategies*, ed. Laurie Fenstermacher (Washington DC:NSI Inc., September 2011), 42.

<sup>3</sup>Rachel Briggs and Sebastien Feve, *Review of Programs to Counter Narratives of Violent Extremism* (London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, July 2013); see also Alex P. Schmid, *Al-Qaeda’s “Single Narrative” and Attempts to Develop Counter-Narratives: The State of Knowledge* (The Hague: ICCT, January 2014).

<sup>4</sup>The quotes are from p. 87 of the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) report ‘Preventing Radicalisation to terrorism and Violent Extremism: Strengthening the EU’s Response’, which was released in January 2014 and can be found at: [http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation\\_awareness\\_network/ran-best-practices/docs/collection\\_of\\_approaches\\_lessons\\_learned\\_and\\_practices\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-best-practices/docs/collection_of_approaches_lessons_learned_and_practices_en.pdf)(accessed 9 September 2015).

<sup>5</sup>The text is from the RAN Voices of Victims of Terrorism (VVT) webpage: [http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation\\_awareness\\_network/about-ran/ran-vvt/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran/ran-vvt/index_en.htm)(accessed 8 July 2015).

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<sup>6</sup>Orla Lynch and Javier Argomaniz, “Meeting the Needs of Victims of Terrorism – Lessons for the International Context,” in *Victims of Terrorism. A Comparative and Interdisciplinary Study*, ed. Orla Lynch and Javier Argomaniz (London: Routledge, 2015): 139-148.

<sup>7</sup>The Asociación de Ayuda a las Víctimas del 11-M and the Asociación 11M Afectados del Terrorismo.

<sup>8</sup>Asociación de Víctimas del Terrorismo (AVT), Colectivo de Víctimas del Terrorismo en el País Vasco (COVITE), Fundación Fernando Buesa, Fundación Gregorio Ordoñez, Fundación Miguel Ángel Blanco (FMAB), Fundación para la Libertad, Fundación Víctimas del Terrorismo (FVT).

<sup>9</sup>A limitation of the sample is that the two main groups that emerged from the 11-M attacks did not answer the researcher’s requests for an interview, although their own websites served as valuable sources for the analysis.

<sup>10</sup>The organisations who have been traditional front-runners in international engagement are the Fundación Miguel Angel Blanco (FMAB) and the Fundación de Víctimas del Terrorismo (FVT). For more information on this and other statutory bodies see: Javier Argomaniz, “State Responses to Victims of Terrorism Needs in Spain,” in *International Perspectives on Terrorist Victimisation. An Interdisciplinary Approach*, ed. Javier Argomaniz and Orla Lynch (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015): 124-148.

<sup>11</sup>Carlos Fernández de Casadevante Romani, *International Law of Victims* (London: Springer, 2012).

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<sup>12</sup> Lucía Sutil and Eduardo E. Lázaro, *El dolor incomprendido. El sufrimiento en las víctimas del terrorismo* (Barcelona: Plataforma Editorial, 2007).

<sup>13</sup>See: <http://www.zoomrights.com/?lang=en>(accessed 5 May 2015).

<sup>14</sup>At the time of writing, another organization, the Asociación de Víctimas del Terrorismo (AVT) is currently translating into English a number of victims testimonies in their website.

<sup>15</sup> Such as the Omagh Self Help and Support Group

<sup>16</sup>See: <http://mapadelterror.com/en/>(accessed 5 May 2015).

<sup>17</sup>Interview with victims group representative, 5 June 2015.

<sup>18</sup>The exhibition's online catalogue can be found at:

[http://www.fmiguelangelblanco.es/archivos/pdf/publicaciones/Dossier\\_en.pdf](http://www.fmiguelangelblanco.es/archivos/pdf/publicaciones/Dossier_en.pdf)(accessed 3 June 2015).

<sup>19</sup>See: <http://www.terra-net.eu/pages/cont.php?id=1&menu=2>(accessed 29 April 2015).

<sup>20</sup>See: <http://www.terra-net.eu/pages/cont.php?id=2&menu=3>(accessed 29 April 2015).

<sup>21</sup>See: [http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation\\_awareness\\_network/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/index_en.htm)(accessed 29 April 2015).

<sup>22</sup>The RAN RVT WG was previously named the Voices of Victims of Terrorism (VVT) Working Group. See: [http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation\\_awareness\\_network/about-ran/ran-rvt/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran/ran-rvt/index_en.htm) (accessed 13 October 2016).

<sup>23</sup>In fact the abovementioned photographic exhibition 'Europe against terrorism. Glance of the victim' was praised as a best practice initiative in a 2014 RAN report:

<http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we->

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do/networks/radicalisation\_awareness\_network/ran-best-practices/docs/collection\_of\_approaches\_lessons\_learned\_and\_practices\_en.pdf(accessed 29 April 2015).

<sup>24</sup>Interview with victims group representative, 5 June 2015.

<sup>25</sup> Bruce Hoffman and Anna-Britt Kasupski, *The Victims of Terrorism. An Assessment of Their Influence and Growing Role in Policy, Legislation and the Private Sector* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2007).

<sup>26</sup>By ETA, we refer more broadly to the organisation *ETA Militar* and related Basque groups such as *ETA Politico-Militar* or the *Comandos Autónomos Anticapitalistas*. Other nationalist militant organisations such as the Catalan *Terra LLiure* or the Galician *Exército Guerrilheiro do Povo Galego Ceive* (EGPGC) had much shorter histories and, by and large, mostly restricted themselves to acts of sabotage and symbolic actions.

<sup>27</sup>Interview with victims group representative, 5 June 2015.

<sup>28</sup>Interview with victims group representative, 28 May 2015.

<sup>29</sup>Interview with victims group representative, 5 June 2015.

<sup>30</sup>Interview with victims group representative, 2 June 2015

<sup>31</sup>See: *La Tribuna del País Vasco*, “COVITE pide urgentemente ayuda económica a sus socios,” July 3, 2015, accessed October 10, 2016, <http://paralalibertad.org/covite-pide-urgentemente-ayuda-economica-a-sus-socios/>.

<sup>32</sup>Interview with victims group representative, 28 May 2015.

<sup>33</sup>For a concise history of the movement, a detailed definition of the term and a clear explanation of what distinguishes it from other similar monikers (such as ‘radical Basque nationalism’ or the



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‘Basque National Liberation Movement (MLNV)’ see: Rafael Leonisio, “Basque Patriotic Left: 50 years of Political and Terrorist Acronyms,” *RIPS* 14 (1) (2015): 83-104.

<sup>34</sup>These four parties are: *Sortu* (To create), *Alternatiba* (Alternative), *Aralar* and *Eusko Alkartasuna* (Basque Solidarity). The former is *Batasuna*’s heir and the dominant coalition member whereas the three other parties support independence but have rejected armed struggle as a political tool and defended instead the use of democratic methods as a matter of principle. It should be noted that *EA* has also been an important political player in the past: a traditional partner in government to the region’s most popular party, the moderate Christian-democratic *Partido Nacionalista Vasco* (PNV-Basque Nationalist Party).

<sup>35</sup>The full statement can be found at <http://gara.naiz.eus/paperezkoa/20120603/344970/es/EPPK-respalda-cambio-ciclo-abre-dar-pasos-futuro->(accessed 18 September 2015).

<sup>36</sup>Florencio Domínguez, *Dentro de ETA. La vida diaria de los terroristas* (Madrid: Santillana, 2002): 361.

<sup>37</sup>For a recent summary of this position see: Pilar Eirene de Prada, “Buscando la ‘paz positiva’ en el País Vasco,” *el diario.es*, April 19, 2015,

[http://www.eldiario.es/contrapoder/paz\\_positiva\\_Euskadi\\_6\\_379072104.html](http://www.eldiario.es/contrapoder/paz_positiva_Euskadi_6_379072104.html) . For a critique of this argument see the response by José M. Portillo “¡Aupa, Jonan! Sobre “conflicto”, “paz” y los olvidos de siempre,” *el diario.es*, 20 April 2015,

[http://www.eldiario.es/norte/vientodelnorte/Aupa-Jonan-conflicto-olvidos-siempre\\_6\\_379422081.html](http://www.eldiario.es/norte/vientodelnorte/Aupa-Jonan-conflicto-olvidos-siempre_6_379422081.html) (both accessed 9 June 2015).

<sup>38</sup>José María Ruíz Soroa, “El canon nacionalista. La argumentación del “conflicto” vasco,” in

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*Breve guía para orientarse en el laberinto vasco* (Bilbao: Fundación para la Libertad, 2008): 14-20.

<sup>39</sup>Interview with victims group representative, 28 May 2015.

<sup>40</sup> See ‘The narrative of victimization and de-radicalization: An expert view’ and ‘Narrative as a paradigm for studying victimization and radicalization’ in this issue.

<sup>41</sup> Masi Noor, Nurit Shnabel, Samer Halabi and Arie Nadler “When Suffering Begets Suffering: The Psychology of Competitive Victimhood Between Adversarial Groups in Violent Conflicts,” *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 16 (4)(2012): 351-374.

<sup>42</sup>Leyre Iglesias, “Sortu convence fuera de España ante el silencio del Gobierno,” *El Mundo*, December 26, 2013, accessed September 10, 2015, <http://www.elmundo.es/pais-vasco/2013/12/26/52bb32e222601d5a618b4585.html> .

<sup>43</sup>Owen Bowcott, “Irish republicans to hold peace summit with Kurdish and Basque separatists,” *The Guardian*, February 10, 2011, accessed October 6, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2011/feb/10/ira-eta-kurds-peace-summit> .

<sup>44</sup>Interview with victims group representative, 5 June 2015.

<sup>45</sup>Interview with victims group representative, 2 June 2015.

<sup>46</sup>Interview with victims group representative, 28 May 2015.

<sup>47</sup>For a document making this case drafted by the Fundación Fernando Buesa see:<http://www.fundacionfernandobuesa.com/pdf/20131114VictimasAulas.pdf>(accessed 5 May 2015).

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<sup>48</sup> Including for instance COVITEs circulation in 2014 of a 12-page dossier to MEPs (‘ETA and its supporters, a danger for Europe’) describing the BPL as a radicalising actor that justified political violence and ultimately left the door open for a hypothetical future return to the ‘armed struggle’. See: “Covite alerta a un centenar de partidos europeos "del peligro" de la IA, que "justifica el asesinato selectivo",” *Europa Press*, November 10, 2014, accessed September 18, 2015 .

<sup>49</sup> Interview with victims group representative, 2 June 2015.

<sup>50</sup> Interview with victims group representative, 1 June 2015.

<sup>51</sup> Interview with victims group representative, 29 May 2015.

<sup>52</sup> At the time of writing, the latest (May 2015) poll on Basque public attitudes carried by the University of Basque Country shows that only 1% of the population unreservedly supports ETA and merely 3% justifies its action ‘critically’. 11% are said to support it in the past but not today. 66% totally rejects the group. The report can be downloaded from:

[http://www.ehu.eus/documents/1457190/1525260/EB\\_Mayo15.pdf](http://www.ehu.eus/documents/1457190/1525260/EB_Mayo15.pdf)(accessed 17 September 2015)

<sup>53</sup> Interview with victims group representative, 2 June 2015.

<sup>54</sup> Interview with victims group representative, 1 June 2015.

<sup>55</sup> Interview with victims group representative, 2 June 2015.

<sup>56</sup> Interview with victims group representative, 1 June 2015.

<sup>57</sup> Gaizka Fernández Soldevilla, “Mitos que matan, La narrativa del “conflicto” vasco,” *Ayer* 98/2015 (2) (2015), pp. 213-240.

<sup>58</sup>The report is available at:

[http://www.ararteko.net/RecursosWeb/DOCUMENTOS/1/5\\_1684\\_3.pdf](http://www.ararteko.net/RecursosWeb/DOCUMENTOS/1/5_1684_3.pdf) . For a journalistic account of the 15% figure see: <http://www.diariovasco.com/20090713/mas-actualidad/nacional/adolescentes-vascos-rechaza-justifica-200907131407.html>(accessed 16 September 2015)

<sup>59</sup>Interview victims group representative, 3 June 2015.

<sup>60</sup> Johanna Vollhart “Altruism born of Suffering and Prosocial Behaviour Following Adverse Life Events: A Review and Conceptualization,” *Social Justice Research*, 22(1) (2009): 53-97.

<sup>61</sup> Francesca Polleta, *It Was Like a Fever. Storytelling in Protest and Politics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006).

<sup>62</sup> Jesus Loza Aguirre, “Como abordar la memoria en el Pais Vasco? El Reto del relato,” in *Políticas de memoria, Qué, cómo y para qué recordar*, Proceedings XI seminario Fernando Buesa(Vitoria: Fundación Fernando Buesa and Instituto Universitario de Historia Social Valentin de Foronda, 2013), 100.

<sup>63</sup>The quote can be found in page 17 of the document:

[http://www.interior.gob.es/en/prensa/noticias/-/asset\\_publisher/GHU8Ap6ztgsg/content/id/3347168](http://www.interior.gob.es/en/prensa/noticias/-/asset_publisher/GHU8Ap6ztgsg/content/id/3347168)(accessed 18 September 2015)

<sup>64</sup>John Horgan,*Walking Away from Terrorism. Accounts of disengagement from radical and extremist movements*(Abingdon: Routledge, 2009); See also: Fernando Reinares, *Patriotas de la muerte. Por qué han militado en ETA y cuando abandonan. 2nd ed.* (Madrid: Santillana, 2011).