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La « syndrome du Nord ». La dimension humaine de la lutte contre l’organisation terroriste ETA

The “Northern Syndrome”. The human dimension of the fight against the terrorist organization ETA*

*Miguel Angel Cano Paños**

Riassunto

Per più di quarant’anni, la Spagna ha dovuto affrontare il fenomeno del terrorismo interno, di natura etnonazionalista, agito per mano dell’organizzazione terroristica ETA. La loro lotta armata, che ha causato più di 850 morti, aveva l’obiettivo di rendere indipendente dalla Spagna i Paesi Baschi, la Navarra e una parte dei Paesi Baschi francesi. E’ stato soprattutto durante gli anni 1970, 1980 e 1990 che le forze di polizia dispiegate nella “zona Nord” sono state esposte non soltanto alla possibilità di subire un attacco terroristico, ma anche al rifiuto e all’animosità di gran parte della popolazione basca e della Navarra, che considerava la polizia come una “forza di occupazione”. E’ così che viene coniato il concetto di “sindrome del Nord”, il quale designa le conseguenze psicologiche prodotte dal terrore e dal rifiuto onnipresente nelle vite sia dei poliziotti che delle loro famiglie. A partire da queste considerazioni, l’obiettivo del presente studio è quello di analizzare tale costrutto psicopatologico. A tal fine, l’autore ha effettuato 25 interviste rivolte sia a poliziotti che lavoravano nei Paesi Baschi e in Navarra durante gli “anni di piombo” che a membri delle loro famiglie. Come sarà evidenziato, la maggior parte delle persone intervistate hanno non solo confermato l’esistenza di questa sindrome, ma anche che esse ne avevano sofferto durante la loro permanenza al Nord e, in certi casi, ancora attualmente.

Résumé

Depuis plus de quarante ans, l’Espagne est confrontée à un terrorisme interne, de nature ethno-nationaliste, déployé par l’organisation terroriste ETA. Leur lutte armée, qui a fait plus de 850 morts, avait pour objectif l’indépendance du Pays basque, de la Navarre, ainsi que d’une partie du Pays basque français. C’est surtout au cours des années 1970, 1980 et 1990 que les forces de police déployées dans la « zone Nord » ont été exposées non seulement à la possibilité de subir une attaque terroriste, mais aussi au rejet et à l’animosité d’une grande partie de la population basque et navarraise, qui considérait la police comme une « force d’occupation ». C’est ainsi que le concept de « syndrome du Nord » apparaît et désigne les conséquences psychologiques que cette terreur et ce rejet omniprésents dans leur vie quotidienne produisaient tant chez les policiers que dans leurs familles. Partant de ces considérations, l’objectif de la présente étude est d’analyser cette construction psycho-pathologique. Pour ce faire, l’auteur a réalisé un total de 25 entretiens auprès des policiers et des membres de leur famille qui étaient en poste au Pays Basque et en Navarre pendant les « années de plomb ». Comme nous le verrons, la plupart des personnes interrogées ont non seulement affirmé l’existence de ce syndrome, mais aussi qu’elles en avaient souffert pendant leur séjour au Nord et, dans certains cas, encore aujourd’hui.

Abstract

For more than forty years, Spain has been confronted with internal terrorism, of an ethno-nationalist nature, deployed by the terrorist organization ETA. Their armed struggle, which caused more than 850 fatalities, had as its objective the independence of the Basque Country, Navarre, as well as a part of the so-called French Basque Country. It was especially during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s when the police forces deployed in the so-called “Northern Zone” were exposed not only to the possibility of suffering a terrorist attack, but also to the rejection and animosity of a large part of the Basque and Navarrese population, which considered the police as an “occupation force”. This gave rise to the concept of “Northern Syndrome”, which referred, above all, to the psychological consequences that this omnipresent terror and rejection in their

* Due to the great impact that this research has had in Spain, being the first criminological study that analyses the so-called “Northern Syndrome”, a version of this article in Spanish has also been published in the magazine *El Criminalista Digital*. However, the Spanish version neither analyses the relationship between the Northern Syndrome and the Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) nor the reasons why, in the 1980s, the Spanish authorities refused to admit said Syndrome as disorder of a psychological nature.

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daily lives produced in both the police officers and their families. Based on these considerations, the objective of the present work is to analyse said psycho-pathological construct. To this end, the author of this paper has conducted a total of 25 interviews with police officers and relatives who were stationed in the Basque Country and Navarra during the so-called “years of lead”. As will be seen, practically all of the individuals interviewed affirm not only the existence of said Syndrome, but also having suffered from it during their stay in the North and, in some cases, also currently.

Key words: ETA; years of lead; police officers; Northern Syndrome.

1. Introduction

Last July 2022 marked the 25th anniversary of the murder by the terrorist organization ETA (1) of the Popular Party councillor in the Biscayan town of Ermua, Miguel Ángel Blanco, as well as the release by the Civil Guard (*Guardia Civil*) of the prison official José Antonio Ortega Lara, kidnapped by the same terrorist organization on January 17, 1996. As it could not be otherwise, the Spanish media echoed both events, bringing to light once again what, for the recent history of Spain, the terrorist activity of said organization has meant (2).

Much has been written about the history of ETA, about its members, its actions, about its direct victims, with in this case those belonging to the political, journalistic, and judicial spheres receiving special prominence. But, to date, nothing or almost nothing has been written about the so-called State Security Forces and Corps (*Fuerzas y Cuerpos de Seguridad del Estado*, FFCCSS hereinafter) that, between the 1970s of the 20th century and the first decade of the 2000s, had to combat ETA in its own niche, namely, in the Basque Country and Navarre. And much less about their families, their wives, partners, sons and daughters who had to experience first-hand that exceptional situation in their lives, 24 hours a day, seven days a week; not only with the fear of becoming victims of a terrorist attack, but also with the rejection and harassment of a significant part of the Basque and Navarrese population. This gave rise to the fact that, already during the 1980s, people began to talk, in the

political, psychological and police context, of the so-called “Northern Syndrome”, which was intended to refer to the psychological consequences that, among police officers and their families, carried out their daily lives in a territory where a terrorist organization roamed freely, with the approval or silence of a significant part of the population.

For the reasons pointed out above, and more than a decade after the terrorist organization ETA declared the “end of the armed struggle”, Spanish society must know what life was like, the day-to-day life of the police officers – and, it must be reiterated, of their families – who were stationed in Basque and Navarrese towns, whether they were members of the Civil Guard or the National Police (*Policía Nacional*); without forgetting the members of the Basque regional police (*Ertzaintza*) and the local Police (*Policía Local*) who also became terrorist targets. To this end, the author of this paper has conducted a total of 25 interviews with police officers, as well as wives of police officers, who experienced ETA’s terrorism first-hand during the so-called “years of lead” (*Años de plomo*). The main objective of this study is to collect the testimonies and experiences of the people interviewed during their period of stay in the so-called “Northern Zone” (*Zona Norte*), to obtain, first-hand, data that allows, from a criminological perspective, to corroborate the existence of the “Northern Syndrome”. At the same time, it is intended to stimulate public recognition of the figure of those

policemen who performed an indispensable function of preserving citizen security while, in parallel, they suffered a threat, harassment and chronic rejection in their person and that of their closest environment, many of them paying for their work with their own lives, or with physical and psychological consequences that, in most cases, remain to this day.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 The lives that ETA distorted in the Basque Country and Navarre within the police forces.

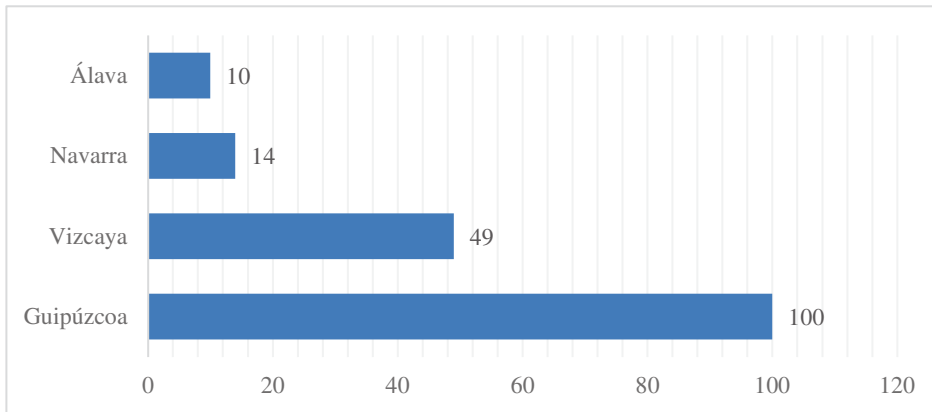
Among all the human targets of the terrorist barbarism deployed by ETA since its beginnings, there is no doubt that the security forces and the army constituted the favourite objective, being considered by the ETA spectrum and its entourage as “occupation forces” that should disappear from the Basque and Navarrese geography. For this reason, the number of police officers and soldiers who were victims of a terrorist action far exceeded that of other groups throughout the entire armed struggle. Within this specific group, for this work only the members of the Civil Guard and the National Police will be considered, without thereby wanting to downplay the importance of the victims within the body of the Basque Autonomous Police (*Ertzaintza*), the local Police or the army.

Next, in different figures, quantitative data is collected showing the members of the Civil Guard and the National Police (or police forces that preceded it) murdered by ETA in the Basque Country and Navarre between the years 1968 and 2009.

Referring first to total figures, the number of police officers of the Civil Guard and the National Police murdered by ETA between the years 1968 and 2009, in the whole of the Spanish State and France, amounted to 357, of which 207 were Civil Guards, while 150 belonged to the National Police (3).

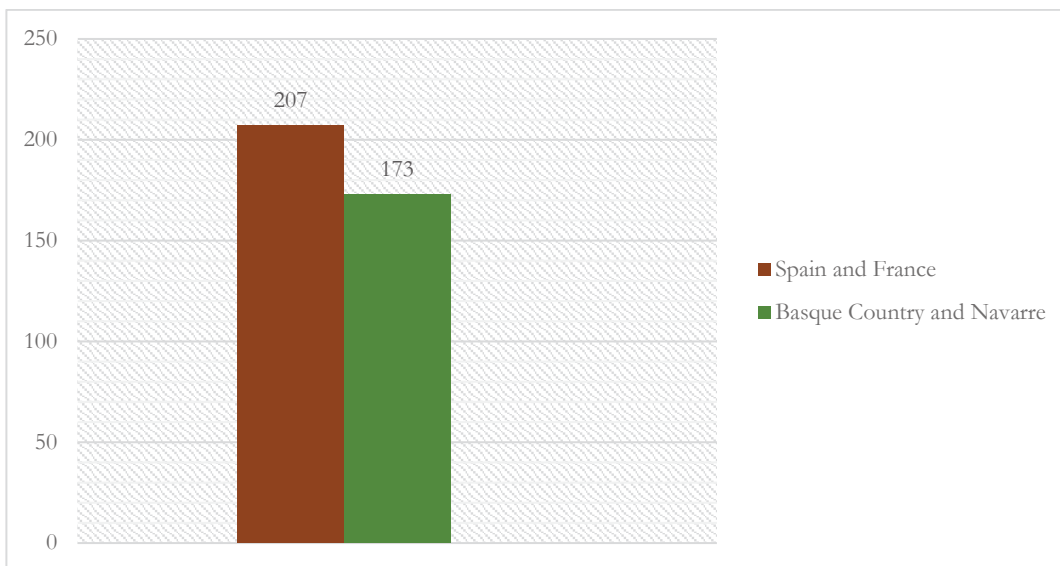
Figure 1 shows the number of members of the Civil Guard murdered by ETA in the Basque Country and Navarre as a whole. As can be seen, the total number reaches 173, which indicates that 83.5% of the police officers of this police force murdered by ETA practiced their profession in the Basque Country or Navarre (Figure 2). By province, Guipúzcoa stands out, with a total of 100 victims. This certainly cannot be surprising if one considers that numerous police officers of the *Guardia Civil* were deployed in this province. These policemen were professionally linked to so called *casas-cuartel* (barracks-houses or quarterings) located in towns belonging to the aforementioned province. As with the National Police, the province of Álava witnessed many fewer attacks compared to the rest of the Basque provinces.

Figure 1: Civil Guards murdered by ETA in the Basque Country and Navarre (1968-2009)



Source: *Author, based on the data published by:* Intxaurbe V. et al. (2022, pp. 14 et seq.)

Figure 2: Comparison of the Civil Guards murdered by ETA in the Spanish State as a whole (and in France) with those who were murdered in the Basque Country and Navarre (1968-2009)

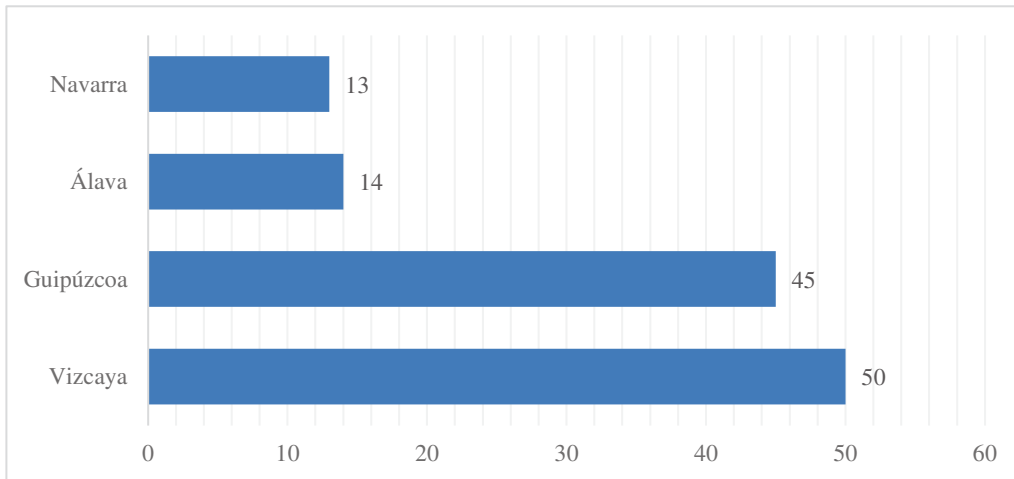


Source: *Author, based on the data published by:* Alonso R. et al. (2010)

Figure 3 contains the number of members of the National Police (or police forces that preceded it) who died because of a terrorist attack committed by ETA in the Basque Country and Navarre. With respect to this specific police corps, the total number reaches 122, which means that 81.3% of the National Police officers who were victims of a fatal terrorist attack were operating in Basque or Navarrese territory (Figure 4). Contrary to what happens in the context of the Civil Guard, in this

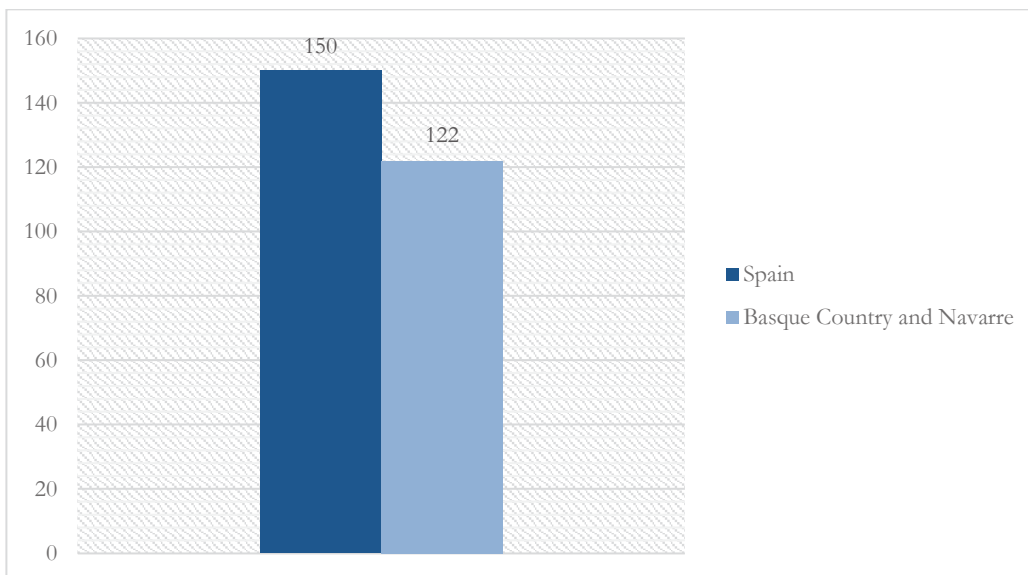
case Vizcaya is the province that generated the highest number of fatalities within the National Police, with 50 deaths. This has its explanation if one considers that the aforementioned province has cities such as Bilbao, a place where numerous members of this police force were deployed, therefore becoming one of ETA's favourite targets. Furthermore, the National Police Corps reserve was in Basauri, which is why many terrorist attacks were committed in the area surrounding said town.

Figure 3: National Police officers murdered by ETA in the Basque Country and Navarre (1968-2009)



Source: *Author, based on the data published by:* Intxaurbe V. et al. (2022, pp. 14 et seq.)

Figure 4: Comparison of the National Police officers murdered by ETA in the Spanish State as a whole with those who were murdered in the Basque Country and Navarre (1968-2009)



Source: *Author, based on the data published by:* Alonso R. et al. (2010)

2.2. What is the “Northern Syndrome”? The vision of science.

On August 11, 1985, the newspaper *El País* published a report, signed by Carlos Yárnoz, which had the following title: «The ‘Northern Syndrome’. Psychologists and police warn of the mental danger for policemen stationed in the Basque Country» (4). It explained the situation of tension and stress of the police officers deployed in the aforementioned autonomous community, which, in some cases, had

given rise to violent behaviour, alcoholism or even suicide. Although at that time the Spanish Home Office denied the existence of the “Northern Syndrome”, both psychologists and police unions representatives assured that the problem was real, linking it, among other factors, to the lack of psychological preparation that the police officers received before being destined for the North.

In this report it was pointed out that members of the National Police and the Civil Guard lived

“under constant pressure and threats in the Basque Country, practically isolated from society, periodically attending funerals for murdered colleagues of theirs, hiding their profession from neighbours or sporadic friends”. Their families also suffered isolation, rejection, and insult from their surroundings.

However, during the 1980s, both in the scientific community and in the bodies of political power, scepticism reigned, and even outright denial, about the existence of the Northern Syndrome (5). This disorder used not to be seen as an illness linked to the professional activity of the policemen assigned to the Basque Country and Navarre, but rather because of the discomfort experienced by them because of their geographical destination, and the deep desire to be would grant them a destination in the rest of Spanish territory.

The reasons that led to this scepticism and subsequent denial are several. On the one hand, it must be considered that the scientific and professional situation of both Psychiatry and the incipient Spanish Psychology in the 1970s and 1980s prevented, the academy and, above all, the medical services and psychiatry responsible for the medical and psychiatric evaluation of police officers and their forensic evaluations, to fully understand what was happening to those who were stationed in the Northern Zone. This meant that convincing reports could not be made that were better based on the psychopathological knowledge at that time. All this, logically, had an impact on a small number of academic and scientific works on the Northern Syndrome that appeared in Spain. In this sense, it must be considered that until the DSM-III was published in 1980 – which appeared in Spain three years later – PTSD was not considered an “official” psychological disorder and that, from those years

on, is when more solid psychopathological knowledge begins to be obtained about mental disorders related to the experience of traumatic events.

On the other hand, the official recognition of the Northern Syndrome would have meant admitting that there was a special lack of protection for the civil guards and national police officers stationed in the Basque Country and Navarre and that, consequently, the terror strategy of both ETA and its radical nationalist environment was succeeding. At the same time, the fact that the State Administration admitted the existence of the Northern Syndrome would have meant recognizing an occupational disease; and the State was neither willing to face those expenses, nor of course to address the flood of sick leave that would surely have been requested by police officers who carried out their professional work in “*El Norte*”.

In 1997, a study carried out at the Burgos Military Hospital was published aimed at verifying the existence of the “Northern Syndrome” with respect to police officers stationed in the Basque Country (Fuentes Rocañín, 1997). To this end, a sample composed of all Civil Guards ($n = 85$) who during 1995 were referred to the Psychiatry Service of the Military Hospital of Burgos was analysed (6). Of that number, 12 had suffered a terrorist attack. In their conclusions, the authors of the study stated that neither the existence of specific signs or symptoms, nor a delimited clinical entity was admissible with the minimum scientific rigor.

Later, in 1999, that same research team published another study related to the topic, collecting in this case a sample of 195 individuals, all of them Civil Guards stationed in the Basque Country and other autonomous communities, and who had been referred for 18 months, for different reasons, at the

Psychiatry service of the Military Hospital of Burgos (Fuertes Rocañín, 1999). Of all of them, 42.6% (83 individuals) were stationed in the Basque Country, of which 11% had suffered, directly or indirectly, a terrorist attack. The objective of this second study was to compare the psychiatric pathology suffered by members of the Civil Guard stationed in the Basque Country, with the same type of pathology presented by other members of the same force stationed in other autonomous communities, in order to, in this way, try to verify the existence of the so-called “Northern Syndrome”.

Also in this second work, the authors pointed out that, from the analysis of the results, it could be stated “with the logical reservations that any study of these characteristics entails”, that there was no higher level of psychopathology in the Civil Guards stationed in the Basque country with respect to those who were stationed in other Spanish autonomous communities (Fuertes Rocañín, 1999, p. 19).

More recently, Sanz and García-Vera have published an interesting work in two parts where they analyse the Northern Syndrome (2022; 2022a). To do this, in the first part they carry out a review of those judicial sentences that, based on psychological, psychiatric, or medical-forensic reports, have discussed or used said construct. In fact, there are court rulings in Spain in which, on an individual basis, and after the relevant expert evidence, the Northern Syndrome has been used to modulate the criminal responsibility of a police officer of the Civil Guard or the National Police who, after being accused of a certain crime, his legal defence alleged the existence of said syndrome after having been stationed in the Basque Country or Navarre (Z).

Well, in almost two thirds of the sentences analysed, no credibility was given to the existence of the Northern Syndrome, assuming that the psychological disorders shown by the Civil Guards or members of the National Police stationed in the Basque Country or Navarre were not due to the situation of stress, fear and hostility that were experienced in both autonomous communities.

In the opinion of Sanz and García-Vera, and as a conclusion to the first part of their article published in 2022 (g), the Northern Syndrome would refer to a psychopathological construct used to describe and understand the psychological alterations presented by some police officers stationed in the Basque Country or Navarre during the years of terrorist activity of the terrorist organization ETA. For these two authors, this construct does not refer to a specific psychological disorder, but rather to a set of psychological disorders, mainly and in this order: depressive disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety disorders and personality disorders. The construct implies assuming that the seriously stressful or even traumatic situation experienced by the Civil Guards and members of the National Police stationed in the Basque Country and Navarre is the necessary and main cause, although not the only nor sufficient one, of the psychological disorders that some of them suffered (Sanz & García-Vera, 2022, p. 178).

Unquestionably, in Spain, apart from the articles by Sanz and García-Vera, which appeared in 2022, there is no work in which reference has been made to the differences between PTSD and the Northern Syndrome. As noted above, there are only two published articles by Fuertes Rocañín et al (1997, 1999), in which – as noted earlier – the existence of said syndrome is denied, as well as a brief reference to the Northern Syndrome in a passage from

García-Andrade's book titled *The Solitude of Man* (*La soledad del hombre*), which appeared for the first time in 1989, and which was later reproduced in two other books by the same author, including in the book titled *Fear and Crime*, published in the year 2012. In this passage, García-Andrade equates the Northern Syndrome with PTSD, but nevertheless, the arguments he seems to raise for this equivalence are weak, since, for example, he states that the cause of the Northern Syndrome is the isolation suffered by the police officers, which is certainly not the causal element that defines PTSD which is, as is known, the experience of a traumatic event (isolation can accompany and aggravate the experience of the traumatic event, but it is not considered a traumatic event per se). On the other hand, García-Andrade does not present a psychopathological analysis that justifies that the symptoms that the Northern Syndrome would supposedly encompass are basically the same as those of PTSD and are not part of other psychological disorders.

As explained, and following again Sanz and García-Vera, it must be stated that the Northern Syndrome basically constitutes a psychopathological construct, which certainly does not refer to a specific psychological disorder, but rather to a set of psychological disorders, among which PTSD would be included.

3. Methodology used for the study

The set of facts and circumstances showed in the previous sections led the author of this work to decide to undertake a project aimed at investigating, from a criminological perspective, the so-called "Northern Syndrome", focusing both on the FFCCSS that were (or not) victims of a terrorist attack, as well as their families who accompanied

them during their stay in the Basque Country and Navarre during the so-called "years of lead". In the specific case of police officers, the sample is made up exclusively of members of the National Police and the Civil Guard.

Before carrying out the interviews, a questionnaire was prepared, which contains a total of 22 open questions that address before, during and after the stay in "El Norte" of the interviewed police officers and their families (9). Thus, the questionnaire consists of a first part referring to the stage prior to moving to the Basque Country and Navarre. In this first part, among others, the following questions are asked: "Why did you decide to become a Civil Guard/National Police officer?" or "Prior to the move to the Basque Country or Navarre, did the police officers receive any specific course from professionals, to face from a psychological point of view the new context to which they would be subjected?".

The second part of the questionnaire, which deals with the stay of the policeman and his family in Basque Country and Navarre, contains, among others, the following questions: "What was your first impression when arriving in the Basque Country/Navarre?", "What kind of safety measures did you and your family take in your daily life?" or "Did you and your family feel discriminated against or rejected by a sector of the Basque/Navarrese population due to your origin or, if applicable, your occupation?". Logically, a central issue of this second part of the questionnaire is to talk about the terrorist attack eventually suffered by the policeman and/or his family.

Finally, the third part of the questionnaire deals with the stage after the stay in the Basque Country or Navarre. This third and final part contains, among others, the following questions: "How would you

assess that the period of time you were stationed in the Basque Country/Navarre has affected your life and that of your family?”, or “Did you request or receive psychological support after your return from the Basque Country/Navarre?”.

As can be seen, it is a semi-structured questionnaire through which an open conversation could be articulated so that the individuals interviewed could outline the particularities of their own testimonies. This qualitative approach allowed access, in first person, to the life stories of the people interviewed, achieving an understanding of the multiple ways in which the threat, harassment and terrorist violence, as well as the rejection by part of a sector of the Basque and Navarrese population, were materialized and the way in which this enormously destabilizing context, from a psychological and emotional point of view, not only affected the professional activity of police officers, their health, but also, in the most of the cases, this context extended to their relatives. On the other hand, it should be noted that all the individuals interviewed did so voluntarily, inevitably finding themselves obliged to recover, on many occasions, especially painful memories linked to their stay in the Northern Zone.

Once the questionnaire was prepared, the next phase of the research project had to be the preparation of the sample that was going to be the subject of the interviews. To do this, several associations of victims of terrorism existing in Spain were contacted, as well as police officers known to the author of the investigation, among other things, due to his teaching activity at the University of Granada (some of their students of the Degree in Law or Criminology at said university and who at the time were stationed in the Basque Country or Navarre).

The objective was to make first a telephone contact with the person who was going to be interviewed, with the purpose of presenting the content and the aim of the project. Once the approval was received, it was a matter of traveling to the place of residence of the police officer or the family member of a police officer to carry out the live interview, preferably in hotel cafeterias, since they are large, quiet places that offer a certain comfort when talking, especially if it happens in the middle of the morning or late in the afternoon. In the case of the police officers interviewed in Granada, the interview took place in the University office where the author of the project carries out his teaching and research activity. With respect to four agents, the interviews were carried out at their respective homes, in three cases at their express wish; in another because of the agent's inability to move due to the consequences of the terrorist attack suffered.

Prior to carrying out the interview, the interviewee was informed of the anonymous nature of the conversation, as well as that the interview was going to be audio recorded to later be transcribed on paper; without prejudice to sending the interviewee the text of the interview so that, subsequently, he/she could make any changes he/she deemed appropriate.

Once the sample was selected, the interviews were carried out between March 2022 and May 2023, throughout Spain. Specifically, the Spanish cities that were visited to carry out the interviews were the following: Valladolid, Santander, Granada, Ciudad Real, Salamanca, Madrid, Valdemoro, Málaga, Badajoz, Segovia, San Sebastián, Vitoria, Castro Urdiales, Málaga and Valencia.

In total 25 individuals were interviewed, 20 men and 5 women. The men were at the time (or in some cases they continue to be) police officers of the

National Police or the Civil Guard. Specifically, of all the policemen interviewed, four belonged to the National Police and sixteen to the Civil Guard. Among the women, three were widows of members of the Civil Guard murdered by ETA, another of a National Police officer who was the victim of a fatal attack by the same terrorist organization; a fifth, sister of a member of the Civil Guard who, after surviving an ETA attack with serious injuries, died years later at the age of 54. On average, the interviews lasted about 70-75 minutes.

Although most of the individuals interviewed had no objection to being mentioned by their first and last names, some of them did prefer to remain anonymous once their testimony came to light. That is why, to maintain unity in the story of the testimonies, it has been decided to omit the personal data of the 25 individuals interviewed, providing only their generic profile, namely, the police force to which the individual belonged (or still currently belongs), adding to each extract of the testimony the number assigned to each person interviewed (E1, E2, E3...). In this way it is considered that the effect of placing the emphasis can be achieved, not on the specific identity of the person interviewed, but rather on the content of their testimony. At this point it should be noted that on some specific occasions the literalness of some testimony has had to be slightly modified to eliminate geographical or personal references that could eventually have revealed the identity of each of the individuals interviewed. The information obtained has been systematized into a series of

thematic blocks that collect the main ideas and experiences transmitted during the interviews, focusing the story on the before, during and after the stay in the Basque Country or Navarre.

The development of the interviews, live, face to face, with the person interviewed, allowed him/her the possibility of telling in first person, without filters, without intermediaries, the truth of the facts, his/her life in the Basque Country and/or Navarre and his/her experience as a victim, direct or indirect, of terrorism, as well as narrating and remembering the wave of rejection and hatred that he/she had to experience in the North. As will be seen below, the development of the interviews has been tremendously emotional for the interviewees; and this despite the time that has passed since their stay in the Basque Country or Navarre. Remembering the experience lived in “*El Norte*” during the decades from 1970 to 1990 has meant for the victims of ETA terrorism, members of the FFCCSS, as well as their families, a hard moment that has given rise to reliving emotions and feelings of enormous sadness, pain, anger and helplessness. In fact, in most cases, there were one or several moments in which the victims, during the interview, could not continue narrating their experiences, having to cut the recording to take the appropriate pause.

Below, in table 1, the profile of a part of the sample that was the subject of the interview is reproduced; specifically of those individuals whose testimony appears in this work.

Table 1: List of the interviewed individuals whose testimony appears in this work

COLLABORATION	CONDITION	S E X	A G E	DESTINATION	PERIOD OF STAY	VICTIM OF A TERRORIS T ATTACK	IDENTIFIER
Interviewee 2	Civil Guard	M	57	Llodio	2/1987- 6/2000	No	E2
Interviewee 3	Civil Guard	M	55	Puerto de Pasajes	9/1988- 6/1991	No	E3
Interviewee 4	Civil Guard	M	60	Éibar	1979- 1999	No	E4
Interviewee 6	Widow of a Civil Guard Officer	F	67	Hernani	Murdered in 1979		E6
Interviewee 7	Widow of a National Police Officer	F	67	Baracaldo	Murdered in 1981		E7
Interviewee 9	Civil Guard (GAR*)	M	63	Mungia	1980- 1984	No	E9
Interviewee 11	Civil Guard (GAR y SI**)	M	67	Intxaurrondo y Fuenterrabia/Irún	1981- 1994	No	E11
Interviewee 12	Civil Guard	M	72	Las Arenas	12/1981- 4/1982	Yes	E12
Interviewee 17	Civil Guard (GAR and Antidrug unit)	M	67	Pamplona, San Sebastián, Irún	1981- 1986 and 1991- 1999	No	E17
Interviewee 18	Civil Guard	M	69	Intxaurrondo, Mungia, Pamplona y Vitoria	1978- 1987	No	E18
Interviewee 21	National Police	M	74	Bilbao/Basauri	1976- 1990	No	E21
Interviewee 22	Civil Guard	M	58	Navarra/Vitoria	1985-now	No	E22
Interviewee 25	National Police	M	69	Bilbao/Basauri	8/1982- 1/1989	Yes	E25

* The GAR (Rural Antiterrorist Groups, later called Rapid Action Groups) constituted an elite unit within the Civil Guard, whose priority task was the fight against terrorism

** Acronym that refers to the Information Service (*Servicio de Información*) within the Civil Guard

Source: *Author*

4. Findings

As noted above, the second part of the questionnaire (10) is about the period that the police officer or family member spent in the Basque Country or Navarre. This part consists of a total of ten questions, one of which focuses on the attack suffered by the policeman, if any. The first question in this part was aimed at knowing what the first impression of the police officer (if applicable, his wife, if accompanying him) was upon arriving in the Basque Country or Navarre. As will be seen below, the different stories show a reality marked without a doubt by fear, threat, harassment, and terror.

“It was worse than I imagined. I arrived in my car, with a Granada license plate, raining and at night. After the ikastola (11). I went home for twenty days on vacation and from Granada I moved to the Basque Country. I remember it was summer and I was wearing shorts; but when I arrived in Burgos and took the highway to the Basque Country, I got tremendously cold. It was a strange sensation, I don't know if it was because it was really cold, or because a chill came over me when I saw and was aware of what I was getting into” (E3).

“All of us [Civil Guard officers] travelled on a bus from El Escorial to Bilbao. I arrived in Bilbao at the Command [Comandancia] and then they distributed us. They assigned me to Las Arenas. The barracks had two floors and a terrace. There I found two mastiff dogs that had been trained by two of our colleagues. You went in and if the policemen were there you could pet the dogs; but if you went out you couldn't go in again because the dogs could kill you. As soon

as I entered the barracks the phone rang. A colleague answered, and someone told him: 'We have already seen the new ones arrive. Don't believe that they are all going to come back alive'.

In that barracks in Las Arenas, when I arrived, I took a walk and saw a coffin inside the barracks. They told me that the coffin was left over after an attack in which a few colleagues had died' (E12).

"I lived here [Salamanca], I got married and left with my husband in 1973. My first impression was very bad, as if I had entered hell. I arrived there in summer, and it was cloudy and raining. We passed through the Blast Furnaces [Altos Hornos]. When I arrived in Barakaldo it was hellish. You went to the butcher shop and the first thing they said to you was: 'Good morning Vizcaya and anyone who is not happy should leave'. There were continuous demonstrations, with people throwing stones and saying 'maketos fuera'" (12) (E7).

"What impressed me the most was the people. And also the Command. There the policemen performed services with bulletproof vests and helmets. It was astonishing. You didn't see that in Madrid. Furthermore, those who were forced there for a year did not leave the barracks house. They only did it to provide services. I remember that while doing services we passed by the barracks houses, and we could see their scared faces. If an agent went out, for example, to make a phone call, two colleagues had to go with him. In Markina there were some large plates in front of the barracks, and they were shot at. You didn't see that in the rest of Spain. I also remember how in a courtyard of the Intxaurrondo barracks there were a lot of vehicles that had suffered an attack with bombs, in some cases with colleagues who were inside and had died. It was impressive to see how, in some vehicles, you could still see dried blood stains" (E9).

"That was a guerrilla war. Street fighting, shutters drawn, burned cars, barricades. It was something similar to Vietnam. Entire families had to remain barracked without being able to leave, with armoured police cars surrounding the front of the barracks. That broke me psychologically" (E2).

Once the impression of arrival in the North had been gathered, the next question was to know from what moment, what fact or circumstance, the police officer realized the danger that he and, if necessary, his family were in.

"Since the first day. I immediately realized that the danger was constant there... It was like being in a war zone. Nobody trusted anyone. You walked down the street with your hand in your pocket (and in your pocket, holding the gun). But, in the end, you get used to that state of tension, and what you fear most is for your family" (E17).

Another of the questions that made up this second part of the questionnaire was aimed at knowing the security measures that the police officer took in his daily life, both to protect his own life and that of his family. From the interviews carried out with the policemen and their families, it can be clearly deduced how they seriously took safety and self-protection rules into account. And this not only during their professional activity, but also during periods of leisure and recreation. In the case of married police officers with children, their concern for the safety of their family is clearly perceived.

"All the ones there were and more. We had six different itineraries to, for example, travel to Cantabria. We looked at the car from afar, the underside, also under the seats, to see if there was a bomb. I did it and until I gave the go-ahead, no one got into the car. It also had the simulated license plate" (E2).

"I strictly followed the SYAP rules (13). I had passwords with my wife (blinds drawn, do not open the door to anyone under any circumstances, etc.). And, in the first person, never get off at the same bus stop, do not take the same itinerary twice, or go to the same bar several days in a row, look at the bottom of the car, etc. Furthermore, as soon as I arrived in San Sebastián, I requested and was immediately granted the simulated license plate, as well as the car starter (a kind of little knob that, connected to the battery, started the vehicle remotely to avoid a car bomb)" (E17).

"My neighbours did not know that I was a police officer, although they could suspect it considering that I was young, Andalusian, and with strange hours in which I had to go to work, for example on Sunday at 2:00 p.m.... In those cases, what I did was to go out with my sports bag and my tennis racket.... although I didn't play tennis. If you leave on a Sunday at 2:00 p.m. in Rekalde, to go to Basauri, if the neighbours see you, what do you tell them? Well, my wife told them that I was going out to play tennis" (E25).

As shown at the beginning of this paper, living in the North during the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and even during much of the 2000s, meant not only being permanently exposed to the terrorist threat, but also experiencing harassment and rejection of that part of the population that sympathized with ETA and,

therefore, opposed the presence of the “occupation forces” in *Euskal Herria*. As will be seen below, this is something that not only the policemen of the National Police and the Civil Guard experienced directly, in their own person, but also their wives and closest relatives. Hence, the question they were asked was whether they felt discriminated against or rejected by a sector of the Basque or Navarrese population due to their origin or, if applicable, their occupation, or the fact of being the wife of a police officer.

“The rejection and hatred were absolute. As they knew you were a Civil Guard, the looks of hatred were incredible. I was in the GAR uniform and the looks of hatred were tremendous. It seemed like they were telling you ‘if I could stab you right now, I would’. Or ‘I hope they put a bomb on you’. They sat next to you or said ‘txakurra kampora’ (14). The policemen of the territorial patrols had it much worse than us, who were members of the GAR. We knew that we were there to fight ETA” (E9).

This hatred and animosity were not only suffered by the policemen during their service, but also in non-professional tasks. The same could be said of their wives, either when they carried out activities in common with their husbands, or when they carried out daily tasks such as shopping.

“Although we lived in the Civil Guard barracks, we went to the bars in Hernani and had to put up with how the rest of the customers kept saying ‘let them leave, let them leave!’. They insulted you, and we held on there at the bar (1977-1978). You went to the stores, they knew who you were and they wouldn’t sell you. They spoke to you in Basque and if you asked them for something they told you that they didn’t understand you and you had no choice but to leave. I always carried my husband’s gun in my bag” (E6).

«My husband applied for my daughters to go to a public school. In the application, in the ‘father’s occupation’ box he put National Police officer, since he said that he had no reason to be ashamed of his occupational activity. Then my two daughters were rejected and not admitted to school. There was a teacher who got along very well with my husband and told him that if he continued to mention the occupation that he really practiced, the school would never admit the girls. ‘What you have to put is a civil servant or bank employee’. When he wrote ‘civil servant’ the girls entered the school. I got along very well with my neighbours. But the day ETA killed my husband, no one showed up at the funeral to give

me their condolences. When months later I went to look for the furniture and they found out it was there, they went to knock on the door, and I told them: ‘Not now. Before, when my husband was exposed all night in his body, you could have gone. Not now’. I don’t want to know anything about those people» (E7).

«I have an anecdote about a young Civil Guard officer whose wife, every time she went to buy at the butcher shop, the owner told her ‘New Civil Guard, wooden pyjamas’. The woman at first did not understand what he meant, and she did not say anything to her husband. A few days later she returned, and the butcher, while cutting the meat, told her again, ‘New Civil Guard, wooden pyjamas’. Until one day, a terrorist attack occurred, and the butcher was having a drink in the butcher shop and, when the woman arrived, he told her: ‘And today I am celebrating because two sons of bitches have fallen’. The woman’s tears came to her eyes and she left, telling her husband, who grabbed her gun with the intention of going to the butcher shop. Fortunately, nothing happened. The Information Service of the Civil Guard took charge of the issue, and it was possible to verify how the butcher was a person close to ETA» (E18).

It is evident that one of the fundamental questions of the questionnaire was to collect the testimony of those individuals who, either directly or indirectly (= being a close relative), had been victims of a terrorist attack perpetrated by ETA. It was basically about remembering the day of the attack. The before, during and after that fateful day. It is evident that this was the hardest, most intense, and emotional part of the interviews. In fact, in many cases the recording had to be cut because the emotional state of the victim, when narrating her experience, prevented it from continuing, so the appropriate pause had to be made.

The third and last part of the questionnaire contains a total of seven questions and focuses on the stage after the police officer and his family stay in the Basque Country or Navarre.

One of the questions addressed to the individuals interviewed was aimed at asking them to assess to what extent the period spent in the Basque Country and Navarre had affected their own lives and that of their families. Logically, this question could only be

answered by those policemen (and widows of police officers) who, after the experience in the North, subsequently returned to their places of origin or to another destination located outside the Basque provinces or Navarre. As will be seen below, all the stories denote the presence of symptoms that could be associated with post-traumatic stress, with episodes such as depression, anxiety, stress or recurring dreams and nightmares where tragic episodes experienced in the North reappeared.

“My stay in the Basque Country meant a radical change in my life and my way of being. I have had to spend years in psychological treatment to re-educate – so to speak – my personality and adapt my way of behaving towards others to coexist properly in society, without considering any trifle as a threat. And yet, today I continue to have disruptive behaviours” (E2).

“It affected my character a lot. For a while I didn’t talk about it with family or friends. Now less so, but at the beginning I had many nightmares and recurring dreams, that I was back in the Basque Country. When I returned from the Basque Country, I had to request psychological help due to my state of mind and character. I had to pay for this psychological help out of my pocket” (E3).

“It has affected me. We went through a lot of nerves and something between my wife and I broke. I was out all day. I, without wearing the police uniform, took my backpack and went to the mountains to make a post, to wait for an ETA command to come by. That distanced us. In fact, my wife and I were separated for a few months because the tension was great. There were times when I, when I was in the Information Service [of the Civil Guard], would leave home and return four days later. My wife didn’t know where I was. My wife then decided to make her life on her own while I was dedicated body and soul to the fight against terrorism” (E11).

The last question was obvious: After the experience lived by the police officer and his family during their stay in the North, the issue was to determine whether they considered that what has been called “Northern Syndrome” really exists. Well, all the individuals interviewed clearly state its existence. In most cases, the policemen and their wives interviewed claimed to suffer from this Syndrome.

“Northern Syndrome exists as a personality disorder. There are such changes in personality that you consider yourself in a world at war, where the concept of civilized society is distorted. In Llodio I got the primitive, animal spirit of defending my family at all costs. Society in the Basque Country (Basque and Spanish) leaves you aside and abandons you. Due to the lack of security, exaggerated behaviour occurs in relation to other people. Danger is seen in everything. My entire life there, from the time I got up until the time I went to bed, my entire behaviour was permanently in a defensive attitude. That disorder, that alteration of your own personality that leads you to disruptive behaviours, not being able to join society with a minimum of insertion and acceptance, that disability that produces in you compared to others who have not suffered the effects of violence, contempt, and humiliation, that is the Northern Syndrome” (E2).

“Of course. What’s more, I’m completely sure. Each and every one of the members of the Security Forces and Corps (Civil Guard, National Police and Local Police) who have been stationed in the Basque Country in the ‘years of lead’, to a greater or lesser extent, have been affected by the so called ‘Northern Syndrome’. A syndrome unknown to many and which those who knew about it – especially government institutions – have taken it upon themselves to ignore, wishing it to be forgotten forever” (E17).

Other police officers narrate how this Northern Syndrome occurred in all its harshness once they returned from the Basque provinces and Navarre to their places of origin.

“When I arrive in Ciudad Real, after the transfer from the North, I start to sleep little, get up and not be able to fall asleep. My head was starting to spin. I spent six years taking Orfidal [Lorazepam]. And that is when I realized what had happened in the Basque Country. Since then, and that is more than twenty years ago, I have had problems resting and falling asleep” (E4).

“You never take that off. These are injuries, but they are not external, but internal. You come from there and you are no longer the same because you distrust everything and everyone. You become unsociable” (E21).

“I have been an alcoholic. I gave up alcohol nine years ago. I didn’t go to bed any day without being drunk. In the Basque Country, alcohol spread among the police officers in a barbaric manner. In all the barracks there was a bar, with all the drinks you could imagine. People only went out to buy at Eroski (15) and go home on vacation. Alcohol was a kind of escape route to go on. Therefore, being in the Basque Country was like an addiction” (E22).

5. Conclusion

Once the quantitative data have been collected and analysed and the qualitative testimonies available for the preparation of this article have been collected, it can be concluded by stating that the members of the FFCCSS, while they were serving in the Basque Country or Navarre, suffered the threat of ETA in a comprehensive manner 24 hours a day, since all members of the police forces (mainly Civil Guard and National Police) lived under the possibility of a real terrorist attack, with greater or lesser imminence. This threat was also extended to their families who lived with them in the Northern Zone. At the same time, both the police officers and their own families (women and children) had to endure permanent and ubiquitous harassment, stigmatization and rejection by a large sector of Basque and Navarrese society. The perception of a ubiquitous threat or terror, with the use of harassment and intimidation techniques, social pressure, isolation, stigmatization and, ultimately, dehumanization of the victims, must have had notable psychological consequences for many police officers and their families, who had to endure that context during their destination in “*El Norte*”.

The fear of suffering a terrorist attack conditioned the lives of the policemen stationed in the Basque Country and Navarre, both when they were on duty and during their rest periods. The contemplation of a wide and heterogeneous range of security measures undoubtedly conditioned the lives of these police officers, including, in some cases, their mental health. Faced with the danger of being victims of terrorist attacks or harassment practices by the terrorist environment, the policemen and their families stationed in the North either withdrew as a community in the barracks, reducing – or even cancelling – their contacts with the outside, or they

tried to go unnoticed, confined to their private homes, accentuating anonymity with lies about their occupational activity, when such a thing was possible. In the testimonies collected for this work, it can be seen how socialization routines (such as going shopping, taking the children to school, having a drink in a bar or using the family vehicle) were guided by strict self-protection rituals and restricted to the essential minimum.

All of this generated an emotional impact in the form of permanent or post-traumatic stress, often associated with a series of behavioural alterations and, in many cases, personality and impulse control disorders. Said psychopathological construct can be defined as the “Northern Syndrome”.

Based on everything explained and focusing the analysis on the testimony given by the 25 individuals who were the subject of the sample, it can be concluded that the psycho-pathological construct called “Northern Syndrome” occurred in the majority of police officers and their families who were displaced in the Basque Country and Navarre during the years in which the terrorist organization ETA developed its armed activity. This construct manifests itself in episodes of depression, anxiety, personality changes and, in some cases, alcoholism, as well as disruptive behaviours that can lead to violent episodes, which in the most extreme cases led to the policeman's suicide. In some cases, it has been possible to demonstrate how this construct continues to manifest years after the police officer has been subjected to that situation of threat, harassment, and stress.

Notes.

(1). ETA constitutes the acronym in Basque (a language spoken mainly in the communities of the Basque Country and Navarre, located in the North of Spain) that means *Euskadi Ta Askatasuna* (homeland and freedom). It is a terrorist organization, of an ethno-nationalist nature that

between 1968 and 2011 was active in Spain. Their political demand was to achieve the independence of the Basque Country and Navarre (communities located in Spanish territory), as well as the so-called French Basque Country (located in French territory). During its armed activity, ETA caused a total of 853 fatalities.

(2). Perhaps the most complete study that has appeared in Spain on the history of ETA is the following: Elorza, A. (Coord.) (2006). *La historia de ETA*, Madrid: Temas de Hoy.

(3). It should be considered that five individuals, who had once belonged to the Civil Guard, were also victims of ETA, although at the time of the terrorist attack they were already carrying out another professional task unrelated to the police.

(4). “El “Síndrome del Norte”. Psicólogos y policías advierten del peligro mental para los agentes destinados en el País Vasco”, *El País*, August 11, 1985.

(5). “El Ministerio del Interior niega la neurosis colectiva de los policías en el País Vasco”, *Diario de Burgos*, edition of January 15, p. 17.

(6). The Psychiatry Service of the Military Hospital of Burgos served as a mandatory reference centre for all Civil Guards assigned to the autonomous communities of the Basque Country, Navarre, Cantabria, La Rioja and Castilla-León who presented some type of relevant psychiatric disorder.

(7). Sanz/García-Vera (2022), *opus cit.*, pp. 168-169. The judicial rulings analysed in said study (54), which made express reference to the Northern Syndrome, had as the object of litigation issues related to the retirement or temporary or permanent incapacity of the police officer for service, mitigating or exonerating circumstance for a crime, disciplinary sanction received, recognition of being a victim of terrorism or as a cause of aggravation or history of a psychological disorder.

(8). In the second part of the work by Sanz and García-Vera, also published in 2022, both authors carry out a systematic review of the scientific articles that appeared in Spain on the Northern Syndrome, finding only two empirical works. A re-analysis of their data revealed that civil guards stationed in the Basque Country and Navarre showed a higher incidence of psychological disorders than those stationed in other autonomous communities.

(9). This questionnaire appears in the Annex to this paper.

(10). The first part of the questionnaire, made up of a total of five questions, will not be the subject of analysis here, since it deals with generic issues such as the reason that motivated the interviewee to become a police officer, the voluntary or forced nature of the transfer of the police officer to the Basque Country or Navarre or the financial supplements or other bonuses that the policemen received for being stationed in the North.

(11). This concept in Basque, which can be translated as “school”, refers to some recycling or “setting” courses that the Civil Guard officers who were going to be transferred to the Basque Country or Navarre carried out in the Basque town of Fuenterrabía, to face their destination in the North. These courses took place over a period of 1-2 weeks.

(12). *Maketo* is the degrading name given to people who emigrated from other regions of Spain to the Basque region.

(13). SYAP is the acronym for Security and Self-Protection (*Seguridad y Autoprotección*).

(14). It is, here too, a derogatory Basque expression that could be translated as “dogs out”.

(15). It is a Basque supermarket chain, established throughout the Basque Country and Navarre, although it also exists in the rest of Spain.

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Annex: *Questionnaire administered to members of the FFCCSS and relatives of deceased police officers*

First Part. Stage before the transfer to the Basque Country

1. Why did you decide to become a Civil Guard/National Police officer?

2. Once you became a policeman, did you know or had you received news about what was happening in the Basque Country?
3. What weighed most when deciding to be transferred? Was it a voluntary transfer, forced or due to the logistical needs of the police force?
4. Prior to the move to the Basque Country or Navarre, did the police officers receive any specific course from professionals, to face from a psychological point of view the new context to which they would be subjected?
5. What kind of financial supplements, job bonuses or preferences (transfers) were granted for having been stationed in the Basque Country or Navarre?

Part Two. Stay in the Basque Country/Navarre

6. What was your first impression when arriving in the Basque Country/Navarre? Was it as you expected? Worse or better?
7. From what moment did you realize the danger that you and, if necessary, your family were in?
8. What kind of safety measures did you and your family take in your daily life?
9. Did you maintain these security measures when, for example, you were on vacation in your place of origin, even if said place was not in the Basque Country/Navarre?
10. During your stay in the Basque Country/Navarre, did you receive psychological support from professionals at the service of FFCCSS?
11. Did you and your family feel discriminated against or rejected by a sector of the Basque/Navarrese population due to your origin or, if applicable, your occupation?
12. How were the continuous murders of police officers committed by the ETA organization experienced in your home? If so, how did your relatives who continued residing in your place of origin feel, considering that climate of permanent violence and terror in the Basque Country/Navarre?

13. Did there come a time when, fearing for your safety or that of your family, you seriously considered the option of requesting a transfer to another part of Spain?
14. Do you remember the day of the terrorist attack? Could you describe the before, during and after of that fateful day?
15. Was the perpetrator(s) of your terrorist attack arrested and convicted? Do you know what his/their current situation is (still serving a sentence, free, deceased, etc.)?

Part Three. Stage after the stay in the Basque Country/Navarre

16. After joining the new assignment outside the Basque Country/Navarre, did you feel the support of the colleagues, bosses, or, on the contrary, did you perceive some stigma for having been assigned in the North?
17. How would you assess that the period you were stationed in the Basque Country/Navarre has affected your life and that of your family?
18. Did you request or receive psychological support after your return from the Basque Country/Navarre? Did the National Police/Civil Guard offer you this possibility?
19. What is your opinion of the initiative promoted by some institutions, consisting of seating terrorists and victims at a table, thereby promoting forgiveness and reconciliation?
20. What feeling did you have on the day that ETA announced the end of the armed struggle?
21. What feelings do you currently have about the demonstrations that are taking place in the Basque Country, requesting the return of ETA prisoners to the prisons of the Basque Country or the tributes that, in their hometowns, they pay to the terrorists who have been released from prison?
22. Finally: do you really consider that, after your lived experience, what has been called "Northern Syndrome" certainly exists?