

Basque National Football Team as a Political Tool. One Hundred Years Old Project and Its Changes (1915–2014)*

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The goal of my article is to analyze football in Basque Country, or better to say Basque national football representation, as a political tool since its inception. I decided to focus on this specific region because football, and Basque national team as well, has a long history and plays an important role in the whole Spanish society. Football in Spain is a political issue because of the multi-national composition of the state where we observe strong separatist or secessionist demands. In my opinion, Basque national team has never been “only” a football selection. *Euskal Selekzioa* is a well-known Basque nationalist speaker because of the way how it represents Basque nation. It uses one of the most popular things all round the world, kicking the ball. This article is divided into four main parts. In the first chapter, I deal with the birth of Basque national movement and with the discovery of the game of football in Spain. The second chapter is dedicated to the Spanish Civil War when the world-famous Basque national football team existed. Another part observes the Basque nationalism in the context of football, not only in Franco’s time but during the years of the transition to democracy. I finish my article with a contemplation of the officialization of Basque national football team.

Keyword: Basque nationalism, football, Basque national football team, officialization, FIFA

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Introduction

There exists a strong relation between two modern phenomena that work with mass mobilization. Both were born in Europe in the 19th century and then they were spread to the other parts of world. We are talking about nationalism on one hand and about modern sport¹ on the other. One of new invented and codified sports was football, soon it has become the most popular game in the world.

I believe that sport can be used as an important tool of nationalism. If we think about the nations as does Benedict Anderson (1991, p. 6) who calls them *imagined communities*, where the word *imagined* means that “[...] the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion”, sport is a very useful assistant to the thinking about national identities. This opinion is elaborated by a British historian Eric Hobsbawm (2012, p. 143) who says: “What has made sport so uniquely effective a medium for inculcating national feelings, at all events for males, is the ease with which even the least political or public individuals can identify with the nation as symbolized by youth persons excelling at what practically every man wants, or at one time in life has wanted, to be good at. The imagined community of millions seems more real as a team of eleven named people. The individual, even the one who only cheers, becomes a symbol of his nation himself”. Sport is a good fit to Michael Billig’s concept of *banal nationalism*. This concept means that everyday presentation of nation in public space, for example hung national flags, national press and its rhetoric or sporting events, creates a solidarity among the national identity holders and makes a national feeling stronger. Billig (1995, p. 125) thinks about sport as something very important for national feeling: “If a citizen from the homeland runs quicker or jumper higher than foreigners, I feel pleasure. Why, I do not know. I want the national team to beat the teams of other countries, scoring more goals, runs or whatever. International matches seem so much more important than domestic ones: there is an extra thrill of competition, with something indefinable at stake”.

All these ideas about nationalism and sport focus on the question of mobilization. It is clear that mass mobilization in the context of sports event connected with national heroes, individuals or teams, is utilized by political elites to make them visible or to legitimize their political behavior. It means that politicians are glad about their photos with sports heroes, about the national sports success in general. I think that we can find another, and maybe more sophisticated, utilization of sport by politicians, although the mass mobilization only is a very important issue. This is the goal of my article, to analyze football

¹For more about the modern sport and its genesis, see (Guttman 1978).

in Basque Country, or better to say Basque national football representation, as a political tool in the historical perspective. I would like to mention the changes in the use of Basque national football team by the nationalists since its inception. This article should be a brief introduction to the much wider phenomenon of Basque nationalism and its relation to football.

I decided to focus on this specific region because of football, and Basque national football team as well, has a long regional history and plays very important role in the Spanish society. Football in Spain is a political issue because of the multi-national composition of the state where we can observe strong separatist or secessionist² demands especially in Basque Country and Catalonia. In my opinion, Basque national football team has never been 'only' a football selection. *Euskal Selekzioa*, as it is called now, is a well-known Basque nationalist speaker because of the way how it represents Basque nation. It uses one of the most popular things all round the world, kicking the ball.

We can find some very interesting works that are dedicated to Basque football and Basque nationalism. John K. Walton (1999, 2011), Javier Díaz Noci (2000) or Péter Molnár (2013) are interested especially in the relations between these two modern phenomena in Basque Country in the first three decades of the 20th century. Patxo Unzueta (1999), Robert Győry Szábo (2013) or Ekain Rojo-Labaïen (2014) present Basque football and the local nationalist politics since the beginning of the 20th century to these days or, better to say, to the time when their works were published. They bring us many interesting reflections about the issues. We can find countless articles that think about the Athletic Club of Bilbao as an important symbol of Basque national identity as well, see for example Jeremy MacClancy (2007), Juan Carlos Castillo (2007, 2008), Mark Groves (2011), or the most recent book of Marianne Vaczi (2015).

The most of these publications mention the existence of Basque national football team but they do not pay significant attention to it. One of the most popular books that are dedicated to this subject is Joseba Gotzon's (1998) historical study of Basque national football team from 1915 to 1997. José Antonio Díaz (2008) is an author of the encyclopedia of Basque sports representations and he wrote one chapter about Basque football representation as well. Patxi Xabier Fernández Monje (2001) is interested in that topic too and Fernando Estomba Etxepare (2007) published his historical study especially about the *equipo Euzkadi*, it means about the Basque national football team that existed during the Spanish Civil War. Very interesting is an article about the Basque national football team by Santiago de Pablo (2012), because this is a part of

²I think about a difference between separatism and secession in the same way as John R. Wood (1981) or Přemysl Rosůlek (2014) do.

the book which presents the main Basque nationalist symbols. The editors of this work mention 53 symbols of Basque nationalism and the Basque national football team is one of them. De Pablo shortly presents its history until 2012. A small disadvantage of these works is that they are written in Spanish and unfortunately non-Spanish speakers, who are interested in this topic, have to try to find the information about the Basque national football team elsewhere.

This article about the history of Basque national football team and its existence in the context of Basque nationalism is divided into four main parts. In the first chapter, I deal with the birth of Basque national movement and with the discovery of the game of football in the Iberian Peninsula in the end of 19th century. I focus on the spreading of these two phenomena in the first decades of 20th century as well. The second chapter is dedicated to the Spanish Civil War when the world-famous Basque national football team existed and was connected with the government of Basque Autonomous Community and Spanish Republicanism as well. This team finished its football-political mission with the end of the Spanish Civil War. Another part of the article observes the Basque nationalism and its existence in the context of football, not only in Franco's time but during the years of the successful transition to democracy when Basque national football team was reborn. I finish my article with an issue that is still current in Basque society. I mention the effort of Basque nationalists to officialize the Basque national sports team. I think, this discussion is the most visible in the context of Basque national football team.

Spreading of Basque Nationalism and Football

Football – just as modern sport in general – was born in Great Britain in the second half of the 19th century. Great Britain, the global power at the time, expanded all around the world and its culture and the game of football like the part of it, spread with its political and economic interests as well. The geographically close Basque Country was not an exception because there existed a strong economic relation with Great Britain. British workers brought the passion for football to the Basque industrial center with them. Thus, the 90's of the 19th century was the period of the first football experiences of the Basques, specifically the first friendly matches between Basques and foreigners are dated to 1894. The game of football started to be popular soon and the first football clubs in Basque Country were founded (MacClancy, 2007, p. 45). In 1898 Athletic Club of Bilbao was one of them.

Basque nationalism was born at the same time. Sabino Arana, the “father” of Basque nationalism, had formulated the fundamental pillars of the new national ideology. Arana was a primordialist and he saw the main feature of

Basque nation embedded in race; the others he observed especially in Basque language, Catholicism and ruralism. He made up popular Basque flag and the Basque anthem 'Gora Ta Gora' and he, with his associates, founded the Basque Nationalist Party (*Partido Nacionalista Vasco*, PNV) in the year 1895. So, we can say that "Sabino Arana created much of the institutional and symbolic foundations for contemporary Basque nationalism" (Lecours, 2007, p. 52). There existed less fundamental perspective on the Basque nation. It was connected with Basque Society (*Sociedad Euzkalerria*) that supported the Basque autonomy and was not as much exclusive as Arana's original point of view. This organization later became part of PNV (Mansvelt Beck, 2003, p. 130). The supporters of PNV – and its Basque national ideals generally – came from the upper middle class and from the industrial sector of society (Watson, 2003, p. 192). It is not a surprise that these people supported English modern sports including football as well. Basque workers cooperated with the British who played the game of football. Basque bourgeois were usually educated in British schools or universities where football was a widespread leisure time activity. Football became a favourite sport in the PNV's environment and its young organizations. *Juventud Vasca de Bilbao* organized its own football competition, *Copa de Euzkadi*, since 1911. The participants were the Basque football team and the nationalist thinking was characteristic for the players (Anasagasti & Erkoreka, 2003, p. 417). José María "Belauste" Belausteguigoitia was responsible for the football activities of the PNV's youth wing in Bilbao and for its football team called *Euzkendarra*. "Belauste" played for Athletic Club and was one of the most famous midfielders in his days (Díaz Noci, 2000). It is interesting that he was a Basque nationalist and, on the other hand, successful Spanish representative as well.

Football was popular not only in Biscay but famous clubs existed also in Gipuzkoa. Real Sociedad de Fútbol of San Sebastian was founded in 1909, but there were many small active clubs in the city that do not exist anymore, and Real Unión of Irun, who merged two cities teams into one in 1915. These two Gipuzkoan teams, together with Athletic Club mentioned above and another club from Biscay, Arenas Club of Getxo, were the founding members of Spanish football league in 1928. Thirteen years before that, Basque national team had come to existence.

The first match that Basque national team has ever played took place on 3rd January 1915 at San Mamés, famous stadium in Bilbao. Catalan selection was the rival and it was, as the newspaper *El Nervión* (1915, p. 1) mentioned, a historical moment for Spaniards, because it was "the first match between regions that was organized in Spain [...]". In the end, Catalans returned to their homes disappointed.

Basque national team, under the name *Norte*,³ knocked down Catalonia 6:1. The spectators were able to admire the famous Basque football players on the pitch such as the Athletic Club's goal-scorer Rafael "Pichichi" Moreno or above mentioned José María "Belauste" Belausteguigoitia, both future silver medalists of the Spanish representation of the Antwerp Olympic Games in 1920. The returned match was held in Barcelona a month later and it ended in a tie 2:2. The further matches were part of the competition *Copa del Príncipe de Asturias* in May 1915. The participant teams were *Norte*, it means Basques, *Centro*, it means the selection of Madrid, and Catalonia. Basques, who were the most supported selection, won the trophy after they defeated Catalans and drew with *Centro* 2:2 (Heraldo Deportivo, 1915, p. 2–3).

The main promotor of the existence of Basque national team, Manuel Aznar "Imanol" Zubigaray, came from the PNV's background. He worked in the PNV's periodical *Euzkadi* and focused on the sports column, especially on football (Anasagasti & Erkoreka, 2003, p. 416). He wrote the article *Nacionalismo y sport. Nuestra esperanza*, Sport and nationalism. Our Expectation, in November 1915. He explained that Basques ought to have its own national team that would be able to manifest the abilities of "Basque race". This kind of team should play the international matches against other nations, he mentioned France, England or Hungary. 'Imanol' was sure that Basque national team would gain the support from the whole Basque society (Aznar Zubigaray, 1915, p. 1). He was not the only one who thought about football in the context of Basque race. For example, Danielo de Abechuco was the man who promoted the practice of sport, and football as well, at the conference of the youth wing of PNV in 1910 (Unzueta, 1999, p. 159). Generally, PNV believed that practicing sports was beneficial for racial reason (Molnár, 2013, p. 305). This thinking about football was not only typical for PNV. For example, the member of the management of Real Sociedad de Fútbol of San Sebastian used the same argument in 1914 when he demanded an exclusion from the new taxes for the club because Real Sociedad "[...] promote[d] the health and morals of the young and the physical development of the Basque race" (Walton, 1999, p. 272) and so on.

Already we have mentioned that all Basque footballers were part of the successful Spanish Olympic team at the Olympic Games in Belgium in 1920. Basque players were the backbone of the team that came with a specific style of football that was called "furia española" but as Jeremy MacClancy (2007, p. 57) mentions, this style should be called "furia vasca" because it was played

³The reason why it was called *Norte* was that football federation of the north part of Spain included not only Biscay, Gipuzkoa, Álava and Navarra, but Cantabria and Logroño, now the capital of La Rioja, as well, but all its players were always Basques (Gómez, 2007, p. 148). The PNV's diary *Euzkadi* did not use the name *Norte* and called it the Basque team etc.

by Spanish national team with many Basques in its squad and then mainly by Athletic Club. The football abilities of the Basques were admired not only in Antwerp and in Spanish regions but also in the Basque diaspora in Latin America. So in 1922 Basque football team – composed of players from Athletic Club, Real Sociedad, Real Unión and Tolosa – visited Latin America, namely Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil. Unfortunately for Basques, their trip was not as successful as they hoped. They did not play well and they did not come up to expectations. Originally they agreed to play ten matches but they spent only eight games on the pitch (Gómez, 2007, p. 149).

Although the Basque national team did not exist in the 20's, we could still observe the relation between Basque nationalists and this popular game. The local football club had been an useful space for spreading the Basque identity, especially the Athletic Club of Bilbao. Only Basque players could play for the club since 1919.⁴ The same policy was used by Real Sociedad de Fútbol of San Sebastian until 1989 (Győri Szabó, 2013, p. 538). There existed very close relation between PNV and Athletic Club in the management as well. For example, three members of famous Basque nationalist family de la Sota became Athletic presidents, namely Alejandro de la Sota y Manuel de la Sota, one of the most important people for Basque national football team in the 30's, and José María Vilallonga, who was a Ramón de la Sota's son-in-law (Unzueta, 1999, p. 153–155). The mentioned Ramón de la Sota, a successful businessman and moderate Basque nationalist, was a director of the second famous football club from Bilbao, Arenas Club of Getxo (Valencia Ruiz & Toral Madariaga, 2009, p. 40–41).

While Primo de Rivera's undemocratic regime lasted and PNV like other political parties were officially banned, sport continued to be an important space for national identity feeling. It was not by accident that PNV's sporting diary – the first sporting diary in Spanish history – *Excelsior* was established in the April 1924. It was a significant issue for PNV from the political and economic point of view (Molnár, 2013, p. 311). Its journalists paid attention especially to the triumphs of Basque sportsmen. This diary was also the initiator of founding the cycling race across the Basque Country, *Vuelta al País Vasco* in the same year (de Pablo & Mees, 2005, p. 109). Generally, sport, including football, was seen as an useful tool for strengthening national feeling in the society.

Basque Footballers in the Service of Republicanism

Another Basque national team's friendly matches were held at the end of

⁴What does “only Basque player” mean is changing. For more about this Athletic Club policy; see for example (MacClancy, 2007, p. 46–47).

undemocratic regime in 1930. The opponent of the Basques, as the tradition prompted was the Catalan national team. This double-header between two stateless nations was the initiative of above mentioned Manuel de la Sota and Josep Sunyol, Catalan who was a member of the political party Republican Left of Catalonia (*Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya*), president of the Catalan football federation and president of CF Barcelona between 1935 and 1936 (Gotzon, 1998, p. 24). As Fernando Estomba Extepare (2007, p. 793) mentioned, Sota's political orientations surely influenced both matches. The first was played in Barcelona and Basques won 1:0. Catalonia lost the second game as well, Basque national team beat its rival 3:2 at San Mamés on the New Year's Day 1931. Unfortunately for Basque football fans, their national football team played hardly any matches⁵ for more than six years. José Antonio Díaz (2008, p. 286) mentioned two main reasons why: the first was the professionalization of football hand in hand with less space for friendly matches, and the Spanish political regime transformation. The monarchy was the past, replaced by the republic.

Spanish republic gave an opportunity to its specific regions of getting some level of autonomy. Basque Country finalized negotiations of its autonomy in October 1936 but Basque Autonomous Community was composed of Biscay, Álava and Gipuzkoa only. José Antonio Aguirre was elected the first head of Basque government, so called *lebendakari*. It is interesting for us that Aguirre, the main person of PNV in second republic, played football for Athletic Club of Bilbao before he became a politician.⁶ So it is not surprising that its government used football as political tool during the Spanish Civil War.

At the beginning of the war, plenty of benefit football matches were played among Basque teams. The one that is the most important for us – *Pro-avión Euzkadi* – took place at San Mamés on 7th February 1937 between PNV's football team and the selection of Basque Nationalist Action (*Acción Nacionalista Vasca*, ANV), the second most relevant regional political party. The proceeds from the match were used for buying a plane for Aguirre's government. We could observe an important person in the context of Basque national movement on the stands. There were Telesforo Monzón, member of PNV's presidium, Jesús María de Leizaola, Basque government leader in exile since 1960, and *lebendakari* José Antonio Aguirre himself who had a very emotive speech. He was full of praise for Basque combatants and spoke about the Basque values as well. His speech was repaid with a huge applause (Bacigalupe, 1997, p. 171–172). For the

⁵For example, Basque national football team played two matches against Barcelona in July 1936. The football players honoured their friend and ex-player José Echeveste from Real Union of Irun (Excelsius, 1932, p. 1). These games are not being mentioned very often and they are partially forgotten.

⁶If you want to know more about Aguirre's career on the football pitch, see (Aiestaran, 2010).

sake of completeness, we add that 22 000 spectators saw ANV's win 7:5. The two return matches were organized as well and the gained funds were meant to be used for buying a ship from USSR that could protect the Basque coast of Bilbao (Díaz 2008, p. 288–289). These matches were not very successful and did not get the attention compared with the first one.

During the war Basque government sought opportunities to make Basque issue visible. The solution was found soon and *equipo Euzkadi*, a Basque national team name in that era, was born in 1937. Its foundation was connected with journalist Melchor Alegría, *lebendakari* Aguirre and Basque socialist Juan Gracia. The formation of *equipo Euzkadi* was a project led by nationalists and it affected team's symbolism as well because team jerseys were stylized to the *ikurriña*'s colors and the name *Euzkadi* was chosen, the term that was made up for Basque Country by Sabino Arana, the PNV's founder (Estomba Etxepare, 2007, p. 794, 796). The main goal seems clear, *Euzkadi* should become "a travelling ambassador of the Basque Country" (Győri Szabó, 2013, p. 531) but its task was not only this one. Basque national team should also be a fundraiser for the Basque people suffering during the war.

The team's⁷ mission started in April 1937 in the nearest country, France. Two days after the Basque footballers left their homeland, *Euzkadi* played its first match against Paris Racing Club. It is ironic that Nazis, supporting Franco, dropped the bombs on Gernika and destroyed the Basque historical city at the same time. This terrifying incident contributed to the meaning of the Basque football mission. We have said that *Euzkadi* was formed by nationalist government and so the team management had very close relations to PNV as well. We can mention Manuel de la Sota once again or Ricardo Irezabal, ex-president of Athletic Club in the 20's, who was a Basque government delegate in the team because of his political identification with PNV's politics. We are not sure about the political identities of the players but their proclamations never went against the tide and their statements were the same as PNV's or rather governmental (Estomba Etxepare, 2007, p. 796–797). After several matches against French clubs, *Euzkadi* changed the country and went to Czechoslovakia, where Basques lost 2:3.⁸

⁷*Euzkadi* was composed mainly by players from Athletic Club of Bilbao. We find on its squad also footballers from Real Madrid and Real Unión of Irun and one at time from Arenas of Getxo. Baracaldo, Barcelona CF, Racing Santander and Oviedo. There were not football players from Real Sociedad de Fútbol of San Sebastian because of the fact that the Basque province Gipuzkoa was hold by Franco's forces in these days.

⁸It is interesting that Czechoslovakian diary *Národní listy* (1937b, p. 6) informed about Basque national team like about the selection of Bilbao and Basque football players were labeled as Spaniards.

They returned to France after their defeat but they played a match in Prague again in June 1937, before their visit to Poland, and *Euzkadi* lost once more.⁹ Basques should have played two matches in Poland but they played only one in the end.¹⁰ The reason was that Poland had always been significantly Catholic country and formed a different opinion about the Spanish civil war than Basques. In addition, Józef Piłsudski, an authoritarian head of Polish state died in 1935 and there was a fear of spreading the communism. For Poles, the Basques fought against Franco and so they were communists in this stereotypical way of thinking (Díaz, 2008, p. 293). In the single match in Poland, *Euzkadi* defeated Silesia 4:3 and its play was praised for being “nice, fast, full of temperament” (Przegląd Sportowy, 1937b, p. 2). It was different in USSR where *Euzkadi* continued its journey. Basque national team was presented there as a “representative of people’s republic, the sister of USSR” (Estomba Etxepare, 2007, p. 799). The Basque visit was a huge event. They spent lot of time on the pitch, played sold-out matches against the best Russian, Belarussian, Ukrainian and Georgian¹¹ teams. Soviet newspaper paid a great attention to Basques, they were presented like a different kind of soldiers fighting against Franco. *Euzkadi* raised the most funds during its Soviet visit, its benefit was more than 100 000 francs and everything was paid by the Soviets (Díaz, 2008, p. 294). Then Basque footballers traveled to the north, to Norway and Denmark. Those were the last matches of *Euzkadi* in Europe.

European part of Basque national team mission was more successful than Latin American. On the other side of the Atlantic, Basques should have played matches in various countries but the political decision of FIFA destroyed these plans. *Euzkadi* started its Latin American campaign with matches in Mexico and then traveled to Cuba and played very well but its Argentine visit became a disaster. The selection was agreed on the friendly matches but *Euzkadi* did not play them because of the FIFA’s ban. There were two football federations in Spain during the war and the delegate of Franco wanted to stop the activity of Basque national team. Unfortunately for Basques, FIFA came to the conclusion that *Euzkadi* was not allowed to play its matches in Argentina and the local clubs did not want to go against the FIFA’s conclusion (Estomba Etxepare, 2007, p. 810). Basque government knew about this possibility. It was *lebendakari* Aguirre who complained to Manuel Irujo, PNV member in Spanish republican

⁹Czechoslovakian journalist already spoke about the team in the context of Basque Country. For example see (Národní listy, 1937a, p. 6).

¹⁰*Euzkadi* should played a match in Warszawa against the first Polish league all-star team (Przegląd Sportowy 1937a, p. 1) but this game was not carried out.

¹¹Santiago de Pablo (2006, p. 277) remarked that a short documental film from the match between *Euzkadi* and Dynamo Tbilisi was recorded. This six minutes long movie “Baski v Tbilisi” included Basque arrival to Tbilisi, *ikurriñas* in Georgian streets and match summary.

government, on fact that FIFA “is in hands of fascist” and he expected some problems (Euskadiko Artxibo Historikoa / Archivo Histórico de Euskadi, 1937, p. 36–37). *Euzkadi* returned to Cuba and Mexico after three months without match in Argentina and it played some games in Mexico and on the Caribbean island. The problems with FIFA did not end in Argentina. A possibility for *Euzkadi* returning to Europe existed but as Juan Garay Uribitarte, the Basque government delegate at Cuba, mentioned it was not probable because of the FIFA’s persecution (Euskadiko Artxibo Historikoa / Archivo Histórico de Euskadi, 1937-1939, p. 62). A new solution could have been a plan to travel to USA and Canada and play there some friendly matches but it was not carried out. That was the reason why Basque footballers decided to go to Mexico and participated in the Mexican league in 1938/39 season. They played twelve matches, gained fifteen points and finished second (Estomba Extepare, 2007, p. 813–814). These games, including a friendly match against Paraguayan team Atlético Corrales, were a Basque national team swan song because the war was lost and there was no reason for *Euzkadi* to play anymore.

Francoist Spain and Rebirth of the National Team

A destiny of regional nationalisms was clear in the undemocratic Franco’s Spain. Basques and Catalans lost their autonomies, their national symbols were banned and the using of Basque language was prohibited as well. The castilization became ever-present also in the football environment. Athletic Club of Bilbao had to change its name to Atlético but it did not destroy its Basque identity Especially matches against Real Madrid, the dominant club in Spain in that era turned into the space where Basque identity was demonstrated (MacClancy, 2007, p. 60–61). The most famous demonstration of Basque national feelings happened at the match between Real Sociedad and Athletic Club on 5th December 1976. Team captains Inaxio Kortabarria from Real Sociedad and Athletic’s José Ángel Iribar, future coach of Basque national team and *Herri Batasuna* member, appeared on the pitch with *ikurriña* in their hands. Francisco Franco was already dead but the Spanish undemocratic regime was still functioning and *ikurriña* was an illegal symbol. State authorities did not intervene and they lifted the ban to using Basque flag three months later (Gómez, 2007, p. 63). It is interesting that we can observe some matches during undemocratic years when Basque selection was a participant, although those were not typical games for Basques. The first took place at Stadium Gal in Irun in 1966 and the Basque rival was Real Madrid. This match was a celebration of fifty years’ foundation of a local club, Real Unión (ABC, 1966, p. 104). Another match was played at San Mamés in 1971 between Basques and Catalans as a tribute to former international referee Juan Gardeazábal from Bilbao (La Vanguardia, 1971, p. 39).

The bell tolled for the undemocratic Spanish in the end of 70's and the process of democratic transition was finalized by the adoption of constitution in 1978 and by general elections that followed. Basque Country became historical autonomous community, composed of Biscay, Álava and Gipuzkoa, soon after successful local referendum in October 1979. Basque identity had been presented in a public space again and the game of football could not stand aside. For example, Athletic Club returned to its original name and many presidents of a club who had very strong relations to PNV (MacClancy, 2007, p. 62–63). Above all Basque national team was back. Basques met their 'old friends' from USSR in March 1978. The Basque squad was composed of Athletics' players, some footballers from Deportivo Alavés and one from Osasuna. We could not find the representatives of Real Sociedad on the list. Gipuzkoan club refused to free them because they had a strenuous match program (Díaz, 2008, p. 310). The Basques and the Soviets battled to scoreless draw.

Euskadi, as was Basque national team called in that era, played three matches between 1979 and 1980. First was played against Ireland in San Mamés in a great atmosphere full of Basque national symbols. Unfortunately, one was missed. Basque anthem "Gernikako Arbola" was not sung before the match. This controversy made Carlos Garaikoetxea, future *lehendakari*, angry, he left his seat at the presidential box and watched the match from the stands. This game, where Basques won 4:1, was important for the Basque language promotion in the campaign "Bai Euskarari" as well and it had very positive response. The next Basque rival was Bulgaria. The national selections clashed in San Sebastian and the match was a national celebration that promoted *ikastolas*, schools where children gain knowledge in Basque language, once again. *Euskadi* won also in Gipuzkoa, 4:0 (Quiroiga Fernández de Soto, 2014, p. 207–208). We can evaluate this activity that "[...] soccer and the Basque language served to protect and strengthen Basque identity" (Győri Szabó, 2013, p. 541). The third match in third province of Autonomous Community of Basque Country took place at Vitoria-Gasteiz against Hungary. This time Basques lost 1:5 and the event was also loss making. Joseba Gotzon (1998, p. 142) evaluates the match as an "economic, organizational and sports deficit". Maybe as a result of that failure, senior Basque national team did not play 'official' match another eight years.

Basque football federation was founded in 1988 and the organization of Basque national team matches has not been only an issue for NGOs and the activists. At the start, federation helped with the organization of the match against London club, Tottenham Hotspur in the same year (Díaz, 2008, p. 318). This game was used as a space for promotion of *ikastolas* again, the campaign "Bateginik" (Gotzon, 1998, p. 143). The next match was played against Romania in 1990. Another, against Bolivia at Anoeta in San Sebastian, took place three

years later and it invented the tradition of the Basque national team matches in the Christmas time that exists until now. All those matches that were carried out received a support by the Basque government, banks and the local companies (Quiroiga Fernández de Soto, 2014, p. 225).

A question of the officialization of Basque national team has been emerging more and more in that time, although this was been a new demand and PNV articulated it for the first time in its newspaper *Euzkadi* in 1982 (de Pablo, 2012, p. 223). The officialization means that Basques would be a part of UEFA and FIFA as well, would play the matches officially and participate at the World or European Championships. Some Basque nationalists, who are passionate sports fans as well, thought that Basque football federation did not work hard enough to enforce the officialization of Basque national team and they established organization ESAIT, *Euskal selekzioaren Aldeko Iritzji Taldea – Grupo de Opinión a favor de las Selecciones Vascas* in 1995. The ESAIT's main argument for officialization was that Basque Country, they used the name *Euskal Herria*, is a nation and so it should have a right to officially participate in the world sports events (ESAIT, n. d.), including football. ESAIT had been visible especially during the Christmas matches when Basque footballers regularly posed with the banners with the ESAIT's slogans, for example “Nazio bat, selekzioa bat” which means “One Nation, One Selection”. It organized also *Selekzioaren eguna*, Day for Representation, between 2000 and 2012. ESAIT got the axe in March 2015. They mentioned in a press release that they fulfilled their mission because there is no doubt that Basque sportsmen have a right to participate on the international and official level in the Basque jersey (ESAIT, 2015). The reality is still different and Basque national teams still participate officially only in some sports, for example in football-tennis or tug of war since 2014. The officialization of Basque national football team has not been accomplished yet and it will be a difficult task.

Ofizialtasuna? Basque National Football Team Nowadays

The important moment arrived on 11th June 1998 when a Basque Sports Law, *Ley Vasca del Deporte* passed in Basque parliament. This law means that Basque sports federations are the unique representatives of Basque sportsmen and they should support the Basque national team representations and their efforts to compete officially. This legislative was supported by nationalist parties PNV, Basque Solidarity (*Eusko Alkartasuna*), Popular Unity (*Herri Batasuna*) and by a leftist party United Left (*Izquierda Unida – Ezker Batua*), main Spanish parties and *Unión Alavesa* voted against. This law also meant that Basque government fell down because Spanish socialists did not support the rule of

PNV and its *lehendakari* José Antonio Ardanza yet. The Spanish government, led by People's Party (*Partido Popular*, PP), made an unsuccessful protest against this law at the Constitutional Court as well. The Constitutional Court came to the conclusion that this law is not unconstitutional. Further it agreed that Basque sports federations are a unique representation of the Basque Country on the international level but provided that there did not exist the Spanish federation in the same discipline (Quiroga Fernández de Soto, 2014, p. 225–226).

Juan José Ibarretxe from PNV became the new *lehendakari* in 1999, after the fall of Basque government and new election as a consequence of *Ley Vasca del Deporte*. Ibarretxe became the most famous *lehendakari* because of his effort to change the autonomous statute of Basque Country called the Ibarretxe plan presented in 2003. This plan should have led to an extension of the Basque self-government and possibly to Basque independence. Among other things, it mentioned Basque national sports teams and their right to participate on the international level (Eusko Jaurlaritza / Gobierno Vasco, 2003, Art. 47.4). So Basque national football team became an important symbol for him. Basques played regular matches in Bilbao and San Sebastian and they left Basque Country for the first time since 1938, they visited Catalonia in 2006 and Venezuela one year later during Ibarretxe presidency. The game against Catalans, played in Barcelona, was significant because two non-state nations outside the FIFA and UEFA structure clashed at the time reserved for FIFA matches. Juan José Ibarretxe was at nearly all Basque national team matches as a *lehendakari*, and the president of Catalonia Pasqual Maragall could not miss the match and they demanded the officialization for their national selections (Díaz, 2008, p. 343). The second often discussed game took place at Caracas, Venezuela, country with a large Basque diaspora. Basques won 4:3 but they were criticized by Spanish authorities because they did not only play but followed the political contacts with Hugo Chávez's government (Gómez, 2007, p. 141–142). The political effort to officialize the selection continued before the clash of Basques and Catalans in Bilbao in December 2007. The document, called *Declaración de San Mamés* was signed there by the delegates of Basque, Catalan and Galician government. This manifest claimed the cooperation among these nations on the project of officialization (Gorospe, 2007). The friendly match ended in great atmosphere in a tie 1:1 but more important thing is that Basque national team did not play another match for three years. The question is clear. Why?

Basque national team played nearly all games under the name *Euskadi*. This is a preferred name for Basque Country by PNV. Except that, other Basque nationalist political actors, including ESAI, prefer the name *Euskal Herria* and they think about *Euskadi* in a sense of the Basque Autonomous Community, which excludes Navarra and French Basque provinces. The name *Euskal Herria*

was used for the match against Catalonia because of the Basque Football Federation decision, however Basque Football Federation did not want to use this name anymore due to criticism of PNV and the Spanish parties as well. The culmination of the name's controversy was the Basque football players' demand, *Euskal Herriko futbolariak*, that they would not represent Basque Country if its name was not *Euskal Herria*.¹² In the end, it meant that Basque national team did not play a prearranged match against Iran on Christmas 2008. This problem was resolved by a compromise among all the parties in the dispute, Basque national team has been playing under the name *Euskal Selekzioa*, it means Basque selection, since 2010.

For the first time in history, *lehendakari* did not come from PNV in that era. The head of Basque government was a socialist Patxi López between 2009 and 2012. This government supported Basque national team but it did not do anything more for the officialization in the controversial sports issue such as in the case of football (Quiroga Fernández de Soto, 2014, p. 231). In addition to it, non-nationalist government invited Spanish national football team to play some matches in Basque Country, where Spain did not play since 1967. A cycling race around the Spain *Vuelta a España* was invited to the territory of Basque Autonomous Community as well. This race did not go through Biscay, Gipuzkoa or Álava since 1978. It is clear that Basque nationalists protested against these invitations and criticized López's government for the "castilization" of the Basque Country (Eusko Legebiltzarra / Parlamento Vasco, 2006, p. 18–36). After the election in 2012, PNV returned to the government with *lehendakari* Iñigo Urkullu. The government mentioned its thinking about sports and national selections a few months later: "Our goal is to strengthen the Basque national teams and to strengthen the projection of [our brand name] *Euskadi Basque Country* abroad" (Eusko Legebiltzarra / Parlamento Vasco, 2013, p. 95). It meant that PNV's government wanted to support the officialization of Basque national teams and it wanted to use Basque sports representatives as a tool of its public diplomacy or better to say sports diplomacy.

The new nationalist government requested the lawyers to write an analysis of the possibility of international recognition of Basque national teams. The results were presented in April 2014 and concluded that there is no legal obstacle for the Basque national team officialization and their membership in the international sports federations. It depends on the private statutes of these international sports federations (Álvarez Rubio, Landaberea Unzueta, & Palacio De Ugarte, 2014, p. 33–34). In the same year, Basque national football team played regular Christmas match against Catalonia at San Mamés where *lehendakari* Urkullu and a President of Catalonia Artur Mas were present. It ended in a tie 1:1 when the

¹²For more see the Basque football players' petition (*Euskal Herriko futbolariak*, 2008).

famous forward Aritz Aduriz from Athletic Club scored the only Basque goal in the first half.

A new founded NGO Jauzia took over the imaginary baton from ESAIT in the activities connected with that football clash. Jauzia, that has the same goals as ESAIT, adopted a motto “One Country, One Team” that was originally used by South Africans in the context of their national rugby team and transition to democracy (Jauzia, 2015). The regular publishing of the photos of famous Basque sportsmen with Jauzia’s motto and hashtag *Selfiekexjioa* on twitter gave Jauzia an important attention. The football teams Athletic Club, Real Sociedad or SD Eibar, some players of rugby team Biarritz Olympique, professional cyclists Haimar Zubeldia, Markel Irizar and Amets Txurruka or triathlete Ainhoa Murua were among the Basque sportsmen who took a picture of themselves with the Jauzia’s motto and supported the officialization of Basque national teams. This motto was visible at the beginning of the match between Basques and Catalans as well.

This football game was something more than just a match. After all, we can say that about all the matches of Basque national team in that era. It was the match between two Spanish regions that are the loudest in their national aspirations, let’s not forget a Catalan *consulta popular* in the question of independence two months before the game. We can think about these issues in the context that Barrie Wharton (2007, p. 609) mentions. He says that the discussion about the membership of Basque, Catalan or Galician national football team in a FIFA’s structure is a space where the local nationalists want to discuss a possibility of a future independence of their regions. It means that football is a space where nationalists try to open a debate about their secessionist demands. Some Basque nationalists look at the officialization as a symbolical step forward on the path to independence. For example, Basque nationalist Joseba Permach, ex-member of *Batasuna*, posted the hashtags *independentzia* and *ofizialtasuna* on his personal twitter account (Permach, 2014), or a political party *Eusko Alkartasuna*, a member of the coalition Basque Country Gather (*Euskal Herria Bildu*), and its regional organization in Biscay posted a similar tweet (Eusko Alkartasuna Bizkaia, 2014).

Unfortunately for Basques, Catalans and so on, there is a condition that is difficult to achieved for them in UEFA Statutes: “Membership of UEFA is open to national football associations situated in the continent of Europe, based in the country which is recognized as an independent state [...]” (UEFA 2014, Art. 5.1). In this context, a director of sports issues in Urkullu’s government Jon Redondo said that the officialization of Basque national football team “[...] is so complicated, almost impossible” (Izquierdo, 2014), but the Basque government is ready to support the playing of football matches in the FIFA’s official times

and not only during the Christmas holidays. I think that we can say that the discussion about the officialization of Basque national football team is a special type of a symbolical discussion about the possibility of Basque independence.

Conclusion

Football, as I mention above, has had a huge world-wide popularity over a long period, and Spain is no exception. The local politicians are aware of this fact which I try to demonstrate on the example of Basque Country. The goal of this article was to present the utilization of football, specifically Basque national team, as an unique political tool and show how it has changed in the context of Basque nationalist politics over time.

We can observe how football was used as an instrument for the strengthening the 'Basque race' in the first decades of 20th century. This thinking had a relation to Basque nationalist doctrine that was presented by Sabino Arana, his followers and PNV generally. It was not the example of Basque Country exclusively. We find the similar way of using a sport activity in the context of *Turnvereine* in German lands or Czechoslovakian *Sokol* for example.

Basque national team was used by Basque government as "a travelling ambassador of the Basque Country" (Gyóri Szabó, 2013, p. 531) in the end of the 30's, it means that it was a tool of Basque political propaganda, or better to say Basque public diplomacy. This team was collecting money for the Basque people suffering during the Spanish Civil War as well. Basque representatives visited many European countries and then they played matches in Cuba and Mexico until FIFA prohibited their activities. Playing football was equal to a political mission. We ought not to forget that some beneficial matches were also played before and during the war and money from them supported the Basque government.

Football was associated with Basque language in the end of Francoist Spain. Basque national team matches were used for supporting *euskara*. NGOs supporting the Basque language received the proceeds from the matches. This situation repeated during a game against London club Tottenham Hotspur in 1988 as well.

The most important change came with a *Ley Vasca del Deporte* in 1998, then with *lehendakari* Juan José Ibarretxe and with the activities of Urkullu's government. A significant effort for officialization of Basque national sport teams has emerged with the ESAIT's and Jauzia's support as well. I think that Basque national football team is the most visible among them. FIFA and UEFA

as well refused those attempts resolutely but they still exist in Basque society. We could observed them obviously in the match of Basque national team against Catalonia in Bilbao on 28th December 2014 that I was interested in. We can think about the efforts to almost impossible officialization of Basque national football team as a discussion about the potential Basque independence.

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