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# An emerging urban community spanning the frontier, the Basque Eurocity Bayonne-Saint Sebastian

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The history of 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe has been marked by profound territorial recompositions (see HABSBAWN 2003), among which one of the most striking has undoubtedly been the passage from a Europe divided into national territories to a Europe abolishing its internal frontiers, frontiers which have been the source of so many conflicts and so much suffering. Finally, the dismantling of these borders was the last step in a process of mutation leading to a geopolitical ideology no longer based on conflict but on agreement between populations who had until then been “enemies”. This institutional dismantling of the frontiers accomplished in 1993 was accompanied by specific measures and notably by the establishment of cooperative programmes across the frontiers (Interreg programmes). In these projects, the local bodies and border populations were invited to “cooperate” and participate in the construction of the new Europe.

The Basque Country (see Map 1), like other border regions, has entered into this cooperative process and participated in alliances across the border. After some years of activity, the cooperative projects initiated in this context seem to be contributing to the emergence of a “territory” spanning the frontier and the nations, which overthrows the international frontier while conferring on it a new attribute, that of being a link. This “territory” appears to be plural as it is composed of diverse elements more or less institutionalized. One of these is urban and strongly institutionalized; it results from the desire of the local political bodies to federate some of their administrative rights in order to construct a new transnational urban territory. The dimensions of this zone exceed the frontier since the urban area extends on either side of the latter, while since

its content is based equally well on common projects as on affirmations of social and cultural cohesion, it is easy to define when one knows its name: the Basque Eurocity Bayonne-Saint Sebastian. However, this invented, artificially constructed city runs up against the image of the city as stable, tangible, entirely itself and controllable. Yves CHALAS (see CHALAS 2002, pp. 53-74) says that the development of contemporary towns follows three modalities: movement, incertitude and incompleteness. Thus, if the territory of cities under construction displays internal frontiers and this “because in the city nothing lasts, everything is obsolete as soon as it has been completed and without even waiting for its end” (ibid, p. 71), Eurocity has an additional prop-

erty, a potential source of incertitude and doubt as to its temporal development. In fact, its emerging urban continuity is founded on the temporalities of several centuries which have shaped it: a pre-national, a national and now a post-national period. These different periods do not have the same consistency and do not carry the same weight, but each in its manner has shaped the ways of thinking and doing things of the local populations, has had and still has an impact on both materialities (forms of habitat, social structures, etc.) and idealities (visions of the world). The logics which presided at their inscription in the frontier region are susceptible to resurface at any moment. A first possible re-emergence could take the form of an ideological and apodic-



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Figure 1: The Eurocity Bayonne-Saint Sebastian

tic current which would hold that there should be a kind of analogy between the post-national and pre-national periods, the frontier time being finally no more than a sort of historical error. A second possible resurgence could take the form of a nationalist or eurosceptic vision of the world, rejecting this new era of the end of national territories and international frontiers.

This article reflects on the nature and modalities of construction of this “city spanning the frontier” which aspires to becoming the Basque eurocity Bayonne-Saint Sebastian, with the aim of determining whether this creation will find in the Basque identity the ideal and material resources necessary and sufficient to ensure its cohesion. Thus, we will first of all describe the politico-ideological context of the emergence of this urban invention in order to define the dimensions and content it is attributed today. Subsequently, we will attempt to give a picture of the practices and conceptions of the young inhabitants of this emerging border town.

The question of the frontier lies at the heart of our reflection. In fact, this frontier zone, until now considered to be marginal and peripheral, torn by strong claims of identity, is experiencing today unprecedented changes. These mutations stem from the new role attributed to the frontier, which is an attempt to establish territorial continuity where there used to be discontinuity. The political figures, prompt to seize any kind of opportunity, have made no mistake and launched themselves with efficacy into a logic of cooperation, to the point of institutionalizing a new transnational urban form. These changes also lead individuals to reconstruct their allegiances and identifications. Hence this new urban form, which is above all political, does it have a social dimension or in other words, does it have meaning for the local populations who a little less than 20 years ago lived in an area cut in two by the power of an international frontier?

### **The eurocity Bayonne-Saint Sebastian: the invention of a city. Projects and ideas**

A little more than ten years ago, this city did not exist. Quite on the contrary, over the fifty kilometres separating Bayonne from Saint Sebastian, one was at the peripheries of two national territories: France and Spain. These peripheries were marked by

a frontier materialized by customs posts, customs officers and low dividing walls. At this time passing the frontier revealed all the meaning of the change of identity. Within this time and space, France and Spain were two territories, contiguous but distinct for anyone crossing the frontier. Moreover, at the approaches to the frontier line all the elements of differentiation and distinction made sense: differences in the population densities, economic systems, urban practices, pace of life, etc. One had the impression that in this region one could see more than anywhere else the force and efficacy of the impact of national ideologies on practices, ways of doing things and views of the world (VELASCO-GRACIET 1998).

Of course, closer observation revealed another region composed of alliances and movements of all kinds: matrimonial alliances, licit and illicit economic exchanges (popularized under the name of contraband), movements of workers, currents of ideas, etc. ... (ibid).

The political speeches insist today, when reference is made to this “time of the frontiers”, on the idea that there existed at this time two distinct territories turning their backs on one another: on one side, the aristocratic city of Saint Sebastian, site of secondary residences of the rich from Madrid, surrounded by industrial towns and a suburban hinterland and on the other side, less important cities (Bayonne, Anglet, Biarritz) and a scattering of small towns or villages with an economy depending essentially on tourism and a rural hinterland.

As of 1993, a territorial movement began to take shape under the impulsion of two territorial images:

- One on the global level linked to the ideology of the construction of a European territory composed of regions;
- The other on the local level finding its roots in historiography and the myth of the Pyrenean republics (CAVAILLES 1910, pp.1-34) and in the context of the (re)construction of a Basque Country (supported notably by the movements for independence).

A new type of territoriality emerged under the impulsion of these two images, including local and global elements and replacing the territorial networks which had prevailed until then. The enterprise thus consisted of two passages, on the one hand from a dividing to a linking frontier and on the other hand from territorial contiguity to territorial connectivity.

It was in 1993 that the eurocity was more or less invented and its territory reallocated for co-administration by two local bodies, the Diputacion foral du Guipúzcoa and the District du BAB (Bayonne Anglet Biarritz). The objectives (see [www.eusko-ikaskuntza.org](http://www.eusko-ikaskuntza.org)) these two authorities have set themselves are the emergence of a new urban reality, spanning the frontier and European and the transformation of the two communities into an agglomeration.

This new urban entity has 600,000 inhabitants distributed over 50 kilometres. It is composed of 42 communes, the most populated being Saint Sebastian with almost 200,000 inhabitants.

The discourses accompanying this urban invention accord it several faces which constitute what J.-M. LARRASQUET calls its “personality” (LARRASQUET 2000). Thus, it is above all a *city of the future*, almost recalling utopia: “in 20 years, from Bayonne to Saint Sebastian, our grandchildren will live in the same European agglomeration which will have become *the natural context* of their work, their games, their social life, their passions and their responsibilities” declared Alain LAMASSOURE, former minister and President of l’Agence Transfrontalière (LAMASSOURE 2000); some see it as *emerging* (DELORME 2000), others as an *American city* (see [www.eusko-ikaskuntza.org](http://www.eusko-ikaskuntza.org)). It is also presented as an *exemplary city* in the relation it establishes between the global and local levels: “it is a fine example for Europe of drawing closer across the frontiers and of an apprenticeship for daily living together” (see [www.eusko-ikaskuntza.org](http://www.eusko-ikaskuntza.org)). In this respect, its very name “Basque Eurocity” highlights the alliance as the city presents itself as both Basque and European. The symbolism of this denomination is capital since the political representatives, through this choice, position themselves outside the context of the national states and in the words of Z. BAUMAN become predominant figures of the second modernity (see BAUMAN 2005).

The constructed “personality” is invented not only in discourses but also in projects (we recommend here the selected reading proposed by MICOUD 2002, pp. 31-52). This involves a double process of figuration and argumentation (referring again to DEBARBIEUX and VANIER, pp. 7-26). It is a figuration firstly on account of its sensitive denomination: the eurocity

is Basque, European and a city covering an area stretching from Bayonne to Saint Sebastian. It is also a figuration on the photographic and cartographic representations produced by its designers, which show it as an urban continuum and exclude the frontier between nations. Finally it is a figuration due to the diversity of the sites and landscapes which the speeches of all kinds - political, tourist, economic, etc.- recall incessantly and which are likewise symbolic places of interest (the beaches, urban promenades, towns, etc.).

This figuration establishes the setting and appears like a sort of “*submitted territorial patent*”, the first building block of this urban invention.

The personality of Eurocity then emerges through argumentation. The arguments employed and which justify the figuration are based on the rhetoric of filling up, i.e. they bring into play functional modalities to light “the spark of life” in the setting, to put movement into it and link the two. It is thus by establishing projects (initially pilot projects) that the animation of the setting will be achieved (this listing is based on elements provided by the site [www.nouveleco.com](http://www.nouveleco.com)).

- Formation of an Atlantic platform of inter-modalities and information;
- Creation of a linear polycentric metropolis forming a network (notably through construction of a tramway between Bayonne and Saint Sebastian);
- Protection and valorisation of the natural and cultural heritage;
- Establishment of a system of local government.

Through these projects, Eurocity fulfils two criteria. First of all, this delimited urban area is affiliated to traditions and a common heritage to protect (criterion of affiliation); secondly this link reveals a history and a community transcending the generations (criterion of connection). It is also committed to its own urban forms and structures (polycentrism within a network) and to a concerted management for which each resident is responsible. The call on local elements constitutes the basis of the process and implies a specific responsibility of all those who are attached to maintenance of the given particularities.

Subsequently, if the setting and its contents start to work, they will only make sense through relationships of distinction and liaison with respect to what

is different: the global element. Thus, Eurocity is situated within Europe and more particularly within one of its regions: the Atlantic Arc. This situation implies the affirmation of an Atlantic identity, of a preponderant spatial position (structuring urban pole of the Atlantic entity) and of the role of an element of the Euro-corridor linking Northern and Southern Europe.

Hence the city may be represented within a framework, has points and lines, centres and networks and opens (or closes) on the wide world. However, its territory is fragmented internally. It possesses internal poles, peripheries around these poles and natural areas. All this is quite classical, but the territory of this new city does not appear like the juxtaposition of two urban areas until then separate. In fact, in the course of its edification, a hard core has formed, a sort of cradle arising from the association of three towns situated around the river Bidassoa (used until 1993 to “mark the frontier”): Fontarabie, Hendaye and Irun.

This agglomeration has several advantages. Firstly it possesses a legal framework as it has the legal form of a *consorcio* (the Bidassoa-Txingudi *consorcio*) since 1<sup>st</sup> December 1998. Secondly it disposes of its own budget and hence has financial autonomy. Finally, it is authorized to exercise a certain number of competences relative to the coordination of administrative and institutional structures, in order to strengthen cooperation across the frontier within the Basin. Its activities concern principally tourism, culture and economic and social development. In each of these domains projects are envisaged and realized, like for example study missions, censuses, advertising campaigns, or the organization of events, setting up of common services and development projects spanning the frontier, or administration of common structures providing information, advice and services.

It is its “over-exemplary” character which is highlighted to distinguish the *consorcio* from the rest of Eurocity. This was in fact the first inter-administrative convention to be signed (see JAUREGUI 2002). Its site is said to be ideally situated: “at the heart of Eurocity, close to the infrastructures for transport and the airports” (see [www.hendaye.com](http://www.hendaye.com)). Moreover, it disposes of “a recognized quality of life in a remarkable environment”

(*ibid*). Still more perhaps because it is known as the “region of the Basques”, finally united and who celebrate their reunification, each year in the month of October, at the *Txingudi Eguna* (feast of the Txingudi, Txingudi being the name of the bay around which these three towns are situated).

The area of the *consorcio* seems to have rigidified while becoming the emblematic centre of this city built on the principle of cooperation. Why does this area stand out from the rest of the city? Is it more Basque? Is it better adapted to cooperation? Is it the only region able to demonstrate the existence of this alliance between the two levels represented by the local and global aspects?

The construction on and by the global level and in consubstantial manner on and by the local level appeals to, among other things, the notion of “Basquity”. This notion referring to a sentiment (which could forge the link) is not attributed the same sense by the different social groups. It is even a source of conflicts and discords since the conceptions it generates range from a singularity of identity to complementarity with the other components of a broader identity.

“Basquity” scarcely seems to unite the two sides of the old frontier; quite on the contrary, when one tries to impose a particular vision of this Basquity, this vague and subjective element only succeeds in hindering cooperation and agreement between individuals who have lived and still live in very different social, political, economic and cultural contexts.

The link in this region is created, obviously and more simply, by the proximity of the three towns and notably on the basis of an “asymmetry”: an economic, sanitary, habitat-related, environmental, professional and fiscal asymmetry from one side to the other of the frontier, which makes the frontier zone attractive for all those who want to benefit from “living well between two”. As an example, according to the latest studies, about 2000 Spanish families live in Hendaye (price of property more accessible), pay their taxes in France, benefit from the French social welfare and nevertheless continue to work in Irun and enjoy their leisure activities in Fontarabie.

New divisions of the territory and the internal and external fragmentation of this new city are certainly based, today, on the ideology of the end of national frontiers.

## Eurocity: people and conceptions

Among the available methods, the principal one we used was the questionnaire. We started from a population of about 80,000 young people between 14 and 25 years living within Eurocity. They represent 14 % of the total population of Eurocity. Since our principal objective was, rather than looking for an exhaustive representativity of the population, to look for contrasts between the different social compartments on the spatial and social levels, we chose a random sample stratified with respect to two principal vectors, spatial and linguistic.

To carry out this study we<sup>2</sup> conducted 398 interviews with last year pupils in secondary schools as well as with first and second year students on university campus on either side of the border between 1st April and 15th May 2001. This relatively homogeneous group of the

same age (17 - 20 years) and with a similar educational background is not representative for the entire population, but allowed us to get some understanding of the relationships between language, space and the border among this young population.

Over and above this institutional process, it is a question of the way in which this frontier population live and envisage this new region. What do they think of it? Does Eurocity have relevance for them? Does it form part of their life?

First of all, we attempted to demonstrate a correlation between identity (feeling more or less Basque) and crossing the frontier (more or less frequent passages across the border). Our *a priori* was that there should be a strong correlation between feeling Basque and crossing the border regularly. In reality, it turned out that the young people who said they had a feeling of belonging to the Basque Country, i.e. felt Basque and in no way French or Spanish, did not spend more time than the other groups (having above all a strong feeling of belonging to either France or Spain) on the other side of the frontier (Spanish or French side).

Hence the discourse of a *uniting basquity* remains fairly rhetorical in this age groupsince in daily life in the border region, this symbolism does not correspond to the principal logics determining the time spent "on the other side of the frontier". The feeling of belonging bears no relation to the frequentation (more or

less time spent). In fact, the frequentation is explained primarily by commercial and festive motives (respectively 57.8 % and 50.8 % of the questionnaires). It is thus a material and tangible logic, with no cultural or ideological basis, which determines the frequentation. It is indeed the differences, both economic and social<sup>3</sup>, on the two sides of the old frontier which explain the flux.

In a general fashion, two cities emerge: one Eurocity as a kind of virtual space only referred to as an identity and separate from another Eurocity which through the practices and movements is split in two by the (or the ex-) national frontier; one has the impression of a re-creation of the border as soon as it had been removed. Other types of frontier appear, more vague frontiers dominated by psychological, social or economic factors. Eurocity, here again, divides in two and reveals the stigmata of the old border.

Concerning the feelings of identification, one finds two different logics according to which side of the border one is on. On the French side, it is the feeling of being French which dominates the panorama. On the contrary, on the Spanish side it is the feeling of being Basque (and almost exclusively Basque) which seems to predominate; in fact the feeling of being exclusively Spanish is very marginal and only represented 3.2 % of our sample population. This suggests to us that this *basquity* is of an integrative type, since it is determined by structural elements (mother tongue, place of birth of the parents and language stream at school).

A poor knowledge of languages would also appear to be an important obstacle reinforcing the separation. Within Eurocity, three languages are spoken: French, Spanish and Basque. Of course, the level of competence and utilization and even the status of each of these differ on either side of the frontier. Nonetheless, it is evident that at least at the quantitative level, Spanish is the language best known to the young inhabitants of Eurocity, given that 85 % of them speak it and that its penetration in the French territory is fairly strong (67 % of the French said they understood Spanish and were capable of speaking it).

<sup>3</sup> The social difference is above all marked by the Spanish life style, oriented towards the public domain and towards certain cultural and sporting events which draw the frontier populations, as for the case of football with the Real Sociedad of Saint Sebastian, the only first class team of Eurocity.

Conversely, the French language has a much weaker penetration in the Spanish territory: only 15 % of the persons asked said they spoke it. This situation is undoubtedly the result of the increasing use of English on a global level.

Even if English does not seem to be the main language of communication in Eurocity (49 % said they spoke it), it would nevertheless appear that it is much more than Basque a language to which one can resort if it is not possible to use French or Spanish. Principally because Basque, historically the only common language, has few chances of being used to communicate across the frontier (17 %)<sup>4</sup> on account of, among other things, the small number of persons who speak it on the French side and the negative image it still carries today.

An analysis of mental maps of the frontier zone shows that the more the feeling of belonging is said to be strong, the less distinct is the frontier; the reason invoked for this "non distinction" is of an ideological order and based on belonging to the Basque Country, but the fact that one is living in a European city is never mentioned.

In general terms, 62 % of the young French had the impression of living in a frontier zone, as compared to 33 % of the young Spanish. One can distinguish here a more profound feeling of autonomy on the Spanish side, conditioned by among other things the large degree of autonomy of their local and regional institutions. The young French on the other hand felt more attached to the rest of the country (France) and as a result saw the frontier zone as a peripheral region, far from the important centres of decision.

However, in a constant manner and on both sides of the border, there emerges a correlation between the feeling of living in a frontier zone and the frequency of traversing it. In fact, the more elevated the level of frequentation, the more elevated the feeling of living in a frontier region (65 % of those who traversed the frontier more than 10 times a year considered that they lived in a frontier zone, as compared to 15.4 % of those who traversed it less than 10 times a year). One can also observe an inverse correlation between the feeling of being Basque and that of living in a border region; the more

<sup>4</sup> We use here the data of the Enquête sociolinguistique au Pays Basque 1996: La continuité de la langue basque II.

<sup>2</sup> The field study was conducted with Xavier Canas.

important the feeling of being Basque, the weaker the impression of living in a frontier zone.

To the question of the significance of the frontier, the replies reveal again the force of national constructions: the frontier was, for these young people, norm, obstacle, separation, repression and virtuality, but not one of them mentioned that it might be an opportunity to live and grow up in a former border region at the time of the construction of Europe.

### Conclusion

The Basque Eurocity Bayonne-Saint Sebastian is a city under construction and here, perhaps more than elsewhere, “the dissociation between two worlds is visible: a world of practices which on the one hand produces new forms of segregation and discontinuity and on the other hand conserves other older ones, and a symbolic world which produces images and territorial values and is fed by material and ideal realizations” (DEBARBIEUX and VANIER, pp. 7-26).

We find ourselves here well and truly at the heart of territorial complexity since to analyze Eurocity “we have to abandon the analyses opposing strictly a before and an after in favour of a new analysis, more delicate and more attentive to what, in the before, heralded the after and what, in the after, recalls the before” (ibid).

Thus, in the logic of these observations and at the end of this article, we could easily conclude that even if the construction of the Basque Eurocity Bayonne-Saint Sebastian figures as a model for the dynamism of the cooperative projects realized and the territorial result obtained, the practices and conceptions of the local populations are still governed by ideological principles dating from the time when the international frontier exerted all its power of separation. It appears that there exists after all a lag between the political territorialities and the territorialities of the social groups and that the latter are not subject to the same temporalities. However, to say this for Eurocity would certainly be hasty and somewhat peremptory. Over the past few years, this border region has in fact started to take on a very different face under the impulsion of socio-cultural phenomena traversing the (ex-)frontier. A residential phenomenon in the first instance, as one observes a significant increase in the Spanish population

living in the French border communes. A linguistic phenomenon in the second place, since the number of implantations of schools teaching in Basque has soared since its initiation in the French Basque Country. A festive phenomenon finally, as the festivities of the Pampelune have become a model reproducible over the entire Basque Country and well beyond its limits. These new emerging territorialities define new territories with boundaries not necessarily corresponding to those of the Basque Eurocity, but like the new political territorialities, they push back in their own way the old international frontier and this, without decree or treaty.

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