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A SYMBOLIC CLASH AMONG THE NATIONAL IDENTITIES IN THE BASQUE AUTONOMOUS COMMUNITY: POLITICAL PARTIES, TWITTER AND UEFA EUROPEAN CHAMPIONSHIP 2016¹

Jiří Zákřavský*

ABSTRACT

As we can observe on a daily basis, sports and politics are not strictly separated. In addition, sport has become a very effective tool for political parties that employ sport to declare their stance or to communicate with the public. The main objective of this article is to analyse how relevant political parties represented in the Basque Parliament used Twitter to comment on the UEFA European Football Championship in the context of their national identities. In addition, during that time the Spanish General Election took place making the Euro the perfect tool for the political parties to influence and mobilize their voters via Twitter. Based on the content analysis of the official Twitter accounts of these political parties, one may assume that political parties in the Basque Autonomous Community would use the reference to the famous sporting event as a tool that could help them construct and restore national sentiment in society. The main assumption, confirmed at the end, is that Basque nationalist political parties project their ideas through sport in a different way than centrists.

Key words: Basque Nationalism, Basque party system, Football, European Football Championship, Politicization of sport

Introduction

More than two million people live in the Basque Autonomous Community. Obviously, it does not mean that all of them identify² themselves as Basques,

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² From my viewpoint, identity is a dynamic concept that emanates from a constructivist perspective. It means that all people are potential holders of many types of identities, including national identity that is not rigid, yet necessary to construct and restore on a daily basis. I can refer to the famous

although clearly, some of them do. However, others favour the Spanish identity and do not identify themselves as Basques anymore. National identity of the rest of the Basque population is not so strict and many of the locals are convinced that they are Basques as well as Spaniards. Local political parties also have to tackle the question of their national identities since they are composed of individuals bringing in their own identities. In addition, the choice of national identity of a political party influences some aspects of its political ideology, basic and election programs, and especially its relation to the Spanish monarchy.

Making a decision about national identity remains a complicated matter that relies on what is the base of the construction process, and what makes us choose this or that identity. It is a complex issue worthy of a considerably long discussion. I would like to simplify this research topic because I, for once, believe that one of the most important elements influencing our daily choice of national identity is sport. A famous academic interested in the phenomenon of a nation and nationalism, **Eric Hobsbawm**, made a remark about the interrelation between sport and national identity: "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" (Hobsbawm 2012, p. 143). It would seem that "sport cannot win territory or destroy an opposing ideology or religion which the nation seeks to demonise. It can only support the construction of a nation which has been imagined" (Cronin – Mayall 2005, p. 2).

Every day, newspaper, radio, television, the Internet and its social networks abound with information about sporting events, results, and sports' stars.

concept of a French writer **Ernest Renan** (2003 [1882]): thinking about the nationality based on a "daily plebiscite". **Michael Billig**, who also refers to Renan, is another thinker that influences my perception concerning national identity. He talks about the "banal nationalism" which "[...] operates with prosaic, routine words, which take nations for granted, and which, in so doing, inhabit them. Small words, rather than grand memorable phrases, offer constant, but barely conscious, reminders of the homeland, making 'our' national identity unforgettable" (Billig 1995, p. 93). It means that people can find it "[...] in the weather reports, on the sporting pages and hanging limply in the flags on the filling-station forecourts" (Billig 1995, p. 155). It means that we were not born as Czechs, Americans, Basques etc., but live in a society that tries to tell us, more or less consciously, who we are and how we can or cannot reflect our indirect thinking about national identity.

Certainly, they have the power to affect the opinion of their consumers and users. As **Liz Crolley** and **David Hand** mention in their analysis of the press, football, and identity, “each media text is contextualized within its own contemporaneous social, political, economic and ideological environment” (Crolley – Hand 2006, p. 1). In other words, the (potential) holders of political power have the interest to influence the discourse that the media present to the people. Several decades ago, political parties had to own their newspapers so as to be able to accomplish this, however the old times are gone. Creating their own websites or using social network platforms is a cheaper and probably much more effective choice to make.

The origins of using social networks in political marketing come from **Barack Obama**’s successful 2008 presidential campaign. **Obama**’s victory and especially the impact of the communication via social networks helped expand their use in the world of politics all around the world. One of the most popular new social networks is Twitter that is being used by political parties in Spain and in the Basque Autonomous Community as a way to communicate with the public. It is possible to say that “Twitter’s micro-blogging service has become one of the most relevant communication spaces in current politics” (Ruiz de Olmo –Bustos Díaz 2016, p. 108) and thus it is one of the most useful areas for analysing political communication and identities of political participants.

The main objective of this article is to analyse how (if at all) relevant political parties³ represented in the Basque Parliament⁴ used Twitter to comment on the UEFA European Football Championship (Euro 2016) held from 10th June to 10th July 2016, in the context of their national identities. In addition, during that time the Spanish General Election took place thus making Euro 2016 the perfect tool for the political parties to influence and mobilize their voters via Twitter. The essential question that I would like to answer in this article remains clear: How did the relevant political parties of the Basque Autonomous Community use Twitter to inform about the UEFA European Football Championship with respect to their own national identities?

³ I use the term “relevant political party” as **Giovanni Sartori** does. It means that the relevant political parties are “[...] all the parties that have either a governmental relevance in the coalition-forming arena, or a competitive relevance in the oppositional arena” (Sartori 2005, p. 108).

⁴ In other words, I focus on four political parties or a coalition: Basque Nationalist Party (*Euzko Alderdi Jeltzalea –Partido Nacionalista Vasco*, EAJ–PNV), Basque Country Unite (*Euskal Herria Bildu*, EHB), Socialist Party of the Basque Country – Basque Country Left (*Partido Socialista de Euskadi – Euskadiko Ezkerra*, PSE–EE) and People’s Party (*Partido Popular*, PP).

I structured this paper accordingly to help me answer the abovementioned question and achieve my goal. The article is divided into three main chapters. The first one is dedicated to the question of national identity in the Basque Autonomous Community in the context of political parties. I work with a sociological enquiry that was presented by the University of the Basque Country at the beginning of 2016 (see Universidad del País Vasco 2016). It should assist with introducing certain basic facts about national identities and their clash or coexistence in the Basque Autonomous Community. I present the attitudes of the political parties represented in the Basque Parliament toward nationalism or centralism as well. The second chapter is dedicated to a brief introduction to the Spanish and Basque national football teams. In the third chapter, the main part of my analysis is presented. I focus on the way these political parties commented on the events of Euro 2016 on Twitter within the context of their national identities. The article concludes by returning to the main question.

Before I start the first chapter, it is imperative to at least briefly present the methodological approach of this paper. This study is based on a content analysis that, as **Klaus H. Krippendorff** (2004, p. 3) mentions, is “[...] a systematic reading of a body of texts, images, and symbolic matter”. I work with four sources of data; four political parties represented in the Basque Parliament by the time of Euro 2016, and their Twitter accounts. These accounts were studied in detail during Euro 2016 held from 10th June to 10th July. On the first reading I was interested in the posts on their Twitter accounts and I classified the tweets into two categories: relevant, when they relate to the European Football Championship in some way (e.g. posting a mention of Euro 2016 showing support to the official Spanish team to the unofficial Basque selection, etc.), and irrelevant, when they do not. Most of the tweets (more than 99% in total) belonged to the latter category and I did not work with them any further. The first group of tweets (less than 1% in total) was much more interesting for me, therefore on the second reading I focused on these posts and analysed them in the historical, political, and social context of the Basque Country.

1 Be or not to be Basque, that is the question: national identities in the Basque Autonomous Community and political parties

As I mentioned above numerous times, it is possible to observe many types of national identities in the Basque Autonomous Community. The University of

the Basque Country regularly investigates this issue and many other ones via sociological enquiries that are called *Eusko Barometro*. The *Eusko Barometro*, published in January 2016, brings notable facts about national identities in the Basque Autonomous Community: 30% of the individuals living there identify themselves as Basques, and 23% consider themselves more Basque than Spanish, and 36% think that they are Basques as much as Spaniards. Only 6% identify themselves as Spaniards and 2% think that they are more Spaniards than Basques (Universidad del País Vasco 2016, p. 60). Since we can observe this identity representation in the Basque Country, local political parties have to reflect it in their political behaviour. This means that these parties need to consider national identifications of their (potential) voters, take certain actions and incorporate all of this into their campaign strategies.⁵ To explain these strategies in the Basque Country it is essential to provide basic insight into four main political formations of the Basque Autonomous Community contextualized with their national identities.

The Basque Nationalist Party (EAJ-PNV) was founded in 1895 and it represents the main political force in the Basque Autonomous Community since its foundation after the Spanish democratic transition. As the name of this political party clearly implies, it is a nationalist formation. Nevertheless, some authors describe EAJ-PNV as a “patriotic pendulum” (de Pablo – Mees 2005) that swings between the call for Basque independence and the support of the idea of the Basque status of autonomy. The party’s history is dotted with clashes between these two positions. EAJ-PNV’s approach is influenced by the historical context and the nationalists occasionally demand a step toward the creation of an independent Basque Country. For example, this attitude could be observed during the governance of Basque prime minister (*lehendakari* in Basque language) **Juan José Ibarretxe** from 1999 to 2009. However, it does not change the party’s national identity inclination. **Andoni Ortuzar**, a president of EAJ-PNV, openly declared party’s identity during the Basque feast day in March 2016: “We are Basque nationalists” (Noticias de Gipuzkoa 2016). 40% of the EAJ-PNV’s voters hold the same opinion; they identify themselves as Basque only, 32% of the voters think that they are more Basque than Spanish, and 23% consider themselves Basque as much as Spanish. According to *Eusko*

⁵ Naturally, it does not mean that the party’s proclaimed identity (and the identity of a voter) is the crucial matter determining the party’s election results. However, it is one of the issues that can help political parties with their (re)election.

Barometro, there are no EAJ–PNV’s voters identifying themselves as primarily Spanish (Universidad del País Vasco 2016, p. 60).

The Basque Country Unite (EHB), a younger political formation founded in 2012, is a coalition of several left-wing nationalist parties that support the existence of an independent Basque Republic. This political attitude is called *ezker abertzalea*, “nationalist left”, and was also connected with Unity (*Batasuna*) – political party that has been banned since 2003. The attitude of this political formation toward Madrid is much more radical than we can observe in the case of EAJ–PNV. Basque identity, its construction, and the question of the Basque independence were the main issues that EHB chose to tackle before the Basque parliamentary election took place in 2012 (Gómez Fortes – Cabeza Pérez 2013, 499). Bearing that in mind, it is quite unsurprising that 81% of EHB voters identify themselves as Basques only and 13% of them as more Basque than Spanish (Universidad del País Vasco 2016, p. 60).

The Socialist Party of the Basque Country – Basque Country Left (PSE-EE) is a representative of the Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party (*Partido Socialista Obrero Español*, PSOE) which is the oldest political party in Spain. The socialist thought has a long tradition in the Basque Country as well, but this party, or, better yet, a regional affiliate of PSOE, was not established under the name of PSE–EE until 1993. The Basque Country Left was founded during the Spanish transition to democracy and their ideology was very close to Basque nationalism. In the course of time, EE abandoned the thought of Basque nationalism and merged into the Spanish socialist party in the Basque Country. This step was meant to regionalize the PSOE in the Basque Autonomous Community and to transform PSE into a “more Basque” political party (Strmiska 2005, p. 50). However, Basque nationalists take PSE–EE as a political formation projecting its power from Madrid, therefore a Spanish political party, although the PSE–EE’s pursuit of the Spanish-Basque identity has resulted in the party’s attractiveness for the socialist voters who identify themselves as Basques as much as Spaniards (59% of the socialist supporters) and those who consider themselves as Spaniards only (22%) (Universidad del País Vasco 2016, p. 60).

The final relevant member of the Basque Parliament, from 2012 to 2016, was the Basque Peoples’ Party. Even though the origins of PP date back to the Spanish transition to democracy and its preceding party had been associated with **Manuel Fraga**, one of the Francoist ministers, PP did not obtain the current name until 1989. Despite the fact that the party has been a part of the Spanish

government since 1996, they have not been as successful in the Basque Autonomous Community. One of their main characteristics is anti-nationalism. For example, the PP's leader in the Basque parliamentary election in 2012, **Antonio Basagoiti**, was very well known for his anti-nationalist statements. The quantitative content analysis of his Twitter posts showed that more than one third of his tweets contained anti-nationalist comments (Gómez Fortes – Cabeza Pérez 2013, p. 499). That implies the national identity held by the PP's voters: 50% of them consider themselves as Spaniards only, none of them identify themselves as a Basque only, or more Basque than Spanish (Universidad del País Vasco 2016, p. 60).

The political parties' attitude toward national identity can be observed through the analysis of Basque parliamentary elections in 2012 by **Braulio Gómez Fortes** and **Laura Cabeza Pérez** (2013). According to their assessment, EHB and EAJ-PNV represent parties with the strongest Basque nationalist attitude in the Basque Autonomous Community. On the contrary, the PP renounces the nationalist position and is the most centrist party in the region. PSE-EE is not as centrist as PP but, according to this analysis and in this context, the socialists are closer to PP than EAJ-PNV (Gómez Fortes – Cabeza Pérez 2013, p. 503).

2 Two national teams in one region: Basque and Spanish football rivals

Firstly, I have to introduce the Spanish national football team against the backdrop of a multi-national Monarchy of Spain. Spaniards won the European Championship three times: in 1964, 2008, and 2012. They became world champions as well, namely in 2010. Between 2008 and 2012 *La Roja*, as the Spanish team is nicknamed, experienced its best results in history. As **Alejandro Quiroga Fernández de Soto** (2014, p. 232) mentions, the triumphs of the Spanish football team were celebrated in the Basque streets as well.

Of course, some players from Catalonia and the Basque Country were part of that successful Spanish squad too and the European Championship in France in 2016 was no exception. For example, the striker **Aritz Aduriz** and the defender **Mikel San José** are Basque footballers who play for the Basque team Athletic Club from Bilbao. This club is world famous because of its policy of

letting only Basques play for the club.⁶ Both of them play traditional friendly matches under the Basque national team called *Euskal Selekzioa*⁷, even though the Basque football federation is not a member of UEFA or FIFA (given that the Basque Country is not a member country of the United Nations) and thus cannot compete officially in European or World Championships. This rule has been in effect since 2001 and it relates only to new UEFA members (Gómez 2007, p. 196).⁸ The effort to officialise *Euskal Selekzioa* is typical for nationalists and for Basque nationalist political formations. For example, the Basque Nationalist Party (EAJ–PNV) mentioned this demand in its programme for the 2012 Basque parliamentary elections (EAJ–PNV 2012, p. 220).

Let us now more closely examine the situation in the Basque Autonomous Community with respect to national identities and football, probably the most popular sport in the region. There is a clash of national identities on the imagined axis between the “Basques” and the “Spaniards” and it represents an issue for all main political parties in the region as well. Furthermore, there are two national football teams. On the one side, a Spanish team can play officially, has been very successful in this era and some Basques are part of it, too. On the other side, the Basque football force can only play friendly matches and cannot participate in European or World Championships.

3 The 2016 European Football Championship in the “Twitter discourse” of nationalists, socialists and the People’s Party

As I mentioned above, one of the most popular social media networks is Twitter. All the relevant political parties in the Basque Autonomous Community use it for communication with the public; however, we are able to observe differences among them. One of them is the number of Twitter followers. In this regard, the most popular political parties in the Basque Country are EHB with more than 44 500 followers, EAJ–PNV being next with 16 800. PSE–EE and

⁶ Many publications focus on that specific policy of the Athletic Club. For example, see an insightful study of Basque football fandom by **Mariann Vaczi** (2015) or journal articles by **Juan Carlos Castillo** (2007, 2008) or **Mark Groves** (2011).

⁷ For more information about *Euskal Selekzioa* and Basque nationalism, see (Zákravský 2016, 2017).

⁸ Kosovo became a member of UEFA and FIFA in 2016 but it is not a member of the UN. This decision did not correspond with the statutes of these organisations and so there a discussion has been initiated about possibly changing them. Clearly, Spain does not support Kosovo’s membership.

PP, Spanish political parties, do not have as many followers in the Basque Country and the posts on their Twitter accounts receive only around 4 000 or 5 000 readers. This disproportionality might be influenced by the fact that these political parties are only regional affiliates of their Madrid parent parties and do not use their own Twitter accounts, so their Basque supporters cannot follow them directly. The differences among these political parties can be observed through their activities on Twitter as well. During the research period from 10th June to 10th July, the most active political party was EHB with 1490 tweets. EAJ–PNV came second with 1026 tweets, followed by PSE–EE with 974 and finally by PP with 777 tweets. All of them commented on the 2016 European Championship during that time, however, each of these political parties approached this sporting event in a different way. This contrast is the subject of my further analysis.

The nationalist EAJ–PNV paid special attention to the European Football Championship. The oldest Basque nationalist party mentioned Euro 2016 or related issues 24 times in that period; more than 2% of all its tweets were connected with this football tournament and associated topics. References to football were made mainly by **Aitor Esteban**, the party's leader for the election to the Spanish Congress of Deputies in July 2016, and by **Andoni Ortuzar**, the president of EAJ–PNV. The first EAJ–PNV's tweet pertaining to Euro 2016 was the quotation of **Aitor Esteban** who said: "What we want is to be like Wales and play against Spain" (EAJ–PNV 2016c) after having claimed the existence of the official Basque national football team in a short video (EAJ–PNV 2016c). Apart from that, **Esteban** mentioned the match between Wales and England as a comparable case numerous times during the group stage of the football tournament, for example see (EAJ–PNV 2016b). For the Basques, the symbolic value of this football game was based on the fact that Wales played against England⁹, both non-members of the United Nations, yet members of UEFA and FIFA. We may then observe, as nationalists do, a parallel with a possible football clash between the Basques and Spain, which is the reason for invoking the England versus Wales match in the first place. Another way in which **Aitor Esteban** took advantage of Euro 2016 (three times, to be more specific) was connected with the call for *Euskal Selekzioa* being able to play its matches

⁹ It is necessary to keep in mind that Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland dispose of their own parliaments while England does not have any and its interests are defended in the Parliament of the Kingdom of Great Britain. In this context, England is considered as a representative of London and the British government.

officially. He remains adamant that making the Basque national team official is “an issue of a political will” and not the “question of law” (EAJ–PNV 2016d). Esteban supported his proclamation by dressing himself in the Basque national football jersey, much like his party’s colleagues standing behind him in the jerseys of all Basque football teams playing in the first Spanish league.

In fact, **Andoni Ortuzar** posted a tweet (or was cited or retweeted) regarding this matter on the official EAJ–PNV’s Twitter feed nine times. In **Ortuzar**’s video message, he proposed a question: “Why can Wales display its national jersey in the European Championship and the Basque Country cannot?” (Andoni Ortuzar 2016). In the next video published by EAJ–PNV **Ortuzar** who, showing the Basque national football team jersey under his sweatshirt, declared that *Euskal Selekzioa* cannot play official matches due to the veto from the authority of the Spanish monarchy (EAJ–PNV 2016e) and “not because it is banned by the Spanish Constitution” (EAJ–PNV 2016g). The president of EAJ–PNV also complained that the case of Euro 2016 resembles that year’s Eurovision Song Contest in Sweden, where initially the Basque flag was banned along with the flags of Kosovo, Palestine, the Donetsk People’s Republic, or the Islamic State etc. **Ortuzar** stated that the organisers “shut out” Basque Country and only the “*La Roja* can play” (EAJ–PNV 2016f; italics added).

EAJ–PNV indirectly defended its Basqueness and naturally stood in opposition to the Spanish identity at the same time. The first tweet was posted by **Joseba Agirretxea**, a candidate to the Congress of Deputies of Spain, who criticised the Podemos by saying that this leftist political party demands that people have the right to decide, but simultaneously “is wearing the Spanish national jersey” (EAJ–PNV Gipuzkoa 2016). We may deduce that Podemos seeks to change matters, but not the position of the Basque Country in the Spanish monarchy. **Agirretxea** may have referred to the interview with a secretary general of Podemos Pablo Iglesias from the same day, who said that when discussing possible Catalan participation in the European Championship, he “likes to see Spain more [...]” in the European Football Championship (El Mundo 2016). Another criticism towards politicians in the Basque Country identifying themselves as Spaniards came from **Koldo Mediavilla**. This member of EAJ–PNV criticised PP’s request for large screens to be installed in the Getxo city hall for broadcasting possible Euro 2016 semi-final and final matches of the Spanish team (EAJ–PNV 2016h). Actually, it would not have materialized anyway given that Spain failed to pass through the round of sixteen after losing a game against Italy.

The last tweet, a cartoon (EAJ-PNV 2016a), symbolically summarized EAJ-PNV's usage of Euro 2016 in the context of politics and national identity. It portrays four representatives of EAJ-PNV – the president of the party **Antoni Ortuzar**, the *lehendakari* **Iñigo Urkullu**, the head of the party in Biscay **Itxaso Atutxa**, and **Aitor Esteban** as a goalkeeper. All of them, dressed in green Basque national team jerseys, are trying to prevent Spain from scoring a goal (with a ball symbolizing centralism). Their opponent, Spain, represented by the leaders of PP, PSOE, Podemos and Ciudadanos, does not seem to be a compact team. In my opinion, this cartoon brilliantly captures the entire Basque nationalist campaign. We can interpret it in a way that would ascribe EAJ-PNV successful protection of the interests of the Basques – one such interest being the existence of an official *Euskal Selekzioa* – against the Spanish and also centrist political parties. Nationalists openly capitalized on the European Championship and the topic connected with it as a tool for mobilizing and rallying their Basque voters and supporters.

Another relevant nationalist formation in the Basque Country is the left-nationalist political coalition EHB that tweeted about Euro 2016 as well. They posted the first related tweet on the first day of the tournament: “Euro 2016 begins today [and] we will work to make it the last championship without the Basque national team” (EH Bildu 2016c) and accompanied it with a photo taken during the football match between *Euskal Selekzioa* and Catalonia from 2014.¹⁰ In the context of Wales versus England match held on 16th June, these nationalists pointed out the existence of the officially unrecognized Basque national football team (EH Bildu 2016e). On the next day, a match between Spain and Turkey was played and the EHB nationalists tweeted that they “[...] would like to see [a match] between the Basque Country and Kurdistan in the World Cup” (EH Bildu 2016d). These tweets were posted in Basque and Spanish as well. They retweeted information from the local party affiliate seated in Bilbao's district Santurtzi that it would hold a discussion about officialising the Basque sports team (EH Bildu Santurtzi 2016). As I mentioned above, the call for recognition of the Basque national football team in international organizations is a regular demand of Basque nationalists. This information corresponds with one of the conclusions of **Jorge Tuñón** and **Elisa Brey**. They analysed sociological research from 2007 and presumed that all voters of the

¹⁰ EHB posted the same tweet in Basque and Spanish as well - the same text for three times in different languages.

Basque Solidarity (*Eusko Alkartasuna*, EA), who are now a part of the political coalition EHB, supported the existence of the Basque, Catalan, and Galician sports representations that could compete officially (Tuñón – Brey 2012, p. 20). This coincides with the fact that the political coalition EHB strictly declared itself a Basque political formation and seized football events and Euro 2016 as an opportunity for promoting its national identity¹¹ too.

Interestingly enough, EHB spoke more about the success of the football club Osasuna Pamplona that just returned to the first Spanish league, than about Euro 2016; see for example (EHB 2016b). However, EHB did not just comment on Euro 2016, but also paid attention to other sporting events.

On the other hand, PP (not only in the Basque Autonomous Community) renounces Basque nationalist thinking unequivocally. This could be observed on the official Twitter account of the Basque regional affiliate of PP during the European Championship in football as well. PP posted tweets that had some connection with Euro for six times but all of them on 13th June, the day when the Spanish football team played its first match in the tournament against the Czech Republic. This political party tweeted that they – the people from “the northern nook” – are ready, and they used a hashtag “Vamos España” that translates as “Let’s go, Spain” (PP Vasco 2016). The Basque affiliate of PP subsequently retweeted two **Mariano Rajoy**’s tweets about that match with the same hashtag (see Mariano Rajoy Brey 2016a, 2016b), tweets from a president of PP in the province of Álava (Javier De Andrés 2016) and a president of it in the province of Gipuzkoa (Borja Sémpere 2016) that supported the Spanish football team with the same hashtag. The last tweet retweeted by PP was **Jesus Isasi**’s message that he and other members of his political party in the Basque Country with its young wing watched the match between Spain and the Czech Republic together (Jesus Isasi 2016). It means that PP openly declared their Spanish national identity during the European Football Championship and they did not mention any link to a possible Basqueness of the party. This observation goes hand in hand with the identification of PP’s voters in the Basque Autonomous Community, because most of them put emphasis on their Spanish identity than on identifying with the Basques.

¹¹ It should be mentioned that in just one tweet connected with Euro did EHB not refer to their “national” identity. Workers’ strikes took place during the Euro 2016 in France and **Oskar Matute**, the leader of EHB’s candidates in Biscay for the Spanish General Election in July 2016, was cited on the official Twitter feed of the party that he supported the workers in the street during the football tournament in France (EH Bildu 2016a).

Socialists paid negligible attention to Euro 2016. They mentioned this popular sporting event just once. It means that PSE–EE referred to this football tournament only in 0.1% of its tweets. The only allusion came on the second day of the European tournament, however not by wishing a good luck to the Spanish football team, or calling for making the Basque football representation official. PSE–EE made a note about the European Championship in the context of the visit of the PSOE president Pedro Sánchez who met with the leaders of the Basque socialists **Idoia Mendia** and **Patxi López**, the *ex-lehendakari* and the president of the Congress of Deputies at that time. The socialists tweeted that “the best line-up at Euro 2016 is not in Paris; it is in the Basque Country” (PSE–EE Euskadi 2016). One may reasonably assume that Basque socialists did not use this football competition in the context of their national identity, but rather turned it into a pun. The reason why PSE–EE did not post some tweets about Euro 2016 in relation to party national identity can be found in their dual identity. As I mentioned above, most socialist voters in the Basque Autonomous Community identify themselves as Spaniards as much as Basques and so the references to the Spanish football team or Basque football representation that cannot participate in France would undoubtedly annoy some of their supporters. PSE–EE seeks to present itself as both Spanish and Basque political party and this very attitude influences its position on this symbolic but also sensitive topic.

A summary of the way the political parties from the Basque Autonomous Community informed about Euro 2016 via their Twitter account is apparent in the table below.

Table 1: A summary of the way the political parties from the Basque Autonomous Community informed about Euro 2016 via Twitter (from 10th June to 10th July 2016)

Political party	Number of (re)tweets	Number of tweets connected with Euro 2016	Percentage of tweets connected with Euro 2016	The main characteristic of the tweets connected with Euro 2016
EAJ-PNV	1026	24	2.3%	Open support of the officialisation of <i>Euskal Selekzioa</i> , criticism of Spanish authorities and the use of a football relation between Wales and England as a model for Basque-Spanish relations
EHB	1490	9	0.6%	Open support to the officialisation of <i>Euskal Selekzioa</i>
PP	777	6	0.8%	Open support to the Spanish football team at Euro 2016
PSE-EE	974	1	0.1%	No reference to national identity through a tweet connected with Euro 2016

Source: Author, the information based on the official Twitter accounts of the political parties.

Conclusion

Here it would be plausible to return to the question I asked in the preface of this article: How did the relevant political parties of the Basque Autonomous Community use Twitter to inform about the UEFA European Championship in the context of their own national identities?

Obviously, every party operates with this issue in a different manner. However, I am not looking for an easy or elusive answer, but rather to be more specific and provide greater insight. Nationalist parties, meaning EAJ-PNV and EHB, mentioned the existence of the unofficial Basque football team that cannot participate in the events organised by UEFA and FIFA, since the Basque football federation is not a member. Mostly, they highlighted the fact that the Basque Country should have the right to participate in Euro 2016, just like the Spaniards. EAJ-PNV mentioned this “football issue” the most, also in the speeches connected with a campaign for the Congress of Deputies elections.

On the contrary, the Basque PP, the regional affiliate of the Spanish PP, openly supported the Spanish football team and referred to its Spanishness this way. This stance was in a total opposition to nationalist thinking. The last relevant political party represented in the Basque Parliament, PSE-EE, posted only one tweet connected with Euro 2016 and it did not refer to their national identity at all. They mentioned the football tournament as a pun that had a relation to the Spanish General Election.

As a way of concluding this paper, I would say that political parties in the Basque Autonomous Community used the reference to this famous sporting event as a tool that could help them construct and restore national feeling in the society. Those nationalist parties that define their national identity in a clear way use sport to refer to the issue of identity more often. The same applies to PP, which remains the most centrist party in the Spanish system and they refer to their Spanish identity in a candid fashion. On the other hand, Basque socialists, who present themselves as the middle-of-the-road option on the imagined axis between the “Basques” and the “Spaniards,” have to be very careful while working with these national references and so they preferred not to comment on the famous sporting event in the context of national identity.

The behaviour of political parties in the Basque Country in the context of the European Football Championship 2016 goes against and, to a large extent, defeats “[...] the common clichés associated with sport that ‘sport and politics should not mix’” (Houlihan 2014, p. 5). Sport and politics are not two autonomous spheres that would stand unaffected by mutual interactions. It is possible to find many examples of politicians exploiting sport for their political gains. The case I selected and explored for the purposes of this study is but one of them.

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