

# Gure Esku Dago and the Right to Decide

Viewpoints, Challenges, and Ways Forward



A report by Scensei and  
The Advanced Consortium on Cooperation, Conflict, and Complexity (AC<sup>4</sup>)  
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Cover photo:

Gure Esku Dago participants form part of a human mosaic supporting Scotland and Catalonia on Zurriola Beach, San Sebastián / Donosti, November 8, 2014.

## About the Authors

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This report was written by Armando Geller, Kristen Rucki, and Joshua Fisher as part of an independent study investigating the reach and effectiveness of the Basque civil society organization Gure Esku Dago. This study included semi-structured interviews, mining and analysis of social media data, and an online survey, and it was developed jointly by Armando Geller, Co-founder and Partner at Scensei, Joshua Fisher, Director of AC<sup>4</sup>, and Kristen Rucki, Coordinator of the Sustainable Human Development Project at AC<sup>4</sup>, in consultation with Gure Esku Dago. Dr. Geller and Ms. Rucki conducted interviews in the Basque Country, and Dr. Geller, Seyed Mohammed Mussavi Rizi, and Maciek Latek of Scensei conducted online data collection and analysis.

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**Executive summary**

Since the end of the Franco government, the Basque Country has witnessed profound economic and political transformations, including the consolidation of a strong civil society. However, the Basque Country faces several emerging challenges, including widening social cleavages around issues of self-determination, the so-called “right to decide.” While there are competing ideas and definitions of self-determination and the right to decide in Basque society, there is widespread acknowledgement that these are important rights and that having direct participatory influence on the structure and function of one’s community is an important value in the Basque collective imagination. This collective imagination, and the central role of the right to decide within it, has spurred civil society organizations, in particular Gure Esku Dago (GED), to work toward realizing the process of self-determination. Notwithstanding such efforts, there continue to be divisions in Basque society over how the right to self-determination and the right to decide can and should be exercised, ranging in scope from broad or informal democratic dialogue to formal political processes such as referenda over the political status of the Basque Country in reference to the Spanish state.

In this context, researchers from Scensei LLC and Columbia University were commissioned by GED to independently study the reach and effectiveness of its programs and work in advancing the democratic process of

self-determination. This was done through a mixed-method approach that consisted of semi-structured interviews and mining and synthesis of social media data. The results of this study show that interviewees perceive GED to emphasize the process of exercising the right to decide, but do not always see it as independent from promoting any specific outcome that may result from the process. GED’s process-oriented, bottom-up approach to encouraging democratic participation is exemplified by its community talks, workshops, and consciousness-raising activities. Because of this, people that were interviewed as part of this research by and large agree that GED contributes to how Basque society thinks about and lives out democracy and, consequentially, how many think about the right to decide and self-determination. In that sense it appears to be fair to state that GED helps to create a positive dialogue.

Importantly, while the research findings indicate some consensus on GED’s positive influence in Basque society, including across political partisan divides, the research also identified differences in the perception of the degree of inclusiveness that GED currently has. This is due both to challenges associated with its limited geographic presence in some regions such as Iparralde and Navarre as well as a perceived close affiliation between some members of GED and the Abertzale Left (AL) writ large. Likewise, many of the interview participants expressed that GED’s political position appears to be ambiguous where clarity

is needed, due perhaps to its process-focused approach.

The synthesis of interview and social media data suggests that GED may be able to multiply its reach and effectiveness by (i) reflecting upon and more clearly articulating its position on several key aspects of the self-determination debate, (ii) prioritizing deep inclusiveness across Basque social and geographic strata, (iii) adopting a goal-oriented approach to programming and messaging, and (iv) ensuring its real and perceived independence from specific political organizations and groups in order to be viewed as more legitimate by a wider Basque public.



Bilbao

## 1. Introduction

The Basque Country<sup>1</sup> has evolved profoundly since the death of Francisco Franco. It has not only developed a modern manufacturing economy marked by innovation, research, and the use of information technology, but it has also witnessed profound social changes exemplified by the historical opportunity to peacefully resolve the contentious Basque history with Spain and take steps toward a process of peaceful conflict resolution. Still, social, economic, and political challenges lie ahead. Tensions have arisen between economically liberal Basques and those drawn toward a society based on alternative norms and values. Likewise, the global economic crisis of the last decade did not leave the Basque Country unscathed: Established firms shut down, raising the unemployment rate to 14.8%<sup>2</sup>, while a political standoff with Spain – and France – over whether the Basques have the right to decide their own future has become more pronounced.

In this context, Gure Esku Dago<sup>3</sup> (GED), a Basque civil society organization, has made socializing the *right to decide* its

agenda.<sup>4</sup> GED commissioned Scensei and Columbia University to conduct this independent study on self-determination as a democratic process in the Basque Country in order to understand its successes and challenges to date in socializing the right to decide. For the research commissioned, GED is interested in answering the following questions:

- 1a. How can self-determination be exercised in the Basque Country?
- 1b. How has GED's work contributed to the socialization of self-determination?
- 2a. Have civil society and political parties collaborated on self-determination?
- 2b. How does the public in the Basque country view such collaboration?

Public discourse on the right to decide in the Basque Country is a fundamentally democratic process. However, it is also a struggle over power in a deeply entrenched societal structure (Euskobarometro 2015; Ansolabehere and Socorro Puy 2015). This struggle unfolds along a number of cleavages, many of which will be touched upon in this study.

Results of the recent municipal elections reflect a changing mood in the Basque Country and throughout Spain. Throughout the state, the influence of

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<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this report the Basque Country comprises Navarre, the Basque Autonomous Community, which includes Álava, Bizkaia and Gipúzkoa, and the French Basque Country.

<sup>2</sup> According to Eustat, 17 April 2015, [tinyurl.com/psdvywv](http://tinyurl.com/psdvywv). Spain's unemployment rate increased slightly in the first quarter of 2015 to 23.8%, according to *The Economist*, "Not doing the job", 24 April 2015, [tinyurl.com/p6dv649](http://tinyurl.com/p6dv649).

<sup>3</sup> Basque for "it is in our hands".

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<sup>4</sup> For a disambiguation of the *right to decide* concept, in particular in demarcation with the concept of self-determination see Section 3.1.



the Spanish right seems to be giving way to a number of minority parties, including the recently formed Podemos<sup>5</sup> as well as Ciudadanos. This situation may require new coalition- building and inter-party cooperation in institutions statewide. In the Basque Country, it may affect new institutional positions around the right to decide. Some of the factors cited by interviewees in this report as contributing to the formation of GED may also have an influence on these various political changes.

In this context of shifting electoral results and new political dynamics, participants interviewed for this study repeatedly expressed a sentiment that the Basque political establishment has not demonstrated the capability to constructively address cleavages in society. Civil society activities such as community-based decision-making and action, on the other hand, play a pervasive role in the Basque Country and have served as mechanisms for mobilizing the Basque people (Aranguren *et al.* 2009; Landeta and Barrutia 2011). For example, elements of Basque civil society supported ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna) against the Franco government when many Spanish and Basques still supported armed resistance. Decades later, Basque civil society, in part organizationally represented by Elkarri and then Lokarri, played a crucial role in convincing ETA to renounce violence (Tejerina 2001;

Whitfield 2014). Similarly, as a myriad of grassroots organizations, the Abertzale Left (AL) is dedicated to providing alternatives to the Spanish system. Other examples include labor unions and cooperatives, both of which factor importantly in the Basque economy (Azevedo and Gitahy 2010; Webb and Cheney 2014).

The advent of GED should therefore be understood in the context of the current climate of frustration with political and government institutions at home, experimentation with political opportunities in Catalonia and Scotland, and the tradition of community-based organization and civil society engagement in the Basque Country.

This report unfolds as follows: In the next section we describe our methodological approach, and we present the data collected in Section 3. We conclude in Section 4 and offer recommendations in Section 5. The Appendix contains the questionnaire used in the interviews.

## 2. Research design

Research on civil society and civil society organizations experienced a veritable revival after the Cold War. Since Tocqueville (1835/40), most scholars have accepted that *societas civilis* (Berman 1997:562) and what is known in political philosophy as *good life* (Walzer 1990) are essential for a

<sup>5</sup> Minder, R. (2015) "Spain's Local Election Results Reshape Political Landscape," *New York Times*, 25 May 2015, p. A8.

healthy democracy.<sup>6</sup> Yet scholars disagree about what civil society entails, and how it interacts with democratic institutions (Foley and Edwards 1996:1; Kumar 2007). As Habermas (1996:366–367) notes, “What is meant by ‘civil society’ today [...] no longer includes the economy as constituted by private law and steered through markets in labor, capital, and commodities. Rather, its institutional core comprises those non-governmental and non-economic connections and voluntary associations that anchor the communication structures of the public sphere in the society component of the lifeworld.”

Far from being categorically beneficial to democracy (Encarnación 2000:10), civil society can pose inherent risks to democracy (von Beyme 1999:3). Only a strong democracy can create a healthy civil society that does not undermine democratic institutions (Berman 1997; Encarnación 2001:54; Walzer 1990:9; Putnam 1994); while democratic institutions also need a healthy civil society (Foley and Edwards 1996:2–6). The impacts of civil society and social movements on democracy depend largely on context (Edelman 2001:309; Foley and Edwards 1996:7–8). The issues of whether civil society functions as a democratization instrument (Edelman 2001:309); creates inclusiveness (Walzer 1990:10); degenerates into another political agent (Foley and Edwards 1996:1), or

constructs new enemies (von Beyme 1999:3) is conditional upon how, when and where political, social, and economic power are leveraged, and by whom.

We investigate how GED mobilizes social discourse by addressing questions 1a–2b with desk study, conversations and semi-structured interviews in the Basque Country, social media data collection and analysis, and an online experiment. In total, we conducted 44 interviews in May 2015 in Bilbao, Gasteiz, Donostia, Iruñea, the municipality of Idiazabal in Goierri (Gipuzkoa) and several sites in Iparralde, France. We were tasked to employ a targeted sampling approach in order to elicit information from participants who are knowledgeable about GED programs and activities. Thus GED nominated a panel of experts that included GED participants, academics, intellectuals and representatives from other institutional and civic sectors including political parties, labor unions, businesses, civil society groups, and the media. Because of this targeted sampling, this report is not intended to be representative of the entire Basque society. Instead our data represents a wide array of perspectives from key informants knowledgeable about GED from across the Basque social and political strata.

To collect data, we followed a semi-structured format, guided by a questionnaire (see Appendix) designed in consultation with GED. Focal interview topics included the exercise of

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<sup>6</sup> Kaldor (2002) discusses the global relevance of these ideas.

self-determination in the Basque Country, perceived impact of GED on Basque public opinion on self-determination, and collaboration between political parties and civil society groups around this theme.

We analyzed themes in the data qualitatively, referencing audio recordings and notes taken during the interviews. In other words, by and large we let the interviews speak for themselves. Common ideas and themes in the data were identified and coded as concepts. Main concepts expressed by interviewees and relationships among them were visualized through concept mapping.

To complement the qualitative analysis, we collected and analyzed social media data by employing the *Social Observer* real-time viewer for English, Spanish, and Basque social media streams on issues related to Basque politics and self-determination. Our viewer then pooled content from posts on major blog platforms such as Wordpress and Blogspot, forums and message boards like Reddit, and link sharing services like Bitly along with video descriptions and comments from YouTube, Dailymotion and Vimeo.<sup>7</sup> Thus we were able to track specific keywords on social media in order to identify individuals and opinion leaders mentioning these keywords, discover other topics and people mentioned in relation to the keywords,

<sup>7</sup> We only considered non-commercial accounts that have made at least one original post on the subject of Basque self-determination.

and ascertain the audiences reached by opinion leaders.

The real-time viewer, including a brief introduction and user guide, is available online at [socialobserver.scensei.ch](http://socialobserver.scensei.ch) and can be accessed using GEDStudy as both username and password.

### 3. What interviewees said

Figures 1 and 2 provide an overview of the concepts mentioned by interviewees, which were coded and visualized as mental maps by us.<sup>8</sup> Colors in Figure 1 denote whether concepts are shared between interviewees with different gender (blue) or are exclusive to one gender (red). Figure 2 presents the same mental map with concepts colored blue if shared by interviewees with different socio-political orientation or red if exclusively “owned” by one group.

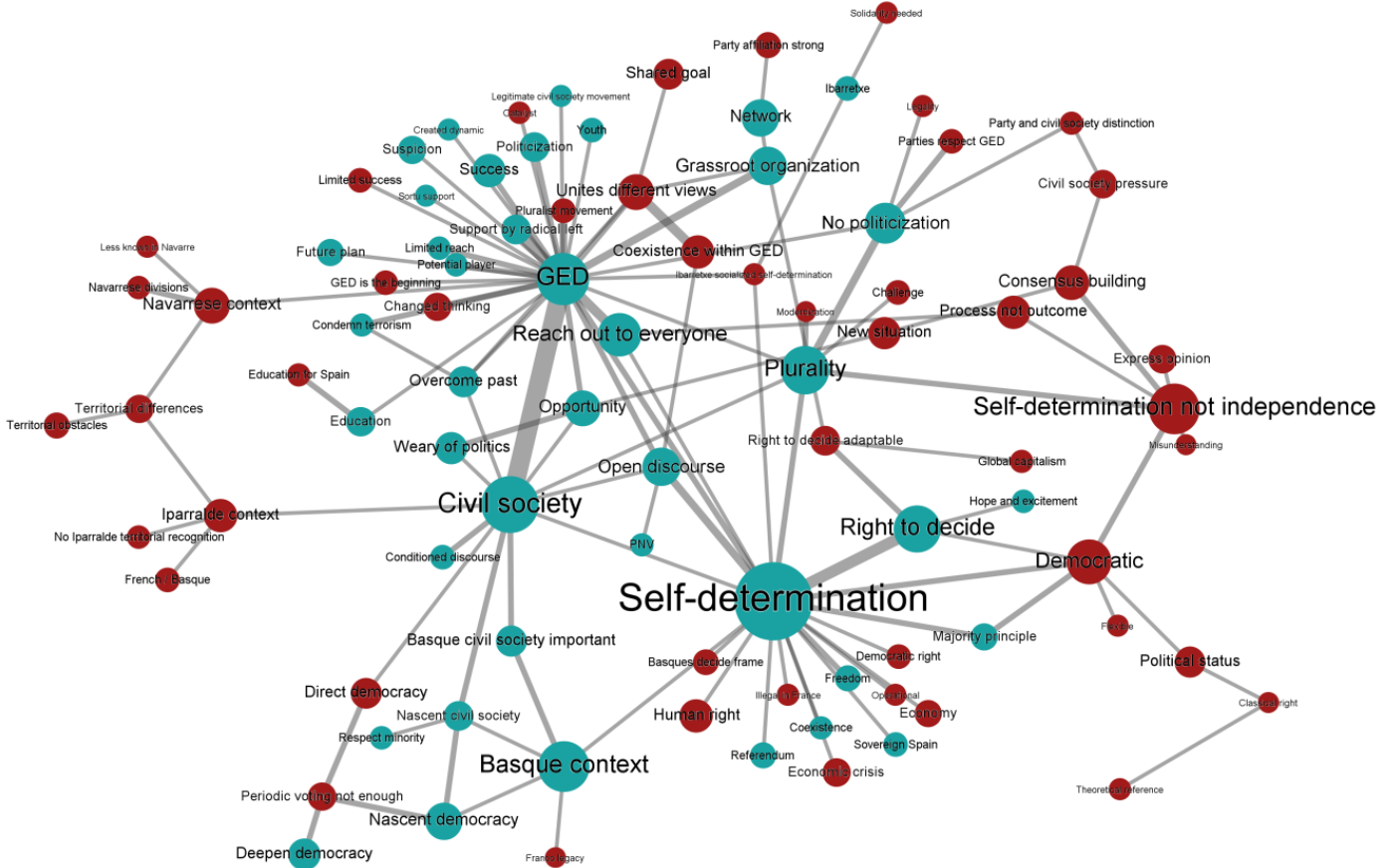
The larger a node is in the network, the more often interviewees mentioned a concept. A concept must have been mentioned by at least two interviewees to be included in the map and belong to a network’s biggest component. Concepts linked to each other were co-mentioned by at least 2 interviewees. The more often they were co-mentioned, the thicker a link.

<sup>8</sup> Visualized here are only the most salient concepts, for purpose of space. The full list of elicited concept can be found on [socialobserver.scensei.ch](http://socialobserver.scensei.ch).

<sup>9</sup> We assigned socio-political orientation using our subjective judgment.



**Figure 2:** Concepts mentioned by interviewees colored by whether a concept is shared between interviewees with different socio-political orientation (blue) or not shared (red).



**3.1 Self-determination in the Basque Country and how to exercise it**

Interviewees are consistent in assessing self-determination as a legitimate right. However, some consider it a democratic right; others a human right, and still others a natural right. The democratic right implies that any legally legitimate issue can be taken to a majority vote. In

contrast, the human right argument implicitly refers to the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights and legally associates with it (UN 1948), and the natural right implies the capability and capacity to effect full decision-making and control “over one’s body,” as described by one interviewee. Some interviewees made use of a historical-natural argument,

describing a Basque ethos of self-determination.<sup>10</sup>

When discussing the exercise of self-determination, interviewees spoke of the complexity of self-determination, along with its legal, political, and cultural implications. While some interviewees used the terms *self-determination* (*autodeterminación*) and the *right to decide* (*derecho a decidir*) interchangeably, others made conceptual and functional distinctions between them. Some see securing and exercising the right to decide as a first step toward the eventual exercise of the more formal right to self-determination: the act of choosing an option related to political status or structure. Some see the right to decide simply as democratic participation, and some see it as self-determination in its processual form. Some use the two terms identically. One interviewee explained that from a democratic perspective, the will of the people can be expressed through majority decisions while still respecting the rights of minorities. This interviewee then saw the right to decide as an evolution of the right to self-determination within the context of democracy.

The right to decide can be directly linked to the exercise of democracy, and several interviewees believe that a more mature, internalized democratic consciousness needs to be raised in the Basque country. Framing the right to

decide as democracy emphasizes what some interviewees consider its deliberate disconnect from predetermined outcomes. As one interviewee said, "*Para mi, el derecho de decidir es democracia [...] en una democracia, el poder está en el pueblo. Es el pueblo que decide su futuro, y la democracia no tiene que ver con una opción política concreta.*" Several interviewees said that making this explicit link to the democratic process serves to expose contradictions in the arguments of those who claim to be against what GED is promoting. Several interviewees implied that recognizing the right itself is simply recognizing democracy.

When asked about what self-determination means to them, interviewees referenced themes ranging from the capacity for individual decision-making to classical rights and international law to the Basque cultural paradigm of *autoeraketak*, or self-establishment. Many discussed the idea that the right to self-determination exists on more than one level in society. The idea that self-determination begins with individual choice and self-actualization as a human was a common theme. As one interview participant defined it, self-determination is "*el poder decidir que somos como país y como personas. No sé que es más importante, como país o como personas.*"

According to various interviewees, having direct participatory influence on the structure and function of one's

<sup>10</sup> See also the short essay by Jon Nikolas Lz. de Ituiño (2015).

community is an important value in the Basque collective imagination, and thus can shape people's conceptions of what the exercise of self-determination entails. The success of social enterprise and cooperative business models and the proliferation of local associations and clubs were given as examples of the importance of self-organization in Basque society. One interviewee mentioned that the traditional socio-political touchstones of *batzarre* (town meetings) and *auzolan* (neighborly duties) play a significant role in the conceptual and practical understanding of self-determination in the Basque Country. Another participant pointed to the historical tradition of small-town *concejos*, in which administrative decisions are made by open assembly, as an example of self-determination in action at a local level. In this case, each town is the political subject that can make collective decisions about its future within the domain of the town. Multiple interviewees from various provinces and regions also stated that putting self-determination into action needs to involve open social dialogue, strengthening coexistence between people with varying identities and ideologies, and/or seeking out points of agreement within society.

Consequentially, interviewees gave different answers about whether the right to decide should be considered an abstract concept or should include specific social, economic, cultural and political issues and responsibilities. Those in favor of the abstract concept want to stress its democratic nature and

the fact that it can be decided. They believe that the right to decide should be valued higher than individual political preferences. Most interviewees, that is, both nationalists and constitutionalists, value the right to decide higher than independence or territorial integrity and are willing to accept it as a democratic mechanism and instrument that can be legitimately exercised. "Any issue can be discussed, as long as it is legal," as one interviewee remarked, referring to the importance of honoring the democratic framework that is in place. For some this leaves open the possible risk of seeing Spanish courts declare the right to decide illegal when it concerns the political status of the Basque Country.

Other modes of exercising self-determination that were mentioned seem to fall within a larger sphere of self-governance: the capacity of Basque people to solve problems and make decisions related to social, economic, and legislative issues pertinent to the Basque Country. Exercising self-determination on this level could include establishing mechanisms for community-based decision-making, having more local control over economic management, or enabling citizens to make other decisions that affect how society is organized. As one interviewee specified, the Basque Country (including Navarre, the Basque Autonomous Community, and the French Basque Country) is an area with a unique socio-economic profile, which results in specific needs that are not reflected in or effectively addressed by

legislation coming from Madrid or Paris. Exercising self-determination involves finding ways to prioritize these needs and thus more effectively and creatively addressing the issues faced in the Basque Country. Of self-determination, this participant said *"lo que nos abre es la puerta a poder hablar de eso, de la necesidad, y la posibilidad de abordar nuestros problemas y nuestras cuestiones."* This viewpoint emphasizes the importance of having the opportunity to manage current and future Basque affairs from within the Basque Country, with input and direction from citizens.

There were divergent responses from interviewees related to the implication that the right to decide includes a decision on the political status of the Basque Country. Interviewees welcoming it associated the right to decide with a betterment of the situation in the Basque Country if decisions can be made without Spanish interference. "We do it better than Spain," said one interviewee. For some the right to decide goes deeper: It is recognition of the Basques as a people who have the right to their own state.

In contrast, those who speak out against the right to decide argue that the Spanish constitution and therefore Spanish democracy entails dedicated instruments to make oneself heard, for example via a referendum. This is an important point, as some interviewees are divided over whether civil society should demand by itself the right to decide or if an existing democratic

instrument should be used. Allegedly a middle ground view held by interviewees is that civil society should play a role, but that Basque institutions should have the final decision-making ability.

If self-determination in the Basque Country is expressed through a change in the nation's political status or an opportunity to re-negotiate its relationship with the Spanish and French states, interviewees stated that it could happen in various ways. In the Spanish Basque Country, these changes could take the form of a modification of the Statute of Autonomy, constitutional reform, a federal or concessional agreement, or separation, among other options. These decisions could be reached through a referendum or general consultation. Many interviewees cited the recent referenda for independence in Scotland and Catalonia and the parliamentary motion in Québec as examples of self-determination operationalized.

What appeared to be clear to most interviewees is that the Basque Country is still in the fledgling stages of conceptualizing the idea of self-determination and continues to grapple with the associated political, social and economic implications of exercising self-determination. As a reference, however, Switzerland was mentioned by a number of interviewees as a good example of a country with longstanding direct democratic traditions. Interviewees lamented lacking socialization of the right to decide and



concluded that people should be democratically educated.

One interviewee said that self-determination should be like a roadmap. The steps marked on this roadmap as well as its destination are currently lacking. Québec was given as an example for how to proceed: A clear question leading to a majority referendum. If secession is decided upon, then the terms of the secession need to be negotiated so that they are acceptable to everyone. An alternative process was mentioned for Iparralde: Self-affirmation, self-organization, and self-determination. Navarre may require a context-specific process too, as many Navarrese do not want to change the democratic framework in which they are currently living. How the question should be brought to the table as long as there is significant disagreement within the Basque Country remains unclear.

Participants also cited conditions that they perceived to be obstacles to exercising self-determination in the Basque Country. Some believe that territorial and identity-based differences hinder this process. Some also cited a prohibitive legal structure in both Spain and France, the constitution of which leaves some autonomy only on the local level (*il existe qu'un peuple*), and a historical legacy of conflict and division throughout the region. Complexities regarding identifying the subject of Basque self-determination were also acknowledged. These limitations are discussed in greater detail in Section 4.

According to many interviewees, civil society and civil society organizations, including GED, can and should play a role in this process of conceptualizing and operationalizing Basque self-determination. Some interviewees specifically emphasized GED's suitability for playing such a role or expressed great hope that it will come to play such a role in the near future. For instance, an understanding of each others' fears will be needed if a way is to be found to live together in plurality. Some interviewees added to the conversation an important Humean element: One's freedom is limited by the freedom of others. Exercising the right to decide should not produce any losers, as one interviewee said, meaning that the right to decide should not impinge on any other rights, nor should it have negative impacts on any individuals or sectors of Basque society. However, the concept of self-determination remains little defined in the Basque Country, and it is not yet apparent how it could be exercised to have this net positive impact. As one interviewee said, maybe now is the moment to stop and think.



San Juan de Gaztelugatxe, Bermeo

### 3.2 Political parties and civil society

When discussing GED specifically, many respondents described its relationship with political parties in an official capacity as respectful. The nationalist parties, the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV) and those from the AL, are generally considered supportive of the organization, although, in the case of PNV, often with reservations. Several interviewees described occasions in which elected officials or political figures showed support for GED or certain actions or activities. In general, GED is much less established in Navarre and in Iparralde than in the Basque Autonomous Community, and its relationship with political parties seems to reflect this. An interviewee mentioned that some political parties in Navarre are reluctant to engage with GED, while others seem interested. Given the differences in Iparralde's socio-political reality and GED's relatively recent presence there,

collaboration with political parties is not a central theme in this arena.

A lack of collaboration and cooperation at an official level among parties themselves was identified as an obstacle to furthering self-determination. As one interviewee noted, *"En vez de solucionar los problemas, lo que han hecho [los politicos] es, de todos los que había antes, han creado uno más, que es la pelea política."* Even parties that officially endorse self-determination may conceptualize the process and the outcome differently. One interviewee described self-determination as part of the long-term vision and ideals of the PNV, to be exercised through self-government and renegotiation of relations with the Spanish state. Meanwhile, this interviewee sees the AL as taking a more tactical approach to self-determination. These parties also differ in their approaches to engagement with civil society organizations. The AL is known to work within a model that puts greater emphasis on engagement with civil society and grassroots groups.

In their assessment of the Basque political and institutional system, interviewees gave an unsurprisingly dichotomous account, albeit interviewees on both sides varied on their assessment of the functionality of the system. Nationalists find it dysfunctional, while constitutionalists find it in general practicable. However, most interviewees acknowledged that the public is tired of political games and

that an autonomous civil society should play a more active role in Basque democracy.

According to many interviewees, people are not happy with how they are currently being represented by political parties. A loss of faith by the public in the political system, political parties, and the political elite in general is a result of this, and parties and politicians need to regain trust. Basque society and public life have become highly politicized over the course of the armed struggle, and politics penetrates many aspects of life. Civil initiatives and movements are often immediately infused by party politics, as are organizations of all *couleur*. However, some interviewees were keen to affirm the political independence of some unions, or community social spaces like *txokos*.

Many interviewees see political parties as operating with their own interest in winning elections in mind. Thus, they see collaboration as a tactic that parties will employ when it serves them. Parties that advocate for self-determination may benefit from citizen mobilization around the issue, but, according to one interviewee, each party also has an interest in leading the effort on its own terms. Meanwhile, Spanish parties like the Popular Party (PP) and the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) must consider how their actions in the Basque Country will affect their standing with the electorate statewide. Some interviewees note that parties may think of collaborating with civil

society groups around self-determination as a risk. Established parties, especially those with more political power, may be uncomfortable with the idea of possibly changing the status quo. One interviewee mentioned that the idea of self-determination, or more specifically the right to decide, has the potential to call into question the very system within which and the processes according to which parties operate with regard to power. Several interviewees named the rapidly advancing Catalanian independence movement, led by civil society, as a potential cautionary tale for Basque political parties.

Civil society was heavily instrumentalized by politics during the years of violent conflict, creating a climate of fear and a less active civil society. During this time some members of civil society organizations were heavily influenced and coopted by political parties and organizations. "They follow political leaders", as one interviewee put it. Many interviewees therefore asked for the education of civil society in order to inspire free dialogue in what some characterized as an underdeveloped democratic climate. This contrasts with the view of some interviewees that the discourse is now softer and that dialogue is happening, unconditioned by violence. Another interviewee stressed the importance of social dialogue, rather than simply political dialogue, around self-determination, and speculated that GED could potentially become a space where this could happen.

According to some interviewees, non-nationalists and nationalists alike, a difficult-to-tackle challenge is GED's owing condemnation of ETA terrorism.<sup>11</sup> Interviewees acknowledged that "many wounds are still open", as one phrased it. All political parties will have to come to terms with this past in one way or the other, but to do so, some respondents expressed that nationalist emotions need to be tempered. Importantly, another interviewee noted that with ETA renouncing violence, civil society can now be more inclusive, as affiliation with the nationalist camp is not immediately seen as an endorsement of violence. Others echoed this sentiment, including an interviewee who mentioned that the kind of inclusiveness and cooperation that was unthinkable just four years ago is now "*posible, necesario, y deseable*". Nevertheless, several interviewees believe that some politicians and the media still perpetuate fear and division by emphasizing old themes of confrontation and terror at the expense of more constructive discourse enabled in part by the peace process.

With some exceptions, none of the interviewees asked explicitly for an overhaul of the party system in the Basque Country – many from the nationalist camp evidently asked for a change of the political system – but some did mention that political parties should rethink how they message to

civil society and how they involve it in the political process. For many interviewees, the latter promised far more interesting prospects, as it is civil society that moves faster than politics, applies pressure to the political system, and should be used to push issues of concern for the public into the political sphere. This is not to be understood as a call for more collaboration between civil society and the political system – to the contrary, some interviewees expressed fear that politics is taking over civil society once again – but a call for more bottom-up influence of civil society in the political domain. In other words, civil society should become a protagonist removed from the influence of political parties and politics. One interviewee made the following cautionary note: "Civil society is like a garden in which the seeds are to be strategically planted."

When asked if there is collaboration between civil society groups and political parties around the issue of self-determination, interviewees' answers varied. Multiple interviewees maintained that, until recently, the issue of Basque self-determination was the domain of political parties. Thus, as some said, they are accustomed to leading efforts around this issue and may not be as willing to cede the power necessary to effectively and genuinely collaborate with civil society groups. Because some Basque parties formally state self-determination among their principles, some interviewees said that the Basque public believes that they are collaborative around this issue. One

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<sup>11</sup> There is rumor that GED is "looking forward" to such a step.

interviewee cited the parliamentary commission for self-governance as an area in which citizens' viewpoints, as well as representatives from across the political spectrum, should be more central. Some interviewees see more collaboration between parties and less explicitly "political" groups, such as those that address racism, violence against women, and other social issues, than groups that work around the right to decide.

Multiple interviewees spoke about the vital importance of civil society in Basque society as a whole. Interviewees attributed many aspects of current Basque society, including cooperative businesses, labor unions, *ikastolas*, infrastructure for linguistic and cultural recovery, and, to an extent, current aspects of political agendas, to efforts that were led in large part by civil society.

However, civil society movements in the Basque Country have historically been co-opted by political parties, as many interviewees pointed out. Now they should act as a countervailing force to the political establishment. One interviewee mentioned that currently there is an institutional hegemony consisting of PNV and Bildu. Because civil society is still weak and cannot organize entirely from the bottom up, although it would be ideal, many interviewees are of the opinion that it is the role of civil society movements to organize people. A mobilized society is always necessary, they reason, as it has

motives distinct from a political rationale.

Amidst the debate over fault lines commonly present in the public discourse, the complex heterogeneity of Basque society can often be overlooked. An important point made by many interviewees, particularly those from Navarre and Iparralde, is that there are at least three identities that share some cultural Basqueness, all of which are relevant to the discussion of Basque civil society and self-determination: the Basques from the three provinces of Bizkaia, Gipuzkoa and Álava; Basques from Navarre who may consider themselves Navarrese first, and French Basques from the Northern Basque Country. If we include those Spanish who nevertheless feel at home in the Basque Country, not to mention other immigrants to the Basque Country, Basque sociological realities become increasingly diverse. In Iparralde, for example, several interviewees explained that civil society is not mobilized. In general, the civil society organizations in Iparralde have been organized around goals unique to the region: namely, territorial and institutional recognition and visibility.

One interviewee gave the example that in Navarre, there exists a political subject that wants to decide its future but considers itself Navarrese first and only then Basque. Another interviewee asserted that regarding the right to decide in Navarre, only Navarrese society, made up of multiple identities, is the political subject that can exercise

this right. The lowest common denominator that unites Basques, as some interviewees pointed out, is not political or economic but cultural. For many, there is a Basque cultural identity, but not a Basque political identity. In fact, in Iparralde there appears at the moment less urgency to form a Basque political identity. If acknowledged, it may be in this atmosphere of plurality that civil society could actually work, as one interviewee hopefully expressed.

Interviewees also mentioned that, while they led the way in the movement for linguistic and cultural recovery, civil society groups have been less involved in the movement for self-determination. While activism around this theme was dynamic and lively following the death of Franco, it slowed in the years that followed. The newly established democratic government structure, as well as ETA's long campaign of nationalist violence, made self-determination the domain of politicians for decades. Nevertheless, civil society groups continued to be vital to Basque society and were cited as instrumental in the Basque peace process. Today, many interviewees see civil society as key to advancing the goal of self-determination. Some cited civil society groups as more pluralist, more willing to move past old models of division and confrontation, and better able to overcome identity-based and political separations that parties have been unable to surpass. Nevertheless, interviewees also made it clear that self-determination is a goal that ultimately

must involve elected officials, politicians, and political decisions as well.

Some interviewees stated that collaboration between GED and political parties occurs through what one interviewee called an invisible link: GED participants who are also active members of political parties and coalitions, including Bildu, and also PNV and PSOE. One interviewee stated that membership in GED helps to normalize relations between members of the bases of the two major political forces, which tend to struggle for political hegemony at the official level. Some thought that this bottom-up, unofficial relationship was easier and more preferable, and some suggested that GED should make more of an effort to reach out to those who form party bases. As one interviewee stated, too much direct involvement from official political parties can be demotivating for members of civil society groups. Some interviewees expressed that society is disillusioned with political parties, but others also mentioned the continued importance of party affiliations and endorsements for many in the Basque Country.

Above all, interviewees expressed that there is a need for both political parties and civil society groups in the Basque Country. Additionally, all sectors need to maintain autonomy, transparency, and clearly defined roles and boundaries. For collaboration to be effective, parties should not try to manipulate, control, or lead civil society

groups, and they should make an effort to listen to civil society groups and create avenues for participation. Meanwhile, civil society groups should understand their role as a “motor” to influence the decisions made by political parties. A commitment to an honest, free flow of communication, respect, and autonomy on the part of all sectors was considered essential.



Market in San Sebastián / Donosti

### 3.3 GED: Socializing self-determination

#### 3.3.1 How is GED perceived?

Interviewees mentioned their impressions of public opinion regarding GED. According to many, GED seems to be most widely known for its public actions, which have included the human chain from Durango to Iruñea in June 2014 and the mosaic celebrating Scotland and Catalonia in November 2014. Interviewees indicated that participant turnout for these actions has routinely been higher than expected, and that organizers are often surprised by how many people participate. According to interviewees, the public perceives the group as an effective civil society organization. People seem to be aware of GED’s capacity for social mobilization: those who are familiar with the organization recognize that GED is capable of mobilizing large numbers of people to execute grand, well-coordinated projects. The positive, creative nature of these projects, as well as the organization’s rapid growth, also attracts attention on the part of the public. Several interviewees mentioned that GED is viewed as positively contributing to coexistence and unity in the Basque Country.

Most interviewees intuitively connect the right to decide with civil society and GED. Interviewees do perceive GED as a legitimate civil society organization; however for some this legitimacy stems not from GED *per se*, but instead from

the more essential belief that civil society organizations are important for democracy. Those who see GED as legitimate explicitly for its work characterize it as a key grassroots organization that is politically and organizationally independent and that functions as a catalyst and positive instrument to create a new, pluralist dynamic in Basque society. This may function as an alternative to existing political dynamics, allowing citizens to democratically participate without having to rely on or identify with political parties. As a social umbrella, GED helps to shed light on, address, and solve historical problems. In this narrative, GED offers a new democratic vindication of self-determination. In short, according to some interviewees, GED is the right civil society initiative at the right time for the Basque Country. "It is the second enlightenment for the Basque Country," as one interviewee put it.

GED is a young organization (according to one interviewee, it seems like it was started the day before yesterday) that deals with a deeply ingrained theme that has long been discussed and analyzed in the Basque Country. According to one group of interviewees, however, GED's framework and approach have contributed some new ways to interact with self-determination. These include popularizing the term *derecho a decidir* (right to decide), making an explicit link between the right to decide and the exercise of democracy, and emphasizing society's role as the

protagonist in self-determination. GED is perceived as promoting a view of self-determination that is process-oriented rather than outcome-oriented, and it emphasizes the importance of finding points of agreement and common ground.

One interviewee mentioned that in recent history, civil groups, legal and illegal organizations, and artists and musicians in the Basque Country, while operating at various levels of organization, have all been conscious of self-determination. Interviewees who were more critical of GED point out that it is historically inaccurate for GED to reclaim the discourse on self-determination for themselves, and that instead Lehendakari Juan José Ibarretxe and the PNV started to socialize this discourse in civil society. The same group of interviewees alleged a close relationship between GED, Sortu and the radical left. The pressing question they raised is who stands behind GED.

During interviews, if presented with these claims, supporters of GED among the interviewees rarely dismissed them; only one interviewee dismissed them outright as propaganda. Irrespective of whether these allegations are real or perceived, they represent a challenge acknowledged by supporters and critics of GED alike.

GED supporters tend to praise GED for its successes; the more critical ones counter that GED is still a young movement without a mass base. Supporters like to mention GED in the



same sentence with European independence movements, such as those in Catalonia and Scotland; critics emphasize challenges, such as those regarding political affiliations and leadership.



Bilbao street view

### 3.3.2 What has GED achieved?

Most interviewees, backers, and pundits agreed that GED is changing how Basque society thinks about and lives out democracy and, consequentially, how many think about self-determination. In that sense, GED helps to create a more positive dialogue. Evidence provided by interviewees, however, differs in scope. The most accepted view is that GED has revitalized the discourse by enlarging its space and giving it a positive spin. This has helped other movements and organizations, according to some interviewees, to more effectively convey their messaging. Many also reported that GED works successfully on the village level and in private companies

and organizations. One interviewee, for example, mentioned that thanks to GED, his organization included the right to decide in its bylaws.

As such, GED works against the demise of democracy in the Basque country and promotes a deeper notion of democracy. The result is a “better”, more “problem-solving”-oriented mood in Basque society, as two interviewees put it. The June 2014 “human chain” is a good illustration for the kind of change in mood that GED has brought about.

Several interviewees cited GED’s popularization of the term “right to decide” as a key contribution of the organization. Some mentioned that “self-determination” is often associated with post-colonial independence movements and changes in status at the international legal level. Within the Basque context, some also see self-determination as an overused term tainted by historical circumstances. At the very least, some interviewees claimed that by using “the right to decide”, GED has brought freshness to the discourse. As one interviewee said, “the right to decide” is seen as more colloquial and easier to understand. It is seen as being more widely applicable at the level of individual choices, local decisions, and other, less explicitly political matters. As a less charged term, it may open up space for more productive discourse.

Interviewees tended to also subscribe to the view that GED makes civil society

the protagonist that steers the agenda in a direction that the people want. A number of interviewees emphasized GED's focus on raising consciousness and encouraging people to recognize and claim their own agency and the agency of civil society. Some interviewees believed that its simple, empowering name and message, as well as its participatory, non-hierarchical structure, resonate with people and have encouraged participation at the grassroots level. Interviewees cited the happy, creative, and festive character of GED actions as positive contributions of the organization, and multiple people emphasized GED's capacity to inspire *ilusión* through actions such as the mosaic and the human chain. One interviewee said that GED has brought *dulzura*, or a certain sweetness, to the socialization of self-determination, and another described the movement's form as plastic, pragmatic, and poetic.

Several interviewees mentioned that GED's grassroots structure is a mode of organizing that is familiar to people in the Basque Country. The capacity for community self-organization and mobilization in Basque society has often been expressed through neighborhood events, *ikastola* festivals, cooperative management of property, cultural movements, and local associations and clubs. By using a similar grassroots model, working with established networks of existing community organizations, and growing through face-to-face interaction, GED applies this familiar participatory methodology to a topic that was often considered to

be the territory of politicians and elected officials. Although some think that the organizing structure can be inefficient or believe that there will be an eventual need for a more permanent organizational system, interviewees do highly value GED's non-hierarchical, bottom-up structure.

As an organization, GED emphasizes the process of exercising self-determination, rather than the specific outcome that may result. This process-oriented, bottom-up approach to encouraging democratic participation is exemplified by the community talks, workshops, and consciousness-raising activities described by interviewees. Some mentioned that arriving at lowest common agreements, finding common ground between people of different ideologies, and working together across differences are among the first steps to claiming and exercising the right to decide. People spoke enthusiastically about the opportunities within GED to have discussions with people who are ideologically different, make compromises, and work together around the right to decide, while understanding and accepting that individual group members may still diverge in their long-term visions for Basque self-determination. One interviewee mentioned that due to decades of division between nationalist groups, there were people in his town that he had no relationship with at all. After working together within GED, they not only have begun to greet each other in the street but have also become friends. Within the organization

itself, interviewees describe an inclusive atmosphere in which people can come together to talk, listen, and form cooperative relationships that may not have existed otherwise.

Nevertheless, interviewees were divided in their perceptions of the degree of inclusiveness of GED as a civil society organization. Although many attested to GED cutting across sectors, critics doubted that they are as inclusive in political and social terms as supporters claim. Supporters argued that GED brings together people of different backgrounds and with different party affiliations, including feminists and food sovereignty advocates, and that it unites different viewpoints on self-determination. For supporters, GED is a non-partisan organization that creates common ground and unites different people under one umbrella: Anchoring the right to decide in democratic discourse. This, according to GED supporters, allows them to break historical barriers. However, as discussed below, some critics do not share this narrative.

### *3.3.3 Where has GED not achieved success so far?*

As mentioned previously, the single biggest point of contention regarding the question of GED's success so far is the dispute over inclusiveness. In response to backers, some pundits argued that GED is not interested in a referendum because they cannot obtain a majority. Furthermore they argued that GED has not yet reached all

members and sectors of Basque society, thus its claim to plurality is unfounded. One reason for this lack of plurality is, for pundits, that many in Basque society associate GED with "certain people": They consider GED to be a campaign organized by Sortu or even view GED as tantamount to Sortu. In the words of one interviewee: "I hope it is not again another political party movement."

Another obstacle to reaching the entire population is geographic. Interviewees believed that GED has not been successful in Navarre. One interviewee made the point that GED never asked Navarrese civil society whether it wanted to be part of GED, and another mentioned that many Navarrese felt "invaded" when the human chain arrived in Iruñea. Many in Navarre associate GED's goal of self-determination with independence and suspect non-democratic tendencies within GED.



Bayonne, French Basque Country (Iparralde)

In Iparralde, GED appears to have missed the local social reality and rhythm, according to two interviewees. With self-determination, GED brought up a subject that was never put onto the agenda of Basque politics in Iparralde, alienating both Basque nationalists and Batera, the civil society movement in Iparralde. The idea that GED is trying to adjust to the goals of the people of Iparralde and how best to represent them was nevertheless expressed. What actually is on the agenda in Iparralde is the creation of Basque institutions that are compatible with French law. A call for self-determination would immediately call a reaction by the French state, based on the principle *un seul peuple*.<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, one interviewee mentioned that a new civil society movement emerged in Iparralde that investigates how GED could become more active in Iparralde by spreading its values.

An extreme statement by one interviewee implied that some people think that with the advent of GED the terrorists have won. This is certainly an outlier in our data. But according to a number of interviewees, it does appear that people in Basque society are afraid of yet another civil society organization trying to control the “social organism,” as one interviewee called it.

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<sup>12</sup> It would be beyond the scope of this report to go into the details of what kind of legal means for local self-determination exist in the French constitution.

Similar to the question of how many people GED in fact represents, some critics are questioning its claims to success. They say that GED is simply overpromising what it can achieve – a view not shared by many when it comes to what GED has already done in terms of revitalizing the discourse and deepening the democratic debate.

### 3.3.4 How can GED do better?

Based on the general consensus of GED’s legitimacy as an effective civil society organization, albeit with divisions over the degree of inclusiveness in its programming and reach, we elicited the following recommendations from interviewees on whether and how GED can be more effective in promoting self-determination.

That GED should be less ambiguous in its messaging was the advice given the most. It should reach out to everyone by putting issues on the table and messaging clearly. As one interviewee put it: “What are we talking about? What do we want? What are the problems?” At the heart of this lies how GED positions itself vis-à-vis Sortu and AL and how it plans to deal with some of its historically more radical members. “Carefully” and “strategically”, one interviewee suggested. In line with this cautious approach, GED has adopted an agenda focused on self-determination processes rather than outcomes. However, many interviewees wished that GED’s positions on key issues were clearer. For example, many interviewees expressly stated that GED

should openly condemn ETA and terrorism. It was mentioned that this could lead to greater inclusion of the PNV.

Similarly, prioritizing inclusiveness and taking steps to reach this goal was another common recommendation. Interviewees claim that, barring minor exceptions, those who get involved in GED want to change the status quo. Internally, GED seems to have made some progress in promoting cooperation and coexistence among its members. However, its composition in general is mainly seen as nationalist. Although its pluralist message may appeal to wide sectors of the population, some interviewees stressed that GED needs to take action to further the inclusiveness of the organization. The *lingua franca* of GED is Euskera, but several interviewees suggested that GED should adapt its communication strategy so that non-Euskera speakers can understand and feel comfortable. Others believed that it should be more mindful of the plurality of identities found in the Basque Country, Navarre, and Iparralde, and be more thoughtful about explicitly addressing inclusive coexistence and conflict resolution.

Interviewees do not speak with one voice about the role GED should play in the political arena. Most would like to see GED provide input to the political system as a genuine civil society organization. For example, it should pressure politicians to reach an agreement and be responsive to GED. While doing so, it should be cautious to

not become coopted by political parties. One interviewee mentioned that it should avoid affiliating with political insiders. Another interviewee stressed that GED should take care to distinguish itself from the *galaxia* of AL, which has the tendency to attract civil society groups to its center of gravity. Another interviewee recommended that GED explain its position and conduct pedagogical activities elsewhere in the Spanish state, where this person claims people are often misinformed about the situation in the Basque Country. Indeed, most interviewees encouraged GED to continue its educational agenda to move civil society forward. As one interviewee said, "Make people think about self-determination." Acting as an alternative to political parties should be avoided, said one interviewee. Only one interviewee said that GED should become a well-trained political movement.<sup>13</sup>

GED should become more goal-oriented. It should develop strong leadership and a clear roadmap, says one interviewee. Many, according to one interviewee, do not know what GED's objectives are: Self-determination? Independence? Both? Many therefore suggested asking the question of self-determination in an abstract, policy-free way. Additionally, some interviewees believed that as it stands, the message of GED is too ambiguous. Eventually GED will need to sharpen the message of what it

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<sup>13</sup> That person being from the left, it was likely not a ruse.

represents, which may include elaborating specific actions or processes that constitute the right to decide. Nevertheless, some interviewees also considered it important that GED preserve its popular character.

Some expressed the belief that GED should also focus less on grassroots events and concentrate more on developing an ideological and political profile. With an ironic undertone, one interviewee mentioned that mobilizing people by “sewing” is good, but working across barriers is more important. Having said this, some interviewees rejected the idea that GED is promoting an ideology at all, beyond the exercise of democracy. Many interviewees welcome GED’s grassroots work and believe that the local level is the right level to address the issue of self-determination. Against this background GED’s difficulties in adapting to the local contexts in Navarre and Iparralde are noteworthy.

In addition to recommendations for GED, some interviewees provided an outlook for the organization moving forward. Some think that GED’s task will be increasingly easy with the situation in the Basque Country normalizing. GED would then be able, according to some interviewees, to open up, include everyone, and profoundly change Basque society. Some believe that GED needs more time to grow as an organization.

One interviewee questioned the lifespan of organizations like GED and speculated about changes it may need to make in its messaging and structure to endure and make a lasting impact. Other interviewees were more pessimistic, saying that GED will never be able to reach out to constitutionalists and that the broad public would never buy into its agenda.

#### 4. What the public says

Some interviewees confirmed that the messages behind GED actions are sometimes misconstrued, misjudged, or unknown. People who may be familiar with the human chain, for example, may still not know what it was meant to represent. Several interviewees mentioned that some members of the Basque public believed that the GED human chain was for Basque independence rather than the right to decide. Perhaps this occurred because the Catalan National Assembly (ANC) had organized a human chain for Catalan independence prior to this action. One interviewee mentioned that some people confuse GED with Podemos.

Self-determination is still a charged term in the Basque Country, and interviewees mentioned that some members of the Basque public believe that GED is promoting Basque independence. Some believe that self-determination and the right to decide are euphemisms for independence or tools to be used with the intention of arriving at this specific outcome. These

beliefs may stem from confusion and misinformation, and several interviewees mentioned that face-to-face engagement, discussion, and relationship-building are the best ways to provide people with information about GED.

Enduring mistrust, skepticism, and political division, or stances associated with particular political affiliations, may also contribute to the perception of GED held by some members of the Basque public. Some interviewees reported that many in constitutionalist parties, as well as the Spanish media, often conflate self-determination, the right to decide, and independence. It was also mentioned that often members of the Basque public will look for hidden political agendas or partisan stances in organizations like GED.

GED is less well known and socially entrenched in Navarre and Iparralde, and it is still navigating issues related to identity and territorial reality in these areas. One interviewee mentioned that media coverage of GED had been much less in Navarre than in the Basque Autonomous Community.

Sampling for this research only targeted informants knowledgeable about GED's work, so the data presented above is not representative of Basque public perceptions of the organization. To expand the range of views and sectors represented in this research, we tracked and analyzed social media data relevant to the issues described above. We used the collected social media data to

identify influencers on the theme of Basque self-determination on Twitter and to map how they connect to each other via shared audiences. We also conducted an experimental online survey on Facebook in order to access the Basque public opinion on the right to decide and how well GED advocates for this objective. The results of this survey are presented in the second half of this section.

Between 1 May and 15 June 2015, we collected 27,000 potentially relevant social media messages that triggered one of the keywords mentioned in Table 1. In a single social media post, multiple keywords can occur simultaneously. By counting which keywords frequently occur together, it is possible to create an approximate map of participants in online conversations. Figure 3 presents such a map.

We also identified the top 500 influencers on the subject of Basque self-determination on Twitter and mapped how they connect to each other via shared audiences. We only considered non-commercial accounts that have posted at least one original tweet on the subject of Basque self-determination. Node size depends on the number of followers: the more followers, the larger the size. The strength of a link between two nodes depends on the overlap between their followers. The more followers two nodes share, the stronger the link.<sup>14</sup> A

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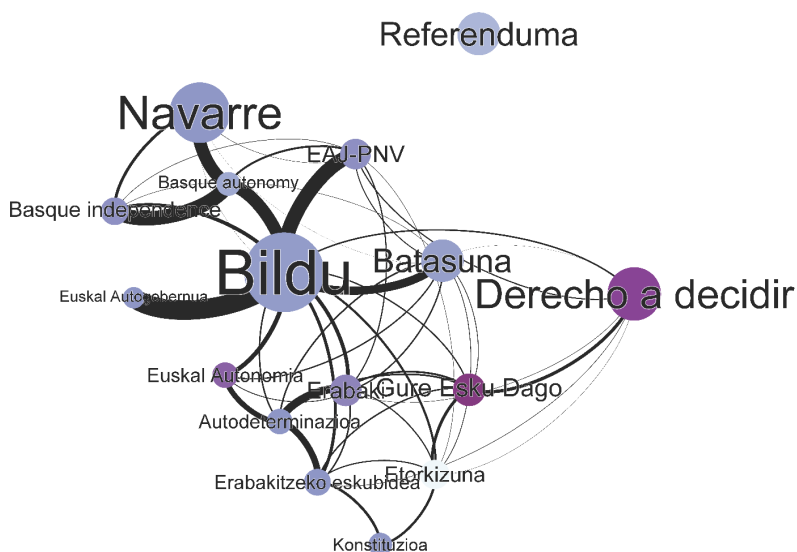
<sup>14</sup> The full network map is available on [socialobserver.scensei.ch](http://socialobserver.scensei.ch).

selection of top Twitter handles is provided in Table 2. The top blog and message board channels frequently

posting relevant content are listed in Table 3.

Keyword	Blogs	Videos	Facebook	Twitter	Total
Bildu	4,900	9	51	7,769	<b>17,756</b>
Navarre			10	4,015	<b>4,041</b>
Derecho a decidir	63			2,249	<b>2,441</b>
Referenduma	457		6	86	<b>984</b>
Batasuna	185	19	2	203	<b>933</b>
GED	23	1	3	139	<b>239</b>
Erabaki	3			140	<b>199</b>
EAJ-PNV	9			44	<b>157</b>
Etorkizuna	10			86	<b>111</b>
Basque independence			11	28	<b>71</b>
Erabakitzeke eskubidea	1			40	<b>53</b>
Euskal Autonomia				3	<b>32</b>
Autodeterminazioa				8	<b>28</b>
Basque autonomy			2	1	<b>11</b>
Konstituzioa				2	<b>9</b>
Euskal Autogobernua	1				<b>1</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>5,658</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>14,813</b>	<b>27,066</b>

**Table 1.** Counts of observed keywords across monitored social media channels.



**Figure 3.** Correlations between monitored keywords. The size of each keyword is proportional to the frequency with which it is found in the social media stream. Two keywords are connected when they are frequently found together in the same social media post or comment.



Handle	Followers
Ehbildu	45,703
Diariovasco	42,863
Jatirado	41,350
Berria	34,971
naiz_info	33,127
andres_cano42	31,740
Trendinaliaes	30,377
Argia	19,713
Eitbeus	19,053
Verdadesofenden	13,895
ehbildu_herriak	13,372
Jpermach	12,756
Eajpvn	12,179
Javiviz	11,584
Pernandobarrena	11,545
Ikerarmentia	11,407
Antifaxismoa	10,782

**Table 2.** A selection of Twitter channels posting at least one relevant tweet daily.

Blogs		Message boards
Most original posts	Most comments	
aberriberri.com	noticiasdenavarra.com	burbuja.info
manulegarreta.wordpress.com	deia.com	areopago.eu
gerindabai.blogspot.com	larazon.es	elkonsultorio.es
borrokagaraia.wordpress.com	reporte24es.info	rosavientos.es
santiagonzalez.wordpress.com	publico.es	
berria.eus	electomania.es	
argia.eus	noticiasdegipuzkoa.com	
zuzeu.eus	diariodenavarra.es	
cursovt.wordpress.com		
kanpezugorria.wordpress.com		
aiete.net		
sustatu.eus		
euskalherriasozialista.blogspot.com		

**Table 3.** A selection of the most active blogs and message boards, based on volume of relevant posts.

Lists of blogs and boards are sorted by volume of relevant comments or posts and contain all sources “worthwhile” monitoring, that is they do not spam or exclusively repost others’ posts.

In addition to surveying the social media environment we conducted an online micro-targeted survey on Facebook to better understand people’s opinions on the right to decide and what they think that other people think.<sup>15</sup> The survey was advertised in Basque on Facebook. Advertising was stopped after the first 100 full responses were received. We used Basque language to control access to the survey, knowing that we would exclude inhabitants of the Basque country who do not speak Basque, but nevertheless identify with being Basque or the Basque issue. Figure 4 shows the Facebook advertisement.



**Figure 4:** Facebook advertisement of Facebook survey with the slogan *Euskal klik egiteki zain* (Basque for “The Basque right to click”).

In the survey we asked the following three questions:

1. Do you think Basques should have the right to decide for themselves?
2. If not, why?
  - Basque Country is already autonomous.  
(*Euskal Herria dagoeneko autonomoa da.*)

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<sup>15</sup> The survey was developed in collaboration with GED. We used the positif.ly app to manage the survey advertising and the reward pool for respondents. You can still take the survey at [tinyurl.com/p7v87mt](https://tinyurl.com/p7v87mt).

- Basque Country is integral part of Spain. (*Euskal Herria Espainiaren zati bat da.*)
- Spain is a democracy and they can already decide for themselves. (*Espainia demokrazia bat da eta dagoeneko beraien kabuz erabaki dezakete.*)
- Basques cannot handle it. (*Euskal herritarrak ezin dute hori kudeatu.*)

3. If yes, which of the following organizations demonstrate the biggest prospect to realize the Basque right to decide for themselves?
  - LAB
  - Bildu
  - ELA
  - Sortu
  - EAJ/PNV
  - GED

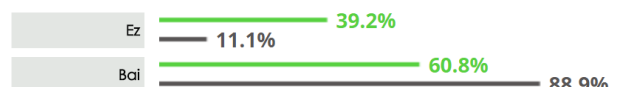
Question 2 (If not, why?) of the survey was asked only if a person responded *Ez* (No) to Question 1 (Do you think Basques should have the right to decide for themselves?). Question 3 was asked only if the person responded *Bai* (Yes) to Question 1.

Figure 5 shows the interface for question 2 as presented to survey respondents.

**Figure 5:** Survey interface for question 2 as seen by survey respondents.

Survey results indicate that only 11.1% of respondents are of the opinion that Basques should have no right to decide, but estimate that 39.2% of the population thinks the same. 88.9% of respondents are of the opinion that Basques in fact should have the right to decide for themselves. However, these 88.9% estimate that only 60.8% of the population think that Basques should have the right to decide for themselves. An interpretation of this result is that respondents *think* that nationalism is not very popular. Another interpretation is that they think about 30% of the population still finds it not socially acceptable to make statements in favor of the right to decide. Yet another interpretation is that they simply reproduce numbers they have heard about in the media. Figure 6 shows these results.

1 Euskal Herritarrok modu librean erabakitzeko eskubidea izan beharko luketela uste duzu?



**Figure 6:** In the Facebook survey 11.1% of respondents are of the opinion that

Basques should not have a right to decide; 88.9% are of the opinion that they should have a right to decide. The 11.1% overpredict that 39.2% have the same opinion as they do; the 88.9% underpredict that 60.8% are of the same opinion.

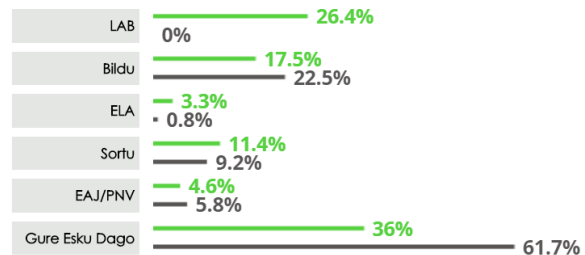
The 11.1% who answered that Basques should not have a right to decide were guided to answer the follow-up question of why (*Zergatik?*) they are of that opinion. 35.8% of the 11.1% think that the Basque Country is already autonomous. However, they predict that no one else is of that very same opinion. 50% of the 11.1% are of the opinion that Spain is already a democracy, while at the same time predicting that only 30.8% population would also be of that opinion.

Interestingly, it is in both cases that people appear to have a poor understanding of what the opinion of assumed likeminded people is. One explanation for this could indeed be that little open civil society discourse exists.

Question 3 was asked only if a person responded *Bai* (Yes) to Question 1. "If yes, which of the following organizations demonstrate the biggest prospect to realize the Basque right to decide for themselves?" Because 88.9% of respondents answered Yes, 88.9% were asked to answer Question 3. Answers to Question 3 indicate (see Figure 7) that none of the respondents is of the opinion that LAB represents the idea of the right to decide, but

estimate that 26.4% of the population believes that LAB does so. Even more interesting, 61.7% of respondents are of the opinion that GED represents the right to decide, but estimate that only 36% of the population is of the same opinion.

3 Ondorengo zein erakunde erakusten du Euskal Herritarron erabakitzeko eskubidearen aldeko erabakitasunik irmoena?



**Figure 7:** Responses to Question 3 of the Facebook survey.

The Facebook survey suggests that GED is underestimating the actual weight it has. In other words, GED is more representative of its own agenda than people believe: Survey respondents are of the opinion that GED represents the idea of the right to decide, but underpredict the number of people in the population who are of the same opinion.

#### 4. Conclusions

A confluence of many factors and conditions has contributed to the formation, impact, and outlook of GED and the character of its message. The end of ETA violence in the Basque Country has opened up space for social

energy to be channeled into constructive and cooperative dialogue. The global economic crisis and the political responses that followed have provoked discussion about political decision-making and economic management in Spain, in the Basque Country, and elsewhere. Meanwhile, recent actions in Scotland and Catalonia have brought issues of self-determination to the attention of the world. In the Basque Country, people's disillusionment with political divisions and a desire by some for more direct representation have led them to seek out new ways of making their voices heard. Together, these paradigm shifts in the Basque Country and worldwide have created conditions for a Basque civil society renaissance around the topic of self-determination in the sense of claiming democratic agency. Some interviewees left no doubt that GED played a role or was even instrumental in this development; others found such a unicausal attribution unfair.

According to the Facebook survey, people appear to have a poor understanding of what the opinion of assumedly like-minded people is. This has implications for the question of the right to decide, for the popularity of GED, and for the degree to which it has already socialized the idea of the right to decide and can develop from a civil society organization into a civil society movement.

GED introduces a valuable level of nuance to the discussion of self-determination in the Basque Country.

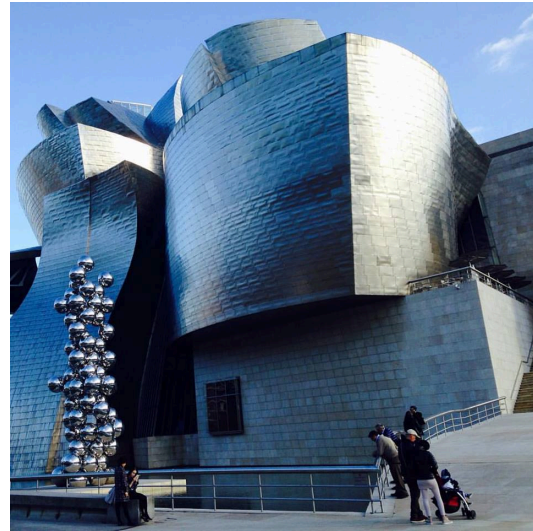
Its vision is process-oriented, flexible, and emphasizes deepening democracy, affirming the agency of individuals and civil society, and strengthening ways to work together. Rather than directing its efforts toward obtaining a specific predetermined outcome that will define the political status and structure of the Basque Country, GED focuses on motivating people to engage with the theme of the right to decide and securing meaningful opportunities for democratic participation. The open-endedness of its goal, with its explicitly uncertain final outcome, may indeed invite pluralist participation. With that said, its ambiguity leaves much room for individual interpretation of the group's objectives, which may also evoke suspicion, confusion, and hesitancy.

Nevertheless, our research indicates that GED is responding to present needs in Basque society. Interviewees of various backgrounds expressed that members of the Basque public are tired of contentious politics and support a more active role for civil society in democracy, a focal objective of GED. Some mentioned that after decades of conflict, people in the Basque Country are ready to embrace issues and themes that unite them. The right to decide likely has the potential to be such a unifying theme. Although many interviewees are declared nationalists and constitutionalists, they value the right to decide higher than independence or territorial integrity, and many are willing to accept it as a democratic mechanism and instrument

that can be legitimately exercised.<sup>16</sup> While its definition needs to be refined and expanded upon, it seems as though plurality, tolerance for divergent opinions, willingness to compromise, and investment in finding points of agreement will be inherent in the acceptance of the right to decide. In order to make this type of broad impact, GED should make an effort to expand its reach beyond the ecosystem of the organization itself and make its ideas about the greater good for Basque society resonate with others. Currently, GED faces several obstacles to doing so, perhaps the most significant of which include its real or perceived closeness to the AL and its disparate impact across the various Basque regions.

Given the challenges that lie ahead of GED, building trust and becoming more inclusive will be critical in order to enhance its legitimacy and expand the reach and effectiveness of its work. Both are directly linked to the Basque Country's conflictive past, overcoming which is ironically now developing as a central theme for GED's future path. This path is poised to be an alternative path, for which the strategic program still needs to be written once the objective has been defined. This requires thorough reflection on what self-determination means, how self-determination functions as a democratic

mechanism, how it can be instrumentalized, and what the limits of self-determination are, all in local Basque contexts and within the framework of the right to decide.



Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao

<sup>16</sup> An open question that begs an answer from a legal point of view is what happens if there is a democratic framework put into existence that expressly prohibits discussions or acts of secession.

## 5. Recommendations

We conclude this report by looking to the future of GED and offering a list of key recommendations that have emerged from our findings. Rather than prescribing a definitive course of action, these recommendations primarily serve to articulate questions for discussion, useful themes for GED to engage with, and potential steps to heighten the organization's effectiveness.

- Interviewees stated that GED is a process-oriented rather than outcome-oriented organization. Thus, GED should emphasize the importance of society's capacity to express opinions and influence decisions in a way that separates the act of deciding from any specific decision itself. Hand in hand with this goes the term *right to decide*, which points to individuals, local decisions, and other, less explicitly political matters. Continuing to reference the right to decide, a less charged and more flexible term than self-determination, may open up space for more productive discourse. GED should deepen and clarify its ideas for operationalizing the right to decide in the context of the Basque Country.
- In general, GED should message its intentions and goals more clearly in order to minimize misunderstanding, confusion, and a lack of information on the part of the public. This may be especially important for large-scale events, the underlying messages of which may be misconstrued or lost. To accomplish this, GED may also benefit from further developing its approach to communication, outreach, and organizational pedagogy. Further research into why certain groups do not share certain concepts as expressed in the interviews would be a valuable effort too.
- GED, acknowledging that discourse around the right to self-determination in the Basque Country takes place in a climate tainted by conflict, should prioritize "sanitizing" its contribution to this discourse by building trust, instead of circumventing it and leaving it to other actors.
- Referencing the examples of Catalonia, Scotland, and Québec is powerful. However, GED should consider the specificities of Basque history and context when making comparisons and apply lessons and examples from elsewhere in a way that takes into account the particular needs, strengths, and challenges present in the current situation in the Basque Country.
- As GED continues to move forward, we recommend that its leadership and members engage in discussion around the following topics:

- Ways in which GED can be made more inclusive, considering the organization's spread, its messaging, how it makes decisions and who these decision makers are, and the issues with which it engages;
  - The differentiated roles, responsibilities, and functions of civil society groups and Basque democratic institutions, and practical ways to foster honest, bi-directional communication, respect, and autonomy between both sectors for effective and genuine collaboration.
  - The nuances of exercising the right to decide as a political subject in the Basque context of multiple identities, geographic differences, and the distinct realities present in different regions and territories.
  - The future structure and functioning of GED, including what may be the eventual need for a more permanent and/or clearly articulated organizational system.
  - The interests of political parties and the opportunities for inter-party collaboration around the right to decide that these may present.
  - The rights of minorities and how this theme fits into GED's mission and the exercise of self-determination in general.
- GED appears to be much more representative of its own agenda than people believe. It should capitalize on this by raising people's awareness.



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## Appendix

### Questionnaire

#### Section 1.a

1. What does self-determination mean to you from a
  - a. Personal/ideal perspective?
  - b. Practical/operational perspective?
2. How can self-determination be exercised in the Basque Country?
3. What role does civil society play in the exercise of self-determination in the Basque Country (referring back to the answer to Q.3)?
4. How has Gure Esko Dago contributed to that?

#### Section 1.b

1. What influence has Gure Esko Dago's work had on the way you understand self-determination and the way it should be exercised?
2. How do you think other people would answer that question?
3. Is self-determination a theme/idea that you encounter or engage with in your daily life? If yes, can you describe how and in what ways you encounter or engage with self-determination?
4. As an organization, do you think Gure Esko Dago has been effective and successful? How could they have been more effective or successful?
5. Do you think others in the Basque Country view Gure Esko Dago as an effective organization?
6. Do you think Gure Esko Dago is furthering the goal of self-determination as you understand it?
7. In your opinion, what should they do to more effectively and successfully advance self-determination?
8. How do you think others would answer this question?

#### Section 2.a

1. Is there collaboration between civil society groups and political parties on the issue of self-determination?
2. Can you describe the types of collaboration that you know of?
3. Is this collaboration effective in advancing self-determination?
4. How do you think collaboration could be made more effective for advancing self-determination?
5. Do you think other people would describe it similarly?

*Section 2.b*

1. Do you think other members of the Basque public think there is collaboration between civil society and political parties?
2. Would members of the Basque public describe such collaboration as effective?

