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Left nationalism in the French Basque Country: From civic opposition to critical participation

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Abstract

Research on territories which have long been subjected to nationalist violence has tended to focus on the most radical manifestations of these struggles and their electoral and institutional consequences. In certain configurations, the involvement of nationalist entrepreneurs in socio-economic initiatives, environmental causes or women's mobilisations reveals a broadening of activism to a larger political scope. This broadening can contribute to diluting or, conversely, reinforcing purely nationalist demands while creating new opportunities for alliances with non-nationalist mobilisations. The French Basque region illustrates such a discussion. Basque nationalist politics has not only taken the form of a political movement but has also constituted a culture of citizen opposition in which the nationalist demand is as much an end as support for other struggles, notably socio-economic ones. The article adopts a socio-historical approach by going back to the main arenas in which Basque nationalism was formed and the struggles that have shaped it. Once having defined the concept of the culture of civic opposition, the article analyses three historical sequences from the 1970s until the 2020s.

KEYWORDS

culture of civic opposition, French Basque Country, left nationalism, social movements, territorial governance

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Research¹ on territories which have long been subjected to nationalist violence has tended to focus on the most radical manifestations of these struggles and their electoral and institutional consequences. More recently, however, research has shown that the spectrum of nationalist mobilisations was broader than political-institutional issues. In certain configurations, the involvement of nationalist entrepreneurs in economic, environmental or feminist causes reveals a broadening of activism to a larger scope than that of ordinary relationships to politics. This broadening can contribute to diluting or, conversely, reinforcing purely nationalist demands while creating new opportunities for alliances with non-nationalist mobilisations. This is particularly true for the left-oriented nationalist and regionalist movements which are concerned by this rapprochement with progressist social movements and parties (Dalle Mulle & Kernalegenn, 2022). This potential proximity also presents some limits, precisely when territorial, institutional and identity-related issues return to the political agenda.

The French Basque region provides a relevant case-study for such a discussion. Less known than its Spanish Basque counterpart, Basque nationalism is deeply rooted in the Basque-speaking area of the French Pyrénées-Atlantiques *département*. The *abertzale*² (Basque nationalist) movement has had a long historical and ideological trajectory, moving from Catholic roots to a more left-wing orientation aspiring to reconcile Marxism with national liberation struggles. In contrast to the Spanish Basque Country, the *abertzale* political spectrum in France is now dominated by its left-wing component (the EH Bai - Euskal Herria Bai coalition³), while the centre-right Basque Nationalist Party (PNB) remains a minority. Left-wing abertzalism has gained electoral support over the past 20 years, turning the *abertzale* formations into pivotal forces in local elections. However, despite this growth, the electoral impact of Basque left-wing nationalism has remained relatively limited, especially in national elections.⁴ Since the 1970s, Basque nationalism has also been traversed by a critical debate on the relationship to the armed struggle led by Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA, “Basque Country and Freedom”), Iparretarrak (“Those of the North”) and their satellite organisations.

In this article, we argue that despite their limited impact on electoral and institutional politics of the French Basque Country, *abertzale* ideas have spread throughout the Basque territory, and sometimes beyond, through a series of socio-economic and civic initiatives undertaken by civil society organisations since the 1970s. These initiatives are to be found in different sectors and are often linked to the social and solidarity economy (SSE): alternative agricultural chambers, short food circuits, associative schools, workers' cooperatives, alternative energy suppliers, local media broadcasting, local currency and savings clubs. This positioning, alongside political and institutional objectives, on socio-economic, cultural and citizen mobilisations, is founded upon linkages with Spanish Basque mobilisations but also with other regionalist and non-regionalist left-wing movements in France. The *abertzale* movement seized this opportunity to open the political spectrum to other spheres of activism: ecology, peasant agriculture, SSE, feminism, minority languages, cross-border cooperation (Itçaina, 2018; Lagrenade, 2018; Poveda, 2020). Since the 1990s–2000s, these *abertzale* mobilisations took part in the very first toward institutional recognition of the territory. Finally, French Basque civil society activists played a decisive role in accompanying and legitimising the disarmament of ETA in 2017 and the associated peace process (Conversi & Espiau, 2019; Zulaika & Murua, 2017).

How can we explain the formation of this left-wing nationalism that combines territorial particularism and universalism, acting today through pacifist channels and carried in large part by civil society organisations? According to our hypothesis, *abertzale* politics has, over the decades, not only taken the form of a political movement but has also constituted, through different processes of politicisation, a *culture of civic opposition* in which the nationalist demand is as much an end as a support for struggles going beyond the Basque cause, notably in the socio-economic and the cultural spheres. In this respect, French Basque nationalism has always been carried on by a cross-sectoral social movement, the politico-electoral dimension being only one of its dimensions. This culture of civic opposition evolved historically from confrontational and highly alternative postures in the 1970–1980s to forms of critical participation in new institutional arenas and public policies since the 2000s.

In order to discuss this argument, we will adopt a genealogical and socio-historical approach by going back to the main arenas in which *abertzalism* was formed, the dynamics and controversies that have shaped it and the individual trajectories that have carried it. In the wake of constructivist approaches to national identity and nationalism, we emphasise the construction and anchoring of national belonging in the contexts of everyday life, and their fluid, situational and processual character (Barth, 1998; Billig, 1995). Yet, as Williams (2019) shows, research faces difficulties in moving beyond a dichotomisation between national identity and nationalism, between the belonging of ordinary citizens and the political framings of their promotion by activists. In her comparison between Basque and Welsh identities, Williams shows the relevance of going beyond this dichotomy to attain a relational vision of the diversity and complexity of regional nationalisms. We complement this perspective with a sociohistorical and multi-dimensional approach to politicisation that considers Basque nationalism as a dynamic cultural process made up of multiple forms of interaction in which different actors nourish the idea of Basque belonging.

The remainder of this article is organised as follows: Section 2 develops our theoretical framework of analysis (the culture of civic opposition) and our methodological design. The next three sections adopt a socio-historical approach to the evolution of the relationship of Basque nationalism to different dimensions of conflictuality through a bottom-up approach along three historical sequences from the 1970s until the 2020s. These sequences have seen the successive sedimentation of three forms of militant hybridisation, with the Basque claim intersecting with other registers of politicisation: the Marxist and anti-colonialist schools of thought (section 3); alter-globalisation, ecology and social economy movements (section 4); and the institutionalised participation of civil society organisations and activists in territorial governance (section 4).

2 | FROM NATIONALISM TO A CULTURE OF CIVIC OPPOSITION: FRAMEWORK OF ANALYSIS AND METHODOLOGICAL DESIGN

2.1 | Theoretical framework: politicisation and culture of civic opposition

In our perspective, the development of left-wing abertzalism, and of nationalisms more generally, is best approached through a historical, cultural and multidimensional approach to politicisation. By doing so, we put to the test the hypothesis that the evolution of *abertzalism*, its expansion into ever more areas of activism, has contributed to the forging, in the French Basque Country, of a culture of civic opposition, i.e., the normalisation of or attachment to postures through which participation in social and civic life has been framed as a means to challenge decisions and actions taken by institutionalised authorities. This questioning led to alternative modes of social, economic and political organisation based on an ethic of civic participation through political dissent.

Politicisation refers here to individual or collective processes through which social actors position themselves on specific issues in various arenas: institutional, media, mobilisations or even the private sphere. Politicisation renders social issues “playable” (Palonen, 2003), and opens up debates over new potential forms of action and solutions (Luhtakallio, 2012). Unlike a restricted approach to politicisation, which considers it to be a matter of actions explicitly formulated in the terms of legitimate and institutionalised politics (Bourdieu, 1977; Converse & Dupeux, 1962), politicisation is also to be found in everyday or discrete forms of action and discourse through which individuals and groups debate, or take a stand on social problems, even without explicit reference to institutional politics (Carrel, 2015; Duchesne & Haegel, 2007). The notion of banal nationalism (Billig, 1995) resonates well with such an approach (Déloye, 2010). The combination of the two approaches is relevant for Basque nationalism, which is a form of politicisation which expresses itself not only in institutional or partisan arenas but also in a priori non-political settings and practices such as work, consumption, education or leisure activities.

Different dimensions are at play in the dynamics of politicisation, from their emergence to their institutional, organisational and individual solidification (Chevallier, 2020; Luhtakallio, 2012; Luhtakallio & Eliasoph, 2014). In this article, we address four dimensions to study the socio-historical evolution of Basque nationalism: institutional

politicisation; rise to generality and social conflictualisation; interpersonal conflictuality and relationship to violence; individual politicisation.

1. *Institutional politicisation*: to analyse electoral behaviour or participation in political organisations, early research mostly emphasised the dimension of familiarity with the categories of legitimate politics through the notions of political sophistication or competence (Bourdieu, 1977; Converse & Dupeux, 1962). In the present article, institutional politicisation will refer to the processes by which issues are taken up through institutional and legitimate channels, i.e., public policy, voting, parties, unions, etc. In the case of the various forms of *abertzale* engagement, the period from the 1960s to the present day shows an important evolution in this respect, with the passage from separatism from the French and Spanish states – outsider strategies – to postures of critical institutional participation in the territorial governance bodies – insider strategies –.
2. *Social conflictualisation*: recent works emphasise the dynamics of politicisation that can emerge in non-institutional, militant but also ordinary practices and discourses, especially through the mechanisms behind the rise in generality and conflictualisation (Chevallier, 2020; Duchesne & Haegel, 2007). In line with pragmatic sociology, the rise in generality refers to the principles of common good and the desingularisation of problems (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1991). Drawing on agonistic politics (Mouffe, 2013), conflictualisation consists in the recognition of lines of division around a problem and in positioning oneself in relation to them (Duchesne & Haegel, 2007). In that sense, the development of *abertzalism* since the 1960s has been characterised by its extension to other struggles that go beyond Basque territory: in favour of the environment, against capitalism, against colonisation, and so on.
3. *Interpersonal conflictuality*: while studying the mechanisms of conflictualisation, some research simultaneously highlights the sensitive dimension of rising conflictuality in situations and the differentiated ways in which people deal with it, depending on their trajectories and motivations (Duchesne & Haegel, 2007). In this article, we define interpersonal conflictuality as the set of postures that collectives and individuals maintain vis-à-vis different forms of sensitive expression of conflictuality, which may be of the physical violence kind or more symbolic confrontation, through discourse or non-violent acts. In his micro-sociology of violence, Collins (2008) puts forward the idea of confrontational tension which emerges in certain forms of physical interaction, fuelled by emotions. There is, thus, a continuum of the dynamics of interactional conflictuality that ranges from a polite expression of disagreement to violent reactions, via the multiple forms of emotional expressions linked to physical confrontation. Echoing Elias (1994) on the civilisation process, politicisation raises the question not only of acceptable forms of conflictuality but also of the ability of individuals and groups to deal with them. In the case of Basque nationalist movements, this dimension of politicisation has long referred to the armed struggle, right up to the recent enshrinement of a non-violent strategy. As we shall see, it also refers to the construction of a culture of debate made possible by the construction of intermediary spaces conducive to collective learning (Dewey, 1954).
4. *Individual politicisation*: politicisation was initially seen in the literature as an individual phenomenon through which certain people learn the codes of electoral and institutional politics, and become and feel competent, which leads them to participate in legitimate forms of participation (voting, parties, unions, etc.) (Bourdieu, 1977; Converse & Dupeux, 1962). Subsequent work has shown the value of extending this approach to other fields, such as the workplace or associations, thus opening the focus up to different types of relationship – from proximity to distance – to institutional politics (Talpin, 2011). In this article, this dimension – which we will only evoke at a remove in order to protect the anonymity of individuals – will be defined by the types of socialisation that, through militant commitments but also professional and family trajectories, have fed and been fed by the collective dynamics of politicisation. In the case of *abertzale* nationalism, we will highlight the diversification of individual politicisations which are no longer summed up by the violent radicalisation of armed struggle militants, but encapsulate a multiplicity of militant and civic trajectories, notably through professionalisation and institutionalisation.

We will approach these dimensions through three socio-political sequences that we consider to be decisive in the evolution of Northern Basque nationalism from civic opposition to critical institutional participation.

2.2 | Sources and research design

In order to untangle this historical skein, the article is based on various fieldwork campaigns conducted by one of its authors, and on the secondary literature relating to the subject. Our empirical evidence has been collected through different qualitative surveys conducted since the late 1990s. These surveys concerned the involvement of different civil society organisations and movements in territorial issues: Catholic social organisations; workers' cooperatives, associations and social economy organisations; farmers' unions; linguistic and cultural associations; and local governance bodies. An initial series of interviews was conducted at the end of the 1990s with the founders of the workers' cooperatives (*Sociétés cooperatives ouvrières de productions*- SCOP) movement of the 1970–1980s. The interviews focused on the motivations of a militant generation then marked by social Catholicism, cooperative doctrines and Basque nationalism. In 2003 and 2004, a second qualitative survey was conducted by Xabier Itçaina, along with Géraldine Guillaud, on 15 SCOPs in the French Basque Country. The survey covered modest-sized companies (between 2 and 78 employees) operating in sectors as diverse as printing, electrical and telephone networks and cabling, horticultural fertilisers, furniture and industrial molding. The interviews focused on perceptions of territorial anchoring and the link between militant and entrepreneurial dimensions. The cross-border dimension of the Basque cooperative movement was highlighted in 2013 by a new survey conducted by Xabier Itçaina, along with Marc Errotabehere, on 24 cross-border SSE projects on Basque language, culture and media, agriculture, health, employment, tourism, gender equality and industry. Interviews focused on the participation of SSE actors in cross-border projects, exploring the role of a shared Basque identity as an impetus (Itçaina, 2018). Specific research was conducted among French Basque farmers' organisations related to small-scale farming and more specifically the ELB (Euskal Herriko Laborarien Batasuna, Union of farmers from the Basque Country) farmers' union and collective farmers' organisations promoting organic, agroecological methods and local food products (Dabas et al. 2023; Itçaina & Gomez, 2015).

Although based on the specific research cited above, the present article offers a socio-historical synthesis of the ideological and political trajectory of the French Basque nationalist movement over the past half-century. Readers wishing to delve deeper into each of the sector case studies should refer to the bibliography provided throughout the text. The remainder of this article develops three socio-historical sequences of this evolution in the French Basque territory. The first period (1970s–1980s) was characterised by the leftist turn of Basque nationalism, which led to the renewal of abertzalism and provided a new impetus to socioeconomic demands, alongside cultural and political ones. The following period (1990s–2000s) was marked by new connections between Basque nationalism, alterglobalisation and ecological movements. From the 2000s onwards, Basque nationalists changed their stance towards a more participative attitude, notably by engaging more pointedly in the new arenas of territorial governance.

3 | THREE SOCIO-HISTORICAL PHASES IN THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE ABERTZALE NATIONALIST MOVEMENT TO A CULTURE OF CIVIC OPPOSITION

3.1 | When Basque nationalism turned left: the anti-colonialist turn and the renewal of abertzale movements

Around the end of the 1960s, the Basque *abertzale* movement experienced an internal shift from Christian-Democratic regionalism to left-wing nationalism. This development corresponded to a significant period of social conflictualisation. The evolution of *Enbata*, a movement of Basque students founded in 1953, incarnated this change, which eventually led to its banning by the French government in 1974. At least three factors were crucial in this left-ist evolution of the *abertzale* movement. The first was the change in the political struggle south of the border. ETA,

founded in 1959, radicalised its actions after 1968, in the context of the hardening of Franco's regime. ETA members sought shelter in the French Basque area, and ideas crossed the border with activists. By the end of the 1960s and the 1970s, ETA's ideas were centered on independence *and* socioeconomic struggles, the compatibility between the two objectives being contained in the formula of the "Basques as a people of workers" (*pueblo trabajador vasco*). This ideological model, while causing splits within ETA (Letamendia, 1994), was influential among French Basque nationalists and accelerated their move away from Christian Democratic centrism. The second factor was the transnational context, which itself had influenced ETA and its supporters. The wave of decolonisation in Third World countries, sometimes through violence as in Algeria, influenced Western regional and national minorities. The latter started framing their own situation as victims of internal colonialism (Lafont, 1967; Hechter, 1998). French regionalist movements entered this framework, and Occitan (Touraine et al., 1981), Breton, Corsican or Basque mobilisations were interpreted as liberation struggles against the French colonial centre. Establishing transnational solidarity between different liberation struggles was also a discursive way to "de-ethnicize" the specific nationalist demands and to relate them to internationalism and decolonisation, then semantically associated with the Left (Giordan, 2015: 60; Kernalegenn, 2018). In some instances, this transnational mutual influence went beyond a mere demonstration effect and resulted in the circulation of repertoires of action and in the activation of transnational solidarity networks.

Third, the shift in the *abertzale* movement was also strongly influenced by the internal debates within the Catholic Church. Following the Vatican II Council (1962–1965) and the rise of Liberation theology in Latin America, internal dissent was more and more audible within the Catholic Church (Pelletier & Schlegel, 2012). In the Basque Country, this stream of contestation concerned the clergy, seminarians as well as lay Catholic associations. Three protests converged: a religious one (against the hierarchical government of the Church), a social one (over the preferential option for the poor) and a political one (around the Basque national question). In some instances such as the Rural Catholic Youth Movement (MRJC, *Mouvement rural de la jeunesse chrétienne*), these internal debates led to challenges to the dominant agricultural unionism. Young activists of the MRJC, along with other activists and notably women farmers, moved closer to the French left-oriented *Paysans-Travailleurs* movement after 1974, and eventually left the majoritarian union FDSEA (*Fédération Syndicale des Exploitants Agricoles*) to create their own union, ELB-Euskal Herriko Laborarien Batasuna (Union of Farmers from the Basque Country), in 1982.

This ideological proximity to left-wing ideas took at least three forms. First, the leftist orientation led to a radicalisation of the political struggle in the Northern Basque Country, with the emergence in the early 1970s of a French Basque armed movement, Iparretarrak (IK, "those of the North"). Framed as both a national and a social liberation struggle, IK distinguished itself from both the old *abertzale* movement, deemed moderate and indifferent to socio-economic issues, and from ETA, due to the specificity of the issues at stake on the French side (Jacob, 1994). Unlike their predecessors, IK's first activists were rooted in the socio-economic realities of the rural hinterland, which also led them to select more radical repertoires of action towards new targets: the state's agencies, but also speculators promoting the tourist economy. IK also took their organisational structure from the two-sided ETA and IRA (Irish Republican Army) model, with a clandestine face as well as a public and legal one (Jacob, 1994). Politicisation through leftist social conflictualisation was then related to political violence, at both organisational and individual levels.

Generations of militants experienced trajectories of violent radicalisation, learning how to get involved in armed struggle and clandestinity. The use of armed combat was the subject of heated debate within the nationalist movement, be it from some of those who doubted its ethical value and political efficiency, or from certain ETA members who wanted to keep the French Basque Country as a safe sanctuary for activists fleeing repression on the Spanish side (Jacob, 1994). Behind the political violence, a diversity of forms of interpersonal conflict developed and confronted each other within the *abertzale* movement (Ahedo, 2005).

Secondly and concerning the cultural and linguistic struggle, the first Basque-speaking immersive schools borrowed their models from the alternative educational models. The *ikastolak* (immersive schools), implemented by the Seaska association after 1969, were inspired by the Freinet innovative pedagogy and based on parents' involvement (Heidemann, 2015).

Thirdly, politicisation through social conflictualisation was also geared towards autonomous and endogenous economic development. The leftist turn gave a new centrality to the economy in the nationalist doctrine, until then focused on cultural and political demands. Local economic development turned into a central issue in the 1970s. In order to provide an alternative to a territorial planning scheme perceived as centered on tourism and the service economy, the *abertzale* movement sought new tools in favour of an endogenous economic development. The ideas of self-management combined with *abertzalismo* and social Catholicism gave birth to worker-run cooperative movements as of 1974 after 1974. In the Spanish Basque Country, the Mondragon cooperative model which, since the 1950s, had integrated production, banking, consumption and education activities (Azkarraga & Cheney, 2019), inspired the French Basque activists. The cooperative system was then perceived as a social, democratic and “Basque way” of organising economic relations (Itçaina, 2018) As expressed by the managing director of a cooperative in the energy network sector founded in the 1980s:

“if the member [of the cooperative], gets a hundred euros, I get a hundred euros too. Bosses from conventional firms don't want that. You have to accept it. You have to be militant. We set up this company to defend local and regional employment. That's our motto. You have to keep the country alive”

(Personal interview, 2004, translated from French).

In the farming sector, the rapprochement between the young activists of the Rural Catholic Action and the French movement of the *Paysans Travailleurs* led to an interpretation by the Basque farmers of their situation through a triple Marxist-*abertzale*-Christian prism. The Catholic Action represented a pre-socialisation to collective action, as expressed by the cofounder of ELB:

“That's how I became a trade unionist. For me it was the same logic. It's true that we changed structure, we were no longer in a movement but in a professional structure. And we became more and more identified with the critical sector.”

(personal interview, 2003, translated from Basque)

The creation of ELB in 1982 articulated demands for small-scale sustainable agriculture and a demand for a specific institutional framework for Basque agriculture. As early as the 1970s, the young people of the MRJC were socialised through multiple meetings, as in Larzac in 1973, when the struggle of the peasants against the extension of a military camp attracted other movements. The creation of ELB followed that of the National Confederation of Peasant Workers' Unions (CNSTP, *Confédération Nationale des Syndicats de Travailleurs Paysans*) at the French national scale in 1981. The CNSTP, together with the FNSP (*Fédération Nationale des Syndicats Paysans*), merged into the left-wing French union *Confédération paysanne* in 1987. ELB took an active part in the latter from its inception. In other words, far from being isolated, as early as the 1970–1980s the distinct socio-economic mobilisations in the Basque Country were fuelled by French and transnational ideas and experiences.

This integration of left-oriented ideas by the *abertzale* movement led to political proximities with French national left-wing organisations and parties in the 1970s. The persistence of the Franco regime in Spain until 1975 incidentally brought together *abertzale* movements but also a wide array of French Left organisations, notably those from the French “second left”. The PSU-*Parti socialiste unifié* party or the CFDT – *Confédération française du travail* union, themselves sensitive to the regionalist issue in France (Kernalegenn et al., 2010), were mobilised on the Basque question at critical junctures, such as the Burgos trial in 1970, or around self-management approaches to the economy. The accession to power of the French Left in 1981 was seen as an opportunity by many regional activists in France. As a Socialist candidate, François Mitterand included the Basque *département* in his 110 pre-election proposals, but the promise remained a dead letter. In the early 1980s, however, French Basque civil society organisations benefited from a more favourable context for some of their expressions given the first embryonic stages of

institutional politicisation. Basque-speaking associative radio stations were set up in 1981–1982 in the wake of the development of free radio channels. The official recognition of the agrarian unions' pluralism in 1981 by Edith Cresson, then Minister of Agriculture, paved the way for the potential reconsideration of the neo-corporatist management of French agriculture, which facilitated the local split between the FDSEA and ELB in 1982.

The openness of the Socialist-led central power towards territorial demands from the Basque Country also had its limits, especially when conflictuality was high. From 1984 onwards, the French government started collaborating with the Spanish one and stopped welcoming “refugees” from the Spanish Basque Country. The GAL (*Groupements Anti-terroristes de Libération*) anti-terrorist squads' attacks on ETA activists or alleged supporters of ETA in the French Basque Country, far from challenging this policy change, ended by legitimising it despite considerable social protest in the Basque Country (Jacob, 1994; Woodworth, 2001).

To sum up, this first sequence (from the end of the 1960s to the early 1990s) was characterised by the rise of different dimensions of politicisation. By relating to other struggles and movements, the *abertzale* movement changed and broadened the definition of what should unite Basques and what they should fight against (the state, imperial capitalism). This left-oriented social conflictualisation turned to diverse social issues such as political autonomy, Basque language and culture, local development, agriculture and cross-border relations. In many instances, these demands echoed some of the aspirations of the non-Basque nationalist left-wing social movements and parties, though their institutional politicisation remained marginal. Interpersonal conflictuality was marked by consistent levels of physical violence, involving several generations of activists. However, mobilisation was also fuelled by other, diverse and more discrete forms of individual politicisation and social movement repertoires and discourses.

3.2 | The rising connections between Basque nationalism, anti-globalisation and ecological movements

From the 1980s onwards, *abertzalismo* was transformed through multiple and hybrid mobilisations. A nebula of companies, associations and cooperatives was created with the aim of developing autonomous structures that could cater to the needs of the territory. This evolution stemmed from encounters with new influences coming from the Southern Basque Country (cooperativism, Basque schools) and the rest of France (anti-globalisation movements, the associative movement, the SSE). In doing so, the *abertzale* activists broadened both their social base and their legitimacy, but nonetheless faced tensions and contradictions. Indeed, professionalisation, institutionalisation and integration into the market economy changed their relationship to conflictuality.

The case of the Seaska federation is enlightening in this regard (Lacroix, 2011). Compared to the other two (public and Catholic) branches of Basque bilingual education systems, Seaska has constantly sought to assert its specificity based on alternative pedagogies, an immersive approach and self-management by parents. Since its foundation, the federation has been marked by internal tensions between conflictuality and cooperation. In the early 1980s, the Seaska board was in favour of negotiating with the French state in order to obtain financial support to pay teachers. At the same time (Lacroix, 2011: 12), *lparretarrak* supporters were becoming influential in the *ikastolak* (Basque immersive schools), which generated heated debates within Seaska regarding its social and institutional politicisation (Jacob, 1994: 224). While the advent of a French national government based upon a left-wing majority in 1981 fostered more institutional openness, the first half of the 1980s was a phase of radicalisation of the movement through actions such as hunger strikes, the occupation of administrative buildings or the stopping of trains. At the same time, Seaska initiated a dialogue with the Ministry of Education and with the Regional Council of Aquitaine. Thanks to these hybrid strategies, the French Ministry of Education granted Seaska its first subsidies in 1983 and proposed to make the funding permanent by integrating teachers into the civil service, something the federation initially refused. In 1985, financial difficulties forced Seaska to lay off teachers and, finally, in 1992, to accept the integration of its teachers into the national education system. As in many social movements that chose to cooperate and participate in public policies (Uitermark & Nicholls, 2014), this integration has since been accompanied by a

professionalisation and a (relative) deconflictualisation of the actions of Seaska's parents. However, Seaska members continued to implement a specific approach, particularly the participative dimension of school board governance as well as their mobilisation capacity at critical junctures (Lagrenade, 2018).

The evolution of *abertzalism's* relation to conflictuality also affected the farming sector. The connection with the *Confédération paysanne* and *Vía Campesina* allowed young farmers close to ELB to continue their work at local, national and transnational scales by integrating the space of alter-globalisation movements in the 2000s while developing their own farming initiatives at the local scale. Regarding this aspect, ELB activists had from the outset included the development of local agriculture as part of a process of building territorial singularity through the creation of a designation of origin for products and the implementation of quality and sustainability approaches (Idoki charter for local farm products, for example). This specificity was also based on the maintenance of small farms while readjusting the traditional models (Itçaina & Gomez, 2015).

This new agricultural community allowed for diffusion of the critical identity approach of ELB while seeking to distance itself from the corporatist model of management that had prevailed before. A “peasant school” was created on a model promoted by the *Confédération paysanne* to train young rural people, not only in the profession, but also in the knowledge of professional matters and institutional structures, and in multiscale activism. Youth structures such as *Gazten aldi* (“Young people's turn”) one of the associations promoting the establishment of young farmers, represented a transition towards the ELB union while paving the way towards an autonomous form of politicisation, exempt from any form of enlistment. Thus, one of the founders of *Gazten Aldi* explained in 2003 the reasons for their mobilisation:

“There was a concern among some of us that we were being picked too soon. When you don't know the trade union world, how can you be thrown into the deep end without having understood anything, without knowing anything about the history of trade unionism. It is not possible, at the age of 18 or 20, to make a choice without having been able to discuss among ourselves the expectations of young people. In addition, we had concerns that were really linked to the setting-up [of young farmers]. “

(personal interview, 2003, translated from Basque)

Far from the centralising tendencies, initiatives such as *Gazten aldi* constituted free spaces (Polletta, 1999) that remained relatively autonomous vis-à-vis the *abertzale* political parties and movement by concentrating on agricultural issues. By putting ELB's politicisation offer to the test of specific interests and by stimulating debate, such initiatives allowed it to widen its social base, to build bridges with different trends and thus to establish its legitimacy. This progression was testified by ELB's score in professional elections. In its beginnings, ELB only achieved its best scores in the elections for the Departmental Chamber of Agriculture in the mountainous cantons of the Basque Country, while the lowlands voted mostly for the FDSEA. The situation changed in 2001 when ELB acquired a slight majority stake among French Basque farmers on the whole. ELB's territorial commitment went beyond agriculture. In 1998, ELB signed the *Bai Euskarari* [“Yes to the Basque language”] agreement aimed at promoting the Basque language. During ETA's truce in 1998–9, ELB also endorsed the Lizarrar-Garazi pact, which demanded recognition by the French and Spanish states of the Basque conflict, the improvement of the situation of political prisoners and the creation of a Basque department in France (Itçaina & Gomez, 2015). *Abertzale* politicisation through social conflictualisation transcended sectoral boundaries.

The evolution of the *abertzale* oppositional culture also came through the development of the SSE. If the movement originated in the workers' cooperatives of the 1970–1980s, it was enlarged to include various SSE experiences in the 2000s: fair trade, microfinance, peasant agriculture, local currency, etc. A multitude of initiatives then aimed not only to promote the development of various SSE sectors but also to federate them and create the infrastructure for their growth with a view to developing the territory. Among these initiatives were the local development association *Hemen* created in 1979, the venture capital company *Herrikoa* founded in 1980 with the aim of becoming a

financial tool for the development of the local and social economy, or the association *Lana* in the early 1980s aiming to promote inter-cooperation on the Mondragon model.

In 2013, several of those actors, including environmental activists, contributed to the creation of a local currency, the *eusko*, through the association Euskal Moneta. In 2018, with the equivalent of one million euros in circulation, this both physical and virtual currency became the first complementary currency in Europe (Fois Duclerc & Lafuente-Sampietro, 2023). In its statutes, Euskal Moneta has set itself objectives that refer both to territorial development and identity and to the defence of broader and universal causes: “relocalization of the economy, defense and promotion of Basque language, strengthening of ecological and solidarity-based practices and of social ties” (art. 2, our translation from French). The currency, an instrument of the capitalist hegemony, was here placed at the service of a socio-political reintegration:

“97% of the exchanges in euros in the world concern the speculative exchange of securities, and not the real economy. The *eusko* is a currency with no interest rate: no need to store *eusko* so that they can be used to multiply! The *eusko* thus favors the use of money for exchanges, and it circulates in the real and local economy only”.⁵

The *eusko* gives citizens a new capacity for democratic expression (Pinos, 2020: 44). Its usage reflects support for certain values and political positions (Bandelj et al., 2017). Users are encouraged to give preference to companies in the *eusko* network through a 5% deduction on all reconversions from *eusko* into euros. The member companies of the network are selected according to their commitment to sustainable and ethical approaches. Through support mechanisms for associations, Euskal Moneta promotes territorial non-profit activities, particularly in the field of the Basque language, SSE and sustainable farming. At a time when the associative world has tended to lose its specificity due to the fall in public funding and the rise of managerial tools (Chevallier, 2022), the *eusko* thus plays the role of a tool for diversifying political and socioeconomic resources. Moreover, the local currency pushed for change in the very ways of conducting public policies (Pinos, 2020). In its early stages, Euskal Moneta depended heavily on public subsidies, notably from municipalities. The support of the latter even went so far as the use of the currency in the framework of local public services such as swimming pools, daycare centres, etc. This commitment of local authorities to economic social movements incidentally tipped them towards a conflict with the state. In 2017, the sub-prefect of Bayonne attacked a deliberation of the municipal council of Bayonne under which the City Hall expressed the wish to use the *eusko* for some of its expenses, a decision which the courts eventually upheld. The *eusko* was thus one of the means of a progressive institutional politicisation of the *abertzale* oppositional culture.

In addition to this example of a local currency, the maturation of the *abertzale* oppositional culture has taken place, more recently, through environmentalist mobilisations. Ecological concerns have been gradually integrated into the Basque nationalist agenda since the 1970s through the idea of peasant agriculture and, later on in the 2000s, the connection with alter-globalisation. More recently ecological issues have formed part of the evolution of *abertzalismo* towards a non-violent strategy combining the promotion of alternatives and civil disobedience. This evolution relates indirectly to the debates about the appropriateness of armed struggle (Ahedo, 2005; Jacob, 1994). At the end of the 1990s, more and more *abertzale* activists considered that the armed struggle was counter-productive. The creation in 2009 (by *abertzale* and non *abertzale* activists) of *Bizil*, an alter-globalisation and environmental movement, then in 2013 of *Alternatiba*, were in fact part of this historical passage from *abertzalismo* to non-violent and multi-scalar activism, especially on environmental and social issues (Milanesi et al., 2022). In response to European and global climate summits (Copenhagen in 2009, COP21 in 2015), *Bizil* initiated counter-summits to both promote alternatives and denounce the lack of regulations and anti-ecological policies. This two-faceted strategy also gave rise to a form of specialisation, with the creation of *Alternatiba*, an organisation that supported the promotion of alternatives at the French scale, notably with the organisation of “*Alternatiba* villages” in Bayonne in 2013 and in other cities. At the time of COP21 in Paris in 2015, *Bizil* contributed to the creation of the association *Action non-violente COP21* (ANVCOP21), whose action was geared towards the strategies of non-violent opposition. This

reflection progressively became central to the *abertzale* organisations culture of opposition, as expressed by the *Bizi!* roadmap for 2020–2024:

“Combining social justice and climate justice, making the link between the local and the global, developing a radical-pragmatic approach, relying on a determined non-violent strategy, marrying denunciations or resistance and proposals and impetus for concrete alternatives, handling in concert the search for effectiveness, inclusiveness, creativity, impertinence, seriousness, awareness and ‘funky’ actions are all elements that make up the ‘Bizi cocktail’”⁶

This “radical-pragmatic” (Poveda, 2020) approach was often linked to the idea of a determined non-violent strategy. This new doctrine was directly related to the dynamics of the disarmament of ETA in 2017–2018 with the involvement of the peace movement known as the *Artisans de la Paix* [“Artisans of peace, peacemakers”]. *Bizi!* was also a driving force in the organisation of several socio-economic mobilisations, among them Euskal Moneta.

In this second phase of development, through Basque teaching initiatives, farmers’ mobilisations, SSE or environmentalist movements, Basque nationalism was enriched by multiple dynamics of politicisation that nurtured a conception of citizenship as a praxis of conflictualisation and of the construction of non-violent means for social transformation. All these experiences tended to embed the social conflictualisation of Basque nationalism into organisational and professional forms. In doing so, oppositional ideas of abertzalism were disseminated across society and were related to ordinary concerns. This tendency was, however, far from being free of ambivalent logic, notably resulting from the cooperation of collectives and individuals with public institutions or from their market involvement. Still, those multiple areas of community-based organisational power progressively enabled Basque nationalists to get involved in generating institutional change.

3.3 | New arenas: Left-Basque nationalist and non-nationalist relations in a changing territorial governance

Interrelations between Leftist movements and parties and Basque Left nationalists also need to be examined from the perspective of the political institutionalisation of the French Basque territory. This process redesigned the institutional rules and provided the strategy of Basque nationalism with new opportunities and constraints. As regards their relation to the French Left, the new institutional context paved the way for potential electoral bargaining and one-off agreements. As regards the Left-oriented component of their own ideology, the accession of many *abertzale* activists to elective offices, especially after the 2014 municipal elections, constituted a test for the implementation of their ideas, this time as policy-makers.

This evolution coincided with the change brought by territorial institutionalisation in the French Basque Country since the early 1990s. This institutionalisation took the form of a participatory and prospective approach to local development, involving state representatives, locally elected officials and civil society organisations. Against all expectations, this process was initiated in the late 1980s by the state via a sub-prefect geared towards local development (Chaussier, 1996). The new institutional design that would eventually emerge from these deliberative spaces was to be based on a compromise between *abertzale* and non-*abertzale* leaders and organisations.

This process led to the creation of new multiple-stakeholder bodies: the Basque Cultural Institute in 1990, the Basque Country Development Council in 1994 and the Council of Basque Country Elected Representatives in 1995. In 1997, the Basque Country was recognised as a *pays* within the meaning of the 1995 Pasqua law on territorial planning, in other words, a territory with a longstanding identity and traditions whose inhabitants share common geographical, economic, cultural or social interests. The work of the aforementioned institutions led to the first Development Agreement with the state in 1997 and to a Specific Agreement for the 2001–2006 period in 2000. The process was repeated in 2005 with a new planning initiative, *Pays Basque 2020*, which led to a new development

contract in 2008. A new policy community (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007) was thus formed around the drive for territorial development. At the French scale, the Voynet law on regional planning and sustainable development of 1999 was inspired by the Basque experience in generalising to all *pays* mechanisms and bodies, such as the Development Councils. This silent process of territorial institutionalisation continued well after its early stages. In the cultural sector, social pressure made it necessary for language policy to become autonomous from cultural policy. In 2005, the Public Office for the Basque Language was inaugurated and became responsible for Basque language policy. In the wake of the new wave of French decentralisation and in application of the NOTRe Law (*Nouvelle Organisation Territoriale de la République*, “New territorial organization of the Republic”), 70% of Basque municipalities voted in favour of a large inter-municipal institution covering the French Basque territory. In 2017, a unique conurbation community was set up for the whole French Basque territory (*Communauté d'Agglomération Pays Basque*, CAPB). For the first time ever, the three historical French Basque provinces were brought together within a unique administrative framework, which replaced existing inter-municipal bodies and complemented others such as the Pyrénées-Atlantiques *département*. This new body took over most of the legally endorsable competencies for major territorial issues.⁷

Viewed from other European regions, and notably from the Spanish Basque side, the institutionalisation of the CAPB could be perceived, as had been the case for the previous stages of institutionalisation of the French Basque territory, as a form of “cosmetic decentralization” (Mansvelt Beck, 2005). Indeed, the new institution, like other French inter-municipal bodies, acted only on matters of intercommunal interest, was less legitimate than a directly elected body and did not satisfy the autonomist aspirations of Basque nationalists. Nevertheless and in the context of French centralism, the CAPB represented a shared institutional framework, which prompted elected representatives to rethink the territory's public problems on a Basque scale. Although limited in terms of legal competencies, this territorial reform was far from being politically neutral.

The *abertzale* campaigners assumed a stance of critical participation in this process and adapted their culture of civic opposition to this institutional context. Many Basque nationalists participated, together with non *abertzale* elected officials and organisations, in the Batera [“together”] mobilisation, which had been set up in 2002 around the issue of institutional recognition, with four demands: a territorial authority with special status; the official recognition of the Basque language; a Basque Chamber of Agriculture; an autonomous University. In 2013, Batera recognised that the new policy style of territorial governance had “enabled a continuous dialogue to take place between elected representatives and civil society”, while lamenting that it had “done nothing to respond either to the need for institutional recognition, or in any sense to the ambitions of the territorial project” (CTPB, 2013: 4, our translation from French).

Faced with the slow progress of institutional recognition, the *abertzale* activists continued to structure parallel networks of civil society organisations, especially in language, agriculture, environment and SSE. These initiatives were much more nested with local policy-making than they might have appeared to at first glance. This was particularly the case in the farming sector. Faced with the refusal of the state to create a separate body for Basque agriculture (in the name of the principle of one *département*, one Chamber of agriculture), in 2005 supporters of sustainable peasant farming unilaterally initiated an alternative Chamber of Agriculture for the Basque Country (EHLG, *Euskal Herriko Laborantza Ganbara*). Founded as a private associative body, EHLG was immediately accused by the state of creating confusion with the official and public Departmental Chamber and of conveying separatist ideas. Judicial litigation was brought and lasted until 2010. EHLG won all the cases and eventually reinforced its legitimacy and strengthened its position in the local institutional arena by offering its expertise to farmers and policy-makers: EHLG-associated farmers, but also consumers, environmentalists and local actors in its own governance, which was also a way to broaden its support far beyond the *abertzale* circles. The experience testified to an evolution of conflictuality: the conflictual relation with the state did not prevent an effective integration within a new inter-partisan policy community that was structured around food policy, farming and environmental issues.

The inter-municipal institutional formula finally adopted in 2017 did not correspond exactly to the demand for a specific territorial authority. It nevertheless opened up a new policy arena. These opportunities were seized by

abertzale elected officials, a strategic decision which impacted relations with the non-*abertzale* Left. Indeed, *abertzale* support was directed towards the less Jacobine and centralist factions of the local branches of the French Left. While remaining a minority, the good results obtained by *abertzale* candidates at local elections gave them access to the multiscale arenas of territorial governance. The 2014 municipal elections saw an unprecedented rise of *abertzale* voting. Eighteen municipalities out of 158 had an *abertzale* mayor, and the *abertzale* played a pivotal role in bargaining with majority parties between the two rounds of voting. Left-wing *abertzale* elected officials entered into alliances with the Socialist party in some municipalities of Labourd, while in Bayonne they united with the far-left *Front de gauche*, thus bringing about the defeat of the Socialist candidate and the victory of the (pro-Basque) centre-right. For their part, the centre-right PNB did not benefit much from this rise. This increase of the *abertzale* left was confirmed in the 2020 municipal elections, even though very few electoral lists were labelled as *abertzale* or were exclusively made up of *abertzale*. The electoral lists led by a personality from the *abertzale* left included candidates with various political and ideological backgrounds, notably, as in Brittany (Kernalegenn, 2023), Greens (*Europe Ecologie Les Verts*), former NPA (*Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste*) members and movements, some *Insoumis*, or non-partisan citizen movements. In Biarritz, the *abertzale* left coalition (EH Bai) built a common list with the Greens and the *Insoumis*, but one *abertzale* leader was also present in the list of the right-wing candidate. In Hendaye, the left *abertzale* supported the Socialist mayor, while centre-right *abertzale* (PNB) generally supported right-wing or centrist candidates as in Saint-Jean-de-Luz, Urrugne, Bayonne. Lists led by a candidate from the *abertzale* left won significant municipalities such as Urrugne, Ustaritz, Ciboure, Itxassou, Baigorri, Saint-Pierre-d'Irube, Ossès, or established governing alliances in Saint-Pée, Hendaye or Saint-Palais. The resulting municipal majorities worked to implement new policy instruments aimed at promoting Basque language, an environmentally friendly productive economy, land regulation and agricultural issues. Moreover, these electoral results reinforced the local representativeness of the *abertzale* activists, which had mechanical its effects at the CAPB.

This rapprochement between *abertzale* and left-wing parties was particularly pronounced over environmental issues, which had also been the case in the Southern Basque Country (Barcena et al., 2003). The Basque Country reproduced the contemporary frame bridging between territorial autonomy/independence and environmental concerns shared by many European substate nationalist parties and movements (Conversi & Friis Hau, 2021). However, unlike in Catalonia or Scotland, this frame bridging did not lead to a powerful instance of 'green nationalism' (ibid.) in the French Basque case. Rather, it generated an incremental and discrete rapprochement. The alliances between Basque nationalists and the Greens, which had already been effective notably for European elections, should not mask the potential differences of interpretation between the two movements, particularly with regard to productive models and territorial autonomy. These differences did not, however, preclude a shared strategy.

Given the new two-scale system of representation, the 2020 municipal elections resulted in some *abertzale* holding significant offices in the new Basque conurbation. Significant vice-presidencies of the CAPB became occupied by the *abertzale* elected representatives: linguistic and cultural policy; sustainable tourism; territorial and urban planning. Major thematic delegations such as engineering in land planning were also given to *abertzales*. This new involvement of the *abertzale* in policymaking resulted from changes in the register of conflictuality around the Basque question. The supposedly definitive end of political violence after 2011 and the self-dissolution of ETA in 2018 had three main effects. First, it facilitated talks *within* the *abertzale* left between those who unconditionally supported political violence and those who rejected it. Second, the end of armed combat made the *abertzale* much more acceptable to the non-*abertzale* local politicians. Third, with the stop of armed violence, it became more difficult for non-Basque nationalist elected officials to take a firm stand *against* an agenda-setting process putting forward such issues as peace, cross-border cooperation, linguistic and cultural rights, but also participative democracy, sustainable farming, land grabbing, housing,⁸ and ecological transition, which had thus far been endorsed by the *abertzale* activists, with selective support from local ecologists.

Abertzale activists, although remaining a minority, started to gain access to institutional arenas. They had the opportunity to convert their activist and professional skills into policy instruments. The articulation between this ongoing institutionalisation and the inherited culture of civic opposition was far from easy and inevitably exposed

the recently appointed *abertzale* officials to criticism from their new institutional partners belonging to the French Left, but also from their rank-and-file members. However, and unlike what would have probably happened thirty years earlier, these debates did not lead to any major splits with the *abertzale* Left given the pre-eminence of the pragmatic tendency.

4 | CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

One of the central issues in the literature on nationalism is the relationship between identities and the movements that promote them (Williams, 2019). In that respect, Basque identity is not a static one, and Basque movements have undergone constant changes. The politicisation of French Basque nationalism has broadened its scope through three socio-historical sequences. The very nature of the struggles around identity changed the demands themselves. By turning to other causes far beyond the Basque one, such as Third Worldism, ecology, SSE and anti-globalisation, the *abertzale* activists have transformed nationalism into what we call here a culture of civic opposition. By penetrating different areas of social and economic life, the *abertzale* activists demonstrated that alternatives were possible and that autonomy from constituted powers, above all the state(s), offered advantages to ordinary citizens. In this way, Basque activists built up organisational powers, broadened their base of supporters and forged alliances, thereby unleashing an unprecedented phase of institutional change. In France, in a period of relative rollback of civil liberties, the Basque Country became known for the creativity and efficiency of its movements. The end of the armed struggle was merely a first glimpse of the bigger picture of initiatives that had enabled political nationalism to become a new kind of banal nationalism (Billig, 1995), this time focused on democracy, social justice and sustainable development.

To develop this hypothesis, we adopted an approach to politicisation that enabled us to address the different dimensions through which this transformation of Basque nationalism was made possible. Regarding *institutional politicisation*, we have seen, over the course of the three phases, how the *abertzale* activists and their followers progressively moved from a position of outsiders to that of insiders and policy-makers, through their commitment to strategies of alternative institutionalisation, and by entering into *both* cooperation with and opposition to public institutions. This institutional politicisation was thus made possible by the construction of a relatively autonomous civil society, within which other dimensions of politicisation were deployed. *Social conflictualisation* refers to the extension of the nationalist cause to other struggles on a national or transnational scale throughout the three phases, and thus to a redefinition of the boundaries of the Basque “we”. In terms of *interpersonal conflictuality*, we have emphasised the multiplication of spaces for exchange, both among the Basque people and with other militant groups in France, in which Basque nationalism has become a culture of discussion of public territorial problems. The move towards non-violence and civil disobedience was linked to the consolidation of this culture of political deliberation. Finally, we highlighted, sometimes in broad strokes, the types of *individual socialisation* and re-socialisation (Lacroix, 2013; Haurat-Perez, 2023) that have supported and emerged from these dynamics, showing how trajectories of violent radicalisation coexisted and had been gradually supplanted by other types of militancy, some of them consolidated and professionalised. This dimension, like the others, highlights the ambivalence and tensions that continue to permeate Basque nationalism, caught between a path of dependency on French state policy (on such issues as political prisoners, decentralisation and regional planning) and the ongoing transformation of a mobilised Basque civil society.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ An earlier version of this paper was discussed at the Panel “The Lefts and Nationalisms”, ECPR 2022 Joint Sessions, Edinburgh.
- ² *Abertzale*, “patriot”, is a neologism invented by Sabino Arana Goiri at the end of the 19th century.
- ³ Which since 2007 has included the Abertzaleen batasuna, Batasuna and Eusko Alkartasuna parties. This merger was an attempt to overcome internal disagreements over the armed struggle and these organizations’ relationship with Spanish Basque movements (Lacroix, 2013).
- ⁴ EH Bai obtained 13% in the 2022 legislative elections in the Basque part of the department of Pyrénées-Atlantiques, which associates the Basque provinces and Béarn since 1790.
- ⁵ URL: <https://www.euskalmoneta.org/7-bonnes-raisons/>, our translation.
- ⁶ URL: <https://bizimugi.eu/feuille-de-route-pour-2020-2024-de-la-transition-a-la-metamorphose-trantsiziotik-metamorfosira>
- ⁷ Territorial strategy, planning and housing; Europe and cross-border cooperation; economy; linguistic and cultural policy; water, coastline and natural environment; mountains; social cohesion; mobilities; waste prevention, collect and recovery.
- ⁸ On the issue of housing and following a proposal from the Alda association, the CAPB voted on 5 March 2022 in favour of a new policy instrument known as “compensation”, i.e., a regulatory mechanism consisting in obliging owners who want to rent out a furnished tourist accommodation to produce a new accommodation on a permanent basis of equivalent surface area and located in the same commune.

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