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DEVELOPMENT OF "CENTER-REGION" RELATIONS UNDER RULE OF AN ETHNO- REGIONALIST PARTY: THE CASE OF THE BASQUE COUNTRY

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ABSTRACT

Under the conditions of regionalization in Europe, there is an increase in support for ethno-regionalist parties. This type of parties gains the capacity to directly influence the implementation of the "center-region" relationship model in European decentralized states. The nature of relations between central and regional authorities is determined by the ruling ethno-regionalist party. Using the example of the Spanish autonomous region of the Basque Country, we can consider the role of the Basque Nationalist Party in the development of relations between the Spanish authorities and the Basque region. The authors analyze the transformation of the party's policy, which has led to a decrease in the level of conflict in the region and a rejection by the region of opposition with the central authorities in favor of establishing bilateral relations based on loyalty to the center.

INTRODUCTION

In modern European polytechnic states, the popularity and influence of ethno-regionalist forces which put forward demands to expand the autonomy of their regions, is growing. The accelerated process of regionalization has led to the strengthening of the positions of ethno-regionalist parties defending the national identity, culture and economic well-being of their regions. It is the ethno-regionalist parties that are becoming active political actors, and who are in favor of expanding the powers of the regions and securing the new institutional status. Strengthening the influence of ethno-regionalist parties is not just a result of the escalation of conflict between central and regional institutions or a protest of the region against the existing political system and state and territorial structure [1], but rather an indicator of accumulated problems in relations between a center and a region [2].

Ethno-regionalist parties, which having a majority in the regional parliament, succeeded to form regional governments, become active political actors seeking to exert a significant influence on government decision-making. The growth of national identity makes regional political associations an influential force capable of imposing its decisions on central authorities. The rise of ethnic and regional parties occurred in the 70-80s of XX century [3], but right now the fundamental changes having took place in the multinational European states have created a reliable basis for the development of ethno-regionalist parties.

Along with the acceleration of European regionalization and decentralization of public administrations, the interest of the scientific community in the study of ethno-regionalist parties, which are the most active actors in the regional political process, is growing. The variety of forms of participation in national and supranational politics makes regional parties particularly relevant and important subjects for the study of political science.

In political science there is no single, generally accepted definition of the notion "ethno-regionalist party". But all the offered versions contain two components - ethnic and territorial requirements [4], which define the ideology and goals of such a party.

By combining the approaches of H. Tursan [5] and F. Muller-Rommel [6] to understand this type of party, we can understand an ethno-regionalist party as a political institution representing interests of a territorially united ethnic group (ethnic minority) and striving to revise the existing state and territorial system in the interests of the region represented.

The inclusion of problems concerning decentralization of relations between a center and regions, the redistribution of powers in favor of regional institutions in the political program distinguishes ethno-regionalist parties from other types of regional and ethnic parties [7].

Despite overcoming the conceptual and terminological vagueness in studying ethno-regionalist parties, the problem concerning influence of parties of this type on the formation of relations between central and regional authorities, remains insufficiently developed. This is explained by the very specifics of the problem, which simultaneously affects two complex research questions - the role and place of ethno-regionalist parties in the European process and their influence on building a model of relations between a center and a region.

KEY WORDS

political party, Spain, Basque Country, ethno-

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METHODS

The methodological basis of this study implies reliance on the postulates of a neo-institutional approach which allows us to consider the institution of parties as an independent actor and participant in the political process, taking into account all forms of interaction that the party enters in the course of its activities.

Using the case study method in neo-institutionalism, we can carry out an in-depth study of various aspects of a particular case; we can also identify specific characteristics inherent only in a particular political institution or phenomenon. The case study is applied in this work in the context of a detailed consideration of the specific features inherent to the activities of ruling ethno-regionalist parties.

The Basque Nationalist Party (EAJ-PNV) which is one of the largest regional parties in Spain was chosen as the case study. This ethno-regionalist party has played and continues to play a serious role in the regional and national political arena. The party, having received 37,36% of the vote in the regional elections in 2016 and 28 seats in the parliament of the Basque Country, formed a coalition government together with the Basque socialists. Control over 9 ministerial portfolios of 12 suggests that the party has sufficient political resources to implement its programmatic provisions. Consequently, we can make the assumption that the line of policy of the regional government of the Basque Country is directed to the implementation of the EAJ-PNV party program. The party is also represented in the upper and lower chambers of the Spanish National Parliament and the European Parliament, what demonstrates the possibility of applying and advancing their political interests not only at the regional, but also at the international level.

The empirical base of the study is presented by the election program of the EAJ-PNV party in the elections to the regional parliament of the autonomous region of the Basque Country in 2016 [8] and the party's election program in the parliamentary elections in Spain in 2016 [9].

In order to reveal the position of the ruling party on building the relations with the center, the following topics are considered as basic: a) national identity and identity of the Basque people; b) the model of relations between the central and regional authorities, c) the state and territorial structure of Spain; d) autonomous status of the Basque Country.

These topics make it possible to identify the pre-election positions and views of the EAJ-PNV on the problems of political and economic relations between the center and the regions and the development of the state and territorial structure in Spain.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Modern Spain is among the European states for which the ethno-regionalist forces are the main opponents of the center and have the strongest influence on public policy. The level of popularity of such movements among the population varies depending on the political and economic situation, but over recent years has remained consistently high.

Using the example of the Basque Nationalist Party (EAJ-PNV), we can reveal the relationship between a line of policy, a position of the regional party and a nature of the relationship between a center and a region. To do this, we consider the main elements of the EAJ-PNV programmer position affecting the problem of building the relationships between the region and the center.

The position of EAJ-PNV on the issue of state and territorial structure has always performed evolutions between national separatism and the readiness to develop within the framework of the Spanish state. The Basque national movement began to take shape at the end of the 19th century as a reaction to the intensification of the centralization process by the Spanish authorities. The first mentions of the special status of the Basques began to appear in the 15th century. This was due to the fact that the Basques had special rights and privileges, the so-called *fueros*, what established a special procedure for building relationships with the central authorities. This special status actually exempted the Basques from taxes [10]. The increased influence of Spain, the centralization of power and ceasing the *fueros* in the 19th century gave rise to protest sentiments.

The Basque national liberation movement soon became institutionalized, the Basque Nationalist Party was formed, the ideologist of which was Sabino Arano, the founder of Basque nationalism. Since the moment of foundation of the Basque Party, its special feature was the combination of political radicalism with moderate practice and the recognition of Spain's political institutions. During the period of its activity, the party entered into alliances with the right and left forces. Such dualism in the political platform of the party included various groups of the population among the party's electorate.

The duality of political ideas put forward, the constant change of images and political partners allow the EAJ-PNV to remain the largest political party in the Basque Country and have a direct influence on the policies of the central government due to its fraction in the Cortes Generales.

Since the 80s, changes in the line of policy of the Basque party EAJ-PNV can be compared with pendulum motion within the range of "moderatism - radicalism", which also applies to the choice of political partners.

“The party does not conclude permanent political pacts, changing allies from different, even opposing, ideological and political camps depending on specific circumstances. Cooperation with the Basque socialists and all democratic forces on the anti-terrorist struggle platform in 1986-1998 changed in the late 90s by blocking with a radical nationalist party of Erry Batasuna closely associated with ETA” [11]. The following stages can be distinguished in the transformation of the line of policy of the Basque nationalist party in the period of democratic Spain: 1) 1979-1998 - moderate line of policy within the framework of recognition of the Spanish Constitution and the autonomous statute of the Basque Country; 2) 1998-2009 - focus on the new model of relations of autonomy with Spain, meaning going beyond the legal field and at the same time combined with participation in the political institutions of the state [12]; 3) 2009-2012 - the period of being in opposition; 4) 2012 - till present time - waiver of the struggle for independence, focusing on cooperation with the central authorities.

For most of the Basques, separatism is associated with the activities of the terrorist group ETA. Declining in support for independence among Basque society has led to a transformation of the line of policy conducted by the ruling Basque Country EAJ-PNV. Wanting to maintain the status of the ruling party, EAJ-PNV could not continue to appeal to unpopular ideas about independence. In the late 2000s, the party ceased to support the ideas of the independence of the Basque Country. Since the cessation of the activities of the radical group ETA in the Basque Country and the disappearance of violence as a political tool, the issues of ethnicity and the struggle for self-determination of the Basques have been paled into significance in the programmer positions of the Basque nationalist party, with their replacement by requirements of further decentralization.

In recent years, the regional authorities of the Basque Country managed to get rid of the image of the “main threat to the stability of the Spanish state” and become the main regional partner of the central authorities of Spain. Changing the strategy of the main political actor in the regional arena lowered the conflict potential of the region. Reject from radical nationalist rhetoric allowed for to change the subject about the future of the region from the “struggle for independence” to the “maximum empowerment of the region” in terms of coordinating positions with the central authorities of Spain.

The position of the Basque party in relation to the existing model of interaction between the center and the autonomous region can be characterized from the traditional position of dualism. The party approves the established order of fiscal relations, without making any economic demands to the central authorities. The Basque country has special preferences in the sphere of intergovernmental relations, the percentage of taxes sent to the center is governed by bilateral agreements, the terms of which are very different from the Spanish system of intergovernmental fiscal equalization that extends to all remaining regions of the country [13]. At the same time, the level of independence of the Basque Country in the field of taxation is the highest among the Spanish autonomies.

The privileged position of the Basque Country contributes to stable growth of the region’s economy. From the point of view of EAJ-PNV, the model of bilateral relations established in the economic sphere should be extended to all spheres of interaction between the Spanish and Basque authorities.

The party demands recognition of the right of the Basque Country to be a subject of international law. The party’s program position emphasizes the need to grant the right of autonomy to open its representative offices on the territory of other states.

A special place in the political program of the party is given to the desire for close cooperation with the autonomous region of Navarre, where the Basques also live. The requirements for creating a common system of social, economic and cultural development can be interpreted from the point of view of a party plan as an association of the Basque Country and Navarre. The frequent mention of Navarre, as the region closest in cultural, historical and economic terms [13] (Navarre also has a special tax status, like the Basque Country) suggests that the Basque party did not abandon the idea of collecting Basque lands into a single state territorial formation, only reducing the degree of radicalism of their requirements in this matter.

Despite the softening of rhetoric, the party emphasizes in its political program the need to recognize the uniqueness of the Basque people, who have a special cultural and historical heritage. The theme of preserving the ethnic identity of the people is clearly traced in party discourse for later reunion. Appeals to the Spanish authorities to accept any decision of the Basque people with respect are declarative.

CONCLUSION

It can be noted that the dualism of the party attitudes in many ways makes it possible to strengthen the position of the party in relations with the center, enhancing its “negotiating potential”. All steps taken by the regional government are consistent with the central authorities.

The regional government led by the Basque Nationalist Party advocates consistent expanding of the powers of the autonomy within the limits of economic benefits and contributing to the prosperity of the region. The slogan of the Basque national party is “no confrontation”; all controversial issues are resolved by seeking consensus. The independence of the Basque Country is not an actual goal for the ruling party. This fact is repeatedly emphasized by regional authorities. The dualism characteristic of EAJ-PNV makes

impact on the line of policy supported by the party. The policy of the ruling ethno-regionalist party demonstrates the intricacies of the ethnic and regional interests of the Basque people. The party seeks to conclude the most advantageous agreements with the Spanish government within the existing institutional and legal framework in exchange for a guarantee of stability in the region. The model of relations developing between the region headed by the EAJ-PNV government and the Spanish government can be positioned as cooperation with elements of bargaining.

In the context of regionalization of European states, ethno-regionalist parties become the main political force influencing the formation of not only regional, but also national politics. The Basque Nationalist Party is a vivid example of a regional party, which, being at the head of the regional government of the Basque Country, manages to exert a direct influence on building profitable relations with the Spanish state. The transformation of the EAJ-PNV policy, the reduction of the radicalism of its requirements and the rejection of alliances with the supporters of the independence of the Basque Country turned the EAJ-PNV into one of the most reliable regional partners of the central authorities.

With the next transformation of the BNP position and the cessation of activity of such an influential regional organization as ETA, the model of conflict relations between the Spanish and Basque authorities is changing to a model of cooperation. This model of relations between the center and the region implies coordination of all actions taken with the will of the center, reforming of the whole state and territorial system and the problem of transfer of powers are solved within the framework of the negotiation process; the region's loyalty to the center is exchanged for additional preferences.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There is no conflict of interest.

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