How Terrorism Ends: A Comparative Analysis of Underground Organisations in Italy and Spain

Final Report Summary - HTE (How Terrorism Ends: A Comparative Analysis of Underground Organisations in Italy and Spain)

The project ‘How Terrorism Ends in Europe: A Comparative Analysis of Underground Organizations in Italy and Spain’, analyses the conditions/factors (at a macro, meso and micro level of analysis) under which terrorist groups fall into decline. This is done by adopting a methodological triangulation strategy, combining a ‘large N’ quantitative study, analyzing all different types of (a) Left-wing (b) Nationalist-Separatist, (c) Religious-Fundamentalist and (d) Right-wing terrorist groups in two European democracies (Italy and Spain) in the last 40 years (1970-2010); with a ‘small N’ comparative case study of
different types of ‘disengaged’ terrorist groups in Italy and Spain (in particular the ETA for Spain and the ‘right-wing’ and ‘left wing’ terrorist groups of the 1970s in Italy, i.e. Red Brigades. Referring to social movement studies and adopting a ‘multi-level approach’ to the study of disengagement, this research explores the possible paths for leaving underground organisations (in particular: defeat, when individuals are arrested and/or terrorist groups are defeated or forced to surrender; negotiations, when there is cooperation with the government; victory, when terrorist groups abandon terrorism because their objectives have been achieved; and splintering, when groups break up as a result of competition among terrorist groups), specifically interrelating the micro-meso-macro analytical level of analysis, exploring how the complex interactions between the social, political, and cultural environment, combined with the internal dynamics of the groups, affect the exiting from terrorism. I applied a “most-different” design to paired comparison in order to look not (only) for correlations between variables but rather for similar mechanisms.

In terms of work performed during the project, I firstly compiled my own dataset of all underground organizations which exit from terrorism, in Italy and Spain in the last 40 years from 1970 to 2010) which included not only the dependent variable but also the independent variables (at micro, meso and macro levels) which I considered relevant to explain disengagement (for my theoretical model see Fig. 1 in attachment). In order to do that I have drawn on a series of major academic and governmental terrorism-incident databases available (such as the Terrorist Organization Profiles TOPs database offered by the START Centre at the University of Maryland; the Worldwide Incidents Tracking System of the National Counterterrorism Center NCTC and the TE-SAT data) and on the dataset compiled by Jones and Libicki (2008). In addition a review of the literature (both scientific and professional) on the subject of counter-terrorism policies have been conducted in order to set the context of political and cultural opportunities for disengagement offered to the underground organizations in each respective countries and the operationalization of these additional independent variables + measurement for the two cases (Italy and Spain) have been done. The quantitative analysis of this first part showed:

* Dependent variable: context sensitivity of disengagement processes. The main path of disengagement from terrorism are policing (41.5%) and splintering (43.9%) in Italy and policing (84%) in Spain.

Also the duration in terrorist activity of the groups in the two countries is different with the Italian terrorist organization, on average active for 15 years (32% of cases) and the Spanish ones active mainly more than 30 years (58% of cases).

* Macro level factors: differences in counter-terrorism measures and measures favouring disengagement between Spain and Italy: higher impact of legal measures offering rewarding alternatives for disengaged people in Italy (e.g. the Law on ‘Dissociazione’); vs. higher impact of repression and police action in Spain. * Presence and importance of cycles of level of violence of the ETA in Spain and left wing terrorist groups in Italy, which can be related to different phases in the political contexts of the two countries under study, beyond counter-terrorism measures (e.g. electoral success; importance of “sensitive periods”, etc.). * Meso level factor: the Group size seems to influence the duration of the terrorist group in action and therefore the exit of the group from terrorism, with bigger groups lasting more time than smaller groups (31% vs. 23%).

Also the goal of the group appears to have an influence with (in Italy) the groups focusing on ‘regime
change’ and ‘social revolution’ lasting more time (47.5% and 45%) than the groups focusing on territorial change (5.6%) and policy change (1.9%). In Spain to the contrary groups focusing on territorial change last more (46%).

In the second step of the project a series of interviews have been conducted with ex militants of the terrorist organization ETA, in Spain, and the Red Brigades (and other left-wing terrorists groups), in Italy, and with experts and key informants who have been for several reasons particularly close to the phenomenon in the respective countries (i.e. police, policy makers, journalists, representatives of civil society associations, historians and academic expert), for a total number of 16 interviews in Spain and 21 in Italy. I have integrated this primary-source material with secondary source interviews: as for Italy, 28 interviews with former left-wing armed militants present at the Instituto Carlo Cattaneo of Bologna in the series of studies on political violence provide 28 interviews with former left-wing armed militants. As regards Spain, with 40 in-deep interviews and life’s histories with former members of ETA which have been conducted and transcribed by the supervisor of this research project, Prof. Fernando Reinares, who kindly agreed to share this and other archival material with me.

The discourse and frame analysis of the interviews in this second (qualitative) part of the study showed:

(Spanish case)

* Differences in the main important factors (at a macro, meso and micro level of analysis) influencing disengagement in different periods (e.g. macro level factors as the main important ones after the mid-90s)
* Combination of factors at different level of analysis influencing disengagement and not any factors ‘working’ in isolation (e.g. after the mid-90s macro level factors, in particular police and judicial action impacted on meso level factors –the type of ETA organizational structure- weakening it.
* Micro level factors as less important than macro+meso in explaining disengagement in the case of ETA.
* Path of disengagement: mainly arrest & disengagement without deradicalization (few disengaged activists, when interviewed, deny the legitimacy of their use of political violence)
* Importance for the end of ETA of the combination between macro and meso level factors.
* Responses from the civil society against political violence. (Italian case).
* Different paths of disengagement than in the Spanish case (not only individual but by group, not only arrest but also voluntary).
* Micro level factors (especially the bibliographical factor and the need to be reintegrated in a normal life, e.g. fatherhood, marriage, etc) played a more important role than in the Spanish case.
* At the macro level factors the most important element emerged to be the mix of repression and reintegration laws (more than only repression taken in isolation)
* However, this only after another important (meso level factor) occurred: loss in confidence in the leadership and difficulties in the generational passage.
* Importance of the variable ‘time’: different factors play an important role in the process of exit from terrorism of left wing terrorist groups in Italy at different time in period.