

THE "BOOM" OF WIND ENERGY IN THE BASQUE COUNTRY UNDER ANALYSIS

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Renewable energies are here to stay. In the Basque Country, there is an incipient "boom" in wind farm projects. It is time to reflect on the territorial model we want, beyond the energy model we need. The energy transition has to be made, but not in any old way.

It is clear that the energy model involves wind energy, as well as solar energy. The IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) in its [Sixth Assessment Report](#) published in 2023 mentions that in the face of the challenge of Climate Change, one of the greatest contributions to guaranteeing a sustainable and habitable future for humanity will come from the increase in renewable energies, especially solar and wind energy.

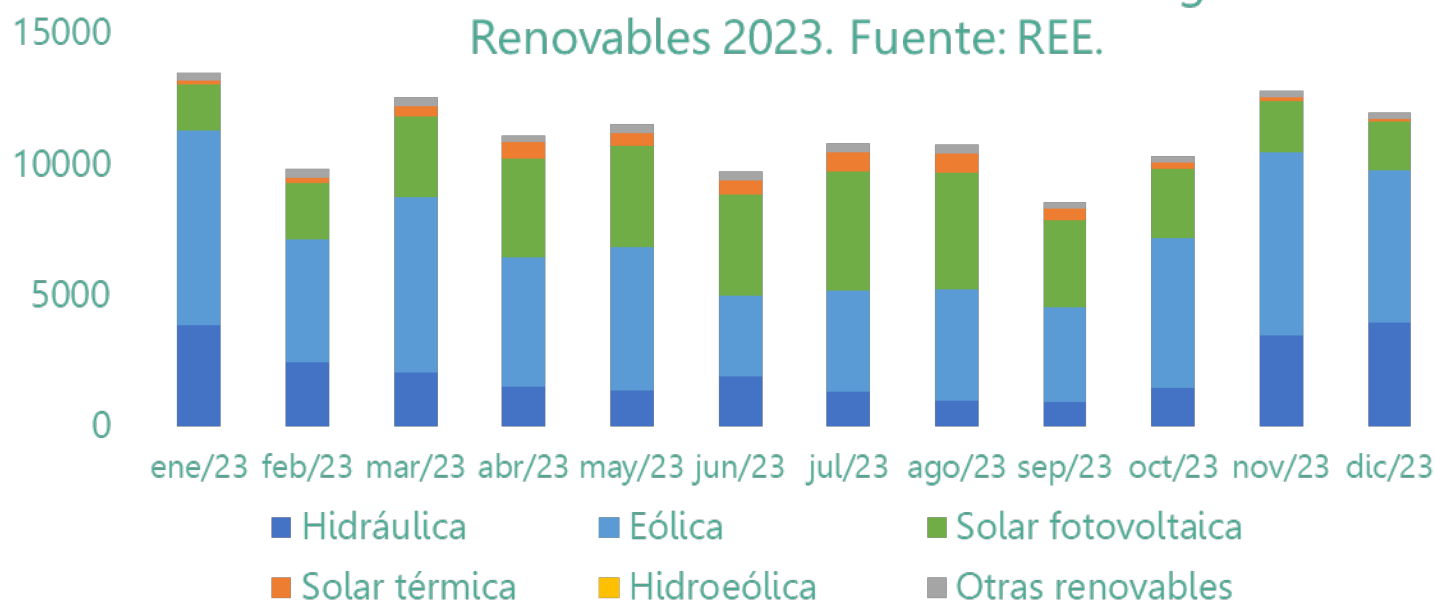
The same report mentions that the unit cost of these two technologies has fallen between 2010 and 2019 by 55% for wind and 85% for solar. The higher profitability of these technologies makes them increasingly competitive in the energy market, consolidating their growth.

According to the [Spanish Wind Energy Association](#), renewable energies are already a consolidated reality, and by 2023 they will generate 24% of the electricity consumed in Spain. The total annual consumption of 16 million households.

At a national level, wind energy was in 2023 the leading technology in the electricity system and the first in terms of installed capacity, consolidating its position as a leader in improving the electricity mix towards a more sustainable one.

Wind power has avoided the emission of 32 million tonnes of CO₂, has saved the cost of approximately 6,500 million euros in fossil fuel imports. And in 2022 it saved consumers €7,400 by reducing the cost of electricity.

Balance Estatal Eléctrico Generación Energías Renovables 2023. Fuente: REE.



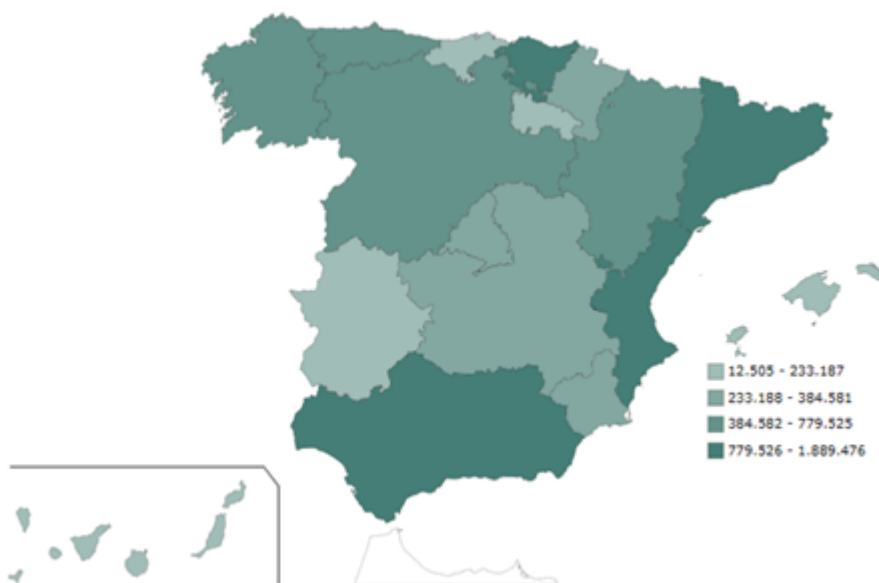
This leadership in clean energy and contribution to economic savings is due to the existence of 1,345 wind farms with a total installed capacity of 29,813 MW distributed in more than 1,000 municipalities throughout the state. The potential of wind energy to materialise the energy transition has been demonstrated. The National Integrated Energy and Climate Plan (PNIEC)

envisages reaching 62GW installed by 2030, which means an installation of 4GW per year, far from the 1.6 GW installed in 2022.

The situation in the Basque Country contrasts with the good position at national level, with the Basque Country having the fifth highest wind power production in the world and the second highest in Europe. Compared to 24% in Spain, wind energy in the Basque Country barely exceeds 2% of electricity demand. Of the more than 1,300 wind farms installed, four are in the Basque Country, with a total installed capacity of 153 MW, 0.5% of the total.

It is also the third region in Spain with the lowest installation of renewables, after Madrid and the Balearic Islands. The Basque Country is the second region in terms of electricity consumption after Catalonia, in a technical tie with Andalusia and Valencia (INE).

The Basque Country is one of the largest energy sinks on the peninsula. It has a high demand and very little energy generation. As far as wind energy is concerned, the Basque Country has an old wind farm, the one in the port of Bilbao being the last to be installed more than 18 years ago.



Kontsumo elektrikoa autonomia-erkidegoen arabera 2021ean. Iturria: INE.

The [Basque Energy Strategy](#) (3E2030), published in 2017, seeks to align itself with global, European and national targets, as well as to reverse the situation with regard to renewable energy generation. It sets out to increase installed wind power capacity to 783MW, a five-fold increase.

The 3E2030 Strategy itself calls for a revision of the 2002 PTS for wind energy. This PTS already listed up to 30 sites as optimal for hosting wind farms. Of these, only the four wind farms mentioned above have materialised.

The new PTS, known as the renewable energy PTS, was initially approved in May 2023. It is still in the process of being processed for final approval. It seeks to replace and expand the previous document, as well as to achieve the new renewable production targets set by the Strategy itself. It establishes up to 57 *areas of selected location*, where the installation of wind farms is considered appropriate.

These are areas of the territory where, a priori, authorisation is viable, in contrast to the map that

shows the areas where this type of installation would be banned. It is not specified how many wind farms are to be built in each zone, nor even whether wind farms will be built in all of them.

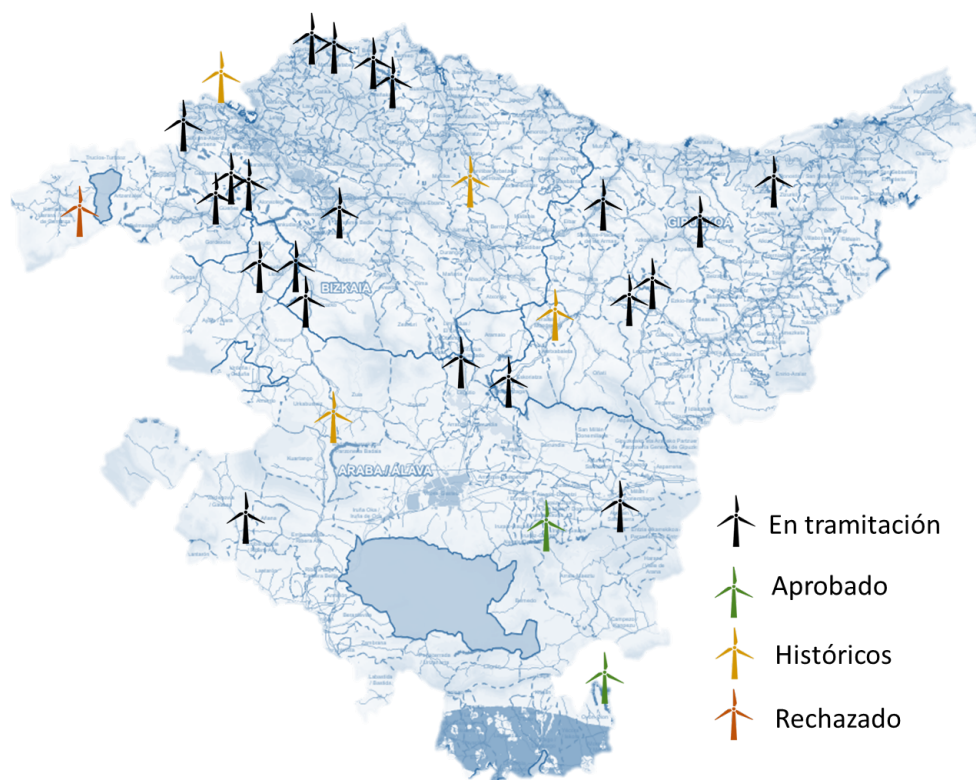
The almost two decades without activating any wind energy project in the Basque Country seems to be due to the lack of economic incentives, as pointed out in the 3E2030; where it is also acknowledged that the regulatory framework is shared with the state, so the difference with respect to the state may be due to other elements specific to the region.

Not wanting to have an impact on the territory or wanting to propose an energy transition based on other consumption and production models does not seem to be one of the reasons. Nonetheless, this new regulatory context that encourages wind energy production has led to a "BOOM" of applications in the last three years.

In March 2021, the first registrations began, initiating the process to implement wind farms in the territory. Within a year, 10 projects were presented, totalling 52 windmills and 268.8MW of contracted power. This exceeds the current 153MW. In the following year, another 3 initiatives were presented, totalling 109.6MW between the 19 mills.

And after the initial approval in May 2023 of the PTS for renewable energies, a second boom in applications burst forth. A total of nine new projects were submitted by the end of 2023, which continued to accumulate more proposals during 2024.

The last three years have been full of applications. Bizkaia is the territory where most wind farms have been proposed, 17 in total, followed by Araba with 12 and Gipuzkoa with 5. In total, more than 600 MW of installed capacity has been permitted. If all these applications were approved by the Basque Government, **the target of 783 MW of installed capacity contemplated in the 3E2030 strategy for the year 2030 could be reached.**



Approximate map of the locations of wind power projects in the Basque Country.

Prepared by the authors (This is an approximation based on data obtained up to December

2023).

In order for the projects to see the light of day, each of them has to present a set of documentation justifying their economic and environmental viability, and it is up to the Basque Government to authorise the installations or not. Some of them have already been rejected, such as the [15-mill wind farm](#) planned between Cantabria and the Encartaciones region. Others have been approved, such as Labraza, planned for 2024, and Azazeta for 2025.

Although the resolution of each application is uncertain, the wind generation targets are there, and this implies that a similar number of wind farms will be installed to the demand generated to date. If not in these locations, it will be in others.

This sudden change of script in wind energy policy has meant that many areas of the territory have been threatened in a very short space of time. The possibility of being affected by the impacts of the installation of wind farms has generated numerous reticent reactions to these projects. This increased pressure on the territory, especially in those places with fewer inhabitants and less demand for energy, has sparked debate in many regions. The generation of wind energy, however renewable it may be, is perceived as a new element of pressure on rural territories to cover urban demands.

Many municipalities, especially in Alava, and even the Alava Provincial Council itself, are clearly against the installation of wind farms in their mountains. As well as institutional rejection, there is also opposition from local residents. In small towns in Alava, as in other neighbouring regions such as [Navarre](#) and [La Rioja](#), citizens are organising themselves around platforms that are calling for a fair transition, in which energy transition is supported without prejudice to territorial balance. Environmental groups and urban citizens have also questioned the model and have joined these platforms.

Basque society is aware of the need to transform the energy generation and consumption model. For decades, the need to change the energy model towards a more sustainable one has been conveyed, and that this must inevitably involve a greater use of renewable energies.

What has perhaps not been reflected on so much is the energy transition model that is desired, and how this will impact on the lives of those who have the least, but also on the most vulnerable territories.

When we talk about a just transition, we quickly associate that removing cars from the roads does not have to mean that the working class has to buy an electric vehicle that they cannot afford. We can also understand that geopolitical conflicts, usually in favour of the West, caused by the exploitation of fossil fuels, should not be replicated when it comes to obtaining the materials needed for renewable energy installations.

Equally, becoming sovereign and responsible for energy-intensive lifestyles means taking responsibility for the impacts of such a model. This is what the decentralisation of renewable energies is enabling. **On the one hand, it brings us closer to energy sovereignty**, but on the other hand, it also brings us closer to the impacts derived from this energy production. And it is here that we must be careful not to repeat global schemes on our territorial scale, with urban societies receiving the benefits of clean energy at the expense of impacts on rural and natural territories and their people.

The electricity mix must be changed, but for this to happen with guarantees of territorial justice, the model must also be changed. Reducing consumption and making the most of urban spaces for generation must be the priority. It is time to stop seeing the territory as a mere supplier of resources to be overexploited. And it is also time to count on the real participation of the communities that inhabit a territory, without seeing them as mere extras on a stage that does not belong to them. This is the only way to ensure a clean and fair energy generation model.

The recently approved Energy Transition and Climate Change Law of the Basque Country spoke of itself as follows: "it represents an important step towards a sustainable and resilient future. **With clear objectives, participatory governance structures and a focus on equity**, it seeks to address the challenges of climate change in a comprehensive and effective manner. Its successful implementation will depend on continued collaboration between different actors and the political will to move forward with concrete steps towards climate neutrality.

So be it.

Main picture: Anna Jiménez Calaf in Unsplash

