

# Basque Country: The Spain internationals playing for a different team

By Matt Davis BBC Sport



Aritz Aduriz (second from left) in the Basque Country strip

**Spain's oldest goalscorer Aritz Aduriz played in an international friendly on Friday - but not for Spain.**

The 37-year-old captained a Basque Country team that also featured fellow Spain internationals Inaki Williams, Inigo Martinez and Asier Illarramendi against Venezuela - the world's 32nd best side.

As they are not an 'official' team, they are not part of Fifa's rankings - but they still won 4-2 in front of a crowd of 15,000 at Alaves' Mendizorrotza stadium

in Vitoria-Gasteiz.

"To be able to become official, it is necessary to show that you have a team capable of competing in international tournaments," said coach Mikel Etxarri.

The squad is selected from players born in the autonomous region in northern Spain, as well as the neighbouring regions of Navarre and the French Basque Country.

The Basque Country has a large degree of self-rule, its own language and cultural traditions, and Basque Football Federation general secretary Kepa Allica said Friday's match, their first since December 2016, was "more than a game".

Players can play for both Spain and the Basque Country because the latter is not affiliated with Fifa or Uefa, but that is their ultimate goal.

"This game is something more," Allica told BBC Sport before the game. "It is an identification with a region, where the people live, where they have grown up.

"It is very important for a lot of people here. We want our own team playing in official competitions."



The Basque region is home to four La Liga teams - Athletic Bilbao, Alaves, Eibar and Real Sociedad - and they are where the majority of players are drawn from.

Aduriz is the Basque Country side's top goalscorer with 12 goals in 11 games, while Sociedad legend Xabi Prieto is their record appearance-maker.

Notable former players include Spanish World Cup winner Xabi Alonso, French World Cup winner Bixente Lizarazu and Tottenham striker Fernando Llorente.

Allica says it is "not difficult" to call up players who play for Spanish teams, but it is "more difficult" if they play in other leagues around Europe.

"[Playing for the Basque team] is very important for them," said Allica. "If we select players, they want to play and try to feature in as many matches with the selection in their career."

Spain beat Wales on Thursday in a friendly, with Chelsea's £71m goalkeeper

Kepa Arrizabalaga the only Basque player to feature.

"We are not playing 'official' matches so it is understood that if Spain calls players up then they play for Spain, after that though they can play for the Basque Country," added Allica.



French World Cup winner Bixente Lizarazu, who was born in Saint-Jean-de-Luz, played for the Basque Country in 1993

Before Friday's match, their last outing was in 2016, where they beat Tunisia 3-1 at Bilbao's San Mames stadium.

In recent years the Basque Country have hammered Peru 6-0 and Bolivia 6-1. They beat Uruguay 2-1 in 2003 and three years later lost 1-0 to Wales, with former Manchester United winger Ryan Giggs scoring the winner.

Friday's game, played on Spain's national day public holiday, was the third time Venezuela have faced the Basque Country. They have lost all three matches.

"I expect a rival of the highest quality," Venezuela manager Rafael Dudamel said in his pre-match comments. "Beyond being a selection not admitted by Fifa, it is composed of players of the highest level.

"Surely they feel a great pride to represent their region and they are professional players who know that every time they jump on the pitch they are being very well observed and evaluated."

Allica said the team is "always strong", adding: "They are players from the same region, with more or less a similar style of play. It is a very important match for us and we want a good result."

Etxarri, who hopes their next game will be at Christmas, added: "Our players have been emptied to the end and in a friendly played like real fighters. A friend told me we looked like a club team."

Fans filled more than three-quarters of the 19,000-seater Mendizorrotza.

One of those at the game was 23-year-old Harry Ball, a former youth team player at Antiguoko - a feeder team for Sociedad.

"A lot of the Basque players are highly ranked football players, which goes to show it could be competitive if allowed to compete at international level officially," he said.

"I personally believe we are at the level of Ukraine. If we had the full team including players like Kepa, we would definitely be better than Scotland, better than Wales if we were recognised as a national team. Games [like Venezuela] are important to show we can compete."



Basque Country's squad to face Venezuela