

# BASQUE NEWS

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*The Lehendakari went to the state funeral for the victims of the 11th March. The event brought together the members of the main royal families, heads of state and leaders from around the world.*

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## After the socialist victory in the general elections, the Lehendakari calls for unconditional dialogue

# Ibarretxe “This is a historical opportunity for peace”

## “The PP is history. Let’s not waste this chance”

“This is a historical opportunity for the Basque Country. An exciting process has begun and the word “dialogue” – so tainted in recent times, has been recovered”. This was the emphatic message of the Lehendakari, Juan José Ibarretxe, after hearing the results of the general elections held on the 14th March in which, against all predictions, the Spanish Socialist Party easily beat the Popular Party. Ibarretxe was optimistic about the new era opened by the socialist leader, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero. In an initial appraisal of the electoral results, the Lehendakari’s words were forceful “the PP is history. We have to look to the future. Before us we have the opportunity to build a future in peace and freedom so that things can change”.

Ibarretxe took the opportunity once again to call for dialogue and not just suppression as the only way of fighting against the world’s violence and terrorism. Dialogue, which in his opinion is a word which democracy has recovered after years of the central government’s repeated refusal to meet with the Lehendakari. In this sense, Juan José Ibarretxe once again announced his willingness to “talk unconditionally and respectfully to everyone, about everything”. In his opinion it was precisely dialogue that won the elections in the Basque Country and Catalonia and it is this same dialogue that will allow easier solutions to be found between the Spanish and Basque governments. “And this is on only one condition” he

added “that the ideas of everybody be respected. That we accept that what I think is equally as legitimate as what Zapatero or Rajoy think”.

To conclude, the Lehendakari was anxious to send out a message of hope to Basque society and asked that this historical opportunity for building a “future in peace and freedom” not be wasted.

These words were especially significant at a time when the horrendous consequences of the brutal terrorist bombs of three days previously were still very much in everybody’s minds. The bomb attacks were carried out by a terrorist group linked to the Islamic organisation Al Qaeda and in them over 190 people were killed and more than 1,000 injured. ➔

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### Lack of transparency and an electoral turnaround

It was precisely the PP Government's determination to maintain that the massacre had been the work of ETA (even when all signs pointed towards an Islamic group) and in this way to avoid Spanish public opinion from blaming this attack on Spain's participation in the Irak war and its subsequent electoral consequences, which, in the opinion of many analysts, produced the electoral turnaround at the last moment in favour of the socialists.

Although the PP government has denied any attempt at manipulation, the truth is that Aznar's Home Office Minister, Angel Acebes supported the main hypothesis that this was an ETA attack right up until the eve of the elections. And all of this in spite of the fact that by then all the signs pointed in a different direction: the finding just a few hours after the attack of a van with detonators the same as those used in the attack together with a tape with verses from the Koran; a statement made by ETA denying responsibility; a video tape from an Islamic group claiming to be responsible for the attack; clues found in a rucksack which did not explode, the detention of several suspects of North-African origin, etc.

The government thesis was widely reported by the public media and other media sources close to the PP in an attempt to convince both Spanish and world public opinion that this was the work of ETA. Similarly, the Minister for Overseas Affairs, Ana Palacio, sent a message out to all the Spanish embassies around the world, to say that ETA was responsible for the Madrid massacre.

All of this, and the way in which events were gradually developing, meant that some countries and much of the overseas press reproached the Madrid government for its lack of transparency and responsibility, considering the obvious consequences that an attack of this kind would have for the rest of the world. In fact, once the responsibility of Al Qaeda had become more or less evident many countries, including the United Kingdom, France and Italy, stepped up their security measures fearing more attacks of this kind.

## The Basque people show their support for the terror victims

As soon as news of the terrible bomb attacks in Madrid and their horrific consequences got out, people were swift to react. The Lehendakari, Mr Ibarretxe, was one of the first to condemn the attacks. Initial information from Madrid indicated ETA as the prime suspects and the Lehendakari backed this version and called ETA members "vermin". However, in the subsequent confusion regarding who was actually responsible for the massacre, Ibarretxe spoke to the public again to initially ask Basque society to show their solidarity with the victims "because people who have dignity and honour, such as the Basque people, know that they should have those who are suffering most in their thoughts at all times" and then demand that the truth be told. "Unfortunately, whether attacks were perpetrated by ETA or Al Qaeda will change nothing for the victims and their families, but it is true that the political appraisal is different and we have the right to know the truth. For social justice and because the victims have the human right to know who is behind this atrocity" he concluded.

The call made by Basque institutions for everyone to show their rejection in the streets received massive public support, and the Basque people once again gave factual proof of their rejection of any kind of terror. The streets of the three main Basque cities were too small to find a place for the thousands and thousands of people who attended all the demonstrations that had been organised.

## Twelve million people show they are against the worst attack ever



The demonstrations organised in the Basque Country were just some of the many marches organised the day after the attacks in all the major cities around Spain. It is thought that a total of around 12 million people took to the streets to express their repulsion and to demand peace. In Madrid alone around 2 million people blocked the city's main roads to express their grief in what became the largest demonstration ever organised. For the first time in history, members of the Spanish royal family were behind the banner at the head of this huge march to show solidarity with the victims.

Even ten days after the massacre, outpourings of grief and solidarity can still be felt in the city which has yet to recover from what some are already calling the "European 11th of September". Atocha station, one of the areas most affected by the bomb blasts has become "ground zero" and thousands of red candles and messages have been left there by members of the public who use this gesture to show their deepest sympathy to the victims and their families.

# The PNV wins the elections in the Basque Autonomous Region

## The Basque socialists get a fantastic result and snatch second place from the PP

The Basque Nationalist Party–PNV triumphed once again by becoming the most voted party in the last general elections held on the 14th March. With 33.68% of the votes, the nationalist coalition keeps the 7 MPs it elected to the Madrid parliament 4 years ago and obtains its best results ever in a general election, both in total number of votes and in percentage. What is more, the Basque Country is not the only autonomous region where the two-party map has changed (something that normally is the case in all the other autonomous regions of Spain).

The socialist party of the Basque Country also obtained electoral triumph, following the general tendency of the rest of the country, and became the second most-voted party in the Basque Country, actually taking this place away from the Popular Party (PP) which lost many votes throughout the Basque Autonomous Community and lost the top spot to the socialist party in the province of Alava. Eusko Alkartasuna (EA) managed to keep their one MP for Guipuzkoa, despite a slight drop in votes and Izquierda Unida (the United Left) did not win a single seat in Madrid despite having been voted for by over 100,000 people

Seats in the Basque Country		BIZKAIA		GIPUZKOA		ALAVA		TOTAL NUMBER OF SEATS
		2004	2000	2004	2000	2004	2000	
	PNV	4	4	2	2	1	1	7
	PSE-EE	3	2	2	1	2	1	7
	PP	2	3	1	2	1	2	4
	EA	-	-	1	1	-	-	1
	EB-IU	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

in the Basque Country and having increased their percentage of votes by over 3 points. The outlawed Batasuna party, who asked its voters to return a void vote, carried on losing voters to other nationalist groups such as Aralar-Zutik which narrowly missed winning a seat for Gipuzkoa in the Madrid parliament. In Navarre, the nationalist party coalition Nafarroa Bai, which was presenting itself at the elections for the first time got off to a blazing start by reducing by one the number of MPs that the Navarre branch of the PP had (thanks to the 60,000 votes it obtained) and forcing the Navarre PP to its worst election results since 1989.

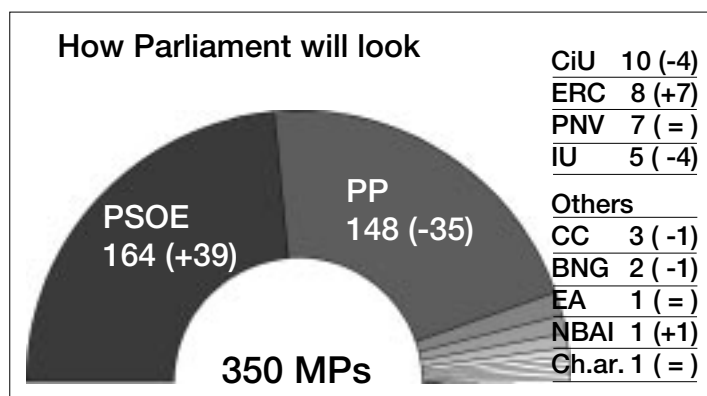
In his first public appearance since

the final election results had been published, the Lehendakari said the results obtained by the three parties in the Basque Government had been very positive, since between the three of them they had obtained 100,000 votes more than 4 years previously, increasing their percentage from 44% of the votes cast to 49%. For Ibarretxe these results are a boost for the Basque Government and “clearly indicate that we are on the right road”.

After having thanked Basque society for the high turn out, the Lehendakari added his thanks to all those Basque people who trust the tripartite government, a level of trust – he concluded – that is on the increase.

## A landslide victory for the socialists and disaster for the PP

In the rest of Spain, the socialists achieved a spectacular victory, made even more so by the fact that all the pre-election opinion polls said that the PP would win, some of them even going so far as to say that the win would be by an absolute majority. Nevertheless, the tragic events of the previous days and the way the PP “handled” them meant, according to some analysts, an unprecedented turnaround, in fact so much so that all forecasts were proved wrong. For the first time in democratic history, a party that had governed with an absolute majority lost the elections four years after coming to power, something that makes the disaster of the PP even more evident. In total, the socialists, led by José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, increased their number of seats by 39 and the PP, led by Mariano Rajoy lost 35. This will allow Zapatero to govern easily although without an absolute majority. The future president has already announced that the socialists will govern alone although they will need to reach agreements with other parties for their electoral programme to be put through. The Catalan independence-seeking party led by Josep Lluís Carod Rovira also obtained spectacular success and went from having only one minister in Madrid to having 8 in these latest elections, and all of this in spite of the campaign of harassment and disrepute that was waged against the Catalan leader after having made public his meeting with two members of ETA last January.



## The elections were held amongst numerous complaints of news manipulation

The general election held on the 14th March came at a time of numerous complaints of news manipulation against the government of José Maria Aznar. This is the first time that something such as this has happened and also the first time that the Madrid correspondents of overseas media accuse the PP government of trying to manipulate them.

The government's determination to lay the blame for the brutal attacks on ETA led those working at their news services to make direct 'phone calls to media editors and overseas journalists and ensure them that the responsibility did not lie with terrorist groups and violent Islamic groups. All of this was happening at a time when throughout Europe people were beginning to relate the Madrid attack to Spain's participation in the Irak war.

The chairman of the Overseas Correspondents Group, Steven Adolf said that "the government of the PP has the duty to inform us and may give us its opinions. However, we do not need warnings about how to write our news stories, especially when the events mentioned do not relate to reality or are premature conclusions to investigations".

In their complaint, the overseas journalists explained that they had received a call from the Presidency of the Government "with explicit instructions to write in our articles and broadcasts in our news programmes that ETA had been responsible for the Madrid attacks". The Overseas Correspondents Group has 70 correspondents and journalist from all around the world as its members, mainly from Europe, the United States and Latin America

### A complaint by the Fernando Buesa Foundation.

Accusations of manipulation did not only come from overseas journalists. The Fernando Buesa Foundation, which had been set up to pay homage to the socialist politician from Alava, murdered together with his bodyguard by ETA, was also angry because Spanish State Television and Madrid Local Television broadcast, the day before the elections, the documentary film "Asesinato en febrero" (Murder



*Thousands of people demonstrate outside the PP's headquarters to demand the truth before going to vote*

in February), which is a remake of how the socialist politician and his bodyguard were murdered. Mr. Buesa's widow said "we cannot remain silent when somebody is cunningly trying to make truth another victim of this carnage. And even less so, when the memory of two terrorist victims are used for electoral, sectarian purposes"

In Madrid Local Television there was tangible tension between managers (appointed by the Popular Party) and workers. When making declarations after the Madrid bombings, the television station's journalists said they were not prepared to tolerate any more "attitudes aimed at controlling the population using manipulation and propaganda techniques."

Irritation even reached the headquarters of the United Nations. The Security Council analysed and debated the Madrid bombings and, giving credit to the information it had received from the Spanish government, ended up making a statement condemning the massacre and making ETA responsible for it. This provoked evident upset amongst UN diplomats.

Nor was the news agency Efe free of accusations of manipulation. The Madrid Press Association is to activate

for the first time since Spain's transition to democracy its Code of Conduct Committee to look into the complaints of "censure" and "manipulation" made during news coverage of the attacks. The agency's works council accused Efe's manager of "disseminating false news".

The world of Spanish culture (artists, film directors, writers, singers, etc.) also joined the long string of protests "against government censorship" and made many statements supporting freedom of expression. Around thirty film directors have prepared a film entitled "There are reasons" (see our previous edition) that deals with the PP's political management and lack of information.

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