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During their discussions, the Lehendakari Ibarretxe and the Minister Jordi Sevilla spoke of beginning a new period, free of confrontation.

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The Constitutional Court backs the democratic legitimacy of the proposal for a new Statute for the Basque Country

The decision of the Constitutional Court not to accept the appeal presented by the previous government presided over by José María Aznar, in November of last year, on the grounds of the unconstitutionality of the New Statute, is a source of great satisfaction for the Basque Government, for whom the resolution signifies "a failure for the policy of non cooperation and confrontation". The immediate consequence of this decision adopted by seven votes in favour and five against (including the President of the Court, Manuel Jiménez de Parga) is that the Basque Parliament in Vitoria will be able to continue processing the so-called "Ibarretxe Plan". However, should the appeal have been accepted, this would have meant suspending the proposal and it would have been impossible, therefore, to debate this issue in the Basque Parliament.

The decision of the Constitutional Court comes almost six months after

the appeal had been lodged, due to disagreements between the 12 magistrates given the job of pronouncing their decision on this matter. In the end, a majority of the High Court decided to reject the appeal due to the fact that they considered it to be inappropriate as it had not been presented against a law as such, but against an agreement of the Council of the Basque Government to refer the proposal to the Parliament and against the decision of the Committee of the Basque Parliament to process the Proposal presented by the Basque Government.

The decision of the Court to allow Parliament to debate the Plan Ibarretxe coincided with the announcement by the new Socialist government to rescind the alteration of the Penal Code initiated by the previous government of the PP to punish with prison sentences any attempt to call a referendum and to try to prevent the Lehendakari from calling a plebiscite on the proposal for

a new institutional framework. The initiative has also been received with satisfaction in Vitoria and comes against a background of a new climate of relations between Basque capital and Madrid, marking the end to the blockade ordered by the Aznar government against Basque institutions. The meeting held between the Lehendakari and the new Minister for Public Administrations, Jordi Sevilla, also took place against this background. After the meeting, Jordi Sevilla insisted on the importance of recovering a sense of normality and dialogue "because we owe it to the people of this country and the best way to serve the people is through institutional coordination rather than through confrontation. These words were echoed by the Vice Lehendakari, Idoia Zenarruzabeitia, who was also at the meeting and who proposed "creating the means for both governments to deepen and develop Basque self-government". ➔

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The reasons behind the decision of the Constitutional Court

Basically, the decision of the Constitutional Court endorsed the thesis maintained by the tripartite government in Vitoria concerning the constitutionality of the proposal for a New Statute and gave its approval for this to be processed by Parliament.

The following conclusions can be drawn from a reading of the complete text of the decision of the Constitutional Court:

- The Proposal of the Basque Government is an initiative intended to set in motion a debate on this subject and is, therefore, subject to the results of that debate. It involves an open initiative which does not predetermine anything and can contain as many changes (and as far-reaching) as the Basque Parliament may decide.

- It is a proposal made in the spirit of the Gernika Statute and is, therefore, from this viewpoint, a perfectly statutory proposal which complies with the procedures and rules stipulated for its preparation, presentation and discussion in Parliament.

- The Constitutional Court endorses the powers and political legitimacy of the Basque Government to make its proposal. It does not harm or violate the powers of any other body.

- The Court considers that the debate set out in the Proposal of the Government is perfectly democratic and that the only place where it can be debated is the Basque Parliament and not the courts, not even the Constitutional Court itself. For the Constitutional Court the antidemocratic thing would be to prevent this debate, even more so in the case of a Parliament.

- Contrary to those who conceive of the Spanish Constitution as a fixed and immovable framework, the Constitutional Court has made the unlimited constitutionality of political debate abundantly clear and has reiterated (as it could not be any other way) that proposing modifications to the Constitution itself is completely constitutional.

Bilbao Exhibition Centre (BEC), the shop window on the Basque Country

The new Bilbao Trade Fair Complex is the most modern in Europe

Since April, the Basque Country has the most modern trade fair centre in Europe. Bilbao Exhibition Centre, better known as the BEC, has opened its doors to the world, ready to become the shop window on the Basque Country. Three years of work and an investment of around 440 million were necessary in order to put into motion one of the most ambitious infrastructure projects undertaken in recent years in the Basque Country.

The new trade fair is located in Ansio (Barakaldo), and occupies the site of the legendary Altos Hornos de Vizcaya. It has a total exhibition area of 155,000 square metres (equivalent to 72 football pitches) distributed in six pavilions, more than 4000 parking places arranged on three floors and a hotel, shopping centre and office block which, when it is completed, will be the highest in the Basque Country, with almost 100 m.

The BEC, which takes the baton from the old Trade Fair Centre of Bilbao, opened its doors for the first time in mid April for the construction fair Construlán, but the real test will come as the end of next month with the holding of the Machine Tool Biennial.

In brief

- **Basque companies** obtained half of the European Environment Prizes awarded to Spanish firms. Basque companies won four first prizes and two second prizes of the twelve established in the different categories of these awards, organised by the European Commission in recognition of the work done by businesses in order to promote sustainable development, which is understood to involve improving the quality of life while ensuring economic development. Now, these six companies will go on to compete for prizes in the European competition, to be announced in June..

- **The Port of Bilbao is completing work on the first marine wind farm in the Spanish state.** It only remains to receive the approval of the Department for the Environment to put the blades of the five gigantic wind turbines installed on the Punta Lucero dike into motion. Thanks to this initiative, the first one of its kind in the Spanish state, 7000 homes in Bizkaia will be supplied with electricity.

- **The Basque tourists sector continues its upward trend,** according to the latest report of the Basque Statistics Institute. Specifically, hotel establishments in the Basque Autonomous Community recorded an influx of 130,250 guests, representing an increase of 7% over those recorded the previous year, when the Basque Country beat its own record.

- **SMEs in Gipuzkoa seek new business in Turkey and China.** An agreement between the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa and the local Chamber of Commerce will allow almost 100 small and medium-sized companies to make trade missions to China and Turkey, countries in which Gipuzkoa sends 1% and 0.8% respectively of its exports. Other priority destinations due to their potential are India, Magreb countries and the countries who have just joined the European Union.

During his visit to Madrid, the Lehendakari declared that his proposal can be modified through dialogue

“I have not come to ask for anything”



“I have not come to ask for anything. I have come to offer dialogue and participation”, the Lehendakari stated categorically in Madrid, invited by the European Forum to speak about the future of the Basque Country. The presence of the Lehendakari created a great deal of expectation in political, economic and social circles. Proof of this was the fact that a large number of people turned up to hear what he had to say. Among these, the recently appointed President of the Senate, Alava-born Javier Rojo, and the new Minister for Public Administrations, Jordi Sevilla.

In his first appearance in Madrid after the elections, Ibarretxe began by referring to the new circumstances (“what a bad situation we were in”, he said, in clear reference to the previous government of the PP) and his intention of having a meeting with President José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, in order to discuss, among other questions, the Proposal for the new Statute.

“The verb ‘withdraw’ belongs to the past”

In this sense, he warned the new Socialist government that he does

not intend to withdraw his proposal as had been requested by the new President in his investiture speech. “The verbs ‘renounce’ and ‘withdraw’ belong to the past, he said. We have to look to the future and the future means contributing, getting involved in the solutions”. For this reason, Ibarretxe made an appeal “in order to advance loyally in the debate, we all have to contribute what we believe to be necessary for the future”.

Asked about his opinion concerning the decision of the Constitutional Court in favour of processing his proposal, the Lehendakari expressed his satisfaction “because now we can debate this issue in Parliament taking into consideration the wishes of our society at all times” and the stated categorically that he will always comply with the decisions of the Constitutional Court and of the Supreme Court.

Finally, Juan José Ibarretxe vindicated the “useful constitutionalism” compared to “constitutional fundamentalism”, defended the idea of a plurinational Spain and insisted that the project of coexistence with the State will always be decided according to the freely expressed wishes of the Basques.

The Government presents its “Economic Reasons” for a new Statute

The Basque Country needs to increase its levels of self-government in order to undertake a new economic transformation to promote growth and increase the well being of Basque citizens. This is the final conclusion of a report presented recently by the Vice Lehendakari, Idoia Zenarruzabeitia, to the Basque Parliament concerning “the economic reasons for a new institutional framework”, which backs the Proposal for a new Statute presented by the Government of Vitoria.

The report is based on the premise that in order to face new challenges, the Basque Country needs to undertake urgently a second economic transformation based on three principles: the construction of the information and knowledge society, the fostering of research and technology and the promotion of total quality as a new way of management.

In accordance with the report, the current framework of self government and, specifically, the strategy followed by the Spanish Government “has stifled” the potential of the Gernika Statute and has endangered the competitiveness of the Basque industrial fabric, greatly weakening the pillars on which this transformation is based. In this document she recalls that these limitations have not only been from the quantitative point of view (due to a lack of complaints with the Statute through the basic laws and decisions of the Constitutional Court) but, especially, from the qualitative viewpoint, because a legal and jurisprudential “cobweb” has been woven around it, muddling its interpretation and preventing its development.

In conclusion, the report points out that far from being a “political whim”, the consolidation of the Political Statute, giving way to a new framework of political and economic relations with the Spanish State, is an urgent need in order to rectify, prop up, consolidate and develop the pillars of the Basque economic model for the 21st century.

Goodbye to the Tree of Gernika

The 146-year-old oak tree has died

After 146 years, during which time the tree has been the most palpable symbol of the Basque Country, the Tree of Gernika has died. The high temperatures recorded last summer finished off the old oak tree, which had been ailing since 1970. It will be replaced by one of its 15-year-old offsprings, which is planted in one of the special nurseries belonging to the Provincial Council of Bizkaia.

Only the intensive care provided by specialists since it was discovered that the tree was seriously affected by the “Armillaria mellea” (yellow mushroom) fungus, enabled them to prolong the life of this oak tree, considered a symbol of the freedom of the Basque Country, before which the kings of Spain had to swear to respect the special rights of the Basque people and all the Lehendakaris have taken their oath of office. The final blow was suffered by the old oak tree last

summer but it was this spring when the specialists certified its death, after seeing that its leaves had not begun to sprout.

The offspring that is to replace it will occupy the same place as its predecessor, i.e., in front of the oath-swearing stand placed at the entrance to the Assembly House, but it will not be planted until the beginning of next year. Before this, it is necessary to replace the earth contaminated by the plague of fungi, install a drainage system and provide the new tree with more space.

The old oak tree was planted in 1858 and was the third tree used for the swearing-in ceremony. The Assembly House still preserves the fossilised trunk of its predecessor known as the “Old Tree” that lived from 1742 to 1892. Moreover, there are records of another, previous tree called “The Father” which is said to have lived 450 years.



The first centre for intercultural mediation has been created

Just a few weeks ago, the Basque Country saw the creation of the first intercultural mediation centre, an initiative of the Basque Government created with the aim of serving as a bridge between the different communities of immigrants that live in the Autonomous Basque Community and between these and the public administrations. In the opinion of its directors, the new centre, which has been given the name of Biltzen, will also be a very useful tool to favour the social integration of this group and prevent possible cultural conflicts. Biltzen is based in Bilbao and will be managed by an NGO specialised in the development of individuals and groups.

Basque scientists in space

Four Basque university students have been selected by the European Space Agency-ESA to carry out a number of experiments on weightlessness on board an aircraft making parabolic flights. In July, before students from the Basque University get on board an aircraft to record on video several experiments that will be used later to enable students to understand how the world functions when there is no gravity. To do this, the students will get on a kind of enormous roller coaster with 31 steep ascents and the same number of descents in less than two hours. But beforehand, they must design a special table for the experiments, obtain 15,000 for material and travelling, and pass the medical examinations.

The Basque mountaineer Mikel Alvarez conquers the North Pole

At the end of last month, Basque mountaineer Mikel Alvarez successfully conquered the North Pole after a journey lasting 8 days in which he had to withstand temperatures of up to 40 degrees below zero. Two years after ascending the highest peaks in Europe, Asia, Africa, North America, South America, Oceania and the Antarctic, this Bilbao-born mountaineer, aged 43 and resident in Pamplona, together with the rest of his expedition formed by six Russians, two Hungarians one English person and one North American, successfully reached the most northerly point on this planet where all the terrestrial meridians meet. Now, this sportsman plans to conquer the South Pole at the end of this year. If he manages to do so, he will become the seventh adventurer in history to have done the “Grand Slam” of ice.