

# BASQUE NEWS

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*Zapatero and Ibarretxe greet each other on the steps of the Moncloa before their long meeting.*

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## During their meeting to discuss the Proposal for the New Statute approved by the Basque Parliament

# Ibarretxe offered dialogue and Zapatero rejected any type of negotiation

Despite a meeting lasting nearly four hours, no agreement was reached. Following the Christmas break, Ibarretxe met with President Rodríguez Zapatero at Moncloa Palace with the firm intention of solving the political problems that have arisen between the Basque and Spanish institutions as the result of the Basque Parliament's approval by absolute majority of the Proposal for the New Political Statute for the Basque Country. Before the meeting, which had raised many expectations, the Basque President had already expressed his intention to go to Madrid with 'his hand outstretched', asking for dialogue and negotiation. Nevertheless, the result of the long conversation between the two Presidents came as no surprise (Zapatero had already announced his opposition) and from the Moncloa, the Spanish President's spokesperson proclaimed his absolute rejection of any type of negotiation regarding the

Proposal.

Just minutes after the end of the meeting, the Spanish Vice President, María Teresa Fernández de la Vega, publicly assessed the result of the conversations. Appearing before the media, de la Vega rejected the decision adopted by the Basque Parliament to initiate a reform of the self-government system, saying that, in her opinion, this decision 'violates the law, fails to respect the rules of the game and goes against both the Spanish and the European Constitutions'.

Curiously enough, at the same time as the Spanish Vice President was making this announcement, the Spokesperson for the European Commission, Françoise Le Bail, affirmed that the Proposal for the New Political Statute for the Basque Country was an internal Spanish issue which should be resolved within Spain before being put to the European Union.

### Hand outstretched and offering dialogue

For his part, the Basque President went to Madrid with his hand outstretched. 'I have not come simply to slam the door again. I have come to stretch out my hand and try and pave the way for dialogue and negotiation, in an attempt to ensure amicable relations between the Basque Country and Spain. We have no need of insults or hurtful remarks. What we need now are seriousness and peace. We have too much manipulation and too little information', said Ibarretxe.

In an appearance before a large group of journalists (the press room at the President's office in Madrid proved almost too small), the Basque President explained that the proposal for the New Statute was no longer in the hands of the Basque government, but rather belonged now to the Parliament, since it had been approved by the absolute majority of the representatives. ➔

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'I would like to say to Spanish society that we must all understand that the political future of the Basque Country shall be decided by the Basque people, no matter where they were born. It will be decided by all of us who live and work in the Basque Country.'

The Basque President then reiterated that the democratically expressed will of the Basque people may not be overruled by the political will of the PP and PSOE parties in Madrid. Do we or do we not accept the majority will of Basque society? asked Ibarretxe out loud.

'I am convinced that an amicable model of relations is possible,' said Ibarretxe in the Moncloa. 'The decision made by the Basque Parliament does not aim to break away from anything. On the contrary, its aim is peaceful coexistence. It is not a problem. It is an opportunity. And it goes far beyond concocted stories,' (alluding to the numerous lies that have been affirmed in relation to the so-called 'Plan Ibarretxe', such as that it aims to create an independent state). The President went on to say that 'we must talk about and debate the issue. The ideas of President Zapatero are just as legitimate as my own ideas. I respect his ideas, although I do not share them, and I would like all of us to be able to respect each other's ideas in the same way.'

The Basque President then referred to the commitment made by President Zapatero when he publicly stated that he would respect the decision made by the Catalanian government regarding statutory reforms, and said that he did not understand how this decision could be respected in some places and not in others.

'If the decision made by absolute majority in the Basque Parliament is rejected, without even the smallest opportunity for dialogue, discussion and negotiation, then I will hand the issue over to the Basque people,' said Ibarretxe. He then added that although this referendum would not be legally valid, because the Madrid government refuses to authorise a legal referendum, it would, however, be valid from a political and democratic perspective.

In this sense, he reminded the gathered journalists that the Catalanian government, run by the socialist Pascual Maragall, also intends to put the issue to the people if the Spanish courts reject the proposal made by his Parliament. 'The Basque institutions have been debating and working on the issue for four years now. If anyone has not had their say, it has not been for lack of opportunity,' added Ibarretxe, referring to the continuous refusal of both the PP and the PSOE parties to present any documents or alternative proposals to the Basque Parliament for debate. 'If we face this issue with political valour, then we can see it not as a problem, but rather as an opportunity,' he concluded. The Basque President also asked the media for their collaboration in ensuring a political debate as peaceful and free of tension as possible.

## Atutxa registers the Proposal with the Chamber of Deputies and requests a bilateral commission

The day after the meeting between Ibarretxe and Zapatero, the President of the Basque Parliament, Juan María Atutxa, travelled to Madrid to present the proposal for statutory reform, approved on 30 December, to the Chamber of Deputies. During an earlier meeting with the President of the Chamber, Manuel Marín, Atutxa requested the creation of a commission made up by delegations of both the Basque Chamber and the Chamber of Deputies, charged with the task of reaching an agreement regarding the interpretation and processing of the Proposal for the New Political Statute for the Basque Country.

Nevertheless, following his meeting with Marín, the President of the Basque Parliament announced that his petition had been rejected. 'He listened to me,' he told journalists, 'but then said that it would be impossible to acquiesce in this Chamber.'

For his part, he said he had gone to Madrid 'with an open mind, ready to collaborate, in representation of the Basque people and their will as expressed in the Parliament.' He added that he had arrived with two objectives: 'to enter the parliamentary agreement in the register' and 'to establish good institutional relations'.

### Extremist protests upon his arrival

'Good' is hardly the word to describe the welcome awaiting the President of the Basque Parliament upon his arrival at the Chamber of Deputies. Outside, a group of right wing extremists launched a verbal assault, with cries of 'murderer'

and 'die', and even attempting to attack him directly. Finally, the group of protesters, who were wearing Falangist insignias, was disbanded by the national police.

Once inside, Atutxa entered the documentation in the Lower Chamber Register.

The President of the Chamber, Manuel Marín, had already announced that he was not prepared to 'officialise' the Basque President's proposal by accepting it in person, although he did attend a later meeting with Atutxa.

**Marín: 'it is impossible for me to acquiesce'**

The presentation of the Proposal to the Parliament will enable the parliamentary committee to examine it in order to decide whether or not it will be processed. If the decision is affirmative, current legislation demands that a Basque Parliament delegation be appointed from among the elected members of parliament. This delegation may comprise no more than three people and would be responsible for presenting and defending the Proposal to the Chamber of Deputies. According to Atutxa, the three members of this delegation would probably be three members of the Basque Parliament's Commission for Justice and Domestic Affairs.

The Proposal for the New Statute will be debated in the Chamber on 1 February. PP and PSOE have already announced that they will reject the Plan.

**In his traditional Christmas Message, one day after the approval of the Proposal for reforming the Statute**

## **The Basque President called for peace and reconciliation in Basque society**

President Ibarretxe believes that this year will serve to 'open the gateway to peace and reconciliation in Basque society'. This was, at least, the commitment he made to Basque citizens during his traditional Christmas Message, broadcast on 31 December 2004, just one day after the Basque Parliament approved, by absolute majority, the Proposal for the New Political Statute for the Basque Country presented by the government. In Ibarretxe's opinion, this coming year is the perfect moment to make real headway in the resolution of the problems facing Basque society, and is an opportunity we cannot afford to miss. 'After many years of pain and suffering, it is time to climb out of the rut,' he said. 'Only by recognising other people's pain and striving for comprehension and generosity of spirit will we find the path to reconciliation.'

During his last Christmas message in this current term of office, the Basque President dedicated a few words of thanks to Basque society 'for its maturity and level-headedness' during the worst moments of political tension, 'for its comprehensive attitude' in relation to the mistakes that have been made and, above all, for 'tirelessly urging us on towards finding the road to Peace'. As part of this search for the road to peace, Ibarretxe called for the definitive end to violence and, once again, told ETA to 'disappear once and for all from our lives', since only in this way 'will the Basque people be able to express their will and decide their future in complete freedom'.

In this sense, Ibarretxe was emphatic in stating that 'we want to decide and we are going to decide', since in his opinion, this is 'our right as individuals and as a people and we will exercise this right in complete freedom,' although 'in the absence of violence'. The President was, of course, referring to the referendum he plans to hold



*Errazti (EA), Ibarretxe, Madrazo (EB) and Imaz (PNV) in a symbolic embrace, moments after the Parliament's approval, by absolute majority, of the proposal for statutory reform presented by the tripartite Basque government.*

regarding the proposal for statutory reform presented by the Basque government.

### **A surprise finish**

Just one day before the message was broadcast, the Basque Parliament approved, against all expectations, the Proposal for the New Political Statute for the Basque Country, popularly known as the 'Plan Ibarretxe' or 'Ibarretxe's Plan'. An announcement by Arnaldo Otegi, spokesman for the parliamentary group Sozialista Abertzaleak, during the early afternoon, saying that three of his party's members were planning to vote in favour of the government's proposal and three were planning to vote against, came as a complete surprise to journalists, guests and politicians alike, none of whom expected this 'Solomonic' distribution of votes, since the left-wing socialists had previously always opposed the plan.

In the end though, the 36 votes of the

parties which together make up the Basque government were joined by 3 votes from the Sozialista Abertzaleak party, thereby giving a total of 39 (one more than the number required for obtaining the absolute majority necessary for approving a statutory reform).

Immediately after the Proposal was approved, President Ibarretxe called an urgent cabinet meeting in the Parliament, during which the decision was made to initiate a round of meetings with the spokespeople of all the Basque parliamentary groups with the aim of assessing the most appropriate way of handling this new political era, and to request a meeting with President Rodríguez Zapatero with the aim of initiating a period of 'open and flexible' political negotiations.

At the same time, the parliament's legal services started work on the procedures required for sending the text approved by the Basque Parliament to the Spanish Parliament in Madrid, so that it can be processed in accordance with current legislation.



**President Ibarretxe met with the trikitrilari from Bilbao, Kepa Junkera,** who has recently won the prize for the Best Folk Album at the Latin Grammy Awards in the United States, for his work entitled 'K'. Junkera visited Ajuria Enea with his wife, three children and various close family members and presented the President with a copy of the album that has gained him international renown. 'K' is a double album, the tenth brought out by the musician, and was recorded live in Arriaga Theatre in Bilbao in March last year. The album features the sounds of the trikitixa and txalaparta, accompanied by a variety of choirs, female groups, metal bands and a mandolin player, as well as Kepa's usual backing group.

## Andrés Urrutia, new President of Euskaltzaindia

The academic Andrés Urrutia has recently been elected President of the Basque Language Academy - Euskaltzaindia, taking over from Jean de Haritschelar, who has resigned his post for personal reasons.

A native of Bilbao, 50-year-old Urrutia is a lawyer-economist and lecturer at Duesto University's Faculty of Law, where he founded the Seminar of Legal Basque.

The new president of the Academy has worked very hard over the years preparing numerous lexicographical and terminological works in Basque, focusing always on the legal field. He has been a member of Euskaltzaindia since 1991, and has held a number of different posts over the last decade, including Director of the Tutelary Section.

## A radar to locate storms in the Basque Autonomous Region

From now on it will be much easier to locate storms that may affect the Basque Autonomous Region, thanks to a new meteorological radar due to commence operation shortly. The new radar will enable the recently-set up Basque Meteorological Agency to locate intense areas of precipitation (rain, snow or hail) within a 400 kilometre radius, monitor their development and pinpoint the affected areas half an hour in advance.

## Basque students are above the average

Basque students passed the exam set by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) with flying colours. The exam was sat by students in 41 countries and the results presented in a triennial report published recently.

According to this report, Basque students scored above the European average in mathematics and reading comprehension, although their results for science were below the mean.

The study compared the academic level of a total of 4,000 15-year-old students from both public and private

schools in the Basque Autonomous Region, finding that the results were above the Spanish mean in nearly all subjects analysed, with the exception of science.

Furthermore, according to the OECD report, the Basque education system scored better than those of other countries as regards equity. In other words, no great differences were found as regards the scores obtained in the tests, with few students scoring exceptionally high or exceptionally low. In this sense, the Basque Country scored highest in Europe, and fourth highest in the world.

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