

# Letter from Aranjuez jail

Iñaki Uria

## 1.

I have been imprisoned in the Aranjuez jail for more than a year for editing *Euskaldunon Egunkaria*, then the only daily newspaper written entirely in Basque. My name is Iñaki Uria. I'm 43 years old, and I've spent 25 working in the Basque press. Basque is the oldest living language in Europe. It has about 800,000 speakers, about 30 per cent of all inhabitants of the Basque Country. Three wars in the 19th century, the loss to Franco in the 20th, the 40 years of Franco's dictatorship, and the waves of massive immigration worsened the health of Basque language. It would be dead by now, save for the efforts of many Basque people in the 1960's. They created Basque primary schools, unified the language, and made it useful for all aspects modern society, from art to science, from religion to business, and, of course, including the press. Until then, the only publications written in Basque were some Catholic journals, with religious content, directed at rural folk.

So in the 1970's Basque journalists did not begin from scratch, but nearly so. We were volunteers, without salaries, driven by day-to-day necessities. Our young vocations as journalists and writers were wholly involved in the effort to start Basque publications, even if we had to work on something else—often during weekends—to earn a living. We managed to initiate *Argia*, a weekly magazine, *Susa*, first a literature magazine, then a publishing company, and *Larrun*, a journal of political essays.

By the 1980's, we saw our projects becoming solid realities. We realized that creating a daily newspaper was the next decisive step on the way to normalizing our language—that is, enabling Basque speakers to communicate in Basque in the normal ways people use their language. We were young and brave—or crazy—enough to embark in a new and difficult project. To begin with, who was going to finance it? In the Basque Country there are no big Maecenas or patrons for cultural projects. No big businessman or political institution volunteered to support the project. They saw no future in a Basque newspaper.

Apparently, all the principles of the market ran against it. But we made it. We begged for money. And we got the support of hundreds of citizens. It is these hundreds of individual stakeholders that constitute the financial basis of *Euskaldunon Egunkaria*. After a difficult birth, it was a success. The potential market of Basque readers was small, but *Egunkaria* gained a significant part of it and, slowly, came to occupy an important place among the papers in the Basque Country. It gained prestige, credibility and influence. The Basque autonomous institutions came to acknowledge its value and began to contribute to its financing. One of its latest projects was the edition of a series of local newspapers, initially distributed for free, which hopefully would attract new readers to the Basque language. And then, unexpectedly, one year ago, judge Juan del Olmo from the Spanish special court called *Audiencia Nacional* decided to close down *Egunkaria*.

## 2.

Yes, it is as easy as that. In Spain, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a judge closed a daily newspaper with 50,000 readers. He sent 200 troops of the *Guardia Civil* (a paramilitary police force) to close down *Egunkaria's* offices in five towns. They arrested 10 people, both current and former staff members. Those arrested included the editor-in-chief, Martxelo Otamendi and myself, the managing editor. I can tell you what happened to me.

**February 20, 2003; about 1:15 a.m.** I am alone at home; sleeping. The bell rings; someone bangs on the door. I open it. Members of the *Guardia Civil* enter with assault guns. There is also a judicial secretary, or so I think. They handcuff me, arms on the back. They search the house. They take all they want. There is no witness. 3 hours and a half later, now blindfolded, they take me to *Egunkaria's* headquarters. After searching these premises, they drive me —still handcuffed and blindfolded— to Madrid —500 kilometers— to the *Guardia Civil's* headquarters. They ask me questions, silly questions. "Do you know who we are? The *Guardia Civil!*" they proudly say. I have strong reasons to be scared, for I am, after all, a Basque. Basque people know that lots of people have been tortured by the *Guardia Civil*. Some of them have been killed by torture: Joseba Arregi, Mikel Zabaltza and Gurutze Yantzi are just three famous cases.

I have reasons to be frightened. I am not frightened because I have done anything wrong. My 'crime' was just editing a newspaper. I am frightened because I am being held incommunicado in the hands of *Guardia Civil*.

They take my jacket away, and leave me just my T-shirt and shirt. I have only one blanket. I am freezing, I cannot sleep. I cannot see either. I am blindfolded most of the time. When it is removed, I still can't see much with my myopic eyes: they have also taken my glasses away. I spend five long days and nights incommunicado. I endure I don't know how many interrogatory sessions. I suffer techniques for physical exhaustion and psychological humiliation: they beat me, they put a plastic bag over my head, they put a gun against my head and pull the trigger, they aim at me with some red laser light in the dark of the punishment cell... they do with me whatever they want. But, what for? What do they seek from me? A confession. They want a connection between ETA and *Egunkaria*: they want me to serve as the intellectual and economic link and, therefore, as the justification for the closure of *Egunkaria*.

There has *never* been *any* tie, not the smallest tie, not economic nor of any other kind, between *Egunkaria* and ETA. Regarding this, I am not worried. I am suffering a lot, but surely, after those five hard days, the truth will be clear. After the isolation and torture, I am led to the judge in the *Audiencia Nacional*. I am not allowed to be assisted by, or appear with, or even talk to my attorney. The judge's questions are all incriminatory. No evidence. He will not listen to the truth. I decide not to declare. Everybody knows that *Audiencia Nacional* is a special court reserved for Basques and big drug dealers as well. Thus, he sends me to jail—a jail which is more than 500 kilometers from my town.

Here in jail as far as the wardens are concerned I am another ETA prisoner—a dangerous fellow. I, who have devoted myself to journalism and other media, am a dangerous prisoner for Spain. This has direct consequences for my quality of life. Basque political prisoners live in a jail within the jail. To discourage visits we are moved at least 500 kms. away from our hometowns and relatives—many to more than 1,000 kms. Cell inspections, naked body inspections, and isolation cells are the rule for Basques. Had our skin been black we could talk of a racist regime, an apartheid within the jail.

It is a year since I was sent here. There has been no trial. But this is not surprising in Spain: you could spend up to four years in prison without a trial—even if you are innocent! I've met people here with two and three years of 'pre-emptive' prison for being members of organizations that work for prisoners' rights, or members of a juvenile political organization, or an association of town councilors. We are Basque political prisoners. We are accused of being dangerous terrorists—with no evidence, and no trial!

### 3.

The daily newspaper we worked so hard to create, *Euskaldunon Egunkaria*, remains closed down. Its five sites are sealed, its bank accounts closed, and the publishing company in process of liquidation, following orders of the judge. Of the ten people arrested on February 20, 2003, I am the only one in prison. On October 20, 2003, nine people more were arrested. They all have been freed.

The judge has turned down two requests by my attorney for my freedom. My appeal is now in the hands of a higher court. The judge says that "there is risk of flight". I tell him no. I do not intend to run away, and I dare say he knows it. I suspect his real motives are others. How could he keep the paper closed down if no one is incriminated? If nobody had committed any crime, what would be his justification for the closure?

What are the real reasons for this attack on freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and the right for information? To understand this we must consider it in the context of the Basque issue, the conflict of the Basque Country with Spain.

Spain has been particularly skilful to take the big wave against terrorism generated after the September 11 attack on America. Spanish president Aznar, good servant of president Bush, began his own attack against Basque nationalism after he won the elections in Spain by an absolute majority. The attack intensified after 9/11 exploiting the international atmosphere the attack created. Aznar equated Basque nationalism with terrorism, banned a political party, almost 300 electors' associations, an association of town councilors, and closed down a daily newspaper. This is, sad to say, all within Spanish law, that's true. In 1996 he promised that his policy against terrorism would always be within the law, that he would not create his own terrorist group to make the war to Basques, like

former president Felipe González, from the Spanish Socialist Party, did, and the so-called GAL group (27 people were killed in "selective murders" from 1983 to 1989).

President Aznar has taught everybody a clear lesson: "you can do a lot of things within the law. If you meet a limit, you just change the law. That's the use of absolute majority." But we all know that acting legally does not mean acting fairly or morally. Having majority in parliament is never a guarantee for justice. Remember Hitler. Many of his acts were legal within the framework of laws he created.

During the last years, using ETA as an excuse, Spain has committed big injustices against Basque people. Political, social, and cultural organizations and media have been attacked, under the umbrella of made-to-order laws. The Supreme Court, the Constitutional Court, the Attorney General and the National Court of Spain have all subordinated to the executive. I'm not alone denouncing it. All Basque political parties and the Spanish parties not in office have made the same claim. But mass media are highly controlled, no less in Spain than in Berlusconi's Italy. In a nutshell, the health of democracy in Spain is in very bad condition.

In these circumstances, the rights of the Basque minority (2.6 million people) are ignored by the government of Spain (43 million people). *Most Basque people want ETA, the armed separatist organization created during Franco's dictatorship, to end its violent activities once and for all.* But we also want the Spanish government to stop the war against the Basque Country and its people it conducts with its media, its police, its judiciary, and its control of political and economic forces.

#### 4.

The conflict of the Basque Country is not new. Leave aside the wars of the 19th century, and focus on the 20<sup>th</sup>. On April 26, 1937, the fascist —German, Italian, and Spanish— air force killed 2,800 people in three hours, in Guernica. It was the first experimental air bombing against civil population. These are the sad figures of that war against Franco in the Basque Country:

- 10,800 soldiers killed in the front; 3,000 disappeared
- 4,700 soldiers and 10,500 civilians killed by air raids
- 17,500 soldiers disabled in the front
- 12,500 soldiers and 19,500 civilians injured by air raids
- 21,780 executed in the rearguard
- 34,550 prisoners
- 52,000 in work fields and concentration camps
- 150,000 refugees

This makes a total of 336,830 direct victims out of a total Basque population of 1.5 million.<sup>1</sup>

Today there are more than 700 Basque prisoners distributed in jails of Spain and France; there are more than 3,000 refugees. From 1968 there have been 1,150 people killed; almost 6,000 injured; 5,300 reported cases of torture; 30,000 detentions —10,000 of them for demonstrations—, thousands of fines, billions of euros in losses.<sup>2</sup>

What's the relevance of these figures when compared to those corresponding to the conflict between Israel and Palestine, or between Russia and Chechnya? What if compared to those of Ireland? Nothing spectacular. That's true. Moreover, unlike most of them, we have no important lobby to work for our case in the U.S.A. Where can we look for help?

After the end of the Spanish War, the Basque president José Antonio de Agirre collaborated with the U.S.A., putting at its service important men from his government in exile and his party —the Basque Nationalist Party, PNV. In the war against communism Basque Catholics were loyal allies. Neither president Agirre nor the PNV expected that the U.S.A. would afterwards support Franco's dictatorship. But Eisenhower and Dulles did so in 1953. Today Bush and Aznar are friends. In the context of their "war against terrorism" they don't distinguish

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<sup>1</sup> Ugalde, Martin (2003), *Idazlan politikoak. Periodismo politico*. Edited by J. M. Torrealdei, p. 72.

<sup>2</sup> Ormazabal, Sabino (2003), *Sufrimenduaren mapa (osatu gabea)*. Bilbao: Robles-Arangiz.

among Basques, Algerians or Iraqis— all are the same. The Spanish government doesn't distinguish among Basque nationalists. Town councilors, journalists, businessmen, and members of the parliament are basically assumed to be in league with terrorists. Dialogue is banned as a means of resolving the conflict. In Spain the war on Basques, portrayed as a brave battle against terrorists, gains votes. The Basque Country is for Aznar's government what Iraq is for the U.S.A.'s or Chechnya is for Russia's. With a difference: in the Basque Country there are almost no terrorist attacks in the last years. Why? Because the Basque people do not support it.

There is no solution for this conflict without the commitment of international organizations. The Spanish powers have closed down two daily newspapers and a radio station in the Basque Country, with absolute impunity. Attacks on free speech should be decried throughout the European Union. But who does so? The Basque Autonomous Region can do nothing except complain about these measures. The Basque Autonomous Parliament itself has been considered "law breakers" by the Spanish government. The president of this Parliament is 'lynched' everyday by the government and mass media in Madrid. Spanish President Aznar has never officially met Basque President Ibarretxe in the last four years. What Ibarretxe presents as a proposal to normalize the relations between Spain and the Basque Country, Aznar sees as a way to break relations between them.

Most Basque people want a new political status for the Basque Country within Europe. We know that concepts like *sovereignty*, *nation*, and *state* are subject to change, especially in a Europe in the process of re-inventing itself. But we are a European country and we want to be recognized as such, without the obstacles posed by Spain and France. We don't want terrorism, that's clear. Neither ETA's nor anyone else's. But our country needs new ways. Ways of peace and self-determination. *Our country needs its voice*. It needs and it has the right to be listened to, to be respected, whatever it democratically decides. But Spain wants hear nothing about that: "There is no conflict with the Basque Country. In fact, there is no Basque Country. All people are Spanish. Anything else is terrorism."

## 5.

I've been in prison a year for having worked for 13 years in *Euskaldunon Egunkaria*. This is my only crime: being the managing editor of the daily newspaper entirely written in the oldest living language in Europe, an endangered language, according to UNESCO. I'm proud of having been part of *Euskaldunon Egunkaria*. Fourteen years ago our aim was to create a paper that would be in Basque language, national, open, plural, independent, militant, professional and modern. In thirteen years of seeking the truth, we made those aims reality, and we gained our readers' trust. The Basque autonomous government partially supported the paper. The Spanish government did not. Eventual support from the Spanish government seems like a conceptual impossibility to Basque people. The Spanish Government likes to say that it "loves the old Basque language". They love it only as a dead language. They don't like to see its use promoted, its vocabulary standardized and updated, and the necessary infrastructure developed to keep it a live language. Linguistic diversity is a treasure... but one to be kept in a museum. If Basque is used in everyday life, or in mass media or posed as a qualification for a job, that is called discrimination.

The Spanish linguistic policy towards Basque can be dubbed just "extreme neo-liberalism". The policy of *laissez faire*. To leave the language seriously wounded by Franco's regime to its natural death. And when they see the Basques, against the tide, are making small steps forward, as they have for the last fifteen years, they attack through the press, the police, and the judiciary as we are clearly witnessing in the *Egunkaria* case.

The party that has been in office in Spain for the last 8 years, the *Partido Popular*, Franco's right wing heirs, now directly or indirectly controls almost all TV channels, radio stations and newspapers. In the Basque Country it has closed down two newspapers and a radio station that it did not control. Recently the heads of the Basque public TV were called to the *Audiencia Nacional* to explain their coverage of an ETA interview.

This is the state of Liberty among us. Even this letter, I'm sure, would not be published by any Spanish paper or journal whatsoever. Not even by those few



nearer to the opposition. I don't know whether it may be published in an American one without annoying the 'Spanish friend'. When the Parliament of Idaho approved a memorial stating the right of the Basque Country for self-determination, the Spanish ambassador hurried up to look for the intervention of the White House.

We know that the international community has a lot of urgent injustices to deal with; we know that every day millions of people have their rights as humans violated. Given this, how will you remember a small daily newspaper that was closed down in a small country that is between Spain and France, or its managing editor that is in prison for more than a year? Perhaps we are too small.

In the end, the Basque issue is just an issue about democracy; an issue of respecting the civil and political rights of Basque people. If we are a country, why can't we decide about our own future? Why should anyone force us to be what we don't want to be? Why don't they just ask Basque people what they want?

This was the context in which *Euskaldunon Egunkaria* survived for 13 years. We had an open mind. We thought we enjoyed a free press. We thought we had the right to inform and being informed. We thought we were free to think and to express what we thought. But we were wrong. Spain has proven us wrong. Being Basque and supporter of the Basque language is "to share the goals of terrorism" (judge Del Olmo, *Egunkaria* closure decree). Calling the paper "national" referring to the Basque nation, not to the Spanish one, is also "to share the goals of terrorism". Being militant, that is, to work under compromise and with low salaries, is "to share the goals of terrorism" too.

## 6.

The powerful don't usually apologize for the injustices they commit. The U.S.A. didn't apologize for the victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. France and the United Kingdom didn't apologize for the disasters in Africa and India. Spain didn't apologize for the genocide in South and Central America... I don't expect the Spanish *Audiencia Nacional* tell me "sorry, we have committed an injustice with you; please, go on editing *Egunkaria*." No. Unfortunately, in our world thinks don't work that way. I know that the path to truth and justice is difficult and silent. It could take years and a lot of work in the Basque Country and also

out of it. But there is no other way. If most people in the Basque Country believe they constitute a nation and want to live their future as a nation in Europe, speaking their own language, they have the right to do so. If they want to have newspapers, TV channels or whatever in Basque they have the right to do so.

One day, Spain and France will have to accept a new status for the Basque Country, with the exercise of self-determination for Basque people. In Slovenia, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia, for instance, this has been possible. In Flanders and Walloon too, they seek their way. Why not in the Basque Country? Why shouldn't the Basque people constitute a free nation in Europe, if that's what they want? Wouldn't Europe be more democratic if the forms of organization wished by their citizens were respected?

Aranjuez (Spain), February 2004