

Xabier Oleaga - Interview

«We need a single strategy in order to defend Basque culture and nationalism»

Xabier Oleaga answered the questions asked by *Egunero* in Navalcarnero prison, where he is still imprisoned. He believes that what happened to *Egunkaria* may be a warning to others and that they should take steps to prevent the same thing happening to them.

He was let out on 3 November 2003 after having paid a bail of €30,000 and after eight months in prison.

How are you?

After this, I think I have the strength to deal with just about anything. Just being in here is bad enough. But it's not the same every day. In prison nerve-racking situations can happen at any time, and that's really hard, it drains you.

What is prison life like?

We've only been in here for a few weeks and a Basque prisoner's mother and brother have already died, while his father is recovering from the terrible accident they had when they were on their way here to visit him. The following week members of the families of another two prisoners had accidents; nobody was badly injured. As if that wasn't bad enough, people at the prison in which I am incarcerated and in others have threatened to punish those of us who want to publicly denounce these terrible events by wearing a little paper badge saying "No to dispersion. Bring the Basque prisoners back to the Basque Country". That's where we're at just now, back and forward with the damned bits of paper.

Another day, because of I don't know what kind of a mistake by the doctor, you feel weak, with no strength. It's a never-ending story. You've got to accept the everyday stress, sometimes more, sometimes less.

The members of your family have just announced that the living conditions are really harsh.

Half of the punishment is the fact that they take away your freedom, and even more so when it is done so arbitrarily. The other half is the living conditions in prison. You mustn't forget that we're in here 24 hours a day, in direct contact with the agents of state oppression; in other words, we're at their mercy. Although it is true that they're not all bad, that's nothing but an anecdote on the subject of living conditions in here. Apart from that is the excessive tendency to act arbitrarily, with impunity, no protection...

And our people, the members of our families, friends, our social environment, are all miles away. We've got enough material to jolt the conscience, in a good TV documentary, of those who always look the other way. But we mustn't forget that a lot of Basque political prisoners are far more worse off than us.

Have you got over your experience with the Guardia Civil or does it still affect you?

After the terrible experience with the Guardia Civil prison seems quite soft. I think I'm over it in that respect. But I can't get to sleep at night; I keep getting flashbacks of what happened during these days. I'm desperate to get back out onto the street, of course, but I'm also frightened. I'm aware of the fact that this could happen again, everything is so arbitrary. But they haven't been able to break my

rationality, although I must admit that they're still working on it.

Did you expect to be treated this way when you were arrested?

In general we know the way the police act in our environment. On the other hand, I can't talk of the way we're treated without talking generally about the case. Recently our generation has been suffering unusual, extremely serious situations. The Spanish state oversteps itself by the day, abuse upon abuse: the closure of *Egin*, the illegalization of the nationalist left-wing structures...

Situations like this open the door to all kinds of action. But this said, my recent predictions didn't include the closure of *Egunkaria* the way it happened, or the way we've been treated.

In other cases the arrests have been less harsh than yours.

That's right. Others have been less harsh than ours. I was also expecting a "soft arrest", in inverted commas, when they came into the house and announced the accusations against us. But let me tell you something. One of the first days, when they were taking me from Navalcarnero to the High Court, one of the Guardia Civil policemen said to the other, talking about me: «... this isn't the kind of guy who kills, he's one of the ones that write»; and the other one answered: «... I couldn't care less, they're all the same to me».

You are accused of belonging to or of collaborating with ETA.

Given the way I was arrested and the way they treated me, they wanted to put us in the same bag as ETA members. We mustn't forget the accusation made against us and as a result of which *Egunkaria* was closed: that the newspaper is an instrument of ETA and that we either belong to or collaborate with the group. They've focussed on this idea to lend credibility to their lies with respect to Spanish public opinion, linking us to the armed struggle.

But you are nevertheless known for your work with respect to Basque culture, to cultural production in general and to social work.

That's right, and I'd like to make the most of this unique occasion to sincerely thank all of those, both individuals and organisms, who have spoken out in our defence. I, at least, feel indebted to their tremendous solidarity, it's been absolutely incredible.

Do you receive many letters in prison?

As far as I know, countless demonstrations of solidarity have arrived both for myself and for my two colleagues still in prison, Iñaki and Xavier, although we have also in this respect run up against the complications imposed by the penitentiary centre itself. I won't hide from you my hope that, thanks to our social and political relations, apart from the members of our three families and friends, we will still have the chance to spread news of our situation and that of all Basque political prisoners. I'm certain that the difference caused by our presence in prison will be noticed, as is now the case.

I'm sure you remember the questions asked by the Guardia Civil. What did they want to know in your case? What conclusions did you make of them?

While interrogating me the Guardia Civil asked widely varying questions, but their main concern, the one for which we could say I was arrested, was to know who incited me to join *Egunkaria* and when I did so. The judge and prosecutor wanted to hear my explanation of why my name appeared on documents stating ETA's intentions with respect to *Egunkaria*. In the first place, they didn't have to ask to find out when I joined *Egunkaria*, the information is right there in the social security files. That's why the interrogation was so absurd, everything was based on questions about legal activities, most of which could have been answered with official documents. With respect to the questions asked by the judge, although my name appears on the three ETA documents, there is no mention in these documents of my conscious intention to participate in this hypothetical project. Because no such

intention exists. I told them so, but you can see the result.

It's been a very long time since you worked as a journalist with *Egunkaria*.

That's another argument in my favour. If I had joined *Egunkaria* for the political purposes and activities of which I am accused, I wouldn't have left it after only a couple of years. They know that that's a strong argument in my favour and the Guardia Civil really tightened the screws while trying to find out why I left *Egunkaria*.

Is it true that they want to put the Ikastolas (Basque schools) in the same bag as ETA?

Both the Guardia Civil and the prosecutor asked me a couple of fairly similar questions about the ikastolas, but didn't show particular interest in the question. The prosecutor asked me if the ikastolas belonged to KAS and how they were funded, nothing else. The judge didn't ask me anything about them. But the Guardia Civil aired their opinion to all and sundry: ikastolas teach our students false history, false geography... It rings a bell, doesn't it? I don't know if PP has inherited its discourse from the Guardia Civil or if, on the contrary, the Guardia Civil has been cooked in the pots of the PP.

Do the Ikastolas have any reason to be concerned?

Yes, there's absolutely no doubt about it. They should at least take preventive steps, because the government's logic includes the taking of action against *Gara* or against any other entity, just as it did against AEK. But it's another thing whether or not they have reason to do so, excuses technically permitting them to link their accusations to ETA. But if they find them, they'll act without a second thought. Because, at the end of the day, we know their intentions, to disguise mere political aggression as the fight against terrorism. Aznar has carefully studied the doctrine introduced to the USA in response to the terrible events of 11-S.

The Spanish Government has brought libel charges against you for having denounced torture.

The government has burned its fingers with the operation against *Egunkaria*. It hasn't been as successful as other previous operations. They wanted denunciations against the operation, but the echo has been stronger in the Basque Country and abroad. Specifically the denunciations of torture have had enormous repercussion. Acebes has done what he has done to try and calm the repercussions. That's why they've silenced the denunciations of torture that we lodged with the courts, instead presenting the ones that they have lodged against us.

Do you think the operation will have a follow-up?

I would never even have said that the *Egunkaria* case could take place. I remember that when I worked at *Egunkaria*, and precisely because I worked at the newspaper, I had the chance to eat with Carlos Iturza. He was pleased, as I was to hear him say so, that ever since he had become General Secretary of his party's central headquarters he had *Egunkaria* delivered to the office with the other papers. He was pleased because he had started the battle within his own party and had won. This relationship has always been appreciated by both of us; I have proof and a witness of his having said this. I don't know what he thinks today about *Egunkaria* or about many other things, although I do know what he says. But things, as is clearly obvious, have changed greatly. The PP and the PSOE, under the leadership of the former, have decided to do away with anything considered by the Spanish State to have even the slightest relationship with the nationalist left-wing. The reason is obvious: because they consider the nationalist left-wing to be the motor of nationalism. For them, many initiatives which are simply nationalistic or which defend the Basque culture are under the influence of the nationalist left-wing. And the consequence is that the entire nationalist environment and defence of the Basque culture built, not without effort, in recent years, can fall to pieces if the nationalist parties, the social agents and, in general, those in favour of a new political framework for the Basque Country don't design and adopt a single strategy.

Do you think the Basque response is sufficient?

We could say a lot of things about the response which took place and continues to do so in the Basque Country with respect to the criminal proceedings against *Egunkaria*. It's really tempting to make an analysis of and comments on that response. The operation against *Egunkaria* has highlighted interesting questions around those attitudes, the objective of which is to solve the Basque conflict, not only the part involving the operation against *Egunkaria* and against the Basque culture. It has been fantastic.

Are there any positive consequences of what happened?

Fortunately there are. Or we should say that they are budding. I am afraid that the rich cultures sown by *Egunkaria* are buried beneath the lava flowing from the erupting volcano of the elections. The elections of 25 May, abnormal from the democratic point of view, are and could mean, in my modest opinion, the distortion of a period hopeful in itself. If the elections are held in this atmosphere I think that the best thing would be to repeat them in democratic conditions, before the term of office ends.