

## Closure of Egunkaria provokes protests throughout Spain and on European level Bilbao 24/02/03, by Jaume Clotet & Margret Qberhofer

The closure of Euskaldunon Egunkaria, the only Basque language newspaper in the Basque Country, by order of a Spanish judge has provoked a wave of protests throughout Spain, but especially in the Basque and Catalan territories. Many political parties, institutions and associations have expressed their concern, and the case has given rise to protests especially among journalists' associations and unions.

On Saturday, a massive demonstration took place in the streets of Donostia (San Sebastian) to protest against the shut down of the newspaper. The march was organised by Kontseilua, the Council of Social Associations in Support of the Basque language, and tens of thousands of demonstrators gathered carrying the slogan 'Egunkaria aurrera, Euskarari bai' (Support Egunkaria, yes to the Basque language). According to Xabier Mendiguren, spokesman of Kontseilua, the situation is critical after the closure of the newspaper. He urged all political parties to 'leave behind their political quarrels and to step into action to defend and promote intensively both the language and the culture of the Basques.' The demonstrators also demanded the release of the 10 arrested directors and managers of Egunkaria.

Three Basque government ministers took part in the demonstration. The Basque president, Juan Jose Ibarretxe, said that the judicial shut down of Euskaldunon Egunkaria was 'an exceptional measure', while his party, the governing Basque Nationalist Party (PNV), issued a statement in which it said that the decision proved that Spain is a 'totalitarian State'.

Meanwhile, the workers and journalists of Euskaldunon Egunkaria have managed to publish a new newspaper, called Egunero. The first day, they sold 50.000 issues while the normal sales of the closed publication amount to 13.000 copies. On Saturday they sold 75.000 newspapers and on Sunday this increased to 100.000 copies. This also is proof of the social concern and solidarity that the Basques have shown with this case.

Also in Catalonia there have been many protests. All political parties, except the conservative Peoples Party (PP), issued statements against the closure of Euskaldunon Egunkaria. Two Catalan journalists' independent associations, Gaziel and Grup Barnils, also condemned the decision of the judge and urged for an immediate reopening of Euskaldunon Egunkaria. Catalan Republican Left (ERC, independentist) member of Spanish Congress Joan Puigercos said the closure of the newspaper is 'a crime against the freedom of speech'. He also urged the judge to 'act against persons but not media.'

The only parties that supported the judge's decision were the Madrid based PP and the socialist PSOE. Spanish Interior minister Angel Acebes said that the operation was, in fact, an act in favour of the Basque language, because, according to him, 'ETA would not use again this language to promote its goals'. Other Spanish politicians also expressed in similar terms, although some socialists also urged the judge to work quickly so Euskaldunon Egunkaria can reopen as soon as possible.

In Madrid, the Spanish federation of journalists' unions issued a statement in which it expressed its 'concern' for the closed newspaper and its workers. Moreover, some Spanish media, such as the newspaper El Mundo and El Pais, made critical editorials and said that the freedom of expression had been 'damaged'.

This is in line with reactions made on a European level: The European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages (EBLUL) considers the closure as a 'a severe attack on freedom of expression as well as on the Basque Language' and 'as completely inappropriate in a democracy.' 'It is a linguistic right to have a newspaper in your own mother tongue and it is especially vital for minority communities', says Bojan Brezigar, president of EBLUL .

The president of the minority dailies association MIDAS, Toni Ebner, comments that 'no state has the right to gag the press' and adds that to storm an editorial office by police force, to imprison editors and administrative personnel and to suppress the media organ of a minority purely on the basis of a suspicion, is a reminder of the darkest

chapters of Spanish and European history.

MEP Michl Ebner (Peoples Party) handed in a written question concerning the closure of Euskaldunon Egunkaria. There, he calls on the European Commission to check if 'the complete shutting down of a newspaper only on basis of suspicion of aiding in terrorist activities is permissible and proportional.(EL)

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