

IV World Congress of Basque Collectivities
Inaugural Speech
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“For each era and from each generation, their knowledge and wisdom”

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Lehendakari Ibarretxe, distinguished public officials of Euskal Herria, delegates of the IV World Congress of Basque Collectivities, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen:

It is again my tremendous honor and privilege to stand before you as one humble representative of the thousands of Basques living away from Euskal Herria. My years of research among -and of- you in the numerous countries represented here tonight have profoundly enriched my personal and professional life beyond words. It is indeed a night of emotion, pride and gratification for me as I witness old friends greeting each other again on the soil of our ancestors. On behalf of the delegates gathered here, our heartfelt thanks and congratulations go to Mr. Josu Legarreta and his superb staff (Benan Oregi, Andoni Martín, and Joseba Arregi) for their years of dedication, organization, and efficient and effective administration for the Basque communities abroad. Today, Basques lead many academic aspects of diaspora and migration studies research and we are recognized internationally due to the good work of the office of the Directorate of Relations with the Basque Collectivities.

I have been invited by our Lehendakari Ibarretxe -as an academic and specialist in Basque migration, diaspora and identity research- to provide my perceptions and suggestions regarding opportunities in the current transnational globalized reality. Tonight I will address three issues that I consider to be of momentous importance:

- 1) the need to centralize and systematize the identification, collection and public access of our own historical migration archives,
- 2) the obligation for self-study in our euskal etxeak and renovation of institutional organization and management, and,
- 3) the opportunities each of us has to contribute to the global landscape a more accurate and positive international image of Basques.

Guarding our past is actually an investment in our future

Protecting and promoting Basque studies and archival collections has been the centuries-old work of various Basque diaspora communities, euskal etxeak, Basque Government-in-exile Delegations, and of Basque studies programs at various universities in Uruguay, Japan, Mexico, the United States, the Philippines. Recently, initiatives of the Basque Government Department of Culture have offered courses at numerous university campuses around the world. In each era, Basques and friends of Basques have toiled endlessly -with great personal commitment- to conserve the records available to them regarding the Basque experience of migration, acculturation and ethnic identity maintenance. It is now time to take the urgent and subsequent appropriate decisions to centralize and systematize this cumulative data and to establish an entity for the study of Basque migration. A museum or research center would function as a fundamental bridge (our theme for this IV Congress), -and using a simile- for research and information traffic, freeing the current gridlock of cost, travel, housing of materials, language and time barriers and instead serving as one physical and virtual museum and center. This initiative could scaffold together academic institutions and their students and professors, our Basque cultural centers, numerous museums, libraries and historical societies in communities where there are Basque populations (approximately 200 worldwide).

A proposed museum or center for Basque migration research could centralize and direct urgent research in collecting oral histories of living emigrants, many of them survivors of the Spanish Civil War and exile of the Franco dictatorship. It could be a physical and virtual space for consolidating databases of Basque genealogy for which thousands of Basques in the diaspora and homeland show interest in finding each other and connecting their heritage trees. Separate genealogy initiatives by University of Nevada, Reno, Eusko Ikaskuntza, the Catholic Church and other entities in Argentina, Venezuela and Chile could be merged in order to not waste time and money duplicating each other's efforts. Such a research museum could house the impressive Basque documentation collected in numerous countries and digitized by Uruguayan-Basques Alberto Irigoyen and Adriana Patrón, and other extraordinary projects of digitizing newspaper publications about the Basques headed by professors Oscar Álvarez and Alberto Angulo. In my years of investigation, all around the Basque diaspora, in boxes and drawers, in file cabinets, attics and garages I have found our relics and our emigrants' records, waiting to be rescued, analyzed and published for the world to see. Let us not dismiss this opportunity to save our own migration and exile memoirs, and let us not be the generation to be judged as reckless and negligent with our ancestors' archives. No one else will chronicle our story. We must do it ourselves, with scientific methodology, trained and capable teams of researchers, and by providing free and public access to materials. The creation of such a museum or center for research would be of extreme importance to our knowing and understanding ourselves and I urge the Congress Delegates to deliberate the initiative resolutely and to prepare for its infrastructure. I have investigated many different ethnic diasporas, and regardless of quantity, geography, or time span, I have concluded that collective memory is essential to the ethnic identity maintenance; guarding our past is actually an investment in our future.

Self-reflection and Critique in the Euskal Etxeak

It is also time for self-reflection and critique of our euskal etxeak and their vitality as institutions and organizations. Are you fulfilling the needs and interests of your members? Our euskal etxeak are non-profit and all-volunteer organizations, and have a special dynamic that has to be protected and nurtured, but also weeded and pruned. No effective organization is monolithic or completely homogeneous. In order to promote innovation you must also protect against “ethnic fatigue” and cultivate many different leaders and participants of all ages, genders and interests.

You, the leaders of the euskal etxeak must ensure infrastructures of “best practice” for ethnic identity manifestation, not only preservation or maintenance, but ethnic identity creation and re-creation. The euskal etxeak should be engines of development, encouraging individuals to seek their Basqueness in whatever ways appeal to them. The Basque Center itself is a bridge; a bridge that connects generations of Basque immigrants to each other, Basque immigrants and latter generations with your host country and with Euskal Herria, today’s Basque identity with the identities of the past and those that will be created by today’s teenagers. Our bridges will carry much traffic, often moving in opposite directions, stopping, reversing, or returning. The goal is not necessarily to direct or control the traffic but rather to offer the bridges themselves, to all Basques in the many countries in which we now live, as connections to our homeland institutions and peoples.

One hundred years from now, let it be said that the Basques of the new millennium were trailblazers of social practice. Let it be said that we followed in the footsteps of our innovative and adventurous predecessors and that we maintained a continuum of *not* fearing but rather of engaging with global transformation and world system evolution. One of the transnational shifts that we know well is that of “identity,” which is ever under construction and continuously in flow, much like the traffic on the bridge. Our euskal etxeak have to ensure that the activation of ideas and identity has numerous and fortified structures for moving “Basqueness” among generations, among geographies, and between genders.

Innovative ideas, new paradigms of ethnicity, and unusual methods of communication each buttress the architecture of our chain of “Basqueness” and foment the design of each subsequent new link. The diaspora cannot expect any homogeneity of identity when the homeland itself is rich with diversity, as shown in the latest significant study of Basque identity and culture conducted and published by Eusko Ikaskuntza. In their interviews and questionnaires of people in all seven territories, there was not one single defining factor of “Basqueness” on which even 50 % of the respondents could agree (Baxok et al. *Identidad y Cultural Vascas a Comienzos del Siglo XXI*. p. 52. Donostia: Eusko Ikaskuntza. 2006.). We are a people rich with pluralism and this advantages us if we use our knowledge and experiences wisely.

Is your organization functioning effectively and efficiently? For our grandparents and parents, the Basque diaspora institutions were prepared to respond to their needs as exiles or emigrants. Today’s and tomorrow’s latter diaspora generations are attracted for

different reasons and you have to find the mechanisms that guarantee that your euskal etxea is building its own bridges for activities and communications inside your organization, with your own local community, in your country, with Euskal Herria, and with other Basque diaspora organizations. The future is voicing inquiries that the past is incapable of answering. Each generation needs their own appropriate solutions to the issues of their own time. Today, the puzzle is the global landscape and knowing how to take advantage of the opportunities that the changing transnational reality affords us. We cannot be afraid of novelty, nor of eliminating segments of our institutions that simply are no longer needed. Today and tomorrow are dynamic and the only certainty of our lifetimes is the uncertainty and rapid shifting with which we live. Certain euskal etxeak that might be accustomed to hierarchy and routine must now learn adaptability, and to improvise with rapid but suitable and appropriate solutions. It is a changed environment and organizations are moving away from the stale structures of the past and progressing towards those based on more fluid and emergent organizational forms such as “interest networks” (Hildreth and Kimble 2004) and epistemic communities of experts. Therefore the centers must probe what it is that their members expect from the institutions? What vias, bridges and infrastructure can the institution provide in order for the individual to find self-completion as a person and as a Basque?

What is the scope of the activities of the euskal etxea? You should define it and then execute it. Then redefine it and execute it, but know what makes the most sense for your individuals, your center, and for your federation whether you are Basque-Australian, Basque-Puerto Rican, Basque-Salvadoran, or Basque-Argentine. You must build an institutional culture that results in sustainable communities of practice, though not necessarily in control of the content of those groups.

Institutional memory and training leaders who keep the knowledge of the organization itself are essential, and we need historians and teachers who are the repositories of our common practices and collective knowledge. Acquisition of ethnic identity knowledge is a social process whereby people learn from communal practices, and new members of our organizations should not be merely peripheral learners, but rather you could give them authority, hand them responsibility, and encourage them to innovate. Maintaining a hierarchy of “Basqueness” (“more” or “less Basque” based on subjective and disputable definitions and categories) often de-legitimizes those with different ideas, and it is counterproductive to us especially in the diaspora. Please remember that our Basque communities are collaboratively “owned” and the borders of “in” and “out” and must be regularly defined, negotiated and renegotiated.

Other questions leaders could ask themselves include: How are we defining and measuring indicators of “success” in our diaspora institutions? By quantity? Increasing the numbers of members participating and benefiting? Increasing the number and types of different institutional activities? And are we also using measurements of quality? For example the increased depth of understanding of Basqueness of our members, or, an increased intensity in the emotional, psychological, spiritual involvement with Basque identity?

Effective all-volunteer organizations do the following:

- Define purposes and goals: Such as, is your ultimate objective to function as a social club for latter-generation Basques, or do you have an educational mission with Euskal Herria as the reference? You, the leaders of the euskal etxeak, might consider opening a democratic dialogue and debate among your members about the purpose of your organization.
- Write a mission statement: What do we want to achieve, how, when, and by whom? What do you require of your members besides an annual fee? How do they contribute to the organization?
- Stick to the mission.
- Determine the most important services and activities needed to achieve these goals.
- Obtain and retain the highest quality volunteers, leaders and professional staff.
- Employ comprehensive financing (self-finance, grants from your own country, and grants from Euskal Herria).
- Be alert to changes in needs and opportunities.

Many of you have confided in me that you believe Basque identity in your community is in decline, but is it really? Perhaps the identity is in constant transformation and it is the institution itself that is not adapting to members' needs and expectations?

We must ask ourselves difficult questions regarding institutional self-reflection: What exactly are we doing to prepare our future leaders? What are we doing to fortify our institutions? What are we doing to increase the quality and quantity of our activities and participants? What are we doing to educate our local area community in regards to the Basques? And, with what variables and with what methodologies are we measuring our efforts? These are internal and institutional issues.

International Image of Basques

My third point of importance concerns external affairs and what I believe to be primarily the responsibilities of individuals and not necessarily the euskal etxeak: the opportunities for Basques living abroad to correct the contemporary news and media image of the Basque Country and people. It is my opinion that in the diaspora, we could mobilize and insist on the accurate dissemination of information that Basques are pro-democracy, pro-peace and pro-human rights. We must correct and replace the international image of conflict and violence, with that of Basques as the victims of aggression as we well know in this year of the 70th anniversary of the bombings of Durango and Gernika. Basques should be equated with and symbolic of peace; we have not declared war on other peoples nor have we tried to expand the territories by conquering other peoples. Basques have not imposed our language and culture on other peoples in other lands. In this small and confined area, our ancestors established the *fueros*, or foral traditional laws, which protected human, civil, and economic rights for the people of these mountains, valleys and coastal villages.

This could be the affirmative message that is broadcast by groups of specialists interested in assisting the homeland with paradiplomacy. It is time to stop playing defense and we now must use our own proactive strategies –instead of always counteracting or correcting the definitions made by others- to expand our policy capacity and advance our own agenda issues, to relay our own positive and more accurate message, on our own terms. Basques in the diaspora could invalidate the international misperception and misrepresentation of facts with our own activities regarding history and the present. In Canada, Italy, Mexico or Great Britain what specifically are you doing to educate the media of your country so that they recognize the historic and current desire of Basques worldwide to enforce and demand respect for our Statutes, endangered cultural practices, and language?

I would like to add a cautionary note in that I would advocate for the creation of epistemic communities -not necessarily inside or a part of the euskal etxeak-, but communities of experts being trained and prepared to give a message. This Congress could discuss the possibility of a special representative committee whose responsibility it would be to disseminate information sent to them by specialists. They could establish the systematic circulation of information through Basque news bureaus, with media packets, and educational materials for academic circles and opinion leaders. Excitingly, the Instituto Vasco Etxepare (initiative to diffuse Basque language and culture in the world) has been approved unanimously by the Basque Parliament and there are already many successes of establishing programs for Basque language and studies in universities, and collaborating in art exhibits, book fairs, and theater and film premiers around the world. The Basque Government Department of Culture will need our help to facilitate their work in our countries and we need to have experts prepared to open the doors to opportunity. Why not create knowledge networks and “communities of practice” that are pro-Basque? I would suggest that this Congress consider reconstituting the *International League of Friends of the Basques* as one of its objectives for the Four Year Plan.

I would suggest several cautious strategies for a possible *International League of Friends of the Basques* such as diaspora paradiplomacy and transnational activity based on the successes I have researched in other small diasporas such as ours:

- Use time-space compression (global telecommunications and technologies) to our advantage.
- Identify specific themes to address (Basques as pro-democracy).
- Determine opportunity structure entry points (where and how to educate others most effectively in your various possible spheres of influence)
- Establish epistemic communities (train the leaders and specialists in Basque issues)

We must work within the transnational network paradigm and not limit ourselves to following the Westphalian structure of only state-to-state relations, using non-governmental organizations, the United Nations, media networks, influential circles of public opinion and public opinion leaders.

What are we waiting for? The Lehendakari Ibarretxe has urged the Basque diaspora to get involved in the peace process and to assist in educating their host countries regarding the worldwide Basques' wish for peaceful coexistence, mutual respect for diversity of opinions, enforcing already existing Statutes, and following democratic processes for governing society. These are not partisan values, but are a part of the makeup of the great majority of all people living in the Basque territories, and of Basques living in other territories. This could be a part of each of our activities – to remind our audiences in our host countries (be they politicians, media, artists or teachers) that Basques around the world are a peaceful people simply attempting to rescue their history, language and culture from extinction.

To conclude, I want to reiterate that my recommendations are based upon years of research with your communities, and after comparing Basques to other ethnic diasporas. Each generation has its own responsibility that pertains to its own time in history. I believe that ours is to work urgently to protect our endangered culture, identity and collective memory. Inversely, it is not compulsory to protect existing institutions, but rather to remodel and redesign the infrastructures so that the content can be defined by those interested. However, I am only one person, and it is you who will discuss and debate these ideas and who will ultimately decide your Institutional Plan of Action for the next four years. My hope is that it will be recorded that the delegates of the IV World Congress of Basque Collectivities made brave and bold commitments -with intelligence, ingenuity and synergy- to collect and protect our archives of migration; to ensure institutional mechanisms for renovation and improvement to organizational structure and management of our euskal etxeak; and to construct bridges between our local Basque communities and the global stage of public opinion.

I wish you luck in the coming week of meetings and conferences, as well as strength, strength to be able to accept change, without haste, but without pause.

Fuerza para el cambio, sin prisa, pero sin pausa.

Eskerrik asko bihotzetik.

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