



José Rama and José Javier Olivas

The Profiteers of Fear?

Right-wing Populism and the COVID-19 Crisis
in Europe
Spain

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About this publication

Spain has been one of the countries hardest hit by the Covid-19 crisis in terms of both the number of victims and the economic impact. Thus, on March 13, 2020 the government of Pedro Sánchez decreed a state of alarm, giving way to one of the most restrictive confinements in Europe.

Meanwhile, the Spanish right-wing party VOX has clashed hard with the government during the Covid-19 crisis and even filled a no-confidence motion last October, 21st 2020. The party has also encouraged several protests against lockdown last May and October.

This study aims to analyse VOX's behaviour during the Covid-19 crisis and see to what extent it has taken advantage (or not) of the crisis. As VOX is a quite recent political party, the paper comes back on VOX's trajectory from its foundation in 2013 to 2018/2019, when it gets parliamentary representation. It then focuses on VOX's actions and discourse, at the Congress and other arena.

Having positioned themselves as the radical opposition to Pedro Sánchez's government during the first wave, where it is assumed that all parties will muck in together, does not seem to have damaged them yet. However, it does not seem as if they have benefited from the situation, at least not in the short term.

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The Profiteers of Fear?

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INTRODUCTION

The use of the term *populism* has become a constant over the last few years,¹ the relevance of this phenomenon has reached such heights that analysts refer to a populist “moment” or “Zeitgeist” (Mudde 2004: 542–563 and Mouffe 2016). The media, political representatives and the general population use it recurrently although often implying meanings that do not fit its scientific conceptualisation and that in general seek to disqualify certain discourses and political leaders. Several definitions are used in academia, one of the most influential comes from Cas Mudde who understands populism as “[...] a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite,” and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.” (Mudde 2004: 543).

There has been a wide variety of populist movements throughout the world, including the Russian “narodnichestvo” and 19th century North American populism, Latin American populisms, left-wing populisms in southern European countries, Euro-sceptic and pro-sovereignty right-wing, personalist in India and many others (Berlin 1968: 137–79 and Roviara-Kaltwasser et al. 2017). In Spain, interest in populism was revived by the global financial crisis and the fascination for the “indignados” or “15-M” mass movements in 2011 (Kyriakidou & Olivas Osuna 2017: 457–472). Podemos emerged from this in 2014, as a party that capitalises on this dissatisfaction with strong, initially transversal, discourse against corruption and “caste” (political and business elites) that led them to become the country’s third political force the following year, winning over twenty percent of the vote. However, while Podemos slowly slid into positions edging closer to the traditional left, and their electoral base dwindled from 2016 onwards, another protest party, in this case the right-wing formation VOX, has begun to generate concern among defenders of a pluralist conception of democracy by gaining a stunning increase in voters and media attention over the last few years.

VOX has exploited political instability in Spain, with a unilateral declaration of independence in Catalonia in 2017, a successful vote of no confidence in 2018, two general elections in 2019 and a minority government, to bring itself to the centre of the Spanish political debate. As Unidas Podemos² entered Pedro Sánchez’s socialist government, VOX managed to carve out its place as the main populist opposition.

On 21 October, Santiago Abascal, leader of VOX, defended his vote of no confidence against the Government of Spain from the benches of the Congress of Deputies. In Abascal’s own words, there was no alternative but to bring a *necessary* vote of no confidence as, without a doubt, Pedro Sánchez’s Government “is the worst Government in the last eighty years” (RTVE 2020). Furthermore, according to the VOX leader, more than a Government, the people who are leading Spain today are a “communist social popular front in alliance with separatists and terrorists”, in other words “a Mafia” (Abascal 2020)³. This use of aggressive and deliberately exaggerated rhetoric with moral connotations is not an isolated or anecdotal incident. It is part of a political strategy and a communication style common to other populist movements, that, in the context of the Coronavirus pandemic, seems to have reached new levels (Moffitt 2016: 17–25 and Ostiguy 2017:17).

The severity of the Covid-19 pandemic in Spain⁴ and the shortcomings of how it was managed by the central and regional governments, have been used by this radical right-wing party as a pretext to exacerbate their antagonistic discourse against the coalition government of the Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party (PSOE) and Unidas Podemos (UP) (Franco 2020 and García-Basteiro et al. 2020: 529–530). With the exception of the first request to approve the state

¹ In 2017, the Cambridge Dictionary made the term *populism* its word of the year: <https://www.cam.ac.uk/news/populism-revealed-as-2017-word-of-the-year-by-cambridge-university-press>

² *Unidos Podemos* is an electoral coalition of Podemos and *Izquierda Unida* (IU) – formerly the Spanish Communist Party (PCE) – that was formed in 2016 for the general elections that took place in June.

³ It is worth noting that the democratic period began in Spain when the Constitution was approved in 1978. By referring to the last eighty years, the VOX leader is suggesting that the current government is worse than the Francoist dictatorship governments.

⁴ Spain is one of the countries most severely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic with excess death figures estimated at 44,593 during the first wave (10 March to 9 May 2020) and 18,752 during the second wave (20 July to 10 November 2020) according to the daily Mortality Monitoring Systems (MoMo) https://momo.isciii.es/public/momo/dashboard/momo_dashboard.html

Table 1
Main political milestones in the history of VOX

2013	
17 December	VOX registered as a new political party founded by former PP members Alejo Vidal-Quadras, Santiago Abascal and José Antonio Ortega Lara.
2014	
16 January	VOX was formally presented as a liberal centre-right party that intended to topple the current Autonomous Regions funding model (RTVE 2014).
8 March	Alejo Vidal-Quadras was elected president of VOX.
25 May	VOX obtained 1.6% of the vote at the European Parliament elections with a total of 246,833 votes.
20 September	Abascal was elected the new president and Iván Espinosa de los Monteros General Secretary.
2015	
22 March	VOX stood in the Andalusia regional elections and obtained 0.23% of the vote.
24 May	VOX obtained 0.29% in the municipal elections and 0.62% of the vote on average in 9 regional elections where it put forward a candidate.
20 December	VOX obtained 0.23% of the vote in the general elections.
2016	
26 June	VOX obtained 0.20% of the vote in the general elections.
25 September	VOX obtained 0.07% of the vote at the Basque Country regional elections even though Abascal, the party leader, was the candidate. The party did not send a candidate to the regional elections in Galicia.
2017	
6 November	VOX stood as a private prosecutor in the case against pro-independence leaders who had organised an illegal referendum in Catalonia.
2018	
10 September	The regional member of parliament for the PP in Extremadura, Juan Antonio Morales, left the PP and joined VOX.
6 October	More than 9000 VOX followers filled the Vistalegre sports arena at a rally that focussed on defending the unity of Spain, against the autonomous regions funding model, immigration and feminism (Hernández 2018).
2 December	VOX obtained 10.96% of the vote at the Andalusia regional elections.
2019	
16 January	Thanks to external support from VOX, a PP and Ciudadanos coalition formed a government in Andalusia.
22 April	VOX was excluded from the first televised debate among candidates for the new general elections (because they had no representation in parliament)
28 April	VOX obtained 10.26% of the vote in the General Elections and 10.59% in the Valencian Community (which held its concurrent regional elections earlier than the other regions)
26 May	VOX obtained 6.21% of the vote in the European Parliament elections, 3.57% in the municipal elections and an average of 6.97% of the vote in the regional elections that all took place on the same day.
26 July	Thanks to support from VOX, a PP and Ciudadanos coalition formed a government in Murcia.
14 August	Thanks to support from VOX, a PP and Ciudadanos coalition formed a government in Madrid.
10 November	VOX obtained 15.09% in the repeat general elections.
2020	
12 July	VOX achieved 1.26% of the vote in the Basque regional elections and 2.03% in Galicia.
22 October	VOX's vote of no confidence against the government was defeated as it failed to gain support from any other party.

Source: own work based on Rama et al. (2021)

of alarm to determine a stay-at-home order or lockdown, VOX has directly opposed all measures suggested by the government, to the point of bringing a vote of no confidence against the Government in the middle of the pandemic.

However, to understand the VOX phenomenon it is important to analyse its trajectory (see Table 1). Formally, the party

emerged in late 2013, mainly driven by former leaders of the conservative Partido Popular (PP). After several failed attempts to obtain representation, they finally managed to get some seats in the Andalusian regional elections in December 2018 and later in the April 2019 General Elections. As opposed to other radical right-wing parties that normally owe their popularity to a discourse rallying citizens' anti-immigration mindset, to a large extent VOX was driven at a grassroots level by

its discourse on the territorial unity of Spain and particularly the context of the secessionist challenge in Catalonia (Turnbull-Dugarte 2019 and Vampa 2020).⁵

THE CONFLICT IN CATALONIA AND THE ELECTORAL THRUST FOR VOX

After a very significant rise in support for independence in Catalonia, the Catalan nationalist parties that controlled the regional government, along with several organisations from civil society produced a road map for unilateral independence⁶. This process began when the, conservative and traditionally moderate, coalition, *Convergència i Unió* that ran the regional government, entrenched in corruption scandals and in the midst of a severe economic crisis, decided to embrace the independence movement and blame the central government in Madrid for Catalonia's problems (Barrio & Field 2018: 713–715 and Olivas Osuna et al. 2020). These plans included setting up state structures and generating a conflict to force “disconnection” with Spain (Hernández 2017). In 2017, after organising an illegal referendum, Catalonia's independence became a great concern for the Spanish people, second only to unemployment (CIS 2017).

In this context of generalised concern, VOX carved out a remarkable public role as a private prosecutor in the widely reported trial against the pro-independence leaders who were accused and later sentenced for a variety of illegal acts (STS 459/2019). By adopting a populist discourse confronting the also populist rhetoric and claims by the Catalan pro-independence parties and Unidas Podemos, VOX capitalised on the concern among many citizens who perceived that the major Spanish parties, PP and PSOE, had lacked conviction and allowed the unity of Spain to be endangered (Barrio et al. 2019 and Olivas Osuna 2019). VOX also managed to capture media attention that helped to boost Abascal's party, and to shape the topics and framing of the public debate.

Consequently, the regional elections held in Andalusia in December 2018 went down in history as putting an end to *Iberian exceptionalism*⁷ against the wave of radical right-wing parties, experienced by its European neighbours over the last few years (Halikiopoulou & Vasilopoulou 2018 and Norris & Inglehart 2019 and). At this point, it seemed that

finally VOX had achieved sufficient critical mass to cross the implicit threshold in the Spanish electoral system and present itself to voters as a viable political force (Márquez & Ramírez 1998: 45–59)⁸. At this point, many former PP voters, although also from other parties, decided to support Abascal's party that now seemed to have a chance of achieving representation.⁹ This wind of change reappeared in the April 2019 general elections in the form of 10.26 of the vote, and only a few months later, after Pedro Sánchez failed to form a government, in the November election the same year, where VOX, now the third most voted party, won more than 15% of the vote. Table 2 sums up the recent electoral *to-ing and fro-ing* in Spanish politics on a national level: from a system with two large parties and a set of smaller ones in 2011, to a multi-party system with five medium-sized national parties and several regional formations from 2019.

In this respect, as opposed to how radical right-wing parties have been treated in other countries, a complete *cordon sanitaire* has not been implemented around VOX in Spain. This party has managed to get political compensation in exchange for support for PP and Ciudadanos coalition governments. However, despite the fact that VOX, as summarised in Table 1, has managed to get good results in general, regional, European and local elections over the last few years his influence should be contextualise. VOX only rules in five local authorities out 8,131 in Spain (all under 115 inhabitants), it has only played a relevant role in the investiture agreements in the Region of Madrid, Murcia and Andalusia and in the city council of Madrid, Zaragoza, Córdoba, Santander and Badajoz, and it has been excluded from most of the coalition governments that it has supported (EFE 2019).¹⁰

So, returning to an idea that was mentioned previously, it is important to highlight the disproportionate media visibility of VOX whose leaders, and often controversial political proposals and interventions in the public sphere, became the central theme of political discussion, opinion articles and even comedy and entertainment programmes (Serrano 2019). The fascination demonstrated by both conservative and progressive media has made it easier for VOX's message to reach citizens. Studies such as by Olalla Ubierna, Chueca and Padilla demonstrate that the main Spanish newspapers, such as *El País* and *El Mundo*, gave VOX disproportionate coverage which, at the time, brought it electoral support at the regional elections in Andalusia in 2018 (Olalla Ubierna et al. 2019).

⁵ It is noteworthy that the presidents of VOX to date have been a Catalan (Alejo Vidal Cuadras) and a Basque (Santiago Abascal).

⁶ The largest nationalist political parties in Catalonia; *Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya* (CDC) and *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* (ERC), joined forces with *Demòcrates de Catalunya* and *Moviment d'Esquerres*, and civil organisations such as *Òmnium Cultural*, *la Associació de Municipis per la Independència* (AMI), *Assemblea Nacional Catalana* (ANC), among others, to create a coalition and stand at the Catalonia regional elections in 2015 in an attempt to get independence for this region. See *Junts pel Sí* (2015) Manifesto.

⁷ Spain, alongside its neighbour Portugal, that also forms part of the Iberian Peninsula, were countries that had not experienced the electoral emergence or rise of radical right-wing populist formations until 2018 in Spain (regional elections in Andalusia) and 2019 in Portugal (legislative elections).

⁸ The Spanish electoral system is detrimental to relatively small political forces that like VOX, do not have a territorially concentrated vote.

⁹ In December 2018, 67.2% of people who said they intended to vote for VOX had voted for the PP, 17.4% for Ciudadanos and the rest abstained or voted for other parties, including 4.7% of UP voters (Varela 2018).

¹⁰ VOX has only formed part of the governing coalition in the city of Badajoz and with just one councillor who oversees waste collection coordination.

Table 2

Electoral results in general elections, Spain 2011– 2019

Percentage of the vote and number of seats for national parties

	2011	2015	2016	2019	2019
IU	7,02 (11)	3,7 (2)			
Podemos/UP		20,83 (69)	21,31 (71)	14,3 (42)	12,8 (35)
PSOE	29,16 (110)	22,16 (90)	22,8 (85)	28,7 (123)	28 (120)
Cs		14,05 (40)	13,16 (32)	15,9 (57)	6,8 (10)
PP	45,25 (186)	28,92 (123)	33,26 (137)	16,7 (66)	20,8 (88)
VOX		0,23 (0)	0,20 (0)	10,3 (24)	15,1 (52)

Source: Ministry of the Interior, Electoral Results (www.infoelectoral.mir.es) and Central Electoral Commission

MAIN IDEOLOGICAL TRAITS

VOX is a party that ideologically might be classified as radical right-wing populist (Turnbull-Dugarte et al. 2020 and Mudde 2010: 1167–1186). Regarding the social component, VOX defends a traditionalist Christian conception of Spanish society with frequent references to the threat of Islam. For example, VOX proposes to “close fundamentalist mosques and expel imams that spread fundamentalism, scorn for women, or the jihad”, “exclusion of teaching about Islam in public schools” and “setting up an Agency to help threatened Christian minorities, imitating a similar initiative in Hungary” (VOX 2018: 17&23). VOX also directly opposes marriage between people of the same sex, demanding protection for the “natural family” and proposes to reform abortion laws to make the process more difficult (VOX 2018: 14&17–18). One important line in its discourse opposes what they call “gender ideology” and feminism (VOX2020). For example, they demand that laws to protect against gender violence are repealed (instead calling to restore former family violence laws) and that “subsidised radical feminist organisations” should be suppressed (VOX 2018: 17). In line with other radical right-wing parties, VOX has taken a position that undeniably opposes immigration, calling for “deportation of illegal immigrants to their countries of origin”, new requirements and barriers for nationality and establishing quotas based on linguistic and cultural criteria (VOX 2018: 5–6 and VOX 2019).

However, this party also presents some peculiarities in its manifesto that are worth highlighting. In economic terms, as opposed to other radical right-wing parties that identify more with so-called welfare chauvinism, such as the French *Rassemblement National*, the Hungarian *Jobbik* or the Polish Law and Justice (PiS), VOX maintains a clearly liberal discourse in favour of the free market (Greve 2019). Consequently, this party maintains a discursive balance between right-wing identitarian logic and economic neoliberalism (González Cuevas 2019: 175–182). In addition, VOX is characterised by defending a unitary and centralised government, proposing to suppress the pro-independence parties

(González Cuevas 2019: 176–177). Despite this proposal to radically transform the configuration of the state, and as opposed to other populist parties, VOX defines itself as the defender of Spanish institutions such as the Constitution and the Constitutional Monarchy against attacks from the left and separatist parties. This defence contrasts with the attitude of the far right in Spain during the transition to democracy.

The profile of a VOX voter is a man in the youngest or oldest age bracket, with intermediate studies, high income levels, a practising Catholic, ideologically aligned with the right, with a strong feeling of identification with Spain but discontent with how its political system works (Santana & Rama 2019). This feeling of a rift with the institutions is clearly seen, not only in levels of satisfaction with democracy expressed by VOX voters but in their support for the former Francoist regime. This leads to the situation where, according to the post-electoral study by the Sociological Research Centre (CIS) for the November 2019 elections, a far from negligible 21.65 percent of VOX voters expressed that, in some circumstances, an authoritarian regime is preferable to a democratic one (CIS 2019).

MUTATION OF THE DISCOURSE AND STYLE

Influenced by other parties and ideologies from the radical right such as Steve Bannon, Abascal's party has moved from a fundamentally ultra-conservative and nationalist discourse towards a much more populist style, adopting anti-globalist ideas, criticising supra-national institutions and embracing conspiracy arguments, including attacks on George Soros and accusations to the PSOE and UP governments of attempting to set up a communist regime (Sommerlad 2019, Parto 2019, El Español 2020, Mayor Ortega 2019 and Congress Sessions Record 2020). VOX has also developed quite an effective social media strategy, becoming for instance the Spanish party with the most followers on Instagram (Viejo & Alonso 2018).

Their populist discourse divides Spain into two different parts: “la España viva” (Living Spain) that VOX represents, as opposed to “España muerta” (Dead Spain), featuring progressive media, partisan elite, gender ideology, among others (Casals 2019 and Casals 2020: 27–35). The leaders of VOX have also embraced a coarse and aggressive rhetoric style, intentionally distanced from what is politically correct emulating Donald Trump and other international populist figures. For example, during VOX’s vote of no confidence against the government, their deputy spokesperson, Ignacio Garriga, referred to “electoral fraud”, accused ruling coalition of “participating in a coup”, of totalitarian ideology, of “starting up a machine of violence against VOX”, of “criminal management” and condemning many Spanish people to death. He also accused “illegal immigrants” of attacking, intimidating and stealing (Garriga 2020). The use of bad manners, a clearly hyperbolic tone and dramatizing political crisis, fits with a populist strategy that aims to side with “Joe public” as opposed to the political, economic and intellectual elites (Moffitt 2016 and Ostiguy 2017).

VOX’S DISCOURSE DURING THE STATE OF ALARM

The COVID19 pandemic has been also instrumentalised in this polarisation strategy. Confirming arguments regarding populism’s performative nature, this party organised people’s rallies to protest against the government’s management during the pandemic, both in May and in October, encouraging citizens to use their vehicles and thereby circumvent the lockdown rules (*La República* 2020 and Europa Press2020). Furthermore, the health and economic crisis seems to have had an impact on confidence in governments and institutions, satisfaction with democracy and electoral participation (Bol et al. 2020 and Flanders et al. 2020). Some studies highlight that it has increased the demand for stronger leaders, citizens’ willingness to renounce their individual freedom and, in general, a growing preference for technocratic governments even if they display some authoritarian traits (Amat et al. 2020).¹¹ Aware of this situation, VOX has adapted and reinforced its confrontation discourse and when the majority of parties attempted to show unity in the fight against the pandemic, they voted against successive extensions for the state of alarm and called a vote of no confidence against the government.

On the one hand, VOX has used conspiracy theories, accusing the Spanish government of using euthanasia on thousands of elderly people and China of having created a virus to damage other countries (Carvajal 2020). Abascal suggests demanding that China should pay compensation and congratulated Trump for leaving the WHO, insinuating that it is

controlled by China (Europa Press 2020). In this context, furthermore, VOX has intensified its European anti-immigration and anti-integration discourse, which seems to bring them even closer, if possible, to their populist European contemporaries (McDonnell & Werner 2019). For example, in Madrid City Hall, VOX has promoted measures to slow down immigration arguing, against all scientific evidence, that immigrants are more likely to carry coronavirus (*La Vanguardia* 2020). On the other hand, VOX has intensified its anti-European discourse. During the recent vote of no confidence, Abascal referred to the European project as “progressive and globalist tyranny” and affirmed that “the Spanish people are not going to allow their nation to disappear, turned into a region of a replica of the People’s Republic of China” and that “Brussels won’t save us” from the crisis.¹²

Getting a better understanding of the scope of this apparent change in VOX discourse in recent times requires systematically analysing their parliamentary speeches on the state of alarm in Spain caused by the COVID19 pandemic. In this respect, as a recap, the declaration of the state of alarm took place on 25 March 2020, transferring most powers to the central government and decreeing a general stay-at-home order. At first, it was called for a period of two weeks. However, it was successively extended, the last time on the 3 June of the same year. VOX only voted in favour of the state of alarm the first time and clearly opposed each of the successive votes.¹³

It is particularly interesting to see to what extent the discourse from the new political force in the Congress, VOX, had been able to change parliamentary dynamics and influence the other political parties. We analysed the content of parliamentary speeches, dissecting them according to the five main dimensions of populism (Laclau 2005; Canovan 1981 and Mudde 2004: 542–563):

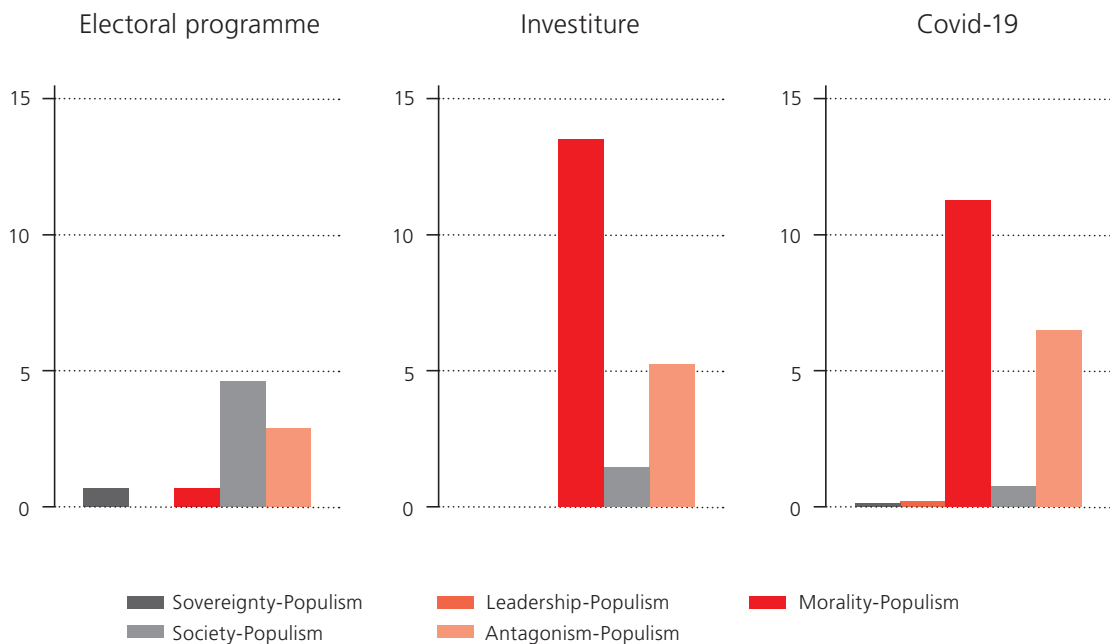
1. Antagonism: simplistic and antagonistic representation of political and social players (“us” against “them”) and calls for radical changes in the system.
2. Morality: establishing a moral hierarchy among players, disqualifications and *ad hominem* attacks to undermine the political opponent.
3. Idealisation of society: ahistorical and anti-pluralist description of the people, emphasis on homogeneity within the group and marked difference from the other.

¹¹ We should remember that elections in Spain were postponed during the pandemic, anyone testing positive for Coronavirus was forbidden to vote (elections in Galicia and the Basque Country), there was a proposal to control information to control fake news, application of the transparency laws was suspended and individual freedom was limited during the state of alarm.

¹² In this respect, Abascal used this criticism of the integration process to, in turn, defend the nation state and emphasise the nativistic component in his discourse: “People are waking up in Europe to defend their sovereignty and defend their western identity, they are demanding the nation-state as an irreplaceable unit and supreme space for democracy, and they reject a federal mega-state that looks like the People’s Republic of China or, even, the Europe that Hitler dreamed of” (Congress Sessions Record 2020).

¹³ Out of all seven extensions to the state of alarm that the Government had to put to a vote in the Congress, VOX only voted in favour the first time, voting against it the other six times (just like most of the regionalist / independent parties such as ERC, JxCat or Bildu) (Alfonso 2020).

Figure 1
Populist references in VOX’s manifesto (November 2019), investiture session (4 January 2020) and interventions in sessions on the state of alarm (March-June 2020)



Source: own work

4. Popular sovereignty: lack of boundaries for the “will of the people” and preference for direct democracy tools such as referendums or massive rallies.
5. Personalist leadership: the leader gives the people a voice and brings their interests to life. Their relationship with this population does not have to be measured by parties, parliaments or other institutions.

Figure 1 shows how VOX’s discourse is modulated from the populist point of view and evolves according to circumstance. The morality and antagonism components become much more salient in Abascal’s parliamentary speeches while the references to an idealised conception of traditional society become less prominent (Olivas-Osuna & Rama 2020).

In the same way, Figure 2 shows that there is an evolution in populist (left-hand graph) and anti-populist (right-hand graph) discourse for the case of VOX during the pandemic.¹⁴

The lines, both moralist and antagonist, tend to move upward and the last debate during the state of alarm saw the greatest doses of populism deployed. Use of antagonistic allusions over the six points in time being analysed stands, on average, at 6.4 while the average of moralist allusions is 11.12. So then, on 3 June, these figures rose to 10.68 and 14.25 respectively. A clearly hyperbolic and belligerent tone could be perceived in the interventions in the final session:

“Mr Sánchez, you can’t disguise this: tens of thousands of dead Spaniards due to sectarianism and criminal negligence by this Government and millions of Spaniards ruined by sectarianism and a hidden state of exception” (Abascal, 3 June 2020)

“...We know where your Government stands,[...], forging new agreements with all of Spain’s enemies who are not in the Council of Ministers, of course: with ETA, with the Partido Nacionalista Vasco and with Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya, with everyone who has only ever been concerned, are and will be concerned by Spain going down in flames...” (Abascal, 3 June 2020).¹⁵

¹⁴ The figures show the density of the allusions. To calculate this figure, the number of phrases that we consider belonging to each category (Sovereignty, Leadership, Morality, etc.) is divided by the total number of words in the speech and multiplied by one thousand, to provide figures that are easier to interpret.

¹⁵ Congress Sessions Report, http://www.congreso.es/public_oficiales/L14/CONG/DS/PL/DSCD-14-PL-25-C1.PDF

Figure 2
Evolution of populist and anti-populist references in VOX's discourse, March 2020 to June 2020



Source: own work

So, this discourse from VOX could have had a contagion effect on other formations. In moralist terms, although far from VOX numbers, Unidos Podemos has demonstrated figures of around 7.5 (a long way off figures for parties such as Ciudadanos or the PSOE, always under 2.5). On the left, Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC) has moved from 2.72 and 1.94 for moralist and antagonist allusions, respectively, on 25 March 2020, to 8.59 and 7.47 on 3 June 2020. This doubtlessly shows a clear increase in populist rhetoric. Even more so given that the populist allusions of these parties were partly allusions to VOX (Congress Sessions Report, 2020).

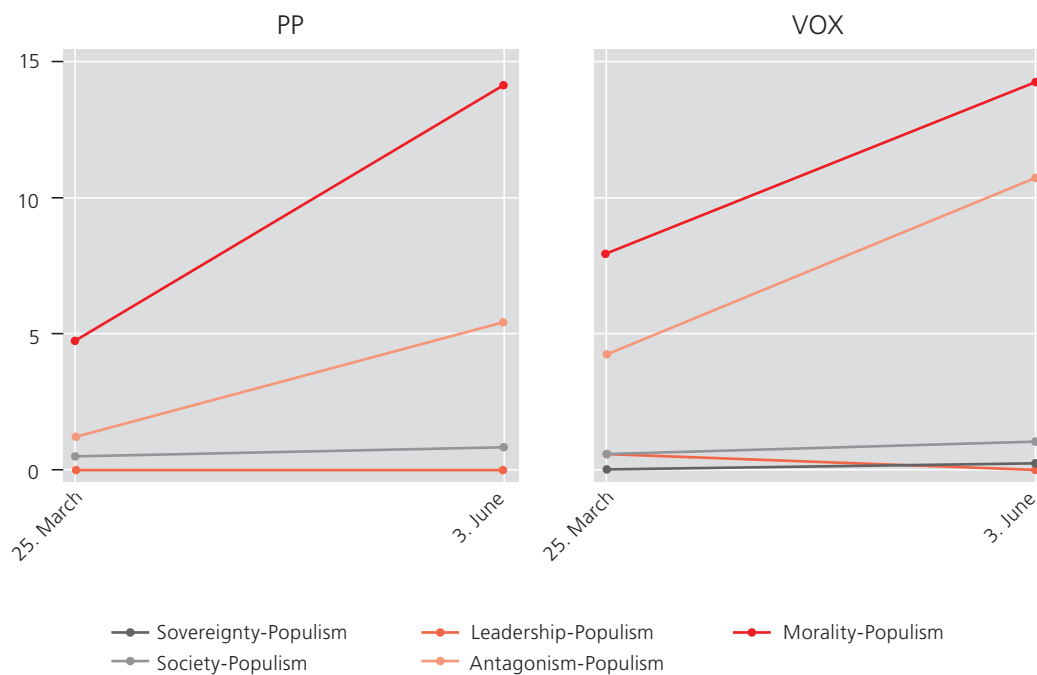
For the case of the PP, this *populist contagion* has been even more relevant: the figures speak for themselves and Figure 3 demonstrates this well. Pablo Casado, leader of the PP, changed from a barely populist intervention at the start of the crisis to a much more populist style where he accused the government of hiding deaths, lying and damaging institutions to stay in power (Congress Sessions Report, 2020). In terms of morality, his populist references tripled from 4.74 to 14.14. In fact, along with the VOX levels on 3 June (14.25), they show the highest values of all the Spanish parties being analysed. The evolution of their antagonistic rhetoric is also remarkable: from 1.25 to 5.44. It seems that the PP, seeing how VOX was presenting itself as the only party that was providing aggressive opposition

to the government, decided to raise the tone so as not to lose voters in favour of this party. However, Casado's coded populist references, although plentiful, do not reach the level of intensity and emotional charge of Abascal's speech. Furthermore, it should be noted that during the vote of no confidence in October, the PP hit a turning point and leaned towards the centre, apparently abandoning its populist tone from previous speeches.

THE FUTURE OF VOX

It is difficult to predict whether VOX's increasingly populist strategy will continue to be successful in the future. Regarding the elections in November, VOX seems to show a slight upwards evolution in some polls, as in the latest survey taken by the Sociological Research Centre (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, CIS) (Electocracia.com and Santaaulalia 2020). Having positioned themselves as the radical opposition to Pedro Sánchez's government, even in the midst of a health crisis such as this, where a certain collaboration of all parties is assumed, does not seem to have harmed them yet. (see Figure 4). VOX seems to have interpreted the coronavirus pandemic as a window of opportunity to differentiate its political offer from that of the rest of Spanish parties, intensifying the use of a confrontational discursive style with many rhetoric elements wherever possible. The initial

Figure 3
Comparison of populist references in the PP and VOX discourse, March 2020 and June 2020



Source: own work

reaction of the PP during the first wave, adopting also a somewhat populist discourse vis-à-vis the COVID-19 crisis may indicate a certain degree of success in VOX approach. However, during the vote of no confidence in October, in the midst of the second wave, the leader of the PP, Pablo Casado, decided to make a clean break from VOX and vote “no” at the vote of no confidence, with a speech that highlighted the danger of this party’s radicalism and that asked citizens to take the threat of populism seriously (*El País* 2020). The speech, applauded by many, took Abascal’s formation by surprise (Santaeulalia 2020). VOX not only seemed confused during the rest of censure motion session but also chose to confront the PP days later in Andalusia by leaving the approval of the regional budget up in the air (Morillo 2020). Abascal and other leaders from his party not only feel betrayed, but have reason to fear that a rupture with the PP will once again pigeonhole them as an extremist party alien to government pacts.

Thus, the radicalisation of VOX’s discourse along with the recent shift of the PP towards the centre of the political chessboard, a space that it seemed to have abandoned after Mariano Rajoy’s departure, could give way to at least two different scenarios: on the one hand, PP’s and Ciudadanos’ centrist turn in the last few months could catapult VOX into the limelight as the “real” opposition to the current government. Especially, if the political climate continues to remain

tense revolving around the territorial conflict and topics of identity, VOX can continue attracting citizens who feel alienated by the left-wing government and not sufficiently defended by the centre-right opposition.¹⁶ In the alternative scenario, the PP could capitalise on the defeat of the vote of no confidence and Casado’s well-received speech and recover voters who left the PP to join VOX or Ciudadanos in the last elections.¹⁷ This could mean that VOX would be isolated and gradually becomes a party with less capacity to shape Spanish politics and therefore less attractive electorally-speaking. Thus, if Spanish politics returns to “relative normality”, VOX’s deliberately exaggerated and aggressive discourse could end up costing it a significant percentage of votes that the Spanish electoral system may translate into a significant loss of seats in future elections.

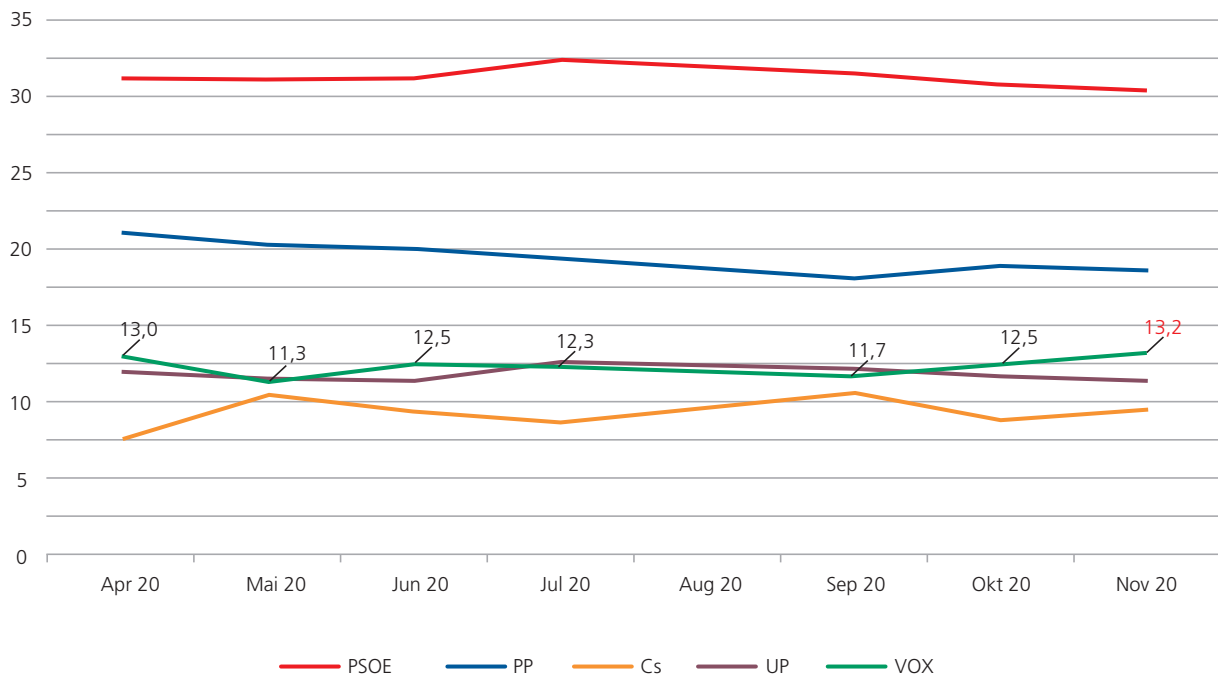
One remarkable element of the Spanish radical right-wing formation to bear in mind when understanding its possible long-term future is that, opposed to most of its European counterparts, VOX does not seem to depend entirely on its leader Santiago Abascal. Thus, compared to the personalism

¹⁶ There is evidence that, Radical Right-wing parties get better electoral support in climates of electoral polarisation (Castanho Silva 2018 and Bischof & Wagner 2019).

¹⁷ Out of all VOX voters in 2019, 58.9 percent had previously voted for the PP.

Figure 4

Predicted vote for the five most relevant national parties in Spain during the COVID19 pandemic, April 2020 – November 2020



Source: CIS surveys April 2020 – November 2020

of parties such as UKIP in the United Kingdom, that without Nigel Farage, or the Freedom Party in the Netherlands, that also depends greatly on Geert Wilders, several of the leaders accompanying Abascal: Espinosa de los Monteros, Macarena Olona, Jorge Buxadé, Rocío Monasterio, among others, seem just as capable as Abascal of taking the party reins if necessary.

Finally, in order to estimate VOX's possible future, it is important to know the strategy of the left, particularly of PSOE as well as the positions of the media. If the PSOE opts to build bridges with Ciudadanos and the PP, now that the conservative party has demonstrated its intention to stick to the centre, it is possible that the polarisation might crumble and that VOX, and probably Unidas Podemos, become less important in the public sphere. If, however, PSOE discourse continues to associate Ciudadanos and PP with VOX, the far right and Francoism, the dynamics of confrontation could continue or even get stronger. Similarly, the media can play an important role in the future of this party. If major newspapers and TV channels continue to give VOX as much airtime as they have done so far, this party will capitalise on both the praise and the criticism and may maintain or even increase its electoral base.

According to the American film-maker Cecil B. DeMille a film should always start with an earthquake and work up to

a climax. If we apply this idea to Spanish politics, it seems that extreme Spanish right now is coming to the end of the earthquake part (i.e. VOX's vote of no confidence) but this might be just the start: there could be even more earth-shattering episodes to come.

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Front cover: ©Noé

Design concept: www.bergsee-blau.de

Layout: www.zumweissenroessl.de

EUROPA

In many countries the COVID-19 crisis had initially led to increased trust in government. The restrictions to personal freedoms, curfews, restrictions on social contacts, the closure of large segments of the economy as well as the widening of executive powers in many countries was largely accepted and supported by the public. However, frustration and distrust of government have been increasing the longer the restrictions have been in place. Some countries, such as Germany, witnessed large demonstrations against the counter measures. Moreover, the wide dissemination of fake news and conspiracy theories are influencing the public debate on how to handle the pandemic.

Reports from Sweden, Finland, Italy, France, Spain, Greece and Germany – all countries with large or growing right-wing populist movements and parties explore the question, if right-wing populism in Europe has been able to benefit from the Corona-crisis. A synopsis interprets and classifies the developments in the individual countries in a comparative perspective.

Further information on the project can be found here:
fes.de/c19rex