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VOX: A NEW FAR RIGHT IN SPAIN?

By Vicente Rubio-Pueyo

Table of Contents

Confronting the Far Right.....	1
VOX: A New Far Right in Spain?	
By Vicente Rubio-Pueyo.....	2
A Politico-Cultural Genealogy.....	3
The Neocon Shift and (Spanish) Constitutional Patriotism.....	4
New Methods, New Media.....	5
The Catalanian Crisis.....	6
Organizational Trajectories within the Spanish Right.....	7
International Connections.....	8
VOX, PP and Ciudadanos: Effects within the Right’s Political Field.....	9
Populist or Neoliberal Far Right? VOX’s Platform.....	9
The “Living Spain”: VOX’s Discourse and Its Enemies.....	11
“Make Spain Great Again”: VOX Historical Vision.....	13
Who Votes VOX?.....	14
In Mode of Conclusion: Strategic Debates.....	15
Bibliography.....	18

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Confronting the Far Right

For the longest time, Spain seemed like the lucky exception to the new European normalcy: the rise of a new far right consisting of more or less populist forces on the right of the political spectrum. The conservative Partido Popular (PP) covered a broad spectrum of the political field, including its right margin. This changed with the Andalusian elections in December 2018, when the new VOX party entered the regional parliament, playing a pivotal role in flipping the region after 37 years of social-democratic rule (since the establishment of regional autonomy in 1982).

This first success of the new party sent a warning sign to the public as well as to VOX's competing parties. As a result, the dominant political force of the Spanish right, the PP, under its new chairman Pablo Casado, turned visibly to the right, trying to prevent voters from migrating to VOX. This strategy failed spectacularly in the general election of April 2019. VOX entered the Spanish parliament for the first time with 10.3 percent, while the PP had to cope with a landslide defeat. Since these parliamentary elections, one thing is clear: The xenophobic and misogynous VOX will play a role in Spanish politics in the coming years. It is a force to be reckoned with. And anxious observers are now confronted with a number of questions, which also apply to almost every other country in Europe (and beyond). What is the nature of the emerging and strengthened right-wing parties? What are the foundations of their successes? Why do left forces not succeed, or no longer succeed, in being perceived as the voice of the discontented? How should left forces react to this challenge?

The Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung—New York Office, in cooperation with the Brussels Office, took a closer look at these questions. This study is published as part of the New York Office's program on a North Atlantic Left Dialog, which explores strategies against the far right. Author Vicente Rubio-Pueyo looks at the genealogy and nature of the Spanish far right, the political and economic background in Spain, and the international political context. In his analysis of VOX's platform, he critically interrogates the party's location between populism and neo-liberalism, its discourse, and its visions. He examines VOX's voter base and, last but not least, discusses possible ways of responding to their rise.

This study contributes in important ways to our knowledge base about the far right. Knowing and understanding parties such as VOX, the reasons for their rise, and the networks behind them is essential for developing strategies against them. The center right, with its attempts at "de-mystifying" the far right or taking their voter base over by moving closer to their political positions, has fatally failed at impeding the rise of the far right. We believe that the left has the potential—as well as the duty—to conduct the kind of sharp critical analyses that allow us to challenge the power of the far right.

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VOX: A New Far Right in Spain?

By Vicente Rubio-Pueyo

Until recently, Spain had seemed immune from the rise of far right forces that have swept across Europe over the last few years. This is certainly surprising given the deep and long lasting negative effects the 2008 crisis had left across Spanish society. These reverberations led to bouts of unemployment, austerity measures, and a surge in evictions. From an ideological-cultural perspective, this has led to a breakup of the main social consensus and narrative that had defined the trajectory of the Spanish Democracy since the Post-Francoist Transitional period of the Seventies. Through this period, Spain had not known any significant far right force, similar to the French Rassemblement National, Italy's Lega Nord, Greece's Golden Dawn, or Germany's AfD.

This situation changed in December 2018's Andalusian regional elections. In those elections, the new far right party VOX received 395,978 votes (almost an 11% of the general vote) translating into 12 regional MPs. VOX's ascent proved pivotal in finishing the 40-year reign of the Socialist Party in Andalusia as they came to an agreement of investiture with Popular Party (PP) and Ciudadanos which allowed those parties to form a government. Beyond the Andalusian elections, those results made clear to the rest of Spain that the new far right force would be a force to be reckoned with during the April 28 2019 national elections.

After an extremely intense electoral campaign, during which some polls projected 70 MP seats to VOX (putting it as the second largest in the country), the results turned out to be not as drastic but still extremely relevant. On April 28, VOX won 2,677,173 votes (10,26% of the total votes) earning 24 seats at the Parliament. With this, the Spanish political system has quickly transitioned beyond its former two-party structure (with the Socialist PSOE and the Conservative PP), and beyond its more recent 4-party structure (with the ascendance of the radical left populist Podemos and neoliberal Ciudadanos), to its current form with a 5 party landscape including VOX. While the emergence of a new far right force is certainly an important and shocking development in Spain, for the time being, it seems that VOX will not play as crucial a role in the country's affairs the other European far right parties who have entered into governments.

The question worth asking is how to explain the—until now—seemingly *Spanish exception*? It is certainly surprising, especially with Franco's 1939-1975 dictatorship impressed on the historical memory of the country. However, there are two main factors that it hadn't happened in Spain until now. Firstly, the Spanish right seemed to block the possibility outright as the conservative PP, which was in government until June 2018, maintained an ample political base. This certainly helped avoid a far right party emergence in Spain for decades, but simultaneously it never put the chances of a far right ascendancy to bed given the PP's ideological and organizational familiarity with Francoism. This political orientation consistently put the PP on the rightward end of the political spectrum amongst the other parties in the European Popular Party (EPP). In other words, the supposed absence of a Spanish far right was always merely a façade: it had never actually left as it had been contained within PP all along (Faber/Seguín 2019).

Secondly, in concert with the responses to the 2008 economic, the emergence of the 15M movement in May 2011 also impeded this type of Right Wing growth. Even if the movement did not ascribe itself to a traditional Left-Right axis, its demands and proposals had a transformative and progressive appeal. This movement began a long cycle of mobilizations sparked by the 15M, the PAH, the Mareas or Tides in defense of the public education and healthcare systems (roughly between 2011 and 2014). This rising movement would later be reflected in new political initiatives across Spain such as Podemos and the Municipalist Confluences which have deeply altered the political landscape of the country. With this rising popular progressivism, until now, there seemed to be no political space for a chauvinistic, anti-immigration, or nationalist response to the crisis.

The question then becomes what is VOX? Where does it come from? What are its components? Why has it had a seemingly sudden emergence now? In this paper, instead of trying to apply labels, especially when some terms like Fascism or Populism have proven ineffective, we will try to understand VOX's emergence through the specific historical trajectories and conditions of the Spanish Case. As we shall see, VOX does not exactly fit in the same framework of the so called "Populist Right." As Stefanie Ehmsen and Albert Scharenberg point out, not all European far right forces can be explained by a purported opposition to neoliberal economics (Ehmsen/Scharenberg 2018, 2). In this sense, a term like "Radical Right", basically understood as neoliberal economic policies merged with Nationalistic politics, could be more fitting for VOX. At the same time, VOX cannot be solely understood through the lens of fascism either. While VOX certainly uses the Francoist regime as a reference point, fascism alone does not describe VOX. Among other reasons, because Francoism itself never fit exactly into the Fascism category. Perhaps a more useful term is, for lack of a better word, what Enzo Traverso calls *Post-Fascism*: a series of adaptations of historical forms of Fascism and Ultra-Conservatism and its discursive elements (Nation, People, etc.) to the economic, social, political and cultural landscape of Neoliberal Globalization (Traverso 2019). Analysts such as Bernardo Gutierrez have insisted that the left's tendency to overuse Fascism and its threat—usually with epic overtones—runs the risk of not understanding the malleability of the recent phenomena. For example, the cases of both Bolsonaro and Trump usually escape clear-cut ideological and historical references, and morph continuously in the fragmented public sphere of contemporary social media (Gutierrez 2018).

Despite its appearance onto the Spanish political stage seemingly out of thin air, VOX's emergence is actually a product of an approximately 15 year process which has been brought out through a slow alignment of social factors, political developments, cultural and intellectual undercurrents, and the transformation of a changing media landscape. Thus, VOX needs to be studied through a broad politico-cultural genealogy to understand from where it emerges.

A Politico-Cultural Genealogy

Undoubtedly, a 38 year dictatorship leaves profound scars on a society. The Francoist Regime was one of the bloodiest dictatorships in the history of the world. Besides the direct victims of a traumatic Civil War (about a million people when counting both sides), more than 140,000 persons were disappeared, executed without trial, and buried in unknown places by Francoist Army either during the war and its immediate aftermath (this number is only surpassed by the Khmer Rouge's viciousness in Cambodia). Beyond the direct and tragic effects of the repression, Francoism's longevity enabled the regime to shape the lives of several generations. The explicit ideological framework of the Regime

was National-Catholicism. This was a militarily based form of Spanish Nationalism combined with ideological and educational devotion to the Catholic Church. However, its effects went beyond explicit messages and Francoism itself, permeating Spanish society and deeply affecting not only the political culture but its understanding of politics, its democratic habits, and its expectations. What would be later termed as “sociological Francoism” consisted (and still consists) of a basic apoliticism or antipoliticism. This was and remains dominated by a fear of political conflict tinged with a hidden yearn for, if not direct authoritarianism, an uncritical attitude towards established institutions, like the Monarchy. Franco himself exemplified this attitude explicitly in a famous response to a foreigner journalist “Do as I do, don’t get yourself mixed up in politics.”

The legacy of this Francoist mindset, and its multiple variants and degrees, is deep, complex, and not always self-evident. While it may not explicitly appear in certain political organizations, it permeated across sectors of society. Additionally, it could be argued that this politics of fear is still present in certain subconscious attitudes of Spaniards towards political participation and, for instance, in a general ignorance or indifference towards the country’s colonial and imperial history. Despite Franco’s attempts to recuperate the imperial imaginary, however, that rhetoric has usually been deemed as old fashioned and archaic for the majority of the population throughout the democratic period. A similar case could be made regarding nationalism. For many years, Spanish nationalism has not taken an especially aggressive, chauvinistic form, but it has remained mostly confined to what Michael Billig termed as “banal nationalism” which include everyday forms of national belonging, a certain pride in cultural elements and lifestyles or, to name a recent example, the celebrations for the winning of the soccer world cup by the national team in 2010 (Billig; for an analysis on this, see Delgado 2014). There is, however, an important exception to that: the function of Catalonia and Basque Nationalisms as internal triggers to a strong, unquestionable sense of national unity at all costs. The effects of the recent crisis in Catalonia, as we shall see, are an example of that.

After the dictatorship and the transitional period (roughly between 1973 and 1982) the space of the political right was structured around two main parties. On the one hand, the governmental UCD (Union de Centro Democrático), formed around then president Adolfo Suárez, with reformist young cadres of the Francoist Regime. On the other, the already mentioned AP (Alianza Popular) which initially consisted of former figures of the Regime and attracted some sectors of the economic elites. After Suárez’s demise in 1981, and his increasing political irrelevance throughout the years, AP would become the main right wing reference, slowly absorbing all Liberal, Christian-Democratic and Conservative tendencies, until its refoundation as Partido Popular in 1989, and the rise of a younger generation of leaders, commanded by José María Aznar, who would lead the party to its victory in 1996, and maintained it in power until 2004.

The Neocon Shift and (Spanish) Constitutional Patriotism

The years of Aznar’s presidency, and especially his second term are crucial for understanding the ideological reconfiguration of the Spanish Right. During his first term Aznar led a relatively moderate conservative government. This was largely because he needed parliamentary pacts with Catalan and Basque conservative nationalists to hold power. By 2000, this has changed as the new election paved the way for a PP absolute majority. The “voyage to the center” that defined Aznar’s first term gave way

to an increasingly aggressive neoconservative second term epitomized by his willful and proud participation in the Iraq War. This coinciding with the rise of the Spanish economy predicated on privatization and internationalization of its major banks and industries led to a triumphalist discourse that was not without colonial undertones.

Domestically, in reaction to the Basque Nationalist ETA's intense and cruel terrorist phase of the 90's, Aznar's PP government made the main Spanish political cleavage a choice between constitutional democracy based on the 1978 Constitution and the democratic regime it spawned on one hand and chaos and terrorism on the other (Carmona, García and Sánchez 2012). Habermas' concept of "constitutional patriotism" was frequently invoked during this period, but with an important, specifically Spanish twist. Habermas' original conception of constitutional patriotism was to build a new sense of belonging for the newly founded Federal Republic of Germany, in the aftermath of the traumas of Nazism and the Second World War. Habermas' constitutional patriotism was founded on values of tolerance, dialogue, and respect to broad consensus and institutions. Its Spanish twist during the Aznar period (by a party with direct roots from Francoism) was more of an operation to fetishize the Constitutional text. In other words: if for many (Socialists, Communists, Catalan, Basque and other so called "peripheral" Nationalists) the 1978 Constitution was viewed as a starting point for future progresses, for the Right (which had initially opposed to the text in the Constitutional Referendum), the Constitution became a sacrosanct culmination of progress (Nuñez Seixas 2005, Epps 2010). As with any sacred text, any changes would be unthinkable. The sole exception was made for the 2011 reform of Article 135 to accommodate European Union pressures on budget spending and austerity measures (which was approved with the votes in favor of both PSOE and PP).

New Methods, New Media

In March 2004, the situation changed. On March 11, Al Qaeda attacked in Madrid leaving 191 victims. With elections only three days later, Aznar's government tried to use the attack for political gain, pointing to ETA as responsible for the attacks. Ultimately this attempt failed as Aznar and the PP lost to José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero and PSOE. In this phase, the PP with the help of conservative media, like newspaper *El Mundo*, began a long campaign of systematically searching for the motives and actors behind the attacks, trying endlessly to find a connection with ETA. This devolved into conspiracy theories disseminated by networks like Peones Negros (Black Pawns). As this was happening outside of institutional politics, inside the parliament the Popular Party practiced an aggressive oppositional style against Zapatero. Every step of the way, the attempted to delegitimize not only his victory but any political initiative taken up by the government. These included his successes like the Same Sex Marriage Law of 2005 or the Historical Memory Law of 2007 amongst others. This tense political climate also witnessed an extraordinary rise of right-wing mobilizations in the streets. These were supported by the Church and sparked a broad base of reactionary civil society organizations and networks such as HazteOír (Make Yourself Heard) and Family Forum (Morange, 2019).

This grassroots neoconservative approach was only one part of a new right's strategy, adopted from US Neocon handbook. The other was the media. Aside from newspapers like *El Mundo*, the monarchic *ABC* (joined by *La Razón* in 1998), and the church supported *COPE* radio network, the neoconservative of-

fensive sparked online multimedia platforms like *Libertad Digital* (with charismatic broadcaster Federico Jimenez Losantos) and the TV channel *Intereconomía*. These new media was openly confrontational to the Socialist government especially on the questions of Catalonia, Basque country, negotiations with ETA, and Zapatero's supposedly indifferent attitude regarding ETA victims. This era of hostile political rhetoric brought figures like César Vidal and former armed leftist GRAPO group member Pio Moa back onto the political stage with their revisionist histories of the Civil War becoming best sellers (Moriche 2019).

The Catalanian Crisis

During this period, discussions around Catalonia and Basque "nationalities" (the constitutional term) within the framework of the Spanish State aroused intense reactions. It should be noted how this issue spread beyond being only a right-wing issue helping to contribute to a general rightward turn of the entire political spectrum. This rightward trend helped give birth to the centrist parties UPyD (Union Progress and Democracy) in 2007 and Ciudadans (Citizens) in Catalonia in 2006, which later reconfigured as Ciudadanos when the party entered the national arena in 2014.

Territorial debates are a structural part of the so called "Regime of '78", or the hegemonic political framework upon which Spanish democracy has existed since 1978. The territorial debate has been one of the most important cleavages in Spanish politics for decades. It has functioned in the political culture of Spanish Democracy even as a sort of controlled polarity, able to structure and channel political conflict, benefiting both Spanish Centralism and Conservative Catalan and Basque Nationalisms, while obscuring or precluding other political issues like social rights or the economy. Only the cycle of mobilizations of the 15M in 2011, and the later emergence of Podemos and the Municipalist confluences (2014-15) have caused any interruptions in that political order. That is why the present conflict in Catalonia since the Referendum of October 2017, despite its undeniable importance, also meant in a way the comeback of a "Regime of '78" on steroids. This was palpable all over Spain during the conflict of September and October 2017. While many Catalans were participating in the organization of the Referendum, thousands of Spaniards demonstrated against it by gathering at police stations, crying "¡A por ellos!" ("Let's go get them!", the usual chant in support of the national soccer team). As Catalonia was filled with thousands of Catalan Independence flags the rest of the Spain responded with hundreds of thousands of Spanish flags hanging from windows all over the country. It was with this that a so called "Spain of the balconies", a veritable "Right Wing's 15M", was born. VOX would soon enter the picture as the entity capable of articulating this reaction in a political form.

Nicos Poulantzas has pointed out fascism's connection to a general move of withdrawal within the State Apparatus (especially within the judicial power, the police, and the military). Spain has seen this withdrawal firsthand as the judiciary process against the Catalan leaders show along with the so-called "Gag Law" (which heavily penalizes the organization of demonstrations, and was approved by PP and PSOE's support in 2015). VOX's foundation can also be explained as a sign of a schism amongst political, media, and economic elites. Overall, while VOX is certainly not situated ideologically at the center of the political spectrum, it definitely stems materially from sectors within the core of the Spanish political and economic system.

Organizational Trajectories: Within and Beyond PP

A key difference between VOX and other parties from the European far right spectrum is that VOX's political lineage stems mainly from the big traditional conservative party. VOX represents a peculiar formation which evolved out of the interaction between different sectors of the Spanish right, both within and beyond the PP.

VOX was founded in 2013. Its members were mostly from the PP, a fact that helped VOX growth by utilizing its members national, international, and think tank connections. Its initial motivation was to protest against Mariano Rajoy's supposedly hesitant attitude to the Catalan question. VOX demanded a firm response and criticized Rajoy for his alleged indifference to the memory of the victims of ETA (Sangiao 2018). VOX's members grouped around MEP Alejo Vidal-Quadras, with an aim of launching the party for May 2014's European Elections. The initial steps of the party were thus closely related to this former wing of PP, at least until those European elections, where VOX fell 2000 votes short of getting representation (it received 246,833 votes). The results prompted a split within the party, and most of the Vidal Quadras's group left, mostly because they wanted to avoid a further fragmentation of the right-wing vote in future elections (Sangiao 2019).

Despite this split, some of the initial promoters remained. Among them, VOX's party leader, Santiago Abascal, was also a former member of PP. Abascal's father was a Basque business owner who was threatened by ETA during the 90s. That experience started Abascal's militancy in PP where he became close to Esperanza Aguirre, the most prominent figure of PP's neocon current. At the time, Aguirre was Aznar's Education Minister and later went on to become President of the Madrid Autonomous Community. Under Aguirre's wing, Abascal enjoyed several positions as a party adviser as well as stints at foundations close to the party including Fundacion DENAES (Foundation in Defense of the Spanish Nation).

DENAES remains a somewhat vague entity. For one, it has not published its financial reports since 2014 despite this directly goes against the Spanish Law on Foundations and Non-Profit entities. In that time, it has served as networking hub for many political cadres, journalists, and revisionist academics (García and Martínez 2019, Sangiao 2018).

Along with Abascal, another prominent figure is Iván Espinosa de los Monteros, the party's Vice Secretary for International Relations. His father was high commissioner for the Spanish global brand within Rajoy's government, and was a former President of Iberia, the national airline. Espinosa descends from General Eugenio Espinosa de los Monteros, Spanish Ambassador to Germany in 1940-41. His wife, Rocío Monasterio, is also a member of the party's National Executive Committee. Monasterio is the Cuban-born daughter of a prominent anti-Castro family. Beyond biographical connections, Espinosa's profile exemplifies many characteristics shared by most members of VOX's leadership: degrees in private elite universities, both in Spain and abroad, and professional experience within important financial institutions and multinational corporations. Other key figures include Javier Ortega Smith who is a former green beret and lawyer who embodies more specific connections with the traditional far right world, such as family links with the board of the Francisco Franco Foundation (Rubio 2019). Lastly, another important figure for VOX from its very beginnings, especially at a symbolic level, has been José Antonio Ortega Lara, a former prison officer kidnapped by ETA in 1996 for 532 days (the

longest kidnapping by the group and an important turning point in the popular mobilizations against them during those years).

After the departure of the Vidal Quadras group in 2014, VOX took a clear turn to more far right positions. The controversy around Catalan independence dominating the media during this period allowed for greater media attention on their new positions. This mix allowed for that former split of the PP congeal with elements of neonazi and other far right extremists to become the VOX of today. These groups had largely been on the fringes of society prior to VOX. These included Fuerza Nueva (New Force), the National Front, Democracia Nacional and España 2000, and CEDADE (Circle of Friends of Europe). None of these organizations achieved any significant political or cultural influence beyond very marginal circles, but many of their former members are now in VOX (Maestre 2019a and Maestre 2019b).

Both symbolically and literally, VOX embodies the hierarchic, organic ideal of an army. Unsurprisingly, as in any far right force, VOX has strong links with police bodies and the army. In fact, it recruits directly from the existing discontent among the rank and file of these apparatuses. A striking example of this is VOX's recruitment of four retired army generals as electoral candidates, some of them signatories of a manifesto in the summer of 2018 against president Sánchez's proposed transfer of Franco's remains from his State-owned mausoleum at Valle de los Caídos, near Madrid, to a private location.

International Connections

Two think tanks have been crucial to VOX's ascendancy: GEES (Strategic Studies Group) and FAES (Foundation for Analysis and Social Studies). GEES has been instrumental in building VOX's international relations capacities, as exemplified by Espinosa de los Monteros' visit to the US in March 2019 where he attended CPAC in Washington DC and hosted an event in New York City. GEES has a strong neoconservative orientation with close links to entities in the US such as the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), Project for the New American Century, and Friends of Israel. GEES holds a pro-atlanticist and pro-zionist view of international policy (Sangiao 2018). GEES' founder, Rafael Bardají, is a longtime columnist at *Libertad Digital*. Bardají was a former Defense adviser under Aznar and is now a member of VOX's leadership. It is through Bardají that VOX has established contacts with Stephen Bannon. Bannon has now met with VOX several times both in Spain and in the US and supposedly is an adviser for them.

In January 2019, *El País* ran an article exposing how VOX, from its inception until the 2014 European elections were funded mainly by donations totaling almost 1 million euros from the Iranian National Opposition Council (Irujo and Gil 2019). In April 2019, two journalists published a report detailing how CitizenGO, a Madrid-based campaign organization that models itself off of a SuperPAC (which are illegal in Spain) has been channeling money from US and Russian ultra-conservative groups to VOX. (Provost and Ramsay 2019)

However, VOX has maintained a somewhat ambivalent attitude towards the whole European far right spectrum. The reason may be because VOX does not fully share the Euro-skeptic stance of many of those parties. Another reason is that the international forums and events where these parties meet are frequently attended by forces sympathetic to the Catalan Independence right.

Nevertheless, this situation has been evolving. Salvini's Lega in Italy is an example of this. In the fall of 2017, Abascal angrily responded on Twitter to a solidarity message by Salvini to the arrested Catalanian leaders. However, in a showcase of how quickly things can change, by April 28 2019, the Italian Deputy Prime Minister was sending a congratulatory message to VOX's leader for the party's results on the national elections. Other connections include Viktor Orban's Fidesz in Hungary, which Abascal has repeatedly regarded as a model. VOX's Catholic allegiances, also put it close to the Polish Law and Justice party (Fernández 2018b, see also Ramas 2018, and Forti 2018).

VOX, PP and Ciudadanos: Effects within the Right's Political Field

Founded by Aznar in 2002, FAES operated as an official PP think tank until 2016 when it broke its ties with the party. The split was supposedly over financial constraints and looking to seek more private donations. However, this split points to deeper, political reasons. FAES had been critical of Rajoy's government for some time, and Aznar has repeatedly criticized Rajoy's "weak" positions regarding Catalonia, and his alleged inability to unify the political Right, especially after the emergence of Ciudadanos. Since then, FAES has acted as an independent political actor, constantly pressing for a reconfiguration of the right wing political field. As journalist Enric Juliana has pointed out, Aznar maintains a significant influence upon all three right wing formations (Juliana 2018). In this sense, the presence of VOX could be seen as a useful instrument in that reconfiguration, either by leading it in its own way, or simply as a powerful incentive or threat, urging certain sectors within PP to react.

In the run up to the 2019 election, VOX proved capable of imposing its own agenda and priorities despite not having any national representation yet. Until the very end of the April campaign, PP's candidate Pablo Casado, attempted to weather the transfer of conservative votes to VOX by adopting VOX's own language and platform. In desperation on the last day of campaign, he even offered VOX a part of his possible government. This all failed miserably. Ciudadanos' leader Albert Rivera also left his Macron-esque neoliberal cosmopolitanism and embraced VOX's clear Spanish nationalist stances. The prime example of this shift was on February 10 at Madrid's Colón Square where the three right wing leaders closed a multitudinous "constitutionalist" rally together. The so called "Colón Picture" with Abascal among Casado and Rivera, enabled by PP and Ciudadanos themselves, clearly marked VOX's entrance into the top line of national politics.

Populist or Neoliberal Far Right? VOX's Platform

The question then becomes what is VOX's actual platform? Its economic, social, and political proposals can be found in the official document "100 medidas para la España Viva" ("100 measures for the Living Spain"). Among expected sections like "Economy and Resources", "Europe and International", and "Education and Culture", other chapters are extremely revealing. For example, "Spain: Unity and Sovereignty" opens the document. In this chapter it defines its first point as the "suspension of Catalan Autonomy until the definitive defeat of the coup d'état and the complete judging of civil and penal responsibilities" (VOX: 100 medidas p. 1), as well as the outlawing of any organization whose

aim is to “destroy the territorial unity of the nation and its sovereignty (p. 1). It also proposes the suppression of the Law for Historical Memory (started by PSOE during the Zapatero years), as well as the implementation of an integral education plan on Spanish History and “the deeds of our national heroes” (p.2) in the first section.

Overall, the document portrays the profoundly ideological (in the worse sense of the term) character of VOX’s program. What appears is not only an exaggerated concern with the country’s unity, but also the implied rhetoric of Spanish Nationalism portraying an authentic Spain against the Anti-Spain (made up by all kind of others, from Catalan and Basques to “reds”). The “Education and Culture” proposals deepen this view, stressing the promotion of Spanish, both internationally and as main language in the whole education system and administration levels. Additionally in a nod to the rural vote there are vindications of bullfighting and hunting as undeniable signs of Spanish identity. Aside from this, rural realities appears only two other times throughout the hundred proposals: on land liberalization and price of combustibles, and regarding the European agricultural subsidies managed through the Common Agricultural Policy.

“Immigration” has its specific section, tellingly followed by “Defense, Security and Borders.” The Immigration section details all kind of measures to raise the requirements for residence and “integration” for migrants while privileging the needs of Spanish economy. The defense section begins with three points explicitly devoted to Islam, including the closing of “fundamentalist mosques” and the exclusion of Islam from public education. It also proposes the erection of a wall in Ceuta and Melilla, Spanish cities in North Africa, bordering with Morocco (Ros 2018, and Aguilera-Carnerero 2019).

Another key difference of VOX compared to otherwise similar forces lies in its economic program. While it is true that VOX has tried to approach to working class voters (by putting information desks in working class neighborhoods, and by using slogans like “the working Spaniards” or “the Spain which rises up early”), its electoral program is strikingly lacking in any protectionist measures besides vague plans on reindustrialization and energy self-reliance. The bulk of the economic proposals consist of tax reductions, land deregulation, and partial privatization of the public pension system.

The income tax section is particularly telling: there is no progressive taxation beyond two basic types (22% for those under 60,000 euros, and 30% for those above); a practical elimination of the inheritance, donation, and assets taxes; and a severe reduction of corporate taxes to 22% (from 30%). All of this is without any consideration of the size of a company. These policies would undoubtedly benefit the wealthier taxpayers while disproportionately affect small and medium companies and working families (Rodríguez 2019). Furthermore, and equally revealing, only “natural families” are the receivers of certain social measures, such as certain tax reductions and a 100-euro per child allowance. This proposal is included in a “Life and Family” section and aims at the creation of a Family Ministry as well as anti-choice policies that include “the defense of life from conception until natural death.” LGBT rights are not directly mentioned, although all the language around “natural families” seems to drive the message home clearly enough, and transgender surgery or any related medical support are left out of public healthcare. There is also a proposal to suppress and defund any state supported “radical feminist organization” which beyond the rhetoric, refers in practice to any women rights support program such as victims of gender violence (p. 16).

Under “Freedoms and Justice” VOX groups together the suspension of any public funding for political organizations, foundations, and unions. Although ETA stopped its activities in 2011, VOX proposes to prosecute any pending cases against the separatist group, as well as against any police or individuals that may have participated in negotiations with them. The section also stresses a kind of judicial sovereignty apart from Europe. The last section, “Europe and International” delves into this stress on sovereignty with a subtle estrangement from the European Union as it currently exists, although never formulated openly. The program does mention the need for a new European Treaty on “borders, national sovereignty and European values, along the line defended by the countries included in the Visegrad group” and the recovery of national sovereignty in international relations (p. 22). VOX’s positions regarding the EU are profoundly vague, probably as a consequence of the very composition of the party. Despite the emphasis on nationalist themes like sovereignty, VOX is based on a strong neoliberal economic ideology. After all, the elites represented by VOX economic interests impede open rejection of the European Union.

The “Living Spain”: VOX’s Discourse and Its Enemies

VOX’s discourse basically rehashes old tropes of Spanish Nationalism and Francoist rhetoric with a postmodern twist. This includes mentions of Catholicism and Christianity, the role of family as basic cell of society, and a clearly reactionary vision of Spanish history based on a barely veiled Imperial nostalgia (Fernández, 2018c). These notions are encapsulated in the slogan and hashtag *#EspañaViva* (LivingSpain). As Enzo Traverso explains, the concept of Nation has historically changed its character and function from 19th century. From an “objective entity” (defined by a supposedly homogeneous community and a territory) it has become a National “identity” (Traverso 2018). Identity implies an individual attribute, a vague sense of belonging to an invoked community, but in a way a phantasmatic one, generated by an anxiety and a desire of order and social ties. “España Viva” actualizes the classical organic imaginary of the nation in two senses: the Nation as a living being that traverses different phases of rise and decadence; and the yearn for a social order where everyone is in their place excluding any foreign elements.

On April 28, as election day began, VOX published a revealing image on its Instagram and Twitter accounts that encapsulates this view: “Let the battle begin!” it said. The image had the figure of Lord of the Rings’s Aragorn, with VOX’s logo, sword in hand, ready to battle all of his enemies: the feminist fist symbol, the hammer and the sickle, several mainstream media outlets, the Catalan independentist flag, the anarchist symbol, and a rainbow colored little ghost (Jones 2019). In other words, VOX was presenting itself, through this male, medieval imaginary, as the sole defender of a true Spain against the whole “*dictadura progre*” (“woke or politically correct (PC) dictatorship”) one of the most repeated tropes in Abascal’s speeches.

VOX’s language appears to channel a social unconscious that is supposedly oppressed by PC conventions. The Trumpian influence is evident with the desire to provoke and scandalize at all costs. Their most famous campaign videos present Abascal and other party figures riding horses in the middle of a field. Epic images, music and language that were deemed ridiculous by many audiences, but somehow have proved capable to connect with certain concerns existing, especially in the rural

world, also appealed through the vindication of bullfighting and hunting as traditions, supposedly threatened by PC thought.

VOX's rural appeal is nevertheless significant, especially in a country which gives greater electoral weight to the rural areas that have fallen behind the urban centers. Recently, the so called "empty Spain" has become a major political discussion as depopulation, low birth rates, and a brain drain have left areas of Spain barren. However, VOX's discourse regarding these realities seems to be more cultural and ideological than actually proposing a solution. One of the most controversial messages has been VOX's proposal similar to the "Stand your ground" discourse in the US. What VOX is actually doing with that proposal is in fact relying on arms possession to invoke and exploit a small landowner's fear of the stranger and specifically immigrants. Additionally, there is special emphasis against North African immigrants, and a clear Islamophobic discourse. Latin American immigrants would be partially dispensed from this, according to a supposedly shared "Hispanic" heritage.

VOX's rise is also closely related to a threatened masculinity. In this regard, its discourse separates itself from other far right formations. VOX has openly embraced a strong polarization towards feminism. It is a striking move, especially in a country where the last wave of feminist mobilizations has achieved historic successes within the last years. VOX deploys the usual reactionary tropes: the denouncement of the dangerous influence of "gender ideology" in schools (a trope stemming from the Evangelic Latino American Church); anti-abortion campaigns; allegations against possible false accusations in cases of sexual abuse and rape, and of partiality in children custody cases, and others. These views connect, indirectly, with male insecurities regarding a changing job market and precarity (Alabao 2019 and F. Rodríguez 2019).

The party's name alludes obviously to the Latin word for *voice*. In order to connect with those discontented with traditional politics, they practice a rightwing mirror of Podemos, presenting themselves as a mouthpiece for the people to intervene in politics. They even chose the same venue as Podemos to open their campaign year, ahead of the Andalusian elections, in the fall of 2018. Despite VOX's inflammatory messages, Abascal's image and delivery make sometimes the impression of a humble, discreet, *family man*. He presents as a kind of anti-Pablo Iglesias figure who is usually received within conservative circles as a cocky, narcissistic, pedantic, university professor.

As any new political formation, VOX has intensely used social media to propagate its messages. An interesting tactic was the hashtag #SiguemeYteSigoVox (Follow me and I will follow you) intended to compact its online base and thus multiply its presence online (DataPolitik 2019). A large part of its appeal has come through the interacting with followers on of different channels: they use Youtube for creating content; Twitter and Facebook for disseminating it; and Whatsapp to reach out and permeate microcommunities, families, and groups of friends. VOX's Instagram account (which has 311,000 followers, more than any other party) frequently serves as dissemination platform for all kind of "fake news" (Martinez 2019). VOX's discourse has also found new online spaces for dissemination, such as the Spanish community Forocoches, where the classical reactionary language of VOX has also found connections with online trolling habits, incel discourses, Jordan Peterson's admirers, and all kind economically libertarian and politically authoritarian references (Rey Vázquez 2019).

“Make Spain Great Again”: VOX Historical Vision

In its view of Spanish history, VOX has combined traditional reactionary tropes from Spanish National-Catholicism with contemporary Trumpian elements, even adopting the MAGA language (Fernández 2018c). Signs with “Make Spain Great Again” or “Spain First” are frequently seen at their events. For most of VOX’s voters and followers, that “great again” clearly signifies the Francoist Regime, although by indirect implication. In Abascal’s speeches, the whole Democratic Period is frequently depicted as a period of decadence that is caused by a boogeyman. Whether it be by Separatism, by the breaking up of the nation by “nationalists” (always the others), by the waste of public money in redundant administrations (the Autonomous communities) or by the Left’s “dictadura progre” (“woke or PC dictatorship”) there is always someone to blame. This is not solely reserved for the left though, but also by the corruption and weakness of the PP (the “*derechita cobarde*” or “the coward little right”, in VOX’s language), and the hypocrisy of Ciudadanos (“*la veleta naranja*” or “the orange wind vane”). There is also a striking insistence on ideals, passions, feelings, in contrast with “Rajoy, who was just doing numbers”, or in other words, the technocratic establishment, including the Conservative Right. VOX’s novelty is its rebellious tone against a sort of right-wing version of what the Left calls the “Regime of ’78.”

VOX’s view of Spanish history comes straight up from Francoist rhetoric with tinges of imperial desire, actually shared beyond right-wing circles. A revealing example of this is the almost unanimous rejection from political, academic, and journalistic circles, towards a recent initiative by Mexico’s President Andrés Manuel López Obrador. López Obrador asked the Spanish State and the Vatican to join an initiative to apologize to Mexico’s first peoples for the genocides and expropriations brought about to them by both by the Spanish Empire and the Mexican State. The Spanish government, all political parties with the exception of Podemos, and the media establishment rejected and even mocked López Obrador’s proposal. The imperial unconscious seems to be in good shape nowadays, not only among Far Right organizations. VOX can be understood not as a rare, extreme eruption of marginal ideological elements, but as a logical outcome of an economic and political elite that, after 40 years of democracy, has not made yet the most basic reflection about what a true democratic ethos would be. These kinds of reactions are revealing of a country that is still unable to cope with its own past without resorting to an insecure, defensive attitude, regarding not only the Civil War and the Francoist Dictatorship, but also the complexities and contingencies of its own Nation-building process, usually hidden under the omnipresent demand for Unity.

VOX’s historical imaginary is certainly outlandish and exaggerated at times, frequently resorting to historical figures like El Cid, Hernán Cortes, or Blas de Lezo (commander of the Spanish Armada in the Eighteenth century). They also refer to episodes and periods like the “Conquest of America” and the “Reconquista” (the eight century-long process, between 711 and 1492, of supposed reconquering of “Spain” by the Christians against the Moors). VOX started its campaign in Covadonga, Asturias, the place where that process supposedly begun, according to the Spanish Nationalist myth. One of their slogans for the Andalusian elections said no less than “The Reconquista begins in Andalusia”. A historically inaccurate, and out of date reference, was nonetheless effective in terms of connecting that tale of the past with the present day’s Islamophobia (Aguilera-Carnerero 2019). Besides the aforementioned Bannon-esque desire for provocation, and tactical campaign emphases, cultural analysts like Joseba Gabilondo link this discourse to a neomedieval imaginary based on the recovery of a strong sense of sovereignty. This yearn for sovereignty would unfold in a double dimension: an individual one, di-

rected to a (male, white) subject, capable of controlling the forces that shape his own life and submit them to his own sense of responsibility; and in a national one, through which the Spanish Nation can reacquire a lost prominence in the global scene (Gabilondo 2019). Nevertheless, this kind of vision is articulated always in pretty abstract (one could say postmodern) terms: there is no clear vindication of, say the Spanish Empire as a political reality to be literally recovered, but as subtle echoes that point to an existential and symbolic compensation. According to VOX's view, certain episodes from the past would be proof that Spain and the Spaniards have been able of the greatest achievements, and will be again, if only "we can stay united."

Who Votes VOX?

As Guillermo Fernández has pointed out VOX's emergence in Andalusia proved two established norms wrong. Firstly, they proved there was a political space for a party to the Right of the Popular Party. Secondly, they proved that crowding an ideological part of the ballot would not negatively affect that field as a whole. In the Andalusian case, the presence of VOX seemed to help the whole bloc of the right not to lose votes that in a different scenario would have been lost to the abstention. Therefore, despite the right's division into three forces (PP, Ciudadanos and Vox) the bloc as a whole was able to beat PSOE and thus form a PP-Ciudadanos government, with the key support of VOX. However, this was not the case in the general elections of April 28. In this case, the votes to VOX did break the voting bloc of the right, hurting its possibilities of forming a parliamentary majority.

Then, who are VOX's voters? If, as we have been describing, the party has its origins in PP, so does its voting base. Both in the Andalusian elections, and in the national elections, comparisons of results between previous and current voting choices leave an evident result: PP's voting base has been fragmented. While PP is still the first opposition force, with 4,356,023 votes (16,7%) and 66 seats, these results represent its largest defeat, coming down from almost 8 million votes (33%) and 137 seats in 2016. Of that 16% of the lost vote, some has gone to Ciudadanos (which grew from 13% to 15%, about 1 million votes, and 57 seats) but most has gone to VOX, which rose from a 0.20% of the vote (47,182 votes in 2016) to 10.26% (2.6 million votes) and 24 seats. While this was a spectacular rise, it was lackluster in comparison with the high results that they were expecting. When comparing result by provinces, cities and even neighborhoods, the transfer of votes from PP to VOX appears with almost mathematical precision.

These results showcase that VOX does not seem to fit into the mold of more populist-oriented far right forces, such as the French RN, or the German AfD. As Hector Meleiro found in his analysis of the Andalusian results, the main motivations of VOX voters were immigration (41.6%), rejection of PSOE (34.2%), and concerns with the unity of Spain (33.7). At the same time, while the concern with immigration would seem to point to a possible working class vote, Meleiro detailed how that kind of vote could be explained through the 'contact hypothesis': those voters concerned with immigration are not the ones who live everyday among immigrants, but in nearby, richer zones (Meleiro 2018). As Sebastian Faber and Bécquer Seguí point out, the fear of immigration and especially African immigrants is perceived mostly in cultural-identitarian terms, as a threat to "Spanishness itself, and not as fear for competition in the job market" (Faber/Seguí 2019). The best results by VOX have occurred either in

very rich neighborhoods or in zones with strong military presence. VOX seems to have split the traditional conservative PP base rather than be the product of a new political realignment.

However, this split also occurs in working class neighborhoods that previously had a strong PP presence. Therefore, though VOX may not have found any new voting group, it has certainly radicalized a significant part of the traditionally conservative base. As we have seen looking at its electoral platform, VOX seems to still be far from developing a right-wing populist or protectionist message. How this could evolve, and more importantly, how VOX could modulate its discourse in the coming future, in order to build a more transversal appeal, is difficult to know now. The recent European autonomous and local elections of May 2019 have confirmed this downward turn from initial expectations in terms of voting trends and demographics. While the results seem to confirm a certain deflation of the hype that has surrounded VOX throughout the last year, it has still achieved a prominent role which could prove key in establishing governing coalitions in many cities (including Madrid) and Autonomous Communities.

In Mode of Conclusion: Strategic debates

During the April 2019 electoral campaign, PSOE clearly tried to amplify VOX's presence in order to mobilize progressive voters. This tactical and short-termed move paid off for Sanchez, and the April 28 results show that VOX's threat operated as a strong call for progressive voters all over the country (Delclós 2019, Gilmartin/Greene 2019). This may have been shortsighted though as it gave VOX a platform.

The question then becomes how has the Left reacted to VOX and what kind of strategic alternatives have been proposed? Unfortunately, the Left seems to have been focused more on its own internal problems than in thinking of strategy during the last months. On the night of the Andalusian Elections on December 2 2018, Podemos' leader Pablo Iglesias made an urgent call for all progressive forces to unite in an "antifascist alert." The call was intended mostly as a general call to mobilization, and as a warning for all the parliamentary forces that had supported the government change the previous June to act carefully in support of the socialist government. Besides its good intentions, this broad call for an "antifascist alert," in the same night when Adelante Andalucía (Podemos' Andalusian electoral brand) received a disappointing result, probably denoted a lack of nuanced response to the problem from Podemos' leadership. It looked like a reflexive response that seemed unable to grasp how to act within the new political landscape. Iñigo Errejón, then Podemos' candidate to Madrid's Community Presidency, separated himself from this diagnosis and called for a deeper understanding of VOX's emergence. "There are not 400,000 fascists now in Andalusia," Errejón said, while considering VOX as "a bad and worrying symptom, but not the cause of the problem". Weeks later, the separation between Iglesias and Errejón, on this and many other matters, would explode when Errejón launched his own new electoral initiative called Más Madrid, with the current Madrid mayor Manuela Carmena.

These divisions impeded a more nuanced strategic debate. However, one surprising effect of this Far Right surge in Spain has been a new discursive modulation of Podemos' and other similar forces towards the Constitution of 1978. This was exemplified by Pablo Iglesias quiet delivery during the tele-

vised electoral debates, in which he carried a copy of the Constitution and quoted several articles (the more social oriented ones) to insist in the idea that, in contrast to the Right's appropriation of the text, there are still many dimensions of it that are not fulfilled. Some activists and analysts have deemed this change as a retreat. They say that Podemos would be abandoning its more critical characteristics to become a more established, conventional political force. While the effects of this new modulation are still difficult to see, it seems to have helped stop Podemos' fall in the polls during the last campaign (Podemos' results in the local and regional elections in May 2018, which were even worse, would seem to respond to a mix of factors too long to detail here). However, a profound reflection on organizational, programmatic, and strategic issues is urgent for Podemos.

While not exclusively related to VOX's rise, there have been relevant debates during the last year that connect with strategic concerns existing within the left throughout Europe and the US in this period of populist, authoritarian and far Right resurgence. One example of this has been the controversial reception of the book *La trampa de la diversidad* (The Diversity Trap) by journalist Daniel Bernabé. Bernabé takes part in a certain trend by leftist writers concerned by the loss of a strong working class consciousness, which in his view has been caused by the appearance of different postmodern fashions more focused on "identity politics" which he uses as a catchall for race, gender, sexual politics, among others. Another controversial episode started with the publication of an article by Julio Anguita (former IU and Communist Party General Secretary), Manuel Monereo (historic Communist intellectual, former IU member, and currently an important figure within Podemos) and Héctor Illueca (Economy Professor and Podemos member as well) titled "¿Fascismo en Italia? Decreto dignidad" which seemed to call for a sympathetic view of the "Dignity Decree" launched by Salvini's Italian Right-Wing government, praising its supposedly antagonistic potentials vis a vis the European Union. In other words, some currents within the Spanish left have started arguing for a return to political practices and discourses rooted in the centrality of class as the best antidote to the surge of Far Right forces. In varying degrees of sophistication, and notwithstanding evident differences, these and similar arguments seem to have been confirmed by Trump's 2016 victory. There are a number of serious empirical, theoretical, and political problems with this kind of position that include the fact that the "white working class" discourse in the States stems mainly from mainstream media which used this framing to divide the actually existing (and racially and gender diverse) working class into (black) racial issues and (white) class issues; the sheer theoretical inconsistency in the attempt of dividing class and race as completely separate processes; or the fact that the possible novelty of Trump's electoral base did not consist of that "white working class" in deindustrialized towns, but more of its appeal to white, college-educated, suburban dwellers.

In what connects to the Spanish case, this trend reveals, precisely in its supposed return to "concrete, material, non-identitarian concerns," a paradoxical identitarian retreat to a reductive, enclosed, notion of class which is not only theoretically weak, but more importantly, socially irresponsible and politically defeatist. It is a one that is unable to cope with the real social dynamics at play within contemporary societies. In the Spanish case, the fact that this kind of argument reemerges precisely when the country has witnessed a historical wave of feminist mobilizations, reveals a symptomatic character. Undoubtedly, any responses to VOX's rise will need to take into account a deepening of the lessons and mobilizations that feminism brought. This feminism would not be neoliberal but would be a transformative force capable of questioning everyday practices, precarity, the division between productive and reproductive labor, and changing inherited notions of what the welfare state and its related social rights are about.

VOX, in contrast to other ideologically similar parties, is not an anti-systemic force. Its discourse and ideology, although certainly far outside mainstream consensus, is a logical derivation of some main currents within Spanish political culture. Its leadership and cadres stem from PP (and in some cases, Ciudadanos) as well as clearly Fascist organizations. It maintains close connections to certain sections of the State, especially the military, police and higher echelons of the extremely conservative judicial power. It is also very well connected to economic elites. Therefore, it can be considered a systemic derivation, a useful tool for certain sectors within the power bloc that, in the midst of the profound political crisis, might be interested in hardening the political situation. In some cases, there might be the intention of "just" rocking the boat, forcing PP to adopt an even more right wing agenda. In others, with a clearer ideological program, a desire to go further than that. Regardless, it is clear VOX is going to play a key role in an upcoming reconfiguration of the Right's political field. The next months will be crucial to see how that process unfolds. In any case, VOX seems to respond to an automatic reflex by a section of the elites to close their ranks. We must be careful because this is a gesture that Poulantzas describes as one of the key elements in the process prior to the arrival of Fascism, or one right before reaching the moment of its inevitability. For now, this process seems to have been avoided. In this sense, the electoral results of April 28 were not only some good news and relief for progressives, but also contain deeper meanings, and probably more medium and long-term consequences. On the one hand, they represent a partial and temporary defeat of the right-wing polarization strategy. On the other hand, the country's picture they brought out seems to be at odds with the purported hegemonic project of a rearmed right. In other words, VOX is not some a political aberration nor is it a force that has come to threaten the supposedly liberal Spanish Democracy from the outside. *VOX is the symptom of Spanish Democracy itself*, its dark unconscious, inhabited by the forgetful forces that shaped it in the first place. Whatever Spain may become in the coming years, these forces are going to find in front of them the undeniable pluralistic and diverse character of the country, its societies and its peoples; the deep impact of feminism; and an always pending desire for a real economic and political democracy. ■■■

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