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# THE SYMBIOTIC RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HATE SPEECH AND POPULISM

*A study of xenophobia and racism in the context of Vox's Instagram account*

# ABSTRACT

Alberto Monroy Trujillo: The symbiotic relationship between hate speech and populism: a study of xenophobia and racism in the context of Vox's Instagram account.
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Polarisation is profoundly changing the way politicians use social media. The apparent self-regulation existing in these platforms facilitate the circulation and propagation of hatred messages. This thesis looked carefully into the concepts of hate speech and populism to find a working definition. Once it was done the goal was to apply it to an empirical case: the Canarian migration crisis of November 2020. In that direction, the Dark Side of Social Media Framework was utilised to find possible patterns in the Spanish far-right party Vox's communication strategy. To analyse the party's Instagram behaviour, I conducted a semiotic analysis on their Instagram immigration-related posts from November 18th to December 18th 2020.

The results indicated a clear pattern where three main elements of the framework used were present: conversations, relationships and groups. The dark usage of social media was backed up by utilising a complete-populism strategy with hate speech messages in their posts. The findings point out that there is a total interrelation, a symbiotic relationship between hate speech and populism in Vox's social media behaviour during the studied period. The recent bans coming from platforms such as Facebook or Twitter are starting to constitute a precedent of forced regulation of freedom of expression. Further research in this area should examine the evolution of hate speech and populism's utilisation and the possible impact on the next generations as they represent our societies' future.

Keywords: Hate speech, populism, dark side of social media, freedom of expression, political far-right, anti-immigration politics, xenophobia, racism, Vox.

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

# Table of Contents

# 1. INTRODUCTION

The world is polarised. The assault to the Capitol of the United States of North America on January 6th of 2021, has marked an inflexion point. On January 7th, the world's biggest social media company, Facebook, decided to suspend Donald Trump's Facebook and Instagram account. This decision brought out a considerable debate in the media over the freedom of expression and Facebook's inaction in other parts of the world (Satariano, 2021). To justify his decision, Facebook's CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, expressed that they believe "the public has a right to the broadest possible access to political speech, even controversial speech. Nevertheless, the current context is now fundamentally different, involving the use of our platform to incite violent insurrection against a democratically elected government" (Zuckerberg, 2021).

Such a critical decision had never happened before. However, such a significant amount of polarisation has long been absent from the occidental democratic systems. Polarisation is understood as "the act of dividing something, especially something that contains different people or opinions, into two completely opposing groups" (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d. -a). In nowadays social media, there is a tendency, and a possibility, to expressly follow those accounts that people like and discard those that they do not like. This way, the possibilities to encounter opinions and information not matching ideological standards are higher than before its appearance.

This phenomenon was studied by Dahlgren, Shehata and Strömbäck (2019) in the search for a connection between polarisation and the exposition to what they called attitude-consistent information, meaning the kind of information that matches with the reader's attitudes. Their findings are significant for this thesis. They found out that attitude-consistent sources in social media and traditional media reinforced the citizens' ideological learning (Dahlgren, Shehata and Strömbäck, 2019, p. 168). It means that someone with a right or left ideology seeking information suiting its ideology would reinforce it.

This conclusion is vital to understand the increasing polarisation in social media. The polarisation seen in multipartyism across Europe is starting to have its effect in the online settings. The reason is simple. If the information providers are the own political parties due to the traditional media's vilification, politicians such as Trump, the receivers of the information, will suffer the same polarisation process. Polarisation is also affected by the ease of connecting with people with similar political or informative opinions. It happens due to the reinforcing effect to listen to other people to express the same concerns and information.

Nonetheless, affective polarisation is also acutely present in Europe (Reiljan, 2020). Reiljan explains how entire groups of people had developed hostile attitudes towards other parties (2020, p. 392). This research's most remarkable outcome is that the data was not collected exclusively from the parties' partisans or militants but many diverse groups. This fact remarks on the importance of these findings because it is a clear sign of our democratic systems' health. In that line, participants evaluated less than 1 or 2 points out of 10 the other parties. Thus, it is not a simple disagreement but something steeper.

What is clear is that political polarisation is a subject to tackle. There are reasons to worry, and there is an urgent need to reduce hate towards other groups of people. The thin line between what is allowed and what is not allowed is the major obstacle to overcome by the policymakers in an intricate political effort. This thesis will look at two potential political polarisation factors and their possible interconnectivity: the symbiotic relationship between hate speech and populism.

## 1.1.      Hate speech definition

In order to establish a solid starting point for this thesis, it is necessary to find a proper definition of the conflictive term hate speech. Just as it is challenging to find consensus in this crime's legal regulation, it is not easy to see unanimity around its definition. The primary debate seems to spin around the target of it and not about what hate speech implies. Hence, it is more a debate dealing with whether hate speech can be targeted to individuals or not and where we put the limit. One of the approaches I find accurate is the one given by the Council of Europe (CE) as it covers most of the aspects to be considered:

> Hate speech covers many forms of expressions which spread, incite, promote or justify hatred, violence and discrimination against a person or group of persons for a variety of reasons. It poses grave dangers for the cohesion of a democratic society, the protection of human rights and the rule of law. If left unaddressed, it can lead to acts of violence and conflict on a broader scale. In this sense hate speech is an extreme form of intolerance which contributes to hate crime. (Council of Europe, n.d.)

This definition of hate speech emphasises the incitation, promotion or justification of hate, violence or discrimination. For that reason, it covers a lot of angles and rules out the common

knowledge that includes only the most severe insults as hate speech and to different targets. Thus, nowadays, social media are full of these apparent hatred messages.

However, when looking at different institutions, we can have a closer approach to it. In his definition for the Encyclopaedia Britannica, Curtis (2019) links the concept to a determinate social group. In other words, hate speech is not only an extraordinarily negative and broad discourse threatening social peace but threatening a determinate social group. It is in this part where it starts to get clearer yet also complex. The problem with belonging to a social group is in the groups' definition or determination since it is not specified if the social group could be a football team, an ideological branch or an ethnic group.

Chetty and Alathur (2018, p. 110) introduced a new dimension since they also added to the definition of hate speech four big categories under which hate speech can appear: gender, religious, racism and disability. In the far-right parties, the gender and the racist question are very much addressed when doing politics. Thus in their hate incitation, the most polemic posts spin around them. What is especially important for this thesis from Chetty and Alathur (2018, p. 108) is their clear and direct connection of hate speech to online social networks. It gives particular importance to the easy ways these social media channels allow the hate speaker to post messages, repost and respond to others.

Consequently, this thesis' hate speech definition will use the three past outlines to create a framework to define hate speech and whatnot. First of all, from the Council of Europe (n.d.) Assuming that hate speech covers "many forms of expressions which spread, incite, promote or justify hatred, violence and discrimination". Secondly, following what Curtis (2019) explains, I understand hate speech directed to a specific social group, not individuals. Lastly, using the four categories (gender, religion, race and disability) provided by Chetty and Alathur (2018, p. 110), adding three myself, for its relevance to this thesis (origin and political ideas) to classify the messages, since they are the most common ones. Therefore the definition that will guide this thesis will be the following:

> Hate speech constitutes any form of expression that spreads, incites, promotes or justifies hatred, violent or discriminating messages towards a determinate social group by its condition of gender, religion, race, origin, disability, gender identity or political ideas.

## 1.2. Populism and its types

Together with hate speech, the other concept that will sustain the empirical analysis of the thesis is populism. Similarly to the case of hate speech, it is a controversial concept. A comprehensive debate in academia often moves its meaning and implications to a debate where moral standards are the central pillar. Even though this debate will be presented in the following chapters, it is necessary to start with a shared understanding of its essential meaning. In most cases, the definition is linked to the idea of the politics directed to the ordinary people: populism is "a political approach that strives to appeal to ordinary people who feel that their concerns are disregarded by established elite groups" (Lexico, n.d.). There is a clear notion of Us and Others.

However, to be more precise, a classification of the different types of populism has been researched. The selected classification was collected by Jagers and Walgrave (2007) and de Vreese et al. (2018) based on the elements treated by the emitted messages, and it includes three divergent groups of populism: complete, excluding, anti-elitist and empty. Complete populism involves all the elements related to it, the appeals to the people, the anti-elitism and the others' exclusion (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007). This kind of populism is probably the most common one. For instance, there is a trend in the far-right nowadays where these movements' leaders try to protect their people from the globalist elites and exclude any other group of people contrary to their ideas.

The second group, excluding populism, includes the people's references and the others' exclusion (de Vreese et al., 2018, p. 426). This second group could be the most resourceful for the xenophobic and racist messages since it includes the two essential elements Us and Them. Lastly, empty populism includes exclusively the references to the people (de Vreese et al., 2018, p. 426), which can be used as a motivational message to forge a stronger bond. Even though they are different in composition, the coordination and correct usage of each type of populism could be the formula to a successful movement. Thus, this classification will be present in the study of populism in the Instagram account of the Spanish reactionary party Vox. It will serve to establish, if possible, a shared or dominant type of populism in their social media activity.

## 1.3. The *seesaw* of social media

Hate speech and populism are not a recent trend, but social media usage has magnified them. These new communication platforms irrupted in our lives approximately ten years ago, some of them before, as the case of Twitter is from 2007, some of them later, like Instagram in 2011. The way we understood interaction on the internet changed entirely as often the live concept

was missing outside the chats. With Twitter, humanity started to interact over issues while happening, right in our brand new smartphones. Nowadays, figures tell us that this phenomenon has already reached 42% of the world's population, with 3.196 active social media users (McDonald, 2018). However, it is challenging to reach general conclusions of media behaviour and interferences in people's lives as there are several differences between ethnicities worldwide (Miller et al., 2016).

Nevertheless, accepting that a common rule cannot be applied generally, it is possible to underline that social media affects a more significant or smaller proportion, depending on our background, decisions, and behaviours. One example of this is our consuming attitude. Hajli (2013) defines social media as a booster that, combined with trust and usefulness, affects consumers' intention to buy through social networking sites. Besides, it is considered proved that social media, together with the internet, empowered customers, and climate can add value to the products collaborating and interacting in social media.

On another note, O'Keeffe et al. (2011) warned about social media's influence on youngsters and teenagers as social media is a non-filtered platform in most cases. The vulnerability of these groups is very high. Indeed, O'Keeffe et al. (2011) explained how teens' privacy is often compromised by fake information flowing throughout social media, creating problems such as bullying or online harassment. This group is often vulnerable, and the hate speech shown in channels as the accounts of political parties is not presumed to be the best influence for them. Incendiaries comments and acts affect young generations in their development as citizens.

Those teenagers are assumed to be the future citizens and voters, maybe politicians and, in Vox, they are significatively active. Vox's first clarification is that this political organisation will be treated as a far-right party, being this qualification neutral and leaving the moral judgements to the reader. The reason is that there is a broad consensus about this fact in academia (Calderon, De la Vega and Herrero, 2020; Hess and Renner, 2019; Doroshenko, 2018; Cervi, 2020; Gould, 2019; and Rodon, 2020). Their young section is one of the most engaging in Spain, and now they have even one representative at the parliament of the European Union. One of the reasons why the party is succeeding more than others in social media, even though they are not as deeply rooted as the above mentioned PP or PSOE, is their ability of populist parties to appear as more authentic (Enli and Rosenberg, 2018). The social media strategy is something that Vox has been able to measure correctly. They divided their presence precisely

to get to the traditional public throughout their presence in what they called *España profunda*[1].
At the same time, Vox was able to use their social media channels to get to the young public:
"The segment of 60 years and above trusted the politicians more than the segment of 30 years
and below, but that the most distrustful, young voters, tended to trust politicians more in social
media than in other media and communication contexts" (Enli and Rosenberg, 2018, p. 9).

The exponential expansion of social media has its downside. Baccarella et al. (2018)
remark on the dark side of online social networks. Nowadays, the way humans have started to
use different social platforms is undoubtedly dangerous. We can often see posts about travels,
giving all the information thieves need to enter or occupy places illegally. In the same direction,
posting pictures of the underaged puts in danger their privacy without their consent. Other
examples are posting a diary of actions online or commenting on others' pictures or posts with
hatred and violent messages.

It is essential to look at the honeycomb framework (Baccarella et al., 2018). It provides
seven social media functionalities to study (conversations, sharing, presence, relationships,
reputation, groups and identity). These functionalities are converted by Baccarella et al. (2018)
into dark functionalities. In this framework it is possible to observe the corruption of the
functionalities that connect and enhance social media users' experience into a dangerous
perversion of the online environments.

The Dark Side of Social Media functionality Honeycomb Framework (Baccarella et al.,
2018) will be used in this thesis to analyse the content of Vox's Instagram account, trying to
prove the existence of hate speech in it as a consequence of a dark usage of social media by the
party. It is imperative to work with a framework like this to avoid biases in the thesis's
development since this is a sensitive topic, touching fundamental rights. For instance, freedom
of expression, a tight line with hate speech that is not easy to discern. One example of it is our
study subject. Vox is continually appealing to the wrong notion of censure to criticise the bans
they suffer from social media platforms. Since this thesis will look at a determinate crisis, it
will be interesting to analyse if a specific pattern followed their strategy development. This
framework provides a vital tool for that.

## 1.4.    Migration challenges

Since studying populism and hate speech in a party's social media is vast, the selected area is
migration. Migratory challenges are incessant in the European Union, and they are present in

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[1] Deep Spain, referring to the countryside population.

the fundamental strategies of the far-right parties. The different wars happening in Africa and the Near East are causing a substantial demographic exodus to European territory. The beginning of the recent migration crisis was the civil war in Syria in 2011. Millions of people were forced to leave their country as the bombs were consuming their homes. The domestic petrol's fierce interests forced the strongest and wealthiest countries and their allies to support the civil war's two sides: the rebels and the governmental forces. As of 2020, the war is still ongoing, while almost a million humans migrated in the last year (Riaño, 2020).

At the moment, a conflict between Morocco and Western Sahara is unleashing a new wave of this latent crisis. In 1975, after the Spanish dictator Francisco Franco died, Spain left all its colonies in Africa except Ceuta and Melilla, which are still part of the country. That included Western Sahara. By then, Morocco invaded the territory of Western Sahara and claimed sovereignty over it. For decades, Polisario Front, a politico-military organisation established to fight off the Spanish occupation, tried to seek Western Sahara's independence. For the same time, Morocco has tried the opposite. The attempts to solve the crisis in a civilised way seemed to end when on November 17th, Polisar Front declared war on Morocco after decades of a ceasefire.

This last war declaration directly involves Spain, and it is the object of this essay. After the war declaration, a new exodus of people running away from the war has been provoked. This time, the Saharawi people tried and reached their closest European destination, the Canary Islands in Spain. The Spanish far-right party Vox, whose ideological postulates are incompatible with this type of immigration, has deployed specific vocabulary and a particular campaign to expel immigrants from "Spanish soil".

These are examples of the same phenomenon—people's exodus from situations happening in their countries, but not the only ones. With COVID-19, the far-right found a new scheme to spread their xenophobia and racism. This thesis will look at the possible divarication of the discourses and the hate speech and populism related to it. It is common to read conspiracy theories about the possible creation of the virus in a Chinese laboratory and its intentional spread across the world (Scientific American, 2020). In times of fear, the brain tends to act in an irrational way (Åhs, 2009), regardless of the fear we feel.

The conspiracy theories have served political parties to gain and lose popularity in the crisis. A possible subject to be studied in the future is the pandemic's effect on governments and oppositions in the Western countries compared to Eastern. COVID-19 has impacted severely in mobility and, therefore, also in migration. A vital asset in the racist or xenophobic discourse tends to be othering based on the fear of the different and the incompatibilities with

the opposite group understood by "Us". Therefore, this thesis will look as well when the pandemic could have increased the populist and hate speech in Vox's Instagram account, in the middle of the other big migration challenge coming from the West Sahara – Morocco conflict.

## 1.5.  Research relevance, aims and questions

The widespread usage of social media and its accessibility from uncountable places worldwide generate new challenges the societies need to tackle. This research's relevance contributes to the control and report of censurable or reproachable conduct in social media. Suppose it is true that hate speech and populism are topics that have been studied before in a substantial amount of literature. In that case, there are not many studies combining or interrelating both. This thesis's novelty establishes a possible symbiotic relationship between the spread of hate speech and populism. The dark side of social media (Baccarella et al., 2018), together with teenagers' possible effects (O'Keeffe et al., 2011), urge for more robust control.

Healthy social media platforms are, indeed, necessary in any democracy. However, exposing future generations to racist or xenophobic messages, among others, might constitute a real threat to the democracies, as mentioned earlier. As hate speech and populism grow, this thesis proposes a more in-depth study of the phenomenon to lay the groundwork for peaceful and inclusive networks.

Nonetheless, as said before, since studying the whole range of areas that hate speech and populism can affect in all the activity of the party in Instagram is not realistic, this thesis aims to tackle the immigration-related hate speech in Vox's account in one specific period: 18.11.2020 to 18.12.2020. These dates correspond from one day after the war declaration between Western Sahara and Morocco one month later.

The initial research question will be answered with the dark side of the social media functionality honeycomb framework (Baccarella et al., 2018) to analyse Vox's social media behaviour's different characteristics.

*RQ1: What elements of the dark side of social media honeycomb are present in Vox's Instagram account?*

Secondly, using the already debated definition of hate speech, build from the debate among different authors in the field, will help with the following research questions:

*RQ2: Is hate speech towards immigrants present on Vox's Instagram account during the studied period? If yes, based on the provided definition, what elements of hate speech can be identified in Vox's Instagram account?*

Thirdly, applying de Vreese et al. (2018) classification of populism and the characteristics present in the populists' discourses, the pertinent question is:

*RQ3: Did Vox use a populist strategy on Instagram during the studied period? What is the predominant type of populism, if any?*

## 1.6.    Structure of the thesis

Before continuing the thesis's literature review, it is precise to cover the thesis's structure briefly. After introducing the main concepts and discussions in this introduction, the thesis will contain three different parts. Beginning with an in-depth literature review in the three fundamental pillars of the thesis as they are the theoretical and ideological fundaments of Vox, hate speech and populism, this work will continue with a presentation of the methodological approaches to the analysis part. After these two, the reader will find the posts' analysis concerning the period aforementioned, a discussion and conclusive remarks. The limitations and recommendations for further developing these research lines will serve as the thesis's ending lines.

# 2. SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE LINE BETWEEN HATE SPEECH AND FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Organisations and so political parties, in the XXI century, cannot survive isolated from the digital world. The COVID-19 crisis has proved the imperative necessity of organisations to develop their digitalisation in the best way possible. For instance, clothing shops had to develop further their online shopping, and even car garages had to communicate with their clients to offer exceptional services. Before this crisis, it was optional; now, it is imperative to survive. The digital world offers great opportunities yet, at the same time, endanger human relationships to some extent, as we have already discussed previously.

For Powell, Horvath and Brandtner (2016), the overall feeling you get when reading them is that digitalisation is overall positive to externalise the organisations and research them. They argue that the website material in research terms is more accurate than others that can be biased (2016, p. 105), since "they can be observed unobtrusively" (2016, p. 106), adding a particular feature of having archives of information to review the past activity of the organisation quickly. For Powell et al. (2016, pp. 107), an organisation's online presence can serve as an *identity project*, providing critical features about the organisation and, most importantly, shaping the perception around it.

The incredible potential the virtual environments and social media offer do require some new approaches to communication. Indeed, Walter and Brüggemann (2020, p.1) understand that the traditional theories helping to understand communication should be revisited. Currently, the opinion leader, traditionally present in the communication schemes, is more effective if it is a politician because it is easier for them to spark conversations, reactions and trigger feedback (Walter and Brüggemann (2020, p.16). The way social media is working at the moment is in a two-step model of communication. First of all, the information reaches the opinion leader, who processes it and selects what is to be shared. Second, the opinion leader forwards the information to the followers (Walter and Brüggemann, 2020, p.2).

However, that is purely describing a communicative process. The main question here is why most of the political parties in the Spanish political panorama may be using the same media, and only Vox achieves to get the most attention. On Instagram, Vox is the most followed party by far with 616k followers, being Podemos the closer with 270k, both considered populist parties. PSOE, the party currently holding the presidency of Spain and PP, the opposition's principal leader, remain far with 115k and 118k followers (Table 1).

| | Followers in Instagram of the 5 biggest political parties in Spain | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Logo | UNID♡S PODEMOS. | PSOE | Cs | PP | VOX |
| Party name | Unidas Podemos | Partido Socialista Obrero Español | Ciudadanos | Partido Popular | Vox |
| Ideology | Far-left Neo-Communist | Left Socialist | Centre-right Liberal | Right Conservative | Far-right Reactionary |
| Foundation year | 2014 | 1879 | 2006 | 1989 | 2013 |
| National Government | Yes | Yes | No | No | No |
| Account | @ahorapodemos | @psoe | @ciudadanos | @partidopopular | @vox_es |
| **Followers** | **270k** | **115k** | **109k** | **118k** | **616k** |

## 2.1. The keys to success in nowadays (social) media

The way to success or a broader audience is challenging to find. Nonetheless, Song, Cho and Kim (2017, p. 21) point out two critical characteristics of an influential or successful opinion leader: openness and exhibitionism. Both attributes, remark the authors, contribute to increasing the followers' trust towards the opinion leader. These attributes are very present in populist leaders since their primary weapon to convince the voters is to seem transparent and different from what they consider to be the elites. For instance, if Vox is criticising the lack of love for Spain given by the left, they need to show that not only in public they love the country but also in their private activity, converting their social media profiles into something more intimate than non-populists ones. Being extrovert plays in favour of those seeking opinion leaders (Song et al., 2017, p. 21). Moreover, the authors conclude that interactive tools are considered to help the task since it increases the closeness to the people and the social presence.

Owing to the fact that effective communication requires adequate persuasion, another key concept of this chapter is *rhetoric*. Beginning with this concept is beginning with its precursor. Aristotle (1991) establishes timelessly the three key features or attributes to be persuasive in rhetoric. The first one, *phronesis*, refers to the orator's wisdom and competence, someone with enough knowledge to convince. The second, *arête*, refers to virtue. This attribute is often linked to the moral standards of the orator, understanding them as highly valuable.

Lastly, *eunoia*, connected to the goodwill and the identification of the messages' receivers, can establish with the speaker. It is important to remark that this is undoubtedly connected to perception, and perception is sorely subjective. In the case of a Vox voter, when Santiago Abascal appears and talks about the General State Budgets, criticising them for what he considers will be Spain's ruin, everything makes sense. Abascal could appear as wise and competent (phronesis), morally laudable since he is straight with his voters, telling them the truth and warning them (arête) and sharing his indignation with his voters, establishing a solid identification between them (eunoia). However, if a left supporter hears the same message, all those attributes automatically change based on the built perception.

In the same line, Madestam and Falkman (2017, p. 301) understand that social media enables politicians to shape their perceptions by presenting themselves in a customised way. One of the most remarkable conclusions the authors express is the fact that social media can contribute to the legitimation of some leaders; what could be the reason why a far-right party in Spain has achieved good popularity and acceptance after 38 years:

> *We know that the way political leaders communicate with their audience affects the perception about and trust in the politicians and thereby the democracy. Social media is a tool for politicians when both language and images are apparent for constructing their images. The Internet provides opportunities for self-configuration and hence possibilities to legitimise political leaders. (Madestam and Falkman, 2017, p. 301)*

With the exhibitionism, openness and proficient use of rhetoric, some other features make Vox and its leader, Santiago Abascal, succeed in social media. The content published there is visceral, contributing to this parties' known ability to transmit, using a familiar and authentic language, sentimental over factual information (Freedman, 2018, p. 604). Indeed, according to Rodríguez, García and Martín (2019, p. 8), only the 8.3% of the content published by the populist far-right parties in Europe correspond to contrastable information, being the aim to generate a common enemy the most represented content with a 33.3% of the total. Another critical factor, as well as the usage of purely ornamental elements to make up their messages.

Among them, the usage of diegetic music with an epic touch, slow-motion shots aims to achieve a heroic apocalyptical way, emulating war-related films such as *Gladiator* and offering a saviours' familiar(Rodríguez, García and Martín, 2019, p. 7). Hence, it is not only the message what matters in these cases but its wrapping and presentation.

Opinion leaders need to connect with their audience, shape their perceptions accordingly to be successful, and populism can be a tool. Populism is often treated just as a political phenomenon, yet de Vreese et al. (2018) understands it as a communicative matter. Their approach is to treat the populist messages like the core of the analysis as independent phenomena differing from the approach that integrates them as part of a determined political family or type of politician (de Vreese et al., 2018, p. 425). The authors' recommendation and study line is to analyse populism as a phenomenon with each subject that has to be studied. Generalising can lead to mistakes in science. That is why this thesis will study Vox as a particular actor and not as a member of the far-right parties family. It is essential to understand if populism has something to do with their particular and evident social media success.

## 2.2.    The Dark Side of Social Media Honeycomb Framework

As stated before, social media has the power to enrich our lives. However, there is an inherent dark side that comes with it. These days, social media success is highly linked to factors that can be considered populist—hyperbolic language, othering, providing comprehensible and straightforward solutions to complex problems. In the introduction, it was already presented what is going to constitute a vital tool of analysis in this thesis: The Dark Side of Social Media Honeycomb Framework by Baccarella et al. (2018).
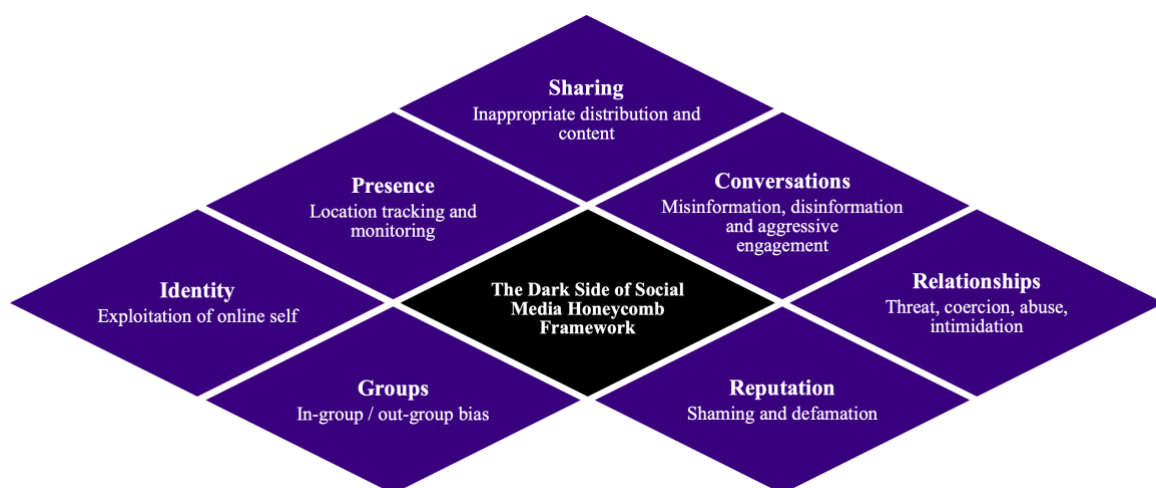


*Figure 1. The Dark Side of Social Media Functionality Honeycomb Framework based on Baccarella. et al. (2018).*

Beginning with conversations, and always based on the article written by Baccarella et al. (2018), it includes any social media interaction such as likes, comments, replies or direct messages. This thesis will also understand posting as a kind of interaction and, thus, a

conversation. For instance, if the subject of this thesis, Vox, publish some misinformation, disinformation and aggressive engagement, it will be labelled with this functionality. The second aspect is sharing, which involves exchanging and distributing information, in this case, in an inappropriate way. For instance, sharing a picture that apparently or factually has not received the expressed consent of the author of the video or the author is not correctly mentioned.

Continuing with presence, it relates to the information linked to the availability and accessibility of others. In practical terms, this happens when a user enables and shares a calendar, allowing them access to others to know the person's schedule in question. The dark side begins when location tracking is done without the user's consent or awareness. The fourth aspect of the honeycomb framework is relationships related to the connections established by the different users. Sometimes, these connections awake negative behaviours based on different factors and bring along attitudes such as intimidation, coercion or abuse towards others. The next element, linked to the previous one, is reputation, which influences how the readers perceive others' standing. It is self-explanatory in both ways since it can influence negatively or positively based on preferences. Second but last, identity concerns all the information about oneself given out in the social environment. The prolonged and uncontrolled usage of social media, says the authors, can lead to the loss of control in what refers to identity since the user can no longer control the information about oneself on the net.

Lastly, and most importantly, for our thesis, groups. On the bright side, understanding this functionality refers to the possibility of enhancing other people sharing the same hobbies or interests — for instance, groups about gaming in a determinate modality or even sports groups. However, taken to the dark side of its understanding, it can mean excluding a group for what they represent. The group dimension is crucial since this thesis will also try to elucidate if there are hate speech and populism present in the Vox Instagram account, both needing a notable out-group bias aspect to be considered as that. In brief, the bright side would argue that social media helps people to form communities and be engaged. In contrast, the dark side would remark the danger of an in-group or out-group bias (Baccarella et al., 2018, pp. 432-433), which in populism is defined as othering.

For instance, that is the case with fake news, pieces of misinformation or disinformation directed to a group to affect their decision-making process and the way they interact. An example of a massive campaign of fake news is Trump presidential campaign for the US elections in 2016, where his top 20 fake news received more attention than the top 20 news stories from 19 big media outlets (Baccarella et al., 2018, p. 435). Another case of constant

production of fake news is Vox in Spain, a party able to post a manipulated image of Gran Via, the most emblematic street in Madrid, full of corps in coffins to gain the public opinion against the Spanish government (InfoLibre, 2020). Unfortunately, among certain people, that image caused the desired effect. Misinformation and fake news are potential feeders of hate speech and populism.

However, it is remarkable to mention that this framework has been used to study user interaction. This thesis will proceed with a new usage of it by applying it to a political party's interaction and behaviour, considered a group of users making use of a single platform. Thus, this thesis will focus on the party and not on the interaction between the followers and users of their Instagram account.

## 2.3.      Unregulated media: the pending policy subject

Polarisation happens under certain circumstances. Why do citizens accept as usual and acceptable racist or xenophobic messages, among others, coming from biased sources as political parties? The answer could be in the devaluation of the traditional media and the new environments that have lowered their filters. Freedman (pp. 610-614) exposes four media policy failures that have led the information society to its current situation. First, there has been a failure to avoid the media conglomerates agglutinating a vast amount of media outlets, leading to a situation where few decision-makers take a wide range of decisions (Freedman, p. 610). Continuing with the failure to regulate the tech companies, currently running without control of their algorithms by which they can make information circulate without filter, what has conducted the democracies to take unexpected decisions such as the election of Donald Trump in 2016 or the Brexit referendum (Freedman, p. 611). The third failure corresponds to the governments' incapability to respect and protect the fourth state, supported by investigative journalism, assuring a transparent and balanced society (Freedman, p. 612). Lastly, the empower and nurture the public media services, ending up as a resource ruled by the governments and the businesses related to them (Freedman, p. 613).

The failure of the traditional media systems has brought a difficult situation to the table. The unregulated media systems are now even more slippery as they have shifted to online environments where the regulation is even more difficult. As mentioned, this thesis will humbly contribute to reporting those messages that incite the hate towards the immigrants in Spain, raise awareness, and propose ways to understand better the relation of hate speech and populism to more effective regulations of these behaviours.

## 2.4.    Hate speech

In the introduction chapter, *hate speech* is a rather tricky concept to define, even more, to legislate and apply the law to it. This chapter will deal with the challenges that constitute the law's application, the differentiation with the freedom of expression and the tools we currently have to detect it in the vast universe of social media. First, it is essential to remind the definition this thesis is going to apply to define the expressions considered as hate speech which was a combination of three as discussed before:

> *Hate speech constitutes any form of expression that spreads, incites, promotes or justifies hatred, violent or discriminating messages towards a determinate social group by its condition of gender, religion, race, origin, disability, gender identity or political ideas.*

### 2.4.1. The legal limit between hate speech and freedom of expression

In Spain, every felony punishable is defined under the Organic Law 10/1995 of the 23rd of November, commonly known as the *Criminal Code of the Kingdom of Spain*. It is the primary document in which the judges base their sanctions on any felonies. In what refers to hate speech, the Criminal Code was modified in 2015 to include the first-ever approximation of its actions' criminal responsibilities. It is defined under Article 510[2], which directly involves discrimination, hate or violence towards people groups. It is imperative since the previous debate in this thesis was trying to focus on groups. In this case, the Criminal Code is protective not only those groups who might be in particular danger of discrimination but any group who might suffer from these acts, aligned to what the definition provided for this thesis establishes. Therefore, it is possible to say that the hate speech to be potentially found in along this work could be in many cases constitutive of a felony. The main question arriving at the table is how potential felonies are present in social media.

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[2] Article 510. 1. Those who provoke discrimination, hate or violence against groups or associations due to racist, anti-Semitic reasons or any other related to ideology, religion or belief, family situation, belonging to an ethnic group or race, national origin, gender, sexual preference, illness or handicap, shall be punished with a sentence of imprisonment from one to three years and a fine from six to twelve months. 2. Those whom with knowledge of its falseness or reckless disregard for the truth were to distribute defamatory information on groups or associations concerning their ideology, religion or belief, belonging to an ethnic group or race, national origin, gender sex, sexual preference, illness or handicap shall be punished with the same penalty. (Legislation Online, n.d.)

Carmen Quesada (2015) carried out an extensive analysis of the jurisprudence around hate speech concerning the high courts' decision in Spain, such as the Constitutional Court, which is the one in charge of interpreting the Spanish Constitution. Particularly remarkable to our case is the study of the expressions coming from the political parties. As a political organisation, they enjoy special considerations regarding freedom of expression, yet it is not unlimited. Quesada (2015, p. 24) remarks some of the limitations found in previous sentences to the freedom of expression. The author explains that the Constitutional Court confirmed that neither the ideological nor the expression freedom could back up manifestations with a racist or xenophobic profile since there are no unlimited human dignity rights. This last mention of human dignity is the door to more than racial or original considerations since the Constitution also covers gender, opinion or beliefs (Quesada, 2015, p. 24). It is then vital to underline that it is sufficiently blunt to paralyse all the political messages attacking these fundamental rights (Quesada, 2015, p. 24).

Providing that comments or expressions that involve the above-mentioned areas should be under consideration for its potential criminal character, the next question to answer is the one referring to the difference between an offensive or critical message and hate speech. Every healthy democracy should grant its citizens the right to express their concerns, criticise the political actors or even voice their opinions in a dissonant way. However, for Quesada (2015, p. 24), in what refers to the migration or racial question, the key is found in the invitation to perpetuate a racist felony or when there is an intentional provocation of hate towards a determinate group of people. This discrimination can be regarding their skin colour, race, religion or origin, generating a climate of violence and hostility. In practical terms, it is not the same critiquing someone for their job performance professionally, even if expressing is offensive than mentioning as a destabilising factor its origin or race. The difference is then in the incitation to hate a collective or a person for its belonging to a collective rather than for what this person is as an individual.

Notwithstanding, who is making the final decision on the limitation? Is it possible to lay jurisprudence around the topic? Marciani Burgos (2013) collects the concerns of the outrageous advocates of the freedom of expression around these questions. For them, there is a considerable risk in delegating the power to decide what is hate speech and what is not to any statal power, for it is preferable to live it in the hands of the ideas' market or public debate and its power to reject wrong ideas, including those containing hate features (Marciani Burgos, 2013, p. 165). In the end, the debate around if the state powers (legislative, judicial and executive) and their action is the one behind our society at the macro level. Liberalism versus

socialism or how the state should leave the invisible forces behind markets in the first place, but societies in the broader sense regulate them versus a state legislating to control and guarantee more protectively their citizens' rights. For it is an overly ambitious task to, thus, lay jurisprudence around the tight line dividing hate speech and freedom of expression, Marciani Burgos (2013, p. 194) concludes that the regulation concerning hate speech is a clear example of the necessity to apply a pragmatic approach instead of a dogmatic one. The application of universal rules could be guiding to the extremes. On the one hand, a protective vision of the freedom of expression could guide a situation where everything is permitted, regardless of its content or message. On the other hand, an over censuring position could tackle the hate problem at the cost of the freedom of expression (Marciani Burgos, 2013, p. 195).

Indeed, the problem around the question in Spain has arrived at some dangerous limits. Rappers, puppeteers and other artists have seen their physical freedom compromised by jail periods for the content of their songs and performances. In 2015, the Organic Law 4/2015 of the 30th of March of citizens security[3] changed the freedom of expression panorama. This new law gives a high discretionary power to the state forces to detect possible felonies regarding, specifically yet not solely, hate speech. However, under that definition, some unusual cases were added. For instance, terrorism enhancement (especially ETA[4] terrorism) was added, which turned out to be a vague concept or injuries to the Spanish Crown or the Spanish King. In this line, there is a concept Surribas Balduque (2020) brings to the debate: *fiction*. Art and fiction usually enjoy superior protection regarding what they express. The black humour and others could sometimes be interpreted as hate speech if we do not relate it to the fictional aura. It is crucial, says the author, to discern the different layers of fiction if art is considered in an exceptional legal situation separated from reality and, therefore, from any possible consequences (Surribas Balduque, 2020, p. 423).

The academia's debate is vast, likely to be proportional to the debate in all society layers around the freedoms. However, the reality is that there are central issues that need to be tackled. While hate speech is punished in Spain in areas concerning institutions or collectives with sufficient protection, the racist, gendered, xenophobic and ideological crimes increases in a dangerous rhythm. For instance, in their last report about hate crimes, the Spanish Ministry of Domestic Affairs reported an increment of 20.9% in racist crimes than the 2018 report

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[3] Better known as *Ley Mordaza*, in English, Jaw Law.

[4] ETA (*Euskadi Ta Askatasuna* in English means Basque Homeland and Freedom), considered a far-left terrorist group.

(Ministerio del Interior, 2019). It was already in 2016 when racist, gendered, xenophobic and ideological crimes constituted the 91.7% of the hate crimes (Bustos Martínez, de Santiago Ortega, Martínez Miró and Rengifo Hidalgo, 2019, p. 32). Between 2015 and 2017, when Europe suffered the terrorist attacks in Paris and Barcelona, Twitter was filled with racist hashtags such as #matadatodoslosmusulmanes[4] in the case of Paris and #stopIslam, #TerroristasWelcome or #Refugeesnotwelcome (Bustos Martínez et al., 2019, p. 28). The process of Othering was massive in this creation of hate speech.

Knowing that such hashtags and the participation in the spreading of messages accompanied by them are, as stated before, constitutive of a felony, it is intriguing to discover what can push someone to speak in such terms publicly. Bustos Martínez et al. (2019, p. 34) establish two variants. First, in those who do not present their identity, anonymity plays a crucial role. The authors understand that this factor might cause an emotional distance, reduce empathy, and the sense of danger that makes it easier to express their ideas. Second, the feeling of belonging to a community. In this case, the feeling of being accepted and, in some cases, praised for those comments guide the potential hate speakers to show their real identity (Bustos Martínez et al., 2019, p. 34). However, there is a hidden circumstance powering this kind of behaviour, sometimes external or internal, which legitimises their trend of thought by far-right parties in Europe (Bustos Martínez et al., 2019, p. 39). Once your message is reproduced by political actors in the higher platforms of any democracy (Parliament or any other public spheres for debate), the feeling of legitimation eases the concerns about the potential hate speech.

# 3. POPULISM, FAR RIGHT, AND VOX

*Populism* is a concept often related to extremist ideologies in different countries around the world. Even though it is possible to relate or link it to some ideas, it is intricate to precise when it comes to being defined conceptually (Featherstone and Karaliotas, 2019). To arrive at a complete and accurate definition of the term, the concept has been searched in different Anglo-Saxons' dictionaries.

*Table 2. Dictionary review of populism.*

| Populism dictionary review | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Dictionary** | **Entry word** | **Primary definition** | **Key concepts** |
| **Merriam-Webster (n.d. -a)** | Populist (no specific entry on populism) | A member of a political party claiming to represent the common people. | Common people |
| **Cambridge dictionary (n.d. -b)** | Populism | Political ideas and activities that are intended to get the support of ordinary people by giving them what they want. | Ordinary people |
| **Oxford learner's dictionary (n.d.)** | Populism | A type of politics that claims to represent the opinions and wishes of ordinary people. | Ordinary people |
| **Lexico (n.d.)** | Populism | A political approach that strives to appeal to ordinary people who feel that their concerns are disregarded by established elite groups. | Ordinary people, elite groups |
| **Collins dictionary (n.d.)** | Populism | Populism refers to political activities or ideas that claim to promote the interests and opinions of ordinary people. | Ordinary people |
| **Macmillan dictionary (n.d.)** | Populism | Politics that represent the interests and opinions of ordinary people | Ordinary people |

Provided the different definitions displayed in Table 2, it is possible to say that populism relates to the common or ordinary people. The political decisions, actions, ideas, representations, or approaches focus on the common or ordinary people. Lexico (n.d.) gives the definition even compliments the discussion with another concept: elite groups as contraposition of the ordinary people. Featherstone and Karaliotas (2019) remark the over-usage of the term that has led to

misuse or misunderstanding. The authors make the connection that nowadays, people instinctively make between populism and demagoguery. It is often possible to see how the term is thrown to the political adversary as if the concept's practical representation had a negative or pejorative connotation. Nevertheless, as shown in Table 2, it does not have to be treated in any specific direction *per se*, unless the conception of the people does so.

In search of defining what the common people means, Featherstone and Karaliotas (2019, p. 33) argue that there is no pre-given and settled group of populations applicable to every case. They continue by saying that the people "are constantly constructed and demarcated through the 'discursive frontiers' that populist discourses draw between them and a 'constitutive outside' - the enemy, against which 'the people' is constituted" Featherstone and Karaliotas (2019, p. 33). The social demands shape the people that the current moment favours, making the people a political actor articulated by the mechanisms developed by the populist strategies. It is an imperial necessity for those who follow a populist strategy to understand their people's needs and demands. An outstanding example is the Malvinas-Falklands conflict, converted premeditatedly into a populist problem, where Margaret Thatcher could make the British citizens they were personally attacked (Featherstone and Karaliotas, 2019, p. 36). Not to mention that the then unpopular Thatcher reversed the situation to be re-elected in the 1983 general election. In Vox's case, the primary study subject in this thesis their target is the Spanish people. Understanding what the Spanish people mean for this political party and addressing them will be one of the thesis's intended goals since it possesses many exclusive characteristics.

## 3.1.    The fourfold typology of populism

The second primary tool to analyse Vox's social media activity is the fourfold typology of populism. It was first developed by Jagers and Walgrave (2007) and later ratified by de Vreese et al. (2018). As advanced in the introduction, the authors concreted the vague term of populism into four different types. They are based on the assumption that populism has three distinct elements: the people, the others and the elites.

The first one, complete populism, would refer to the utilisation of all of them. That means that there would be a utilisation of the people's conceptualised image, making a deep differentiation with the others and the elites. Complete populism is usually used when the speaker wants to propose a solution to defend their conceptualised people to find the opposing group's culprit. In this sense, the emphasis would appear to be divided (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007, p. 335).

The second one and the third one, excluding and anti-elitist populism, are relatively similar. Both are based on the simple mechanism of excluding the opposing group. However, they hold some differences. On the one hand, anti-elitist populism finds its roots in the anti-establishment ideals and focuses on an inclusive idea of the people that have to fight it. On the other hand, excluding populism is not based on anti-establishment standards but more on the exclusive belonging to the group considered to be the people. Contrary to what happens to complete populism, in this case, the emphasis is upon the others. (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007, p. 335)

The fourth group, empty populism, is the opposite to complete populism. In this case, there is a total focus on the concept of the people. There is no opposing group mentioned and, therefore, no exclusive features. Empty populism features are inclusion and the total absence of anti-establishment. In this case, the emphasis is on the people. (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007, p. 335)

The reason why the fourfold typology of populism is the selected approach for this thesis is the depth it brings. There is a second approach that has traditionally been studied: the differences between right and left populism. Ivaldi, Lanzone and Woods (2017) conducted a comparative study between far-right and far-left parties in Europe regarding their ideological standards. One of the main remarks in their paper is the idea of populism as a thin or a thick ideology that piles up with another one. In the same direction, Mudde (2004) remarked that a thin ideology is based on two antagonist groups.

For that reason, in this context, the utilisation of the fourfold typology of populism will bring a more precise result about the utilisation of the different elements present in populism to discern if a clear pattern or strategy has been followed. This thesis tries to find the possible approach taken to achieve the best in their populist process.

## 3.2.    Populism timeline

To fully understand the concept's complexity, it is essential to briefly cover the concept's timeline from its first usage until now. Fuentes (2020) establishes four different stages: 1870-1900 as the beginning of the concept, the usage of the concept in the Interwar Period, the Cold War, and the period from 1989 until nowadays.

According to Fuentes (2020, pp. 52-56), the period (1870-1900) is considered the first one in the history in which the term was put in use. The idea behind it was the defence of all the agrarian people in the United States that were in the wrong positions due to the new

establishment derived by the gold standard, financial power and the strong railroad companies. The concept was born together with the People's Party, also known as the People's Party or Populist Party, in the North American states of Colorado, Idaho, Kansas, North Dakota, and Nevada. In this case, the concept of the people was crystalline clear.

The second stage of the concept is Fuentes's (2020, pp. 57-58) in the Interwar period, between the First World War and the Second World War. This period was strongly marked by the Great Depression of 1929. The populist movements spread their salvation messages worldwide, with the most significant case in Europe brought by the fascist regimes. However, Fuentes (2020, p. 58) argues that soon the matter of calling the adversary populist would be underused. Thus the concept was buried in favour of fascist, communist or red. In this stage, populism ended up with marginal usage.

After the Second World War and with the Cold War's arrival, the third period made its way through. Fuentes (2020, pp. 58-61) continues by saying that this was a particular moment when leaders such as Jean-Marie Le Pen adopted the concept proudly. With the frenetic recovery after the Second World War and the waning presence of communist regimes, democracy seemed to be the only option in place again. Therefore, leaders like Marine Le Pen in France understood populism as a connection to the people.

Finally, the last period recognised by Fuentes (2020, pp. 62-65) is the one that covers from 1989 until nowadays. The end of the Soviet Union would bring a re-division of the dualities in the political spectrum. It would not be capitalism versus communism anymore rather than different ideologies under the capitalist frame. The new geopolitical divisions and the economic crisis would ease the appearance of new populisms around the globe, such as Podemos or Vox in Spain. The new populisms would cover the significant issues of the moment, varying from the rejection of immigration to the resistance to the EU's austere and anti-crisis strategies.

## 3.3.     Spanish turbulences and the arrival of the far-right populism

As of 2021, we naturally live in the last stage provided by Fuentes (2020). For those who can potentially read this thesis in some years from now, including me, I will stop here to contextualise the current situation to offer a better understanding of Vox's communicative

strategy. In 2018, the leader of the opposition's party (PSOE[5]), Pedro Sánchez, filed a motion of censure against the then president of the Government, Mariano Rajoy (PP[6]). The reasons Sánchez argued when presenting the motion of censure were mainly two. On the one hand, the PP was condemned as an organisation for a "B" accounting; therefore, the party needed a profound transformation and renovation from the inside. On the other hand, in the papers being judged by the tribunals, the nomenclature 'M.Rajoy' appeared as one of the beneficiaries of some allegedly irregular money transactions, and the name of the Spanish president was close enough to the nomenclature given.

The motion of censure needed the support of the absolute majority of the Parliament (176/350), and that was a rather difficult task since the proposing party (PSOE) had 84 seats. However, Pedro Sánchez turned out to be able to convince the far-left party Podemos with 67 seats, the Catalonian independentist parties (ERC and PdeCat) with 17 votes, the Basque Country independentists parties (PNV and Bildu) with seven seats, the Valencian left party Compromís with four votes and the Canary party Nueva Canarias with 1. In total, 180 votes in favour to sack Rajoy from the Government and proclaim Pedro Sanchez as the Government's new Spanish president.

The motion of censure was approved, yet the Government was very fragile and weak. From June 2018, when the president changed, to almost the end of 2019, Spain lived two general elections (28-April and 10-November). In both, PSOE won without the needed majority to form the executive. However, after the second elections on the 10th of November, besides the left lost support, the block of censure's motion invested Pedro Sánchez as the new president. The reason for that has a name, and it is Vox.

Vox went from inexistent parliamentary representation in 2018 to 24 seats in the 28A elections in 2019 and 52 seats after the repetition of the elections in the 10N elections (EuropaPress, 2019). Vox had already become the third strongest party nationwide, surpassing Podemos and Ciudadanos. Nowadays, the Government is still in place, and they have approved the State's General Budgets to grant their perdurance during the whole legislature. However, what they could not expect was the COVID-19 pandemic, being this situation was a tragedy in terms of human lives and a tragedy in terms of political stability. The rampant crisis derived from the coronavirus has enhanced Vox's political tactics.

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[5] Partido Socialista Obrero Español, whose ideology is considered to be centre-left, following the European Social-Democrat tradition.
[6] Partido Popular, considered to be centre-right, following the European People's Party tradition.

There is an exciting debate in academia around the populist nature of Vox's political tactics, being this one an extraordinarily cumbersome one for the party's short life. On the one hand, Barrio (2020, p. 243) assures that Vox is not a populist party. The primary rationale behind this assertion is that the author considers the division of the reality in groups such as the elites and the people and the antagonistic relationship between those. Barrio (2020, p. 243) continues stating that the idea of sovereignty in Vox does not reside with the people but with Spain's idea.

On the other hand, Álvarez-Benavides and Jiménez Aguilar (2020, p. 66) prove throughout the party's public activity on Twitter the existence of what he calls the "tools" of the enemy. Duality can be considered the absent dichotomy that Barrio (2020) does not find. Álvarez-Benavides and Jiménez Aguilar (2020, p. 67) go beyond and regard Vox's populist discourse as the way their voters have found direct answers, allowing them to feel empowered again.

In the same line, Umberto Eco (1995), in his essay Eternal Fascism, develops 14 characteristics of the new fascisms, considered eternal. Modern and with no more extended appearance of dictatorships. One of the main points he describes is what he calls *qualitative populism*. Eco (1995) establishes that for this new type of populism, the *individuals* do not possess rights, and *the People* is conceived as a quality, a monolithic entity expressing the *common will*, where the leader is proclaimed as the interpretant. This conception of the people as a monolithic entity confirms that the argument that Barrio (2020, p. 243) expresses about the sovereignty placed in Spain rather than the individuals is compatible with populism. Some scholars even consider that populism can be split into different types considering its messages' features. As it was brought up in the introduction, de Vreese et al. (2018, p. 426) collects a classification in three degrees of populism: complete, excluding and empty. This flexibility between the main assets of the populist concept (the people, us and the elites and enemies) complicates the term as it cannot be ruled out when one of the elements is missing. For that reason, even if it was evident, as Barrio (2020) assures, that there is no division between people and elites in Vox (and Podemos) discourse, there could not be a certain assertion denying its presence in the far-right party.

Besides the "terminological chaos" (Freedman, 2018) and constant debate around the concept regarding what can be considered populist and what cannot, it is somehow clear the shifting conception of *the people* and the imperial necessity of the political parties to assess what is the best strategy to reach that public they consider to be *the people*. Around Vox, there is also an increasing debate. The truth is that the party is mutating as fast as the current politics

are, which makes it especially difficult to catalogue as valid the expositions that some scholars claimed a few years back. This work will provide more background about Vox's mutation to more or fewer populists statements and which type their populism represents.

## 3.4.    Vox

The natural way to solidify this theoretical cementation of the thesis is by reviewing the academic discussion around the main subject of the thesis: Vox. Vox was founded in 2013 by politicians coming from different right parties and associations such as the People's Party or the AVT[7]. However, the first time the gained relevance in the political panorama was in 2018, getting to the Andalusian Parliament (12/109 MPs) in the first place and to the Spanish National Parliament in 2019 (24/350 MPs). For those with little background knowledge in Spanish history, it is essential to remark that Spain suffered a far-right dictatorship from General Francisco Franco from 1939-1975, commonly referred to as Francoist Dictatorship. When in 1975, Franco died, *Transición Española*[8] started to culminate in 1978 with the current period of democracy. Since that moment, the far-right forces remained insignificant, leading to a period of 38 years with no seats in any parliament in the Spanish territory.

The main reason for this change in 2018 was social media, which played a significant role in their campaign and selecting the messages sent throughout these channels. Aladro and Requeijo (2020, p. 205) argue that "Vox's triumph on this social network was not incidental, but it was due to a thorough and continuous strategy in the hands of important figures such as Steve Bannon, who have been advising its leaders since 2017". Eco (1995) warned that the new *eternal fascism,* as he described the new movements that were on their way, would never look as they used to. They would seem like any other political movement and their leader as any other politician. They would not look as they used to in the military dictatorships of the XX century. In the same line, Gould (2019, p. 1) establishes a very illuminating wordplay by saying that the far-right parties" use the technological achievements of the twenty-first century to attack the late-twentieth-century political and social achievements of the European Union in order to replace them with the nineteenth-century idea of the distinct ethnocultural nation fully sovereign in its nation-state".

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[7] *Asociación de Víctimas del Terrorismo*. This association had its foundation goal to defend the victims' interests of the terrorism caused by the terrorist band ETA (*Euskadi Ta Askatasuna*, which in English means Basque Homeland and Freedom), considered a far-left terrorist group.

[8] Spanish Transition.

### 3.4.1. Ideological x-ray

The condition of being a far-right party might already come with some prejudgements for the reader. However, it is essential to review what the literature says to confirm or debunk the party's possible pre-conceptions. There is an underlying condition behind the party, and it is that its foundation was seven years ago, which often arrives with an ideological instability or even unclear positions about specific topics.

First, their immigration concept, the focus topic in this work, is often similar to other far-right parties. Calderon, De la Vega and Herrero (2020, p. 16) found out that Vox's discourse was nationalist and anti-immigration. In their study, the authors found out that the hatred messages appearing around the party's social media's orbit had a direct link to those positions. For instance, the findings pointed out in the direction of a discussion where there were demands for discriminating the immigrants and restricting their rights, even removing the public support they receive (Calderon, De la Vega and Herrero, 2020, p. 16). In the article, the authors found hate speech in Vox's Twitter account's orbit from supporters and sympathisers following their publications charged of anti-immigration dyes.

Furthermore, it is vital to clarify that their rejection of immigration has a distinctive feature common to the South European countries: Islamophobia. For Cervi (2020, p. 4), their Islamophobia is rooted in the soil of Orientalism (Said, 1987), having eurocentric solid prejudices against those coming from Islamic and Oriental societies for their believed incompatibility with the Western values (they appear to be primitive, violent, despotic, fanatic and irrational, being those *static* features). Islamophobia emerges in Vox's political ideas as a racial rejection (Cervi, p. 4), more than a xenophobic one, which is also implied somehow. The other rooting to the xenophobic and Islamophobic discourse is the presence of nativism. Cervi (2020, p. 3) establishes Vox as a populist party, the combination of Nationalism and Xenophobia existing in nativism is how the party portrays *the enemy* or *the other,* a necessary component appearing in populist discourses.

Having clear their positions regarding the people whose origin is not Spain, it is time to talk about their conception of the domestic society, the way they envision it. In an extensive analysis of Vox ideology, Álvarez-Benavides and Jiménez Aguilar (2020, pp. 59-64) argue that that in their postulates they reject multiculturalism, as seen in the previous paragraph as well; the sexual diversity, with a clear opposition to the LGBTIQ+ collectives in favour of the *traditional* family and the ethnic and linguistic diversity existing in the different regions of the Spanish geography. Moreover, Álvarez-Benavides and Jiménez Aguilar (2020, p. 64)

establish that one of their communicative strategies is to *seduce* and *rescue* those conservative collectives showing rejection of the inequality of women respecting men. The authors describe Vox as a defender of the patriarchal conception of the family and the traditional relations of power inside it, trying to catch those men's support, fearing the loss of privileges.

How could a government control and impact how the population of a country views reality? By centralising all the public services. Spain is a decentralised country where the Central Government coordinates 17 Autonomous Communities and 2 Autonomous Cities. Education, Health Services, Security and Justice are the competence of each Autonomous Community. Therefore, each of those territories can have certain flexibilities to implement different policies in the fields. It can be undoubtedly dangerous for a party to have a clear rejection of the XXI Century Welfare States' progress to leave the education decentralised. Indeed, they advocate for an immediate re-centralisation of the competences in the above-mentioned matters and, literally, "limiting in every possible way the legislative capacity of the autonomies" (Vox, 2018, p. 3).

Following the same logic of reducing the institutions' freedom in the educational field, they propose the so-called Parental Expressed Authorisation Pin. The idea behind this measure is that the education-related to ethical, social, civic, moral or sexual values is subject to explicit parental authorisation, reducing the educators' authority significatively (Vox, 2018, p. 15). In what respects to the Health services, they defend a similar strategy. First of all, they propose centralising all the services such as vaccinations or waiting lists that are now transferred to the autonomies (Vox, 2018, p. 14). In what referrers to their crusade against the LGBTIQ+ and the women rights collective by suppressing what they consider as interventions alien to the health such as gender change and abortions (Vox, 2018, p. 14). In the same line and reaffirming the anti-immigration, they also defend eliminating the universal access to the health services to illegal immigrants, regardless of their condition and installing a co-pay for those legal immigrants who have not been more than ten years in Spain (Vox, 2018, p. 14).

Considering that for Vox, even the legal immigrants would need to pay for their health services, the following logic topic to cover was their position regarding the European Union. Gould (2019, p. 13) reminds us about Spain's phenomenon with Vox called *Spexit*. It happened when Vox had irrelevant influence in Spanish politics and, thus, was never taken into consideration. However, now that the party occupies the third position in what seats in the Parliament refers, it is remarkable. Vox, similar to *Alternative für Deutschland* in Germany, developed an inner hostility to the EU "because of limitations resulting from encroachment by existing treaties" and promoting a "call for new treaties which respect national sovereignty"

(Gould, 2019, p. 13). Thus, this far-right party considers the three pillars of the EU project (migration, supranational political organisations and economic Europeanisation/globalisation) are in crisis, for which they are considered eurosceptic (Gould, 2019, p. 19).

*Table 3. Vox's ideological fundamentals summary.*

| Vox's Ideological Summary | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Category** | **Outcome** | **Comment** |
| **Ideological spectrum** | Far-right | Broad consensus in the literature. |
| **Migration** | Anti-immigration<br><br>Xenophobic<br><br>Islamophobic<br><br>Racist | Strongly related to an orientalist, Islamophobic and nativist trend of thought. |
| **European Union** | Eurosceptic | |
| **Feminism** | Anti-feminist | Defence of the traditional family and power relations inside it. Rejection of feminist policies since they do not recognise such a problem. |
| **Diversity** | Anti-LGBTIQ+<br><br>Anti-multiculturalism | |
| **Public services** | Limited services for immigrants<br><br>Centralisation<br><br>Strong control in education | State control over the autonomies. Health for Spanish people and immigrants with more than ten years in Spain. |
| **Climate change** | Ambiguous | They accept climate science, supports fracking and bet on ending solar taxes to support efficiency. |

Lastly, to conclude with the ideological review, Vox's position on the climate crisis will be presented. Although they could be expected to have a firm opposition to more environmental friendly postulates, Hess and Rener (2019) concluded otherwise. In what refers to climate policymaking, they accept climate science, yet they warn about the costs and advocate for liberalisation (Hess and Rener, 2019, p. 426). However, it is true that when it comes to the fossil-fuels policies, their preference is fracking, yet, speaking about the Renewable Energy

and Energy Efficiency (REEE) policies, they advocate for the solution of ending the solar tax and supporting the efficiency. Their position is not accurately defined, yet it is already closer to the European conservative right parties than the far-right ones (Hess and Rener, 2019, p. 427).

Once the ideological x-ray has been displayed, it is essential to deepen the understanding of the concepts surrounding Vox's migration ideological posture since it is the focus area of this thesis. The key concepts found in the previous literature defining their ideology have been *Nativism*, *Islamophobia and Orientalism.* Since they might be used to analyse the content, it is precise to look at the academic discussion. The final lines will be a brief review of Sinophobia, which might also appear in the analysis.

### 3.4.1.1. Nativism

The first concept, nativism, is heuristically studied by Betz (2019) in-depth. To begin with, the author defines the term as a trend that "appeals to a range of sentiments and ideational constructs, most prominently patriotism, nationalism and even racism, yet goes beyond them" (2019, p. 112). Nativism, as described by Betz (2019, p. 112), expresses a preference for the native-born culture in preference to the foreign-born, based on the sole reason of being native. As it has already been addressed in our study, nativism will play a significant role since Vox's anti-immigration postures are highly influenced. For Vox, similar to what happens in many countries with their far-right parties, the native-born go first. It has been displayed in the messages orchestrated by Soros in the USA in late years, with the untiredly repeated "America First". Vox has also copied it in Spain with their "Spain First". However, nativism is a broad term that affects in many different ways. Betz (2019) proposes a division in three faces: economic nativism, welfare chauvinism and symbolic nativism, which can be found separately or all together.

Beginning with *economic nativism*, Betz (2019, p. 113) describes the two dominant mantras: the first one, the immigrants take our jobs from us -native-born-. The second one, the immigrants devalue the wages the native-born can aspire to with the low wages they perceive and are willing to perceive. In times of crisis, this is mainly a prominent characteristic of the nativist discourse. As will be analysed later in this thesis, Vox takes all the opportunities possible to convince the native-born public opinion about those two trends described by Betz. It is often not proven with data, and it is linked to common sense: the more people, the fewer jobs available. The logic does not explore the internal socio-economic complications such as the jobs the foreign-born are willing to apply for and if they are the same as the native-born.

"Public opinion, in any case, usually takes little account of the intricacies of economic analysis" (Betz, p. 113).

The second face of nativism is set to be *welfare chauvinism*. Chauvinism, as defined by the Encyclopaedia Britannica (n.d), is an "excessive and unreasonable patriotism". Therefore, the combination of this term with welfare makes the concept a patriotic view over the country's welfare state in question. This face of nativism establishes the jeopardisation of the welfare systems by the foreign-born. Marine Le Pen assured that the French are paying to protect each other for the only reason that they belong to the same family, France (Betz, p. 117). This idea makes the foreign-born unworthy of receiving the native-born's payment reasonably, yet it is the precise definition of how Vox views the immigrants' access to the health care system. For Vox, only the native-born should have access to free health care, regardless of the foreign-born condition, which could very well be paying its taxes as any other native-born.

Lastly, symbolic nativism is another crucial facet of the same phenomenon. Unlike the others, centred in some ways on the economic situation or the socio-economic views of the society, symbolic nativism is focused on the defence of the fundamental traditions, values and institutional arrangements that define a particular community (Betz, p. 123). In this case, the debate might be centred around aspects such as monarchy or republic, Catholic, Islamic or laic society or the family's central values. For the conservatism in far-right parties, the focus is always on preserving the societies' ancient values, fearing any progression. It is visible in Vox's position, for instance, around the family or their negative conception of the LGTBI+ collective and the late years' social achievements. It is clear for Betz (2019, p. 134) that the far-right seems to have discovered the winning formula in nativism. Their discourses not only have not caused rejection for their reactionary views but have gotten to the irrational fear people share in times of crisis.

### 3.4.1.2. Orientalism and Islamophobia

Symbolic nativism is tightly related to Orientalism and Islamophobia since both relate to cultural assets. Edward Said (1978) can be considered the precursor of orientalism, and it establishes a confrontation between 'us' and 'the other', which in this case is West and Orient. Orientalism is understood as "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident'", where the Western style is dominating and restructuring the Orient (Said, 1978, p. 2-3). In Said's work, the concept is related to a political or social organisation; it is attached to even art. The concept flourished

while the European colonising powers, France and the United Kingdom, had their most significant spoils in Africa and Asia. Orientalism is, thus, directly linked to the colonisation of the moment. Said work is considered to be the starting point of many postcolonial studies.

Coming to the end of the XX Century, the focus was shifted to Islamophobia (Skenderovic and Späti, 2019) or neo-Orientalism (Kerboua, 2016). The concept was raised as a concern existing in Europe about the potential religious crisis between Christian Europe and Islamic Orient (Skenderovic and Späti, 2019, p. 134). Nonetheless, the literature suggested that Islamophobia could not be related to a purely religious conflict rather than a racial one, being the debate closer to anti-Muslim or anti-Arab racism than to an Islam related one (Skenderovic and Späti, 2019, p. 135). Therefore, it started to be treated as a racial problem. In the current far-right movements, the problem is not only with Islam as a religion. It could be a triggering factor but not a decisive one. It is indeed the race that is targeted. One clear example of this is the conflict derived from the Syrian Civil War. Regardless of the religion of the migrants, they were treated as a whole, as an Islamic or Oriental group invading Europe. It was not solely the religion that was used by the far-right to reject them. It was multiculturalism, their habits, their incompatible ways of living with our societies. Thus, racism. Skenderovic and Späti (2019, p. 136) make an interesting comparison between antisemitism and Islamophobia, where the Othering process is central, yet maintaining their time-placing as one of their distinctive points.

The process in which orientalism has left the floor to Islamophobia in Western societies contains certain peculiarities. For example, when orientalism was conceived, it was a negative and positive, mystical connotation that together constructed the Otherness (Skenderovic and Späti, 2019, p. 137). However, it is not the case in Islamophobia. In the latter concept, Muslims and Islam are considered to be just as a menace to Western societies, changing the exotic appearance of the Other in Orientalism to a clear unfavourable, prejudicial and stereotypical image of the Muslim and Arabs, causing hostility towards them (Skenderovic and Späti, 2019, p. 137). In Vox's case, Islamophobia gets to an outer stage since they seem to merge all African or, at least, North African and East African into the same Otherness.

### 3.4.1.3. Sinophobia

Unexpectedly yet significant is the reviewing briefly the concept of Sinophobia. Even if there is no extensive literature covering Vox and Sinophobia's specific relation, it will appear in the analysis due to the current pandemic situation. COVID-19, originally coming from Wuhan, has awakened a new type of orientalism, directed to China in specific. Zhang and Xu (2020) review

the situation that emanated from it. The authors establish a critical point of view to the exhibition of moral superiority from the Western democracies to the Oriental authoritarian regimes, taking as an example Russia and China. In their article, they put the focus on the misleading information provided by different sources. One clear example is the assumption without any scientific confirmation that Chinese authorities knew about the Sars-Cov-2 in the first days of December 2019, hiding it for weeks until they finally dated in late December their first case (Zhang and Xu, 2020, p. 214). For them, Western democracies questioned China's drastic actions in the early stage of the then epidemic due to authoritarianism, assuming their decisions were not grounded in scientific research (Zhang and Xu, 2020, p. 215).

This new way orientalism has evolved might be present in the academic discussions in the following years. For now, it is a relatively new concept to study. However, for it will be present in one of the studied periods in which this thesis will cover Vox's social media activity, the remark had to be done.

### 3.4.2. Hyperbolic language to set the agenda

Besides agenda setting is not the core concept of this academic work, it is worth reviewing it since the far-right parties possess a great capacity to impact public discussions, both in media and politics. The concept's primary definition is the transfer of private or untreated issues by nature to the public debate, handled by public institutions. This offers a possibility to gain relevance and acquire enough attention to possibly crystallise in public policies.

The first author who described this process was Lippmann (1922), using a fictitious situation to explain how the mass media and the pseudo-environment in which we live determine our position and feelings towards the real world. For this purpose, Lippmann (1922) placed his work in September 1914, when the First World War started. French, German, and English citizens lived isolated from the world, with only a connection to it every 60 days. While the war started, they did not know a single thing about it and acted as friends, even though the war between their countries would make them enemies. In the continent, the citizens knew the situation in about 6 hours through the mass media. This way, Lippmann (1922) explained that the link between the real world and the person's pseudo-environment is the mass media, affecting how you act and think.

However, even though it was in the early twenties, the first approach to the concept would not be until 1972, when McCombs and Shaw would conduct the first empirical study on the impact of agenda-setting. Their study was the USA Presidential Elections of 1968, with hot

issues such as the Vietnam War. The study's main goal was to compare the media agenda's critical issues and those considered necessary by the undecided voters. The results were evident in the support of the agenda-setting theory. McCombs and Shaw (1972) concluded that the media substantially impacted public opinion by guiding voters to focus on specific topics and ignore others. Following the same argument line that Lippmann (1922), the authors placed media between the real world and the voters, acting as filters. Nonetheless, McCombs and Shaw (1972) could not link in every case the individual opinion to the effect of the agenda-setting in the voters since they considered a much more complex mechanism affected by other factors such as the socio-economic situation or psychological factors.

In 2006, Walgrave and Van Aelst established a model of studying agenda-setting based on three different stages. The first stage, the media input, is determined by the issue type, for instance, violence, sports or any other issue. The media outlet and the coverage, both determined by the kind of media and estimated impact on public opinion. The second stage is the political contexts as such. It is determined by factors such as the election's times, institutional rules, the institutions' internal functioning, the political situation and configuration, and the personal traits that the public agents have with the issue and topic. If a topic is a fundamental issue for public opinion and the elections are happening soon after it, it is much more likely that the candidates include it in their agendas to gain votes.

Nevertheless, if the topic goes against the internal regulations, it is more likely to disappear from the agenda. The third and last stage is political adoption related to the topic. In this case, for Walgrave and Van Aelst (2006), the reaction can vary from no reaction and symbolic reaction to a substantial one. For the authors, both symbolic and substantial reaction can go either fast or slow. Applying the agenda-setting concepts to this thesis, it is clear that the media plays a crucial role in Vox's activity. Aladro and Requeijo (2020, p. 205) already talk about a critical role in their recent success in the way they understand and use social media:

The use of the metaphor combined with synecdoche is essential in constructing its discourse's core identity narratives. Vox is a party presented to us as marked by symbolic associations, with networks of semantic relations that connect with a whole, making it susceptible to an absolute identification with the country. Vox is Spain, the flag, the nation, the homeland, which also evokes the concept of the house, home, family and father. Aladro and Requeijo (2020, p. 220)

However, the exaggerated language used in their social media can sometimes be related to hate speech. As mentioned in the introduction, hate speech is differentiated from any other kind of offensive discourse because it is always directed to a group or a person related to its

belonging to some group. However, criminalising and pursuing a group is not the only feature of hate speakers. According to MacAvaney et al. (2019), praising a hateful group is also part of hate speech. Thus, those who actively participate in platforms where hate speech is spread can be considered as hate speakers as much as those who do not support them actively but reproduce their messages.

In the case of Vox, it is possible to find something peculiar. To describe what this party represents nowadays, it is necessary to go backwards and look at the former Spanish far-right parties before Vox irrupted in 2018. Ben David and Matamoros Fernández (2016) showed how Facebook hosted an increasingly large amount of hate speech posts in the accounts of parties as España 2000, La Falange, Nudo Patriota Español or Alternative Española. In these posts, the authors describe fantasising situations such as an invasion of Turkish citizens to Europe or the Muslim values' imposture to Christian women. It is common for far-right parties to create and use fake situations to favour the social alarm and get votes from desperate people.

Another example of this is Vox. During the campaign of the Andalusian elections 2018. Before the polls, the far-right party published videos warning about a fictitious expropriation of the emblematic La Giralda to Muslims and after the elections celebrating inexistent victories (Reyes Moriana, 2019).

Vox is auto-defined as the absolute right, opposite of what they call *derechita cobarde*[9], despite that their leader, Santiago Abascal, repeatedly says that they are not a fascist party. Paradoxically, most of the above mentioned far-right parties were eclipsed by Vox in the 2018 and 2019 elections. Hence, it is possible to say that the hate speakers and voters of those parties found an outstanding possibility to unify Vox's ideas and political strength. Their political agenda was made out of Donald Trump's remains and a strong focus on immigration. Simultaneously, they catch the media's attention easier than traditional parties (Reyes Moriana, 2019) as most of them are scandals and the media tries to uncover the fake content on their messages. With a single topic on their agenda, Vox achieved to centralise and fulfil the media agenda simultaneously. With basic messages full of fake and incomplete data, gathering their voters' hate towards a specific and vulnerable collective is the African or Islamic immigrants.

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[9] In English, coward right.

# 4. METHODOLOGY

The thesis's theoretical cementation leads to this chapter, where most of the research decisions are taken. This chapter will explain the philosophical research choices to then continue with the data generation and its analysis. The research method, semiotic analysis, will be justified and explained to understand its relevance to this study.

## 4.1.     Research philosophical choices

The philosophical choices help the researcher justify and build the research design that fits its work's best purpose. Ontologically, the approach selected has been constructivism in its social aspects. It happens as constructivists question the individualist approach of rationalism and believe in a social ontology (Fierke, 2013). According to Creswell (2007), social constructivists focus on understanding the world they live in, developing subjective meaning based on their experiences. This means that the meanings are social constructs based on specific life situations and historical time. Constructivists argue that being cannot be isolated from the social conditions surrounding them. This fact leads logically to the epistemological understanding that this research is based on interpretivism.

Contrary to positivism, interpretivism establishes that knowledge and truth are subjective and influenced by culture, historical situation and experiences (Ryan, 2018). In the same direction, the researchers are assumed to be influenced by affecting the way they face the data. This first decision is critical to understand the following. Considering that the concepts analysed in the theoretical framework are very subjective, the ontological and epistemological choices perfectly suit this research's purpose. Thus, along with the analysis, the main task will be to understand how the posts regarding immigration in Vox's Instagram account are socially constructed. The meaning of the words, expressions and resemblances will be the target.

This thesis will observe the far-right party's social media behaviour to reach conclusions; the research approach is induction. This approach will gather all the information, form patterns – if possible, and then reach a general statement. All the previous choices lead to the selection of qualitative methods as the most suitable for this thesis. The analysis of abstract concepts is not simple to quantify. However, there is an assumption that usually appears around the qualitative methods: applicability or credibility. This problem is addressed by Gioia, Corley and Hamilton (2012) as they try to justify all their choices in their research carefully. Indeed, the authors remark the relevance of finding a systemic analysis applicable to all the process.

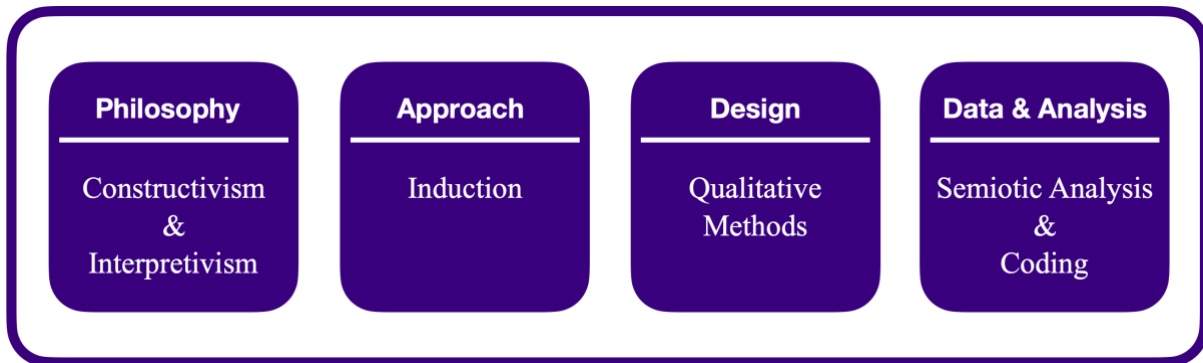Following their recommendations, the data analysis has been exhaustively designed to find that applicability.



*Figure 2. Research philosophical choices summary.*

The selected method has been a semiotic analysis. However, it is not the only method I had in mind when thinking about the analysis. Before starting the thesis, I considered hate speech and populism in Vox's everyday discourse, not a question to resolve. For that reason, I was interested in an ethnographic or netnographic analysis to understand the spreading group's peculiarities. Considering Vox's supporters as a determinate cultural group, ethnography could have allowed me to understand their values, behaviours, beliefs and language (Creswell, 2007). The most significant limitation was the current pandemic and the difficulty to spend time studying their acts physically.

Consequently, the idea was reconducted to a netnographic approach. Netnography has some different benefits for this particular case. For instance, it allows the researcher to avoid costs or overcome the difficulties that situations such as the current pandemic has brought to us. Moreover, it will enable studying more successfully sensitive political topics and illegal ones to coexist with anonymity (Leesa, McDermott & Ruth, 2017). Nonetheless, after the literature review and a glance at their activity, I noticed hate speech and populism depends on the topic. This discovery made me look for a situation where studying the activity would be remarkable to find hate speech and populism: the migration crisis.

## 4.2.    Semiotic Analysis

The semiotic analysis will help identify the posts' signs and then the information needed to answer the research questions. The analysis will be done in three different layers: ornamental elements, the public image of the party and message, in ascending relevance order. The

justification of this order is made based on the thesis's topic, as the primary study subjects to detect hate speech and populism are the speeches themselves, yet not only. After retrieving the signs from the posts based on these layers, each post will be given a code that will summarise the outcome of the analysis, answering the research questions. Finally, the research results will be displayed in three different tables gathering all the results from the coding, which will be detailed shortly, serving as the literature's discussion and will meet the empirical results. The conclusions and the different research lines will be offered as the closing lines of this thesis.

Semiotic analysis is the "process of analysing the effects of the production and reproduction, reception and circulation of meanings in all forms, used by all kinds of agents of communication" (Hodge and Kress, 1988). This thesis will be grounded in the sign conception introduced by Ferdinand de Saussure (Bouissac, 2010). In this theory, two critical elements are displayed in Figure 3: the signifier (concept, acoustic image) and the signified (mental representation of the concept). Beginning with the signifier, it is the element that assembles the object or signified in the reader's mind. To exemplify this, we can take the sign of a tree. Either written or in a picture, with the essential elements of a trunk, branches and leaves, the reader automatically assigns that signifier part of the sign to the signified image of a tree. Regardless of the colour, the number of branches, leaves or fruits, it is a tree. In this example, to sum up, the word or picture is the signifier, and the conceptual representation of it is the signified.

However, the key element of semiotics in politics and, thus, this thesis is arbitrariness. In the Saussurean concept of the sign, the signifier's interrelation and signified is "solely based on a social convention" (Bouissac, 2010, p. 91). It is there where the interpretation of the impact and meaning for society can occur. The application is simple. Looking at Figure 3, the represented semiotic analysis is one of the multiple that can occur. The image (signifier) appearing on the right side, based on the social conventions of the reader, the signified could be the palm tree that was described above, but it can also resemble the idea of a vacation or a Caribbean beach. Even the representation of a palm tree can be arbitrarily assigned to a particular beach for the reader. These are only some of the examples that can be listed under a specific social convention. If applied to this thesis, the semiotic analysis will be the mental process to interpret the signs to then talk about the arbitrariness it evokes. In practical terms, I will divide each post into signs to be analysed individually (texts, visuals, gestures, among others). Once this previous process is concluded, each sign is subjected to the semiotic analysis, as displayed in Figure 3.
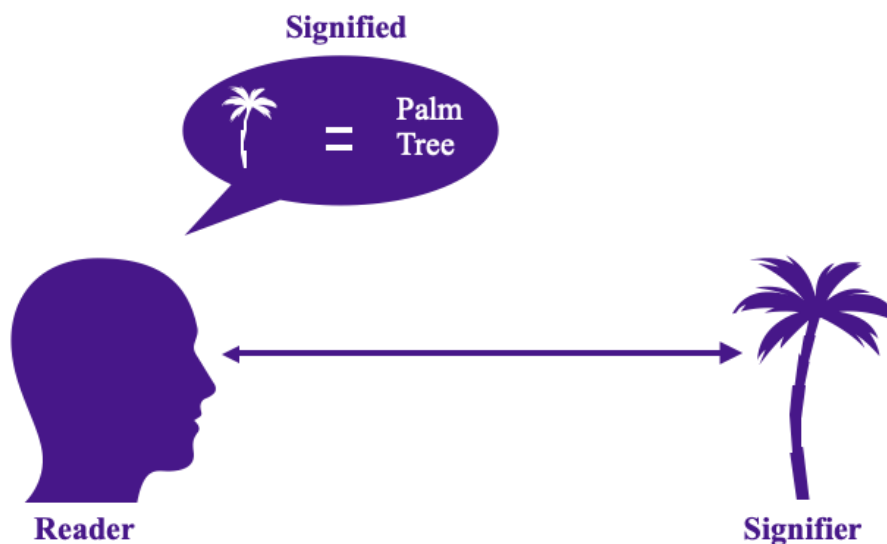
*Figure 3. Semiotic analysis process.*

Thus, I will observe and read each signifier and interpret them based on the theoretical background gained in the previous chapters of the thesis, and the social conventions present in my background, to assign each signifier a signified. The signs, divided in signifier and signified, will be listed after each post to contribute to the method's systematisation. After this process is done, each sign will provide meaning and an outcome to then be able to classify the posts as hate speech, populism and assign them a category in the Dark Side of Social Media Honeycomb Framework. As defended above, the semiotic analysis is arbitrary, and, for that reason, dictionaries will be used. For semantic appreciations of the terms, the Merriam Webster Dictionary and the dictionary of the *Real Academia de la Lengua Española* will be used to avoid possible biases.

## 4.3.    Data generation and coding

Going more in-depth in explaining the semiotic analysis, it is necessary to design the different levels in which the signs will be divided, read and interpreted. There will be a three-level analysis going from the least relevant to the core signs of the posts. The first one will be the ornamental elements of the posts, such as flags, music, or the shot's selection. The second level is set to be the public image and representation of the party, where the speaker selected, the place, the posture and gestures will be the target. Finally, and most importantly, the messages. In this category, the analysis will stop to analyse the possible pieces of misinformation, the adjectives, the tone and the rhetoric usage. All of this represented in Figure 4.
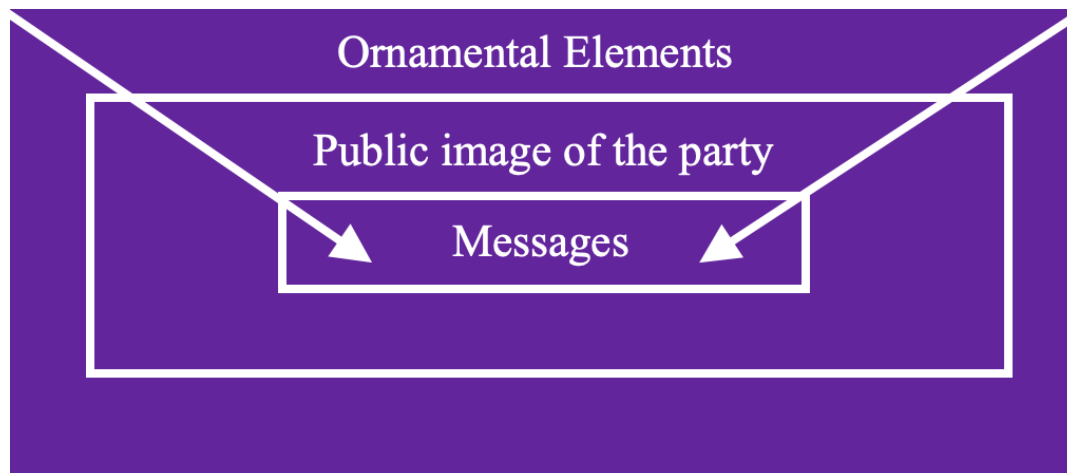
*Figure 4. Semiotic analysis' steps.*

As presented in the introduction, there will be three main questions, and each one of them will be based on a particular definition, discussion or framework. To narrow down the research, granting its feasibility, the analysis will be grounded on one of the aspects of Vox's political discourse, immigration. It is a choice based on the party's recent activity and the importance of the migration movements during this year. The studied period corresponds to a recent migratory crisis concerning Western Sahara's war declaration to Morocco, where the immigrants arriving in the Canary Islands' costs awaken the party's anti-immigration side. Specifically, the dates will be 18.11.2020, one day after the war declaration to 18.12.2020, selected to limit the data to round one natural month.

First, there will be a categorisation of all Vox's posts in the selected period to begin with the analysis. This way, it will be possible to quantify the topic's relevance in the party's agenda-setting and make it proportional to the other topics selected. There will not be specific topics but approximated to a general topical area. For example, if there is a post about a speech referring to the Canary Islands situation, it will be approximated to immigration. After that first classification, the focus will be on those posts where immigration is the core of the content and message. That means that the analysis and connection between hate speech and populism will be made about those migration-related ones, for it is the central discussion of this thesis.

Once the signs have been identified, studied and analysed, it is time to code them and prepare them to be discussed and presented. For that task, every post-analysis will conclude with a coding line. There will be a number for each research question (1, 2 and 3), and each option of the research question will be given a letter (1A, 1B, 1C, progressively). Beginning with the Research Question 1, related to the Dark Side of Social Media Honeycomb Framework (Baccarella et al., 2018), the classification is made in seven different aspects: sharing,

inappropriate distribution; presence, location tracking and monitoring; conversations, including misinformation, disinformation and aggressive engagement; identity as the exploitation of the online self; relationships, probably the most related to hate speech since it includes features as threat or intimidation; groups, presumed to be tightly related to populism as it deals with the in and out-group biases; and, finally, the reputation, which includes the shaming of defamation.

A critical remark to make is that, even though the signs will be studied individually, the post will be classified as a whole. Practically, it means that one post can be marked as having several features of the framework. The coding (C=) and the summary (Table 4) will then include the total number of posts related to immigration and the framework's features, and the total percentage.

*Table 4. Own creation based on the dark side of social media honeycomb framework by Baccarella et al. (2018).*

| RQ1: What elements of the dark side of social media honeycomb are present in Vox's Instagram account? | **Sharing**. Inappropriate distribution and content. | C=1A | Number of posts | Percentage of total |
| | **Presence**. Location tracking and monitoring. | C=1B | Number of posts | Percentage of total |
| | **Conversations**. Misinformation, disinformation and aggressive engagement. | C=1C | Number of posts | Percentage of total |
| | **Identity**. The exploitation of online self. | C=1D | Number of posts | Percentage of total |
| | **Relationships**. Threat, coercion, abuse and intimidation. | C=1E | Number of posts | Percentage of total |
| | **Groups**. In-group and out-group bias. | C=1F | Number of posts | Percentage of total |
| | **Reputation**. Shaming and defamation. | C=1G | Number of posts | Percentage of total |

Research Question 2 (Table 5), related to the presence or not of hate speech in the posts related to immigration during the studied period, will follow the same procedure and the previous one. In this case, based on the definition inducted in the introduction, the signs will be catalogued as hate speech or not. The presence of one sign containing hate speech will automatically make the post be coded like that. If the post is tagged as hate speech, the coding will follow to identify the core element, race, origin and religion, the specification selected based on the literature review discussion on an anti-immigration theoretical basis. If the hate message is directed to the immigrants for the sole reason, it will be approximated based on origin as a specification for its xenophobic features.

| **RQ2.** *Is hate speech towards immigrants present in Vox's Instagram account during the studied period? What elements can be found?* | Hate speech constitutes any form of expression that spread, incite, promote or justify hatred, violent or discriminating messages towards a determinate social group by its condition of gender, religion, race, origin, disability, gender identity or political ideas. | | | | |
| | Posts found to contain hate speech messages (C=2A) | | | No hate speech present in the post (C=2B) | |
| | Number of posts | Percentage of total | | Number of posts | Percentage of total |
| | Based on race (C=2A1) | Based on origin (C=2A2) | Based on religion (C=2A3) | | |
| | N / % | N / % | N / % | | |

The latest coding (Table 6), regarding Research Question 3, is dedicated to classifying the possible posts as populist or not and which populism is used in the post. As clarified in the previous coding table, the detection of one sign with populist features will place the publication. The coding will work in the same way for hate speech and populism. First, it will be catalogued as containing or not containing and, afterwards, further consideration is to be taken. In the case of populism, the three-level classification collected by de Vreese et al. (2018) will be used. Under complete populism, the posts refiring to the people, the other and the elites; regarding the exclusionary populism, only those who refer to the people and the others; and the empty populism, only those messages that refer or concern the people.

| **RQ3**: *Did Vox use a populist strategy on Instagram during the studied period? What is the predominant type of populism, if any?* | Based on the literature, there will be considered populist statements by those who appeal to *the people*, *the other*s or *the elites*. They can appear together or separately and concern the belonging to one of these groups. | | | | |
| | Posts found to be populist (C=3A) | | | Posts found **not** to be populist (C=3B) | |
| | Number of posts | Percentage of total | | Number of posts | Percentage of total |
| | Complete populism (C=3A1) | Exclusionary populism (C=3A2) | Anti-elitist populism (C=3A3) | Empty populism (C=3A4) | |
| | N / % | N / % | N / % | N / % | |

The last consideration of the methodology shall be concerning the presentation of the analysis. A picture of the post will be placed in the thesis paper since it is a semiotic analysis based on a visual element. A screenshot or screenshots will be pasted to the possible videos' analysis, describing the main elements. The three-step process of the semiotic analysis will be reflected in its integrity in the paper as well. After each process, the reader will find a bold line where the coding is shown and summarised, which increases the transparency of the outcomes and allows the reader to follow the process real-time. After the analysis and having the tables filled, a discussion will be conducted. One of the thesis's main aims is to establish a connection between hate speech and populism. For that reason, the discussion will include a reflection on the relationship between both. Thus, the coding's relevance is to establish a clear outline about the posts that can be considered hate speech and populist, what aspects, and to what degree they are present in Vox's activity.

## 4.4.    Summary of the research methods

To clarify the analysis levels, it is convenient to introduce a summary of the methods. The next chapter will begin with a topical analysis of all the posts published in @vox_es, Vox's official Instagram account. With the classification, it will be possible to assess the parties' agenda-setting preferred topics to disseminate to their followers. After this, the target of the analysis will be the immigration or anti-immigration posts, as they will be the ones subjected to the coding regarding the dark side of social media, hate speech and populism.
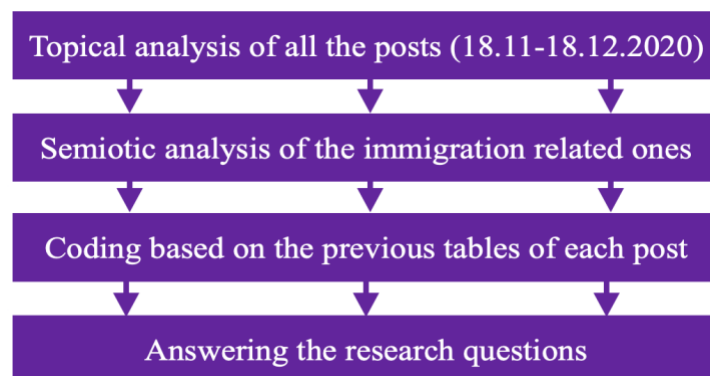


*Figure 5. Analysis' structure.*

Those posts will be subjected to a semiotic analysis in the three levels previously introduced: ornamental elements, the public image of the party and messages, following an ascendant level of relevance. Each of the posts will be given a coding based on the analysis results, implying

the presence or not of the dark usage of social media, hate speech, and populism. It will be then when the analysis is ready to lead to a discussion of the results to answer the research questions (Figure 5).

## 4.5.    Research Ethics

Politics is a sensitive topic, and substantial research ethics had to be taken into account. Ideologies are often based on irrational beliefs and convictions. This research wants to provide answers to incredibly uncomfortable realities, especially those who follow the far-right thought trend. In order to avoid the maximum bias possible, reliable theoretical cementation has been provided. It was a great concern to present Vox's ideological foundations with literature more than what can be presumed. It is similar to discussing the concepts of hate speech and populism, both very used yet with a long academic debate coming from different interpretations of the nuances.

Coming to the research data collection, some aspects must be mentioned. To begin with, all the material is originally in Spanish. Therefore, the different direct quotations that will be provided from the posts will be translated by the author. There will not be a particular remark on the own translation every time as all the material will be translated with the same method. Secondly, avoiding the possible disappearance of the posts, their deletion or the automatic elimination by Instagram, they have been downloaded and placed in a Dropbox folder which access will be provided in the annexed content. Any further clarification can be done by contacting the author.

As for the analysis, it has carefully been designed based on the literature. There are no arbitrary selections for the method of analysis, its categories and coding. During the analysis, as mentioned before, the semantic considerations will be treated with the Merriam Webster Dictionary's help to avoid using a different dictionary each time that suits the author's beliefs. To precise the term interpretation in the Spanish language, the dictionary of the *Real Academia de la Lengua Española,* which is the official and academic dictionary of the language.

The final consideration concerns the citation. The selected referencing style is the American Psychological Association (APA). There is no accounting of plagiarism, and every idea has been attributed to its author(s). All the referenced content will be found at the end of the thesis.

## 5. EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

Immigration has always been a critical part of the political agenda-setting in Spain. The geographical proximity makes this Southern European country one of the most accessible places to enter Europe. The last immigrational crisis started with the war declaration from the Polisario Front of Western Sahara to Morocco for the territories they had occupied after Spain gave up the zone in 1975. The war declaration is dated as of November 17th 2020. Thus, this thesis will look at the crisis outbreak period and its treatment in the political agenda-setting of the far-right party Vox, the study period from one day after the war declaration (November 18th 2020) to one natural month after (December 18th 2020).

To begin with, it is necessary to draw the context in which this crisis is placed. Apart from the immigrational challenge, in Spain, there were some very relevant topics co-occurring. In the field of education, a new general law was passed. This is always a significant subject since it affects the upcoming generation and is very susceptible to criticism by those who do not support the proposition. The LOMLOE[10] was passed with 177 votes in favour, needing 176 as a minimum. The tight margin displays how education is far from the political consensus in the Spanish political spectrum.

In the same period, the COVID-19 pandemic was still at a hazardous point in the country. Every day, around 200 people died and the notification of cases, even though it was decreasing, marked numbers oscillating between 8 and 12 thousand new cases daily (Sánchez, Ordaz and Oliveres, 2021). There was a political conflict existing between those Autonomous Communities ruled by the right and the Central Government in the evolution and the treatment of the pandemic, and, therefore, it could be expected to be a topic highly represented in Vox's Instagram account.

In addition to those, there was another key topic, the General State Budgets (PGE in Spanish). This was a specially relevant topic since the political instability and the lack of bridges between political adversaries had driven the country into a situation where the PGE of the year 2018 had to be prorogued for the fiscal years 2019 and 2020, an unprecedented situation in the more than four decades of the Spanish democracy. After a long period with conservative budgets, the left coalition government achieved to approve their first budget. This fact was likely to bring along criticism from the conservative and reactionary sectors of the Parliament.

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[10] Ley Orgánica de Modificación de la Ley Orgánica de Educación (LOMLOE).

However, Vox decided to put its focus on the immigrational challenge (Table 7). From 34 posts, 12 are related to this topic, which represents 35% of the attention. Most of their posts target the invasion, as they call it, of immigrants, related to the Canary Islands situation. None of them is destined to explain the context, give numbers or give factual and contrastable information. The visit made by Vox's leader, Santiago Abascal, occupies almost half of the posts, where he is shown as the saviour of the islands, the only one caring about the situation.

*Table 7. Topic review of the activity in @vox_es between 18.11-18.12.2020.*

| Topic | Amount of posts | Percentage of total |
|---|---|---|
| Immigration | 12 | 35% |
| Economy | 6 | 18% |
| Attack to the Government | 5 | 15% |
| Gender violence denial | 3 | 9% |
| Education | 2 | 6% |
| History of Spain | 2 | 6% |
| Health | 1 | 3% |
| Attack to the press | 1 | 3% |
| Religion | 1 | 3% |
| Empty content | 1 | 3% |

The economy's case had significant coverage, being the second topic most covered with six posts and 18% of the total. The main focus of the economic topics is a series of videos that the party released to offer their particular vision about the new State General Budgets called Budgets of the Ruin. In these videos, the speaker, often with no studies in economy[11], takes a particular topic and simplifies the discussion to understand. As retirement allowances and taxes, highly complex topics are reduced in videos of two to three minutes. In the same line, attacking the government is closely represented with five posts and 15%. Vox targets the executive for treachery or negligence in these posts, taking special attention to the Catalonian situation since the Autonomic Elections are held in February.

The rest of the topics are marginally represented. For instance, their often gender violence denial gets a small but constant presence (9%). It is more surprising that a topic with the relevance mentioned before, as it is education, only gathers the attention of 2 posts (6%), attacking what they called Ley Celaá, taking the surname of the Minister of Education. It is even more surprising considering that the colonial and catholic kingdoms' resemblance, with authoritarian forms of ruling, gets the same attention, remarking their reactionary profile.

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[11] Ignacio Garriga, Dentistry; Patricia Rueda Perelló, Infant Education.

There is each time a more typical attack on the press, made on public television (RTVE). This attack is interesting since it is done using the television they considered to be part of the government propaganda machinery and, yet, they are allowed there, and their discourse is not censored. This strategy is, once again, relating the party to the dogmatic approach of Steve Bannon since it is highly similar to the attitude of the former president of the USA, Donald Trump. Besides, there are two more posts with religious and empty content. Stopping in the qualification as empty, there is a consideration made considering the term empty populism (de Vreese et al., 2018). In the post, there is a simple video with people drawing a Spanish flag in the air using flares, which refers to a feeling of belonging to a group and discards other elements.

What is clear is the agenda-setting preference of the party in the studied period. Immigration holds the first place in the ranking of their attention, with double the amount of posts than the second option. Now it is time to analyse the content of these 12 posts and elucidate if and how is the dark side of social media present in those posts, additionally, if they are constitutive of hate speech and or populism, together with their specific characteristics.

## 5.1.     Analysis of the posts

The apocalyptical image of the world feeding Vox discourse found in the Canary Island's crisis one of its best allies. One-third of the content published in their Instagram account was directed towards immigration, being their position clearly against it. Indeed, the following lines will treat the posts as they were published, following a chronological logic in the analysis. This way, it will be possible to see the party's activity around the topic, and the actions are undertaken. The beginning of the conflict is blurred, a broad coverage of the issue with no significant involvement, it is mainly a depiction of the migration problem and their particular vision of it. However, there is an inflexion point. Santiago Abascal would visit the Canary Islands to show the party's support and spread their message rejecting the immigrants. Their posts' selection is full of signs charged with meaning, overall relating to their visit to the conflict zone. It is essential to underline that now they are trying to export it to the national media and debates to reach the highest number of people possible. The post analysis will end with another anti-immigration discourse found out arbitrarily: the sinophobic one. Signifiers (Sr) and signifieds (Sd) will be assigned to guide the text.

### 5.1.1. The outbreak of the Canarian immigrational crisis

The first of the posts regarding this crisis is dated on November 17th. As displayed in Picture 1, a notable group of migrants arrived at the Canary Islands. In the level of the ornamental elements, the selection of the shot is not casual. The wall shown in the background contains advertisements from different restaurants in that specific place (Sr). If the video had been taken a few meters to the left or the right, there would not have been any Spanish references. This way, they portray a mass of people, othering and dehumanising them when they remark they are entering Spain, creating the feeling of Us (Sd). The video is taken in a semi-fixed shot, and it is 18 seconds long. It displays the beginning of the queue of people, but it is not showing the end. The perception the reader can obtain from it is that it is unfinishable. No numbers are clarifying the video, and no explanation of the context.
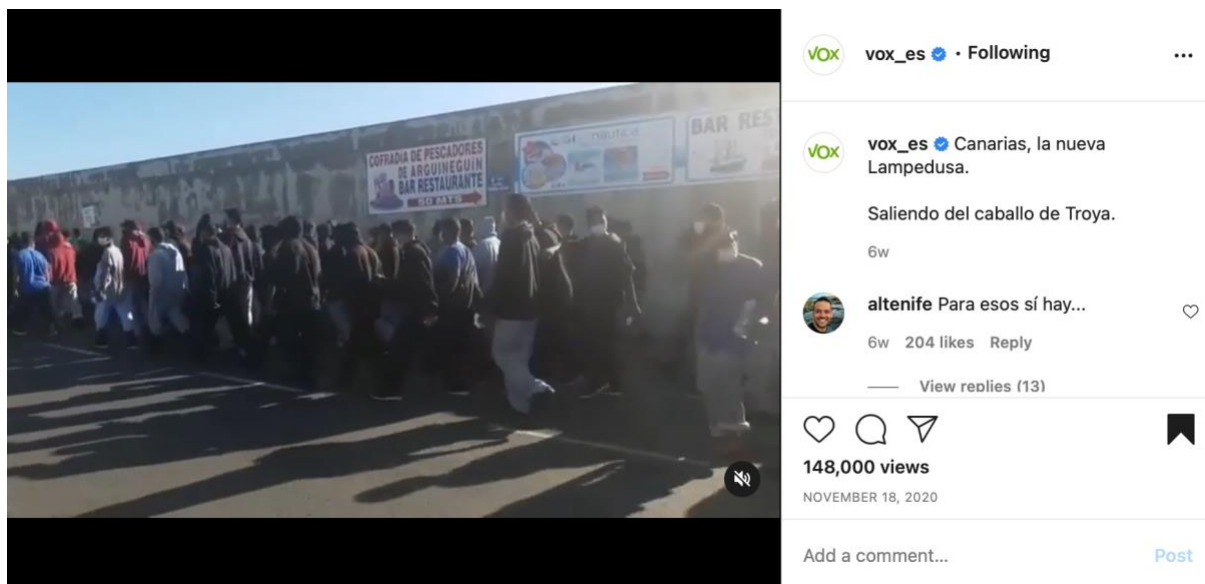


*Post 1. Arrival of immigrants to the Canary Islands. (Vox, 2020a)*

In what refers to the party, it is not present in the video as such. The only element in which the party is present is by stating their opposition to the arrival by comparing it to the Trojan Horse (Sr). As for the message part, Vox compares this to Lampedusa's crisis from the Syrian context. This post, as such, could be potentially considered as an informative one by a Vox supporter. However, the comparison is pretentious, and the following text, where it reads "coming out the Trojan Horse", is granting a negative label to them. Contextualising the Trojan War, it is easy to understand that the assimilation comparing the migrants to the warriors slaughtering guards after entering the walls inside the horse is not neutral (Sd). Even though the comments section

is not the object of analysis in this thesis, it might be interesting for the reader to understand the user's message appearing on the screen after the party's text. It is saying, "for those there are…" (Sr). In Spanish, this expression means that resources or any other elements lack other people for the sentence's subject. This case refers to the mantra present among Vox followers about the easiness of the illegal immigrants coming to Spain and receiving free money and a roof, which for ordinary Spanish people might not be that easy (Sd). As unfounded as it is, this comment represents the success in the Othering strategy of the post.

*Table 8. Semiotic analysis summary.*

| Signs | |
|---|---|
| **Signifier(s)** | **Signified(s)** |
| Shooting from the back of the migrants. | Dehumanising. |
| Shooting the Spanish advertisements. | Creating the effect -them and us-. |
| Shooting the middle of the line of people. | Endless incoming immigration. |
| Trojan War allusion. | Danger, threat. |

Therefore, the elements found in these posts suggest some elements of the Dark Side of Social Media Honeycomb Framework (hereafter DSSMHF) by Baccarella et al., 2018. Since the information is highly biased and incomplete, there are elements of disinformation (conversations), as well as the in-group and out-group bias (groups) and the pejorative assimilation to the Trojan War, defaming the group (reputation). There are elements for an exclusionary populism, as there are resemblances of them and us, but not from the elites. Lastly, the previous elements point out in the direction of hate speech towards immigrants for the mere fact of being immigrants since no information is given about them. The post itself is a discrimination of the group for the comparison to a sanguinary event and the invitation to the discrimination for what they represent. (Coding: 1C, 1F, 1G; 2A; 3A2).

Continuing with the timeline, Vox would start looking for the Canarian crisis response only one day later. The video represented in Picture 2 targets one of the two representatives of the Canarian Coalition Party in the Parliament. As their name suggests, they are a party only based on the islands. They have traditionally been the ones fighting for the rights of the citizens of the Canary Islands.
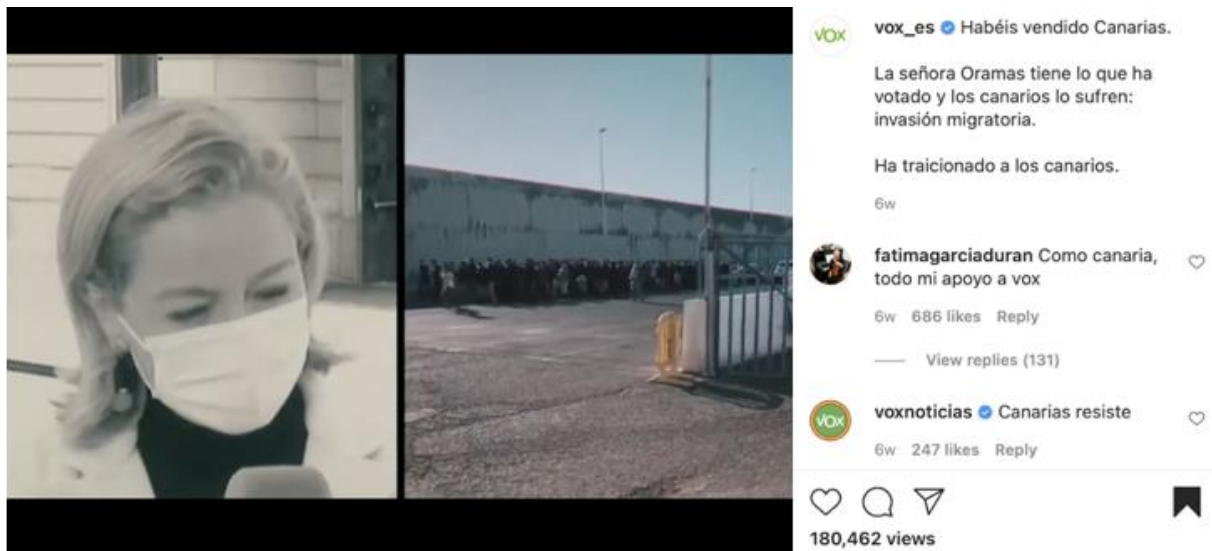
*Post 2. Blaming video towards Ana Oramas (Canarian Coalition) as the responsible of the crisis. (Vox, 2020b)*

Vox uses the crisis to show the evolution in the speech of Oramas before and after the crisis outbreak. The post contains several ornamental elements to be remarked. Besides, there is text establishing a chronological development of the video. There is a usage of the black and white (Sr) to clearly state the change of position from Ana Oramas, the past (Sd). The video's ultimate intention is to show how the Canarian politician is responsible for supporting the Central Government and what can be understood as being too lax towards immigration. Therefore, the party needed to highlight the change, even though they mix the crisis with the congresswoman's political and ethical thinking. Besides, they use dramatic music (Sr) to increase the feeling of the danger of the reader (Sd). It goes in crescendo until the climax is met when Oramas complains to the Central Government about the Canary Islands' issues, understood as a real shock. In the last part of the video, they continue with their dehumanisation of the immigrants (Sd), showing 13 different shots in 3 seconds (Sr), where it is impossible to distinguish the faces of the people as it is impossible to elucidate if the pictures are linked to the Canarian crisis or not. Vox is shown as the only party that saw this coming. They recriminate that Oramas called them racist for addressing what they understand as fighting against illegal immigration. However, there is no apparent presence of the party as a starring actor.

In what refers to the message, they select different speeches from Ana Oramas in a different situation, mixing contexts. They use recrimination made towards the People's Party for their inaction in the Syrian migration exodus, in which Europe compromised to some shared quotas that Spain did not respect under the right-wing Government (Vox, 2020b, 0:00). The following video used is the denial of some of the statements proclaimed by Vox. She is

defending that the immigrants come with a PCR test done, and they do not come to steal the jobs from the Spanish people (Vox, 2020b, 0:10). After that, Abascal appears to again make assimilation between the Canary Islands and Lampedusa, as in the previous post. To establish a dialogue where the Canarian politician is portrayed as responsible, they use an out of context sentence where Oramas says, "we need to be tolerant". In a situational jump, the next appearance is selected when she urges for help to the government's president in the Parliament, stating the critical situation and their incapability to solve this alone.

This post includes and starts a new dimension in their discourse. They start deploying their apocalyptical and hyperbolic vocabulary to describe the crisis from their lenses. Abascal mentions a "massive boat avalanche" (Vox, 2020, 0:34) (Sr), which already contains a wide range of aspects to remark. Avalanche connotes an event caused by violence and suddenness, with the snow floods' most representative example (Sd). The boat meaning is a pejorative one in Spanish, and they include the adjective massive to add some tremendousness to the situation (Sd). Moving to the text description, they remark their position of blaming Ana Oramas for the crisis by saying, "you have sold the Canary Islands. Miss Oramas has what she voted, and the Canarians suffer it: migratory invasion". At the end of that sentence, there is another hyperbolic word to analyse: invasion (Sr). Since it is a term that will be at the centre of their tactics, it is worth establishing a clear semantic definition. Invasion is mainly the "incursion of an army to conquer or plunder" (Sd) and "the incoming or spread of something usually hurtful" (Merriam Webster, n.d. -b). In Spanish, the translation of the RAE's primary definition (n.d. -a) is "irrupt or enter using the force".

*Table 9. Semiotic analysis summary.*

| Signs | |
|---|---|
| **Signifier(s)** | **Signified(s)** |
| High frame speed picture transition | Dehumanisation of the migrants. |
| Black and white. | Past times, contraposition with the present. |
| Dramatic music. | Dramatism, theatralisation, histrionic. |
| Uncontextualised shots. | Confusion, fake news building. |
| Comparison with Lampedusa. | Crisis, critical situation. |
| "Massive boat avalanche". | Danger, threat, invasion. |
| "Migratory invasion". | Danger, othering, violence. |

This post is complete for this analysis. In the same direction as the previous post, in what refers to the DSSMHF, this video contains plenty of unfounded, unproven and out of context information, which can be targeted as disinformation or even misinformation (conversations). There is a clear in-group and out-group bias based on the mere usage of terms such as invasion, which already gives the connotation of the irruption of an external force into a domestic one (groups), and there are a clear shaming and defamation on the figure of the congresswoman Ana Oramas. Moreover, concerning hate speech, this post is found to be justifying hatred, violent or discriminating behaviours towards immigrants, based again on the warlike resemblance of the concept invasion. However, they are so dehumanised that they are not given even a determinate origin. Finally, Post 1 can be considered as a complete populist one. The Canarians and Vox incarnate people, the elites in Ana Oramas, and others in the immigrants' dehumanised description. (Coding: 1C, 1F, 1G; 2A; 3A1).

On November 21st, two days later, Vox would publish another post without background information. This time it is again a video where it is possible to see how a group of people arrives at a beach and disembarks from a boat. There is a significant difference in this video; the boat type cannot be considered a patera. It is a motorised vehicle, wooden and in good shape, while a patera is usually filled with air and is made of plastic, sometimes motorised and sometimes not. After arriving, they appear using some fireworks and celebrating at the same time that the video shooter is swearing and complaining about it (Post 3).



*Post 3. Group of people arriving to a beach. (Vox, 2020c)*

Coherent to their strategy of disseminating information without background, they posted a video about an 'invasion' in situ. Location, date and context unknown, the official account of the third biggest party in Spain posted a video of a group of people arriving at a beach. There are some ornamental elements to highlight in this video. First of all, the selection of the video shooting. For the elements present in it, the image coming to the reader's mind is taken from a hotel. The proximity to the beach (Sr) indicates that it can very well be a luxury hotel (Sd) and, therefore, the contrast is itself a contraposition of wealthy people versus the 'invaders' coming to ruin the peace existent there (Sd). The video ends with the migrants celebrating; what they do afterwards is not shown.

The image of the party is again the clear and academic definition of how a populist party behaves. The fifth line of the text reads: "In Vox we have it clear: detention and immediate expulsion". This is, again, offering simple solutions to complex problems, even though there is a legal prohibition to that. For instance, as part of the European Union, Spain is ascribed to the European Convention of Human Rights. The aforementioned document prohibits Article 4 of Section IV of this act by saying: "collective expulsion of aliens is prohibited" (ECHR, 1963, p. 2). It does not specify the foreigners' condition, their legal situation or any particular motivation. It simply prohibits expulsion.

The text reinforces, once more, the idea of an 'invasion', attributing the responsibility to all the political groups, including the traditional right in their vision of the elites. This new movement, including the People's Party (PP), goes in the direction that Vox is the people. They are just different to absolutely all the other political forces, regardless of their ideology and regardless of Vox's past in which was part of the PP. They portray themselves as the only alternative, the one offering solutions to the people. Their proposal is simple and straightforward for everyone to understand, which inevitably leads the reader to conclude that what they propose might be possible, yet it is prohibited.

This new post serves to keep reinforcing the attitude of the party towards immigration. They do not seek to inform their followers about the problem as they do not seek to provide contextual and essential information to understand the complexity of this crisis successfully. The video itself, seen without sound and without reading the description, could lead to a different interpretation. The only elements appearing are a group of people whose precedence, for the video's quality, is impossible to distinguish landing on a beach and celebrating with fireworks. However, since that is too weak of an interpretation, Vox adds the elements mentioned before.

*Table 10. Semiotic analysis summary.*

| Signs | |
|---|---|
| **Signifier(s)** | **Signified(s)** |
| "*Patera*". | Illegal or irregular immigration, threat. |
| "Migratory invasion". | Danger, othering, violence. |
| Shooting from a hotel. | Dichotomy legal – illegal. |
| Proximity to the beach from the hotel. | Luxury. |
| "Detention and immediate expulsion". | Simplicity of the solution. |

In what refers to the DSSMHF, this post contains similar elements to the previous ones. Strictly talking about the fact that the video is taken by a tourist of the hotel, for it is implausible a Vox member was conveniently when the boat arrived at the beach, we are before an inappropriate video distribution (sharing). There is no sign of the authorship of the shot. Again, this video lack of context spreads misinformation and impossible solutions that go against human rights (conversations). There is a clear intention of creating a division between the person filming and the others. There is an in-group and out-group bias (groups) and defaming them by calling them invaders (reputation). Regarding hate speech, there is no doubt this post constitutes hate speech against immigrants. They are, again, called invaders without context, creating a negative image of them and showing in a video how the invaders look like. However, hate speech is just general since it cannot distinguish between origin, religion or race. Finally, there is a complete populism present in the post. Vox incarnates the people, standing by them and offering solutions, opposite to what the elites, the rest of the parties, do not do. The others are depicted in the group of people arriving at the beach. (Coding: 1A, 1C, 1F, 1G; 2A; 3A1).

In the next post, dated November 24th, the party goes more profound in the aggressive strategy. Using the word invaders again as a substitution for immigrants, they offer a photomontage of some ships whose interpretant can observe a Spanish flag. Far from explaining to their followers in an exercise of transparency the origin and the context of this migration, they continue with their idea of the invasion. In Post 4 (see next page), continuing with their natural defence of the army and the military interventions over calmed, consensual and stable solutions, Vox claims military intervention.

This photomontage is full of ornamental elements. Beginning with the picture ships' unknown precedence, unlikely to be from the Spanish Army after checking their last official pictures (Ministerio de Defensa, n.d.), they seem to be taken from an American war movie. The

ship appears in the centre of the image (Sr), focusing the reader's attention on a few elements that converge in the same point, showing military power (Sd). Coinciding with it, there is a large Spanish flag occupying all the picture's length from left to right (Sr) and dividing the sea from an almost imperceptible map of the Canary Islands, which portrays patriotism and nationalism (Sd). There is a helicopter, moving as well, on the right side of the image (Sr). All this scenery suggests an action, a movement and helps the reader of the signs to understand that the help is coming (Sd). This is probably the most fictitious and hyperbolic post from all the ones that have been analysed along with this thesis.



*Post 4. Naval Blockade. (Vox, 2020d)*

The party is once again shown as the only alternative. Here they are proposing a straightforward solution as it is using the Spanish Armada to create a blockade in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean blocking Morocco from Spain. Regardless of the human rights, the legal consequences that would bring to Spain as an EU country and the own legislation of the Kingdom of Spain, they offer a simple, understandable and, a priori, viable solution.

However, the text indicates an increment of hate speech in their messages by suggesting military action. The picture text remains in the same line as the previous publications by saying: "In the face of the migratory invasion in the Canary Islands: Naval Blockade!". Nonetheless, it is in the text of the publication where the step up is present. It reads: "More than 17.000 invaders

have already assaulted the Canary Islands from Africa and tens of thousands more will do it if the army is not mobilised. Naval blockade now!". In this new level, the migrants are not only called invaders but assaulters (Sr). The semantic consideration has to be made again to analyse unbiased the concept. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (n.d. -b), assault is "a violent verbal or physical attack" (Sd) and "a military attack usually involving direct combat with the enemy forces" (Sd). In translating the Spanish definition of *asaltar*, assault in English, the RAE (n.d. -b) establishes that it is to undertake impetuously a place or a fortress to enter it climbing the defences (Sd). By calling the migrants assaulters and invaders, the reader might get the impression that they are bringing nothing but problems (Sd). They are shown as a group of vandals using violence to undertake or attack the Spanish sovereignty. For the first time, they add broad information about their precedence, Africa, in an exercise of creating a whole continent as a single element.

Nevertheless, it is worth fact-checking the number of migrants they claim to have arrived at the Canary Islands. Their guess is "more than 17000" (Sr), close to the actual one. In the Ministry of Domestic Affairs' official data, as of November 15th 2020, the Atlantic islands had received 16760 irregular immigrants (Ministerio del Interior, 2020a). This was the last official data by the time Vox published Post 4. Therefore, even though it was pretentious to assert that more than 17000 people had arrived, it is close enough to be considered truthful.

*Table 11. Semiotic analysis summary.*

| Signs | |
|---|---|
| **Signifier(s)** | **Signified(s)** |
| Naval forces ships. | Resemblance of the Spanish Armada. |
| Ships as the centre of the picture. | Military power, solution, attention. |
| Movement of the elements. | Mobilisation, action. |
| Spanish flag. | Nationalism, political right wing. |
| "Migratory invasion". | Danger, othering, violence. |
| Invaders. | Threat, assault. |
| Africa instead of Morocco | Treatment of the continent as a single unit |

In this post, the elements of the DSSMHF present differ slightly from the previous posts. There is an in-group and out-group bias again, for they are referring to the migrants as criminals by saying they are invaders and assaulters, both conditions having an undoubtedly negative

connotation (groups). In contrast, the order and the law are on the Spanish people's side, where the Vox logo is present. There is also shaming, and defamation for the same reasons stated before, since calling them criminals without any proof is directed to making them be associated with harmful elements (reputation). Together with the army forces' usage, this fact can be considered a form of intimidation towards them (relationships).

The hate speech towards immigrants is present in this picture for the coercion elements used in the post. The way the migrants are represented can be understood as a justification to use the force to repel them for what they represent as invaders and assaulters. In addition, it is the first time in this study that their hate speech relates to the origin of the migrants. As for populism, the absence of references to the elites converts these posts into an exclusionary populist. Elements refer to the Spanish people and the othering of the immigrants treating them as a mass invading the country. (Coding: 1E, 1F, 1G; 2A2, 3A2).

The following post would be the last one before the change of strategy. So far, the party had bet on the Canary Islands' reality's biased reporting, yet they would seek appropriate political benefits. In Post 5, the Canary population starts its protests concerning the situation. It appears to be a genuine concentration with no political signs nor leaders. However, Vox publishes this in their official account, showing that they would appropriate the movement. In every democratic society, protesting is part of the normal development of the system. The citizens who elect their representatives in the institutions have the right to demand what they consider fair. In the video, what is possible to see is a group of people exercising their rights to demand a solution for the Canary Islands' immigration crisis.



*Post 5. Civil protest in the Canary Islands. (Vox, 2020e)*

As ornamental elements, there are very few to underline. Since the protest was organically organised, many different elements do not relate to each other. For instance, only a handful of Spanish and Canarian flags (Sr), a sign that the far-right was, yet, not involved here (Sd). The nationalism present in Vox carries out inherently a torrent of national symbols. The protesters are holding different placards or banners which messages towards the government. It is possible to read that the hotels are not home to illegal immigrants or solely want to recover them. In this case, the political party is complexly absent from the post, and there is nothing to underline from it.

However, in what refers to the text, there are a couple of elements to analyse. This time, there are, again, some signs of wording formulas such as invasion, as well as there is a subtle expression closely related to the far-right: levanta (Sr). This word is a verbal conjugation of the verb levantar, which means to wake up. However, there are 34 different definitions for this verb in Spanish, and one is to rebel (Sd) (RAE, n.d. -c). The tight definition of the far-right is due to the usage by them in the past. When General Franco organised a military coup against the democratic regime in 1936, it was called "levantamiento", the noun of the aforementioned verb. This is a way to whiten the cruelty and severity of the act (Sd). By any means, this aims to be a comparison to that tragic situation. Nonetheless, this is an example of the easiness with which the Spanish far-right uses this military expression.

*Table 12. Semiotic analysis summary.*

| Signs | |
| --- | --- |
| **Signifier(s)** | **Signified(s)** |
| Low presence of Spanish flags. | Mob alien to Vox. |
| "Migratory invasion". | Danger, othering, violence. |
| Illegal immigrants. | Dehumanisation, denial of human rights. |
| "Levantar". | Verb tightly related to the Spanish Civil War. |

This post could be considered as one of the most informative ones. Applying the DSSMHF, this post has been found to differ slightly from the previous ones. From what seems to be a transversal protest against the acute immigrational problem's lack of measures, Vox interprets that the protest is against immigration. However, there are no signs of such claim in the video they are describing as such. Therefore, this information is pretentious and potentially false, which is a sign of disinformation (conversations). Despite the consideration about this post to

be one of the most informative ones, there are signs again of the in and out-group bias when considering the immigrants as invaders (groups), for the same reason there is a shaming towards them (reputation). Hate speech is founded over the discriminatory fact of this consideration in a broad sense as there are, again, no signs of any contextualisation about the origin or precedence of these migrants. As for populism, this time, there are no signs of the elites in their message. On the contrary, there is a clear contraposition between the people of the Canary Islands and the invaders. Thus, this post is catalogued as exclusionary populism. (Coding: 1C, 1F, 1G; 2A; 3A2).

### 5.1.2. Abascal's messianic visit to the Canary Islands

The Post 5 would be the last post where Vox would act as a third person in the conflict. The party was already planning their appropriation strategy to accumulate the support from the crisis to their party. Santiago Abascal, leader of the far-right formation, travelled to the islands to show their concern about the situation, selecting this topic in their national agenda-setting, in the algid point of their populist strategy. Vox, an extraordinarily centralised party just as they aspire to centralise all the competences if they arrive at the Central Government, relies significantly on its leader. He is, by far, the most followed politician in Spain, and he barely leaves someone indifferent. For that reason, the party could not send anyone else than him. His arrival to the Canary Islands was broadcasted live by the party and announced as an extraordinary happening.
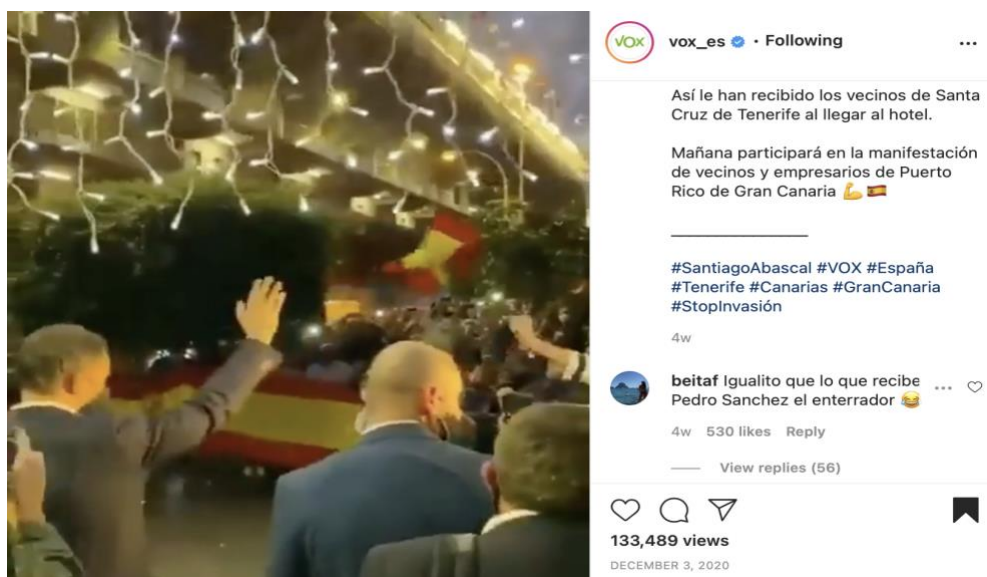


*Post 6. Abascal arrives at the Canary Islands. (Vox, 2020f)*

Vox's visit was meticulously orchestrated. The ornamental elements analysis focuses on how the party prepared every little detail for his leader to arrive as a messiah, as a saviour. Once Abascal has arrived at the hotel, there is a substantial Spanish flag covering the mob's front (Sr). This type of flags is challenging to get from the private market since they are useless for individuals. The length and presumed weight suggest that this element was prepared beforehand by the party and placed there with the assistants (Sd). The flag element has been traditionally capitalised by the right and far-right in Spain, creating an irrational feeling of belonging to the Spanish nation and dividing the society between the nationalists and those who believe in a more inclusive and diverse image of the country (Sd). In this particular case, the usage of the Spanish flag is used in two directions: for the mob, to make clear that they are there supporting Vox, which is also the only defender of the nation and for the viewer of the post to try to make them believe that the flag was organically placed there by the assistants. In the video, it is possible to observe a man in what seems to be a role of controlling the mob and directing their movements and chants. This act was organised using social media and was broadcasted via Instagram live, which is part of the gathering's success.

The image of the party is very successfully boosted. The leader arrives while the mob calls him president and shouts "viva España". From the perspective of the pandemic situation, this is a worrying act since the interpersonal distance is non-existent, the people are shouting, and they are touching objects, such as the flag, that other people are touching at the same time. However, for Vox, similar to other far-right parties, the right to protest and the economy are usually above health. The other element in their strategy is the usage of Santiago Abascal as the person visiting the area. It serves as a demonstration that for Vox, this conflict was at the centre of their agenda-setting.

*Table 13. Semiotic analysis summary.*

| Signs | |
|---|---|
| **Signifier(s)** | **Signified(s)** |
| Spanish flag. | Nationalism, political right wing. |
| Santiago Abascal. | Saviour, hope, leader. |
| Greeting the mob. | Acclaimed leader, popularity, proximity. |
| "Illegal immigrants". | Dehumanisation, denial of human rights. |

The text points to remarking that the Canarians greatly received Abascal's presence in what refers to the message. This is merely a propagandistic post to gain visibility and advertise the big day, which would be the following one. The party claims that they are only joining a demonstration organised by the "neighbours and the businessmen of Puerto Rico de Gran Canaria", a different island than the one they are posting this video.

This post can be considered as an empty one in terms of significance. The only purpose is to feed the ego and image of a party that lives from the political atmosphere's hyperpolarisation. Concerning the DSSMHF, this post can be considered, again, as out-grouping the immigrants and defaming them for their repeated and untired usage of the term invasion. Similarly to the association made before, this fact constitutes inherently a general type of hate speech. As for populism, this post belongs to the category of exclusionary populism. There is no sign of the elites but the people, merged with the party and the outsiders, the immigrants, are both presents. (Coding: 1F, 1G; 2A; 3A2).

The following video contains distinctive elements. As displayed in Post 7, Abascal participated in a demonstration whose organising committee remains unknown. The main difference with the one in Post 5 is the increment of Spanish flags, which is a clear distinctive of the party's image. Due to the country's internal division, the flag's colours are challenging to be shown by the left since they are the same as during the Francoist dictatorship. Nationalism, with all its signs, are closer to the right ideologies. Indeed, there is a unique symbol found in this video and possible to see in the screenshot (Post 7): the Cross of Burgundy (Sr). This flag, which can be found in the rightest part of the image, is a symbol used historically by different monarchs. It is a historical symbol first seen in Spain under the Spanish Empire. The invasion and colonisation of America done by the Europeans had a significant influence on Spanish history (Sd).
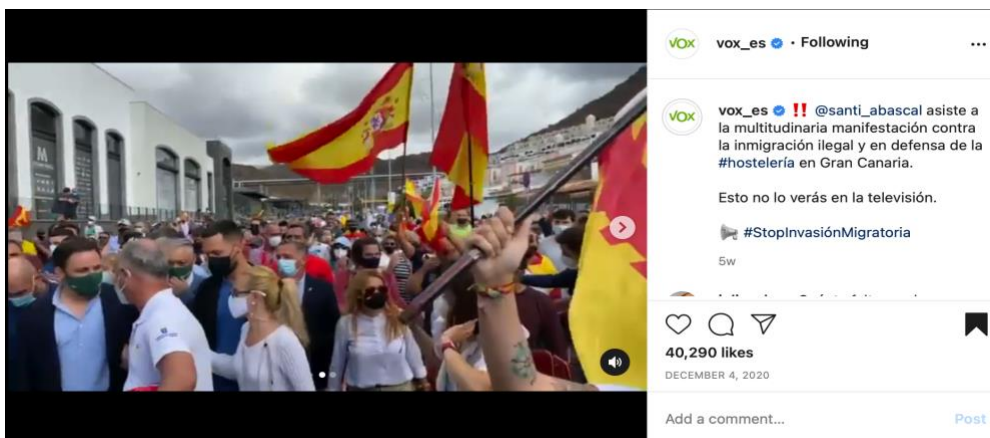


*Post 7. Protest with the presence of Abascal. (Vox, 2020g)*

Afterwards, this flag has been used during the aftercoming centuries. However, the most recent historical event when this flag was used was the Spanish Civil War, concretely on the Nationalist side. This link to the Civil War and, more, to the fascist forces that would impose a dictatorship afterwards make this flag closely linked to the far-right. Even though historically, this flag is much more than this. More to it, the colours are not the correct ones. The flag is initially white, and with the cross in red, together with the change to the red and yellow colours, can correspond to a deeper appropriation of this historical symbol of the nation.

Going back to Santiago Abascal (Sr) 's presence, it is also possible to see his closeness to the people and his support for what they express in their hashtag #StopMigratoryInvasion. During the duration of the video, he is displayed as a saviour (Sd). The people were cheering at him and treating him as a true idol. He is dressed like any other protester, with no tie, the shirt is not completely closed, and he is just chatting with the people with total normality. The fact is that Santiago Abascal seems to be equal to Vox, and therefore, sending him to this area was equalling to sending the whole party there (Sd). If that is not the correct reading of the situation, sending him was making clear that this conflict was the most important in their agenda-setting. The party's image is defined as very close to the people, reinforcing one of the populist aspects.

Again, the text captures most of the other elements present in the formula of populism. They make it clear that they are there to protest against illegal immigration and defend the Canary Islands' tertiary sector. There it is possible to find Vox merged with the people. The Othering strategy concerning immigrants is directed throughout the omnipresent qualification of invaders directed to the migrants. Besides, in this post, Vox addressed the elites in a particular way by attacking the televisions' agenda-setting (Sr), subjectivising the elites (Sd). They claim that this manifestation will not be broadcasted, and it was not.

Nonetheless, it was a pretty plausible prediction since television has minimal time to select news, and the big broadcasting companies had already covered most of this problematic. Moreover, this was the second protest organised in Mogán, so the relevance decreased. The far-right party aimed for the best coverage, which finally was not granted. It has recently been a considerable debate in populist parties that the establishment is trying to silence them. Even if it might not be truthful, these populist parties seem to get credit for disseminating doubts around their listeners.

*Table 14. Semiotic analysis summary.*

| Signs | |
|---|---|
| **Signifier(s)** | **Signified(s)** |
| Increment of Spanish flags. | Mob organised by Vox, nationalism. |
| Cross of Burgundy flag. | Spanish Empire, colonisation, Civil War (Nationalist Side) |
| Santiago Abascal. | Saviour, hope, leader, personification of Vox. |
| "Migratory invasion". | Danger, othering, violence. |
| "Illegal immigrants". | Dehumanisation, denial of human rights. |
| Attack against the TVs. | Subjectification of the elites, othering. |

While summarising this post's findings, it was found to be almost identical to the previous one. Regarding the DSSMHF, the strategy targeted the migrants as invaders, analysed previously, creating this adjective a division and a defamation (groups, reputation). For the aforementioned reasoning, hate speech is, once again, present without an evident characteristic else than the criminalisation and generation of hate around the migrants. As for populism, this is a complete populist post since adding to the common anti-immigration and pro-people discourse. Here the elites are represented by the media, which for Vox is not doing their job correctly. (Coding: 1F, 1G; 2A; 3A1).

On December 5th 2020, the big day arrived. Vox visited Santa Cruz de Tenerife to give what they were seeking from the beginning: a rally. There was no time anymore to pretend that this was about supporting the cause uninterestedly. In the Canary Islands, Vox remained irrelevant in the last Autonomic Elections of 2019, where they did not seat even one party member in the Autonomic Parliament (El País, 2019). The autonomic administrations in Spain remain close to the citizens, which assures some fluctuation from the general elections to the autonomic ones. For instance, in Galicia, the People's Party won with an absolute majority the autonomic vote, and PSOE won when the national elections happened. For that reason, Vox needs to prove its utility in daily matters to the Canary population, which was the perfect occasion. Therefore, this act was no longer a spontaneous protest but an orchestrated political rally to disseminate the populist and warlike language they had been spreading before arriving on the islands on social media.
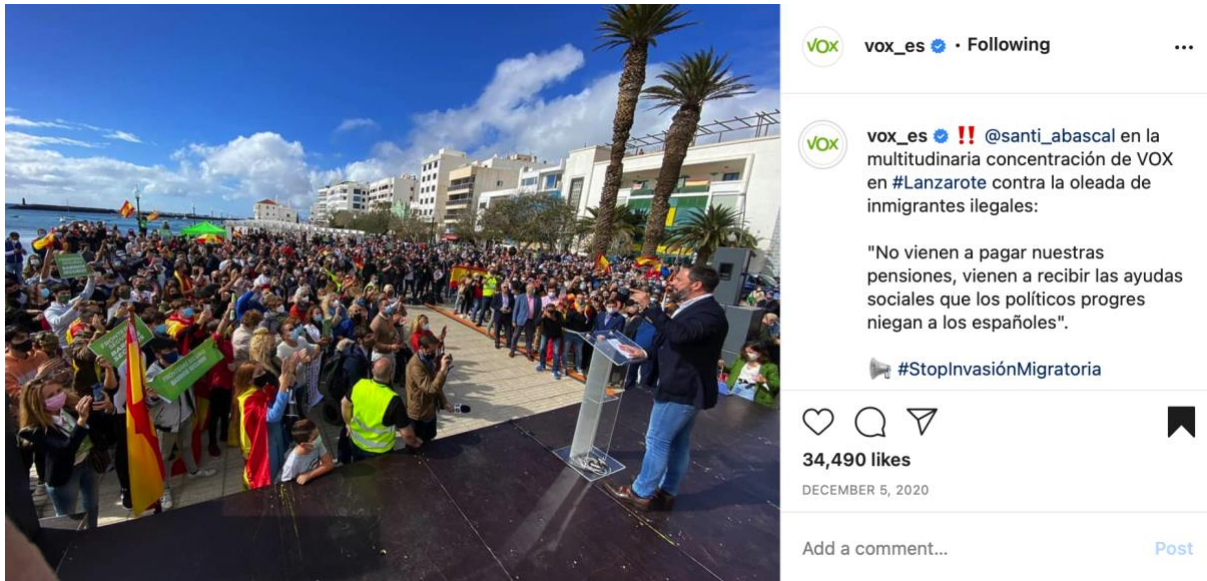
*Post 8. Abascal during a rally. (Vox, 2020h)*

This image contains certain elements to look at. For those readers with knowledge of photography, it is elementary to discern that this shot has been taken with a wide angular lens (Sr). The way these lenses work is similar to the human eye. The shape is not flat but curved, allowing the photographer to capture up to 180º. The difference with our eyes is that we cannot see sharp in the full range of what we receive as we have a frontal focal point that loses sharpness as it gets to the sides. The usage in this picture allows the party to show more people than they are (Sd). This is possible because the picture becomes more profound as it gets wider to cover more angles. These artificial effect distort the reality to benefit the party. The assistants to the rally wear Vox's typical gear: Spanish flags and green elements (Sr) to honour the far-right formation, merging into their particular conception of the people (Sd).

The way the rally is given is somehow surprising. Vox used a similar format to other populist formations, such as the far-left party Unidas Podemos, using a circle or semicircle to break the act's frontality. However, in this case, they come back to the ancient rally system where the followers are sitting or standing opposite their leader. For a far-right party, this is not an odd habit.

In what refers to the message, it is as hyperbolic as a populist rally can be derived to. The second part of the text, which is the most relevant, reads: "They do not come to pay our retirement pensions, they come to receive the social help provided by the progressive[12] politicians and denied to the Spanish people" (Sr). This asseveration is as untrue as dangerous.

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[12] In Spanish: *progre*. It is a pejorative diminutive used by the far-right to describe the progressive politicians. The long word and neutral one is *progresista*. It is a political choice linked to the left wing ideologies.

Ruiz (2019) explains that to receive any public help, such as unemployment, rental or any other, the prerequisite is to have legal residence. Moreover, from the total of subsidies receivers, only 15.17% are immigrants, according to the author. As for illegal immigrants, they do not have access to any conventional and stable subsidies. However, they can receive emergency assistance from their local authorities regarding food vouchers, schooling and health care. The asseveration is false, pretentious and dangerous. This is an old claim made by the far-right, which has achieved to penetrate many citizens' mindset and create a feeling of rejection (Sd).

*Table 15. Semiotic analysis summary.*

| Signs | |
|---|---|
| **Signifier(s)** | **Signified(s)** |
| Warlike language. | Belligerence, combative attitude, defence. |
| Wide angular lens. | Depth increment, effect on the affluence of people. |
| Spanish flag. | Nationalism, political right wing. |
| Frontal position of the speaker. | Strong leadership. |
| Santiago Abascal. | Saviour, hope, leader, personification of Vox. |
| Fake claims on immigrants. | Lowered immigrants image, rejection. |
| Progressive politicians. | Subjectification of the elites, othering. |

The application of the DSSMHF leaves some important aspects. This might be the post that contains the most dangerous and unfounded information towards immigrants (conversations), and it is both misinformation and disinformation. There might be some inaccurate data they base their speech on, and it is a piece of fake information as a whole. The usage of migratory invasion once again leads to the same categorisation as out-group bias and shaming, and defamation (groups and reputation). Hate speech is undoubtedly present in this post. The fake information puts the migrants in a position to be hated since they are presumed to be receiving privileged treatment to the nationals' detriment. As for populism, this is a complete populism. Vox as the people, the progressive politicians as the elites and the immigrants as the other. (Coding: 1C, 1F, 1G; 2A; 3A1).

Vox's big day would still receive the attention of a massive post composed of 9 pictures and one video. All of them of an evident similarity since they were taken in the rally (Vox, 2020i). Once again, the beginning of the post is the certification of the propaganda movement

this visit was. It is a video, similar to the one displayed in Post 5, where Abascal is surrounded by people, stopping by and taking selfies with the people. The chants of the assistants can be considered as an ornamental and well-premeditated element. "Long live Spain, long live the king, long live Vox" (Sr). The representation or the association of the party seems to be equal to the whole nation and the kingship. The mythification of Vox and other far-right parties and leaders have entered a mystical dimension (Sd). The political strategy put in place early in 2015 has been entering the people's brain subconsciously to make Vox appear as the only element that can save liberty (Sr). Debating the concept of liberty for the far-right would successfully cover a whole new thesis, yet it is essential to precise that for them, liberty is related to a neo-liberal approach (Sd).

Going more profound in the post, there is one picture that underscores the most. It contains all the propagandistic political messages found in the protesters' placards, handed out by the party and children. The picture (Post 9) is full of underaged teens and children holding the placards, touching each other and idolising Vox's leader. However, what makes it particularly preoccupying is the presence of children whose understanding of the context and the situation might be limited to what their parents teach them at home. Politicising underaged in-formation children is a danger and a success achieved by the far-right.
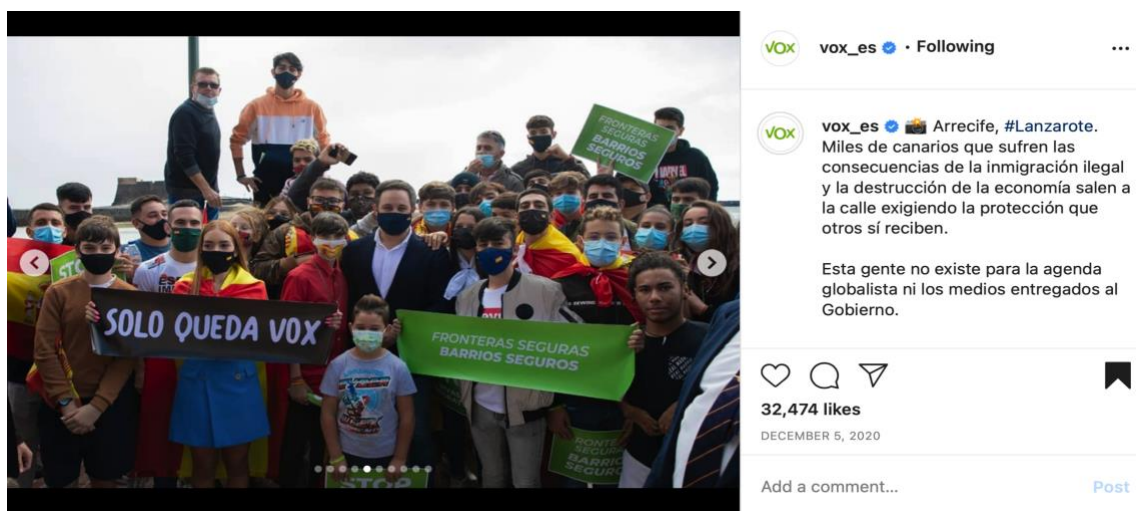


*Post 9. Abascal taking a picture with a group of kids. (Vox, 2020i)*

Looking at the kid in the centre of the image, he holds a placard where the message is "stop the migratory invasion". The chances of the kid not understanding it are high enough to consider this as a worrying image. There is a meticulous orchestration of this image. The children are holding in the very centre of the image two key placards. One is "it is only Vox left" and "safe

borders, safe neighbourhoods". Said or held by youngsters (Sr), the message is even more direct (Sd). The reader might think that the kids live in an awful and very extreme situation to ask for safe neighbourhoods to play safe (Sd). Nonetheless, in the Ministry of Domestic Affairs' official data, the criminality in the Canary Islands not only did not rise but decreased significatively a total of -13.2% (Ministerio del Interior, 2020b, p. 83). The linkage between immigration, regular or irregular, and criminality is often found in the far-right discourses. However, there is a lack of data to prove it. It is just the logical assumption that people coming irregularly cannot do good to the country. There is no will to fact-check the messages they are receiving or repeating.

The party's image in this particular picture and the post, in general, is the perfect capture for a populist candidate. He is merging with the people, taking pictures and using his time to commit to the cause, to spend time with the new generations. Once again, Abascal's presence is remarkable because it is the leader of the third biggest party in Spain who is granting this mobilisation's success.

As for the message part, the different captures aim to make sure the rally's highlights are clear and present for everyone. It is essential to resume the three central messages found in the picture with the children. "It is only Vox left" states an extraordinarily populist division between the considered political elites, especially what they call the progressive globalist consensus and the party that stands by the people. The black colour (Sr) used in this placard denotes sadness, darkness or hardship (Sd) based on the study of the colours made by Nugraha (2019). The author also extends the interpretation to illegality, which is also applicable to this case. Continuing with "safe borders, safe neighbourhoods", this message is based on a false assumption as it has been debunked before. The colour used is the party one, which is interesting to analyse as well. For Nugraha (2019), green (Sr) is associated with attributes as cool, refreshing, traditional, stable or conservative, among others (Sd). Both elections of colours are very cautiously thought beforehand. "Stop migratory invasion" has repeatedly been present in every post, and it is associated with a violent occupation of a place, which, as the criminality report suggests, is also a presumptuous asseveration.

Besides, the post text can read, "Thousands of people, who suffer the consequences of the illegal immigration and the destruction of the economy, go out to the streets demanding the protection that others do receive". This message is disseminating hate speech against migrants and fake news using a populist vocabulary. They assure others, clear subject of populism, receive the help the Canary (us) do not receive. No data on the veracity of their claims. Furthermore, as said in the previous post, to receive the statal authorities' official subsidies, the

main requirement is to be a regular resident in the country. In case the migrant is irregular, the only possible help possible comes from the charity or the emergency social shields protecting people in extreme risk of poverty by giving them access to the essential elements to survive. The other half of the message claims that "these people do not exist for the globalist agenda nor the news outlets controlled by the Government". Here they state another time that they are different from the elites, understood as the globalist elites and the newspapers that, in their view, are under control by the Central Government. Again, no proof of such claims.

*Table 16. Semiotic analysis summary.*

| Signs | |
| --- | --- |
| **Signifier(s)** | **Signified(s)** |
| Santiago Abascal. | Saviour, hope, leader, personification of Vox. |
| Long live Spain, the King and Vox. | Reactionary chant, mythification. |
| Liberty-like language. | Political right wing, neoliberalism. |
| Usage of teens. | Proximity to new generations, novelty, future. |
| Unsafety claims regarding immigrants. | Criminalisation, danger, threat. |
| "It's only Vox left" | Us, othering, the saviours. |
| Usage of black colour. | Sadness, darkness, hardship. |
| Usage of green colour. | Refreshing, traditional, stability. |
| "Migratory invasion". | Danger, othering, violence. |
| Fake claims on immigrants. | Lowered immigrants image, rejection, threat. |

To sum up this post, it is possible to say that it is a complete one. Concerning the DSSMHF, assuming they have not asked the legal tutor of every child present in the picture for their consent, there is an inappropriate distribution of content (sharing). The high rate of misinformation or disinformation present in the post is evident (conversations). There is a whole range of ambiguity and possible interpretations about their meaning for the wide range of meaningful elements in the post, potentially leading to losing their essence (identity). The last elements, present in almost every post, concerns the explicit in and out-group bias and the shaming of the migrants (groups and reputation). Hate speech is present, once again without a specific element describing it. It is based on the criminalisation of the migrants, potentially inciting violence towards them. The populism of this post is complete; several elements are pointing out in the direction of the elites, being either the other political parties, the news outlets

and the globalists. The people and the others are omnipresent almost in every element of the post. (Coding: 1A, 1C, 1D, 1F, 1G; 2A; 3A1).

### 5.1.3. Exportation of the message nationwide

After Vox's visit to the Canary Islands, the time to export the message to the general public had arrived. So far, their strategy had reached their followers via social media and some Canarian with their visit to the islands. The following three posts, which are also the last ones, relate to Javier Ortega Smith's appearance, the second most recognisable face of the party and member of the Congress of Deputies, in a morning program broadcasted nationwide. The last two posts correspond to Abascal's intervention in the Congress, addressing topics such as Islamism, the migratory invasion, or the chinavirus. The three posts will not contain an analysis of the ornamental elements since in these posts, the most relevant part is the speeches, which are part of the last steps for the analysis.



*Post 10. Ortega Smith in a TV debate. (Vox, 2020j)*

As said, the protagonist of the Post 10 is not Abascal but his second, Ortega Smith. This is the culmination of the strategy. Taking advantage of the repercussions of the program he is in, Ortega-Smith continues spreading the warlike and hyperbolic language. If on Instagram, only the platform users, the young public in general terms, are sensitive to their populist discourse, this apparition could increase their reach in the middle age group. In the video, he insists that they are the only ones taking care of the problem and is the left (the others) neglecting the country's essential issues. "The Spanish people are not fooled by the distractions of the left.

Today we are worried about the attack on the Constitution, the migratory invasion and the economic and sanitary crisis, and there Vox will be".

Their use of up to four different elements in the video's text description does not correspond to the video. Using the apocalyptic vocabulary, following the rhetorical guidelines from the far-right formation, he addresses attacks, invasions and crisis, providing zero evidence of what they are writing there. Also, they are not proving what they are stating, but they spread misinformation with the appearance of utterly trustable information. In the video, Ortega Smith says:

"[…] yesterday, in the National Security Commission, the only political party which defended the application of the National Security Law of 2015 and the National Security Strategy of 2017 which explicitly say that one of the major risks and menaces for the national security is found in the illegal migratory processes, qualified as migratory invasion […]". (Vox, 2020j, 0:13-0:33).

The sentence is from a TV debate, which makes it incomplete and senseless. However, the message contains two false pieces of information (Sr). After consulting with a Vox follower what he understood with this asseveration, he answered that Ortega Smith did not claim that neither the law nor the strategy contained the term "migratory invasion". For that reason, my argument, which would be claiming the untruthfulness of it, would have been biased. To be precise with my analysis, this fact-check aimed to find the terms "illegal migration" "migratory invasion", both the only references in his discourse. In the National Security Law of 2015 (BOE, 2015), there are absolutely no mentions of any of the aforementioned terms. Not together, not divided, not synonyms. This part of the claim is fake news.

The other half was concerning the National Security Strategy (NSS) of 2017. Before unveiling the search result, it is essential to underline that the Government creates an NSS, and the one before is updated each year. For that reason, even if the claim were accurate, the NSS he mentions is no longer applicable. This is because the challenges change, and the NSS has to cover different aspects that might not be tackled by the previous one. However, the NSS of 2017 does not even contain any of the terms before mentioned. There is only one of the lines of actions in the document saying that it is vital to "foment the collaboration between Public Administrations and, in particular cases, with NGOs and the private sector, with the objectives to prevent the risks derived from the irregular immigration" (Presidencia del Gobierno, 2017, p. 113).

There are many aspects to underline after this. Javier Ortega Smith-Molina is a lawyer (Sr). Thus, he is supposed to talk with certain precision about the content of the legislation. It is dangerous to manipulate the words semantically, more if you are spreading it on nationwide television. Since he is presumed to accumulate significant knowledge in legal aspects, the audience might not consider spreading fake news (Sd). The second aspect is the consciously sifting from the term irregular to illegal (Sr). The term illegal is often related to criminal conducts, while irregular only means that the migrant has no documentation. For instance, once asking for political asylum, a person cannot be considered illegal, and that can happen when they arrive at the destination in any part of Spain, under the consideration of being a refugee (Legalteam, 2015). The consideration of a human being labelled as illegal is ethically debatable, yet it is in line with Vox's racist and xenophobic strategy (Sd).

*Table 17. Semiotic analysis summary.*

| Signs | |
|---|---|
| **Signifier(s)** | **Signified(s)** |
| Javier Ortega Smith. | Reliability in legal aspects, lawyer, Vox. |
| "Migratory invasion". | Danger, othering, violence. |
| Fake claims on immigrants. | Lowered immigrants image, rejection, threat. |
| Fake allusions to laws. | Intent to prove the fake news, reliability. |

Under the DSSMHF, these posts spread important fake news and misinformation. With the unfunded claims about the Constitution's attacks or the migratory invasion (conversations), Wrong legal considerations. This post contains the usual attack on the migrants as invaders with the same analysis as in the previous posts (groups and reputation). Hate speech is present again without a specific underlying condition, in a broad sense, since they criminalise the migrants without any particular hallmark in mind. As for populism, it is a complete one. The post relates to what Vox will do for the Spanish people, unlike the left (elites) to protect them from the invaders (others). (Coding: 1C, 1F, 1G; 2A; 3A1).

The following two posts correspond to Santiago Abascal's intervention in the Congress session when Pedro Sánchez, president of the Government, explained the European Union news. In the same way as the previous post, the analysis will be focused on the message level rather than on the ornamental elements or image of the party since it is the most relevant in a speech.

In the first post, Abascal covers Islamism and how it is affecting Spain in his view. The text reads: "In Spain, Islamism is already a real problem even though the progressive media affine to the Government hide it". This time, there is a prominent figure that would justify the problem they are mentioning as in his speech it is said that "[…] even the Government Delegate for Gender Violence recognises that there are thousands of girls, thousands in Spain, in our country under risk of suffering the feminine genital mutilation […]". Such asseveration had to be fact-checked. The recognition Abascal is attributing to the Government Delegate is, in fact, a study from the Wassu Foundation of the Autonomous University of Barcelona with the support of the Delegation of the Government for Gender Violence. Therefore, it is not a press declaration or any press release launching an unspecified number, as Abascal is saying. Going deeper into the document says that exactly 3652.13 girls are under the beforementioned risk of genital mutilation (Fundación Wassu-UAB, 2020, p. 44).



*Post 11. Abascal during a Congress intervention. (Vox, 2020k)*

What is more, in the document, it is explicitly mentioned that there has been any case reported of genital mutilation since 1993 (Fundación Wassu-UAB, 2020, p. 47), being the risk mentioned in their countries of origin, where mutilation is allowed (p. 36). Therefore, the linkage of Islamism with genital mutilation in Spain is a clear example of misinformation (Sr). By Abascal's speech, the interpretant can understand that the increment of people professing Islam in Spain raises the danger of genital mutilation (Sd). To justify that, he uses very skewed a public university study with scientific methods and explicitly said that this is not happening in Spain. The study aims to protect these girls from being taken to their original countries to be mutilated and not protect them from an illegal practice in Spain.

To round the misinformation spread, Abascal reproaches the Government to encourage the NGOs and mafias to bring illegal people to the country and make the people from the humble neighbourhoods suffer the consequences that they, as influential politicians, do not suffer (Vox, 2020k, 0:44 – 1:20). Again, with no background information and great use of hyperbolical language, he accuses the Government of cooperating actively with NGOs and passively with mafias in bringing Islam to Spain in the form of illegal immigrants. The discussion of the previous post about the illegal/irregular migrant is applicable here as well. Abascal uses two correlating times the word illegal to emphasise this condition, deepening in their message.

*Table 18. Semiotic analysis summary.*

| Signs | |
|---|---|
| **Signifier(s)** | **Signified(s)** |
| Santiago Abascal. | Leader of Vox, opposition to the Government. |
| "Migratory invasion". | Danger, othering, violence. |
| Fake claims related to the Government Delegate for Gender Violence. | Antifeminism, islamophobia. |
| Hyperbolic vocabulary. | Impact the audience, catch attention, rejection to the subject of the post (islamophobia). |

Upon applying the DSSMHF, this post contains the three elements present in most of their activity in this period. The usage of data without proper contextualisation, inaccurate and mixing it in a beneficial way for their interest is a clear example of misinformation (conversations). This misinformation is used to create a clear out-group bias towards Islamic people, criminalising them and connecting them to false accusations of mutilation in Spain (groups and reputation). The hate speech is present again, and, for the first time, it is explicitly possible to categorise. In this case, islamophobia is present as the vector to disseminate hate speech and following Skenderovic and Späti (2019) consideration, it will be treated not only as a religious conflict but as a form of racism. As for populism, it is a complete one. Vox is by the "humble people suffering the illegal immigration" while the Government is encouraging it. (Coding: 1C, 1F, 1G; 2A1, 2A3; 3A1)

The last post to be analysed is from the same day as Post 11. During the elaboration of the base of the xenophobic and racist ideologies, a concept came to my attention in a very

arbitrary way: sinofobia. I did not know if it would appear in the posts since it happened after elaborating that part. This post reads the following: "China must pay" (Sr). The idea behind this was initially spread by Donald Trump and repeated by other far-right parties across the globe, which sustain that China hid the information about the pandemic and did not warn the other nations about the severity of the COVID-19.
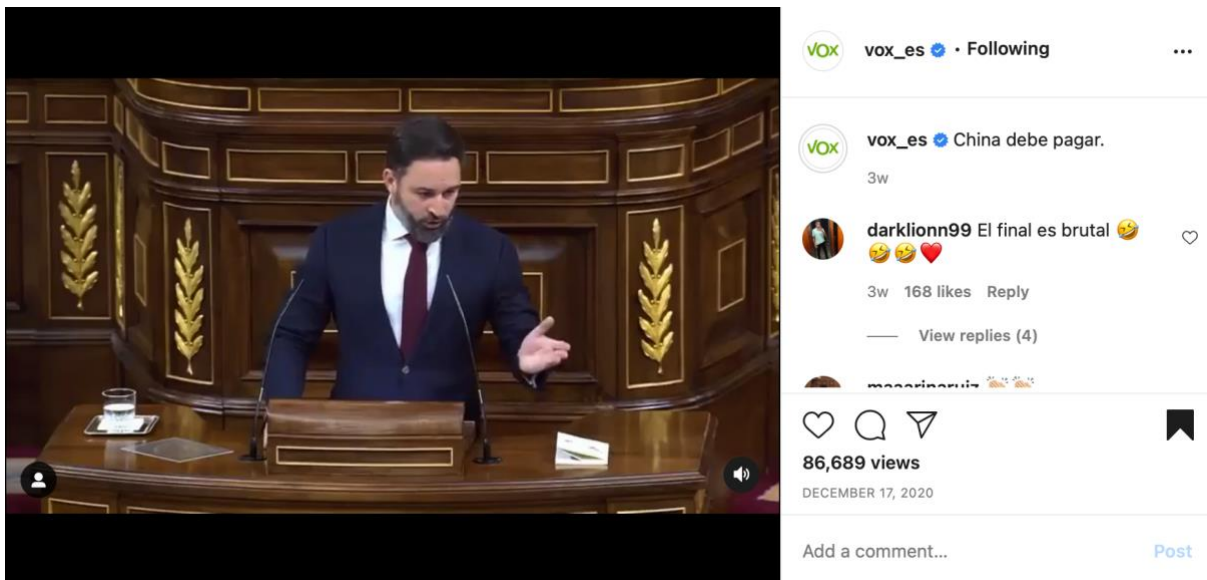


*Post 12. Abascal during a Congress intervention. (Vox, 2020l)*

"[…] Opposite to that progressive bureaucracy that called us xenophobes because we claimed in February to close the borders as a response to the menace of the expansion of a virus coming from the communist China, we want an Europe that demands China's communist Government to be accountable for their international responsibilities, because the Europeans, and I think practically all the citizens of all the nations of the world are scandalised seeing how our economies are shrinking while the Chinese economy has benefited from the occultation and lies from the Communist Government. The Chinese one, not yours, Mr. Sánchez".

The truth is that as early as January 12th 2020, China published the whole virus genetic sequence, allowing all the laboratories around the world to start working on reproducing and studying the virus. In the same direction, on January 22nd, the epidemiologist Li Lanjuan proposed quarantining people from Wuhan to Beijing's authorities since she warned the novel coronavirus could be transmitted from human to human (Zhang and Xu, 2020, p. 215). Wuhan closed to shut down the transport as early as January 23rd. It remains unclear what Abascal is pursuing by demonising without any evidence China (Sd).

This speech captures one of the conspiracy theories present in nowadays far-right discourses.   These accusations' veracity remains unclear since there has not been an investigation unveiling the virus's origin. However, without a proper investigation, the spread of such unfounded conspiracy theory is a new example of misinformation. On the other hand, there has been a long recent trend by the far-right calling COVID-19 the Chinavirus. This thesis will consider this qualification as a form of racism, sinophobia, for it is unnecessary and intentionally unclear the information this adds to the context of what is said. Another biased mention in Abascal's speech calls China communist on three different occasions in 15 seconds. There seems to be an intention to link the ideology to better or worse management of the pandemic and affecting the interests to prevent the spread of the virus.

*Table 19. Semiotic analysis summary.*

| Signs | |
|---|---|
| **Signifier(s)** | **Signified(s)** |
| Santiago Abascal. | Leader of Vox, opposition to the Government. |
| Attack on China. | Othering, sinophobia, demonising. |
| Attack on communism. | Alternative, saviours. |

This last post contains almost the same elements as Post 11. In what refers to the DSSMHF, the post spreads pieces out of context and unfounded accusations, which are effectively misinformation (conversations). There is a clear objective in criminalising China for what happened with the virus, potentially generating a negative perception from the citizens and rejection (groups and reputation). Hate speech resides in the empty and useless asseveration where Vox claims that China must pay. The search for a responsible of a disgraceful situation as it is the spread of the virus, that has led to a dreadful outcome, can generate hate in the readers. The populism is, once more, complete. Vox is erected as the people's defender by finding responsible and urging consequences towards them, the progressive Government that allowed this virus to enter Spain serves as the elites, and the other is China. (Coding: 1C, 1F, 1G; 2A2; 3A1).

## 5.2.    Results

The posts' analysis has shown a clear pattern about Vox's strategy to cover this migration crisis. At the beginning of this thesis, the Dark Side of Social Media Honeycomb Framework (Bacarella et al., 2018) tried to enable the possibility of finding that pattern. As displayed in Table 20, three categories are clearly over the rest: conversations (75%), groups (100%) and reputation (100%). The peculiarity of these three elements is that they appear together in most cases. For that reason, it is possible to say that they are part of a clear strategy to tackle the communication strategy regarding this crisis.

*Table 20. DSSMHF application results.*

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **RQ1**: *What elements of the dark side of social media honeycomb are present in Vox's Instagram account?* | **Sharing**. Inappropriate distribution and content. | C=1A | 2 | 16.67% |
| | **Presence**. Location tracking and monitoring. | C=1B | 0 | 0% |
| | **Conversations**. Misinformation, disinformation and aggressive engagement. | C=1C | 9 | 75% |
| | **Identity**. The exploitation of online self. | C=1D | 1 | 8.33% |
| | **Relationships**. Threat, coercion, abuse and intimidation. | C=1E | 1 | 8.33% |
| | **Groups**. In-group and out-group bias. | C=1F | 12 | 100% |
| | **Reputation**. Shaming and defamation. | C=1G | 12 | 100% |

Simultaneously, the immigrants' image coming to the Canary Islands is defined by those three elements. First, the shaming and defamation (reputation) of the migrants is seen in how they are portrayed as a threat and a danger to the Canary Islands. There are several allusions to the safety in the streets being compromised simultaneously, as they downgrade their rights by qualifying them as illegal humans. One of the most used expressions during this period was "migratory invasion", deepening in the idea of the threat and magnifying the problem to a number potentially higher than the one that was eventually occurring. The semiotic analysis has been the perfect tool to look deeper and report the arbitrariness' usage in the meanings built around these asseverations.

Secondly, the unfounded and out of context information contributed to the spread of misinformation and disinformation, which could potentially derive aggressive engagement from the users (conversations). Along with the analysis, one of the densest parts has been bringing context and fact-checked information to add the context and the information missing in the party's posts. In the same line, it is possible to say that some of the fake news spread by the party seems to be intentional. The best example is Vox's second-highest political responsible

participation, Javier Ortega-Smith, in a TV show. With his background in Law, he named different legal documents in an untruthful manner. Providing that some of the TV show spectators might acknowledge that Ortega-Smith is a lawyer, his word's trust can be more significant. Therefore, using the image your followers have about you and spreading fake news can be understood as a measured movement. However, this is not the only reason to conclude in this direction. In this intervention, together with others such as Abascal's parliamentary session, existing documents are used to base their arguments on, even though the fake information they spread does not exist.

As a result of implementing a strategy based on fake information and defamation, there is an in-group and out-group bias (groups). Vox repeatedly tries to make a rotund differentiation between the good (Vox, the Spanish people) and the evil (the migrants, the invaders, the elites). They treat themselves as the only solution left, as the last resource the Spanish people have to save their privileges and their status quo. The in and out-group bias does not come only towards the immigrants but also towards the rest of the political spectrum and the TVs, a stereotypical feature of the populist movements.

*RQ1: What elements of the Dark Side of Social Media Honeycomb Framework (DSSMHF) are present in Vox's Instagram account?*

Therefore, regarding RQ1, the information and conclusions derived from the application of the DSSMHF overpower the question. The answer to the question is naturally that all the elements but one, presence, appear linked to Vox's Instagram account. However, that is not the main conclusion obtained from the application of this framework. The remarkable observation comes when it is clear that the party uses a determined strategy involving the three elements discussed previously: reputation, groups, and conversations.

Moving towards the second focal point of the thesis, hate speech, the results establish a link between social media's dark usage and what is considered hate speech. By defaming, shaming or criminalising the migrants, Vox could generate hate towards the collective, and, thus, the analysis was understood following that line of thought. In Table 21, it is possible to see that the totality of the posts contained elements compatible with the definition of hate speech. Notably, the most influential part of the definition refers to discrimination. This feature has had a significant incidence in determining whether a post contains or not hate speech messages.

*Table 21. Hate speech results in the posts analysis.*

| RQ2. Is hate speech towards immigrants present in Vox's Instagram account during the studied period? What elements can be found? | Hate speech constitutes any form of expression that spread, incite, promote or justify hatred, violent or discriminating messages towards a determinate social group by its condition of gender, religion, race, origin, disability, gender identity or political ideas. | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Posts found to contain hate speech messages (C=2A) | | | No hate speech present in the post (C=2B) | |
| | 12 | 100% | | 0 | 0% |
| | Based on race (C=2A1) | Based on origin (C=2A2) | Based on religion (C=2A3) | | |
| | 1 / 8.2% | 11 / 91.8% | 1 / 8.2% | | |

In general, there is a constant use of semantic hate speech. That is the reason why the semiotic analysis allowed the research to interpret the posts better. Vox is constantly using meanings throughout expressions to hate-speak. In the posts, there is no direct insult towards the migrants. The way hate speech is addressed by diminishing, criminalising, shaming or defaming the image of the migrants. For the party, they are invaders, illegal, the reason for unsafeness or criminals. Those accusations allow the reader to develop the perception that their hate towards them might be justified. The usage of unproven data and often out of context is the modus operandi to justify those affirmations.

There was a particular surprise concerning my initial assumptions regarding the hate speech receiver's condition. While studying the literature, Vox's Islamophobic profile was clear for specific authors such as Skenderovic and Späti (2019). Nonetheless, the results of this analysis point out otherwise. In 91.8% of the cases, the hate speech was based on the people's origin, understood as outsiders. This is, the migrants' religion or race was not the relevant feature in this case. From a semiotic point of view, the treatment was dehumanising. They were considered illegal migrants.

However, in Post 11, Abascal directly referred to Islamism as a process threatening Spain and criminalising it. That would coincide with the literature assumptions on the party more than the treatment of the Canarian crisis. Paradoxically, in both posts, the topic was not the Canary Islands, but it was migration in a broad sense.

RQ2: Is hate speech towards immigrants present on Vox's Instagram account during the studied period? If yes, based on the provided definition, what elements of hate speech can be identified in Vox's Instagram account?

For the reasons mentioned above, the answers to the RQ2 differ slightly from the expected ones. Firstly, it is sure to say that there is hate speech towards migrants in Vox's Instagram account during the studied period. However, contrary to what the literature might have suggested before, the main elements defining hate speech receivers are the origin. Religion and race are not significant in this case.

The last element of this triangle is populism. The usage of certain elements such as shaming, defaming and spreading hate and discrimination towards a group of migrants directly comes with the conclusion that there is an opposing group. The literature on populism establishes a dichotomic opposition between Us and Them. In this particular case, Vox has incarnated the proposing group while establishing the migrants, the rest of the political spectrum and the media as the opposing group.

*Table 22. Populism results in the posts analysis.*

| *RQ3: Did Vox use a populist strategy on Instagram during the studied period? What is the predominant type of populism, if any?* | Based on the literature, there will be considered populist statements by those who appeal to *the people*, *the other*s or *the elites*. They can appear together or separately and concern the belonging to one of these groups. | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Posts found to be populist (C=3A) | | | | Posts found <u>not</u> to be populist (C=3B) | |
| | 12 | | 100% | | 0 | 0% |
| | Complete populism (C=3A1) | Exclusionary populism (C=3A2) | Anti-elitist populism (C=3A3) | Empty populism (C=3A4) | | |
| | 8    66.7% | 4    33.3% | 0    0% | 0    0% | | |

Similar to the result coming from the hate speech table, populism is present in the posts' totality (Table 22). Vox's populist strategy during this period can be understood as a mixture of complete populism (66.7%) and exclusionary populism (33.3%). On the one hand, complete populism represents the party's preference to develop a communication strategy where they are

present together with what they understand by others and the elites. On the other hand, if the objective is to launch a hate speech message, the preferred formula is to eliminate the elites' element to focus on the dichotomy of Vox-migrants.

RQ3: Did Vox use a populist strategy on Instagram during the studied period? What is the predominant type of populism, if any?

Thus, the answer to the first part of RQ3 is affirmative; Vox used a populist strategy on Instagram during the migratory crisis. Also, the predominant type of populism is complete populism. This equation allows the party to establish the differentiation between the good and the evil discussed before, with the possibility of blaming the elites for what they are reporting.

It is important to underline that there is a presence of populism where the elites are othered. The coding does not reflect that because it comes together with all the other features. Therefore, instead of considering it anti-elitist populism, it has been considered complete populism.

The absence of empty populism is undoubtedly intriguing. For the party's strategy, the glorification of the people, by itself, is irrelevant. This fact implies that the possibility of a positive populism is not on the table. In every case, there is always an opposing group to blame or to criminalise to glorify Vox. For that reason, since complete populism is the majoritarian strategy, this line of thought is reinforced. The migrants are present in the totality of the posts with a very similar description, whereas the elites are present only when the party wants to blame someone for the arrival of the migrants.

# 6. CONCLUSIONS

This thesis started with a reflection on polarisation. The political differences among the different ideological sensibilities are growing apart. The tension generated from that process is penetrating social media with the great danger it represents. One of the main aims of this academic work was to understand if political polarisation would influence social media. More concretely, if it would end up in the propagation of hate speech and populism.

For that reason, one of this thesis' main contributions is the extensive discussion around the concepts of hate speech and populism. Academia is still trying to find a broad consensus to achieve a pan-definition for both. In what refers to hate speech, the debate goes tightly related to the legal discussion since its recognition and regulation would directly affect a fundamental right as it is the freedom of speech.

As for populism as a concept, along with this work, it has been possible to see how a theoretical contribution by Jagers and Walgrave (2007) and de Vreese et al. (2018) can be applied to a recent case. In addition, from this application, it was possible to extract conclusions to understand the implications of what a populist party represents and how they use that strategy. The research contributions read to build the theoretical background of this thesis stated that Vox was a populist party. However, this division in different types goes beyond.

The increasing presence of hate speech linked to a populist strategy led to utilising the Dark Side of Social Media Honeycomb Framework (Baccarella et al., 2018). The remarkable fact about this framework is that it was designed to highlight that social media has its downside. In that direction, the thesis framework's utilisation has proven a clear pattern in the Vox case behind a particular strategy based on populism and hate speech. Special mention to the usability of this framework. It was conceived to study user interaction, but it has helped study single user behaviour in this thesis.

This thesis's results are clear; Vox utilised a perfectly defined strategy based on the in-group and out-group bias, the shaming and defamation, and misinformation in their posts. This strategy contributed to the dissemination of hate speech using a populist strategy. Populism served as a vehicle to enlighten their audience's sentimental aspect to spread a hateful and harmful message regarding the migrants. That is the reason why one of the main conclusions of this thesis is that both populism and hate speech exist in a symbiotic relationship in Vox's Instagram account. This means that without the populist strategy, it is likely that the acceptance of the hatred messages would not have the same effect. Here works by creating a feeling of danger and threat, dehumanising the out-group and offering a solution for the in-group.

In order to preserve the feeling of safeness, everything seems to be acceptable. Writing anything that comes to our minds has become a trend. Now it seems there is no need to prove or justify what you write. Social media has become a place where, under anonymity, any thought is expressed regardless of the consequences. The penalty of expressing specific thoughts is yet very debated among the European Union, and, therefore, fearing the possible judicial actions is likely to be absent from these behaviours.

This debate is certainly not new. In the past, under the authoritarian regimes in the XX century, censure was one of the most used resources to silence the opponent. Nowadays, the use of the concept of censure to criticise and reproach the legal actions towards particular messages is widespread. In short, whenever there is a limitation to some message, a very intense critique of the system comes.

The most recent and relevant example of this was Donald Trump's Instagram and Facebook account suspension at the beginning of this thesis. Even though it was not only Facebook but also Twitter, who censured the USA's former president, the public opinion showed very despaired positions. The feeling that Trump had been feeding the electoral fraud claims unfoundedly was as controversial as its consequences. A profound debate over freedom of expression was carried away, interpellant Facebook as a grant of that freedom. A giant, private company seemed to have the power to give or take the speech of a president of one of the world's most powerful countries. A company located and founded in the own USA. More to it, in Spain, Vox received a temporary ban in January 2021. Some weeks after, Facebook catalogued a publication by the far-right party as fake news, and Twitter decided to ban their account indefinitely. The reason, accusing the Spanish Government of fomenting paedophilia without any data, information or background.

These cases lead to a conclusion: the polarised, hyperbolic, and unlimited discourses in social media are finding contestation. The high level of polarisation has pushed social media companies to set more precise limits to free speech on their platforms. More than free speech, to hate speech, despite the possible conflictive definitions that different platforms have about the term. The possible reason why some political actors claim against the limitation of speeches might find its origin in their judicial immunity when holding a representative position. When politicians receive their deputies' documentation in Spain, they hold immunity to interfering with only the Supreme Court. They do not directly judge hate speech crimes. In that sense, when political parties use social media, they tend to communicate in similar terms as they do in the Congress or Parliaments. Nevertheless, they forget that private companies with their criteria regulate the speeches published on social media.

Along with this thesis, it has been possible to see the different claims that criminalise and incite hatred behaviour towards immigrants. From the unproven claims about the subsidies they receive to calling them illegal, as a trading object, and alerting from a migratory invasion when less than twenty thousand people arrived during the last year. Moreover, fake claims about the criminality increment were dismantled in the analysis. These fake and hatred claims might have found their last permissive moments. While freedom of expression is a right to continue, social media companies are starting to detect and fight this behaviour. The short term's deciding goal will be to clearly and bluntly explain the criteria to the users to avoid possible complaints.

Social media's political utilisation seemed to have substituted the traditional ways to reach people, and the campaign pursues their aspirations. There is, precisely, where Vox shines. Their bet on social media has placed them clearly above the rest of the parties in what followers, interaction and response rate refer. A meticulous orchestration of the content is posted, creating a direct and persistent campaign for each cause, as this thesis's results point out. There are careful selections of colours, shots, messages, images, music or even people to create a coherent brand. These facts could justify their overwhelming success over the rest of the Spanish parties on Instagram.

Social media is the present and, most importantly, the future. The next generations are already born with strong orientations to these platforms. It is a duty from academia, public institutions and civil society to build safe environments, free of hate, to foment a safe development of our societies. To limit specific messages could be justified not only as freedom of expression but also as preserving other freedoms, such as life. Ronald Reagan expressed that freedom is never more than one generation away from extinction. Now it is time to change freedom for democracy. We should never take democracy for granted. We shall preserve and fight to maintain and endorse the fundamental rights that make a democracy be respected and recognised. From generation to generation.

## 6.1.    Limitations and further research

Conducting a semiotic analysis has the benefit of being able to deepen the meanings of the signs using the social context as the primary tool. It requires a long justification, and, therefore, it is space consuming. For that reason, the main limitation of this thesis is the number of posts that have been analysed. For further research, especially in terms of a doctoral dissertation, it would be interesting to increase the number of posts and compare selecting

different moments to discriminate if the communication strategy is permanent around a topic or mutates.

As stated before, there is still a need to keep looking for a broad consensus around the term hate speech. Even though there is an increasing development of policies to understand it better, there are still many different interpretations. In Law, it might be exciting to keep researching the comparative legislation around different countries and the possible development over the years. In Political Sciences, the role of the researchers should accompany the process described before. There is a need to apply these concepts to understand how deep hate speech is rooting in populist discourses, with specific attention to the far-right. The increasing presence of extremist parties in the political scenery should be closely monitored to correctly advise the public institutions to tackle future generations' possible threats.

Another crucial line of investigation discovered during this thesis is the possible interference of polarisation in the increment of hate speech, not only toward migrants but also other social collectives. It is vital to investigate further the impact of crises in the polarisation of a society and its possible impact. There is a lack and a need for research around the possible interference of this political polarisation in future generations in that very same line. That is the only way we could capture the impact of these behaviours in the upcoming years.

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