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Published online: 07 Apr 2022.

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Reconquest 2.0: the Spanish far right and the mobilization of historical memory during the 2019 elections

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ABSTRACT

This paper brings together the literature on far right parties, medievalism and opinion leadership in order to more closely interrogate the memory politics of the far right. We address two broad questions: what does the mobilization of distant-past events do in far right discourse? And how do these memories circulate online? We unpack one specific case study: the mobilization of the topic 'La Reconquista' (The Reconquest) among the computer-mediated networks of one Europe's newest national-populist parties: Spain's VOX. First, we show three strategies through which the Reconquest trope reproduced a conservative historiography that creates a transhistorical, exclusionary and Catholic Spanish nation: the creation of memory sites, the glorification of heroes and a specifically antagonistic memory. Second, we show that the one-word nature of the historical narrative, through its Twitter circulation, gave it a crucial ability to mobilize in the context of an election. Finally, drawing from opinion leader theory we show how these Reconquest narratives were put forward by traditional elite actors such as political parties and newspapers, but relied on the role of ordinary citizens to spread and circulate.

Introduction

In the middle of an electoral debate for the recent Catalan election of 2021, the leader of right-wing party Partido Popular de Cataluña (PPC), Alejandro Fernández countered the anti-Muslim claims of far right VOX candidate by telling him that 'we are not in the crusades, and you and I are not knights templar' (Tv3, 2021, p. 1:47:12). Although this may seem like an isolated occurrence, it is far from it. For over three years, Vox had repeatedly mentioned medieval events such as the crusades and mobilized a variety of other historical images in their political discourse (Blanco, 2019).

Scholarship on the far right is increasingly paying attention to the role that memory and historical narratives play in far right political discourse (Rosenfeld, 2021). And yet, most analyses focus on the references and re-elaborations of relatively recent events,

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such as twentieth century fascisms and communism. This contrasts with a burgeoning literature on medievalisms, which points to the presence in contemporary societies of a variety of images of the medieval period and to their political salience. Not only this, but recent studies in political medievalisms have shown that the internet in general, and increasingly social media in particular, are playing a crucial role in the diffusion and circulation of these medievalisms (Elliott, 2017). In the case of the far right, this resonates with an increasingly large literature that points to the importance of new media for the circulation of their discourse (Crosset et al., 2019; Ganesh & Froio, 2020). However, literature on the memory politics of the far right still remains, for the most part, focused on 'traditional' forms of political discourse, raising the need for a closer analysis of the ways in which historical memory circulates.

In this paper, we bring together the literatures on far right parties, medievalism and opinion leadership in order to more closely interrogate the memory politics of the far right. We aim to address two broad questions: what does the mobilization of distant-past events do in far right discourse? And how do these memories circulate online? To do so, we study the mobilization of everyday historical narratives on social media during the 2019 Spanish elections. Specifically, we analyse the mobilization of the topic 'La Reconquista' (The Reconquest) – a term used to refer to a series of campaigns by Christian polities to conquer Muslim territory in the Iberian Peninsula from the eighth to the fifteenth centuries – among the computer-mediated networks of one of the newest far right parties in Europe: Spain's VOX (Ferreira, 2019). In analysing the mobilization of the Reconquest, we not only want to explore the specific dynamics of this case but also hope to draw attention to and deepen the understanding of far right parties' social media use to (re)shape political memory. The examination of the reconfiguration of political memory through social media is, in turn, crucial to explain – albeit only partially – the electoral success of these parties.

Although VOX was founded in 2013 by former members of Spain's right-wing Partido Popular (PP), it was not until December 2018, in the context of the regional elections for the parliament in Andalucía, that it obtained political representation. In the five years between both events, however, the party had gained large visibility in Spanish media, thanks to their activism in joining widely-publicized court cases, such as some murder trials or law suits against secessionist Catalan politicians (Precedo, 2018). Ideologically, far from being a single-issue party focused on matters of migration, VOX has a socially-conservative nationalist ideology, supporting issues such as the death penalty, abortion bans, reduction of social welfare provisions, criminalization of secessionist ideas, as well as an anti-immigrant agenda (Turnbull-Dugarte, 2019). After their success in obtaining representation in the Andalucian elections, Vox ran a national campaign with the slogan 'Por España!' [For Spain!] for the April 2019 general election. The election was held on the 28 of April and Vox went on to obtain 10,26 percent of votes and 24 seats.

Similar to other right-wing parties, Vox made extensive use of Twitter to 'criticize the opponents, carry out personal battles and draw the attention of media' (Campos-Domínguez, 2017, p. 86). Indeed, because of the outsider nature of the party and its limited access to traditional media, Vox made use of Twitter to build its public agenda (Enli, 2017). In comparison to traditional parties (e.g. PSOE or PP) though, Vox has built a more thematic agenda focused on a limited number of issues (e.g. immigration). This has allowed the party to spread messages easily convertible to headlines (Justel-

Vázquez et al., 2018), as our study of the 'Reconquista' reveals. Lastly, in line with the personalized structure of the party, Vox has done an extensive use of Twitter to promote its leaders and spread their messages, especially those of Santiago Abascal, as our analysis also reveals. This social media personalization communication style (de Vreese et al., 2018) is in line with the use other populist parties make of Twitter, for instance, the Spanish party Podemos and the promotion it did of its former Secretary-General, Pablo Iglesias (Lioy et al., 2019).[1]

Specifically, we tackle the following two questions: What is the role of Reconquest tropes in VOX's discourse? How did Reconquest tropes spread and circulate? To answer these questions, we have collected all the tweets mentioning and retweeting the party '@vox_es' during the 2019 Spanish national elections ($N = $ 824,871). We analyse a sample of this data (the 'Reconquest' retweet network) by employing a combination of critical discourse analysis (CDA) and social network analysis (SNA). First, we show that through a variety of strategies, such as the creation of memory sites, the glorification of heroes and a specifically antagonistic memory, the Reconquest trope reproduced conservative historiography that creates a transhistorical, exclusionary and Catholic Spanish nation. Second, we show that the one-word nature of the historical narrative, through its Twitter circulation, gave it a crucial mobilization ability in the context of an election. Finally, drawing from opinion leader theory, we show how these Reconquest narratives were put forward by traditional elite actors such as political parties and newspapers but relied on the role of ordinary citizens to spread and circulate. All in all, the use of a mixed-method approach (CDA and SNA) allows us to unpack the memory politics surrounding the mobilization of the Reconquista while taking into account their circulation and the structural characteristics of the network in which these uses of history take place.

Theoretical background

The Reconquista in Spanish memory

The Reconquista holds a distinctive place in Spanish historiography and political memory. The so-called 'Reconquest' is a loose historiographical concept used to refer to the wars between Christian and Muslim polities starting after the Umayyad conquest of the Iberian Peninsula in the eighth century and culminating with the conquest of Granada by Castilian forces in 1492. As with any historiographical concept, far from being value-neutral, the idea of the Reconquista has been significantly contested in Spanish historiography (García-Sanjuán, 2013; Hertel, 2015; Ríos Saloma, 2011). Carlos de Ayala Martínez (2020), for example, identifies a variety of narratives about the Reconquista as a medieval ideology that have little in common, other than serving as a religious justification for the conquering of Muslim territory. Conversely, Miguel Ríos Saloma (2011) maintains that the term constitutes a historiographical misrepresentation, since it was only coined in the eighteenth century and thus did not correspond to a medieval lived reality. Rather, the notion of the Reconquest would be a *post facto* nationalist construct. In a similar vein, García-Sanjuán (2013) identifies a variety of global historiographies of the period, some of which glorify the Islamic conquest in the eighth century, and some of which glorify the progressive Christian conquest of the following centuries.

There are, therefore, a variety of historiographical traditions on the topic. However, its role as (political) memory goes well beyond historiography. Indeed, political discourses in the last few centuries have extensively drawn on these historiographies to construct distinct social identities. Most famously, the notion of the Reconquista is closely associated with a conservative version of Spanish nationalism that started in the nineteenth century and became central in the historiographical writing and political discourse of the Francoist dictatorship (see, for example, García-Sanjuán, 2018; Hertel, 2015). Indeed, a key part of the historiographical narrative of the dictatorships national-catholic ideology, the Reconquista was understood as the unification moment of Spain, where after almost 800 years, the Catholic Kings succeeded not only in expelling the illegitimate Muslim invaders but also unified the Iberian Peninsula under one rule to match the Spanish nation. The Reconquista, however, has also been mobilized by a variety of other Iberian nationalisms, from Basque to Portuguese or Andalusian (see Hertel, 2015, p. 31).

The goal of this paper is certainly not to arbitrate between the different historiographical opinions. Rather, this very brief review serves to highlight a crucial element for understanding the memory politics of Vox. Far right parties are not working on a blank slate of memory, nor are they merely inventing new narratives that resignify past events. On the contrary, their memory politics need to be interpreted in a broader societal context in which a variety of memories circulate and provide an 'emotional reservoir' for right-wing politics (Wodak & Forchtner, 2014). In this case, Vox is not only operating in a context where 'la *Reconquista*' is a meaningful and circulating social trope but also where there are a variety of possible 'Reconquistas'. Indeed, as some of the critics of the term argue, the notion itself is far from neutral (Ríos Saloma, 2011). We may thus preliminarily identify two specific connotations of understanding these 700 years of Iberian history through the notion of the Reconquest: first, by grouping together a variety of military campaigns spanning over 700 years, it puts forward the image of a coherent and directed enterprise with a specific goal, as opposed to seeing these campaigns and their ends as diverse. Second, by adopting the notion of a *re*-conquest it puts forward the idea of a continuity between those polities before the Umayyad conquest and the ones after it and posits the middle period as merely an (illegitimate) interlude.

Far right memory politics and medievalism

Although the politics of the contemporary far right have attracted much scholarly attention (Mudde, 2019), it is only recently that scholars have begun to notice the crucial role that memory and historical narratives play in contemporary far right politics. Indeed, as noted in a recent article, far right parties 'use history in their language, reference and symbols as a way to consolidate popular support' (Couperus & Tortola, 2019, p. 106), and they do so in a way that is far from accessory to their entire ideological project. On the contrary, different collective memories are crucial in understanding the space and mobilization capacity of far right parties (Caramani & Manucci, 2019), and some scholars even see divergent historical memories as central to the rise of illiberal democracy in Eastern European countries (Verovšek, 2021).

And yet, there have been selectivities at play in which 'uses of the past' have attracted scholarly attention, with the (relatively) recent past, and most notably the memory of twentieth century totalitarian regimes, receiving most of the attention. Tied to what

Rosenfeld (2021) identifies as the 'memory boom' of the turn of the century and the sub-sequent rise of illiberal democracies, scholars have shown how contemporary far right actors seek to mobilize, shape and resignify the memory of fascism, communism and the Holocaust. This, however, leaves a blind spot regarding some memory politics of the far right for, as the initial example in this article shows, the historical references are sometimes much more distant.

A wealth of literature on contemporary medievalisms has pointed to the crucial role of the distant-past, and particularly the Middle Ages, in contemporary politics, of both far right and mainstream parties. Holsinger, for example, has shown the ways in which the idea of a 'crusade' was essential in the discourse and policy of the War on Terror (2007), while authors such as Wollenberg (2014) and Wodak and Forchtner (2014) have pointed to the circulation of a variety of medieval and Early Modern pop culture tropes in contemporary Western societies that both serve as enablers of, and are mobilized by, far right actors. Medievalism literature, moreover, has not only noted this crucial role in contemporary far right movements but also in historical fascisms. Most famously, for example, medieval imagery played a core role in Nazi discourse and esthetics (Wistrich & Holland, 1995).

Importantly, these elements of medievalism appear to resonate well with other core elements of far right discourse. Cas Mudde (2019, p. 26), for example, has identified *nativism* – understood as a combination of nationalism and xenophobia – as central in this discourse. In this sense, following Bull and Hansen (2016, p. 393), the politics of the far right can be inscribed into an 'antagonistic memory' tradition, that seeks to counter cosmopolitan memories with an attempt to (re)construct a particularistic national identity through a reimagining of 'territory in exclusionary terms'. Historically, the naturalization of the nation as the core political community cannot be understood merely as a synchronous fellowship between citizens but rather relies on the imagery of the nation as a trans-temporal entity with its own history. And within this, relatively distant history was frequently invoked. Thus, for example, a variety of European nationalisms trace their origin to the peoples emerging from the dissolution of the Roman empire in the Early Middle Ages (Geary, 2002), while certain versions of Dutch nationalism understood the Dutch nation to have biblical origins as a chosen people (Gorski, 2000).

Despite the various contributions of both the literature on far right memory politics and of medievalisms, therefore, the mobilization of the distant-past by far right movements remains an understudied topic. Through the case of the online mobilization of the Reconquista in the @vox_es twitter network, a first goal of this study is to begin to fill this gap, addressing what role the medieval past can play in the political discourse and campaigning of a far right party.

Memory politics in an internet age

Before we can address this, however, it is worth considering the medium in which this medieval past is mobilized, for as Elliott notes, 'the workings of the medium of retransmission … ultimately govern the ways in which the past finds itself transmitted to the present' (2017, p. 38). An increasing literature on far right politics points to the crucial role in mobilization of support of (new) media (Crosset et al., 2019). More broadly, the rise of social media has challenged the notion of citizens as mere consumers of

information, raising the question of their role not only in distributing but also in producing information (Castells, 2008). And yet, the use of social media in far right memory politics has so far received little attention. The second goal of this paper is to address this by asking how far right historical tropes circulate on social media. Is it enough with thinking of them as produced by 'official actors', such as far right parties? What is the role of ordinary citizens in the circulation of these narratives?

In order to understand how the topic of the 'Reconquest' spread through the retweet Twitter networks of @vox_es, we draw on the literature on opinion leaders. The theory of opinion leaders opposes the so-called one-step flow theory (hypodermic needle model), which suggests that a (political) message is directly received and accepted by the population (Bennett & Manheim, 2006). Instead, it argues that a minority of individuals are extremely compelling in spreading ideas. These individuals are defined as opinion leaders in a two-step flow theory (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). The rationale is thus that the influence of the media first reaches opinion leaders and via them the wider population (Katz, 1957, 1955).

Previous research has studied opinion leadership in Twitter political networks by employing two classic social network metrics of centrality, indegree and outdegree (see Freeman, 1978, for an explanation of these metrics). Hsu and Park (2012) analysis of communication relationships among members of the Korean National Assembly revealed that a reduced number of politicians were far more popular (as measured by their total number of followers – indegree) than the rest of politicians. Dubois and Gaffney (2014) revealed that indegree and eigenvector centrality identified traditional political elite, media outlets and journalists as opinion leaders. The study conducted by Esteve Del Valle and Borge Bravo (2018) on a parliamentary following-follower Twitter network showed that, while party leaders were the most followed (indegree) nodes in the network, new opinion leaders (young and female) emerged as information brokers. Himelboim et al. (2017) measured the degree of centralization – dispersion of centrality of nodes throughout the network – in Twitter topic-networks by employing indegree and outdegree metrics. And Eldridge et al., (2019) used the indegree and outdegree metrics to find out the 'programmers' (indegree) and the 'mobilizers' (outdegree) of Twitter political networks in Spain, United Kingdom and the Netherlands.

In sum, our study builds on the findings of previous research in Twitter political networks (Borge Bravo & Esteve-Del-Valle, 2017; Dubois & Gaffney, 2014; Eldridge II et al., 2019; Esteve-Del-Valle et al., 2021, 2018) which has pointed to the existence of two types of opinion leaders in these networks; on the one hand politicians, media outlets and journalists who receive most of the retweets (indegree), on the other, ordinary citizens who send most of the retweets (outdegree).

Data and methods

The exploration of the mobilization of 'La Reconquista' through the @vox_es Twitter network thus starts from a two-fold goal: first, to understand the role of memory tropes in far right discourse and how they are used in the context of an electoral campaign; and second, to take seriously the medium in which these tropes circulate by examining the structure of nationalist Twitter mobilization and in particular its opinion leaders.

For data collection, we used Netlytic, a cloud-based text and social network analyser (Gruzd, 2016), to collect all the tweets related to @vox_es during the 2019 Spanish electoral campaign (April 12–28, 2019). This gave us a total of 824,871 tweets. The reason for the limitation of the time-frame of this study to the electoral campaign period responds to the fact that campaigns force both political actors and ordinary citizens to explicitly articulate their political preferences, and as such, we expected that the nationalist visions of Spain would be more explicitly visible. Furthermore, we decided to focus on Twitter because this platform is known worldwide for inspiring political discussions, it was relatively easy to access to the Twitter data, and we knew @vox_es was an active and engaged Twitter user. To build the @vox_es 'Reconquest' retweet network, we selected all the retweets in which the account @vox_es was mentioned. Then we filtered these retweets by using the keyword 'Reconquista' – Reconquest. This gave us a final dataset consisting of 2,897 retweets. Further information about the construction of the @vox_es 'Reconquest' retweet network can be found in the Appendix of this study.

In order to cover both goals of the paper, we adopted a mixed-methods approach that draws from different methodological traditions. First, using critical discourse analysis (CDA) of 'Reconquest' tweets and narratives during the campaign, we unpack its role in the production of a specific exclusionary Spanish national identity, as well as its role in political mobilization. CDA is a useful method (Khosravinik, 2017), for it not only understands that discourse is essential for social life, insofar as it institutes particular structures of meaning that constitute social reality but also places particular emphasis on power structures that underlay and are reproduced by certain discursive uses. Additionally, it presents the advantage of going beyond an understanding of discourse as merely language, and incorporating the study of visual and audiovisual media. In a context such as Twitter, where text, image and video are integrated, CDA thus provides an excellent tool to unpack the specific notions of Spanish nationhood at play, as well as the contestation over them during both campaigns (Fairclough, 2001). Specifically, our analysis focuses on three discursive strategies surrounding the use of the term 'Reconquista': articulation, that is, the binding together of different elements of discourse which are 'combined to produce contingent and contextually specific representations' (Weldes, 1996, p. 284); interpellation or the creation of social identities and relations, which allows us to see discursive attempts at constituting the Spanish nation; and re- and de-contextualisation, that is, the extraction of some element from its original context and its use in a different context (Wodak & Forchtner, 2014).

Second, we use a social network analysis approach to find the opinion leaders of the @vox_es 'Reconquest' retweet network. Specifically, we employed two commonly used network centrality metrics (see Borge Bravo & Esteve-Del-Valle, 2017; Dubois & Gaffney, 2014; Esteve-Del-Valle & Borge Bravo, 2018; Freeman, 1978; Hsu & Park, 2012), *indegree* and the *outdegree*. The indegree counts the number of ties to a node (see Figure 1). In the case of the @vox_es 'Reconquest' retweet network, this is the number of retweets a node receives from the other nodes. The assumption is that the more retweets a node receives, the more central the node is in the information flows of the network. On the other hand, the outdegree counts the number of ties from a node (see Figure 1). In the case of the @vox_es 'Reconquest' retweet network, this is the number of retweets sent by a node to the other nodes. The assumption is that the nodes who
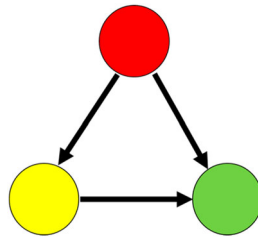
Figure 1. Graph representation of the indegree and the outdegree in a directed graph. Note: Red node: indegree (0) and outdegree (2); Green node: indegree (2) and outdegree (0); Yellow node: indegree (1) and outdegree (1).

sends more retweets occupy opinion leadership positions in the network because of they are highly engaged in the communication flows.

Gephi, an open graph visualization platform (Bastian et al., 2009) was used to calculate the descriptive statistics of the network (density and diameter) and the indegree and out-degree centrality metrics of its nodes. To measure the modularity of the network, we employed the community detection method proposed by Vincent et al. (2008).

In the following sections, we unpack the ways in which the circulation of the *Reconquista* trope through the Vox twitter network builds on these connotations to construct specific identities and achieve political ends.

Constructing the Spanish nation

In this section, we show how Vox mobilized a specific image of the Reconquista that very much draws on, and resonates with the one that we saw was put forward during the Fran-coist dictatorship: a notion of a transhistorical Spanish nation under threat from a variety of internal and external enemies, most notably Muslims. Crucially, this analysis brings to light how this imaginary of the Spanish nation relied on a wide variety of modalities and strategies of historical memory creation and reproduction that operated through the notion of the 'Reconquista'. In this section, we unpack three crucial ones: the creation of sites of memory, the creation of heroes and mythical figures, the articulation of an antagonistic view of history through the division between good and evil.

First, the *Reconquista* trope served to engage in what Zavatti (2021) has termed the cre-ation of far right sites of memory. These are specific, physical sites, where far right memory takes a spatial dimension in a way that fixes and normalizes their politics. In the case of Vox, we see that this was done both *in situ* through specific acts and performances, and crucially through their social media activity as a way of diffusing their message. As broadly announced through the @vox_es network, already the initial rally of the electoral campaign was designed around a specific notion of *Reconquista*, taking place in the north-ern-Spanish town of Covadonga. In conservative Spanish historiography, the Battle of Covadonga stands as the first battle won by Christian forces in the mid-eighth century, under the direction of Don Pelayo – the first king of Asturias. The use of this battle by Vox for the starting rally of the electoral campaign explicitly draws on this circulating notion and in doing so, interpellates a particular notion of Spain: one that has existed as a united nation since at least the eighth century and that succeeded in fighting for

its survival and unification. In the announcement tweet by the Asturian branch of VOX, this joint articulation of the party, a specific memory site, and a unified, transhistorical Spain is put forward both in the text and through the mobilization of specific images (Figure 2).

Figure 2. VOX Asturias tweet about the start of the campaign. 'The #aliveSpain begins the campaign. Tomorrow in Asturias, cradle of the Reconquest, we will begin. #Covadonga at 16 h and in #Oviedo large rally of @vox_es with @Santi_ABASCAL, Ortega Lara and Rodolfo Espina. #ForSpainVoteVox #Asturias' https://twitter.com/vox_asturias/status/1116469582523510785

Indeed, the tweet includes not only repeated mentions of Spain and the Reconquest but also a photo of a famous statue of Don Pelayo at the site itself, with the addition of the campaign motto 'Por España' ['For Spain'] written in the colors of the Spanish flag. The statue in question was installed at the site in 1965 during the Francoist dictatorship. In drawing attention to the site and the statue, thus, Vox mobilize a long-standing narrative that constitutes Covadonga as a core far right memory site.

This statue calls attention to a second memory strategy, namely the construction of heroes and mythical figures. As Zavatti points out (2021, p. 2): 'in their sites of memory, the far right inscribes its "true" national character, constructed by references to martyrdom, self-sacrifice, patriotism, heroism'. Pelayo was a Visigoth noble who defeated Muslim troops. Although historically 'it was not a particularly consequential battle' (Hertel, 2015, p. 108), Spanish nationalist memory has progressively re-signified the battle as a crucial point that marks the beginning of the *Reconquest*, and Pelayo as a national hero.

What political imaginary emerges through these memory strategies? With the mobilization of this site and its heroes, Vox interpellates the Spanish nation that has in essence existed unchanged for at least centuries – if not millennia – and that constitutes the core object that Vox fights for. Not only this but this particular understanding of what Spain is, is closely associated with the Catholic faith. This is not only exemplified by the

Catholic-vs-Muslim narrative of the Reconquista but also reinforced through visual mediums: for one, in the picture, Don Pelayo is standing in front of a cross. It is also reinforced through the actions performed by party leaders, and their diffusion through the Twitter network: the initial rally itself consisted of the Vox's leader Santiago Abascal performing an offering to the Virgin of Covadonga. This circulated through the network by journalist @alvaro7carvajal (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Tweet and video of the start of the campaign. '@Santi_ABASCAL launches @vox_es's campaign with an offering of flowers in Covadonga, 'cradle of Spain' and symbol of the Reconquest' https://twitter.com/alvaro7carvajal/status/1116708347527483392/video/1

This specific tweet – widely shared with 1,377 retweets – draws the explicit connection between the Reconquest and Spain by transforming the message in the official @Vox_Asturias account, which spoke of Covadonga as the 'cradle of the Reconquista' and turning it into 'cradle of Spain'. The elision between the Reconquest and Spain as a nation is also present in the words of the offering: '*Santina* of Covadonga, save us and save Spain!'. Thus, through the Reconquista, VOX puts forward a specific notion of Spain as having existed homogenous and Catholic for centuries, even while fighting against 'Muslim invaders' (@vox_es, 2 January 2019).

The fact that the image of a catholic Spanish nation is articulated through the explicit opposition between Christians and Muslims brings to light a third memory strategy: what Bull and Hansen term 'antagonistic memory' (2016). This antagonistic mode of remembering is characterized by its reliance on a 'Manichean division of the historical characters into good and evil' (Bull & Hansen, 2016, p. 390). This is a crucial move, for the specific politics of history and nationhood of the *Reconquista* not only understand the Spanish nation to be a transhistorical community but also understand that

the conflict between Christians and Muslims also has a recurrent character (see Millar & Lopez, 2021). This articulation of Catholic Spain, the medieval campaigns against Muslim polities and xenophobic themes in contemporary far right politics is not only implicitly but also explicitly drawn by both political leaders and by ordinary citizens in the network (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Tweet reacting to the start of the campaign. 'The hispanofobic left shows its nervousness because @vox_es is bringing out in Spaniards a natural sentiment for their fatherland and history, starting in Covadonga, where a Reconquest against the Islam defended by so many corrupt people loaded with petrodollars was started'https://twitter.com/joseant95962275/status/1116947977195667457

For @joseant95962275 not only was the Reconquest a campaign against Islam, but this campaign is still politically relevant, as people in Spain are still defending Islam after being corrupted by money coming from oil-rich Muslim countries. In this way, through successive recontextualisations of the Reconquista, the connection between Spain's past and its present are explicitly drawn through an antagonistic memory that portrays Spain constantly under threat.

The importance of the Reconquista narrative for the specific construction of the Spanish nation put forward by VOX is evident if we examine the ways in which contestation over the Reconquista unfolded in the network. Indeed, far from being treated as a marginal discursive practice, the repeated use of Reconquista imagery became a central point for discussion in the @Vox_es Twitter network and beyond that in print and online media. For example, noting some of the historiographical inaccuracies in the historical narrative put forward by VOX, journalist Patricia R. Blanco published an article in El Pais entitled 'Neither did Spain exist nor was the Reconquest like Vox says it was' ['Ni España existía ni la Reconquista fue tal cómo la cuenta Vox'] on 12 of April, the first day of the campaign (Blanco, 2019). In it, the journalist interviewed a number of historians explaining the Francoist legacy of Reconquest historiography and broadly listing some of the historical inaccuracies in the Reconquest narrative circulated by Vox. This article was widely shared online, including through the @vox_es network. Of interest to our study, however, is how Vox responded to this and other similar articles (Figure 5).

Figure 5. VOX tweet reacting to information in the media. 'We are not annoyed by the Prisa Group doing these campaign videos against us, what's more, it amuses and benefits us. But we do not accept that they spit on Spain by denying the Reconquest. It is false and ridiculous and shows very little love for our nation' https://twitter.com/vox_es/status/1117738180051124224

In this tweet, the Reconquest is seen as a truth integral to the existence and nature of Spain as a nation, to the point that mobilizing critical historiography is seen as an offense on Spain itself and a demonstration of hatred ('little love') for the nation.

In sum, through the deployment of specific memory strategies of the Reconquista, the @vox_es 'Reconquest' retweet network puts forward a very specific image of the Spanish nation as a homogenous Catholic entity that has existed for centuries, and that is constantly under threat from both an external Muslim enemy and a variety of internal left-wing and economic elites.

Mobilizing online

The fact that the Reconquista is constantly recontextualized so that it applies to contemporary politics points to the limitations in understanding the memory politics of the far right as mere narratives about the past. Rather, this forces us to think about the ways in which specific historical narratives can be used for a variety of different ends, including political mobilization. In this section, we show how the use of 'la Reconquista', served to engage and mobilize voters by adopting a language and imagery that emphasized action and transformation.

A starting point for analysing this is the observation that the entire historical narrative of the Reconquista circulated through the retweet network chiefly through a single word (and sometimes hashtag): #Reconquista. This stands in clear contrast with both an understanding of historical narratives as something carefully crafted by historians on the basis of available evidence, but also with traditional ways of understanding the relevance of

historical memory for identity formation, which placed a primer on elements such as school textbooks (see for example, Koyama, 2018). Against this, scholars in medievalism have suggested that online media, and the current networked society have fundamentally altered the way in which (medieval) history circulates, and consequently, the ways in which it is mobilized. Elliott, for example, contends that 'history thus becomes transformed from something learned at school into something on casual offer' and as such in 'this modern, tapas-style history, facts from the past can be selected at will and loosely corralled into almost anything we wish them to be' (2017, p. 9).

This observation allows us to understand the various (re)significations and recontextualisations of the *Reconquista* present in the @vox_es network, as well as how a one-word historical narrative could be used as a political slogan in a campaign. Indeed, the specific historical narrative of the Reconquista was not only mobilized in reference to the medieval series of campaigns along with nationalist conservative historiography, as we saw in the previous section but also recontextualised as something contemporary happening during the election under the leadership of VOX. Through a single word, the campaign and political action of VOX was represented as a process of reconquering Spain by accessing its political institutions and liberating it not only from the hold of historical enemies – Islam and its supporters – but from a variety of contemporary threats. The identification of these varied throughout the campaign and was once again enabled by the casual malleability of the online trope. In most cases, Spain itself, its unity and its freedom are what needs to be reconquered. The following tweet by party leader Santiago Abascal is an example (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Tweet of Santiago Abascal reacting to an article about his activity in the Basque country. 'It is actually the live Spain that has triumphed in the Basque lands. From the 28th of April onwards nothing will be the same. We have started, for Spain [*sic*] the reconquest of its unity and of Spaniards' freedom. And we will not stop. #ForSpain' https://twitter.com/Santi_ABASCAL/status/1117352878841192448

In this tweet, the image of the medieval Reconquista is mobilized to portray the possibility of change in a Spain that is seen as unfree and at risk of losing its unity. Reconquest, in this sense, is a helpful imagery, as it has an intrinsic connotation of process and change – of conquering again what has been lost. In this sense, when coupled with its centrality in Spanish nationalist discourse, it served as a very helpful mobilization tool for a new party in an election. Through it, VOX could present itself as a vanguard that led the reconquest-qua-recovery of the true nature of Spain from its enemies.

However, the general non-specificity of the reconquering imagery means that a variety of other political issues are also susceptible of being reimagined through this narrative. A central political issue in the 2019 Spanish elections was the political conflict with Catalan secessionism. Since 2010, there has been a growth of secessionist support within the North-Eastern region of Spain, culminating in the organization of a so-called independence referendum by the regional government in October 2017. As a result of this, secessionist leaders were arrested and put on trial for their actions. Not only did this trial take place during the election examined here but some of the politicians on trial also ran in the election. Consequently, this was a highly salient issue during the campaign. In this context, both ordinary citizens and some opinion leaders could recontextualize the Reconquista narrative to bear on the matter. Albert Boadella – a Catalan playwright, known for actively opposing independence – reacted to the initial rally of VOX in Covadonga by noting that 'Good, but Covadonga is for the moment secured and consolidated. What is not secured is Catalonia. This is where another reconquest is needed' (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Tweet of Albert Boadella linking VOX rhetoric to the situation in Catalonia.

This tweet – then retweeted 96 times through the @Vox_es network – uses a fairly conventional understanding of the Reconquista as territorial (re)conquering from illegitimate invaders but does so against Catalan secessionism. As a result of this recontextualisation, the latter appears as illegitimately haven taken over a territory and the unitary Spanish nationalism represented by Boadella and VOX as the only legitimate political options for the Catalan territory.

In the Twitter Reconquista trope, therefore, we find a one-word historical narrative with crucial mobilization ability due to its malleability. This resonates with some of the literature's observations about history in an internet age. Indeed, Elliott, for example, notes that the increasing circulation and transmission of historical narratives on media divest

'medievalism of its original meanings and context-dependent significance, making it ripe to be grafted onto modern concerns' (2017, p. 6). As this section has shown, the *Reconquista* was so malleable that it served to capture a variety of contemporary concerns and, at the same time, mobilize in an electoral campaign. At the same time, something else emerges from this analysis. For this very malleability shows that we cannot just understand far right memory discourses as a matter of political elites: throughout the analysis, we have anecdotally seen how the meanings were reinforced, diffused and in some cases also changed by a variety of nonparty members or ordinary citizens. What does this tell us about how the Reconquest trope circulated on Twitter? The following explores this issue through an analysis of the @vox_es 'Reconquest' retweet network structure.

The circulation of online memory

In this section, we analyse the results of the social network analysis we conducted to examine how the 'Reconquista' was mobilized through the @vox_es retweet network. Our data shows that the circulation of the Reconquista tropes did not simply go from the party to the general population as a whole. On the contrary, some ordinary citizens were crucial in spreading the messages of both political leaders of VOX and media outlets. In doing so, our analysis shows that the study of the memory politics of the Far Right cannot be restricted to the discourse of far right parties but needs to take into account the ways in which memory circulates and the differential role of citizens in this circulation.

Descriptive network statistics

Table 1 below shows the descriptive statistics of the @vox_es 'Reconquest' retweet network for the 2019 Spanish national elections:

Table 1. Descriptive network statistics of the @vox_es 'Reconquest' retweet network (2019 Spanish national elections).

	@vox_es 'Reconquest' retweet network
N (number of nodes)	1,336
R (number of retweets)	2,897
Graph Density	0.002
Average Path Length	4
Modularity	0.253

For the @vox_es 'Reconquest' retweet network, 1,336 users retweeted a total of 2,897 tweets. The graph density is very low (0.002), meaning that only two percent of the total relations amongst the nodes occur. The Average Path Length is 4, indicating that the average distance between the users is four steps. Although the density in the network is low, the short distance among the nodes makes it possible to connect to others easily.

As for the modularity of the network, our data shows the existence of a high level of interconnectivity (with a modularity score value of 0.253) and few isolates (Hansen et al., 2010, p. 8).

All in all, these descriptive network statistics reveal that the 'Reconquest' retweet network was composed by (relatively) few sparse but yet interconnected nodes. In other words, although the total number of political actors (Vox representatives, ordinary citizens, media outlets, etc.) in the network was low, this is a well-connected group of users.

Opinion leaders

Opinion Leader Theory leads us to expect that not all users in this network will behave in the same way nor have the same importance in formulating and transmitting the message – that is, in putting forward and circulating specific memory narratives. To analyse these dynamics, Figure 8 shows the distribution of the indegree and outdegree among the 1,336 nodes of the @vox_es 'Reconquest' retweet network:
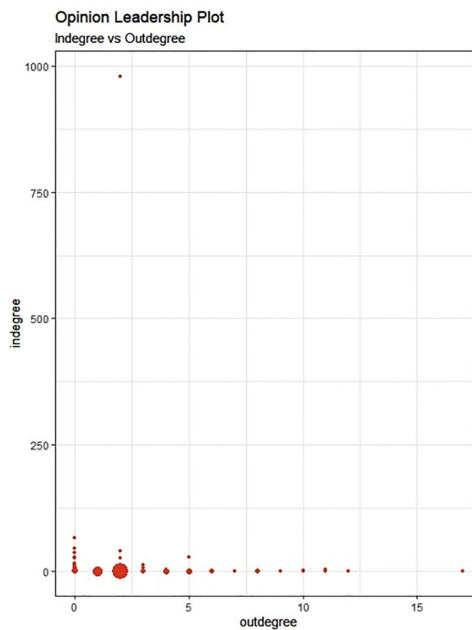
Figure 8. Distribution of the indegree and outdegree in the @vox_es 'Reconquest' retweet network.

As it can be observed in the graph, most of the nodes of the @vox_es 'Reconquest' retweet network received ($\mu =$ 1.294; $\sigma =$ 27.068) and sent ($\mu =$ 2.168; $\sigma =$ 1.603) very few retweets. It also points to the existence of few nodes (users) occupying what we term opinion leadership positions in the network. That is, few users who receive most of the retweets (see the y axis) and who send (see the x axis) many more retweets than the rest of the users (see the Twitter handles of these nodes in Table 2 below). Most importantly, perhaps, the figure indicates the existence of an outlier (upper position of the y axis) who concentrates most of the retweets (Santiago Abascal, the leader of Vox).

To better know the characteristics of these opinion leaders, we analysed the role of the ten most retweeted nodes and the ten nodes most engaged (in terms of retweets sent) with the information flows in the network. Table 2 shows the opinion leaders of the @vox_es 'Reconquest' retweet network:

Table 2. The opinion leaders of the @vox_es 'Reconquest' retweet network (2019 Spanish National Elections).

Twitter User	Retweets Received (Indegree)	Role
santi_abascal	980	Political leader Vox
ortega_smith	66	Political leader Vox
ivanedlm	45	Political leader Vox
el_pais	45	Media outlet
elmundoes	39	Media outlet
elmundo_orbyt	37	Media outlet
sanchezdelreal	37	Political leader Vox
voxnoticias_es	27	Political party Vox
agustinrosety	27	Political leader Vox
fibesevilla	26	Institutional (Sevilla)
Twitter User	Retweets Sent (outdegree)	Role
dessynmvc	17	Ordinary citizen
gelen31	12	Ordinary citizen
ivan_de_vargas	11	Journalist
voxbaix	15	Political party Vox
reconquistad	12	Ordinary citizen
isabelcatolica2	10	Ordinary citizen
lady_of_mercy	11	Ordinary citizen
jalfonzo	10	Ordinary citizen
lmandaeggs	10	Ordinary citizen
ingenius6	9	Ordinary citizen

The first column of the table indicates the Twitter handle of the users, the second column shows the number of retweets received (indegree) or sent (outdegree) by these users, and the last column (based on previous research findings – see Borge Bravo & Esteve-Del-Valle, 2017; Dubois & Gaffney, 2014; Eldridge II et al., 2019; Esteve-Del-Valle & Borge Bravo, 2018) classifies the nodes by their political role (if they officially represent the party Vox in the institutions), their media role (if they are media outlets or journalists) or as ordinary citizens (when they do not represent the party in the institutions and they are not media outlets or journalists).

As shown in the table, political leaders and media outlets are the nodes receiving most of the retweets. Specifically, the three most retweeted nodes are the president of Vox (@santi_abascal) – with 980 retweets – followed by the secretary general of the party (@ortega_smith) and the spokesperson of the parliamentary group in the Spanish Congress (@ivanedlm). Following these three accounts, we find media outlets: the Twitter handle of the second most read (AIMC, 2022) newspaper in Spain, @el_pais (owned by the Spanish media conglomerate PRISA) and two Twitter handles (@elmundoes and @elmundo_orbyt) of the fourth most read (AIMC, 2022) newspaper in Spain, El Mundo (owned by the media conglomerate 'Unidad Editorial'). Closing the list of the ten most retweeted nodes, we find two Twitter handles (@sanchezdelreal and @agustinrosety) from Vox deputes to the Congress (e.g. @agustinrosety a retired Brigadier general who became a depute for the province of 'Cádiz'), the official news Twitter account of the party (@voxnoticias_es) and an account of a public conference center (@fibesevilla) from Seville where Vox organized a campaign meeting during the elections. To show the centrality of these opinion leaders in the communication flows of the network, Figure 9 below visualizes the five most retweeted nodes of the @vox_es 'Reconquest' retweet network:
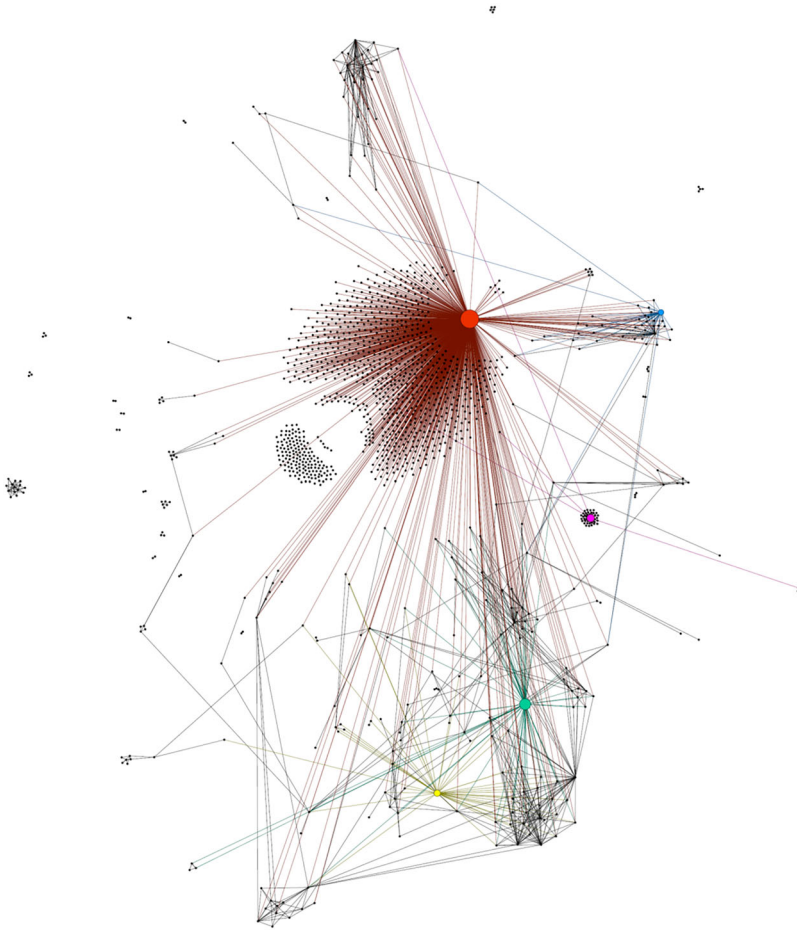
Figure 9. Visualization of the five most retweeted nodes of the @vox_es 'Reconquest' retweet network. Note: The nodes of the network represent the Twitter users. The size of the nodes is equivalent to the number of retweets the Twitter users received. The edges show the retweets between the Twitter users. The colored nodes represent the five most retweeted nodes (red = @santi_abascal; green = @ortega_smith; pink = @ivanedlm; blue = @el_pais; yellow = @elmundoes).

The network above shows the centrality of the five most retweeted nodes in the information flows of the @vox_es 'Reconquest' retweet network. The nodes of the network are Twitter users. The edges of the network show the retweets between these Twitter users. The colored nodes represent the five most retweeted nodes (red = @santi_abascal; green = @ortega_smith; pink = @ivanedlm; blue = @el_pais; yellow = @elmundoes). And the size of the colored nodes is equivalent to their number of retweets.

On the other hand, ordinary citizens dominate the flow of retweets sent in the network. That is, our analysis shows that circulation of Reconquista tropes relies on the work of ordinary citizens, who retweet the messages of the opinion leaders and thus diffuse the message. Specifically, seven out of the ten most active users in the 'Reconquest' retweet network fall into this category. From a visual exploration of the images and definitions of the Twitter handles of these accounts, the unique observable common

characteristic – beyond the fact that all of them seem to be ordinary citizens – is their explicit nationalist sentiment which is often expressed through the use of the Spanish flag in their profile pictures (see as an example the profile of the account @ingenius6: https://twitter.com/ingenius6). Finally, among the most engaged users of the network, we find one of the official Twitter accounts of Vox in the region of Catalonia (@voxbaix) and the account of a journalist (@ivan_de_vargas) working for an independent nationalistic media outlet ('Cadena Ibérica' – Iberian Chanel – see https://twitter.com/cadena_iberica).

In sum, these results seem to corroborate previous research findings and point to the existence of different nodes (politicians, media outlets, journalists and ordinary citizens) occupying different opinion leadership positions (e.g. retweets received and sent) in Twitter political networks. In doing so, an analysis of this particular memory trope adds to increasing evidence of the role of ordinary citizens in the construction and spreading of far right messages in Western Democracies (Åkerlund, 2020).

Concluding remarks

This research has studied the mobilization of the topic 'La Reconquista' – The Reconquest – through the retweet network of far right Spanish party VOX during the 2019 Spanish national election. Bringing together the literatures on far right memory politics, medievalism and opinion leaders, we sought to examine the role of these medieval Reconquest tropes within far right discourse, and particularly in the context of an electoral campaign. We also sought to examine how this historical trope circulated, and to identify the actors responsible for its diffusion.

A Critical Discourse Analysis of the articulations and interpellations surrounding the notion 'Reconquista' in this network reveals that the Reconquest not only reproduces and naturalizes the existence of a long-standing Spanish nation but also advances a more specific imaginary. The creation of heroes, sites of memory and the reduction of all actors and processes to a narrative of good and evil was used to advance a fundamental Catholic identity of a Spain that is and has been for centuries under threat by internal and external enemies. And, in turn, this particular historical narrative of the nation could serve to mobilize action in the context of an electoral campaign.

Crucially, as the analysis of the opinion leaders demonstrates, this mobilization role of historical narratives, however, cannot merely be understood through a top-down model of nationalist mobilization and reproduction but rather relied on the activity of ordinary citizens to disseminate it. Indeed, regarding the spread and circulation of nationalist Reconquest narratives, our social network analysis reveals the existence of a middle size (1,336 nodes) and highly interconnected (Average Path Length of 4, and modularity score of 0.253) network. By examining the centrality of the nodes, our data shows that political leaders and media outlets lead in the number of retweets received while ordinary citizens are the most active nodes in sending retweets. In other words, while traditional elite far right actors are indeed central in the production of specific messages, and thus in the articulation of specific memories, these messages only spread and mobilize thanks to the everyday activity of ordinary citizens. When it comes to an understanding far right memory politics, therefore, this points to the need to further investigate their production beyond unidirectional models, and to think instead of the production of far

right memory as an interplay between a variety of actors that through issuing a message, diffusing, shifting, contesting and re-signifying it constitute an entire discursive political space.

The centrality of our findings about both the malleability of the notion of the Reconquista, and the centrality of the interplay between different actors raise a number of interesting questions that would call for further exploration not undertaken in this paper. To begin with, the importance of the online medium for the circulation of these messages cannot just be based on a differentiation between online and offline, but would lead to a reasonable expectation that mobilization dynamics, but also meaning construction may vary across different social networking sites, also accounting for different degrees of ordinary citizen participation. In other words, it is to be expected not only that memory claims will be made in other social networks, but also that the specific structure of those sites (e.g. the possibility to write longer posts on Facebook or the image-based nature of Instagram) will also have an impact on the construction of the message. An analysis of other social networks could therefore be helpful in unpacking different discursive strategies and their politics. Second, the fact that VOX is both a far right and a populist party (ASDV) raises some interesting questions about the intersections between far right and populist memory strategies: for, while some of the discursive strategies we have seen do fit with what Cas Mudde (2021) has termed the 'ideational approach' populism – the focus on a division between the people and elites – not all of them conform to this discursive structure. The presence of a variety of differently-structured discourses of memory creation, even when exploring the construction and circulation of a single trope, thus opens up the possibility of further examining the interaction between different ideological elements in the contemporary far right. All in all, and despite these limitations, it is our hope that this study opens up further possibilities in understanding the constant and contested processes of memory claims in far right politics.

Note

1. The populist character of VOX is well-established in the literature (e.g. Rama et al., 2021; Vampa, 2020). Although we use the label, we have nevertheless chosen not to analyse the memory dynamics in this article through a theoretical lens of populism. Instead, we theoretically centre their character as far right memory dynamics, drawing on a literature that highlights that elements such as nativism and nationalism, while central to some populist parties, go well beyond populism (e.g. Mudde, 2007).

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Appendix

To build the @vox_es 'Reconquest' retweet network, we selected all the retweets in which the account @vox_es was mentioned. Then we filtered these retweets by using the keyword 'Reconquista' – Reconquest. This gave us a final dataset consisting of 2,897 retweets. The figure below shows the step-by-step process we followed to construct the network:

Figure. Step-by-step scheme illustrating the data collection process to build the @Vox_es 'Reconquest' retweet network:

Step 1: On April 25 at 2:17 am the user @DoraLaVoxeadora posted the following tweet mentioning @vox_es and the topic 'Reconquista' – Reconquest:

Own Translation: We the Spaniards are good people, but we are not stupid, we are not like other European countries where the good faith which has facilitated and invasion of the Islam, reigns. This #28A I will vote for @vox_es. This is the only party that can save us. We need to reconquest Spain! Let's do it again!

Step 2: On April 25 at 11:17 am the user @Malendj80Jesus (alias 'ESPAÑOL ORGULLOSO' – PROUD SPANIARD-) retweeted the tweet posted by @DoraLaVoxeadora:

Step 3: We collected this retweet to build the @Vox_es Reconquest retweet network of the 2019 Spain national elections.