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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Translated Name of the Party	Original Name of the Party	Acronym
<b>United Kingdom</b>		
United Kingdom Independence Party	United Kingdom Independence Party	UKIP
Brexit Party	Brexit Party	Brexit Party
<b>Spain</b>		
Spanish Socialist Workers' Party	Partido Socialista Obrero Español	PSOE
People's Party	Partido Popular	PP
VOX	VOX	VOX
United We Can	Unidas Podemos	PP
Citizens	Ciudadanos	C's
<b>Italy</b>		
Go Italy	Forza Italia	FI
Brothers of Italy	Fratelli d'Italia	FdI
League	Lega	Lega
Five Star Movement	Movimento 5 Stelle	M5S
Democratic Party	Partito Democratico	PD
<b>France</b>		
National Rally	Rassemblement National	RN
Indomitable France	La France Insoumise	LFI
The Republic on the Move	La République en Marche	LREM
MODEM	MODEM	MODEM
Democrats and Independants' Union	Union des Démocrates et Indépendants	UDI
Socialist Party	Parti Socialiste	PS
Greens	Les Verts	EELV
The Republicans	Les Républicains	LR
<b>Germany</b>		
Alternative for Germany	Alternative für Deutschland	AfD
Federal Minister of Health	Bundesministerium für Gesundheit	BMG
Christian Democratic Union	Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands	CDU
Christian Social Union in Bavaria	Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern	CSU
Liberal Democratic Party	Freie Demokratische Partei	F.D.P.
Green Party	Bündnis 90/Die Grünen	Grüne
The Left Party	Die Linke	Linke
Robert Koch Institute	Robert Koch Institut	RKI
Social Democratic Party	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands	SPD
<b>Hungary</b>		
Fidesz	Fidesz	Fidesz
Christian Democratic People's Party	Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt	KDNP
Hungarian Socialist Party	Magyar Szocialista Párt	MSZP
For a Better Hungary	Jobbik Magyarországért Mozgalom	Jobbik
Democratic Coalition	Demokratikus Koalíció	DK
Another Politics Is Possible	Lehet Más a Politika	LMP
Momentum	Momentum	Momentum
Dialogue	Párbeszéd	P
<b>Czech Republic</b>		
ANO 2011	ANO 2011	ANO
Freedom and Direct Democracy	Svoboda a přímá demokracie	SPD
Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia	Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy	KSČM
<b>Poland</b>		
Law and Justice	Prawo i Sprawiedliwość	PiS
Confederation 'Freedom and Independence'	Konfederacja 'Wolność i Niepodległość'	Confederation
Civic Platform	Platforma Obywatelska	PO
Polish People's Party	Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe	PSL
Democratic Left Alliance	Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej	SLD

## CHAPTER 3

### SPAIN: IS IDEOLOGY BACK IN POPULIST DISCOURSE?

#### **Abstract**

The hit of the pandemic in Spain has been one of the most important in number of deaths and infected people in all Europe and the central government implemented one of the toughest confinement measures. Aside from this government's performance, opposition parties and, particularly VOX have mainly driven the political tension that has filled Spain during the months of lockdown. In this scenario, VOX has sensed this opportunity and has decided to use the pandemic to direct fierce criticism at the Spanish government, to the point of becoming practically an anti-establishment party. In a complete different role, Podemos has been conditioned by its institutional position as part of the Spanish government. While the two parties have adopted differing strategies towards the government's performance, however, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, both have discarded their populist standpoints to a great extent and, instead, highlighted the ideological content of their proposals.

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#### **Introduction**

Although in a representative and pluralistic democracy the task of the opposition is indispensable, so is the fact that the seriousness of the health situation in Spain has failed to impose the logic of consensus. Instead, what has prevailed is the logic of majority-opposition, which conservative parties have been able to take advantage of in a very effective way, especially VOX. The role of Unidas Podemos, the other great Spanish populist party, has been mediatized by its institutional position in the coalition Spanish government. Despite this different position, both have faced the COVID-19 pandemic leaving out populist argumentation and have, rather, enhanced the ideological content of their proposals. VOX has shown its radical right-wing profile that, sometimes, they pretend to camouflage. And in the case of Unidas Podemos, they have been forced to emphasize their left-wing ideology to keep a profile of their own in the coalition government of which they are the minority partner.

The political construction of the discourse of both parties seems to be marked by the very evolution of the pandemic. Thus, we establish a chronology that begins with the break out of the health crisis and the approval of the state of constitutional alarm, followed by the strictest confinement period, and ending with the phase of de-scaling that has been described by the government with the concept of 'the new normality'.

#### **1. Political context**

The year 2014 sees the emergence of the two main populist forces in Spain: Podemos and VOX. The appearance of both at the same time can be largely accounted for by the deep and prolonged economic crisis that had impacted on much of Spanish society and the realisation that the traditional mechanisms of political representation were incapable of channelling citizens' demands and indignation. This long economic crisis was particularly intense in the countries of southern Europe, and the way it was handled by certain political powers triggered shifts in attitudes away from the classic image of Spaniards' political culture, particularly due to a perceived lack of political efficacy or, to be more precise, political competence (Cordero & Montero, 2015).

The two parties' brief electoral history runs from the 2014 European elections to the last time they competed: in the Spanish general elections of November 2019. A look at the timeline plotting the general elections they have taken part in shows them taking diverging paths. After initial electoral success, Podemos subsequently begins to show a marked downward trend: so much so that in less than five years it sees its electoral support fall by eight percentage points. It should not be forgotten that Podemos has for a long time been the institutional mouthpiece of the different social movements that arose in the early 2000s, and its gradual loss of electoral potential could be attributed to an inborn weakness (Torreblanca, 2015; Galindo, 2015). VOX, on the other hand, emerges when the most radical sector of the centre-right of the Partido Popular (People's Party, Spain's principal conservative party: PP) breaks away from this party. Its rise in the polls has been spectacular: going from a haul of 57,000 votes in 2015 to becoming the third political force in Spain four years later, with over three and a half million votes and 52 deputies in the Congreso de Diputados (Congress of Deputies, the Spanish parliament). The same progression can be seen in the share of seats in the last four general elections. Podemos, in very few years, sees its parliamentary representation practically halved, while VOX goes from having no representatives in parliament to becoming the third political force in the chamber.

**Table 3.1 Main Spanish political parties (>5% in the last general election)**

Political party	November 2019 general election		2019 European election	
	Vote shares	Seats	Vote shares	Seats
<i>In power</i>				
PSOE	27.7%	120	32.8%	20
UP	12.7%	35	10.1%	6
<i>In opposition</i>				
PP	20.6%	88	20.1%	12
VOX	14.9%	52	6.2%	3
C's	6.7%	10	12.2%	7

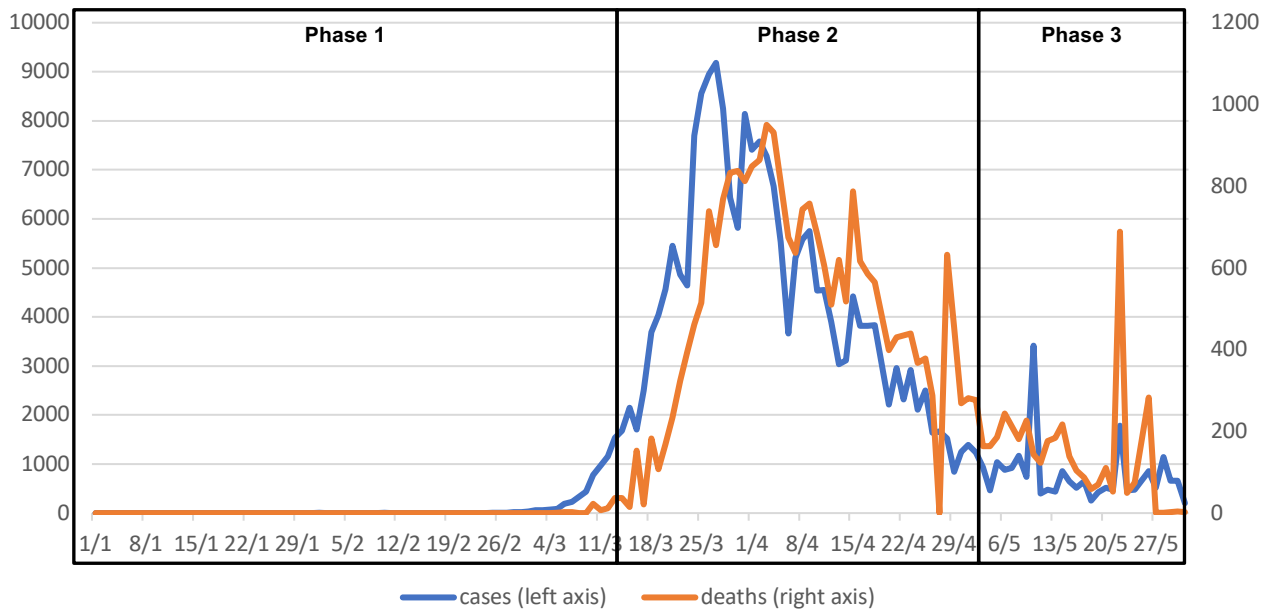
Podemos's parliamentary results placed it in a weak negotiating position until the last elections, after which it made a deal with the winner, the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party: PSOE) and joined the government with a greater ministerial representation than its results warranted. Regarding Santiago Abascal's VOX party, it currently holds the key that lets the PP and Ciudadanos (Citizens: C's) govern in some autonomous communities, like Madrid and Andalusia, and in some municipalities. This gives an idea of its muscle in inter-party negotiations and power-sharing, but VOX's main victory lies in its ability to disrupt the political debate and force the PP into taking up more extreme ideological positions: something that this party would not have done without the parliamentary strength obtained by VOX in the last general elections.

The pandemic crisis coincides, moreover, with one of the most convulsive periods in recent years in politics and society, largely due to the judgement of the leaders of Catalonia's independence process, which has placed the focus of much of public debate on the territorial unity of the Spanish state. Additionally, to further complicate the situation, this debate has to be resolved in a context of political fragmentation in the party system that is much greater than normal in the Spanish electoral tradition. The result is easy to imagine: impossible coalitions and a centrifugal trend in the discourses of certain political parties.

## 2. COVID-19 diffusion and political measures

Spain has suffered one of the worst COVID-19 outbreaks in the world. As the virus has continued to spread, Spain has become the country with the seventh highest number of both confirmed cases and of deaths. In June 2020 there were close to 300,000 cases, with 30,000 deaths.

**Figure 3.1 Daily death toll and new cases in Spain**



Source: European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control

Phase 1: pre-Covid-19; Phase 2: spread and containment measures; Phase 3: contagion mitigation

**Table 3.2 COVID-19 pandemic in Spain**

Cases	289,046
Total deaths	27,136
Total recovered	140,033
Cases per 1 M pop	6.182
Deaths per 1 M pop	580

Source: [www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/](http://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/) (update 10/6/2020)

The Spanish public health-care system has had to confront the crisis after a decade of austerity and low investment, which has placed health workers in a very precarious position. According to the European Commission report ‘State of Health in the UE, 2019’ (European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies, 2019), Spain reduced its spending on health care by 5.3 per cent between the 2008 crisis and 2015: almost 1 per cent of its GDP. The number of hospital beds has fallen by a fifth since the start of the century: from 368 per 100,000 inhabitants in the year 2000 to 298 in 2015.

With the virus spreading rapidly, on 14 March 2020, the government declared a state of alarm pursuant to Article 116 of the Spanish constitution, and went on to extend it by two-week periods as many as six times. This state of alarm and the corresponding lockdown have been one of the longest and strictest of any European Union country. Perhaps for this reason, there has been some debate in Spain about restrictions on certain fundamental rights, mainly concerning the free movement of persons and business freedom.

In the midst of this political consternation, the principal measures taken by the government have focused on the labour market and social services, on the one hand, and on business incentives on the other. Regarding the first of these areas, apart from the suspension of evictions in the case of tenants



who have lost their jobs due to COVID-19, the moratorium on mortgages, and the guaranteed supplies of electricity, gas and water during the crisis, the two most emblematic government measures have been the Temporary Lay-off Plans (ERTE) and the Minimum Living Income (IMV).

The ERTE is a mechanism that allows employment contracts to be suspended or working hours reduced temporarily, with the aim of avoiding redundancies during the health crisis and helping businesses, so that these can quickly resume their normal operations when the health situation allows. The Employment Ministry states that 3,386,785 workers were affected by an ERTE in Spain at the end of April 2020, which means a quarter of those signed up to the national insurance system. As for the IMV, this is a non-contributory Social Security benefit that guarantees a minimum income for those that would otherwise have none. It is defined as a subjective right of the citizenry: to be paid whenever the eligibility requirements are met, just like the right to a retirement pension or unemployment benefits. 255,000 citizens are expected to be eligible for the Minimum Living Income.

Despite all these measures, the OECD predicts that the Spanish economy will be the hardest-hit of all its members, with a contraction in GDP in 2020 of 14.4 per cent and a 19.2 per cent unemployment rate. (OECD, 2020). This bad economic forecast comes only a few years after the deep economic crisis of 2008 that plunged the country into a decade of austerity, unemployment and increased social inequality.

### **3. Populist discourse at the time of COVID-19**

Just before the state of alarm was declared, Spanish politics was going through a period of high political tension, marked by constant partisan conflict. The COVID-19 pandemic has only served to exacerbate this confrontation. Spanish citizens are aware of this and over 80% of them describe the situation as inflamed, according to data from the 'Barometer' of the Centre for Sociological Research (CIS), and a quarter regard Santiago Abascal and his VOX party as the main sources of this tension. Their reactions are similar when assessing the role of the opposition during the response to the pandemic: only 10% of the total population of Spain approve of the stance taken up by VOX and its main leader Santiago Abascal during the months of lockdown.

The latter's opposition, according to experts in political communication, is unequalled in its intensity and use of disinformation techniques to discredit the Spanish government and certain political organisations. In fact, this is not the first time VOX has been accused of disinformation. The European Commission's security commissioner, Julian King, named VOX on 14 June 2019 as an example of disinformation and rumour-peddling on social media.

VOX's permanent confrontation with the executive seems to come from a wish to take on the role of 'national opposition' and monopolise protests against the government. In this, it is favoured by the current political climate, as the party system has been in a state of upheaval for some time. C's is swerving towards the political centre and exploring a possible deal with the executive, while the PP is manoeuvring to prevent its criticism of President Sánchez from eroding its image as a 'party of state'<sup>16</sup>. VOX, therefore, has considerable room for manoeuvre towards achieving its wish, fighting for the ideological monopoly of the Spanish right and making the PP change political course. In the end, what is in dispute is the post-pandemic narrative and, here, VOX has shown itself to be more than capable of setting the public agenda and the terms of debate. The unexpected result of this new position is that the intensity, harshness and disproportionality of its criticism of the government gives it almost the appearance of an anti-establishment party.

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<sup>16</sup> Casals, X., VOX i la Covid-19. *El Periódico*, 10/5/2020.

The new institutional role of Unidas Podemos (United We Can: UP) – a member of the governing coalition with the PSOE since the general elections of November 2019 – implies a need for solidarity between the members of the executive and, therefore, its public profile has been much lower during the pandemic, which reached Spain within only three months of their taking office. Whatever the case, the fact that four ministries controlled by the PSOE (Health, Interior, Defence and Transport) were placed in charge of managing the health crisis has pushed UP into the background, so it has tried to regain the political limelight through two different strategies: firstly by presenting itself before the public as being in charge of the so-called social shield (the set of social measures to protect the most vulnerable groups against COVID) and, secondly, by taking public responsibility for rebutting the arguments of the nativist radical right. In other words, it could be said that the populist characteristics of UP are slowly fading away and it is taking on board the principles of a traditional party of the European left. This would explain the obsession with avoiding at all costs the solutions adopted in the 2008 economic crisis, which led to greater inequality, a huge growth in unemployment and widespread poverty across the population (Montero's Twitter account 17/4/2020; Montero's Twitter account 1/5/2020; Iglesias's Twitter account 27/3/2020)

To sum up, here we have two very different strategies for making political use of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the case of VOX, the strategic burden of defending the nation has made it a practically anti-establishment party. On the other hand, UP is conditioned by its institutional role as part of the governing coalition, which has probably lent weight to its identity as a party of the left to the detriment of its populist tendencies.

The question now is how these populist organisations have adapted their discourse during the pandemic. As far as VOX is concerned, although it maintains the main arguments of nativist populism that characterise it, what the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light is this organisation's radical-right positions. That is to say, while the common thread running through the pronouncements of its main leaders continues to be the idea of rescuing the nation from those who are perverting and damaging it – currently the government and the 'Chavist communists' of UP – it is also true that populist rhetoric does not appear directly in VOX's discourse: it could have adopted an anti-science discourse or held up the health workers and the security forces as an example to shame the political elites who left them to their fate, but it has not done so. VOX is more interested in disrupting the party system and appearing as the true national defender of the people against the government. Accordingly, it has berated the executive, accusing it of using the pandemic, now that Spaniards' guard is down, as an excuse to impose a totalitarian regime through a state of emergency disguised as a (less drastic) state of alarm (Abascal's Twitter account, 19/5/2020; Olona's Twitter account, 11/3/2020). As evidence of this, it points to what it sees as a disproportionate restriction of fundamental rights: mainly personal freedom of movement, business freedom and freedom of worship or assembly, using words like 'totalitarian government', 'dictatorship', 'genocide' and 'communism', and clamouring for 'liberty' and an end to the lockdown. And it goes even further. According to VOX, the government's actions have amounted to an attack on the right to life, since euthanasia, which is illegal in Spain, has been practised with extreme ferocity on elderly persons in care homes. VOX has gone on to bring criminal proceedings (a *querrela*) against the executive before the Supreme Court, for crimes of serious imprudence resulting in death (Monasterio's Twitter account 18/5/2020).

The remainder of VOX's discourse consists of nativist nationalism. National and cultural identity as an element of resistance to national, foreign and supra-national elites (De Cleen, 2017) appears in most of the speeches made by the organisation's leaders in Parliament and in public. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that its Secretary General for Organisation, Ortega Smith, has referred to '*Spanish antibodies*' as a way to combat '*those damned Chinese viruses*'. VOX's striking nationalism has remained intact throughout the pandemic.

In fact, the hard-hitting spread of the pandemic through Spain has allowed it to double down on its claims about global insecurity, borders, immigration, economic protectionism, national unity and centralised decision-making, providing a justification for its highly publicised ideological principles (Fernández, 2020).

The situation of UP is different. Although the path taken by this political organisation leads to its consolidation as a left-wing party, this does not mean to say that it has completely abandoned the populist ideas that marked its origins. Ultimately, the two souls that have been present in the party since its foundation continue to exist and compete. This would explain why, at the height of the pandemic, it has endorsed the campaigns against the monarchy and former king Juan Carlos I and against the Deep State.

#### **4. The politicization of COVID-19 issue by populists**

This section traces the development of the populist discourse in Spain, highlighting the process by which VOX and Podemos construct their position on management of the pandemic. The process begins with the exploding health crisis and the ensuing declaration of a state of alarm under the Constitution, continues with the period of strict lockdown and ends with the de-escalation phase and what the government terms the ‘new normality’.

The first phase of politicization lasted from the health-care disaster in early March to the declaration of a state of alarm under the Constitution in mid-March. VOX and Podemos view the problem through their own lenses.

Although VOX clashes with the government from the very start of the pandemic, it is visibly disconcerted by the seriousness of the health situation, along with the rest of the Spanish political class. The institutional policy it adopts in those early days is nothing like the one it will pursue later: it does not oppose the government's state of alarm declaration on 14 March and even votes in favour of its first extension on 28 March. From then on, however, it votes against all subsequent extensions of the state of alarm, radically opposing the strict stay-at-home lockdown that is initially enforced in Spain.

At this early stage, VOX's approach is to send out messages of support for health workers and security forces, mixed in with patriotic slogans. VOX's messages stray very little from the official discourse at the time: transmitting bewilderment, fear, a sense of unreality and of being in the midst of events of great significance, and, at the same time calling for unity, responsibility and teamwork and praising the health workers (Fernández, 2020). The line VOX takes is to unreservedly support the police and the health workers, trying to insert patriotic slogans into its messages of encouragement, while at the same time resorting to the classic resources of populism, appealing to an intact, all-powerful people. *‘[...] the determination of the Spanish people to continue advancing is our best asset. The people have always stepped up in the end when the institutions have failed’* (Abascal's Twitter account, 14/3/2020).

Meanwhile, Podemos, as a minority member of the first coalition government in Spain's recent democratic history, finds itself in an ambivalent position at that early stage: without denying the seriousness of the health situation and the need to take urgent, drastic measures, it seems to (mildly) disapprove of a constitutional state of alarm that excessively curtails fundamental rights and even involves the military to a high degree.

This leads to friction between PSOE ministers and Podemos government members. The disagreement is basically about the financial impact of the lockdown on workers, and means that a meeting over

seven hours long was needed for the government to pass the state of alarm<sup>17</sup>. In that phase, Podemos begins to define the health crisis also in terms of social protection for the worst-hit citizens.

During the second phase the management of the pandemic grows stricter and restrictions on fundamental rights and the economic deterioration increase. It is in this second phase that VOX culminates the switch to a strategy of hounding the government and the centralised medical command to destruction. It starts taking a more critical stance, focusing on the government's lack of foresight, the shortages of medical supplies, the thronged feminist demonstrations held on 8 March, and the high numbers of infections and deaths. This means abandoning all traces of the minimal institutional loyalty shown up to that point and ruthlessly switching to ferocious attacks on the coalition government's performance.

The result of this is that during most of the lockdown it is VOX that acts as the real opposition to the government. VOX's policy of all-out criticism of the government's handling of the crisis is clearly aimed at wearing down the PP, the dominant centre-right party in the chamber, taking advantage of the latter's role as a 'party of state' that votes on three consecutive occasions to extend the state of alarm and abstains in the fourth vote, despite having kept up a consistently critical stance. Subsequently, the PP joins VOX in voting against extending the state of alarm on three further occasions.

The rationale behind VOX's policy of criticising the handling of the crisis is basically this: the exceptionally bad handling of the crisis in Spain deserves exceptionally harsh criticism. (Fernández, 2020). In its discourse, VOX claims that responsibility for the pandemic and the chaotic health-care situation lies with the government's decision-making. The words that stand out the most in its discourse in this period are irresponsibility, ideology, improvisation, incompetence and bad management: '*... we see a government that is unprepared to cope with the challenges to health and the economy posed by a pandemic*', '*recklessly putting health workers in danger*', '*conducting too few tests*', '*allowing an alarming shortage of masks*'.

VOX's metamorphosis with regard to the other radical-right parties in Europe begins in the last week of March, when, after criticising the executive's handling of the crisis, it demands the government's resignation. This initiates an escalation that leads Santiago Abascal's party to call for *caceroladas* (pot-banging protests) in the name of freedom and to fight on several fronts to bring down the coalition government. In this phase it goes back to its roots as a political and civil spearhead against the 'social-communist government'.

At the same time, Podemos completely abandons any hint of criticism of the government's performance to concentrate on a discourse of protection for the most underprivileged sectors of society. While the actual handling of the health crisis remains in the hands of PSOE ministers, Podemos ministers get on with building the 'social shield' narrative. Podemos's public discourse hinges on two fundamental components: social protection, on the one hand, and attacking the opposition from VOX and the PP, to a lesser extent.

As for the first of these, Podemos takes on the job of designing and defending a socially just way out of the crisis, focusing on the reconstruction of the welfare state, fair taxation and the recovery of the public sector as the basis for economic and social recovery. In this phase, it lays particular emphasis on the idea that the weight of the economic crisis should not be borne by the disadvantaged and the working class, as was the case in the 2008 financial crisis (Iglesias's Twitter account, 14/5/2020; 17/5/2020; 12/5/2020).

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<sup>17</sup> Las divergencias entre el PSOE y UP sobre el plan de choque económico alargan el Consejo de ministros. *El País*, 14/3/2020.

At the same time, it seems to specialise in knife-wielding for the government, mainly against the attacks coming from VOX. ‘The extreme right is irritated by democracy and social justice’ (Montero’s Twitter account, 18/6/2020), ‘VOX would like to stage a coup d’état, but they don’t dare to’<sup>18</sup>. The PP is moving further and further away from Spain and from being a useful opposition’ (Iglesias’s Twitter account, 10/6/2020). However, in accusing the opposition of lack of cooperation and disloyalty, its rhetoric is not particularly populist in nature.

Having controlled the first wave of the health crisis, Spain finally entered in the third phase when the government ends the state of alarm and places the management of the post-pandemic situation back in the hands of the Autonomous Communities.

In this scenario, VOX fades into the background as the opposition to the government, since the PP sticks to its policy of repeatedly disputing the government’s management of health care. This means that VOX will now turn all its attention from health care to the parliamentary electoral campaigns in the Basque Country and Galicia, taking aim at the Basque Nationalist Party – one of the government’s main parliamentary supporters – at Podemos (Abascal’s Twitter account, 28/6/2020), and at the Galician PP. In other words, it goes back to its classic strategy of confronting peripheral nationalisms in Spain, apparently assuming it has capitalised fully on its health-care stance.

Podemos, meanwhile, continues to showcase its social approach to managing the crisis and the solidity of the coalition government, and forcefully renews its criticisms of the performance of conservative parties wherever these have been in power: ‘It’s indecent that, when the main lesson to be drawn from the pandemic is the need to take better care of public health services and their workers, wherever the PP is in charge it continues to privatise hospital services, as they’re doing in Madrid. They have learned nothing’ (Iglesias’s Twitter account, 24/6/2020).

## 5. Conclusion

The results of the survey Public Opinion in Times of COVID-19, commissioned by the European Parliament, reveal Spaniards to be the European citizens who are the most critical of their government’s handling of the COVID-19 health crisis. Aside from the government’s performance in this regard, the fact that it is the worst rated also reflects the political tension that has filled Spain during the months of lockdown: a tension that in recent years has led to changes of government following major political, social and economic crises.

Events like the public opposition to the Iraq war in 2002, the 11M terrorist attacks in 2004, the economic crisis in 2008, and the motion of censure against President Rajoy in 2018 were largely responsible for ousting the party in government. VOX has sensed this opportunity and has decided to use the pandemic to direct fierce criticism at the Spanish government, to the point of becoming practically an anti-establishment party. Podemos’s role is obviously conditioned by its institutional position as part of the Spanish government. This would explain why, at one point, the Secretary for Organisation of UP declared that ‘after almost a hundred days of the state of alarm, we can look around at the international scene and conclude that the coalition government has done the right thing’ (Echenique’s Twitter account, 21/6/2020).

While the two parties have adopted differing strategies towards the government’s performance, there are similarities between them, however, regarding the populist component in their messaging. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, both have discarded their populist standpoints to a great extent

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<sup>18</sup> Iglesias admite su salida de tono en la Comisión de reconstrucción pero subraya que dijo la verdad. *Diario ABC*, 29/5/2020.

and, instead, highlighted the ideological content of their proposals. Not once have they resorted to the anti-science and anti-expert discourse that is so typical of these types of organisations, nor have they used the health workers as a judgemental people-versus-political-class symbol. VOX, to the contrary, has adopted the role of ‘national opposition’ to the government of Spain and has exhibited the radical-right profile that it had previously kept hidden. The intention is to capitalise on the pandemic to disrupt the party system and emerge as the representative of a certain Spanish right. As for UP, it has had to accentuate its left-wing component to maintain a distinct profile as a minority member of the coalition government. This is the main reason why it has claimed to be the force behind the so-called social shield and its greatest defender.

Ultimately, it is not easy to gauge how much both parties' strategies will affect voting in the general elections. In fact, the first round has already taken place, in July 2020, a month after the lockdown: two of the historical Autonomous Communities – Galicia and the Basque Country – held elections to their own parliaments. The results reveal that the fall in electoral support that Podemos has been suffering since 2015 still continues: never has it had so much power and so few votes. VOX, on the other hand, has held steady in elections that were never likely to give it a boost. There is no causal link of any kind between the position it held during the pandemic and the results obtained in Autonomous-Community elections, but these results do hint at how it will approach the elections to the Spanish parliament.

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