



CASE STUDY: FAR-RIGHT ISLAMOPHOBIC SPEECH IN SPAIN

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1. Summary

This case study analyzes the Islamophobic discourse of the Spanish far-right during 2018 and 2019. Specifically, it examines speech acts by Vox, a far-right political party founded in 2013 that experienced a significant electoral rise in the November 2019 general elections, becoming the third largest party in the Spanish Parliament. The speakers of the three speech acts examined are Vox official Twitter account in one of the cases, and relevant figures of the party in the other two: Javier Ortega Smith, Vox's Secretary General, and Rocío Monasterio, Vox president in the region of Madrid. The speech acts analyzed contain several hallmarks of dangerous speech, including dehumanization and the threat of sexual attacks.

2. Dangerous Speech Framework Analysis

Social and Historical Context

In Spain, the far-right did not have any representation in Parliament (*Congreso de los Diputados* and *Senado*) between 1982, when the country completed its transition to democracy.¹ and 2018. In this sense, for many years, Spain was an exception in Europe. One of the reasons was that, after almost 40 years of dictatorship, the mainstream conservative People's Party (*Partido Popular*) was able to bring together the whole spectrum of the right: from the most moderate to most of the far-right. To a certain extent, the People's Party had been able to represent those far-right voters who demanded tougher migration control policies as well as a centralist territorial view, leaving little space for far-right parties to enter the political arena.² As a result, with some exceptions at the local level,³ anti-immigration discourse in the political sphere was relatively scarce compared to other European countries.⁴

In 2013, a group of former members of the People's Party founded Vox, a far-right party that claims to be the "common-sense" party, and "the only one that fights against the suffocating political

¹ After the Civil War (1936 to 1939), Spain was held under Franco regime until the death of the dictator in 1975. After that, a transition period opened that lasted until 1982, when the Socialist Party (PSOE) won the democratic elections. Note that in the first elections during the transition period after Franco's death, the far-right political party Fuerza Nueva had one seat in Parliament, which it lost in the 1982 elections.

² See, for example, Sonia Alonso & Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (2015) Spain: No Country for the Populist Radical Right?, *South European Society and Politics*, 20:1, 21-45, DOI: 10.1080/13608746.2014.985448 or Jorge Galindo, "Why is there not a successful far right party in Spain?" *Politikon*, February 6, 2017, <https://politikon.es/2017/02/06/why-is-there-not-a-successfull-far-right-party-in-spain/>

³ "El Consejo de Europa pone a Albiol y Maroto como ejemplos de políticos xenófobos" [The Council of Europe holds Albiol and Maroto as examples of xenophobic politicians], *El Mundo*, February 28, 2018, <https://www.elmundo.es/cataluna/2018/02/28/5a96939dca4741191d8b4616.html>

⁴ This is also because of the centrality of the political conflict between central and peripheral nationalisms, framing the "us" vs "them" discourse in terms of the different nationalisms. See Sonia Alonso & Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (2015), *Op. cit.*

correctness”⁵ and taboos, such as questioning the validity of Spain’s gender equality laws.⁶ The following elements are central to Vox ideology: nationalism, nativism, defense of traditional values and authoritarianism.⁷

In the regional elections in Andalusia in December 2018, Vox won 12 seats in the regional parliament and as a result obtained one seat in the Spanish Senate. At the national level, Vox took 24 out of the 350 seats in the Spanish Parliament in the April 28, 2019 general elections. However, as a result of political deadlock and the failure to form a government, a second round of general elections was held on November 10, 2019, and Vox became the third largest party in Parliament with 52 seats, in spite of its leaders being poorly rated in different surveys.⁸ Although the main driver of the party’s electoral success was its hardline position on the Catalan political crisis,⁹ the party’s anti-immigration stance also played a “fundamental role” in its advance.¹⁰ This anti-immigration standpoint, and specifically the party’s anti-Muslim position, have become hallmarks of the Vox platform.

According to Vox’s leaders, Spain faces an invasion of immigrants who arrive with the help of NGOs sponsored by globalist elites and in collaboration with mafias.¹¹ Part of the blame lies, according to Vox leader Santiago Abascal, in the European Union. He reasons that the European Union is “increasingly Islamized due to the weakness and betrayal of the European politicians”.¹² The party’s position on immigration also varies depending on where an immigrant is coming from: in the words of Abascal, “An immigrant from a Latin American brother-country, with the same culture, the same

⁵ “VOX es el partido del sentido común, el que pone voz a lo que piensan millones de españoles en sus casas; el único que lucha contra la corrección política asfixiante” [VOX is the party of common sense, the one that says what millions of Spaniards think; the only one fighting against the suffocating political correctness], <https://www.voxespana.es/espana/que-es-vox>

⁶ For example, Vox claims that many of the accusations of violence against women are false, and they claim that this is a taboo in Spain. For this reason, they argue, the anti gender-violence laws should be repealed. See e.g. <https://www.laverdad.es/murcia/rebelado-dictadura-correccion-20181114011046-ntvo.html?ref=https:%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F>

⁷ Ferreira, C. (2019). Vox como representante de la derecha radical en España: un estudio sobre su ideología. *Revista Española De Ciencia Política*, (51), 73-98.

⁸ In a survey conducted by the Center for Sociological Research in July 2019, Vox president Santiago Abascal was the political leader less valued by the respondents, rating its political action with an average of 2.3 (1 being considered as very bad and 10 a very good). Available at: http://www.cis.es/cis/export/sites/default/-Archivos/Marginales/3240_3259/3257/es3257mar.pdf

Similarly, Vox Secretary General Ortega Smith was the worst rated political leader by the respondents in a survey conducted in June 2020 in the frame of the elections in Madrid City Hall. He was rated with an average of 3.19 points. <https://elpais.com/espana/madrid/2020-07-02/almeida-ganaria-las-elecciones-aunque-dependeria-de-nuevo-de-ciudadanos-y-vox-segun-una-encuesta-publicada-por-telemadrid.html>

Likewise, Rocío Monasterio, president of Vox in the region of Madrid, was also the worst rated political leader in a survey conducted in June 2020 regarding the region of Madrid. He was rated with an average of 3.28 points. <https://www.lavanguardia.com/local/madrid/20200624/481943232895/pp-ganaria-ahora-las-elecciones-en-madrid-y-el-centro-derecha-mantendria-la-mayoria-segun-una-encuesta-de-telemadrid.html>

⁹ Catalonia is one of Spain’s 17 “autonomous communities,” similar to a state or province. Since 2010 there have been organized efforts to declare independence from Spain; in October 2019, nine politicians and political activists received lengthy prison sentences for their role in a 2017 independence referendum. This resulted in mass protests across the region, including violent clashes with police. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-spain-politics-catalonia-strike-idUSKBN1WX0TY>

¹⁰ Eleonor Rosenbach, “The rise of the far right in Spain”, openDemocracy, November 27, 2019, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/rise-far-right-spain/>

¹¹ <https://www.voxespana.es/noticias/inmigracion/vox-reitera-programa-inmigracion-denuncia-consenso-progre-menas-20190808>

¹² <https://www.voxespana.es/noticias/santiago-abascal-no-queremos-una-ue-crecientemente-islamizada-20160608>

language, the same worldview, is not the same as immigration from Islamic countries. We don't want Spain to be as the rest of Europe".¹³

The fear of Islam and Muslims is deeply rooted in Spanish history,¹⁴ and Vox usually uses terms such as Crusades or Reconquest¹⁵ (the "*Reconquista*"), which recall historical clashes between Christians and Muslims and invoke the idea of invasion. According to Abascal, Spain "was vaccinated against Islamic immigration during eight centuries of occupation and eight centuries of reconquest".¹⁶ In the imaginary of Vox, the Spanish nation itself is constructed precisely upon the Reconquista and the expulsion of Muslims in 1492. Within this frame, Vox represents Muslims as the major external threat, depicting them as totally incompatible with Spaniards.¹⁷ During an institutional act held on January 2, 2020 in the city of Granada to commemorate the 528th anniversary of the end of Muslim rule on the Iberian Peninsula (known as "*Toma de Granada*"),¹⁸ the Secretary General of Vox, Ortega Smith, declared to the media that the Reconquest must continue "in view of the invasion of radical Islamism, of Salafist mosques, of those who want to impose in Europe, a totalitarian conception, a theocracy...".¹⁹ The abovementioned fear of Islam and Muslims rooted in the imaginary of Spanish history, together with the constant association of Islam and/or Muslims with terrorism and insecurity in the media and in the political discourse,²⁰ has allowed this type of narrative to resonate with a number of people in Spain.

Taking into account that there are almost 2 million Muslims²¹ in Spain, fueling this fear is a real danger for social coexistence. Although Islamophobic incidents remain under-documented and under-reported,²² the Ministry of Home Affairs²³ and many civil society organizations have noted the

¹³ "Abascal (Vox): 'No es lo mismo un inmigrante hispanoamericano que la inmigración de los países islámicos'" [Abascal (Vox): 'A Latinamerican immigrant is not the same as immigration from Islamic countries'], *elDiario.es*, April 17, 2018, https://www.eldiario.es/canariasahora/sociedad/VIDEO-Abascal-Vox-hispanoamericano-inmigracion_0_761874455.html and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jl43Neqlf3c>

¹⁴ Bourekba, M. (2018). Discursos estereotipados sobre los musulmanes en España: de moro a musulmán, de islam a musulmanes. Una realidad incontestable: islamofobia en los medios, 19-28. <https://www.iemed.org/publicaciones-es/historic-de-publicacions/coedicions/una-realidad-incontestable.-islamofobia-en-los-medios>

¹⁵ The "Reconquista" refers to the historical period in the Iberian Peninsula that goes from the Muslim conquest of the Visigothic Kingdom of Hispania in 711 until the fall of the Muslim kingdom of Granada to the expanding Christian kingdoms in 1492.

¹⁶ "Abascal proclama en Italia que 'no todas las religiones valen lo mismo'" [Abascal proclaims in Italy that "not all religions are worth the same"], *El País*, September 22, 2019, https://elpais.com/politica/2019/09/22/actualidad/1569175849_637199.html

¹⁷ Laura Cervi. "Exclusionary Populism and Islamophobia: A Comparative Analysis of Italy and Spain." *Religions* (Basel, Switzerland) 11.516 (2020): 516. Web.

¹⁸ This act is held on January 2 on a yearly basis to commemorate the end of the "Reconquista". It is considered by some as racist and anti-Muslim.

¹⁹ "Ortega Smith sostiene que "la reconquista no ha terminado" frente a "la invasión del islamismo radical"" [Ortega Smith maintains that "the reconquest is not over" given "the invasion of radical Islamism"], *EuropaPress*, January 2, 2020, <https://www.europapress.es/andalucia/noticia-ortega-smith-sostiene-reconquista-no-terminado-frente-invasion-islamismo-radical-20200102124546.html>

²⁰ Observatorio de la Islamofobia en los Medios. Una realidad incontestable: islamofobia en los medios, 19-28. <https://www.iemed.org/publicaciones-es/historic-de-publicacions/coedicions/una-realidad-incontestable.-islamofobia-en-los-medios>

²¹ UCIDE: Unión de Comunidades Islámicas de España. Estudio demográfico de la Población Musulmana 2019. <http://observatorio.hispanomuslim.es/estademograf.pdf>

²² European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, "Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey (EU – MIDIS II) Muslims – Selected findings" (2017), https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2017-eu-minorities-survey-muslims-selected-findings_en.pdf

²³ Ministry of Interior. Action Plan to Combat Hate Crimes. 2020. <http://www.interior.gob.es/documents/642012/3479677/Plan+de+accion+ingles/222063a3-5505-4a06-b464-a4052c6a9b48>.

rise in the number and seriousness of incidents such as slurs, threats, physical attacks on people, and acts of vandalism in the form of attacks on mosques and graffiti in public spaces and on Muslim associations or Islamic centers.²⁴

The rejection of Muslim immigrants by Vox has largely focused on unaccompanied foreign minors, known as "*menas*," based on the Spanish acronym "MENA", which stands for "*Menores Extranjeros No Acompañados*" (Unaccompanied Foreign Minors). Originally, the term "MENA" was part of the technical jargon of the public authorities and NGOs.²⁵ However, in the last two years the term has been broadly used in the public sphere. This has been criticized by children rights' organizations such as Save the Children,²⁶ who allege that the term robs them of their humanity, concealing that they are children who are alone and vulnerable (and, therefore, in need of protection). The far-right has used the term repeatedly to link them to crime. Vox politicians use the word "mena" as a metonymy to represent young men from Maghreb (northwestern Africa), who commit crimes, whether they are under 18 years old or not.²⁷

In the last few years, there has been a considerable increase in the arrival of unaccompanied minors in Spain. According to official data of the Ministry of Home Affairs, the number of minors registered under the protection system in Spain increased from 3,997 in 2016 to 13,012 in 2018, with 73% of them coming from Morocco and Algeria.²⁸ This 325% increase has overwhelmed the reception system, which has been unable to provide the children with the appropriate reception and socio-educational integration.²⁹ Upon arrival in Spain, and once they are certified to be under 18 years old, unaccompanied foreign minors enter the child protection system. As part of it, most of them are placed under state guardianship and live in childcare centers. However, resources are generally insufficient, and many of the centers have an occupation that far exceeds their capacity. There have even been reports of cases of mistreatment from security officers at some centers.³⁰ Such conditions have led, in some cases, to conflicts among the minors, with some abandoning the centers to live on the street.³¹ In addition, by law³² the childcare institution must request residence and work permits

²⁴ [Ali, Aurora. "Islamophobia in Spain. National Report 2019". In *European Islamophobia Report 2019* \(eds Bayrakli, E. and Hafez, F.\) Available at \[https://www.islamophobiaeurope.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/EIR_2019.pdf\]\(https://www.islamophobiaeurope.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/EIR_2019.pdf\)](#)

²⁵ "Cómo el término "mena" invisibiliza a los niños migrantes" [How the term "mena" makes migrant children invisible], *El País*, November 13, 2019, https://verne.elpais.com/verne/2019/11/12/articulo/1573549678_900503.html

²⁶ Save the Children. "MENAS es un estigma. Son niños y niñas solos". December 2, 2019. <https://www.savethechildren.es/actualidad/menas-es-un-estigma-son-ninos-y-ninas-solos>

²⁷ "La vida visible de las palabras: un análisis del concepto "mena" y su uso en las redes" [The visible life of words: an analysis of the concept "mena" and its use in networks], *El Salto*, September 30, 2019, <https://www.elsaltodiario.com/comunicacion/Analisis-palabra-mena-racismo>

²⁸ UNICEF, "The rights of unaccompanied and separated children at Spain's southern border" (2019), <https://www.unicef.es/sites/unicef.es/files/recursos/Spanish-Assessment-Southern-Border2019-ExecutiveSummary.pdf>

²⁹ "El abandono y la falta de recursos públicos favorecen el conflicto y la exclusión de los menores inmigrantes en España" [Neglect and lack of public resources favor conflict and exclusion of immigrant minors in Spain], *elDiario.es*, July 13, 2019, https://www.eldiario.es/desalambre/Saturacion-actividades-abandonados-deficiente-conflictividad_0_919708664.html

³⁰ Noves Vies and Fundación Raíces. 2017. "Unaccompanied Migrant Children in Spain. Alternative Report to the V and VI Implementation Report to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and Their Optional Protocols Submitted by Spain". <http://www.fundacionraices.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Alternative-report-executive-summary.pdf>

³¹ "El abandono y la falta de recursos públicos favorecen el conflicto y la exclusión de los menores inmigrantes en España" [Neglect and lack of public resources favor conflict and exclusion of immigrant minors in Spain], *elDiario.es*, 13 July 2019, https://www.eldiario.es/desalambre/Saturacion-actividades-abandonados-deficiente-conflictividad_0_919708664.html

³² Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration. Portal de Inmigración. Autorización de residencia temporal de menores no acompañados.

for unaccompanied minors (and the state must grant them), but often there are delays, and the permits are not obtained in a timely fashion. Upon reaching 18 years old, unaccompanied minors are no longer eligible for the child protection system, and must leave the centers – even if they have not yet received their documents, meaning they cannot legally work. This leaves many marginalized and living on the streets.³³

This case study will present three examples of Vox Islamophobic discourse and will analyze the dangerous speech hallmarks in each of them. The first speech act is an example of anti-Islam discourse, and the following two focus on speech acts that criminalize unaccompanied foreign minors.

Speech Act 1

- **Message:**

Javier Ortega Smith, Vox’s Secretary General, made the following statements in September 2018:

“Our common enemy, the enemy of Europe, the enemy of freedom, the enemy of progress, the enemy of democracy, the enemy of the family, the enemy of life, the enemy of the future is called the Islamic invasion. What we understand as civilization is at stake. It is seriously threatened. But we are not alone, I tell you, you well know it. More and more Europeans are rising up because they are suffering what it means to have Sharia law applied in their cities, in their streets and in their neighborhoods. They are not willing to have their cathedrals demolished and forcibly replaced by mosques. They are not willing to have their women cover their faces with a black cloth, to be forced to walk ten steps behind and be treated worse than camels. They do not want the end of what we understand as civilization in terms of respect for rights and freedom.”³⁴

Analysis:

By repeating the word “enemy” and using the word “invasion,” the message characterizes Muslim citizens as a threat. The speech promotes hatred (“the enemy”) as well as fear (“civilization is threatened”), presenting a dichotomy of “us” (“we”, referring to Spaniards, and Europeans) and “them” (referring to Muslims). The speaker makes a series of false statements and alleged threats to Europeans. Most narratives promoting fear of Islam are synthesized in this discourse: incompatibility with so-called “European values”, the idea of invasion, the danger of terrorism, the threat to European culture and identity, and the automatic link between Islam and oppression of women. The presence

<http://extranjeros.mitramiss.gob.es/es/informacioninteres/informacionprocedimientos/Ciudadanosnocomunitarios/hoja062/index.html>

³³ “Mil ‘menas’, en la calle y sin trabajo tras cumplir los 18 años” [A thousand ‘menas’, on the street and without a job after turning 18], El Periódico, February 7, 2019, <https://www.elperiodico.com/es/sociedad/20190205/menas-salen-calle-sin-permiso-trabajo-mayoria-edad-7286352>

³⁴ Original Spanish excerpt: “Nuestro enemigo común, el enemigo de Europa, el enemigo de la libertad, el enemigo del progreso, el enemigo de la democracia, el enemigo de la familia, el enemigo de la vida, el enemigo del futuro se llama la invasión islamista. Está en juego lo que entendemos o conocemos como la civilización. Está seriamente amenazada. Pero no estamos solos, como os digo, bien lo sabéis. Cada vez más europeos se están poniendo en pie porque están sufriendo en sus ciudades, en sus calles y en sus barrios, lo que significa la aplicación de la sharia y no están dispuestos, a que se derriben sus catedrales para ser sustituidas obligatoriamente por Mezquitas. No están dispuestos a que sus mujeres tengan que cubrir su rostro con una tela negra y ser tratadas diez pasos atrás, peor que los camellos. No están dispuestos a que se acabe con lo que entendemos por civilización, por respeto a los derechos y a la libertad”.

of Muslims in European society is described as an "Islamist invasion", suggesting the idea of a religious war, in which Islam is the enemy of freedom, progress, democracy, family, and life. Islam is categorized as a unitary, homogeneous, immutable, and unassimilable phenomenon, which poses a threat to Spanish society. This narrative departs from a monolithic conception of Islam and contains, implicitly, an idealization of Spanish and European society ("us"), which is portrayed as civilized, peaceful, rational, enlightened, and scientific. In opposition, there is a supposedly homogeneous Muslim culture ("them") characterized by lack of freedom, violence, irrational traditions, and oppression of women.

- **The Speaker (Speech Act 1)**

Javier Ortega Smith has been the Secretary General of Vox since 2014. At the time of this speech in September 2018, Vox did not yet have any seats in the Spanish Parliament or any regional parliament. It was a few months later, in December 2018, when Vox entered the Andalusian Parliament and began its stunning political rise, which led the party to become the third most powerful political party in Spain in a matter of months. At this early stage, the media had already begun to follow Vox closely, because its leaders' highly controversial statements that already worked as a magnet to attract readers and viewers.

Ortega Smith has issued many controversial statements on a range of matters. Some examples include his refusal to condemn the Francoist regime,³⁵ or his denial of the existence of gender violence.³⁶ His statements have attracted lots of media attention and have framed the debate on issues on which there was a kind of political consensus, such as condemning the dictatorship,³⁷ or on gender violence; a consensus that Vox has clearly broken.

He became known to the general public in 2016, when he swam across the Gibraltar Strait, entered Gibraltar³⁸ irregularly and unfolded a Spanish flag of almost 18 meters.³⁹ While some media outlets made fun of him,⁴⁰ for Vox voters (around 15% of total votes in the last national elections on November 10, 2019) and supporters he is an influential representative of their ideas and concerns. Therefore, his influence cannot be underestimated.

³⁵ "Ortega Smith: 'Yo no condeno expresamente el franquismo'" [Ortega Smith: 'I do not expressly condemn Francoism'], Público, October 25, 2020, <https://www.publico.es/politica/ortega-smith-ortega-smith-no-condeno-expresamente-franquismo.html>

³⁶ "Ortega Smith: 'La violencia de género es una gran mentira, negar esto es como negar el día o la noche'" [Ortega Smith: 'Gender violence is a big lie, denying this is like denying day or night'], La Vanguardia, September 9, 2019, <https://www.lavanguardia.com/vida/20190909/47259533169/ortega-smith-la-violencia-de-genero-es-una-gran-mentira-negar-esto-es-como-negar-el-dia-o-la-noche.html>

³⁷ Caparrós, M. "Vox y los restos de Franco" [Vox and Franco's remains], The New York Times, November 14, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/es/2019/11/14/espanol/opinion/vox-espana.html>

³⁸ Gibraltar is a British Overseas Territory of only a 6.7 km², located at the Southern end of the Iberian Peninsula, bordering Spain. The sovereignty over Gibraltar is disputed by Spain.

³⁹ "Detenido un dirigente de Vox tras desplegar una bandera española de 18 metros en Gibraltar" [A Vox leader arrested after unfurling an 18-meter Spanish flag in Gibraltar], elDiario.es, June 20, 2016, https://www.eldiario.es/politica/detenido-dirigente-vox-desplegar-panon_1_3935816.html

⁴⁰ See, for example, "El Intermedio' ridiculiza al líder de VOX y le regala una bandera franquista" [El Intermedio' ridicules the leader of VOX and gives him a Francoist flag], El Nacional, November 23, 2017, https://www.elnacional.cat/en/blau/es/television/intermedio-vox-bandera-franquista_215169_102.html

- **The Audience (Speech Act 1)**

Ortega Smith made this speech at a party rally in the city of Valencia, in front of 200 Vox supporters. The speech was also recorded and uploaded to Vox's YouTube channel, where it has been viewed over 12,000 times.⁴¹

Spanish society, in general, is not on the verge of a violent outbreak. However, there is a danger that isolated individuals or small groups may feel incited to protect themselves from the delusional threat that Ortega Smith describes in his speech. A survey on "Attitudes towards Immigration",⁴² carried out in September 2017 by the Center for Sociological Research (CIS) in Spain, included the question "Is there any particular group of immigrants that you dislike the most or for whom you have less sympathy?". The five groups that least aroused sympathy were "Moroccans" (11.6%), "Muslims" (6.1%), "Arabs" (4.3%), and "Moors" (1.9%).

Therefore, discourses such as Ortega Smith's connect with a feeling of dislike towards what is Muslim or is perceived as Muslim, which would be shared by more than 20% of the population, according to said survey.

- **Medium (Speech Act 1)**

Ortega Smith's speech was an oral speech that took place at a political rally held in Valencia on September 23, 2018. Once the video of the event was uploaded to Vox YouTube channel, this became the primary means of dissemination. With this, the main features of the online space are applicable to this speech act: the multiplier effect -exponential transmission of content-, the permanence of content, and sharing the content across platforms (in this case, from YouTube to Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, etc.)

Regarding its capacity for social influence, Vox's YouTube channel is a relevant source of information only for militant supporters of the political party, who are most likely to be receptive to this message. On the other hand, the analyzed speech act lasts just over a minute in a 49-minute video, which makes it more difficult for it to go viral, since the contents that work best are short messages. Having said that, it is worth noting that this speech act was reported in most of the media outlets as soon as a complaint was filed against it in Court. In this regard, it is to be noted that Vox has received in the last years outstanding attention, which did not correspond to the share of voters,⁴³ thus giving Vox an undeserved platform to spread their fake news and dangerous speech.

⁴¹ As of 10 March 2020, the video had 12,004 views.

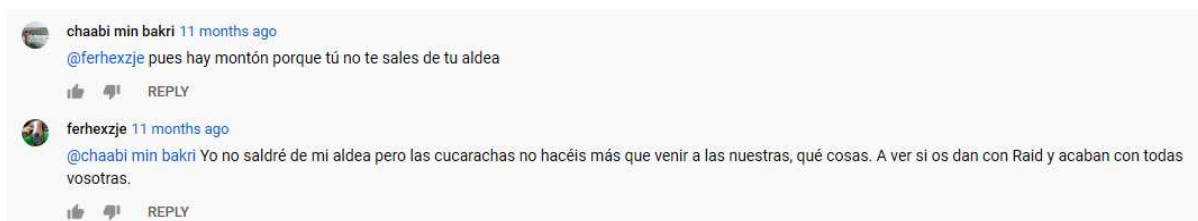
⁴² Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (2017). Actitudes hacia la inmigración (X). (Estudio nº 3.190). http://www.cis.es/cis/export/sites/default/-Archivos/Marginales/3180_3199/3190/es3190mar.pdf

⁴³ "Spain is no longer exceptional: Mainstream media and the far-right party Vox", LSE Blog, January 10, 2019, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/eurocrisispress/2019/01/10/spain-is-no-longer-exceptional-mainstream-media-and-the-far-right-party-vox/>

Responses (Speech Act 1)

- **Supportive Responses (Speech Act 1)**

The video has 399 likes (and 41 dislikes),⁴⁴ and among the 158 comments that the video has on YouTube, the vast majority are messages of support for Ortega Smith and Vox, although few make specific mention of the part of the speech that we are analyzing. One message stands out, among all, for its dehumanizing character. In the thread of responses to one of the comments, the anonymous user (“ferhexzje”) addresses another user (“chaabi min bakri”), apparently of Arab origin, in the following terms: “(...) you cockroaches keep coming to our village, what a thing. Let's see if you get sprayed with Raid⁴⁵ and all of you get killed.”



As pointed out in the context analysis, Islamophobic statements by Vox party members are common. Therefore, it can be assumed that Ortega Smith had the support of his fellow party members. The fact that the video is available on the party's official YouTube channel is a clear indication of the party's support.

- **Opposition/Counterspeech (Speech Act 1)**

Muslims against Islamophobia, a Muslim advocacy association, filed a complaint with the Valencia prosecutor's office, claiming that Ortega Smith's statements were “completely untrue and undermine social peace and coexistence, by encouraging the creation of an atmosphere of fear and rejection towards Muslim communities.”⁴⁶ Article 510.1 of the Spanish Criminal Code prohibits “publicly fomenting, promoting or inciting, directly or indirectly, hate, hostility, discrimination or violence against a group [...] for racist, anti-Semitic or other motives associated with ideology, religion or beliefs”, with violations punishable by one to four years in prison.

While the Prosecutor of the Spanish Supreme Court found the statements to be “inappropriate”, “repulsive in some of the contents”, “abominable”, and “a delirious discourse”, he dismissed the complaint because Ortega Smith did not make a direct call to react violently nor incite others to commit a crime.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ In March 2020.

⁴⁵ Raid is an insecticide.

⁴⁶ “La Fiscalía investiga al «número dos» de Vox, Ortega Smith por referirse a una «invasión islamista» [The Prosecutor's Office investigates Vox's "number two", Ortega Smith for referring to an "Islamist invasion"], ABC, April 3, 2019, https://www.abc.es/espana/comunidad-valenciana/abci-fiscalia-investiga-numero-ortega-smith-referirse-invasion-islamista-201904031800_noticia.html?ref=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.gatestoneinstitute.org%2F14090%2Fspain-islamist-hate-speech

⁴⁷ “La Fiscalía del Supremo afirma que el discurso de Ortega Smith sobre los musulmanes es “repulsivo”, pero no delito” [The Prosecutor's Office of the Supreme Court asserts that Ortega Smith's speech on Muslims is “repulsive”, but not a

It is worth noting that the complaint arose more media interest than the speech itself. Although, in general, most of the media covered the news of the complaint from a critical perspective and in opposition to Ortega Smith's words, in the end the speech was given more publicity than it probably would have had if no complaint was filed. In addition, in some ways, it contributed to creating an image of Vox and its leaders as free speech martyrs, which strengthens Vox's narrative that it is standing up to a "dictatorship of what is politically correct".⁴⁸

Speech Act 2

- **Message:**

According to official sources of the regional Catalan Government,⁴⁹ after a tense demonstration in front of a center for unaccompanied foreign minors in El Masnou (a village near the city of Barcelona), a group of people attacked some of the teenagers living in the center. As a result, four minors and two center staff suffered minor injuries. A few days after, six people were detained by the police, accused of public disorder, resistance to authority, and committing a hate crime.⁵⁰ After the incident that took place in July 2019, Vox's official Twitter,⁵¹ Facebook⁵² and Instagram⁵³ accounts posted: "Proud that our Catalan members back neighbors and common sense. It is urgent that Spain repatriate the 'menas', a source of crime and rapes, and dismantle the mafia that brings them to Spain." The posts on the three social media accounts were accompanied by a photo of a newspaper front page with the headline "Far-Right members organized the march against menas" followed by "A Vox member encouraged the protests that ended in an assault".

crime], Público, July 3, 2019, <https://www.publico.es/politica/islamofobia-fiscalia-supremo-afirma-discurso-ortega-smith-musulmanes-repulsivo-no-delito.html>

⁴⁸ "Santiago Abascal: «Nos hemos rebelado contra la dictadura de la corrección política»" [Santiago Abascal: «We have rebelled against the dictatorship of political correctness»], La Verdad, November 14, 2018, <https://www.laverdad.es/murcia/rebelado-dictadura-correccion-20181114011046-ntvo.html>

⁴⁹ The Minister of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Catalan government and the mayor of El Masnou offered a press conference after a meeting to discuss the attack, https://www.eldiario.es/sociedad/Govern-denuncia-extrema-derecha-organizaron_0_917258829.html

⁵⁰ "Cuatro detenidos por el ataque xenófobo a un centro de menores migrantes del Masnou (Barcelona)" [Four arrested for the xenophobic attack on a center for migrant minors in Masnou (Barcelona)], elDiario.es, July 22, 2019, https://www.eldiario.es/catalunya/politica/Mossos-detienen-hombres-intento-migrantes_0_923208304.html

⁵¹ https://twitter.com/vox_es/status/1147504013895786496

⁵² <https://www.facebook.com/vox.espana/photos/-orgullosos-de-que-nuestros-militantes-catalanes-est%C3%A9n-con-los-vecinos-y-con-el-/1978764105562334/>

⁵³ https://www.instagram.com/p/Bzk_Q9HokM6/

Orgullosos de que nuestros militantes catalanes estén con los vecinos y con el sentido común 🇪🇸

✓ Urge que España repatrie a los menas, foco de delincuencia y violaciones, y desmonte las mafias que los traen.



Analysis

The message contains one of the hallmarks of dangerous speech, the assertion of attack on women: Vox claims “menas” are “a source of rapes”.

The message clearly sets two groups in opposition. On the one hand, the message refers to Vox militants, "our militants", described as the ones with "common sense" and who allegedly support "the neighbors", the residents of El Masnou, where the incident took place. Reference to this group is accompanied with a Spanish flag icon. In opposition to them, the message points at unaccompanied foreign minors, linking them to insecurity, to mafias and to sexual violence against women. The accusation that unaccompanied foreign minors are a sexual threat to women is recurrent in the statements of Vox politicians.⁵⁴

Furthermore, it professes pride in the fact that one of the individuals who encouraged and led the demonstration that ended with violent incidents was a member of Vox.⁵⁵ By praising and granting legitimacy to a demonstration that ends that way, they are condoning the use of violence.

- **The Speaker (Speech Act 2)**

The speaker for this message is Vox’s official Twitter account, which has more than 390,000 followers.⁵⁶ At the time this message was tweeted, Vox had already become a strong parliamentary force in Congress, after the party won 24 deputies (10.26% of the votes) in the April 2019 elections.

⁵⁴ As can be seen, for example, in the Speech Act 3 analyzed below.

⁵⁵ As per the news in the media, a militant of Vox was identified as one of the organizers and one of the individuals that led the demonstration. See “Los ultras alimentan la fobia a los menas en Catalunya” [The far-right feeds the phobia against menas Catalonia], July 5, 2019, <https://www.elperiodico.com/es/sociedad/20190705/ataque-menas-masnou-ultras-fobia-7538581>

⁵⁶ In March 2020.

While Vox is subject to significant criticism by other political parties and by much of the media, there is no doubt that the official account of a political party with that political weight has capacity to influence their own voters at least. In fact, it is worth highlighting that one of Vox strengths is the use of social media.⁵⁷ In the November 2019 elections, Vox was the party that had the most impact through social media and digital networks.⁵⁸

- **The Audience (Speech Act 2)**

As for the direct audience, the message of the party's official Twitter account, with more than 390,000 followers, obtained more than 1,700 likes, 700 retweets and 189 comments.⁵⁹ Furthermore, the same message was posted in the party's Facebook profile (with 535,000 followers) and its Instagram account (with 559,000 followers), where it was also shared and liked extensively.

The violent incident referred to in this speech act is not an isolated case, as detailed in Section 3. Therefore, while nothing indicates that there is nowadays a risk of widespread violence in Spain, there are evidently some willing to act violently against another group of people, specifically Moroccan teenagers. As explained in the analysis of the audience of speech act 1, the antipathy towards Moroccans and/or Muslims is shared by over 20% of Spanish society.

- **Medium (Speech Act 2)**

In Spain, Twitter is the most widely-used social network for political conversation.⁶⁰ As discussed earlier, key features of social networks are permanence, sharing between platforms, and the multiplying effect of messages. Thus, the medium had the potential to reach broad audiences, and to go viral.

Responses (Speech Act 2)

- **Supportive Responses**

Among the comments to the tweet, there are numerous messages of support for Vox, and of rejection of Moroccan minors, especially reaffirming the idea that they are a sexual threat to women and calling for their expulsion from Spain.

- **Opposition/Counterspeech**

The support of Vox to the incident in the center for unaccompanied minors in El Masnou received harsh criticism from various media outlets such as El Periódico or La Vanguardia, which are the best-

⁵⁷ Aladro Vico, Eva, and Requeijo Rey, Paula. "Discurso, Estrategias E Interacciones De Vox En Su Cuenta Oficial De Instagram En Las Elecciones Del 28-A. Derecha Radical Y Redes Sociales." *Revista Latina De Comunicación Social* 77 (2020): 203-29. Web.

⁵⁸ According to the survey carried out by the Center for Sociological Research in January 2020. Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (2020). Barómetro de enero. (Estudio N° 3.271). http://www.cis.es/cis/export/sites/default/-Archivos/Marginales/3260_3279/3271/es3271mar.pdf

⁵⁹ Data collected in March 2020.

⁶⁰ Casero-Ripollés, Andreu (2018). "Research on political information and social media: Key points and challenges for the future". *El profesional de la información*, v. 27, n. 5, pp. 964-974

selling Catalan newspapers. Likewise, Público, a left-leaning national online newspaper, published the headline "Perplexity at the latest atrocity of Vox. They pride themselves on assaulting minors".⁶¹

In the political sphere, the most notable reaction was that of Isabel Serra, Speaker in the Regional Parliament of Madrid and a member of Unidas Podemos, a left-wing political party which is currently part of the national coalition government. She posted the following tweet⁶²: "It is a very dangerous step that VOX has come to defend the aggression against 'protected' migrant children in Barcelona. They pride themselves on assaulting minors. How capable we are of facing the extreme right will depend on the response we make to such outrage".

Speech Act 3

- **Message**

On November 4, 2019, Vox's president in the region of Madrid, Rocío Monasterio, held a rally in front of the gates of a center for unaccompanied foreign minors in Seville (the capital city of Andalusia, the region where Vox first gained parliamentary representation in December 2018), and declared the following:⁶³

"The other politicians want a pact of silence, they do not want us to talk about this issue, but we want to protect women and our elders, who have sometimes been robbed. Spanish people have the right to walk without the fear of being assaulted by a *manada* ['herd' or 'wolfpack'] of menas."⁶⁴

Analysis

Using the word 'manada' (herd/wolfpack) to refer to unaccompanied foreign minors was possibly the most dangerous speech act in Vox's campaign. The expression contains multiple hallmarks of dangerous speech. First, it is dehumanizing since it portrays foreign children as animals. Second, the word is an assertion of attack against women and girls, as the term 'manada' has gained widespread usage in recent years in Spain as a reference to gang rapists. The term took on this meaning following a rape case that drew intense public attention where the group of perpetrators shared a video of their crime in a WhatsApp group that they called 'La Manada.' By describing unaccompanied foreign minors as animals, she denied the children their humanity. At the same time, by using a term associated with a famous case of sexual assault, she was suggesting that unaccompanied foreign minors pose a sexual threat to women. Such framing could make violence against them seem less serious or even justifiable.

⁶¹ "Perplejidad ante la última bestialidad de Vox: "Se enorgullecen de agredir a menores de edad" [Perplexed at Vox's latest bestiality: "They pride themselves on assaulting minors"], Público, July 7, 2019, <https://www.publico.es/tremending/2019/07/07/perplejidad-ante-la-ultima-bestialidad-de-vox-se-enorgullecen-de-agredir-a-menores-de-edad/>

⁶² <https://twitter.com/isaserras/status/1147512080205004800>

⁶³ "Vox arremete contra las "manadas de Menas" mientras los vecinos desmontan sus acusaciones" [Vox lashes out at the "herds of menas" as neighbors take down their accusations], El Periódico, November 4, 2019, <https://www.elperiodico.com/es/politica/20191104/voz-andalucia-manadas-menas-vecinos-desmienten-7714065>

⁶⁴ Original Spanish: "Los demás políticos quieren un pacto de silencio, que no hablemos de este tema, pero nosotros queremos proteger a las mujeres y nuestros mayores, a los que en ocasiones han atracado. El español de a pie tiene derecho a caminar en libertad, sin miedo a ser asaltado por una manada de menas".

Likewise, as in the other speech acts analyzed in this case study, the message presents two opposing groups: “us” (women, elders, Spanish people, and Vox) and “them” (the so-called “manada”, referring to unaccompanied foreign minors).

In addition, Monasterio claimed that other Spanish politicians wanted “a pact of silence.” With this, the in-group loyalty of the other parties was questioned, and Vox representatives presented themselves as the saviors, as the only politicians who want to protect women and elders from the stated threat, questioning the will of the other parties to do so, in a strategy to delegitimize them. This type of discourse, presenting Vox as the savior against alleged threats and suggesting the existence of taboos that are only challenged by Vox, is one of the hallmarks of the party’s rhetorical strategies. The party regularly makes controversial statements on topics on which there is general consensus in Spain, such as gender violence, with the aim of attracting potential voters as well as media attention.⁶⁵

This message was made in the run-up to the November 2019 general elections. One of the main strategies used by Vox to attract media attention during that electoral campaign was the rejection of immigrants, with a focus on unaccompanied foreign minors, referred to as “menas”. During the official electoral campaign period,⁶⁶ which lasted from 1 to 8 November, several similar statements were made by other Vox leaders. Vox president Santiago Abascal claimed during the main televised electoral debate on November 4 that “...every time I’m on the street – and there’s a menas’ center there – I run into women who come and tell me that the police tell them not to wear their jewelry on the street; and mothers who are worried that their daughters are coming home late and are scared of being assaulted”.⁶⁷ The day after, Iván Espinosa de los Monteros, Spokesperson of Vox in Congress, claimed on TV that “foreigners are three times more likely to commit rape than Spaniards”.⁶⁸ These statements were part of an insistent fear-mongering campaign pushing disinformation.⁶⁹ This created a social climate that led to isolated but significant violent incidents,⁷⁰ during that same week and the weeks that followed, such as a grenade being thrown at one of the centers in December 2019, as described in section 3. For a few weeks, the issue of fostering unaccompanied foreign minors became one of the central issues on the Spanish socio-political agenda, with reports in the media, television programs dedicated to the subject, etc.

⁶⁵ Álvarez-Benavides, A., and Jiménez Aguilar, F. (2020). “Estrategias de comunicación de la nueva extrema derecha española. De Hogar Social a Vox, del alter-activismo a la doctrina del shock”, *Estudios de la Paz y el Conflicto, Revista Latinoamericana*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 55-78. DOI: 10.5377/rlpc.v1i2.9833

⁶⁶ Elections are held six weeks after the elections are officially called, and the official campaign in Spain has a duration of only one week (in this case from 1 to 8 November). While nowadays political parties start campaigning informally once the elections are called, for example through social media, parties can only hold rallies, celebrate debates, or send electoral communication to voters during that week. Note that Spain has a multi-party system, and therefore elections are sometimes called before the four years of mandate expire, should the party or parties in government cease to have the needed support in Congress.

⁶⁷ “Santiago Abascal divide Hortaleza, un barrio obrero tensionado por los menas” [Santiago Abascal divides Hortaleza, a working-class neighborhood under stress because of the means], *El Mundo*, November 6, 2019, <https://www.elmundo.es/espana/2019/11/05/5dc1c6e021efa0d9308b468b.html>

⁶⁸ “Un extranjero es más propenso a violar que un español”: nuevo frente judicial para Vox” [“A foreigner is more prone to rape than a Spanish”: new judicial front for Vox], *El Confidencial*, February 4, 2020, https://www.elconfidencial.com/espana/2020-02-04/nuevo-frente-judicial-vox-abascal-espinosa-injurias-inmigrantes_2439607/

⁶⁹ The fact-checking organization Maldito Buló has debunked Vox statements repeatedly. As a way of example: <https://maldito.es/malditobulo/2019/11/08/bulos-que-ha-usado-vox-para-hablar-de-inmigracion-manadas-ayudas-al-alquiler-menores-extranjeros-no-acompanados-y-paguitas-de-664-euros/>

⁷⁰ “El discurso del odio” [Hate Speech], *El País*, December 7, 2019, https://elpais.com/elpais/2019/12/06/opinion/1575659271_221673.html

- **The Speaker (Speech Act 3)**

Rocío Monasterio is the president of Vox for the region of Madrid⁷¹ and a deputy and spokesperson for Vox in the Madrid regional parliament. As she officially represents an institution (the party), she has a certain capacity to influence.

- **The Audience (Speech Act 3)**

The same audience characteristics described for the previous speech acts also apply here. In other words, although Spanish society, in general, is not influenced by this type of message, it is still likely that these messages will reach and influence a portion of the Spanish population.

The direct audience for this speech act were journalists, militants and party supporters who Vox representatives summoned to the gates of a center for unaccompanied foreign minors in the city of Seville for a political rally. However, through the media, the message reached the rest of Spanish society, which during the electoral campaign was especially attentive to the statements of politicians.

There is also evidence that isolated audiences were already receptive to these messages. On June 3, 2019, a small neighborhood association, Asociación de Vecinos Miraflores-La Trinidad, had protested, with the support of members of Vox,⁷² against the opening of that center for unaccompanied foreign minors in the Seville's neighborhood La Macarena, arguing that the center would become a source of crime. This suggests that some Spanish residents were already fearful, making continued dangerous speech against the unaccompanied foreign minors potentially even more dangerous.

- **Medium (Speech Act 3)**

Rocío Monasterio made these statements during a speech in front of journalists during a political rally. It was a provocative message, and Monasterio was likely seeking to create controversy to attract the attention of the media – which she did⁷³ – and of potential voters. One of Vox's communication strategies is to use provocation, through controversial statements, so that political rivals contribute to spread the message and put the issues on the political agenda and in the frames preferred by Vox.⁷⁴

Responses (Speech Act 3)

- **Supportive Responses (Speech Act 3)**

As previously explained, Rocío Monasterio's message was not an isolated statement. On the contrary, it was part of a deliberate strategy by her party to push the issue of unaccompanied foreign minors on the media and the political agenda. In fact, the political rally was published on the party's official website with the headline “The average Spaniard has the right to walk without fear of being assaulted

⁷¹ One of Spanish 17 autonomous regions.

⁷² “Vox participa en una concentración ilegal contra un centro de menores inmigrantes en Sevilla” [Vox participates in an illegal concentration against a center for immigrant minors in Seville], elDiario.es, June 3, 2019, https://www.eldiario.es/andalucia/sevilla/vecinos-vox-concentran-ilegalmente-inmigrantes_1_1521770.html

⁷³ Monasterio's statements appeared in most newspapers in Spain (among others, La Vanguardia, elDiario.es, Europapress, El Periódico, 20Minutos) and in television.

⁷⁴ Gutiérrez-Rubí, A. “Vox y el Tea Party” [Vox and the Tea Party], El Periódico, January 24, 2020. <https://www.elperiodico.com/es/opinion/20200124/vox-y-el-tea-party-por-antoni-gutierrez-rubi-7819835>

by a *manada* of ‘menas’”.⁷⁵ Therefore, it is obvious that she had the support of the party, and presumably also of Asociación de Vecinos Miraflores-La Trinidad, the neighborhood association that had demonstrated, with members of Vox, against the opening of the center before the summer.

- **Opposition/Counterspeech (Speech Act 3)**

It was reported in the media⁷⁶ that some of the neighbors shouted “fascists go away” at Monasterio on her way to the center for unaccompanied minors.

Likewise, Rocío Monasterio's message drew significant criticism from other political parties, the media, NGOs and associations. “Macarena for All”, a neighbors’ association of the Macarena neighborhood, where Monasterio had held the political rally, denied problems of coexistence in the area, assured they were not aware of any complaints filed against the minors, and criticized the “cowardly and opportunistic” behavior of Vox politicians for using children in a political rally.⁷⁷

Moreover, politicians from different political parties condemned Monasterio’s statements. Rocío Ruiz, from the center-right party Ciudadanos, and Councilor for Equality and Social Policies in the regional government of Andalusia, expressed that the use of the minors by Vox was “immoral”, and denied the existence of conflicts linked to them.⁷⁸ The Secretary General of the Socialist Party in Andalusia, Susana Díaz, qualified Vox’s act as a “provocation”.⁷⁹ Several politicians from Adelante Andalucía, a left-wing electoral coalition in that region, also expressed their opposition to Monasterio’s statements. Among others, the leader of said coalition, Teresa Rodríguez, requested the regional government to protect “our boys and girls” from the attack of the “scavengers”.⁸⁰

Finally, Teresa Rodríguez, mentioned above, filed a complaint against Rocío Monasterio with the Seville prosecutor’s office for incitement to hatred, and an investigation was opened to determine whether the statements were constitutive of a crime.⁸¹ In January 2020, the prosecutor referred the case to the Spanish Supreme Court, and is currently under investigation.

3. Incidents of Violence or Discrimination

The attack against a center for unaccompanied foreign minors in El Masnou (near Barcelona) in July 2019, referred to in Speech Act 2, was not an isolated case that year. There have been other

⁷⁵ <https://www.voxespana.es/noticias/rocio-monasterio-espanol-pie-tiene-derecho-caminar-miedo-ser-asaltado-manada-menas-20191104>

⁷⁶ “Vox acude a un centro de menores migrantes de Sevilla para denunciar ‘manadas de menas’ ante gritos de ‘fuera fascistas’ de los vecinos” [Vox goes to a center for migrant minors in Seville to denounce ‘manadas of menas’ amid shouts of ‘fascists go away’ from the neighbors], *elDiario.es*, November 4, 2019, https://www.eldiario.es/andalucia/sevilla/monasterio-migrantes-sevilla-denunciar-fascistas-menas-vox_1_1163805.html

⁷⁷ *Ibid* 1

⁷⁸ “Duras críticas contra Vox por programar un acto junto a un centro de menores extranjeros en Sevilla”, [Harsh criticism against Vox for scheduling an event nearby a center for foreign minors in Seville], *El Mundo*, November 4, 2019, <https://www.elmundo.es/andalucia/2019/11/04/5dc0060721efa00a798b4697.html>

⁷⁹ *Ibid*

⁸⁰ *Ibid*

⁸¹ “La Fiscalía andaluza incoa diligencias contra Monasterio por un presunto delito de odio contra los menores migrante” [The Andalusian Prosecutor's Office initiates proceedings against Monasterio for an alleged hate crime against migrant minors], *El Mundo*, November 19, 2019, <https://www.elmundo.es/madrid/2019/11/19/5dd3ea87fc6c8368118b4839.html>

documented cases of incidents of violence and/or discrimination against Muslims and particularly against unaccompanied foreign minors.

In March 2019, two serious incidents were reported in villages near the city of Barcelona. A man armed with a machete entered another center in the village of Canet de Mar, threatening to kill the 50 minors living there, and was finally detained by the police.⁸² No injuries were reported. A few days after, a group of 25 hooded individuals attacked another center in the village of Castelldefels.⁸³ As a result, one child had to be treated in hospital and two educators suffered minor injuries. The day after, around 60 people gathered in front of the center and threw stones at it. They were dispersed by the police.⁸⁴

The number of attacks intensified in the weeks leading to the general elections held on November 10, 2019 and continued after the election. A chronological list of the main incidents is below:

- At the end of September 2019,⁸⁵ two men with masks attacked two foreign unaccompanied minors residing in the center located in the neighborhood of Hortaleza,⁸⁶ in Madrid, with paddles. A video of the attack circulated through social media and, on October 4, 2019, graffiti that read “all rowing together” and a mask like the ones used in the attack appeared on the wall and door of a neighbors’ association in Hortaleza.⁸⁷
- On October 27, 2019, in the town of Zaragoza, a group of people (according to the victim’s testimony, 7 individuals) brutally attacked a 17-year-old unaccompanied Moroccan minor and left him with a serious skull injury that kept him in the Intensive Care Unit for several days.⁸⁸
- On November 3, 2019, a group of 10 individuals used nightsticks to attack several Moroccan minors in a park near the center located in Hortaleza, in Madrid. Minor injuries were reported. A few hours before the attack, a demonstration of more than 200 people to protest against the presence of these minors in the neighborhood was held.⁸⁹

⁸² “Un hombre entra armado con un machete en un centro de menores” [A man enters a minors’ center armed with a machete], La Vanguardia, March 6, 2019, <https://www.lavanguardia.com/local/maresme/20190306/46893607857/hombre-armado-machete-centro-menores-canet-de-mar.html>

⁸³ “Violento ataque de un grupo de encapuchados a un centro de ‘menas’ en Castelldefels” [Violent attack by a group of hooded men at a ‘menas’ center in Castelldefels], La Vanguardia, March 10, 2019, <https://www.lavanguardia.com/local/baix-lobregat/20190310/46959219414/ataque-grupo-encapuchados-centro-menas-castelldefels.html>

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ The exact date is not confirmed, although it is suspected to have occurred on September 29, 2019.

⁸⁶ Ortega Smith visited the center in Hortaleza in May 2019 and he demanded more control on irregular migration. Rocío Monasterio held a press conference on 21 October 2019 at the doors of the same center where she stated that “it is a shame that people cannot walk around without fear of being mugged by menas”.

⁸⁷ “Denuncian ante la Fiscalía el ataque racista de dos enmascarados a dos jóvenes en el barrio madrileño de Hortaleza” [The racist attack by two masked men on two young people in the Madrid neighborhood of Hortaleza is denounced to the Prosecutor’s Office], elDiario.es, October 8, 2019, https://www.eldiario.es/desalambre/denuncian-fiscalia-enmascarados-madrileno-hortaleza_1_1162294.html

⁸⁸ “Un menor tutelado acaba en la UCI tras recibir una brutal paliza” [A minor under guardianship ends up in the ICU after receiving a brutal beating], La Vanguardia, November 7, 2019, <https://www.lavanguardia.com/sucesos/20191107/471442165196/mena-brutal-paliza-zaragoza.html>

⁸⁹ “Más Madrid denuncia la agresión a ‘menas’ y acusa a Vox de fomentar el odio” [Más Madrid denounces the attack on ‘menas’ and accuses Vox of fomenting hatred], La Vanguardia, November 7, 2019, <https://www.lavanguardia.com/local/madrid/20191107/471440143758/mas-madrid-denuncia-vox-agresion-menas.html>

- On December 4, 2019, a grenade was thrown over the wall of the center in Hortaleza, in Madrid. A police bomb squad had to carry out a controlled explosion.⁹⁰
- On December 24, 2019, an explosive device (that was later discovered to be fake) was found at the entrance of a center for unaccompanied foreign minors in Alhama, Murcia.⁹¹
- On February 3, 2020, a man verbally abused a female employee of a center located in Badalona (a city next to Barcelona), in the center's surroundings, then followed her to the center where he hit one of the workers at the center that defended her and verbally abused two minors.⁹²
- On June 14, 2020, a group of 50 individuals harassed and threw stones at a group of youngsters who were former unaccompanied foreign minors and were squatting a flat in Premià de Mar (near Barcelona).⁹³

While we cannot say that Vox's speech targeting unaccompanied migrant minors *caused* these attacks, it would be a mistake to assume there was no relationship. Vox frames the unaccompanied minors as a dangerous threat, and when politicians talk about a threat, many people give credit to it. In a certain way, fear becomes institutionalized, and the chance of violent incidents grows.

4. General obstacles and opportunities for countering this speech in Spain

Challenges to countering dangerous speech

Generally, conditions are favorable for counterspeech in Spain. The country is considered to be democratic, where political opposition is generally exercised freely, and the press is also free. However, there are certainly a variety of factors that influence or pave the way for how counterspeech is carried out.

Firstly, in the last few years, there have been concerns regarding the curb in freedom of expression due to the application of certain provisions contained in the Criminal Code.⁹⁴ In particular, the

⁹⁰ "Los Tedax explotan la granada lanzada contra un centro de menores de Madrid" [The Tedax explode the grenade thrown at a center for minors in Madrid], La Vanguardia, December 4, 2019, <https://www.lavanguardia.com/local/madrid/20191204/472055642072/centro-menores-madrid-hortaleza-granada.html>

⁹¹ "Hallado un artefacto explosivo simulado en la puerta de un centro de menores inmigrantes de Alhama de Murcia" [Found a simulated explosive device at the door of a center for immigrant minors in Alhama de Murcia], El País, December 24, 2019, https://elpais.com/politica/2019/12/24/actualidad/1577206289_590459.html

⁹² "Un detenido por una agresión racista en un centro de menores de Badalona" [A detainee for a racist attack in a center for minors in Badalona], El Periódico, February 4, 2020, <https://www.elperiodico.com/es/sociedad/20200204/ataque-racista-en-un-centro-de-menores-de-badalona-7834785>

⁹³ "Medio centenar de vecinos intentan linchar a varios jóvenes migrantes en Premià de Mar, Barcelona" [Fifty neighbors try to lynch several young migrants in Premià de Mar, Barcelona], La Sexta, June 15, 2020, https://www.lasexta.com/noticias/sociedad/medio-centenar-de-vecinos-intentan-linchar-a-tres-menas-en-premia-de-mar-barcelona_202006155ee7373465a809000185b4e5.html

⁹⁴ Article 19. "Spain: Speech related offences of the Penal Code". March 2020. <https://www.article19.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Spain-Penal-Code-analysis-March-2020-Final.pdf>

provisions are the glorification of terrorism⁹⁵ and humiliation of victims (article 578), felonies against the Crown (article 485), incitement to hatred (article 510), felonies against religious feelings (article 525), and offences against Spain or its symbols (article 543). Thus, several artists and social media users have been prosecuted -and some sentenced to jail- in recent years under some of these charges, for satire tweets, songs, or statements. This is worrying not only for the charges and sentences brought forward, but also for the danger of increasing self-censorship.⁹⁶ In February 2021, the government announced that it would start the process to reform of the Criminal Code, to decriminalise some of these types of activities.⁹⁷ Likewise, in 2015 the Law on the Protection of Public Security, known as the “gag law” (*ley mordaza*), was amended, including new limitations on protests and public assembly, and increasing fines and police powers. This has also affected freedom of expression in Spain and therefore influences the ability to counterspeak.⁹⁸

In some cases, this has also affected immigrant rights activists. One of the most notorious cases were those of Rommy Arce, a local politician from Ahora Madrid (a left-wing local party), originally from Peru, and councilor at the Madrid City Hall from 2015 to 2019, and of Malick Gueye, the spokesperson of Sindicato Mantero y Latero de Madrid.⁹⁹ In 2018, following the death of Mame Mbaye, a migrant street vendor who died of a heart attack while running away from the police, Rommy Arce posted several tweets accusing the police of institutional racism, and Malick Gueye issued statements in the same vein during an interview. Two police trade unions sued them for their statements, on the grounds of incitement to hatred against the police, as well as defamation, both under the Spanish Criminal Code. The judge ruled out the first charge from the beginning (since the incitement to hatred is not thought of to protect the police), but both were asked to testify in relation to the defamation charge. While the court finally acquitted them of any crime, in October 2019, stating that their statements fell within freedom of expression,¹⁰⁰ this is also an example of how counterspeech can be hindered.

It is also worth mentioning the case of activist Helena Maleno, human rights defender and researcher, who was investigated by the Spanish police for her work at the Southern border of Spain with Morocco, assisting migrants in transit and requesting rescue operations in the Mediterranean. In 2017 she was summoned to appear before the court in Morocco on charges of “promoting illegal immigration” and “migrant-smuggling”, based on information provided by the Spanish police. She was finally acquitted.¹⁰¹

Online harassment against antiracism activists is also not uncommon. Some of the best-known cases are those of Moha Gerehou, Desirée Bela-Lobedde, or Daniela Ortiz, among many others. Moha

⁹⁵ Note that this article is applied in relation to domestic terrorism (e.g. ETA, Grapo, etc.). Currently there are no active terrorist groups in Spain, after ETA self-dissolved in 2018.

⁹⁶ Amnesty International, “Spain: Tweet... If You Dare: How Counter-Terrorism Laws Restrict Freedom Of Expression In Spain”, March 2018, <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/EUR4179242018ENGLISH.PDF>

⁹⁷ “El Gobierno plantea la reforma de los delitos sobre libertad de expresión y eliminará las penas de prisión” [The Government proposes the reform of crimes on freedom of expression and will eliminate prison sentences], February 8, 2021, Público, <https://www.publico.es/sociedad/gobierno-plantea-reforma-delitos-libertad.html>

⁹⁸ Amnesty International, “España: Activistas Sociales y el Derecho a la Información, en el punto de mira”, June 2017, <https://doc.es.amnesty.org/ms-opac/recordmedia/1@000029362/object/37844/raw>

⁹⁹ The Sindicato Mantero is the association of street vendors that denounces the persecution migrant street vendors are subjected to from the police, and institutional racism in general. <https://manteros.org/>.

¹⁰⁰ “Los jueces archivan la querrela contra la exedil Rommy Arce” [The judges file the lawsuit against former councilor Rommy Arce], El País, 23 October 2019. “https://elpais.com/ccaa/2019/10/23/madrid/1571853907_933915.html

¹⁰¹ Frontline Defenders, “Criminal case against Helena Maleno dropped”, 12 March 2019, <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/statement-report/criminal-case-against-helena-maleno-dropped>

Gerehou is a journalist, activist, and former president of the NGO SOS Racism. In July 2016, a fake auction of him was staged on Twitter, and a few months later, in September 2016, he also received death threats on that platform. The police identified and arrested the perpetrators, under the charge of hate crime.¹⁰² Desirée Bela-Lobedde is also an activist and youtuber who has been the target of many racist and xenophobic comments. She requested that the prosecutor intervene in regard to comments posted on one of her YouTube videos entitled “To be a Black woman in Spain,” but the prosecutor dropped the investigation because it was not possible to identify the authors of the comments.¹⁰³ Daniela Ortiz is a Peruvian artist and an activist, who fled Spain in August 2020 after being the target of a xenophobic campaign on social media and receiving threats.¹⁰⁴

In terms of press freedom, the press in Spain is nowadays considered free. In the 2020 World Press Freedom Index¹⁰⁵ of the organization Reporters Without Borders, Spain ranked 29, behind Scandinavian countries, Portugal, and Costa Rica, among many others, but before other European countries such as France and the United Kingdom (ranked 34 and 35 respectively) or the United States (ranked 45). It is to be noted, however, that during a demonstration organized by Vox in May 2020, journalists covering the event suffered verbal attacks and were harassed.¹⁰⁶ Also, Vox banned certain media (newspapers El País, elDiario.es, or el Mundo, among others, and some TV shows) from attending their press conferences, not only during the electoral campaign in November 2019 but also afterwards, arguing that they are not journalists, but activists.¹⁰⁷ This has been criticized by the Spanish Association of Journalists as it hinders press freedom.¹⁰⁸

Finally, increasingly, citizens tend to give credit only to news or opinions that are similar to theirs, living in information bubbles. This is fertile ground for the spread of fake news.¹⁰⁹ At a time of generalized use of social media, polarization and the circulation of fake news are factors that can hamper the countering of dangerous speech in Spain.¹¹⁰

¹⁰² “Detenidos cuatro tuiteros que amenazaron al presidente de SOS Racismo” [“Four tweeters arrested who threatened the president of SOS Racismo”, El Confidencial, April 15, 2017, https://www.elconfidencial.com/espana/2017-04-15/detenidos-tuiteros-amenazas-presidente-sos-racismo-mohamed-gerehou_1367162/]

¹⁰³ “La Fiscalía archiva una denuncia por insultos racistas contra una 'youtuber' porque fueron eliminados” [The Prosecutor's Office files a complaint for racist insults against a 'youtuber' because they were deleted], elDiario.es, February 8, 2017, https://www.eldiario.es/sociedad/deitos-de-odio-redes-sociales-desiree-bela-lobedde-youtube_1_3660841.html

¹⁰⁴ “La artista Daniela Ortiz sale de España por una campaña de amenazas en las redes sociales” [Artist Daniela Ortiz leaves Spain due to a campaign of threats on social media], La Vanguardia, August 2, 2020, <https://www.lavanguardia.com/cultura/20200802/482579201722/daniela-ortiz-macba-centro-nacional-de-arte-la-virreina.html>

¹⁰⁵ <https://rsf.org/en/spain>

¹⁰⁶ “Denuncian ataques a periodistas cuando cubrían la protesta de Vox” [Attacks on journalists while covering a Vox demonstration are denounced], El Mundo, May 24, 2020, <https://www.elmundo.es/espana/2020/05/23/5ec98d9f21efa0f9208b4639.html>

¹⁰⁷ “Las listas negras de Vox para vetar a medios y periodistas: ‘Son activistas que solamente hablarán mal de nosotros’” [Vox's blacklists to veto media and journalists: ‘They are activists who will only speak ill of us’], elDiario.es, October 20, 2019, https://www.eldiario.es/politica/vox-medios-de-comunicacion_1_1302626.html

¹⁰⁸ FAPE, “La FAPE condena el nuevo veto de Vox al libre ejercicio del periodismo” [FAPE condemns the new Vox veto on the free exercise of journalism], June 2020, <https://fape.es/la-fape-condena-el-nuevo-veto-de-vox-al-libre-ejercicio-del-periodismo/>

¹⁰⁹ Innerarity, Daniel y Colomina, Carme. «La verdad en las democracias algorítmicas». Revista CIDOB d'Afers Internacionals, n.º 124 (April 2020), p. 11-23. DOI: doi.org/10.24241/rcai.2020.124.1.11. Available at: https://www.cidob.org/articulos/revista_cidob_d_afers_internacionals/124/la_verdad_en_las_democracias_algoritmicas

¹¹⁰ Eleonor Rosenbach, “Coronavirus, fake news, and the future of the Spanish left”, openDemocracy, April 20, 2020, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/coronavirus-fake-news-and-future-spanish-left/>

Opportunities for counterspeech

Despite the challenges, there are plenty of opportunities and strategies in place for counterspeech in Spain.

Firstly, counterspeech is actively done by some politicians (mostly from the left-wing parties Podemos and Izquierda Unida, but also the Socialist party PSOE), and at times also by government members. For example, Podemos has on multiple occasions actively denounced (politically and at times at court) speech acts of Vox (as explained above). And, after a grenade was thrown at a center for unaccompanied minors in Hortaleza (Madrid), most political parties and members of the government (such as the Minister of Justice, from the PSOE) publicly reproached Vox for their speech against the minors.¹¹¹

Secondly, Spain has a solid civil society net. The so-called “third sector” is composed of more than 30,000 organizations in Spain. Local activists are organized, and a wide range of organizations that work in favor of equality and against discrimination, racism, and intolerance exist in Spain. Some of them very well established, such as SOS Racism¹¹² and CEAR¹¹³ (Spanish Committee for Refugee Aid), among many others.

Several organizations in Spain are currently working specifically on the framing of new narratives and on counteracting intolerant and dangerous speech:

- Organizations: porCausa,¹¹⁴ SOS Racism, Red Acoge,¹¹⁵ Fundación Secretariado Gitano,¹¹⁶ among others.
- Projects: Proyecto Proxi,¹¹⁷ CibeRespect,¹¹⁸ among others.
- Fact-checking projects: Maldito Buló,¹¹⁹ and, specifically related to migration, Maldita Migración,¹²⁰ and Newtral,¹²¹ among others.

As part of their work, Spanish organizations are or have been partners of consortia in research projects that work on counterspeech, funded mainly by the European Commission: PRISM,¹²² REACT,¹²³ and Words Are Stones¹²⁴ are some examples. Other projects such as the No Hate Speech Movement,

¹¹¹ “El Gobierno y los partidos piden a Vox que cese su discurso de odio tras el episodio de la granada en el centro de menores” [Government and parties request Vox to stop its hate speech after the episode of the grenade in the center for minors], elDiario.es, December 4, 2019, https://www.eldiario.es/politica/gobierno-partidos-vox-incidente-madrid_1_1202864.html

¹¹² <https://soseracismo.eu/>

¹¹³ <https://www.cear.es/>

¹¹⁴ <https://porcausa.org/>

¹¹⁵ <https://www.redacoge.org/es/>

¹¹⁶ <https://www.gitanos.org/>

¹¹⁷ www.observatorioproxi.org

¹¹⁸ www.ciberrespect.org

¹¹⁹ <https://maldita.es/malditobulo/>

¹²⁰ <https://migracion.maldita.es/>

¹²¹ <https://www.newtral.es/>

¹²² <http://www.prismproject.eu/>

¹²³ <http://www.reactnohate.eu/>

¹²⁴ <https://www.wordsarestones.eu/>

sponsored by the Council of Europe, also had activities carried out and organizations involved in Spain.¹²⁵

Finally, local governments in many towns and cities across Spain are also working on the issue. The Antirumors Strategy¹²⁶ launched by the Council of Europe was born in Barcelona in 2010. The strategy aims at counteracting rumors and stereotypes, and it combines public policy and strong citizen participation. Currently, more than 15 cities in Spain have an antirumours strategy, and it has now expanded across Europe and beyond.

¹²⁵ <http://www.injuve.es/no-hate/noticia/la-campana-no-hate-speech>

¹²⁶ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/interculturalcities/anti-rumours#:~:text=The%20anti%2Drumour%20strategy%20aims,of%20discriminatory%20and%20racists%20attitudes.>