

SPAIN



The Spanish Radical Right under the shadow of the invasion of Ukraine

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Abstract

Despite the geographical distance, the war in Ukraine has brought to the fore links between the Russian establishment and Radical Right forces in Spain. Both scholars and pundits have taken an interest in the question, which spread to party competition, quickly turning into a (discursive) race away from Putin as the consequences of war become more evident. Despite the war's unquestioned relevance and previous links between Russia and the Radical Right in Spain (albeit less established than in other European countries), a systematic analysis of the effects of the invasion is missing. This report addresses this gap by focusing on the impact of the Ukraine invasion on party discourse and public opinion in Spain. It analyses records of proceedings from the Spanish Parliament, Twitter messages posted by the VOX party and its leader, and survey data gathered since February 2022 by the Spanish Center for Sociological Research (CIS). The main findings at the party level highlight the relatively weak associations between the Kremlin and The Radical Right in Spain (compared to other European countries), as well as efforts to separate from Putin after the invasion started. A more complex pattern of preferences is identified at the individual level.

Keywords: *Radical Right; populism; Russia–Ukraine war; VOX party; Spain*

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Introduction

Located on opposite sides of the European continent from Spain, Russia has seldom exerted much economic and political influence on the country. Whatever influence Moscow had has only declined since European Union (EU) sanctions were introduced in 2014, which adversely affected bilateral trade (Dunaev, 2018; Féas, 2022). These changes have shaped connections between Russian political and economic elites and the Spanish Radical Right.

This report focuses on Russia's links to VOX, the most electorally successful but certainly not the only party with a radical right-wing orientation in Spain.¹ Other relevant parties in the Spanish party system mentioned in this report are the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE), the Partido Popular (PP), and Unidas Podemos (UP). The PSOE—a centre-left party that belongs to the group of the Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament (EP)—received the most votes in the most recent national elections. The PP, currently the main opposition party in Spain, lies on the centre-right and belongs to the European People's Party group in the EP. For its part, UP is a Radical Left party that belongs to the European United Left (GUE/NGL) in the EP and is part of the coalition government led by Pedro Sánchez (Bakker et al., 2020). The UP is itself an electoral coalition dominated by the parties Podemos and Izquierda Unida (IU), which have often been characterized as populist outfits (Ramiro & Gomez, 2016; Marcos-Marne et al., 2020). VOX is universally classified as a Radical Right party because it adheres to authoritarian and nativist ideas (Ferreira, 2019; Mudde, 2004). Populist ideas also appear less consistently in the discourses of the party (Marcos-Marne et al., 2021; Rooduijn et al., 2019).

For a long time, Spain was a European outlier in lacking an electorally successful Radical Right party (Alonso & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2015), but this ended in 2019 when VOX broke through in national elections (Turnbull-Dugarte et al., 2020).² VOX's emergence confirmed the disintegration of Spain's established two-party system, and while the 2019 elections saw a left-wing national government elected, VOX's success quickly had institutional consequences at the subnational level. For

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1. For additional information on the complex relations between comparatively small groups of the Radical Right and Russia, see Albin (2022).
 2. To be clear, radical right-wing parties existed in Spain before VOX attained institutional representation following the regional elections in Andalucía in 2018. However, these were mainly marginal groups that never achieved the electoral success VOX attained nation-wide in April 2019.

example, the PP was only able to form a coalition government in Madrid after VOX was persuaded to abstain and the party's votes were necessary to ensure the PP's regional government in Murcia. In Castilla y León, VOX entered coalition government alongside the PP.

Analysis of relations between VOX and Russia before the invasion of Ukraine falls into several distinct categories. First, in organizational and financial terms, VOX and Russia share several international allies on the Far Right (e.g., Viktor Orbán, Marine Le Pen, and Matteo Salvini), and organizations associated with VOX (i.e., Hazte Oír-CitizenGO) have received funding from Russian oligarchs close to the Kremlin (Datta, 2021). Second, in ideological terms, there is a strong complementarity between the Kremlin and VOX primarily based on nationalism (with a strong emphasis on opposing the EU as a supranational project) and authoritarianism (including resolute opposition to gender equality). There is thus a strong ideological affinity between VOX and the Kremlin, which is not necessarily reflected in deep financial ties (especially when compared to Russia's support for other Radical Right forces in Europe).

To be clear, voices that speak in favour of Putin have continued among VOX politicians even after the invasion of Ukraine started (Testa, 2022). Even before the invasion (and since), party leader Santiago Abascal has pointedly refrained from criticizing Putin in public interviews due to ideological connections (González, 2019, 2022). However, ties have never been as blatant and significant as in other European countries. So then, how has the invasion of Ukraine affected these relations?

The Radical Right parties and Russia after the invasion

At the level of party discourse, the invasion of Ukraine forced VOX to take a comparatively less ambiguous position towards Russia and its president, Vladimir Putin. In this vein, Abascal largely supported both the arrival of refugees³ and sending war supplies to Ukraine, a position that he combined with strong criticism against the EU (both for being too weak and too expansionist) and the Spanish

3. This measure was not supported by all members of VOX, as can be seen in statements issued by VOX Andalucía (Morillo, 2022).



government (blaming UP for having relations with the Russian government). In March 2022, alongside all the parliamentary groups except the Grupo Mixto,⁴ VOX supported an official statement supporting Ukraine and against the invasion by Vladimir Putin. In the same debate, Abascal directed robust discourse against members of the government, accusing them of supporting the invasion of Ukraine indirectly due to government links with Russia via “El Grupo de Puebla”, their critical positions towards NATO, and previous criticisms directed against the Ukrainian government for (allegedly) giving support to Radical Right groups (Congreso de los Diputados, 2022a).

In Spain’s “state of the nation” debate held in the Spanish Parliament in July 2022, VOX’s MPs avoided any positive statements about Russia, the Kremlin, or Vladimir Putin, even if they did accuse Prime Minister Sánchez of using the war in Ukraine to deflect responsibility for the economic crunch (“It is not Putin, it is not Franco, it is not the virus. It is you, Pedro Sánchez, the government, and the erratic economic policy that explains to a great extent the economic collapse suffered...” (Congreso de los Diputados, 2022b, p. 27). Although a systematic analysis of VOX discourse on Twitter is beyond the scope of the current report, there are also enough examples to support the view that the party turned (more) critical toward Russia after February 2022:

Putin’s arrogance progresses due to the silence of many cowardly leaders and the support of tyrants from all around the world, like those from the Grupo de Puebla, formed by socialists and communists from the Spanish government. (Abascal, 2022a)

Putin’s allies are sitting in the government, and Pedro Sánchez should expel them immediately. Spain must support Ukraine unanimously, and there is no room for half-measures. (VOX, 2022)

I celebrate the Spanish Parliament’s support for the Ukrainian president. Zelenskyy has exhibited heroic behaviour in front of the criminal and deadly attack led by Putin, which would have made most Western politicians flee by helicopter. That deserves our recognition. (Abascal, 2022b)

4. The Candidatura de Unidad Popular (CUP), which counts two MPs in Spain’s parliament, decided not to support the official statement as it failed to mention the role of NATO and the United States in the origins of the conflict.

Overall, the invasion of Ukraine has been politicized in the Spanish political landscape, and repertoires of competition have included accusing political opponents of being allies of Putin and his government.⁵ VOX took part in this trend despite its previously ambiguous discourses towards Russia and the Kremlin, mostly focusing its discursive efforts on criticizing UP. However, consistent with the ambiguous relations highlighted above, VOX did not concentrate its communication strategy on the war. Indeed, at the time of writing, only 11 mentions of Putin, 20 of Ukraine, and 8 of Russia have been posted by VOX's official Twitter account since February 2022. Abascal's Twitter account had posted ten mentions of Putin, six of Ukraine, and two of Russia in the same period.

Voters of the Radical Right and Russia after the invasion

Data gathered by the Spanish Center for Sociological Research (CIS) allows for a public opinion perspective on the effects of the war in Ukraine among voters of the Radical Right, focusing on two main topics: the degree of concern about the war in Ukraine and support for different measures to help Ukraine (sending humanitarian help, hosting refugees, putting pressure on Putin to withdraw the army, and advocating for direct NATO intervention).⁶ To allow for comparisons, we grouped respondents in each survey of the CIS by vote recall (which party the respondent voted for) in the last national elections (held in November 2019), considering the four parties that garnered the highest vote share: the PSOE, the PP, VOX and UP.

The lines in Figure 1 represent the share of voters for each of the four main parties declaring little or no concern at all about the war. These values evidence that most of the respondents were at least somehow concerned about the war, as the percentage plotted never reaches 30% or even 15% for the two main parties. They further suggest an overall growing lack of concern about the war among voters of all parties, with comparatively higher values displayed by voters of VOX and UP. Last, they indicate that voters of VOX were the least concerned about the war in

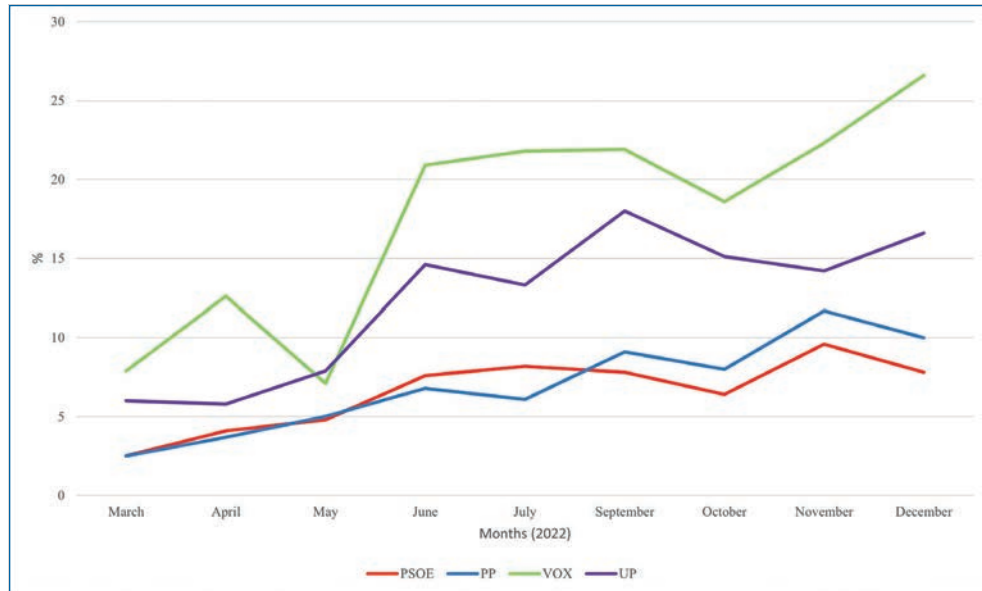
5. Criticisms directed towards Russia have traditionally had traction among the Radical Right in Spain, and VOX emphasized links between Russia, as the successor to the USSR, and current members of the government belonging to the Spanish Communist Party.

6. The CIS surveys used in this section can be retrieved from the Center for Sociological Research (n.d.).



eight out of nine surveys conducted by the CIS between March and December 2022 (in May, voters of VOX and UP reported almost the same level of concern with the selected indicator).

Figure 1. Share of respondents reporting little or no concern about the war in Ukraine by party voted for at the last election (March-December 2022).



Source: Author's elaboration based on data from the Center for Sociological Research (Study 3355, 3359, 3363, 3366, 3371, 3375, 3380, 3384, and 3388).

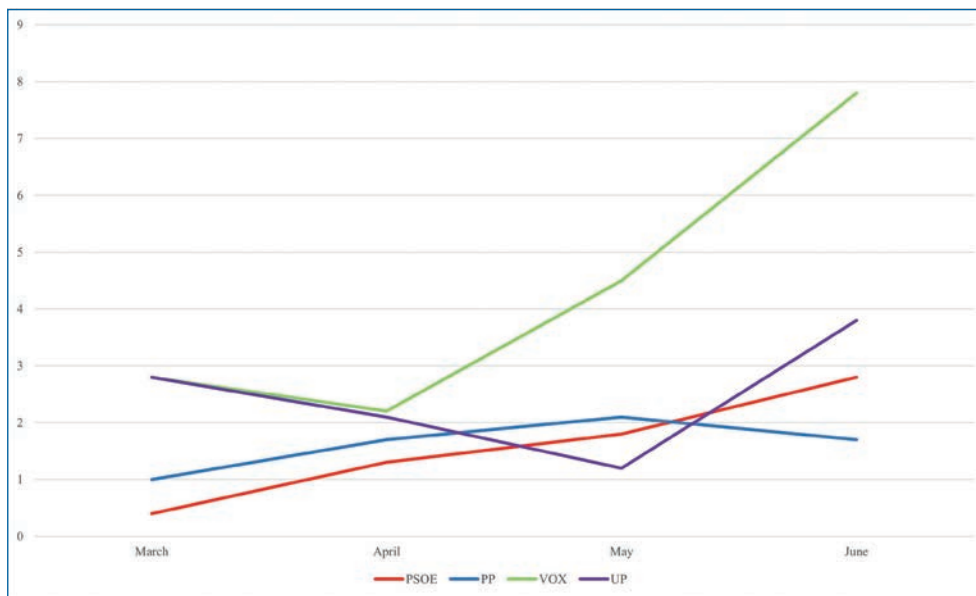
Beyond levels of concern, a battery of questions referring to specific measures regarding the invasion of Ukraine were asked in four different surveys between March and June. Four of them were selected for this report and refer to sending humanitarian help to Ukraine, hosting refugees from Ukraine, putting pressure on Putin to withdraw the army from Ukraine, and supporting a NATO direct intervention on Ukrainian territory.

Figures 2 to 5 show the percentage of voters for each party that disagree or disagree strongly with each of these measures. It can be seen in Figure 2 that respondents who declared to have voted for VOX were the least disposed to sending humanitarian help to Ukraine (a trend particularly visible in May and June). Voters of VOX also opposed more clearly the hosting of refugees from Ukraine (Figure 3), but the evolution of preferences in this group seems to diverge from the others. Voters of PSOE, PP, and UP start with very low levels of disagreement that grow only marginally with time. The trend for voters of VOX is more U-shaped as it starts with much higher levels of disagreement in March and April, almost joins the three other parties in May, and deviates again in June with higher levels of debate.

I speculate this trend could be explained because discourses of VOX towards Ukrainian refugees, comparatively much more positive than previous refugee crises, had an effect among its voters that vanished with time as the invasion went on in time, and less public attention was devoted to it.

VOX's voters also express reluctance towards the notion the government should pressure Putin to withdraw Russian forces from Ukrainian territory (as do UP voters, albeit less so, see Figure 4). Last, the distribution of preferences vis-à-vis direct NATO intervention in Ukraine shows that UP voters most strongly disagreed with this proposal (Figure 5). This might be explained by the traditional negative relationship between NATO and the (radical) Left in Spain (Viñas, 1988).⁷ In this case, the position of VOX voters was indistinguishable from that of PSOE and PP voters.

Figure 2. Share of respondents who disagree with sending humanitarian help to Ukraine, grouped by party voted and CIS survey wave (March-June 2022)

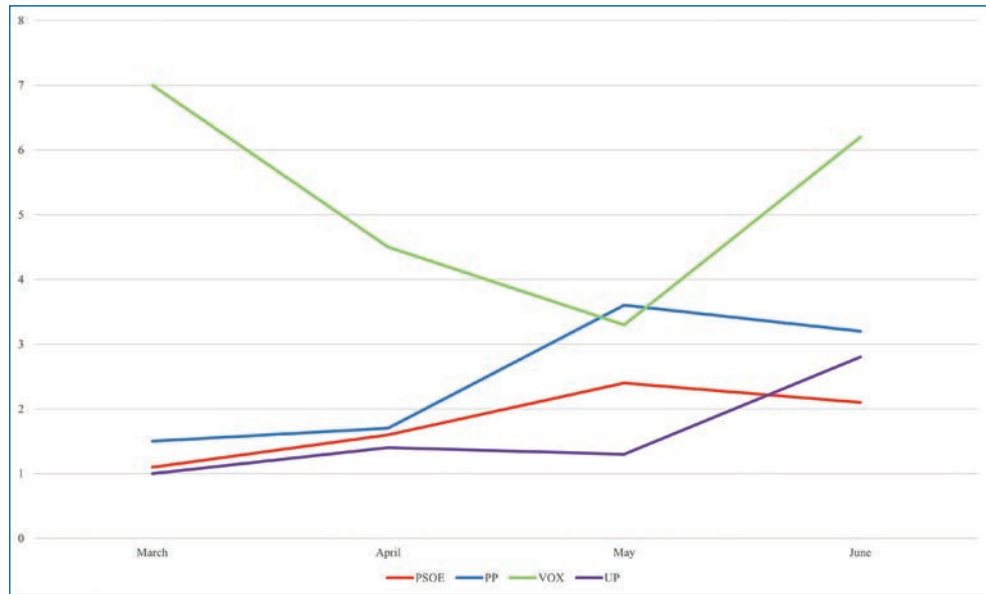


Source: Author's elaboration with data from the Center for Sociological Research (Study 3355, 3359, 3363, and 3366).

7. This position has been mainly based on anti-imperialism, anti-militarism and non-alignment infused with a critical view of the foreign action of the United States. PSOE's turn from criticizing to supporting Spain's participation in the NATO in 1986 was a major political issue that put to an end the overall agreement of left-wing forces in this regard. The radical left-wing IU was born in 1986 at the height of mobilization against NATO and has remained opposed to NATO since then.

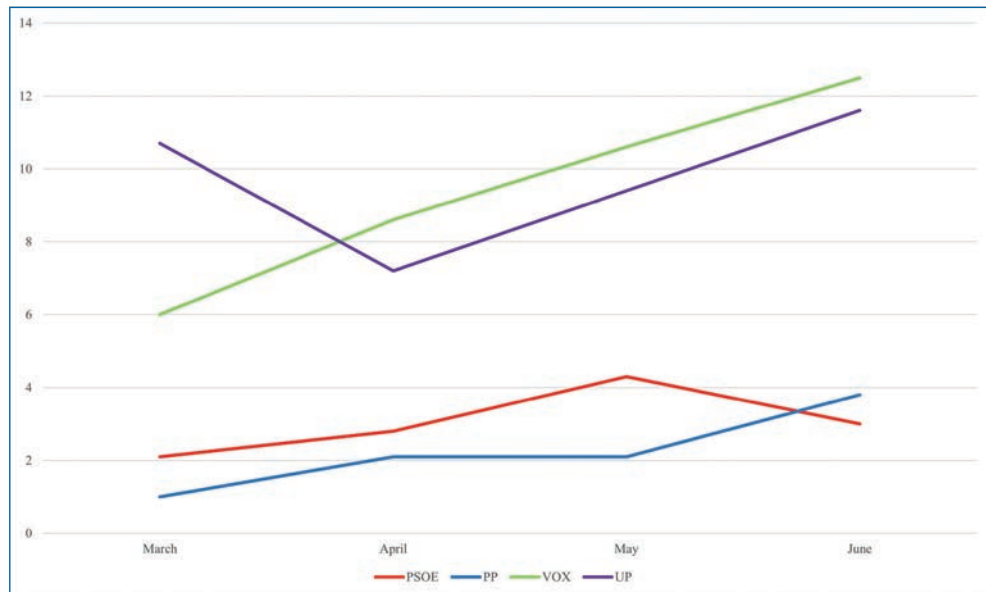


Figure 3. Share of respondents who disagree with hosting refugees from Ukraine, grouped by party voted and CIS survey wave (March-June 2022)



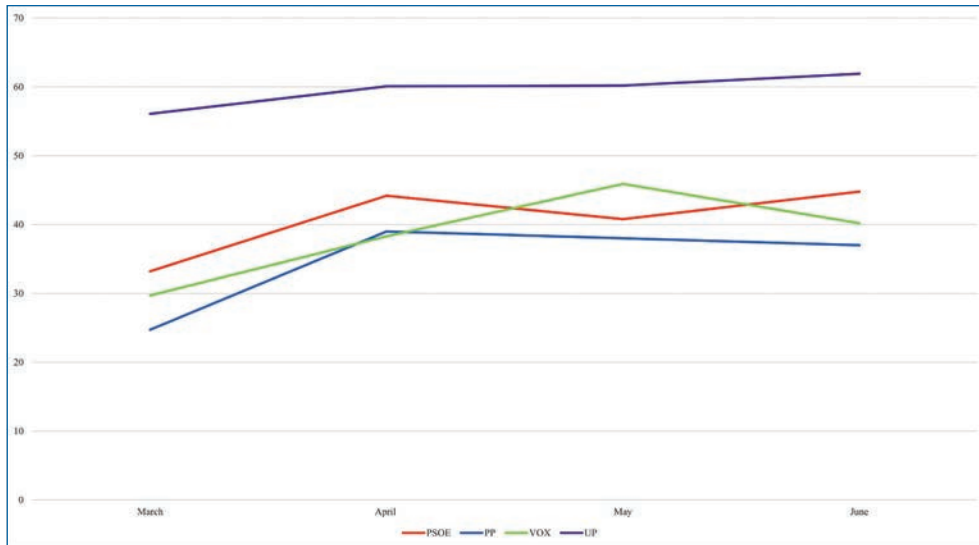
Source: Author's elaboration with data from the Center for Sociological Research (Study 3355, 3359, 3363, and 3366).

Figure 4. Percentage of respondents who disagree with putting pressure on Putin to withdraw the Russian army, grouped by party voted and CIS survey wave (March-June 2022).



Source: Author's elaboration with data from the Center for Sociological Research (Study 3355, 3359, 3363, and 3366).

Figure 5. Percentage of respondents who disagree with direct NATO intervention in Ukraine, grouped by party voted and CIS survey wave.



Source: Author's elaboration with data from the Center for Sociological Research (Study 3355, 3359, 3363, and 3366).

Final remarks

The weak and somewhat ambiguous links between VOX and the Kremlin transformed after the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Although not very frequent, the main messages from VOX on the war have criticized Putin's government, presented Ukraine in a positive light, and often accused members of the Spanish government of collaborating with Russia. Therefore, the invasion of Ukraine has been integrated into the discourse of VOX as a second-order element used to undermine the position of rival parties within a more integrated discourse, including nationalist and authoritarian elements. Although further analysis would be needed to test the proposition, we might speculate that the party's limited public profile on the war reflects the fact that any pro-Ukraine message would not sit well with the party's virulent anti-EU positioning, together with the ideological affinities between VOX and the Kremlin that persist despite the war.

At the individual level, VOX voters are comparatively less concerned about the war, which seems consistent with the low-profile strategy mentioned above. They are also comparatively more reluctant to help Ukraine by sending humanitarian help, hosting refugees, or calling on Putin to withdraw. Overall, the findings from this report suggest that the association between Russia and VOX can be better explained by focusing on the radical right-wing component of the party's discourse (crucially, nationalism and authoritarianism) rather than the populist one.



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