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## **Abstract**

Drawing on the analysis of public controversies around violent speech or act, this paper examines the construction of ‘extremism’ in Spain. We explore how differences in public understanding of the limits of the (un)acceptable end up in a process that normalizes far right. We argue that singularities of each country’s political culture play a role in the understanding of extremism. Our paper examines four cases: a public debate on terrorism glorification, an episode of collective violence, a group of retired militaries deploying violence speech, and an episode of anti-Semite speech in a public francoist memorialization. We show how, while certain political expressions are constructed as extreme, other remain in the realm of the normal. Our findings shed light into the process whereby far right is downplayed and clarifies some challenges faced by PVE paradigms.

Key words: extremism, radical, far-right, banalization, public controversies, political culture, Spain

## **1. Introduction**

In November 2019, a public facility for the reception of unaccompanied minors in Madrid was assaulted with a grenade, after the far-right political party adopted a political rhetoric against migrant unaccompanied children in the previous days. Four days later, an attack that was carried out with military equipment, could not be traced in the newspapers. How is it possible that such an event not only did not become a security issue, framed within counterterrorism or extremism, but did not even spark public concern? In this paper, we argue that, to answer this question, we need to explore the

socio-political processes through which some forms of extremism are constructed as a threat, becoming a security concern, while others are not, specifically looking at Spain.

Recent events such as the US Capitol has brought far-right violence into the centre of the conversation within CTS. In international and domestic political conversations and in academic circles, this revolves around whether certain far-right inspired acts should be considered as terrorism and extremism and how these movements should be dealt with. The existing literature highlight how this violence is rarely dubbed as terrorism and the concept of violent extremism is rarely used to refer to these parties. We scrutinize why and how this violence is downplayed. This is an urgent question for CTS and Terrorism and Security Studies in general, specifically considered that the C/PVE architecture is built to anticipate terrorism by intervening on ‘extremist’ speech and ideas.

Overall, CTS have been key to deconstruct discourses and representations of violence (Jackson, 2005) and to bring politics into its understandings. More recently, CTS research has established how countering and preventing radicalisation and extremism have been based on pathologisation and depoliticisation narratives (Baker-Beall, Heath-Kelly and Jarvis, 2015). Nevertheless, while significant (Massoumi, Mills and Miller, 2020; Martin, 2019; Pettinger, 2020a), few are the CTS authors that have focused on the role of political actors in shaping our understandings of violence. Drawing on CTS, we understand that there is an ideational dimension constructing behaviours and ideas into threats. However, we argue, constructions are related to the singularities of specific political cultures that, despite having an international Western cosmopolitan component, are nationally dependent. In other words, ‘extremism’ is the result of a *repertoire* of established consensuses that range from global human rights regimes to specificities of each country’s political cultures. Looking at Spain, we scrutinize the multi-actors’ construction of what we metaphorically call ‘red lines’ of the acceptable in politics in the public sphere. To specify what falls under the label of ‘extremism’ we need to examine public debates around issues that bring the ‘red lines’ of each society to the conversation and grasp what is understood as a threat and what remains in the realm of the normal in the Spanish context.

Spain has a long history of counter-terrorism, but countering and preventing radicalisation and extremism programmes have not been systematically implemented yet. Nevertheless, ‘extremism’ has been surveilled for the last decades through and expanded CT legislation that allows the anticipation of speech conducive to violence (Fernández de Mosteyrín y Limón, 2018). In fact, many people have been prosecuted in Spain under jihadist terrorism, most of them being charged under preparatory acts and indoctrination. According to the Spanish Ministry of Justice, 122 sentences have been issued since 2004-2020 for terrorist glorification (2011-2020), several musicians and artist targeted under this legislation. Debates on violence, extremism and free speech are not new in the country. However, in winter 2020/2021, the growth of far-right party VOX, international rising

authoritarianism or the US capitol assaults brought free speech, violence, and radicalism to the centre of public and political debates, opening the context in which our four controversies become intelligible.

Our article develops in three parts: we first provide our theoretical framework by adding the notion of political culture to constructivist approach and discussing our methodological anchors. We proceed with then analysis of the construction of ‘extremism’. For each case, we focus on three core aspects of threat construction: 1) the construction of threat; 2) the qualities attached to ‘the radical’; 3) reactions and positionings to counter the threat. We finally discuss how far-right cases are minimized as a source of concern.

## **2. Capturing political culture**

Social phenomena are productive through language, but culture is more than discourse and practice. The understanding of extremism depends on wider political cultures conceived as the set of values, political representations, moral universes, identities, collective experiences, and memories that become the social scaffolding of politics (Eliasoph and Lichterman, 2003; Swidler, 2003). In other words, political culture provides the frame of intelligibility for how a community thinks of extremism. The way extremism is constructed can be captured by scrutinising public controversies and media discourse (Cerulo, 1998). In fact, the analysis of public controversies allows to scrutinise those social situations where collective consensus is built through the mobilization of speech by collective actors in the public sphere.

The study of controversies has revealed fruitful to find out how culture works in action. Controversies do not emerge in a vacuum; they are processes where competing ‘moral entrepreneurs’ seek support for their interpretations (Wagner-Pacifici y Schwartz 1991, 382). Culture emerges in its most conflictive nature in the realm of social practices and symbolic universes of social groups, politicians or experts that converge in a public controversy. It is here that we can explore actors’ constructions of threats but also of collective consensus – built on symbolic universes, ideological cosmovisions, previous experiences, or memories of the past.

Whenever something is constructed as a threat, it becomes securitized and ruled out of the political normal. In an opposite logic, whenever something is not constructed as threat, it is envisioned as ordinary and somehow unproblematic. As the opposite to threat, we work with the idea of the banalization in terms conferred by M. Billig, in his seminal examination of nationalism (Billig, 1995). As he puts it, mainstream nationalism is banal because it is routinised into everyday political life becoming invisible; it is not the waving of a national flag in moments of collective effervescence, but the flag quietly hanging on a public building what encapsulates this idea. Transposing his argument, we use banal to condense violent speech that, far from making noise, gets its path through the public

sphere without being signalled as a threat. Banal can also be understood as trivial, frivolous, anecdotal, and mundane. As such, this second understanding of banal remits to specific discourses and practices through which certain issues are downplayed.

Our paper covers four of such cases: C1) a public debate around glorification of terrorism and the limits of free speech stimulated by the imprisonment of a musician; C2) an episode of collective violence; C3) a group of Spanish retired military men deploying violent speech in private social media; C4) an episode of anti-Semitic speech in a public francoist memorialization. The cases set in motion a multidimensional negotiation of meaning displaying different conceptions, interests and competing visions and meanings over what is threatening, what the sources of ‘extremism’ are, and what is to be done. The result is a layered discourse for which cultural repertoires are mobilised to draw on established consensus and to generating new meanings (Swidler, 2003). While C1 and C2 became real public controversies, C3 and C4 became anecdotal.

Although these episodes would look extraordinary, all the four are frequent in Spanish politics in the last years. As illustrated, CT law have been used to tackle certain types of extreme speech. At the same time, homages, and rituals of francoist exaltation are frequent, at least 5000 memorial pieces are still scattered across the country, victims are still to be recognized and repaired and, more importantly, no *cordon sanitaire* has been set to avoid far-right parties entering institutions so far. And yet, none of these issues are usually framed under the label ‘extremism’.

In the flow of each case’s public conversation, consensual assumptions and common dissents arose, shaping the construction of the ‘normal’ and the ‘pathological’, the threats and the acceptable as something that we metaphorically call the *red lines*: 1) the distinction between speech an act and the centrality of violence (and its potential victims) as the limits of acceptable free speech; 2) specific characterizations of ‘the radical’ as carriers of threats (depicted as responsible o enemies) and their bonds with other actors or organizations; 3) collective reactions to these two components, both legal and discursive (rituals of condemnation as proof of democracy). All forms of meaning are derived from positions in society, so layers of meaning serve as the cultural underpinning of present understandings of the normal and the extreme. Besides the obvious left-right ideological axis, the international referent, the generational approach, and the ever-present political memories of the past, anchor the construction of meaning both extreme and of the normal/acceptable.

### **3. Methodology**

The four episodes took place in December 2020-March 2021. What allows us to reconstruct the four different episodes into controversies was the amount of talk generated, socio-political actors’

positioning, and the level of public attention devoted. Therefore, we first built the controversies and then juxtaposed them to find the construction of the threat – or lack thereof.

We map these debates through an in-depth analysis of Spanish written media to find the ‘voice’ of various actors such as government, policy actors, political parties, civil society organizations, and other media through editorials, news, interviews, public statements, and reportages. However, we did not only considered media as spaces that only reproduce priorities and frames and give voice to other actors. We used them as powerful actors that shape the public talk agenda, privileging specific voices - i.e., ‘authorized opinions’, experts, scholars, opinion leaders, pundits – and setting the parameters of the conversation. Therefore, our analysis covers all kinds of articles published from December 5<sup>th</sup>, 2020 to March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2021 on four major Spanish newspapers in digital version: *El País* (mainstream progressive); *Eldiario.es* (left-wing); *ABC* (mainstream liberal conservative); *El Español* (right-wing).

In decoding meaning, we systematized the amount and density of the information produced in each case, the selected and privileged voices, the overall account of the problem of violent speech/act and the semantics of extremism emerging therein. We then proceeded with discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2006) with a pre-selected category system (the threat, the radical, the reaction) and a basic ideological axis (left /right – progressive/conservative) to further combine it with a grounded theory approach. Emergent categories were fruitful for the interpretation of consensus and dissents (ideological, visions of the international, generational positioning) and to find emergent categories that became core to the analysis, like political memories.

#### **4. Constructing extremism through public controversies**

##### *4.1 Case one. Speech and its limits: glorification of terrorism.*

In early February 2021, the Spanish rapper, Pablo Hasél, was arrested by the Catalan police. Spain’s central High Court, the *Audiencia Nacional*, had found him guilty over a series of Tweets expressing support for terrorist organizations such as the now-defunct Basque group ETA. He also supported the Marxist GRAPO<sup>1</sup>, referring to a GRAPO militant shot dead by police in 1982, saying he was ‘murdered by the police for defending our rights’. The Spanish Crown was also a target in some of his songs and some tweets. Various messages were insulting King Felipe VI and his father Juan Carlos, depicted by the rapper as ‘drunken tyrant’ and a ‘fascist’ and ‘mafia capo’, calling him ‘Juan

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<sup>1</sup> Radical left armed organization operating during the Spanish Transition.

Carlos el Bobon’ — roughly, ‘Juan Carlos the idiot’. Hasél also accused them of homicide, embezzlement, corruption and other several crimes. He called the national police ‘murderers’ and accused the Guardia Civil of torturing demonstrators and murdering migrants using the term ‘Nazional Police’. He was sentenced in March 2018 to a prison term of two years, a punishment later reduced to nine months as his Twitter messages did ‘not pose a real risk’. It was because of his criminal record that the Spanish High Court ruled that the new prison term could not be put on hold, as it would usually happen for these crimes. Hasél was punished under criminal codes controversially reformed by the previous conservative administration in 2015. His case reignited a public debate about crimes involving freedom of expression, its limits.

These events happened in a public atmosphere where Trump’s inspired Capitol assault in early January stimulated a conversation on the limits of speech, generating significant amount of information and published opinion on the case, including the transposition of those event’s logic to Spanish populisms. In early February 2021, the rapper’s case entered major written media whose published accounts, articles, and opinion pieces brought the conversation on these issues to the fore. As the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) has condemned Spanish state in several related lawsuits and, more recently the Council of Europe has called for the reform of certain criminal code provisions (including terrorism glorification), the case adopted a contentious debate of positions. A multilevel conversation started taking place involving all different kinds of actors. A group of 200 artists and civil society organizations from the culture sector, publicized an open letter to the Spanish government in defence of the rapper. Civil society organizations (human rights, culture, victims of terrorism...) were also visible. Disagreements appeared even in Courts (Elpaís, 01/16/2021), divided by visions of the fundamental rights exercise (in coherence with the ECHR’s position). All of this pushed the government to announce a criminal code reform to soften certain punishments. However, on the one hand, left-wing party in the government’s coalitions, *Podemos*, stated the need to revoke the crime of ‘insults to the Crown’ and ‘terrorism glorification’ (Cué, 09/02/2021). On the other hand, the other left-wing government party, *PSOE*, positioned itself more in line with the ECHR requirements.

### *Concerns, threats, and sources of extremism*

The conversation about free speech revealed different sources of concern and thresholds of democratic tolerance. Different actors participated in displaying discourses of such limits, helping to clarify to what extent Hasél-like phenomena represented a threat, what other sources of concern should be considered, and how to respond.

The four newspapers joined the conversation in very unbalanced ways. Liberal-conservative inspired *Abc* and *El Español* devoted less attention to Hasél's case, and much more to the transposition of Capitol's events to Spanish forms of populism envisaged as threats. They evaluated the international as a source of toxic transnational political expression (populism) that ends up adopting domestic forms, or as a source of comparison to EU countries with similar legislation. In contrast, progressive *Elpais* and *Eldiario* framed the Hasél's case in a wider debate on the limits of speech and the need to reform criminal laws looking at the international political universe as the source of inspiration and democratic standards. In the same conversation, a stronger focus was set, either on the case of the rapper as a potential source of threat, or on populist parties (left wing and peripheral nationalism parties) as a source or concern.

Similarly, for progressive actors such as the Socialist party, *Podemos* party, civil liberties organizations, progressive law experts, the European space became a source of resonance and emphasis was placed on the European institutions warning. Although there is consensus over the stark difference between speech and act, *Eldiario* is more focused on EU standards, the criminalization of dissent or the disequilibrium between left wing musicians and far right events (see C4), while the problem of violence is more developed in *Elpais*. Contrastingly, the conservative *ABC* and *El Español* enter the debate on the line of their previous transposition of the Capitol events to Spanish populism – i.e., represented, according to their view, by represented by *Podemos*, Catalan Independentist, Catalan Republicans, Basque radical nationalists. They use the international as a source of comparison of other countries' legal regulations of free speech as applied to incitements of violence. This kind of populism is a 'threat to democracy' (*ElEspañol*, Editorial 01/08/2021), and the transposition of the Capitol assault to Spain is observable:

'you have to be blind to not be able to see the invisible threat that ties *Podemos* and Donald Trump, ERC (Catalan republicans) to (French) National Front, Ada Colau (Barcelona *Podemos* Major) to Jair Bolsonaro, Arnaldo Otegui (Basque radical nationalist) to Hogar Social (far right organization), Black Lives Matter to Anti-Vaccine organizations: their profound philosophical, intrinsically antidemocratic, illiterate, redeemers genetic...(…) even in horns are our *golpistas* similar to them' (*Campos*, C. *El Español*, 8/01/2021).

All these different political expressions are labelled as 'populists' and constructed as threats and democratic anomalies. The recurrent denial of legitimacy is sustained through the accusation of those political parties as dwelling a realm they do not belong to and through deployment of a language of 'dangerous enemies', 'internal enemies', 'separatist' and 'hispanophobic' (*Ondarroa*, *El Español*, 25/01/2021). The international is the symbolic universe to compare and to turn vernacular what is considered a menace to democracy (*Vilches*, J., *El Español*, 8/01/2021). So, in the conservative press, Hasél was not discussed straight-forward and he was eventually subsumed in the scope of *Podemos*'

‘threatening influence’ in the coalition government. Therefore, rather than analysing his case, Hasél becomes the excuse to delegitimize the governmental coalition and blame the more left-wing part of the coalition (Podemos) of *extremism*.

The source of extremism being different for different actors, C1 is a complex controversy about what can be said or not; a debate that has a clear and consensual ‘red line’ in the threat of violence. This explains why crimes of victims’ humiliation and terrorist glorification are very controversial. In fact, on both ideological sides, there is actors’ consensus about the fact that speech and act are two very distinguishable dimensions of social behavior, that freedom of speech is a first most liberty and condition to democracy where the only limit is the explicit incitement to violence. If it is speech, anything is acceptable:

‘I prefer a country where Francisco Franco’s Foundation is legal, but no rappers are sentenced for sulfuric tweets (...) laws should punish acts, not speech: and no, P. Hasél is not a threat to society. No more than the mentioned foundation and their sexual coups fantasies’ (Lorena G. Maldonado, *El Español*, 02/13/2021).

Generational consensus is clear among progressive *El País* and conservative *ABC* – two major media along the democratic period – and liberal -conservative inspired *El Español*, over the fact that, while speech and act are to be differentiated for democratic reasons, there are two limits that, even in the context of a reform of criminal laws, cannot be ignored: 1) the state still needs this legal types for preventing terrorism, as jihadist violence still being a major threat ; 2) victims of terrorism are to be protected from humiliation. This position is well accepted by mainstream media and sets the threshold of in the realm of terrorism. As such, this consensus anchors in the CT efforts to combat ETA by anticipating violent speech of communities of legitimation, and through the mobilization of victims as democracy safeguards (Heath-Kelly and Fernández de Mosteyrín, 2021):

‘Special attention should be given to those types of terrorism glorification and victim’s humiliation, considering trauma in recent Spanish experience (...) a complete depenalization seems ill-timed, in attention to Spanish history and political present – different to neighbour countries-. (...) in a different socio-political context, a radical change would be possible, but now, a U-turn without consensus would provoke a rupture; persistence threat of other types of terrorism should be beard in mind’ (*Elpais*, Editorial. 02/13/2021)

The mobilisation of the memory frame of ETA became a rhetorical means to set the limits of the acceptable in terrorism and its victims. The three *El País*, *ABC*, *El Español* ‘generational’ media resort to this frame of memory to justify the limits of a possible law reform in discourse conducive to violence and victims’ humiliation.

*Who are the radicals? From individuals to collective actors*

In early emergence of C1, the rapper is anecdotal as he is one among others that has faced ‘free speech’ charges. It should be acknowledged that progressive media, specifically *Eldiario.es*, give significant space to the analysis of the limits of free speech and the control of dissent. The hegemonic focus is set on the problem, not so much on Hasél, in a deliberate effort to avoid the construction of a free speech martyr. And still, while efforts are made not to devote much attention to him, he does not dodge the label of ‘radical’. All outlets but *Eldiario* deploy trivial language to refer to him with laughable epithets, but only conservative press refers to him as ‘antisistema’<sup>2</sup> and ‘radical’. Depoliticising him, it is in the depiction of the ‘radical’ where the mobilization of the generational frame is more visible (‘too young’ and ‘too well served in a democratic country to be consider a martyr of free speech’ when there are many living people that with prison experience under Francoism). In an infantilized depiction, he ‘deserves death because of his hideous lyrics’ (Maldonado, *El Español*, 02/13/2021). He is regarded as not knowing what he talks about (communism, anarchisms) through a somewhat patronizing frame of the generation that made the Spanish Transition to democracy. He is presented as more of a clumsy- stupid genre:

‘I am not afraid of Hasél, can’t imagine why anybody should, I feel compassion. Because he is 33 – like Jesus – another radical- and he is already being crucified (...) crucified face but without epic or apostle (...) whenever he shows up in prison he will be bumped in his head like in childhood bar games’ (Maldonado, *El Español*, 02/13/2021).

To the conservative press, Hasél represents one ‘sort’ of a group individuals that may raise concerns. While threat related terms like social-communist or ETA’s trustee were used, (Sinova, *J El Español* 01/19/21) the semantics of extremism emerge and would evolve in the following weeks, shaping C2. Moreover, memory frames help the depiction of the radical too. In fact, the memory of Spanish Transition is mobilized by many contributors, columnists, and politicians to construct him as an ‘immature kid’, ‘martyr of nothing’, never a ‘truly antifascist’ (Maldonado, *El Español*, 02/13/2021). He is judges as not representing the fighting for liberties, according to a generation of Spaniards that considers themselves as representing the ones challenging Francoism and making the Transition possible (especially visible in *Elpaís /Abc/ El Español*).

While efforts were made by conservative press to incorporate the threat of ‘populism’ to C1’s conversation, a clear threatening discourse did not become central to it.

*Reactions: When limits are set, what should be done?*

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<sup>2</sup> The Spanish word for: outsider, extremist, radical.

A previous consensus shows, limit of speech is set when an actual incitation to violence happens. In addition to legal action, the practice of condemnation appears as the collective ritual of expulsion from the normal politics. It is the social practice of positioning whereby organizations, especially political parties, speak clearly against violence. This is something well ritualized in Spanish politics in the last two decades in the domain of the politics of counterterrorism (Fernández de Mosteyrín, 2020) as it has become ‘proof of democracy’ and ‘community of legitimation’ (Apter, 1997). Condemnation represents the ritual to be accepted in the political community.

C1 opens a conversation about the limits of the acceptable. It shows the normalization of the use of CT laws for radical speech opening a crack in previous consensus and marginal critics. It clarifies how the international dimension, the generational ruptures and the political memories shape the ways positions are negotiated shaping public understandings of ‘extremism’, although the language and semantics of ‘extremism’ is not fully visible. Hasél’s glorification lawsuit stimulated the ‘canonical’ consensus in Spanish politics. Speech is acceptable to the extent that it does not convey violence incitation (i.e., conceived as terrorism). This controversy has all the elements of the CT consensus Spain has developed along the years (Fernández de Mosteyrín, 2020; 2021). While legislation may need to be reformed – and there are arguments by almost all media holding this position- violence/terrorism sets the limits and the *red line*.

#### 4.2 Case Two. Violence in action: crossing the red lines

Hasél’s arrest triggered a wave of protests resulting in clashes with the riot police in several Spanish cities, including Lleida, Barcelona, Girona, Madrid, and Valencia. Hundreds of demonstrators gathered calling for the rapper to be released and wielding banners reading ‘enough censorship’. Urban furniture and vehicles were set on fire while vandalism acts were carried out. In a clash with the police, a woman in Barcelona suffered an eye injury after police shot foam rounds into the crowd. A police van was set on fire with police agent inside. What started as a protest for the rapper became three weeks of sustained violent riots resulting in many injured demonstrators and police officers, heavy material damage, several detainees.

The analysis of the causes vanished, and the conversation shifted from the ‘what’ to the ‘who’. C1 situated discourses on ‘the radical’ at the forefront. At this point, the conversation on public speech turned into tons of paper, hours of television and radio podcast about violence. In written media, specially *Elpaís* and *ABC*, almost all collaborators wrote a piece related to violence, especial

senior long-term contributors, and well-known opinion leaders. Every political party positioned itself against the eruption of violence along those days, while the practice of condemnation became core to the negotiation of meaning.

### *Threats and sources of extremism*

The problem was not free speech anymore, but the use of violence in politics. Vocabularies of delegitimation, well-rehearsed in Spain in the last decades in the fight ETA and later transposed into any sort of collective action, were deployed (Fernández de Mosteyrín, 2018). These expressed ‘unacceptable violence’ and depicted ‘un-stabilizing minorities embedded in the ‘*Podemos*’ influence’. Once violence appeared, discontent was depoliticised. Debates on the origins of violence kept appearing in *Elpaís* (Querol, *Elpaís* 02/22/2021; Sanz, *Elpaís*, 02/22/2021). However, it was argued that these ‘forms [of manifesting discontent are ‘watering [social discontent issues] them down’ (Grandes, *Elpaís*, 02/22/2021).

These juveniles were not regarded as representing their generation. Moreover, arguments for the examination of root causes shaded when claims of condemnation occupied the centre of the debate. In elucidating where expression ends and violence starts, *Elpaís* and its contributors kept the storyline initiated in C1, setting the limit in incitation. However, these protests are said not to express politics anymore, but channelling ‘pure rage’ (Querol, *Elpaís* 02/22/2021). Violent riots made evident the fact that certain discourses are regarded as conducive to violence:

‘In times where any antifeminist or racial, joke is punished with civil death (...) [freedom of speech] is more necessary than ever [but] to consider that free speech is freedom for defamation, death threats, horrible offenses to people and institutions, applauses to terrorists (...) why prosecuting pederasty, or fake news? Why not dismiss evolution from schools? With messages like these, Capitol invaders were motivated’ (Savater, *Elpaís*, 02/27/2021).

Just like C1, the international continues to be the source of comparison and transposition and equation of different sources of extremism:

‘Donald Trump did not invent it. He just pushes an old sophistry to the limits of political discourse: the negation of reality (...) in Spain, it is regularly used by *Podemos* (...). Hasel related riots is the perfect example that supported with their ‘hornbill knives’ to attack Catalan police’s action and the Government by the back’ (Elorza, *Elpaís* 03/03/2021)

The generational position helps those in mediatic power to analyse events from the position of political memories that give them the superiority status of having experience pro-democracy conflict against Franco’s regime:

‘(...) it is not the same to stand before a tyranny than a recently elected president, or fighting for threatening liberties than setting on fire and looting a city in defence of the wrong hero’ (Querol, *Elpaís*, 02/22/21)

Marginal in *Elpaís*, the examination of root causes became core in *Eldiario.es*. This echoed international standards and human rights and reproduced international court’s condemnation of Spain for not investigate police brutality (Herrera, *Eldiario*, 03/09/2021), pointing to structural problems that were vanishing from press accounts and political parties’ narrative. This newspaper made a visible effort to signal sources of violence (structural violence, police brutality, far right acceptability...) and denouncing the synecdochally approach that takes the minority as the majority, and such minority ‘under the influence of *Podemos*’ to depolitise events:

‘The ‘garbage of the country’ (police brutality, arbitrary detentions, demonization of demonstrations) is not in the conversation, but the burning garbage bin is’ (Gallego, *Eldiario*, 02/22/2021)

‘Too much attention has been given to a violent minority vis a vis a pacific majority’ (Rodriguez, *Eldiario*, 02/22/2021)

Conservative media, commentators, and political parties, including far Right party (VOX), subsumed violence under the influence of what they called the ‘social-communist’ government. A pyramidal logic’s synecdoche is used to depict *Podemos* as the instigator and PM Sánchez (PSOE) as tolerating ‘extremism’ within his coalition government. Following the lead of C1, in which the extremist threat was *populism* in the Spanish Government, violent riots further sustained this argument. Vice-president and member of *Podemos*, Pablo Iglesias, was labelled as ‘extremist’. *Podemos*’s spokesperson earlier tweet encouraging ‘antifascist’ youth standing up against police brutality<sup>3</sup>, served to connect violent riots to *Podemos*, and to pressure Sánchez to push *Podemos* out of the coalition:

‘What is more serious about violence is that it is justified from a party that shares government with PSOE. Democracy knows how to defeat vandalic violence through policing and law. But [democracy] it is much more vulnerable when it has a spy mole of the violent among the Executive’ (*ABC* Editorial, 02/20/2021)

Summing up, in the framing of C2 what is more visible is the shift from the problem and its causes to the individuals. In a continuation of C1’s logic, speech and act are two separated things, but ‘violent speech’ is clearly envisaged as explaining violent riots and synecdochally connected to other actors that end up being hold accountable by the ‘community of legitimation’.

*Who are the radicals? From individuals to collective actors*

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<sup>3</sup> Formally accused of hate crimes at the Spanish Supreme Court on March 2021.

If C1 showed two sources of extremism and consequently two different depictions of the radical (Hasél and ‘Populists’), depictions of radicals in C2 include violent participants in riots. Demonstrators become ‘delinquents’, equating the few for the many, removing any sort of political motivation through either pathological or ‘terrorist’ depictions. The radicals are envisaged as ‘irrational’ and pathological, regarded as ‘an abnormal society’, ‘noisy troublemakers’ and ‘diabolic society’ (Lapuente, Elpaís, 03/23/2021). In a much stronger terms, but equally depoliticising, conservative press and parties deployed the frame of ETA – depicting rioters as ‘terrorist’ and participants as ‘savage hordes’ (El Español, XX) that have nothing to do with politics:

‘I do not believe that the pyromaniac care nothing about the bully rapper, it is a violence that is like the children of ETA (...) even though journalist try to not photograph terrorists, leaders are distinguishable.’ (Azúa, El País, 02/03/2021)

‘In the vanguard of *haselims*, there are some regular suspects: antisystem, *antifa*, anarchists, football hooligans, CDRs, disturbed teenagers, all those who (...) would set garbage containers on fire for P. Hasél or Jocker (...) (Silva, El Español. 02/20/2021).

This vision of ‘haselism’ as containing an amalgam of political and non-political outsiders is underpinned by the claim (by police agencies, media, and some experts) of the presence of dangerous organizations and transnational movements operating behind violent protestors. As in C1, the international imaginaries shape the understanding of events to the extent that anarchism or extreme left organizations become the source of violent agitators that spread turmoil from one country to another.

Two rhetorical mechanisms for delegitimizing of demonstrators maintain the hegemonic discourse. First, a generational positioning on the sort ‘If they had the chance of having some alternative source of leisure, they would not engage in violence’ (Coll, *Elpaís*, 02/21/2021), that underpins the depoliticization logics over violence. Second, a resort to political memories (either of fighting ETA or far too old memories of the violent thirties) by using epithets like ‘fascist patriotic gang’ in comparison to Falange-JONS<sup>4</sup> (Reverte, Elpaís, 02/26/2021). While not serving as a banalization mechanism – as violence is clearly constructed as a threat – it depoliticises in a patronage exercise that is shared by the *Elpaís*, *ABC* and *El Español*, but not by *Eldiario*:

‘the State is putting this little man in jail when the fact is that he should be educated and offered therapy (...) Others died before so you (the protesters) can keep playing’ (Mejía, El Español, 02/23/2021)

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<sup>4</sup> Falange JONS is a fascist paramilitary organization operating along the thirties eventually becoming Francoism’s political party in early stages of the Regime (1939-1975)

Following the pyramidal logic that subsumes one phenomenon into a bigger one, left wing parties become the target of ‘extremist’ attributions by *El País*, *ABC* and *El Español*, through different rhetorical mechanisms. *El País*’ contributors make a strong effort to delegitimize these events by first downgrading the violent minority and later infantilizing *Podemos*. Without totally depicting it as a ‘threat’, the party is considered not having enough maturity to be within the political system and equated, in this non-ability to be in the system, to independentist and other antisystem.

‘To be in the government and College canteen at the same is of childish personality, the ones that want to make the revolution at the same time they’re receiving the paycheck of a member of parliament (....)’ (Llamazares, *El País*, 02/20/2021)

Conservative discourses developed a strong narrative of threat affirming that the party, above all Pablo Iglesias, are incompatible with democracy: ‘Podemos is incompatible with social peace’ (*El Español* Editorial 02/18/2021). Such quality is shared by other ‘enemies of Spain’ like independentist and Basque radical nationalists (defined ‘*philoetarras*<sup>5</sup>’). Epithets are used – e.g., ‘Antisystem’, ‘lazy/not laborious’, ‘antidemocratic’, ‘spoiled by the media’, ‘vengeful’, ‘nepotic’ and ‘violent’ (C. Campos, *El Español*, XX). All of these, make of *Podemos* the perfect threat while the frame of memory operated again to transpose CT language to consider Pablo Iglesias, the ‘intellectual author of the *kale borroka*<sup>6</sup>’. According to President of Madrid Autonomous Region, ‘Iglesias [was] a threat to social coexistence’ making into the *El Español* headline on February 21<sup>st</sup> (*El Español*, 02/21/2021). Eventually, former conservative president Mr. Aznar made a well-repeated claim in the last decades: ‘a part of ETA is in the government’ (*El Español*, 03/02/2021)<sup>7</sup>

All in all, the big threat for conservative parties and media is the extremism of *Podemos* and socialist president’s connivence with the extremist:

‘The alteration of 1978 democracy is happening without enough political and intellectual alarm so to agitate sleeping minds (...) irrational or harming norms and projects against liberty, like those that favour occupation or gender ideology, progress without notice...’ (*El Español*, Editorial XX)

*Red Lines are crossed: legitimation or condemnation*

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<sup>5</sup> Etarra: the Spanish despective term form mebers of ETA

<sup>6</sup> Kale Borroka is the Basque expression for street violence deployed by youth armed groups during the nineties and 2000s.

<sup>7</sup> The expresión ‘it is all ETA’ encapsulates the expansion of the referent of terrorism and CT laws during the 2000s.

Once consensus is established on the unacceptability of violence, and only when root causes vanished, red lines were marked: it was either condemnation or symbolic expulsion of the political community. The problem and the context went marginal while positionings for or against violence became core. *Podemos* spokesperson's tweet had unbounded reactions across the political parties and media, claiming for declarations of condemnation. Positioning against violence devoured all other discursive storylines. The core of the controversy – agreed across all mainstream and generational media, together with conservative parties (PP, Ciudadanos) and far-right party (VOX) – revolved around to what extent do political parties rejected those acts of violence.

*Elpaís*'s editorial on February 19<sup>th</sup>, 2021 pointed to the mistakes made by *Podemos* and called for an urgent condemnation by its leaders (*Elpaís*, 02/19/2021). This was followed by similar calls from *ABC* and *El Español*. However, the latter also depicted the socialist party as hostage of extremists: 'the PSOE is governing (thanks to *Podemos*) with less seats than any other government before and this (*Podemos*) pushes him to get across *red lines* every day.' [emphasis added] (Ramírez, P.J. Editorial, 03/02/2021). Condemnation ritual raises the 'either with us (democrats) or against us' identification mechanism. To be 'in' means to support police agencies and to give up any attempt to explain violence because of any social or political factor. This is the line *Podemos* and progressive media *Eldiario* rhetorically resisted to cross, by persevering in their speaking out about 'police brutality', 'freedom of speech' and 'criminalization of dissent'. This is the line *Podemos* did not want to cross to be in the 'bright side' of democracy (Martínez, *Elpaís*, 02/21/2021):

'What they say they do in the name of the people, like not condemning violence from public positions, is antipolitics, and banalises protest, understood as the occupation of streets for those who do not have platforms to be heard from' (Martínez, *Elpaís*, 02/21/2021)

Positioning for or against violence entered Spanish parliamentary debate. Here, the Popular Party's spokesperson asked PM Sánchez 'Who are you with? With them or with us?'. *ABC*'s editorial (22/22/21) finally situated Vice-President Pablo Iglesias on the red-line, asking him to choose 'between Mr. Sánchez [government] or the violent radicals'. In this split on sides, not only political parties or representatives are hold accountable. Also, civil society organizations, artists and common citizens must choose:

'... Amnesty International...Please! those of us converted that have collaborated with AI before, ask know, in front of the pro-Hasél campaign, if we have errored, how to still be part of us? (Savater, F. *Elpaís*, AI!, 02/27/2021)

Only certain contributors of progressive *Eldiario* stayed away of the condemnation pressure to show precisely how it deviated attention on causes and other sources of violence like Far Right (Rodriguez, Eldiario, 2021). Despite some dissent, major political leaders, public opinion leader and mainstream media demanded positioning:

‘Demonstrations are essential to democracy (...) it would be superfluous and obvious to say that violence and vandalism are absolutely unacceptable; but it becomes necessary when a party in power, *Unidas Podemos*, shows hesitance to reject the excesses that happened in different Spanish cities.’ (Elpaís, Editorial, 02/19/2021).

Eventually, the pressure progressively forced *Podemos* to state: ‘we support protestors but disagree with riots’ (02/19/21).

C2 shows the narrative unveiled in C1 is displayed in action. Once there is open violence, absolute consensus is set on the fact that red lines have been trespassed. At this point, different mechanisms operate to delegitimize, depolitise, and individualize violence (both generational and memorial). Two peripheral discursive components in C1 become core in C2. By synecdochally associating events to either an international movement or a political party, ‘communities of legitimation’ become central to reaction. In consequence, attribution of extremism is directed to a political party that is pressured for condemnation statements as proof of democracy.

#### 4.3 Case Three. Letters, Chats and Military Talk

On November 2020, several letters were sent by retired high commands of the Spanish Air Force (SAF) and Army to Spanish King (Felipe VI) and the European Parliament, warning on the political, social and economic deterioration of the Spanish democracy and the threat posed by the left wing governamental coalition. This was depicted as ‘social communist’, ‘supported by independentist and philo-etarras’ threatening ‘the unity of the nation’, ‘freedom of speech’, ‘judicial impartiality’ and ‘media control’ (Infolibre, 12/13/2020).

Shortly after, on 1 December 2020, journalistic inquires revealed conversations in a WhatsApp chat dubbed ‘The XIX of the Air/*La XIX del Aire*’. Spanish retired armed forces high ranks were supporting for military uprisings and mass executions and longing for a coup de *etat*. A retired colonel, Francisco Beca, posted a message where he was stating: ‘I've read it [a book by Pio Moa, *Myths of the Civil War*], as any good fascist should, and if it's true what it says (...), there's no choice but to start shooting 26 million sons of bitches’ – referring to left-wing voters of the current government. He also stated ‘Spanish society is divided, and the good ones are currently more cowards than the bad ones. The only thing left (unfortunately) is to repeat history’ – referring to Spanish dictatorship. Retired captain expressed: ‘I woke up this morning totally convinced. I don't want these

bastards to lose the elections. No. I want them all to die along with their entire lineage. This is what I want. Is it too much to ask?'. Some other messages that were sent from Francisco Beca's mobile were:

'Spain is full of ungovernable people and the only way forward is to educate people something that is impossible with the left. It's sad but it's the reality of Spain'

- 'I don't want to discourage you, but having reached this point, nothing can change with only words'

When questioned about it, members of the group emphasised that this was a private chat. They claimed their letters were aimed to 'initiate a movement that awakens the Spaniards so we can prevent the entrance of Communism in Spain'. Immediately after, the Minister of Defence, Margarita Robles, made a formal complaint to the Public Prosecutor's Office in Madrid to inquiry into whether these claims represent a crime but, in March 2021, the prosecutor closed the complaint on hate speech, because of the 'private' nature of the chat. Overall, no public big public conversation took place beyond media attention to the public letters written by retired military officials.

### *Concerns and sources of extremism*

These events were overall framed under a clear distinction between speech and act as C1. There was an overall agreement among political parties and media, on the fact that speech is free but open threats are a source of concern. Therefore, the missives were regarded as totally different to the chat's speech. The episodes were framed in very domestic terms, although the international being considered as a box of resonance and democratic standards (ABC, Ventoso, Luis, 12/06/2020) and as a an ideal of democratic standards that also serves as a ridiculing delegitimation mechanism. The 'bizarre' letter that would be 'unthinkable in a European democracy' (Elpaís, 02/12/2020) underlies a sort of shameful singularity:

'if this [chats and letters] did not cause more astonishment in mass media it in Spain is because we all know that *Spain is different (...)* We cannot forget that terms like '*pronunciamiento*', together with *guerrilla* are the Spanish contribution to international military lexicon' (Fortes, X, [Former Military Official] Infolibre, 12/13/2020).

An acknowledgement on transnational far right movements or any source of comparison to other countries is absent, even among those that more clearly relate the events to far right party VOX, of the emerging transnational far right drive, otherwise present in C1 and C2. Moreover, as in C1 and C2, generational position also serves as a resource to trivialise facts:

‘Apparently the only *coup* these military can carry out is to hijack an *Imserzo* bus<sup>8</sup> to be deviated to the Valley of the Fallen [where Franco’s corps rested for four decades], ending up lost in a road strip club. The idea has such possibilities that would perfectly fit on a secondary plot of a movie.’ (Saenz de Ugarte, 12/03/2020, *Eldiario*)

Two different consensus operate in this controversy: a generational one, and an ideological one. In generational terms, both PP and PSOE and related media agree that SAF<sup>9</sup> became a democratic institution in the last four decades. The memory of the failed *coup* (1981) serves as the starting point of structural change. Therefore, progressives consider these men as a ‘rotten apples’, but the conservatives (PP) consider it a trifle that resonates to the benefit of left-wing parties. If examined in ideological axis (left/right), *Podemos*, progressive media, and to a lesser extent PSOE, agree on certain ‘sociological Francoism traits’ still present in the SAF. Contrastingly, for conservatives missives to the King are acceptable speech, even necessary, as they emphasise ‘general discomfort’ (‘radical’ and ‘social-communist’ government is a common expression from the moderate/liberal-right to the Spanish far right). The chat is ‘incitation to violence’, but overall diagnosis in the letters and chat can be openly shared without concern – something unacceptable in C2’s storylines.

For progressive parties and media, these events are ‘minor’ although some context is accounted for. *Eldiario* maintains these events reveal a structural problem: the sociological background still alive within SAF. And still, information produced was less than half of the attention than those devoted to C1 and C2.

Discovering the chat, the progressive newspaper *Infolibre* documents all the episodes (Gutierrez, A. *Infolibre*, 12/03/2020) and voices retired military. It relates the missives and the chat to previous attempts of resonance by examining in depth (articles, reportages by members of SAF) the network of Francoist supporters and relating it all to VOX (Gutierrez, A. *Infolibre*, 12/03/2020). In an *El País*’ editorial published on the missives, a relation of these episodes with VOX was signalled:

‘Appropriating VOX’s language and discourse, they blame a ‘Social-Communist government, supported by philo-etarras and independentists’ that constitute, to their judgement, a risk to national cohesion and a threat to Spanish democracy’ (*Elpaís*, Editorial, 12/02/2020)

No relevant opinion leader wrote a piece on this issue except for the renowned Iñaki Gabilondo’s warning on the need to look at the background and the atmosphere of delegitimation of the government. Although missives and chats are two separated things, in his account both are tied to ‘the

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<sup>8</sup> IMSERSO is the Spanish Government Agency for Elderly and Social Care, popularly known for providing trip-vacation to low income retired.

<sup>9</sup> SAF: Spanish Armed Forces

same wick fired by VOX', conservative parties and related media with their 'insistence in accusing the government of having a destructive propose'. As such, these expressions are 'insane', 'darkest bragging', and 'dangerous'.

This threat depiction is not consensual, however. In an exercise of narrative conversion (Block and Somers, 2014), conservative parties and VOX openly minimised the problem. Conservatives agree to focus on left wing party's agenda that allegedly, benefitted from attacking SAF:

'Fortunately, the destructive potential of their slip [military chat] is limited. In opposition we have facts: those at the Forefront of Armed Forces have lawfully used their arms. I cannot say the same, by the way, of those at the front of some parties that want to mark as Francoist to most because of the snarl of the few' (Silva, Lorenzo, El Español 12/05/2020)

The influence of those military is not a threat, if compared to independentist (Catalan or Basque). Consequently, any time the episodes are described, it is in comparison to something else (i.e., the extremist branch of the coalition government detailed in C2). Both chat and missives contain the language of 'enemies of Spain' which remits to the 19636`s (Sánchez León and Izquierdo, 2006), but C3 shows less use of political memory as discursive resource. Only progressive media and commentators allude to Francoist background in the Military. But, in the is exercise of narrative conversion, 'no threat' conceptions that turn to Government and *Podemos* as attacking SAF, contain the 1936`s framework of memory to assign the 'extreme'. In this same line, efforts are made in the anniversary of the 1978 Constitution to frame the 'military talk events' in opposition to the democratization of SAF in the last four decades inaugurated with the failed coup in 1981.

Not only consensus is not reach on whether there is a threat that needs attention, but public manifestations of sharing ends or support to the promotor of letters is not rhetorically censored (as seen in C2). At the same time, VOX openly described the people behind the letters and chats as 'our people' – even if denying the attribution of being behind the letters (Elpaís, Editorial, 12/02/2020).

Overall, the 'red line' is clearly defined in this controversy that never became a large public conversation, if compared to C1 and C2, even when speech and act are separated; no mention to victims' humiliation ever emerged.

### *Who are the radicals? From collective actors to ridicule individuals*

Generational and individualization frames entered the characterization of the episode. There is a clear agreement across all actors, including political parties, media, and commentators that all of their protagonists are 'nostalgic', 'old fellow', 'without capacities' to any harm.

According to former socialist Ministry of Interior, Mr. Bono, one of the promoters was, ‘within his way of thinking, (...) a serious, rigorous and honest man; not two faced (...) he always was a disciplined and polite man’ (Elpaís, 12/14/2020). This ‘way’ of thinking not being problematized, he is depicted as the perfect believer in ‘Fatherland, God, Family’ with an ‘impeccable trajectory’, always prioritizing the duty to serve and defend Spain’ (Elpaís, 12/14/2020). Not representing a collectively, he does not pose a threat. Moreover, he is willing to ‘defend’ the country.

To find some cultural Francoism or far-right background in the SAF, *Elpaís* informed of the sociological profiles in the military in a reportage titled ‘Whatsapps noise in the flags romos’ (Elpaís). Noise being something minor:

‘the military casino’s canteen has changed into cell phones and the doses of hate has increased to unbearable levels. It surprises me that it was not a *ranker drunk uncouth sergeant*, but former Higher commands who write ‘there Will no option but to execute 26 million Spaniards’ (coronel González Espinar, Elpaís. 12/06/2020. Emphasis added).’

*Eldiario/ Infolibre* and to some extent *Elpais* openly relate the events to VOX although, efforts to associate it with a political party never reached the intensity of C1 and C2. Similarly, *Eldiario* voiced active and retired military that credited the threats, while deploying ironic and strong epithets like ‘*Eisantzgruppen of the 25M executable*’ before relating them to both VOX and a Francoist cultural ‘comon sense’ in the SAF:

‘They had command not so long ago. Not in the post-war or in early Transition (...) They commanded officers and troops and managed public resources in democracy. And we cannot assume that their manifestations (...) are unexpected ideological effusions’ (Cabrera Padilla, Infolibre, 12/13/2020)

‘This is tied to a state of opinion instigated through speech and act by VOX, PP, *Ciudadanos* sometimes, some media, and a long list of narcissist snipers with a core argument: the government is illegitimate, and everything is valid to put it to an end. They point, and the maniac gets it literally. It is of fascism preschool’ (Dimas, F (retired military). Infolibre, 12/11/2020)

However, despite the political organizations behind the events, the synecdochally mechanism detailed in C1 and C2, did not emerge with strength in C3. Mainstream media did not present the problem as a threat or concern. Even *Podemos*’ leader, Pablo Iglesias, dismissed the chat: ‘only those who can threaten will (...) whatever these gentlemen say, with their age and already retired, over drinks and in a chat, does not represent a threat’ (Elpaís, 12/03/2020).

*Limits, positioning, condemnation.*

Reactions were diverse, from the opening of investigations by the General Prosecutor for crime of hate speech, to the withdrawal of military privileges to the promoters and the issued of a new Defence norm on the mandatory teaching of democratic and constitutional values in military schools (Elpaís, González M.01/11/2021). Reactions were balanced between attempts not to devote too much attention, and the need to position. When it became clear that speech and act were different, the missives representing speech while chat representing ‘incitement to violence’, red lines had been crossed by the few. Nevertheless, no positioning pressures ever happened on C3 or they did not reach so much consensus. The previous rhetorical exercise of ‘with (democratic) us/against (democratic) us’, all the efforts to find a community of legitimation to blame, all the efforts to persuade for statements of condemnation’ did not happen or were peripheral in this controversy.

Conservative party PP openly rejected the chat, describing it as ‘unacceptable’, with some deviations inside the party by representatives that affirmed the sharing of intentions and ends. VOX not only avoided condemnation statements (El País, 12/04/2020), but it affirmed that the unity of Spain should be defended in different institutional settings. Among the 400 signatories of the missives, the content of the chat was regarded as ‘unacceptable’ and vulgar, and explicitly rejected. However, they insisted on the ‘deterioration of Spanish democracy’ caused by ‘hegemonic thinking’, ‘gender ideology’, and ‘national unity’. As analysed in C1 and C2, condemnation is proof of democracy only when clear statements without postscripts like VOX claim ‘they’re our people’ happen.

C3 contains certain elements of the previous cases like the distinction between speech and act, generational frame as a mechanism of delegitimation, and the mobilization of memory to read present politics and understand the extreme. This case shows, however, a much more fragmenting and less consensual discourse. The ideological axis operates more clearly than in C1 and C2 as a source of agreement/dissent. In consequence, no consensus is reached on whether or to what extent this is a threat and who is to be regarded as responsible, beside individuals (far right parties? Conservative parties? Military institution?). The positioning discursive battle did not happen, and far right discourse remained, despite disagreements, in the discursive space of the normal.

#### *4.4 Case Four. Chic Fascism.*

On the 13 of February 2021 – around the same day violence erupted in C2 and few days before the chat in C3 was regarded by Courts as non-problematic –, a rally was held in Madrid to honour – like every year since 2007 – the Blue Division – the tens of thousands of Spanish volunteers who fought for Hitler’s axis in Russia, immediately after the end of Spanish War. Around 300 attendees carried Nazi symbols and flags, sang Nazi songs, and made the Nazi salute, and they laid flowers on the memorial of the Blue Division soldiers. Isabel Peralta, the spokesperson of a far-right youth

organization (Bastión Frontal) delivered a speech claiming communism was invented by Jewish people to pit workers against one another, adding: ‘Our highest obligation is to fight for Spain, to fight for Europe, which is now weak and has been eliminated by the enemy. The enemy is always the same, even if he uses different masks: the Jew.’ She claimed: ‘Because there is nothing that is truer than this statement: the Jew is to blame, the Jew is to blame, and the Blue Division fought for this.’

Jewish communities called for probe into demonstration on the hate crimes public prosecutor. The regional government of Madrid asked prosecutors to investigate whether the comments constituted a hate crime. An investigation started into the anti-Semitic comments to establish whether they constituted an offense relating to the exercise of fundamental rights and public freedoms. In line with C3 on military talk, and considering the fact that media attention was set those days on the riots, and public discussion was taking place around free speech and its limits (C1 and C2), the overall attention to C4 was minimal.

These events entered the media with a very domestic frame, besides anecdotal and ironic comparison with US negationist far right ( (Nuñez Seixas, Elpaís, 02/20/2021), attempts by progressive press to frame it in terms of the international regime of human rights (El País, González, 02/15/2021) as a source of inspiration in the understanding of such memorialization of Nazi-related enterprise. *El País* gave voice to the Jews community through an open tribune by the Israeli’s ambassador who place this issue in the wider regime of memory of the Holocaust.

‘76 years and three generations after WWI, it seems that we have reached a time people has forgotten how simply dangerous these ideas are (...) (Lauder, R, Elpaís, 02/234/2021)

### *Concerns, threats, and sources of extremism.*

Overall, the events were understood through a clear distinction between speech /act clarified in C1, tested in C2 and C3 and reproduced in this less substance controversy: only speech that trespasses the red line of violence incitement, is to be intervened. The hostile speech was then probed by Prosecutor. And still, these events were not constructed as threat in a consensual discourse. Not many commentators, either from conservative or progressive press pronounce on these events; no editorials, few articles and tribunes, few reportages and interviews were published. For the hegemonic discourse, these events do not represent a threat. They are characterised as a trivial anecdote that is significant only by media resonance.

*Eldiario*, that devotes strong attention to far-right, francoist crimes victims and memories, was the only exception. It strongly connected through expert’s opinion, with C1 to show the contradiction of challenging hate speech while protecting liberties. Experts consulted, like most actor involved (media, commentators, and political parties) agreed to separate the homage (the memorialization of a

Nazi enterprise) –legal in Spain, from the manifestations of hate. The red line was established in Peralta’s open call to violence. Efforts made by the Jews community, and reproduced by *Elpaís* to raise concern by explicitly pointing to a threat that if not quantitative, was qualitative, did not find the resonance that would have been normal in C1 (terrorism glorification or victims’ humiliation) and C2 (explicit violence)

In this same outlet, the C1 schema was translated to C4 because ‘speech was only speech’:

‘Hasél case coincided in time with the entrance of Isabel Peralta in the scene, turned into the awesome figure of an awful homage of the Blue Division, in which she proclaimed herself a fascist eventually exhorting with a terrific slogan (...) it seems a drivel to me that P. Hasél was sentenced for the thing he sang (...) at the same time (...) I would not like her [Peralta] in jail for what she said.’ (Ramoneda, *Elpaís*, 02/20/2021)

Besides conservative press, specially *El Español*, awarding some space to these events, with reportages, interviews and commentator’s articles most regular commentators either in this newspaper, *ABC* or *Elpaís*, widely known for their opinion leadership in agenda topics, were more prone to devote their attention to the C2, which reveals that either this issue was not relevant, or there was a rational strategy of not giving it resonance. According to one commentator, the news ‘was not news at all’ (Del Molino, *Elpais*, 02/19/2021):

‘A bunch of powerless marginals, organized by an unknown organization without social representatives does not sound like a ‘breaking news’ (Del Molino, *Elpais*, 02/19/2021)

Nevertheless, no strong connections were made to far right parties and the need to tackle a potential threat posed by far right organizations like Peralta’s.

### *Banalising the radical*

Characterizations of the radical in *Elpais*, *ABC*, *El Español* are both, trivializing and generationally delegitimatising with the original appearance of a male patronising narrative that regards women as not representing naturally a threat. The analysis shows that Peralta, the organizations she represents or even the community of supporters therein was not constructed in threatening terms, even though, as in C2, accounts were centred on the perpetrator’s, some media pieces being interviews, profiles and reportages including closed-up pictures of her.

Her ‘chic looks’ (del Molino, *Elpaís*, 02/19/2021) seems more relevant than the far-right organization she represents. She is depicted as young and harmless, as a *Quixote* (dreamer), intoxicated with (erroneous) political readings. Descriptions turned her into a ‘singular’, ‘rebellious’, ‘dauntless’, but never dangerous or threatening, despite her belonging to a far-right organization.

Ironizing with the entrance of the news in the media because of the attractiveness of the protagonist, an article published by *Elpais*, titled ‘the irresistible beauty of chic fascism’, encapsulates very well the sort of trivial patronising and generational banalization:

‘if we resort to democratic reasons ([to publish this info or not] it evades the fact that the only reasons by which the pictures are included is the disturbing and violent beauty of chic fascism, and the contrast between red lipstick and the intense blue of her shirt’ (del Molino, *Elpais*, 02/19/2021)

We are before a petty event for which nobody should be giving resonance. There were not political representatives, famous people nowhere. There was no reason to reproduce her words so, ‘if she was not so young and beautiful, nobody should have noticed’ (del Molino, *Elpais*, 02/19/2021). This is the opposite to a discourse of threat. A discourse that trivialises through different mechanisms, including the characterization of ordinary gestures.

Conservative press covered these events in a very much personalised centred approach. *ABC* interviewed her, and credited her and informed in-depth on the ‘extremist’ organisation she represents without any caution (contrasting with C1 and 2) of making her a hero: ‘Spanish fascism already has a mirror (...) a referent to the publics’ (*ABC*, 2021). Space for interview was also awarded in *La Razón* (*La Razón*, 02/16/2020) and *El Español*.

*El Español* voices her in an interview full of suggestive pictures, devoting her enough room to position herself and reproduce her political views. Headlines in *El Español* focused on her, who she is, her style. The ‘muse of far right’ was presented as:

‘The day she left home, with her arian face, her blue shirt and her red lips and her non-existent [covid]mask (...) she wanted to tribute the Falange [Spanish Fascist party] Founder in the traditional march to The Valle of The Fallen and she never went back’ (referring to the fact that she is there every year) (*El Español* Interview, XX).

Much more patronising – and with a clear gendered component – but in equal trivial terms, one of its commentators used expressions like ‘naive national socialism’ and ‘the carmine girl’:

‘It is exactly what the *blondie* is looking for [attention] and we should recognise that how much does blue colour suits the *lolas* that don’t even know where the Sudetes are or the moral, but do know where the front gates of the circus are’ (Nieto, *El Español*, (02/21/2021)

Besides accounts focused on the individual, only *Elpais* and *ABC* issued some information relating her to well-known far right organization (Bastión Frontal). However, no synecdochally attribution of responsibility explored in previous cases, took place and no effort was made to connect these discourses to far right parties, let alone conservative parties.

*Positioning, Condemnation as proof of democracy*

As C2 did not made it from episodes to controversy, effects in terms of discursive battle were minimal. If compared to C1, it is a well canalised case to the extent that is constructed in opposition to a threat. Despite the marginal efforts to connect the episode with wider far-right emergence, synecdochal mechanisms did not operate in the same ways of C1 and C2 as this event had no echo in everyday politics and generated no exchange of attributions of responsibility.

Nevertheless, considering that in that same days a large public controversy was taking place around the limits of speech, extremism and violence, both the homage and the anti-semitic speech managed to make it into the media without provoking strong reactions and, apparently, not having any consequence beside the opening of a criminal lawsuit against Mrs. Peralta. No pressure was set against individuals or organizations to react or reject. No community of legitimation was pointed at, no political responsibility was sketched, not even political relations were attributed to far-right party VOX.

## 5. Conclusion

Altogether, the four cases constitute different pieces of the Spanish public debate on extremism and radical as the result of episodes, individuals and events regarded as outside of the limits of the acceptable and constructed as a threat to democracy. Even though the semantics of ‘extreme’ is not always evident, overall constructions of the problem, qualities attached to the radical protagonists, either individual or groups, and the collective reactions it stimulates, allows us to compare our four cases. C1 serves to outline the central elements of Spanish CT consensus as developed in the last decades and applied to several forms of violent speech (Fernández de Mosteyrín, 2020; 2021). This narrative schema, when tested in violent situations (C2), reveals how the schema is tensioned and its components of radical qualities, synecdochally attribution of responsibilities and condemnation become core – resulting in depoliticisation, pathologization and individualization, while at the same time pressuring certain political actors (i.e, left wing party *Podemos*).

Taken together, C1 and C2 represent the canonical widely agreed narrative of ‘extremism’. Nevertheless, when exploring the previous narrative schema for two far-right speech cases, ruptures appear among public sphere actors and no agreement is reach as to 1) whether there is a threat; 2) who/how threatening the radical is and who is to be blamed as community of legitimation; 3) how to respond and, specially, how political actors should position in front of these speeches. Like C1 and C2, C3 contains the distinction between speech and act, a generational delegitimation, and the mobilization of memory to read present politics and understand the extreme. But this case shows a much more fragmented discourse, and the ideological axis operates more clearly than in C1 and C2.

In consequence, the positioning discursive ‘battle’ did not happen, and far-right discourse remained, despite disagreements, in the discursive space of the normal. Significantly enough, C4 is the perfect example of a banalization as, even when there is an organization supporting violent speech, and despite of being investigated by Prosecutor as hate speech, public debate on this issue was either trivial, or non-existent.

Our mapping and analysis of the meaning of extremism in Spain as a process of discursive construction of *red lines* shows how what ‘extremism’ is varies depending on constructions of power, stable elements of political cultures like ideological axis, national political universes, and identities, but also on more unstable and processual elements like generational frameworks and memories of the past. Although the most outstanding differences in the threat construction in our cases is ideological (progressive/conservative left -right), we have shown how other elements are playing a role. The construction of something as a threat/extreme and the *red lines* that mark the limits of the acceptable, is also contextual as it happens in the intersection of at least four dimensions. Speech and act are clearly differentiated, according to our cases framing and not always perceived as conducting to violence.

All in all, the four cases show a rupture with contemporary CT narrative: the clear separation between speech and act shows that something that was already agreed upon when dealing with ETA and jihad, may not be so strong if we are dealing with other sources of potential violence. Our paper further shows how what is to be detected, ‘extremism’, organizations, and communities of legitimation, are not self-evident in any society. Much to the contrary, it depends on public representations of threats and sources of menace. As such, this is a strong contribution to PVE knowledge to the extent that, as the paradigm goes, it is societal effort what need to be mobilized to prevent. If certain sources of extremism are normalised into everyday politics, constraints are strong for prevention, as US Capitol’s events showed in January 2021. As the argument goes, every context has its visible ‘extremes’ and its ‘normal’ politics. It is a challenge to determine how this happens in a socio-political dynamic very well shaped by political cultures.

Our study certainly has several limitations that are to be outlined. First, is the comparability of these four cases as only one of them entails actual violence. As we have shown, C1 and C2 are continuation of the same case, C2 the one that tests the narrative. Also, our systematized account, even considering agreements and disagreement, may seem monolithically as it does not consider a wide varied of other newspapers and online media that range from left to right wing in present Spain. We understand this exploration cannot be generalised, either in terms of media representativeness, or in terms of societal political culture. Our cases are bits of wider processes and simplified versions of larger debates.

The problem of how political culture operates in making ‘extremism’ outstanding or normal deserves a wider analysis of media and social media, including TV that still is the most universally accessed media; it also deserves in depth empirical knowledge of ordinary citizen’s representations and beliefs of the extreme. Finally, what we have explored in this paper is not immediately coherent with what experts and operators regard as threats. So, the gaps between societal knowledge, either public sphere or lay citizens, and policy elites, security experts and PVE operators is still to be accounted for.

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