



Vox España, an Alternative Identity for Spain: Nationalism, Opposition to the European Union and Proposals for a “Spexit”

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Author’s Note: The title above deliberately references that of the author’s long analysis of the positions of the *Alternative für Deutschland* as expressed in the manifestos for the five elections in Germany in 2017 (Gould 2018: all references to AfD positions are to be found in that analysis and will not be noted separately). This commentary will discuss positions of another far-right party, Vox España, its opposition to the European Union, its views on the nation and sovereignty, its Islamophobia, and its conservative social orientation. In order to show European

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commonalities, some brief comparisons will be made between certain positions of Vox España and the corresponding views of the Alternative for Germany (AfD).

Introduction

In the elections in Andalusia on December 2, 2018, the far-right party Vox España won its first seats in the parliament of any of Spain's seventeen autonomous communities. Andalusia is the country's most populous 'autonomous community' (a sub-national governmental unit somewhat analogous to a Canadian province or a German *Bundesland*), with 8.4 million inhabitants and 17.4% of the total Spanish population. Founded in 2013, the party had remained completely marginal until December 2018 when, to general surprise, it obtained twelve seats instead of the predicted one. Given the distribution of seats among the other parties, this put it in the position of king-maker to support the formation of a coalition government in Andalusia by the two "respectable right" parties – the *Partido Popular* with 26 seats (PP: an alliance of Catholic and (sometimes very) conservative forces which emerged shortly after the end of the Franco regime as the *Alianza Popular* (which later changed its name and structure in 1989 to become the *Partido Popular* [PP]) and the much newer *Ciudadanos* (Citizens [C's]) with 21 seats – a conservative party without the Catholic background and seeking to clarify and establish its position on the centre-right. Vox is not in the coalition, but does support the proposed government, thus providing the absolute majority (55 votes) needed to confirm the PP leader in Andalusia, Juan Manuel Moreno, as premier of Andalusia in the first round of voting on January 16, 2019. The price of this support was a signed undertaking by the PP and Vox, published with the logos of both parties, that the new government would pass a list of measures drawn in part from the Vox programme (PP and Vox 2019). This support also put an end to the 40 years of unbroken power in Andalusia of the social democratic *Partido Socialista Obrero de España* (PSOE), first elected in 1978.

The election result, the negotiations and their outcome provided Vox with significant publicity and standing at the beginning of a year in which elections will be held on May 26th in a total of thirteen of the seventeen autonomous communities² and in all municipalities (including the City of Madrid). There will also be the elections for the European Parliament on May 26th. In addition, given the somewhat precarious minority position of the PSOE government at the national level, the possibility of a general election in 2019 cannot be entirely ruled out.

Briefly put, the significance of the elections and the outcome lie in the parliamentary representation in Spain of a far-right nationalist with populist overtones which is opposed to much of what the EU stands for and which, it is fair to say, promotes positions which lie to the right of anything which the *Alternative für Deutschland* has proposed in Germany. In addition, the fact that the *Partido Popular* sought and accepted the support of Vox means that any notion of a "cordon

² In Aragon, Asturias, the Balearic Islands, the Canary Islands, Cantabria, Castile-La Mancha, Castile and Leon, Extremadura, La Rioja, Madrid, Murcia, Navarre, Valencia.

sanitaire” around Vox, such as has happened with the AfD in Germany and the Sweden Democrats in Sweden, has been discarded. Through the alliance with the PP, Vox gains significant publicity, respectability and legitimacy. In addition, the PP has said that it will follow the same type of post-electoral alliance in the autonomous communities of Madrid and Valencia as in Andalusia (Junquera and Mateo 2019).

Given this situation, which marks a change both in the Spanish political landscape and also the emergence into parliamentary representation of a further anti-EU party in Europe, this commentary will briefly examine the salient points of the Vox programme starting with those which directly concern the EU. It will consider also some fundamental issues raised by the document the party submitted to the PP and C’s in Andalusia³ as the basis for obtaining the support mentioned above. To present a further perspective on what is happening in Spain, the commentary will also include some comparisons with the AfD programmes for the 2017 state and Bundestag elections in Germany.

Europe and the EU

VOX’s national programme *100 medidas para la España viva* (approximately: *One Hundred Measures to promote Spanish Life and Values*) (Vox España 2018) is deemed valid for electoral purposes at all levels. Like the AfD programmes, its starting point is national sovereignty and the nation (the latter topic will be addressed below). The emphasis on this concept inevitably leads to repudiation of various treaty obligations which Spain has assumed towards the European institutions, both the EU and the Council of Europe. In brief, the Vox position includes:

- 1) A proposal for a new European treaty emphasising national sovereignty and respect for the values of European culture, and which would also increase the weight of Spain in the decision-making process (96);⁴
- 2) reduction of the European budget, reducing duplication of agencies and those which interfere with national sovereignty (97);
- 3) exclusive responsibility of the Spanish government in all international affairs (97);
- 4) reform of the CAP to put money and control directly into the hands of the farmers who live principally from the cultivation of their land (98);
- 5) placing emphasis on bilateral relations and renunciation of membership in supranational organisations (placed on the same level as “oligarchies, party bosses and lobbies”) acting contrary to Spanish interests (83);
- 6) judgements of Spanish courts no longer to be subject to European oversight (91);
- 7) suspension of the Schengen area until there is a European guarantee it will not be used by criminals (including separatists) to escape justice (33);

³ Rejected out of hand by C’s.

⁴ The figures in brackets refer to the numbers given to each of the individual measures in the document *100 medidas para la España viva*.

- 8) emphasis on the bilateral nature of international relations and leaving supranational organisation which are contrary to the interests of Spain (99).

In addition, to promote Spanish society and business, Vox proposes a series of measures which run contrary to the EU obligation of equal treatment for all EU citizens and commercial entities.

It proposes:

1. Preference for Spanish companies in bids for public contracts (43);
2. Preferential benefits to businesses which hire unemployed Spanish citizens (50);
3. Health-care charges for legal foreign residents (no exception is made for EU citizens) of less than ten years standing “on our territory” (*en nuestro suelo*) (59);
4. Family allowances for “Spanish families” with dependent children; again, no exception is made for EU citizens (73);

Although it is not spelled out, it is clear that all these measures are incompatible with existing EU arrangements and that, if implemented, they would mean nothing less than a “Spexit” both from the European Union and also from the Council of Europe and its protections of human rights. If only certain measures were implemented, it would lead to a weakening of the EU. In addition, it is being repeatedly suggested that there is a fundamental incompatibility between Spanish sovereignty and identity on the one hand and European Union practices and values or Council of Europe oversight on the other.

Furthermore, as part of the measures to promote national autonomy, there is also a proposal to reduce dependence on NATO (27).

Sovereignty and the Nation

Given the long-continuing process of (re)defining (or reinforcing) regional or national identity in Spain since the end of the Franco era, it is no accident that the first section of the Vox document is headed “Spain, Unity and Sovereignty”. Nor is it an accident that in this first section item (1) mentions Catalonia in terms of an attempted “coup”. In parallel, item (2) proposes making illegal those “political parties, associations and NGO’s which militate for the destruction of the unity of the Nation and its sovereignty”. Basque separatism and terrorism have receded, but the reality of the Catalan independence process remains, and the hostility in the rest of Spain towards it is very palpable. The illegal independence referendum in Catalonia on October 1st 2017, the subsequent elections, the suspension of Catalan self-government (now restored), the cross-border flight of certain independence leaders and the arrest and laying of criminal charges, including that of rebellion, against certain others who remained in Spain has maintained public attention on the matter, as have also demonstrations and the un-cooperative position of the (separatist) Catalan government. The forthcoming criminal trial in 2019 of those accused of rebellion and other offences will draw more attention to the Catalan question and the delicacy of the current situation. It has been suggested that only in the ongoing “context of separatism” can the Vox surge be

understood (Amón 2019), and other academic analysts have placed the increased support against a background of Spanish nationalism (Ordaz 2019). If this view or these views are accepted, it can be seen that the Catalonia situation will benefit Vox in the context of the multiple 2019 elections mentioned above. It should be noted that it has also been suggested that the emergence in Germany of the AfD from marginality to the position of a viable party was due in an important measure to immigration and in particular to the admission in 2016 of 800,000 to 1 million refugees principally from Moslem countries. The common element in the two countries is the presentation of an enemy and threat to the nation and national identity.

This theme of danger to national identity and the necessity of stern measures in the face of threats both from inside and outside run through the first section “Spain, Unity and Sovereignty” of the Vox manifesto *100 medidas para la España viva*, including the banning of political and civil society organisations which “pursue the destruction of the territorial unity of the Nation and its sovereignty” (2). National symbols, the flag, the anthem and the Crown are to be given increased legal protection and offenses against them firmly punished (3). (All these symbols have been rejected or booed (including the King himself) during the current Catalan independence crisis). In addition, and significantly, the section urges the uniformisation of the Spanish state and identity to the point of dismantling existing constitutional arrangements which were fundamental to the successful transition to democracy in the late 1970’s. The existing seventeen autonomous regions are to be abolished and Spain is to become a “unitary state which will promote equality and solidarity instead of privileges and division” (6). This proposal means a return to the centralised format of the Franco state, abolition of the deliberate diffusion of political power among sub-national entities which is a fundamental characteristic of post-Franco Spain, just as it is of post-war Germany. The changes also mean a de-emphasis of regional identities. As a first step, it is proposed that there be a transfer from the communities to the national government of the responsibilities for “education, health, security and justice” (6). As part of the process towards the complete abolition of the police forces of the autonomous communities, they are to be placed under the control of the National Police Force (*Cuerpo de policía nacional*) and the *Guardia Civil* (5). The position of co-official languages (Basque – in two communities; Galician – in one community; Catalan – in three communities) in those autonomous communities which have them is to be weakened (4). The dominance of the Spanish language is to be protected, promoted and emphasised as the language of all Spaniards; insulting or denigrating Spanish by individuals or administrative bodies is to be made an offence (4). Governments in the autonomous communities with co-official languages have been seeking and are seeking to strengthen local identity through their language legislation. For the AfD, also, the role of language as a unifying element of national identity and identification is prominent, as is also the alleged need to protect it. In the case of the AfD, however, the protection that is advocated is against social changes: neologisms arising from the creation of neutral terms which totally avoid marking gender or which are inclusive of the feminine form of professional titles, etc.

Item (62) of *100 medidas para la España viva* guarantees the right of schooling in Spanish in every part of Spain: Spanish is to become the obligatory language of instruction everywhere and the co-official languages (Galician, Basque, Catalan) would be optional (Canadians are particularly aware how delicate and potent is the question of which language/s can be used or must be used in politics, public administration, and education).

In addition, in a later section “Freedoms and Justice” (*Libertades y justicia*), it is stated that organisations “designed to create structures parallel to those of the National Government [*el Estado*]” are to be abolished, including the television (and radio) services of the individual autonomous communities, their ombuds services (*defensores del pueblo*), consultative commissions, etc. (35). Juries are to be abolished (95). These are further proposals towards the concentration of information, power and communications in the central government in Madrid.

Society and Values

In addition, in the important area of society and societal values Vox holds conservative views. There are two proposals relating to “typical Spanish” practices and customs: Bullfighting is to receive particular legal protection as part of Spain’s “cultural heritage” (67). However, it should be noted that bullfighting is not uncontested in Spain and is currently prohibited by law in Catalonia. Tax deductions are to be available for businesses and individuals to sponsor support for cultural events or the maintenance and restoration of heritage buildings (66). And just as the AfD stresses the value of *Heimat*, Vox promotes “rootedness in the earth (*arraigo a la tierra*), folkloric events and “traditions of Spain and its peoples within the context of *Hispanidad*” (66).

Another aspect of national identity which links Vox with AfD and other far-right parties in Europe is the conservative view of the family and the importance of increasing the birthrate to overcome what Vox calls “the demographic winter”. The section *Vida y familia* (Life and Family) contains a series of specific measures, including financial ones, to encourage and support large families and increase the birth rate (72). These include baby-bonuses reserved for “Spanish families” mentioned above (73). An earlier section, *Economía y recursos* (Economy and Resources) had also proposed general tax relief for families with children (39) and particularly for large families (44). *Vida y familia* includes in item (75) the granting of legal “protection to life from conception to natural death”: in once and still somewhat-Catholic Spain this reflects Church teaching, but clashes with the current ready availability of legal abortion. Again in line with church teaching, surrogacy (currently illegal) is specifically opposed (80).

The starting point in this important section on life and the family is the proposal to repeal any law mentioning violence against women (70). This is in line with repeated condemnations of “ideologies” – meaning in fact anything which Vox is in disagreement with, particularly “feminism” or on the left of the political spectrum. Specifically mentioned in item (70) is the proposed suppression of “radical feminist organisations receiving any [public] subsidies”. To be

noted here are the repeated AfD objections to “gender mainstreaming” emanating (among other sources) from the EU. It is in this connection of current trends to re-define social relationships that the proposal to introduce a *ley orgánica*⁵ to “recognise it [the natural family] as an institution existing prior to the state” (*que la reconozca como institución anterior al Estado*) is to be understood. Behind this term “natural family” lies the conception of the family as father-plus-mother-plus children, a framework or “natural law” which the state should not interfere with. This is in contrast to the more flexible forms of family which have developed, represented, for example, by the fact that Spain recognises and authorises same-sex marriage.

Within the framework of the nation and its values lies also the vexed question of religion, including the presence of Islam, and their relationship with the state (see Gould 2015 and 2016). This also raises constitutional questions, as the Spanish state is neutral in religious matters and public authorities are enjoined to “take into consideration the beliefs of Spanish society and maintain the resulting cooperative relations with the Catholic Church and the other religions” (Spanish Constitution, Article 16). The demand in (25) to abolish the teaching of Islam in schools is discriminatory and clearly contrary to the obligation to cooperate with other religions in addition to Roman Catholicism. The wording permits the implication, particularly clear in the Spanish context, that the teaching of Christianity (principally Catholicism), which currently exists in publicly-funded schools, is to remain untouched. The prohibition of the teaching of Islam is quite distinct from the proposals to prosecute Islamic extremism (23, 24). These proposals are in the section “Defence, Security and Borders” (*Defensa, seguridad y fronteras*) which, as with the AfD positions, presents Islam as a threat which makes particular defensive and border protection measures necessary. In Germany the AfD is promoting the religious divide between Christian and Moslem. In Spain Vox is doing exactly the same thing – in a country which is only some 22 miles from Morocco, which at two points even has a land border with that country arising from its two North-African exclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, which has a long history of Moslem / North-African presence and continuing influence including many of the heritage buildings mentioned above for preferential tax treatment, and where many churches and cathedrals are built on the foundations of mosques or even incorporate the whole structure of what was a mosque.

While in the two documents Vox does not explicitly emphasise “Christian-occidental values” in the way that the *AfD* repeatedly does, its preference for Christianity and for some Catholic teachings has been shown, and it also proposes measures to create an agency “to support threatened Christian minorities, imitating the initiative of Hungary” (99). Within this context, including the party’s views on maintaining the teaching of Christianity in schools and the protection of Christian minorities just mentioned, it is to be understood that in the section “Europe and International” of *100 medidas* the drive towards a new European treaty which would “defend . . . respect for the

⁵ A *ley orgánica* is a legislative act considered particularly important and thus requiring a majority not just of the votes cast but an absolute majority of the votes of ALL elected representatives in the parliament.

values of European culture” (96) means essentially the same as the AfD’s promotion of “Christian-occidental values”: hostility towards Islam.

Constitutional Problems

At least four matters mentioned above raise constitutional problems: the proposal to outlaw parties, associations and NGO’s which support the separation of any part of the national territory; the proposal to create a centralised state, the proposals to abolish public funding to various civil society organisations, and the teaching of Islam in schools. The last three will be discussed here within the context of the document “Vox’s Proposals for the Investiture of the Premier of the Government of Andalusia” (*Propuestas de Vox para la investidura del Presidente de la Junta de Andalucía*) (Vox España 2019). This document has been selected as a) in these measures it goes beyond the more general *100 medidas para la España viva*, and b) it was published as a set of negotiating terms in direct and immediate connection with the formation of a government.

The first matter is fundamental in view of the Constitution’s establishing Spain as a country founded on political pluralism (Articles 1 and 6). The establishment and continuing existence of parties based on ideas which do not find approval everywhere in the country and which even militate against the constitutional principle of the “indivisibility of the Spanish people” (Article 2) is thus guaranteed. That is quite separate from the taking of concrete steps towards separation, which has led to the criminal prosecutions for rebellion etc. mentioned above.

It is quite clear that the proposal to transfer to the national government the competences of education, health care, justice, and public order (see above), contained also item 1 of the *Propuestas* (Vox España 2019) is a radical and far-reaching shift, particularly as the foundation statement of *100 medidas para la España viva* sees it as the first step towards the total abolition of the autonomous communities themselves. The measure goes far beyond anything proposed by the AfD, which accepts both the federal structure of Germany and also regional differences. For Spain to achieve such a change in the whole structure of the state as is proposed by Vox could be done legally but would require a set of particular and complicated procedures (Iribar 2018).

Secondly, point 3 proposes the reduction and then elimination of funding to “political parties, unions, and business organisations”; also cancellation of funding to “ideological associations and NGO’S (all those devoted to the propagation of a specific ideological vision) independently of whether they are communist, feminist, progressive, liberal, conservative in nature”. Given the absence of any criteria, the latter statement would appear to mean any organisation that Vox disapproves of.⁶ These proposals, too, run contrary to Article 1 Paragraph 1 of the Spanish Constitution which defines political pluralism as one of the constitutional foundations of the

⁶ All parties and NGO’s etc. have an ideology: for example, Article 2 of the Statutes of the conservative *Partido Popular* is headed “Ideology” (PP 2008).

country. In addition, Article 6 protects political parties, Article 7 protects both labour unions and business organisations equally, and Article 16 guarantees “freedom of ideology, religion and worship”. Consequently these proposals are encountering considerable objections on the part of jurists (see Iríbar 2018; Pérez and Gálvez 2019).

Point 5 accuses the Government of Andalusia of covering up illegal immigration by keeping from the police the documentation needed to expel 55,000 people in Andalusia illegally. In not supplying police with such information the government is in fact acting in conformity with a judgement of the Constitutional Court in 2013 which strictly limits the access of police to such information and places access under judicial oversight. This was imposed to protect foreigners’ rights and precisely to prevent the sort of sweeping and unilateral actions by representatives of state power that Vox is proposing (Pérez and Gálvez 2019).

Point 11 proposes the elimination of funding to Islamic organisations, which also would infringe constitutional principles of non-discrimination according to belief, as well as the obligation of the non-confessional Spanish state to co-operate with all religions (see above). There is no balancing proposal to cut funding to Christian organisations.

Points 16, 17 and 18 demand the repeal of acts of the Andalusian Parliament to prevent violence against women, to protect and guarantee LGBTI rights and those of their families (17), and to promote the equality of men and women (18). Such laws are a fulfilment of the promises in Article 9 of the Constitution to remove obstacles and to promote the integration of individuals and groups into “political, economic, social and cultural life”.

It is clear that independently of whether they contain real or potential constitutional conflicts or not, the social values of the party are conservative and backward looking, just as are their political views for a centralised and possibly authoritarian Spain. Vox is stating these views openly and clearly, consequently it is quite reasonable to conclude that the party is convinced – quite rightly - - that votes are to be gained in stating such views publicly: in Andalusia they obtained 395,978 votes, i.e. 10.97% of the total votes cast.

A Note on Provocation

It is clear that many of the points outlined above are extreme, both those in the *100 medidas para la España viva* and those from the negotiation document *Propuestas de Vox para la investidura del presidente del gobierno de Andalucía* (Vox España 2019). They are extreme in the sense that it is known in advance that they cannot be realised in the current political context. In addition to stating the party’s views, they are there also to provoke, and to provoke in such a way that they ensure media coverage and thus create free publicity for the party. Particularly the proposals in items (16) to (18) to repeal the Act to prevent Violence against Women (16), the Act to guarantee the Rights of Equality of Treatment and Non-discrimination of LGBTI Persons and their Families

(17), and the Act to promote the Equality of the Sexes (18) provoked large demonstrations throughout Andalusia and elsewhere in Spain in mid-January 2019 when the Andalusian Parliament met and received significant media coverage (Valdés 2019). The proposals themselves are completely absent from the agreement between Vox and the PP, but one can argue that they achieved their dual goal of widely propagating a conservative social vision and creating extensive media attention.

In addition to the points expressed and briefly analysed above, among Vox' negotiating list were demands that the public holiday known as the Day of Andalusia be moved from 28 February (anniversary of the referendum which gave democratic legitimacy to the autonomous status of Andalusia) to 2 January, the anniversary of the capitulation of Granada in 1492 which marked the end of Moslem rule in any part of the territory of what is now Spain.⁷ This was no doubt a deliberate provocation with no chance of success in the negotiations. However, it served to refer to both the triumph of Christian Spain in Andalusia as well as to the increasing Moslem population resulting from legal and irregular migration from or via Morocco – the region to which the expelled Arabs and Berbers returned. And, as noted above, Vox accused the PSOE government of covering up the number of irregular migrants and preventing the police from expelling them.

On the other hand, it is also clear that many such views are unacceptable to the PP and to many voters. The final agreement between the Andalusian PP and Vox varied noticeably from Vox' demands.

Conclusion

In the final agreement between Vox and the Partido Popular to support the latter's candidate for premier of Andalusia, Vox agreed "to protect the constitutional order and the unity of Spain maintaining always the greatest loyalty towards the Crown and the Constitution" (PP and Vox 2019, item 1). In addition, the two parties state "We condemn any and all attacks on any democratic political force" (item 3). With this, Vox provides itself with protection against accusations of disloyalty to the Constitution, despite the radical reforms of the state it is proposing and the constitutionally dubious measures outlined above. In a similar way the AfD sought to protect itself by means of frequent references to *die freiheitlich-demokratische Grundordnung*, the free and democratic rule of law, which is a fundamental term taken from the German Constitution and frequently used in German political discourse.

Importantly, the implication of much of what Vox is stating in the two earlier documents is that the existing political parties have failed, and are continuing to fail, to protect the state and society from hostile forces both within and without. As outlined in the section "Europe and the EU" above, this includes forces and influences emanating from the European Union or the Council of

⁷ It should be noted that in Granada itself the anniversary is celebrated every year.

Europe and the transfer to these supranational bodies of important aspects of sovereignty. And, internally, by their lack of decisive action the established nation-wide parties have failed in their obligation to protect the sovereignty and national integrity of Spain from the actions of the separatist movement and separatist political parties in Catalonia.

Vox' conservative vision of society, and particularly of women, has been noted above, including the condemnation of "ideologies" and particularly of "radical feminist organisations receiving public funding" (70). In this connection it is worth noting the impulses emanating from the Treaty of Amsterdam (EC 1997). In this the European Community (later the European Union) assumes the obligation, expressed particularly in Article 119 of the treaty, to promote the equality of men and women in the labour market, including the right of Member States "to provide specific measures to make it easier for the under-represented sex to pursue a vocational activity or prevent or compensate for disadvantages in professional careers". Vox does not mention the EU specifically in this context, but in fact many of the changes in society it condemns have received some of their energy and force from Brussels as well as from women's organisations and lobbies.

The aim of the measures proposed in order to increase the birthrate mirrors that of the AfD, which is to increase the 'native' population in the face of shifting demographics and the desire to reduce the reliance on immigration for labour-market and fiscal needs, as well as for long-term economic development in general. Vox's resistance to immigration is derived from a largely ethno-cultural vision of Spanish identity, summarised in the term *hispanidad* (66) used in the section "Educación y Cultura" of *100 medidas para la España viva* where other marks of cultural identity (beyond the scope of this commentary) are also outlined. And this identity is expressed in the majority of instances in opposition to "Others" who do not belong to "nationalities [the term contains a strong ethno-cultural component] which share a language and important links of friendship and culture with Spain" (*100 medidas*, item 22).

In summary, tensions which are inevitably present between the national and the supranational are being instrumentalised and foregrounded as a fundamental issue in Vox's self-definition and public presentations. Its views of the Spanish nation, of national sovereignty, and the country's political structure, all of which are more focussed on Madrid as the centre for decision-making, as opposed to being diffused among the autonomous communities or ceded to supranational organisations, lead to an appreciable distancing from the paths which have characterised Spain in the forty years since the end of the Franco era: acceptance of pluralism in politics and social values, a form of federalism resulting from the existence and functions of the autonomous communities, and integration within the European organisations.

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