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Islamophobia and Twitter: The Political Discourse of the Extreme Right in Spain and Its Impact on the Public

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Abstract: This paper analyzes the discourse concerning Islam and Muslims by assessing the extreme right-wing party, Vox, on Twitter. In addition, this paper examines the incidence (impact and reactions) of this party on the users of this social network. The objectives of this study are as follows: to identify themes and topics concerning this discourse; to analyze how the discourse is articulated and represented; and to understand the impact of this discourse by measuring the engagement of the most viral publications. To do so, we observed the publications posted by the party via its official account throughout 2022. The research methodology was based on qualitative and quantitative content analysis, and the publications themselves were monitored to ascertain the level of engagement. The results of this study clearly show that Vox created Islamophobic narratives; thus, Islam and Muslims are explicit targets of Vox's hate speech. Their rhetoric referred to security threats and threats to national identity, with the recurrent use of the idea that there is a "danger of Islamization" in Spain. The party uses disinformation and hoaxes, and users respond in a polarized way. The results of this study alert us to the worrying levels of radicalization and the normalization of Islamophobic racist discourse in the examined context.

Keywords: Islamophobia; political discourse; social network; racism; extreme right; Spain; Vox

1. Introduction

Currently, the rapid rise of extreme right-wing parties is an issue that is affecting an increasing number of countries (Mudde 2019; Wodak 2021). This has been the case in Europe for some time; for instance, in countries such as France and Austria, the Front National (known as the National Rally since 2018) and the Freedom Party of Austria have become more prominent. More recently, in Poland (Law and Justice Party), Hungary (Fidesz–Hungarian Civil Alliance) and Italy (Northern League or Brothers of Italy), far-right leaders are present in the government. In the European Union, we also observed how the extreme right gained significant representation as a result of the 2014 European Parliament elections. In Spain, since 2018, we have noticed the rise of the extreme right; this is when the political party, Vox, first entered institutions, forming part of an autonomous parliament—that of Andalusia—and later, the state parliament (2019).

Despite the fact that this type of political forces and parties present specificities depending on whether they are newly formed parties or parties with historical baggage, the specific national contexts in which they are located or whether or not they are part of a government (Ignazi 2003; Mudde 2019), certain characteristics present in most of them can be identified. This is the case, for example, in terms of their anti-immigration positioning and discourses (Wodak and Van Dijk 2000; Mudde 2019; Casals 2020); and especially in terms of their anti-Muslim and Islamophobic positioning and discourses (Rydgren 2017; Wodak and Krzyżanowski 2017; Kallis 2018; Akkerman 2018). Alongside that, the Islamophobic nature of these parties is an issue that has increased since the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York, which have been occurring on European soil since 2004 (Casals 2019; Forti 2021) and the 2015 "refugee crisis" (Akkerman 2018; Pettersson 2020), progressively increasing as an

omnipresent rhetoric, which is more radical in terms of its content and more extreme and powerful in terms of its scope (Kallis 2018).

In this regard, the main lines of discourse of anti-Islam and Islamophobic ideologies sustained by these parties are: (1) regard for Islam and/or Muslims as a security threat for European and Western societies in general; and (2) regard for Islam and/or Muslims as a threat for European and Western societies in cultural terms, in general (Hafez 2014; Kallis 2018; Rydgren 2017; Wodak 2021). Both issues underpin the political proposals of these types of parties, rejecting multiculturalism and even assimilation, and considering it non-viable and impossible, alluding to the Clash of Civilizations of Huntington (1993) (Bazian 2018).

With regard to security discourse and extreme right parties, such parties are focused on associating and identifying Islam with terrorism (Kallis 2018; Acha et al. 2020) in order to promote a culture of fear and rejection around Islam and/or Muslims. In order to do so, these parties typify any incident in which a Muslim is involved, such as a terrorist act, and they generalize the event as being typical of the wider Muslim community, thus stigmatizing all Muslims and the Islamic world. Such events, thus, prompt Muslims to be treated with suspicion, and when these events are described in religious and fanatic terms, it prevents any other explanations from being considered. Consequently, in one part of the population, fear of another part of the population is instilled, thus helping this type of racism to be accepted (Hafez 2014), and being understood as justified.

In terms of discourses that present Islam and/or Muslims to be a threat in cultural terms, criticisms by these parties do not tend to focus on beliefs, but on religious practices (Acha et al. 2020); for instance, the use of the veil worn by women (Bazian 2018; Sauer 2022). This position is one that apparently defends the rights of Muslim women, who are understood as being oppressed for wearing the veil. This contradicts the very conservative and traditional visions of gender that these parties tend to have of women in general (Acha et al. 2020). This strategy enables the extreme right to justify their xenophobic rhetoric (Acha 2021) and attract female voters (Casals 2019).

Among the reasons outlined to explain the current rise of these types of forces, in particular those without significant historic baggage, are the internet and the use of social networks by these parties. In this regard, Forti (2021) makes reference to the "Extreme Right 2.0", which refers to a radical new phenomenon. This phenomenon consists of political forces that use populist tools, and which have the capacity to employ new technologies for propagandistic purposes; parties that comprise this phenomenon use propagandistic tools more often and to a better effect than traditional parties. In the words of Forti (2021), Vox would form part of this "macro category", specific to the current situation and that—among other characteristics—demonstrates significant nationalism and Islamophobic rhetoric. In this respect, authors, such as Ekman (2015), have previously warned of how one of the defining elements of these political forces—the internet and social networks—has "facilitated a space where racist attitudes towards Muslims are easily disseminated into the public debate, fueling animosity against European Muslims" (Ekman 2015, p. 1). Ekman (2015) insists that the internet portrays anti-Muslim sentiment as being the dominant political position. This is because such sentiments are framed as defending Western values and the freedom of expression, which is exactly what contributes to support for such views, and their dissemination, both online and offline.

This paper analyzes the functioning logic of the Spanish extreme right discourse on Twitter (specifically concerning the political party, Vox) regarding Islam and Muslims, and their incidence (impact and reactions) on users of this social network. The appearance and entry of this extreme right party into institutions has transformed traditional debates on immigration in Spain, and has led to the construction of a new anti-immigration discourse (Oso et al. 2021) that normalizes racism (Olmos-Alcaraz 2022, 2023), especially against Muslims (Ferreira 2019; Urban 2019; Cervi 2020; Ramos 2021). Within the context of the study taken into account, there is some recent research that specifically explores hate speech, racism in general and Islamophobia by Vox on social media. In her work on Vox's discourse

on immigration and unaccompanied foreign minors on Twitter, Camargo Fernández (2021) states that the party's first significant Islamophobic campaign took place following the terrorist attacks in Barcelona in August 2017. In a study undertaken on Vox's discourse regarding Afghan refugees, also on Twitter, Sosinski and Sánchez García (2022) state that one of the party's most important conceptual frameworks was concerned with the idea of "Christians first". The authors regard this as an example of "clear Islamophobia" by Vox. Indeed, Vox argues that there is a need to prioritize the acceptance of refugees from Christian minorities. In their research on Islamophobic hate discourse on Twitter, Fuentes and Arcila (2023) identified how, at specific times, the political discourse promoted by Vox led to an increase in tweets with Islamophobic content. In other words, not only did the extreme right political party Vox publish Islamophobic content on social media, but those publications led to an increase in Islamophobic discourse on these social media platforms.

Based on this context, and in order to examine the aforementioned theoretical object, this article proposes the following research questions: (1) How are central issues related to Islam and Muslims to the party's publications? (2) How are these issues represented? (3) What level of engagement do its most viral publications achieve and how do Twitter users react to them? (4) Are the party's communication strategies based on Islamophobia and hate speech? In order to try to answer these questions, we set out three objectives: (1) to identify the themes and topics that surround Islam and Muslims on Twitter as a result of Vox's rhetoric; (2) to analyze how these issues are articulated and represented; and (3) to gauge the impact of these publications and how Twitter users have reacted to them. In order to do so, this study will briefly explore the conceptual debates that currently surround Islamophobia and its status as a type of racism. Secondly, it will present the methodological design that was followed throughout the research process. Thirdly, it will summarize the main results obtained from the analysis of the extreme right political party, Vox, and its activity on Twitter, with specific regard to the topics of Islam and/or Muslims, the topics and discursive strategies employed in its publications, and the engagement—interest and commitment—that these publications inspired among the public. The paper concludes with a discussion of the aforementioned results, and a discussion of the functioning logic of racist political discourse on social media, in addition to its radicalization and normalization.

2. Islamophobia as a Type of Racism

To date, some of the main issues regarding Islamophobia concern its lack of visibility, the denial of its existence, and the denial that it constitutes a "type of racism". This is not a minor issue, as reducing Islamophobia to a non-racist form of discrimination diminishes the significance of its existence, thus enabling others to perceive it as being a "tolerable" form of discrimination (Hafez 2014). Additionally, as indicated by Modood (2018), if Islamophobia is not considered a type of racism, it removes legitimacy from Muslim involvement with anti-racist equality initiatives, as it is argued that they are "not a racial group".

The report created by The Runnymede Trust in 1997, *Islamophobia: A challenge for us all* (Runnymede Trust 1997), has been considered an incredibly influential document, as it concerns the visibility and reporting of this social problem (Allen 2010). Modood (2018) states that although The Runnymede Trust gave significant visibility to this issue, it did not make clear that Islamophobia was a type of "racism", as it only discussed anti-Muslim discrimination; however, this author does mention that this issue has been overcome with the new report by Think Tank, entitled *Islamophobia: Still a challenge for us all*, published in 2017 (Runnymede Trust 2017).

In this paper, as is the case in a significant number of other studies (Bhatti 2021; Grosfoguel 2014; Modood 2018; Gómez Garcia 2019), we understand Islamophobia to be a type of racism, more specifically, a type of cultural racism. In this sense, we agree with Gómez Garcia (2019) in that Islamophobia concerns the fear, hate, or prejudice against Islam and Muslims due to their faith or supposed belonging to an Islamic race (Gómez Garcia 2019). We agree with Modood (2018), who explicitly notes that the racialization process is important in the definition of Islamophobia. For this author, Islamophobia is a racialization

of Muslims based on their physical appearance or the fact that they are descendants of members of a community, attributing cultural or religious characteristics to them to slander, marginalize, discriminate against or demand their assimilation and, consequently, treat them as second-class citizens (Modood 2018). This process of racialization, as affirmed by Bhatti (2021), is underpinned by power relations that allow each member of the group to be treated as if specific characteristics were innate to him or her; these characteristics transcend ethnicity. We consider the way in which Grosfoguel (2014) reminds us that we are not faced with a new issue, but, in any case, is an issue that presents specificities currently, and following the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States, it is a current issue that is of great importance. For this author, Islamophobia has been a longstanding problem in the "Western centric/Christian centric/modern/colonial/capitalist/patriarchal system-world", and it has remained in the minds and imaginations of the white European and North American populations (Grosfoguel 2014).

All the aforementioned authors concur that we are faced with a type of discrimination that is racist in nature and that is mobilized by the racialization processes that work intersectionally. Such processes prove that we are faced with a specific logic that underpins the functioning of racism, and which cause Islam and Muslims (and a series of religious markers) to be re-signified in ethno-cultural terms. Gómez Garcia (2019) discusses Islamophobia in terms of "hate". This is because Islamophobic discrimination is often based on a person's presumed belonging to an Islamic race, and thus, we can infer that such discrimination is caused by those who racialize Islam. Modood (2018) openly discusses the existence of processes wherein racialized cultural features are attributed to a religious group (Muslims), as was the case with Jewish peoples. The author insists on the racist–culturalist nature of Islamophobia, and they highlight how non-practicing Muslims face equal levels of discrimination (even without being religious individuals). This occurs exclusively because they are racialized. Grosfoguel (2014) notes that as a result of the racialization processes, specific social groups (often dominant) use cultural and/or biological characteristics to construct hierarchies of superiority and inferiority among collective social agents. Grosfoguel (2014) adds that, in the case of Islamophobia, these processes provoke a racial subalternization and inferiorization of Islam, which is mobilized by way of a discursive transmutation, which results in the transformation of medieval religious discriminations into racial discrimination (Grosfoguel 2014).

Finally, it is important to note that when we talk about Islamophobia as a type of racism, we are also talking about institutional racism (it is not a matter of individual prejudice); thus, we are talking about a phenomenon that is socio-cultural and present at the structural and systemic level (Bhatti 2021). In this regard, we must bear in mind that the existence of institutional racism, in general, is usually denied (bell hooks 1994; Carmichael and Hamilton 1967; Davis 1983); and this issue is intensified when we talk about Islamophobia, for the reasons outlined above. In other words, we are dealing with a type of racism that is particularly and worryingly invisibilized.

3. Materials and Methods

In this paper, we studied the logic underpinning the discourse on Islam and Muslims, as propagated by the extreme right political party, Vox, on Twitter, and its incidence (impact and reactions) on users of this social network. In order to achieve this, the activity of this political party on Twitter, via its official account (@vox_es), was analyzed during 2022, as was the incidence that the activity on this social network had on the public.

As previously mentioned, the objectives of this research were to: (1) to identify the themes and topics that surround Islam and Muslims on Twitter as a result of Vox's rhetoric; (2) analyze how these issues are articulated and represented; and (3) gauge the impact of these publications and how Twitter users have reacted to them. Our methodology was based on an analysis of qualitative and quantitative content (for the first two objectives). We also monitored the publications in order to establish the level of engagement achieved (for the third objective).

The publications (tweets, retweets, and quotes) included in the sample were collected using the Twitter API. The observed account published a total of 8653 messages throughout 2022, of which only 194 made reference to Islam and/or Muslims. In order to collect this sample, a series of keywords were used, and the sample was collected in two filtered stages. In the first stage, all publications containing any of the terms intentionally established in line with the theoretical object and objectives of the research were filtered.[1] After an initial reading of the collected material, during the second phase, other words that appeared recurrently in the publications and which were found to refer to issues related to Islam and/or Muslims were added.[2] The second group of words was less descriptive and had more social connotations. Finally, the sample was established, and it comprised 194 publications.

The analysis of these data was undertaken using different qualitative and quantitative analysis software and social media monitoring tools. NVivo was used in order to identify—using an inductive process—the themes and topics. The frequencies were obtained and analyzed with Excel. The analysis of representations and discourses was also carried out with NVivo. Finally, the analysis of the impact of these publications and user reactions was undertaken by calculating the engagement levels of the most viral publications, using the social media monitoring tool, Social Elephants. The formula applied to calculate the level of engagement has been the total sum of likes, comments and retweets in relation to the followers of each account/profile, expressed in percentages.[3] Additionally, the qualitative content (discursive strategies) of the user interactions with the party's account was analyzed using NVivo.

4. Results: Vox's Discourse on Islam and Muslims on Twitter

4.1. Activity

The first issue observed in this research was the centrality that this extreme right party gave to Islam and/or Muslims. Of all the publications posted by Vox on its official account throughout 2022 (N = 8653), just 2.2% (a total of 194) addressed these issues. We can observe the temporal progression of these publications in the following graph (Figure 1).
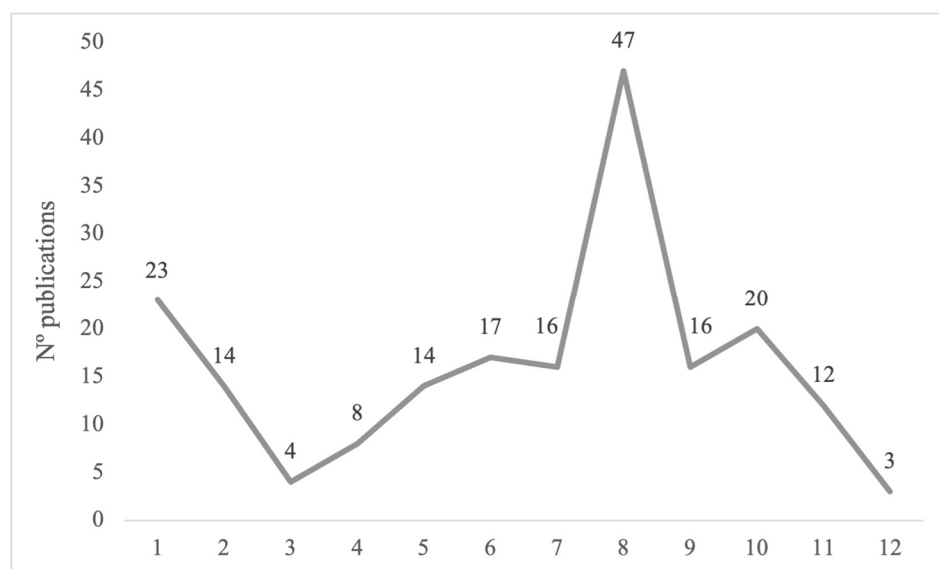

Figure 1. Twitter publications by Vox (@vox_es) on Islam and/or Muslims during 2022. Source: prepared by the author based on data provided by the Twitter API.

On average there were 16.2 publications per month: 9 months went above, and just 3 months fell below this average. The months of January, August and October saw the highest number of publications that focused upon the aforementioned topics. In January, Vox posted 23 publications (11.9% of the total) that focused on Islam and/or Muslims, and in October, it posted 20 publications (10.3%); however, in August, the party posted its

highest number of publications—almost 50—that focused on the aforementioned topics, which represents 24.2% of the total.

In January, the peak in activity is explained by the celebration of an ephemeris in Spain—the "Conquest of Granada"[4]—, which Vox used to remember the past triumph of Christianity over Islam, and to reaffirm the country's national Catholic identity. In October, we can observe diverse publications in which the extreme right party expresses its support for Mohamed Said Badoui's detention and expulsion from the country[5]. Badoui was a Moroccan citizen who was resident in Catalonia for 30 years, a human rights activist, and leader of the Muslim community in his municipality. He was accused of "radicalism" (El Diario 2022). In August, the peak in activity can be explained by the fact that at this time of year, the number of small boats arriving with migrants to the Spanish coast tends to be high. This would explain the existence of many publications that speak of the "call effect", that identify "migrants" as "Muslim migrants", and that link their arrival in Spain with what Vox calls "Islamization" and the "jihadist threat".

We will go on to observe this in depth in the next sections, in addition to other discursive strategies employed by the extreme right party in their publications in order to discuss and represent Islam and/or Muslims.

4.2. Themes, Topics, and Representations

The 194 publications were coded using an inductive strategy. Publications with several themes/topics related to Islam and/or Muslims were included in several categories simultaneously. This process led to 216 codified units of meaning. Here, the objective was to ascertain the percentage of units of meaning (codifications) that were aimed at certain themes/topics, in order to undertake a joint valuation of the types of discursive narratives and strategies that dominate the publications which concern Islam and/or Muslims (see Table 1).

Table 1. Themes/topics present in publications by Vox (@vox_es) that concern Islam and/or Muslims during 2022.

Category: Themes/Topics	N° Codifications	%
1. Aspects regarding security, terrorism and crime	88	40.7
1.1. Reports, accusations, or suspicions of terrorism	44	50
1.2. Loss of freedom, security, and rights due to Islam and/or Muslims	35	39.8
1.3. Crimes committed by Muslims	9	10.2
2. Cultural aspects	70	32.4
2.1. Islamization, Islamist threat	37	52.9
2.2. Islam and/or Muslims are enemies of civilization, the West, and/or Christianity	13	18.6
2.3. Celebrations of the expulsion of Islam and Muslims from Spain	9	12.9
2.4. The Muslim woman and the veil	5	7.1
2.5. Muslims do not adapt to our customs	4	5.7
2.6. The presence of Islam and/or Muslims in schools	2	2.6
3. Aspects related to migration	58	26.9
3.1. Migrant children and MENAS (unaccompanied foreign minors)	34	58.6
3.2. Illegal immigration	24	41.4

Source: prepared by the author using NVivo.

This analysis gave rise to three main themes which we have categorized as follows: (1) aspects regarding security, terrorism and crime; (2) cultural aspects; and (3) aspects related to migration. The first group, which is related to the topic of security in a broad sense, is composed of 40.7% of the units of meaning that were categorized. The second

group, which concerns cultural aspects, is more diverse in terms of themes, and it is composed of 32.4% of the total units of meaning that were categorized. The third group, which is related to the phenomenon of migration, is composed of 26.9% of all the units of meaning that were analyzed. We will proceed to examine each of these areas in further detail.

Without doubt, the security aspects constitute the predominant theme in the publications posted by Vox that concern Islam and/or Muslims. Within this large category, we can also identify three subthemes or topics. The most common topic concerns "reports, accusations or suspicions of terrorism" (50% of the units on this topic are of this type) that the party—or people affiliated with it—aim at Islam and/or Muslims. Quote 1 is an example of this type of discourse.

Quote 1[6]:

"Spain is the second country in terms of the number of Jihadists who have been detained (more than 130) according to Europol. Islamist attacks such as those which have taken place in Barcelona, Cambrils, Brussels or Bataclan may reoccur soon if we continue to leave the South Border unprotected." (18 May 2022. https://onx.la/a2644)

These are publications that often warn of "the possibility" of an attack (in other words, they focus on suspicion and hypothetical situations), and they do not limit themselves to reviewing attacks that have already taken place.

Below, the most frequent subtopic (39.8%) concerns the perceived "loss of freedom, security and rights" due to the presence of Islam and/or Muslims in Spain.

Quote 2:

"Mass and uncontrolled immigration from Muslim countries implies a decrease in terms of the safety of women and homosexuals." (17 February 2022. https://onx.la/e06db)

In accordance with the discourses that concern "specific crimes committed by Muslims" (10.2%), this last case makes reference to publications that provide information on thefts, rapes and attacks. Moreover, the nationality and religion of those who committed these crimes are mentioned, and thus, specific nationalities are associated with Islam and with crime, as can be observed in the example below.

Quote 3:

"In Melilla, 30 MENAS attacked two security guards, while a dangerous Islamist being pursued by Interpol was detained in Ceuta. In Usera, two south Americans and two Maghrebis were detained for an extremely violent attack on a couple who were out walking." (1 January 2022. https://onx.la/466fe)

Themes related to "cultural aspects" are referred to with the second-highest degree of frequency. Regarding this theme, although there are fewer discourses, the included narratives are more diverse. We will not mention all the subtopics identified in this category (see Table 1), as this is beyond the remit of this paper; however, we will address the most important subtopics. First, we can observe that the majority of the units of meaning that were categorized within this theme (more than half, 52.9%) develop the idea of what the party coins "Islamization" of Spain, which is something it defines as a significant threat, especially in certain neighborhoods, for both the country and for Europe. For instance,

Quote 4:

"The silence of other parties regarding the Islamization of Catalunya will have very serious consequences for our land. It is twice as dangerous: terrorist attacks and an end to rights and freedoms in our neighbourhoods. We do not want to become Saint-Dennis or Molenbeek." (4 February 2022. https://onx.la/165fa)

This type of discourse is recurrent, and it follows very similar patterns. In such discourse, "Islamization" is deemed to be something that needs to be addressed urgently,

and it implies the loss of identity, rights and freedoms for Spanish people. Moreover, it also implies that this has already occurred in other nearby European countries.

Secondly, within the "cultural aspects" category, it was noted that Vox tends to take advantage of the celebrations of events that commemorate "the expulsion of Islam and Muslims from Spain" (12.9%). This occurs in order to deploy a nostalgic ethno-nationalist discourse, while revindicating the Christian nature of the country. The following example was published during the aforementioned celebration, the "Conquest of Granada".

Quote 5:

"Tomorrow, before dawn, WE WILL CONQUER GRANADA, said the glorious Queen Isabel. And that's what happened. Today we celebrate the triumph of our Christian identity and the end of Muslim occupation, with the fall of the Nasrid kingdom. Granada. Where everything began #ConquestOfGranada #ConquestUntouched." (2 January 2022. https://onx.la/fa3dc)

Here, there is an insistence of the celebration of "our Christian identity", against those they define as "invaders" (Islam and Muslims).

Finally, within this category, we want to mention—as interesting data—that the units of meaning that concern "the Muslim woman and the use of the Islamic veil" (7.1%) were very scarce. This is interesting as it tends to be a frequent cause of controversy in extreme right parties. One such scarce example can be observed below.

Quote 6:

"The EU has financed a guide to instruct journalists to avoid "gender-based Islamophobia": "be inclusive", "avoid mentioning religion", "remember that women may prefer to wear the hijab" . . . ; making it a guide which imposes one sole discourse." (27 July 2022. https://onx.la/a903c)

Finally, the third main identified theme is related to the "migration phenomenon". In this case, there were two types of units of meaning: those that made reference to "unaccompanied foreign minors" (MENAS)[7] (58.6% of the categorizations of this theme); and those that made reference to Muslim migrants as "illegal" (41.45%). With regard to the first of these types, we observed numerous publications that were intended to spread information concerning the supposed crimes and atrocities committed by these minors, as shown by the following example.

Quote 7:

"I'll fix it for you: an Algerian MENA rapes, robs and beats an 80-year-old woman. Informative terrorism hides the fact that (again) the political caste has condemned Spaniards to live in fear." (14 February 2022. https://onx.la/0931b)

The "unaccompanied foreign minors" group has significant presence in publications by Vox, and although this category does not necessarily comprise unaccompanied foreign minors who are Muslims, it is often used by the party to refer to minors who come from the neighboring country (Morocco).

With regard to the units of meaning that mention "illegal immigration", again, this label usually refers to migrants from majority Muslim countries. Alternatively, it refers to migrants that have committed, are suspected of having committed, or may hypothetically commit, a terrorist act. For example,

Quote 8:

"Spain is the second European country with the most detained Jihadists. What did VOX demand? For illegal immigration to be declared of National Security interest due to the infiltration of terrorists. The other parties voted against this and neglected the security of Spanish people." (14 July 2022. https://onx.la/a18ae)

As can be observed, the logic in this argument concerns the idea that "if there are 'jihadists' it is because there is 'illegal immigration'", thus identifying "immigration" with the "'illegal' immigration of Muslim people", and in turn, these people are associated with Jihadist terrorism.

4.3. Incidence of Publications

In order to find out the incidence that the publications posted by the extreme right party, Vox, had on Twitter users, we have chosen to analyze the level of engagement of the most viral messages during the observed year. The greater the level of engagement of a publication, the better it has connected with the audience in terms of the digital conversation generated and the number of interactions it instigated among users. The average level of engagement of the official Vox account during 2022 was 0.478%. Although this is a comparative metric, on Twitter—in general terms—a good level of engagement is considered to be between 1% and 2% (see Figure 2).
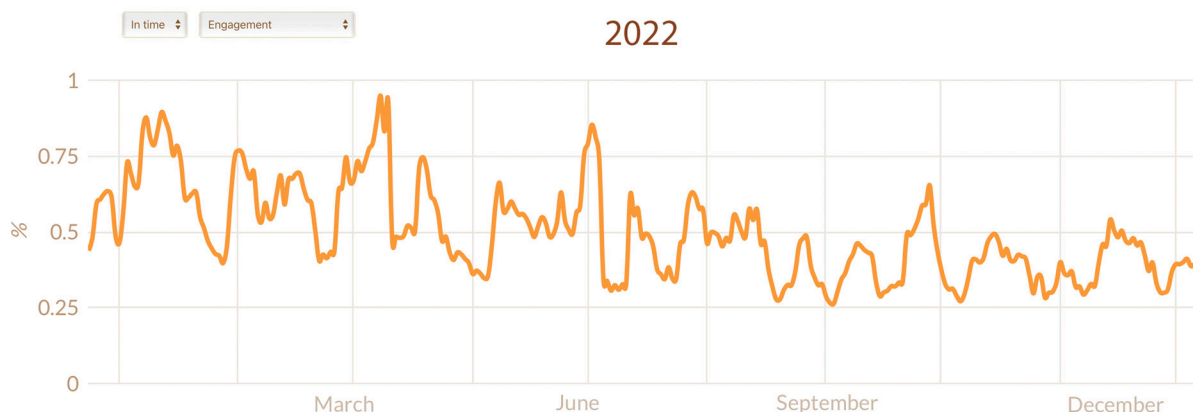

Figure 2. Engagement rate of Vox (@vox_es) during 2022. Source: Social Elephants.

Two of the three most viral publications showed a level of engagement that was significantly above the average recorded by the official party account throughout the year: 52.1% and 17.9%, respectively. This indicates that—in these cases—the explanatory value of the average values is limited and should be viewed with caution. The third most viral publication presents an engagement level of 1.9% (see Table 2).

Table 2. Engagement rate of the most viral publications (retweets) by Vox (@vox_es) that concern Islam and/or Muslims in 2022.

Publication Text/Date	Engagement Variables		Level of Engagement[8]
A group of Muslim immigrants tries to bomb a Holy Week procession in El Vendrell. They don't want to adapt; they don't want to be a part of anything. May God forgive them, but at home. Not here. Not us. (11 April 2022)	Likes Replies Retweets Followers	10,815 882 4612 31,274	52.1%
A group of MENAS brought in via the system brutally attack a 15-year-old lad for trying to protect his sister in Torrelodones. Spaniards are alone. Completely alone. (01 August 2022)	Likes Replies Retweets Followers	7314 547 4308 68,002	17.9%
Unbelievable silence from the press, focused on world environment day, in the face of a new case of Christian slaughter, this time in Nigeria, at the hands of Islamists. (06 June 2022)	Likes Replies Retweets Followers	8566 526 4100 700,962	1.9%

Source: prepared by the author using Twitter and Social Elephants.

None of the three publications are messages created by the official Twitter account of the party. They are retweets from profiles and accounts that belong to some of their representatives and the president of Vox. The publication that received the highest level of engagement is a retweet of a message published by Alberto Tarradas, a Vox representative in the Catalonian Parliament and president of Vox in the province of Girona. The publication

with the second-highest level of engagement is a retweet by Rocío de Meer, the national Vox representative for Almeria. The publication with the third-highest level of engagement is a retweet of a post by Santiago Abascal, the president of the party. We will focus on analyzing the publication with the highest level of engagement in depth.

The content of this publication makes reference to an incident that was supposedly led by young Muslim immigrants and was designed to protest a religious Catholic event, a Holy Week procession that took place in a municipality in Catalonia. The fact-checking foundation, Maldita.es, later denied that this incident was religiously motivated,[9] and it interviewed members of the Town Hall in the locality where the incident took place, as well as members of the brotherhood that organized the procession itself. The information shared by Vox on its official account, initially published by one of its representatives, was a hoax; however, this did not prevent it from becoming Vox's most viral publication in 2022, and it also achieved the highest level of engagement. In fact, the level of engagement of this publication is incredibly high: 52.1% compared with the 0.478% average recorded for the party's account in 2022. This publication generated a conversation that consisted of 882 comments, of which, only 50 (5.7%) explicitly addressed issues related to racism, xenophobia, and/or islamophobia.[10] Upon analysis of these publications, we can observe how they are incredibly polarized: 26 comments reported Vox's publication as being racist (a minimal proportion specifies that it is Islamophobia), and 24 comments deny that it is racism, and instead, they accuse Muslims of being racist towards Spaniards and/or Christians, with some even openly reclaiming racism. The following quotes are taken from comments that regard Vox's publication to be racist:

Quote 9:

"It's not racism, it's Islamophobia." (11 April 2022. https://onx.la/059e9)

Quote 10:

"Stop manipulating and inventing things. Muslims in Spain, whatever their nationality, don't do the things the holyweekers of Spanish nationalism are accusing them of. Enough Xenophobia . . . I'm a Christian and the only people who offend Christ are the cultural Christians." (11 April 2022. https://onx.la/059e9)

The following quotes are taken from comments that deny racism.
Quote 11:

"When will these mobs and other parasites that do nothing but cost us money be deported? No. It's not racism, it's reality." (11 April 2022. https://onx.la/059e9)

The following quote accuses Muslims of racism.
Quote 12:

"Islam is not compatible with democracy. They are the racists!" (11 April 2022. https://onx.la/059e9)

Lastly, the following example highlights explicit claims of racism, where the author ends by affirming "I am racist".
Quote 13:

"Fucking mobs who we're giving the 5-star treatment, if being racist is not wanting these sons of bitches anywhere near us, wanting them deported so they cannot come back, nor them nor any others, then use all means necessary to exterminate illegal or legal entry of shitbags. I am racist." (11 April 2022. https://onx.la/059e9)

We have not explored the possibility of bots intercepting the data, and moreover, we cannot rule out this possibility. Despite this, having monitored the interactions between followers, we cannot deny the polarized discourse that confronts users who either support the racist and Islamophobic publication (we must not forget that it was a hoax), or users who report it (almost always as racism, though rarely as a specific type of racism, such as Islamophobia).

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The issue of racism is incredibly complex, and it is difficult to address from a social research perspective given the aspects that shape it, its global and historical dimensions, and the terrible consequences that those who suffer from it must encounter on a daily basis. Today, this issue is becoming increasingly visible in digital spaces, especially on social media (Matamoros 2017; Olmos-Alcaraz 2018, 2022; Bustos Martínez et al. 2019; Arcila Calderón et al. 2020; Criss et al. 2021). It is also particularly concerning, especially with regard to Islamophobia as a type of racism (Gómez Garcia 2019; Grosfoguel 2014; Modood 2018), because that is frequently denied and not recognized as such. Moreover, in digital spaces, Islamophobia is becoming increasingly prominent (Ekman 2015; Awan 2016; Alcántara and Ruíz 2017; Civila et al. 2020; Sosinski and Sánchez García 2022; Fuentes and Arcila 2023).

Islamophobia is significantly diverse in terms of narratives and hate speech, and it is a persistent problem, especially in the West (Grosfoguel 2014; Bazian 2018). In Europe, the far right has made Islamophobia a hallmark of its identity (Rydgren 2017; Wodak and Krzyżanowski 2017; Akkerman 2018; Kallis 2018; Wodak 2021), thus exposing its position on the matter, which predominantly occurs on social media (Ekman 2015; Forti 2021). In this article, we considered how this reality is presented within the context of Spain, where, unlike other European countries, the extreme right (represented by Vox) has only recently become part of the autonomous and state parliaments. For this purpose, a case study has been conducted, wherein we analyzed representations of Islam and/or Muslims in the publications posted during 2022 via the far-right party's official Twitter account. Here, the objectives were as follows: (1) to identify the most common themes and topics; (2) to analyze the articulation of the representations and the discourses surrounding them; and (3) to assess the impact that this has on the users of the social network examined.

In this regard, our research identified a scarce presence of issues related to Islam and/or Muslims in the party's publications. We discovered that only 2.2% of all publications posted during 2022 made explicit reference to Islam and/or Muslims. This finding, however, has to be considered with caution, so as not to assert that such issues are unimportant to the party, and their social media activity. Some authors (Acha 2021) have argued that the migratory issue in Vox's narratives and discourses frequently appears to be diluted across various topics (education, employment, housing, health, culture, etc.), and in this paper, as well as in a previous publication (Olmos-Alcaraz 2022), we have observed that, to a large extent, issues related to Islam and/or Muslims are assimilated to the "migratory issue". Given that a large number of issues related to Islam and/or Muslims are considered to be synonymous with the "migratory issue", this might partly explain the small number of publications found; therefore, if we were to broaden the search terms to include words related to migration, and observe their presence in discourses on education, employment, housing, health, culture, and so on, we would likely find more publications that concern Islam and Muslims.

In terms of the most recurrent themes and topics found in the publications posted by the party, our findings coincide with the findings of specialist studies on the subject (Hafez 2014; Rydgren 2017; Kallis 2018; Casals 2019; Mudde 2019; Wodak 2021); no major differences can be identified with respect to other European contexts and/or countries, although there are some specificities that we will assess. In the abovementioned case study, Vox's narratives exhibit a reductive understanding of Islam and/or Muslims, portraying them as a threat, in terms of security (40.7% of the units of meaning in the sample were of this type) and in terms of culture (32.4%). Additionally, Islam and Muslims are also "othered", as they are consistently associated with the migratory phenomenon (this was the case in 26.9% of the units). In this regard, it is relevant to mention the fact that the most frequent discursive strategy in the analyzed sample was related to the party's "reports, accusations or suspicions of terrorism" concerning Islam and/or Muslims. It is especially relevant to focus on how, within this discursive strategy, we identified recurrent narratives outlining "suspicions or insinuations of terrorism", as opposed to proven facts. In relation to the narratives that were most used to represent Islam and/or Muslims as a threat

in cultural terms, it was found that the fear of "possible Islamization" was frequently alluded to. This discursive strategy appeals to a loss of a supposedly homogenous and pre-existing Spanish–Catholic national identity in the country, which aligns with what some authors note about the characteristic ethno-nationalism of extreme right-wing parties (Mudde 2019; Casals 2019; Urban 2019; Wodak 2021). In the case of Vox, we also noted how this was reinforced by celebrating the expulsion of the Muslim population from the Iberian Peninsula, through an appeal to anachronistic and controversial festivities in the present day. Among other issues, such festivities enable the exaltation of racism, such as the aforementioned celebration of the day of the Conquest of Granada (Rosón 2005). Another peculiarity of the party's discourse, with respect to the extreme right in general, is the presence (or rather, in this case, absence) of discourse on Muslim women. Very few publications were found in this regard, although they aimed to question practices—such as the use of the veil—rather than religious beliefs. These findings have been confirmed in other studies (Acha et al. 2020). Finally, regarding the themes and topics addressed by the party on its Twitter account, we must highlight the continuous identification of Islam and/or Muslims with immigration. This discursive strategy manages to reinforce an image of both remoteness and otherness with respect to the Muslim religion and all those who practice it. This is because it spreads the idea that there are no non-migrant Muslims in Spain (thus excluding, for example, the population of Spanish Muslim converts). Additionally, by criminalizing immigration (predominantly discussing "illegal" immigration), it is possible to generate an imagined version of the Muslim as a criminal. In this regard, there is one group that is especially demonized by the party. The use and abuse of the MENA category has been noted by much research in this context of study (Cheddadi 2020; Camargo Fernández 2021), and in the rhetoric of the party itself, we can observe the way in which it becomes an epithet of criminal. In administrative terms, this category makes reference to children who migrate without their families, and consequently, they are a highly vulnerable migrant group in general; however, Vox has managed to redefine this group, with very concerning results.

This thematic and discursive framing of Islam and/or Muslims as a whole (which is limited to speaking only about certain issues, ignoring unproblematized realities, recurrently linking themes, using criminalizing language, etc.) allows us to consider Vox's discourse as being essentially Islamophobic. This transcends the idea that if someone considers the publications in an isolated manner, they could observe messages appearing to be informative or descriptive.

In relation to the impact of the Twitter publications and user reactions to them, which we have observed by using the engagement metric (in terms of user interest, digital conversation generated, and interactions produced), we identified several noteworthy issues. Firstly, the most viral publication received a very high level of engagement in relation to the average level of engagement observed on the party's account and other viral messages. We have already noted that the aforementioned publication makes reference to an altercation which took place during a Holy Week procession. It involved the celebration of a religious Catholic event. However, it is notable that this was in fact a hoax (confirmed by a fact checking agency). It therefore consisted of information that was based on suspicion and the Islamophobic interpretation of some facts. Indeed, the motives of the incident were not religious, as insinuated by Vox's initial publication. In other words, the publication that generated the most interactions and digital conversations in 2022 offered false information. We could therefore perhaps think that it was precisely this issue that made it a publication with significant impact, but the reality is that, despite being an Islamophobic hoax, only half of the comments received by this publication and that made reference to racism did so in order to report it. The other half, as we observed in the results section, were adding to the racist discourse, i.e., posting more Islamophobic tweets. We can therefore identify—in the case study—that this discourse is significantly polarized. On the one hand, there are messages supporting both racism and Islamophobia, and on the other, there are messages rejecting it. The publications with the highest levels of engagement, and those in second

and third place, addressed two of the topics that were most represented in the sample analyzed: MENAs and terrorism. Although it would have been interesting to address the conversation generated by these publications in order to ascertain the level of polarization with regard to racism and Islamophobia, such a task is beyond the remit of this paper; therefore, this might be a possibility for future studies in order to find out, for example, whether there are topics that generate more polarized discourse than others.

We conclude this paper by reflecting on the identification of openly Islamophobic narratives in political discourse, and the analysis of the social network examined, wherein Islam and Muslims are the explicit targets of Vox's hate speech. Both Islam and Muslims are presented as "the other", and they are considered as posing a terrible threat to society: as dangerous, terrorists and criminals. In sum, they are considered to be a danger to Spanish identity and culture. As we mentioned earlier, there are several studies that have also confirmed these findings. They are based on specific case studies that have been conducted using Twitter (Camargo Fernández 2021; Sosinski and Sánchez García 2022; Fuentes and Arcila 2023; among others). Our contribution reinforces these findings and provides the possibility of a joint understanding of the articulation of Islamophobic narratives and their impact on Twitter users. This is based on monitoring engagement levels. This has enabled us to see how—in the case study conducted—these publications have prompted such significant polarization, and that in the publications that replicated the racist and Islamophobic formula, there were also strategies of denial of racism in general, and more specifically Islamophobia, trying to normalize it as part of "common sense", and therefore as something acceptable (Hafez 2014). This makes us consider the concerning radicalization of the Islamophobic racist discourse on social networks, based on the case study undertaken, as a reality that may be the prelude to the normalization of racism (Wodak 2021) and Islamophobia in the context examined.

Notes

[1] Islam: Islamist, Islamists, Islamophobia, Islamophobe, Islamophobes, Islamic, Islamics, Muslim, Muslims, mosque, imam, Quran, jihad, jihadist, jihadists, hiyab, hijab, veil, scarf, niqab, burka, MENA, MENAs and "unaccompanied foreign minors". The terms used in Spanish were: Islam, islamista, islamistas, islamofobia, islamófobo, islamóbofa, islamófobos/as, islámico, islámica, islámicos, islámicas, musulmán, musulmana, musulmanes, musulmanas, mezquita, imán, Corán, yihad, yihadista, yihadistas, hiyab, hijab, velo, pañuelo, niqab, burka, MENA, MENAs and "menores extranjeros no acompañados".

[2] Islamisation, Islamism, leftist-Islam, Islamised, Islamising, jihadism, anti-jihadists. The terms used in Spanish were: Islamización, islamismo, islamo-izquierdistas, islamo-izquierdismo, islamizadas, islamizante, yihadismo, antiyihadistas.

[3] There is a diversity of proposals with regard to how to best conceptualize engagement, and that note which variables (likes, comments, retweets) should be considered in order to define the level of engagement. Hollebeek et al. (2014) and Ballesteros Herencia (2019), among others, can be consulted for a review of different metrics and proposals used in social networks to measure it.

[4] The "Conquest of Granada" is controversial and is celebrated in the city on 2nd January each year. The celebration, which has existed since 1495, commemorates the end of the "Christian recapture" and the expulsion of the last Muslim dynasty from the Iberian Peninsula (Rosón 2005).

5   What happened to Mohamed Said Badaoui is the most controversial and important case of institutional racism and Islamophobia by the State (Babiker 2022) that has occurred in Spain in the present days. His process of deportation began when Mohamed requested Spanish nationality, not prior, which thus reveals that the main reason for his detention and deportation was due to being a person of migrant and Muslim origin, and politically active in the defence of human rights (Garcés 2022).

6   All the publications analyzed in this article have been translated into English; they were originally in Spanish. The non-textual elements of all the analyzed publications have been removed.

7   In Spain, a huge majority of unaccompanied foreign minors are from the Maghreb (Fernández 2023).

8   As has been indicated in the methodology section, in order to calculate the level of engagement, we have taken into account the total sum of likes, comments, and retweets compared to the followers of each account/profile; this has been expressed in percentages.

9   https://maldita.es/malditobulo/20220412/boicotear-procesion-vendrell-tarragona-musulmanes/, accessed on 1 February 2023.

10 In this case, the publications were filtered based on the following terms: racist, racists, racism, xenophobe, xenophobes, xenophobia, Islamophobe, Islamophobes, and Islamophobia.

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