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Populism and racism on social networks: an analysis of the Vox discourse on Twitter during the Ceuta 'migrant crisis'

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ABSTRACT

On 17 and 18 May 2021 almost 8,000 migrants arrived in Ceuta, crossing over from the Moroccan side of the border. The humanitarian emergency was evident, but the Spanish extreme right defined the situation as something quite different. This paper analyses Vox's activity on Twitter during the two weeks following the arrival of the migrants, with the aim of identifying the logics of racism in its discourse. The methodology used is content analysis, focusing on topics frequency and discursive strategies used. A total of 762 publications from the official Vox account are analysed. The results indicate that the party constructs the aforementioned crisis as a warlike situation of threat, by way of populist discursive strategies. The logics of racist discourse are specifically xenophobic and cultural. Vox demands anti-immigrant institutional racism that does not respect human rights. This paper concludes with some reflections on the worrying normalisation of racist discourse today.

KEYWORDS

Vox; Populist discourse; Racist discourse; Twitter; Migrations; Ceuta.

INTRODUCTION

The recent and sudden increase in extreme right populism in Europe, with its origins on the French National Front and the Freedom Party of Austria (Mudde and Rovira 2019;

Wodak 2020), is a social issue increasingly affecting more countries. As we are aware, one of the central issues of the ideology of this type of political forces –especially in the West– is their anti-immigration argument (Casals 2020; Mudde 2007; Mudde and Rovira 2019; Wodak and Van Dijk 2000), which has been reinforced in the European context since 2015 following the arrival of refugees on EU soil (Veiga et al. 2019). Despite this hallmark, extreme right populism is an ‘extremely elusive phenomenon [...] a strange hybrid at the intersection of a range of both traditional and new forms and formats of political action and political behaviour’ (Wodak and Krzyżanowski 2017: 4). An example of this is that the term *populism* is currently used to refer to heterogeneous and sometimes poorly-developed phenomena (Stavrakakis 2017), so we must always contextualise it in order to be able to analyse it (Charaudeau 2009; Mudde and Rovira 2019). However, a definition of minimums includes a particular notion of ‘three central concepts: the people, the elite and the general will’ (Mudde and Rovira 2019: 38). In the European context, moreover, we must add that the migration issue is central (Wodak 2020), with racist, anti-immigrant discourse being a very effective tool employed by these political forces to mobilise and attract voters.

This problem has been visible in the Spanish context since Vox, a declared extreme right-wing party,¹ entered the institutions in the Andalusian regional elections in December 2018 and subsequently in the general elections held in April 2019. From then on, Spain ceased to be the European exception (Casals 2019), a situation that had been explained predominantly by our recent dictatorial past (Urban 2019) and the existence of a right-wing party such as the PP that also attracted extreme right-wing voters (Casals 2020; Mudde and Rovira 2019; Urban 2019). Vox’s anti-immigration discourse can be summarised as considering migrations and migrants as a threat: in terms of security, economy and culture. This reality means the end of political correctness in the political discourse on immigration; a trend that had prevailed in the studied context (Olmos-Alcaraz 2020), since the phenomenon of immigration made its appearance on political agendas in the 1990s (López-Sala 2005).

This paper analyses the operating logics of the racist anti-immigration discourse² in the extreme right-wing political party, based on the observation of the publications made on Twitter from its official account, during the so-called ‘Migrant Crisis’ in Ceuta. Although there had previously been talk of ‘migratory crises’ in the country, on this occasion it became an unprecedented situation in Spain, presented as ‘a theatricalization of chaos’ (Garcés 2021: 2) both due to the form of entry, the number of people in such a short space of time, the characteristics of many of these individuals (many of them were unaccompanied minors), and the actions of the State Security Forces and Bodies. But, most importantly, the crisis had a clear diplomatic and political component of confrontation with Morocco, which had not been so explicit on previous occasions (Garcés 2021; Fernández-Molina 2021; Pasetti 2021).

In the context of this study, some research has specifically investigated hate speech and racism against migrants on Twitter (Valdez-Apolo et al. 2019; Arcila-Calderón et al. 2020), although not focusing on the Vox discourse in this regard. On the other hand, we can also identify recent research that has studied the populist features of Vox’s digital communication strategies, highlighting above all, the enormous prominence given to its president and the emotional, aggressive, direct and extremely confrontational bias of its messages (González 2021; Lava 2021; López-Rabadán and Doménech-Fabregat 2021; Oleaque 2020; Pérez-Curiel 2020; Rivas-de-Roca et al. 2020; Vázquez-Barrio 2021). We focus on analysing how these features, and others typical of populist discourse, structure the party’s racist, anti-immigration messages on Twitter. In order to do so, we first outline some theoretical notes on the characteristics of populist political discourse and its

relationship with the anti-immigrant racist discourse. Secondly, the methodology employed throughout this research is established. The main results and analysis are demonstrated below. The article concludes with a discussion of these results and some concluding notes on the operating logics of racist political discourse on social networks, its radicalisation and normalisation, using Vox's discourse as an example.

POPULIST AND RACIST POLITICAL DISCOURSE

Charaudeau (2009) attributes specific characteristics to populist political discourse, however, they affirm that the majority are common in any political discourse, but presented in excess:

An excess that plays on emotion to the detriment of political reason, an emotion capable of deceiving the people without any suspicion. It is used to stage: (1) a *catastrophic description* of the social situation of which the people are victims; (2) a *denunciation of the culprits*, among whom are the political class, the elites isolated from the people, the institutions that have lost all authority and bureaucracy, the source of all evils; (3) the *exaltation of values* and (4) the appearance of a *providential man/woman*, charismatic, visionary, capable of breaking with the past and who will be the saviour of society.³ (Charaudeau 2009: 264)

The author also speaks of a discourse common to both the right and the left, which is simplistic and essentialising and always born out of a crisis situation. In populist political discourse, the leader 'promises to break with the practices of the past, to put an end to corruption and to return power to the people' (Charaudeau 2009: 260), occupying a central role to the detriment of a clear political programme. They also warn of the existence of differences between the populist discourses of those who never came to power and those who did, differences that are related to 'the relationship between language and action, between discursive rhetoric and mode of governance' (Charaudeau 2009: 256).

In terms of the populist rhetoric of extreme right-wing political movements, Wodak (2020) indicates that it always combines a particular form and content: division between 'good' and 'bad', scapegoating, offending political opponents, legitimising exclusionary policies, speaking in the name of 'the people', dramatization and insistent repetition, abuse and exaggeration of emotions, and promises of liberation or salvation. According to the author, such discourses respond to certain patterns, but at the same time acquire particularities as they are addressed to specific audiences and adapted to specific contexts. These discursive features are particularly visible in extreme right populist rhetoric when addressing migration-related issues. We can therefore identify two types of recurrent arguments in this regard (Wodak 2020; Wodak and Van Dijk 2000). On the one hand, a definition of the phenomenon (migration) and its protagonists (migrants) as a threat to society. Various discursive strategies can be developed in order to support this argumentation, providing dubious or false images/representations of externally located threats; speaking of threats to the identity and cultural cohesion of the people/nation; identifying migrants with crime; always placing migrants within an illegal labour market, thereby pointing out that they endanger the jobs of the indigenous population; and rejecting the practices of asylum and family reunification on the grounds that they represent an excessive cost for the state. And, on the other hand, the argument that a restrictive and strict immigration policy is essential. This second argument is often developed with discursive strategies such as the following: a liberal immigration policy

encourages illegal immigration ('pull' factors); laws are required (without detailing) in order to eliminate all such threats to 'genuine people'.

Both types of argument ('migrations as a threat' and 'the need for restrictive migration policies') serve as a means by which to develop explicit racist discourses that interiorise and dehumanise migrants by identifying them with the 'illegal', the 'criminal', the 'cultural other', the 'poor person who abuses the system', etc. These are all forms of social differentiation in which various logics of racist functioning intersect (Grosfoguel 2012; Van Dijk 2009; Wieviorka 2014), which are increasingly radicalised today (Douhaibi and Amazian 2019; Wodak 2020; Wodak and Krzyżanowski 2017). An incendiary and uninhibited rhetoric on this matter are features of the extreme right discourse that make it attractive compared to the more moderate discourse of the right (Veiga et al. 2019). The normalisation of this loss of political correctness also implies a normalisation of racist discourse (Wodak 2020).

The aforementioned radicalisation of the discourse is one of the reasons why the traditional media sometimes veto the appearance and participation of these political forces, given the message of hate that they brandish as their hallmark. However, we see how at present, far from disappearing, these extreme right political formations are strengthening their presence in institutions (Mudde and Rovira 2019; Veiga et al. 2019), while at the same time they are provoking very specific 'discursive changes' in the political and media spheres (Wodak and Krzyżanowski 2017). In that sense, numerous works in the studied context (Alonso-Muñoz and Casero-Ripollés 2018; López-Rabadán and Doménech-Fabregat 2021; Pérez-Curiel 2020) and internationally (D'Ancona 2019; Krzyżanowski and Ledin 2017; Littler and Feldman 2017; Wodak 2020) have demonstrated that the communication possibilities offered by digital social networks and the aggressive use made of them by these political parties, largely explain their current rise and success.

METHODOLOGY

The aim of this study was to understand the discourse deployed by Vox during the so-called 'migratory crisis' in Ceuta, experienced in May 2021, following the entry of more than 8,000 people via Playa del Tarajal. With this objective, the aim was to go beyond the analysis of the use that this political group makes of its network channels (specifically Twitter), or the study of its communication strategy, in order to identify the logics of how racism works based on its communication interactions.

In order to develop the sample, the publications made by the party's official account during the two weeks that followed the first migrant entries (from 17 to 30 May 2021) were considered. The party stopped posting continuously in relation to the crisis thereafter (see Graph 1). The publications were collected by way of the Twitter API.⁴ Of a total of 762 publications (including tweets, retweets and quotes), and following the initial selection of those that referred to the crisis situation (the information was filtered using Excel in order to obtain exclusively the messages that contained any of the following terms: Ceuta, migrations, migratory, migrant/s, immigration-immigrants, foreigner/s and/or immigration), the sample was finally reduced to 268 publications (tweets, retweets and quotes) that were subjected to quantitative and qualitative content analysis. Twitter was selected as a result of its proven political purposes and uses (Campos-Domínguez 2017; Casero-Ripollés 2018; Jungherr 2016). The quantitative analysis (register, description and frequency distribution) was undertaken via Excel, and the qualitative content analysis (discursive strategies), through Nvivo.

A guide of topics was designed, operating inductively, but aiming to respond (deductive process) to the recurrent arguments in extreme right-wing anti-immigration political

discourses detected by specialised research on the subject (Wodak 2020; Wodak and Van Dijk 2000): 1) Immigration as a threat; 2) The need for restrictive laws to combat this threat. The research questions derived from these assumptions, and that led the work in the data classification process were: 1) How does Vox describe/define the situation?; 2) What does it propose to do about it? Based on these questions, themes emerged inductively from the data, resulting in the template shown in Table 1:

Table 1: Analysis protocol.

Discursive strategies and topics	
1. Descriptive discourse strategies: how the situation is described/defined.	1.1.What happens? 1.2.Who ‘gets in’? 1.3.Who is responsible for/at fault for the situation? 1.4.What are the consequences of the situation?
2. Propositional discursive strategies: what is proposed before it.	2.1.Actions. 2.2.Who undertakes/should undertake them? 2.3.Aim of the proposals.

The messages were coded in diverse categories simultaneously, according to the presence of topics and/or discursive strategies related to our theoretical object. The aim of this process was to find out the percentage of messages oriented towards certain topics or others, in order to be able to make an overall assessment of the types of discourse and discursive strategies predominant in the period and account observed.

RESULTS

The aim has been to understand how the extreme right-wing party positioned itself in terms of the crisis which occurred at the Ceuta border in May 2021, by way of the study of the activity of its Twitter account and the study of the subjects and discursive strategies deployed in its publications.

Activity

The Twitter activity of the observed account can be seen below in terms of publications on the crisis in Ceuta (268), publications on other topics (494) and general publications (762) throughout the observed period:

[Insert here Graph 1]

Graph 1: Twitter activity (publications) of the official Vox account (17-30 May 2021). Source: Own elaboration based on Twitter API.

Following observation, it was found that the posts related to the crisis outnumbered the rest of the posts published on the party’s account on several occasions: coinciding with the visits that the president of the party, Santiago Abascal, paid to Ceuta (19 and 24 May);

and coinciding with the statements he subsequently made to the press regarding the cancellation of the second event mentioned above, on 25 May.

With regards to the interest that the publications arouse among users, taking into consideration the number of retweets, likes and comments received, the data are as follows: publications related to the crisis received an average of 1,578 likes, were retweeted an average of 1,252 times and received an average of 99 replies; compared to publications from the same period unrelated to the crisis, which received 1,428 likes, 1,087 retweets and 90 replies on average. This therefore indicates that the user interest was greater (in the terms considered) in content related to the crisis than in other issues present on the party's account during the period observed, despite the fact that the latter were more numerous (268 publications related to the crisis compared to 494 on other issues).

The publication relating to the crisis that received the most likes, retweets and comments was the following:

Morocco is invading #Ceuta with thousands of assailants because of the cowardly and criminal inaction of the Government that has surrendered our southern border. We demand the deployment of the army and the expulsion of the invaders. I will travel to Ceuta tomorrow to support our compatriots (@Vox_es, 18 May 2021).

The message –with an obvious belligerent tone– deemed the migrants as ‘assailants’ and ‘invaders’ and called for military action to deal with them. It was a retweet of a post by Santiago Abascal, the leader of the party, who defined the situation as an ‘invasion’ by Morocco, with the connivance of the Spanish government. The post received 8,357 retweets, 21,186 likes and 1,481 comments.

The last element analysed regarding the activity of the account under observation were the hashtags used by the party in tweets that addressed topics relating to the crisis in Ceuta. This information observed as a whole, given that the hashtags essentially tag the topics present in a conversation, enable us to extract both the tone and the essence of the messages communicated by Vox during the time their account was under observation. The hashtags used, beyond #Ceuta, were the following: #StopInvasión, #CeutaSeDefiende, #SoloQuedaVox, #StopInvasiónInmigratoria, #InvasionMarroqui, #CeutaNoSeRinde, #FronterasSeguras, #VoxCeuta, #LIBERTAD, #PeriodismoBasura and #CeutaEsEspaña.⁵ The semantic load of these hashtags are of a complete rejection of immigration (especially from Morocco), defined in terms of invasion (#StopInvasión, #StopInvasionInmigratoria, #InvasionMarroqui, #Fronterasseguras); a representation of Ceuta as an aggrieved entity that has been forced to defend itself, as if it were in a war with nationalist overtones (#CeutaSeDefiende, #CeutaNoSeRinde, #CeutaEsEspaña, #LIBERTAD, #URGENTE); and an exaltation of the party as a benefactor and defender of the weakest (#SoloQuedaVox, #VoxCeuta). There was also a critical mention of the media (#PeriodismoBasura). Of these hashtags, two (#StopInvasión and #CeutaSeDefiende) appeared to be much more relevant than the others (in terms of visibility). They were both repeated the most, they were used and shared 42,908 and 33,284 times (tweets, retweets and quoted tweets) respectively. That is to say, they are the messages with the greatest scope on social media, embodying that which generated a wider conversation. The party's use of these hashtags is also a strategy used to legitimise their discourses, as they represent ‘what has already been said’ by society. Given their semantic load, both are examples of the potential persuasive use that hashtags can have, beyond their labelling function. They are examples of the breakdown of political correctness and the normalisation of racism, as they are clear examples of ‘what cannot

be said’: they communicate an implicit representation of migrants that dehumanises them as both invaders and aggressors.

Topics and discursive strategies

Table 2 demonstrates the encryption system followed during this research, in addition to the results obtained in terms of frequency, topics and discursive strategies.

Discursive strategies	Topics	%
1.Descriptions	1.1. What happens	46.5
	1.1.1. Aggression	3.7
	1.1.2. Chaos	2.2
	1.1.3. Crisis	0.7
	1.1.4. Humanitarian crisis	0.7
	1.1.5. Entries	4.5
	1.1.6. Invasion, border attack, occupation	34.7
	1.2. Who enters	40.5
	1.2.1. Teenagers, Young adults	0.4
	1.2.2. Africans	0.7
	1.2.3. Assailants	1.1
	1.2.4. Illegal immigrants, illegals	15.3
	1.2.5. Invaders	3
	1.2.6. Moroccans	7.8
	1.2.7. Unaccompanied minors (MENAS)	9.3
	1.2.8. Muslims	0.7
1.2.9 Non-refugees	0.7	
1.2.10. Jihadis	1.5	
1.3. Who is to blame?	43.3	
1.3.1. Government	31	
1.3.2. Morocco	12.3	
1.4. What are the consequences and for whom?	46	
1.4.1. Economic	2.2	
1.4.2. Insecurity	4.9	
1.4.3. Collapse/Overwhelm	3.4	
1.4.4. Victim: Ceuta	22.8	
1.4.5. Victim: Spain/Spaniards	12.3	
1.4.6. Victim: State Security Forces and Bodies	0.4	
2.Proposals	2.1. Actions	20
	2.1.1. Deploy the military	5.6
	2.1.2. Employ the use of force	0.7
	2.1.3. Removal, return, deportation	10.8
	2.1.4. Dissuasive measures. Wall.	2.2
	2.1.5. Other.	0.7
	2.2. Who employs/Could employ them?	34.8
	2.2.1. FCSE	1.9
2.2.2. Government	4.5	
2.2.3. Vox	28.4	

	2.3. Objective (what for)	7.1
	2.3.1. To avoid insecurity and destruction of coexistence	2.2
	2.3.2. To protect the borders	4.9

Table 2: Encryptions of the description/definition of the situation and regarding the related proposals (N=268).

The discursive strategies employed by the party on Twitter during the period of observation were more descriptive than proactive. More than 40 per cent of the tweets included descriptive topics (in all dimensions considered) of what was happening on those dates on Playa del Tarajal and in Ceuta, while the number of tweets with suggestions as to how to make improvements was much lower, although the percentage was very imbalanced depending on the topic considered. The main findings are analysed in more detail, below.

In terms of how Vox used its official Twitter account to define the situation, the encryption strategy undertaken as part of the research –of an inductive nature– which made it possible to identify four descriptive topics: 1) What was going on; 2) Who entered; 3) Who is responsible, and 4) What consequences are derived as a result of what happened/who is affected.

Regarding the first topic, 46.5 per cent of the tweets published made some sort of comment, highlighting in particular the messages that defined what was occurring in Ceuta at the time as an ‘invasion, an attack on our borders or an occupation’ (34.7 per cent):

!! #URGENT Hundreds of unaccompanied young migrants are storming our borders in Ceuta. If Pedro Sánchez doesn’t order them to be sent back to their parents, they will soon end up creating insecurity and destroying coexistence in the neighbourhoods of any Spanish city. Deport them now! (@Vox_es, 17 May 2021).

A small number of tweets (4.5 per cent) narrated the events in a more neutral tone, referencing ‘entries’, and 0.7 per cent defined the events as a ‘humanitarian crisis’.

The second topic, related to how the people who arrived by swimming across Playa del Tarajal were identified, was apparent in 40.5 per cent of the tweets. Among the various forms of nominalisation, the most frequent was that of ‘illegal immigrants or illegals’ (15.3 per cent):

!! Ceuta is in chaos, as told by our MP @TeresaGdVinuesa: illegals robbing shops, houses and throwing stones at our agents. The Government is yet to react to the civil army sent in by Morocco. #CeutaSeDefiende (@Vox_es, 18 May 2021).

Those who swam across the border were also called ‘MENAS’ (Unaccompanied foreign minors) (9.3 per cent) and ‘Moroccans’ (7.9 per cent), in addition to more sporadic categories such as ‘invaders’ (3 per cent), ‘Jihadis’ (1.5 per cent) or ‘assailants’ (1.1 per cent) among others. There was also a brief reference made to a definition of what they are not: ‘they are not refugees’ (0.7 per cent).

Regarding the topic relating to the responsibility for the situation, which was present in 43.3 per cent of the publications, the options were the ‘Government’ (broadly speaking:

Pedro Sánchez, the Interior Ministry, the Executive, etc.) or ‘Morocco’. 31 per cent blamed the Government:

!! The irresponsible management of migration by the Government is what has led us here. At current, Ceuta, Melilla and the coast of Andalusia are in danger of African occupation. Get the military to our borders! #StopInvasiónInmigratoria. (@Vox_es, 17 May 2021).

And 12.3 per cent blamed the latter:

Permanent militarisation of the borders of Ceuta and Melilla. Immediate deportation of all illegal immigrants, including the children taken away from their parents by Morocco. #FronterasSeguras (@Vox_es, 24 May 2021).

Lastly, within the discursive strategy that describes the situation, it was found that 46 per cent of the tweets made reference to the consequences of what was happening and/or to whom it affected. On this occasion, the most frequent topics were those relating to units of broad significance and that identified and/or defined Ceuta or Spain as ‘victims’. 22.8 per cent of the publications emphasised the autonomous city’s state of victimhood:

Ceuta is suffering from government neglect as it has surrendered the borders. It doesn’t even let the people of Ceuta protest to request protection and the measures the government owes them. We will appeal and be present in Ceuta (@Vox_es, 23 May 2021).

12.3 per cent did the same regarding Spain and Spaniards, or reclaiming Ceuta’s Spanishness. Fewer tweets made reference to specific consequences: regarding the increase in ‘insecurity’ (4.9 per cent), consequences relating to the ‘collapse’ of the emergency services, social services, etc. (3.4 per cent) and consequences identified openly as ‘economic’ (2.2 per cent). Various tweets (0.4 per cent) made reference to the consequences for the ‘State Security Forces and Bodies’, placing emphasis on the condition of their ‘victims’.

Regarding the discursive strategies of a proactive nature, three topics were identified during the encryption process: 1) Actions; 2) Who does them or could do them, and 3) The aim (for what purpose).

The topic categorised as ‘actions’ was present in 20 per cent of the tweets. The variety of actions proposed by the party were all indicated in the same direction. The majority of the tweets with specific proposals regarding how to address the situation (10.8 per cent) stated that the individuals should be ‘removed, returned or deported’: ‘Abascal, in Ceuta: “We’re going to remove all invaders sent by the Moroccan Government”’ (@Vox_es, 19 May 2021). The next proposal in terms of popularity was to ‘send in the troops’ (5.6 per cent), followed by ‘dissuasive measures’, such as building a ‘wall’ (2.2 per cent). Some publications even proposed the ‘use of force’ (0.7 per cent), in addition to some that proposed more specific measures and actions (0.7 per cent), beyond border control, however, they were always along similar lines:

What are our proposals? Blocking the granting of visas to Moroccan citizens or cancelling the residency permits already granted to those who live in Spain. Cancellation of the *Operación Paso del Estrecho* and closure of the border with Morocco. (@Vox_es, 28 May 2021).

Regarding those who are identified as the executors of the measures proposed, mentions were identified in 34.8 per cent of the tweets. Within this topic, Vox named the State Security Forces and Bodies (1.9 per cent); the ‘Government’ (4.5 per cent), almost always in a generic, non-personified way, in the forces quoted. However, above all themselves (28.4 per cent): ‘Vox’ as a party or its president, Santiago Abascal: ‘This is what happens when a government abandons its people and what happens when a leader accompanies their own. Ceuta will always be Spanish!’ (@Vox_es, 19 May 2021). However, the previous tweet does not appear to fundamentally refer to ‘those who are executing the actions’. More so pointing a finger at ‘those who could or should execute’ them satisfactorily, from their position as a party not currently in Government:

Rise, Ceuta! This Monday, @Santi_ABASCAL will be in Ceuta to protect our borders and request the removal of all illegal immigrants. It will take place at 8pm in Plaza de los Reyes. We’re not afraid of anyone or anything! (@Vox_es, 24 May 2021).

Finally, regarding the aim of the proposals that were put forward –information that was present in just 7.1 per cent of the publications– Vox did not move away from the ‘protecting the borders’ argument (4.9 per cent):

Declare the migratory invasion of Ceuta, Melilla and the Canary Islands to be of National Security Interest. Deployment of all military means necessary to guarantee the integrity of our borders and security of our people (@Vox_es, 28 May 2021).

This appears to be an end in itself. Publications that furthered the argument of containment were scarce, however, on occasion (2.2 per cent), ‘avoiding insecurity and the destruction of coexistence’ was mentioned.

DISCUSSION

This study has analysed the characteristics of the anti-immigration discourse of Vox by way of the observation of their Twitter publications during the so-called ‘migration crisis’, which occurred in Ceuta during May 2021. The increase of extreme right-wing populism in our immediate context (Mudde and Rovira 2019) is contributing to the increase, radicalisation and normalisation of racism (Wodak 2020). The public discourse of parties such as Vox, is a clear example of this (Casals 2020; Urban 2019). This paper enables us to affirm that the extreme right-wing party describes the aforementioned situation in terms of threat; and that, in the light of this definition of the situation, it makes proposals for repressive and restrictive actions in order to combat it. The collection of publications analysed facilitates a discussion regarding the existence of an openly racist discussion used against migrants. The situation is described as an invasion as opposed to a humanitarian crisis. The individuals who enter are not recognised as victims, nor as asylum seekers, etc. But instead, they are deemed aggressors and assailants. They blame Pedro Sánchez’s government and Morocco, but never Immigration Law, the migration policies in the European Union, the Global North/South division or other causes of a structural nature. The consequences of these discursive strategies are the victimisation of both Ceuta and Spain, but never of the protagonists, those who arrived at the border by swimming in a state of extreme vulnerability. Vox even went so far as to victimise the State Security Forces and Bodies before the migrants themselves. The proposed actions

in a situation defined in these terms are immediate removal and permanent militarisation of the border; never acceptance on humanitarian grounds, supporting the work undertaken by the NGOs, investment in development cooperation policies, dialogue between countries or the flexibilization of border control policies. There is no existence of anything that resembles a proposal for action aimed at integration, coexistence, multiculturalism or interculturalism. Vox holds the Government responsible for the situation, fundamentally for having demonstrated a stance that, in their eyes, is weak, thereby demanding forceful and radical action in the aforementioned terms and proclaiming itself to be ‘the saviours’ of both Spaniards and Spain.

The populist characteristics of the discourse we have analysed are particularly evident, so we note the results that aimed others research before (González 2021; Lava 2021; López-Rabadán and Doménech-Fabregat 2021; Oleaque 2020; Pérez-Curiel 2020; Rivas-de-Roca et al. 2020; Vázquez-Barrio 2021). However, in this study, we have focused exclusively on the analysis of these characteristics in terms of issues relating to migration. In doing so, we aim to advance the study of this issue beyond the approach to political communication during election campaigns, which is where most of the research undertaken to date is located. In this case study, the language used is aggressive and appears polarised between the in-group, and, in this case, the various out-groups (the ‘invaders’ and their supporters). One of the specific discursive strategies of extreme right-wing populism is the appeal to security-based issues, as this allows for rigid boundaries to be drawn between ‘us’ and ‘the other’ (Wodak 2020). In the material analysed, the appeal to security has been placed at the centre of the discourse. For a few weeks, a humanitarian crisis became the ideal scenario for the circulation and promotion for unabashed hate speech. In this case, it is a matter of ‘discursive strategies that are those of any political discourse, but governed by a lack of control and excess’ (Charaudeau 2009: 272). There is a constant appeal to the people (claims that Ceuta is Spain), and to the ‘elite’ as the enemy: in this case, the Government of Pedro Sánchez, which is to blame for what occurred (however, there is also mention of the Moroccan government). But what is most significant, is the place occupied by the party’s ‘leader’ in the speeches that have been analysed. Santiago Abascal is presented as a ‘saviour’, alluding to the fact that he is the only one who dares to say what nobody else would, due to the ‘censorship’ of political correctness.

The racism present in the discourses that we have analysed is both xenophobic and cultural (essentially anti-immigration), where diverse logics of racialisation are articulated (Grosfoguel 2012; Wieviorka 2014). However, it is not a racism that works through essentially biologicist logics (Hall 2017), but rather strategies of de-humanisation (Fanon 1953; Santos 2014) are deployed from socio-cultural categories associated with migratory processes. Additionally, by way of the staging of its discourse, Vox claims a state, institutional racism that turns a deaf ear to respect for national and international legislation of asylum and refuge. Thus, in its discourse, Vox normalises the recurrent attacks towards democratic institutions that do respect this legislation. Migrants are continually dehumanised in the party’s speeches: there is no mention of their health conditions, the fatalities that have occurred, their vulnerability or the violation of their rights. The publications that have been analysed are a clear example of the total loss of political correctness and the radicalisation of racist discourse: Vox has no considerations, modesty, complexes or fear in claiming the violation of human rights. Migrants are openly presented in its discourse as the enemy, as criminals and aggressors, which implies a clear rupture of existing taboos in the Spanish public discourse, non-existent in other parties and non-existent, importantly, before Vox gained its current public visibility. Wodak (2020) speaks in this regard – and relating to the context she studies – of the ‘normalisation

of the unspeakable’: although these discourses should be considered in democratic societies as abnormal and unacceptable, they are in fact increasingly being deemed legitimate and reasonable, thus shifting the boundaries of normality and the unspeakable. In addition the author alerts us to ‘the lack of legal consequences’ for such behaviors, which confirms that ‘anything goes’, and is yet another example of ‘shameless normalization’ (Wodak 2020: 25) of racist discourse. It is necessary to continue to study this social issue within the context of Spain, perhaps together with works that inquire as to how the public opinion and other political actors react and confront this type of discourse; but this should not minimise the severity of the topic addressed in this paper, as a prelude to what is happening already in other European countries and the United States, among others (Mondon and Winter 2020; Wodak 2020).

CONCLUSIONS

Finally, it is worth asking ourselves about the social consequences of the radicalisation and normalisation of racist discourse that we are witnessing, and the particularities it acquires when it is disseminated through social networks. To this end, it is necessary to recall the performative nature of all discourse (Fairclough 2001; Foucault 2002), but in particular that of political discourse (Van Dijk 2009). Charaudeau (2009: 261) states that political discourses are especially powerful and influential, as they have ‘repercussions on citizens’ expectation systems (mirror effect), which are sensitive to values, to the charisma of political personalities and to situational emotion’. It is here, moreover, where we can find one of the limitations of the research undertaken and a future line of work. The importance given to the president of Vox, S. Abascal, in the data analysed, and the centrality of his speeches on behalf of the party itself, brings us to consider the possibility of working with broader data samples, which consider – in this case- the leader’s own profile on Twitter. We cannot forget that the use of digital networks and platforms generate democratic and social consequences because ‘social media are not neutral artefacts, but are political and social spaces with strong implications’ (Casero-Ripollés 2018: 271). That is why the discursive violence and hate speech present in digital spaces is a growing problem today (Civila et al. 2021), and very particularly when it comes to racist speech (Olmos-Alcaraz 2018). The challenge for social research is, with respect to the theoretical object that concerns us, to continue investigating how the racism present in digital discourses regarding immigration is reflected in offline racism, and vice versa. In order to do this, for example, it would be interesting to continue inquiring into whether the normalisation of the racism detected in Vox’s discourse is expanding to the other political parties. The proposal is to continue to delve deeper in future research into the analysis of political discourse on immigration on social networks, as a potential indicator of the radicalisation and normalisation of racist discourse and racism in general.

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¹ Before its entry into the institutions, we encountered certain resistance in the party itself in terms of openly identifying as an extreme right-wing political force; something that was also visible in the way in which it was reported in mainstream media. Currently, on their website they describe themselves as a party of 'extreme necessity', a play on words that evokes more meanings than it conceals. However, it is becoming increasingly common to see that party members do not deny this label.

² In this research, we understand 'racist discourse' to be racism itself, and not a minor component of it, given the performative nature of discourse as praxis (Fairclough 2001, Foucault 2002, Van Dijk 2009). We opt for a notion of racism as a set of processes of racialisation that function in an intersectional and heterarchical manner, by way of contextually diverse, changing and processual logics of de-humanisation. This enables us to understand that any socio-cultural category is susceptible of being 'racialised' and of functioning in a similar way to the category 'race' did in classical biological racism; and allows us to epistemically make visible to forms of racism that are frequently invisibilised/naturalised, named with less negatively charged appellatives and/or not addressed in all their complexity, especially at an institutional level. For further discussion, we can consult Hall (2017), Fanon (1953), Grosfoguel (2012) and Santos (2014), among others. We also refer to our own works in which we reflect on the problem of racism at a conceptual level (Olmos-Alcaraz 2020; Sebastiani, Martín and Olmos-Alcaraz, 2022).

³ Italics are from the original.

⁴ In the process of capturing the material was converted into text, thereby losing some semiotic elements (some hyperlinks, videos, images, emoticons) that could be analysed. With this work option, we gave up capturing the full density of meanings in the material, in order to analytically cover the entire sample. However, we saved the links to the original tweets so that, once the material had been categorised, we returned to them whenever necessary in order to contextualise and/or to give meaning to the data itself.

⁵ #StopInvasion, #CeutaDefends #OnlyVoxRemains, #StopImmigrationInvasion, #MoroccanInvasion, #CeutaWontBackDown #SecureBorders, #VoxCeuta, #FREEDOM, #RubbishJournalism and #CeutaIsSpain.