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**Nativist nationalism, cultural homogenisation and bullfighting: VOX's cultural policy as an instrument for cultural battle (2019–2023)**

Joaquim Rius-Ulldemolins

Universitat de València

Juan Arturo Rubio-Arostegui

Universidad Antonio de Nebrija

Juan Pecourt

Universitat de València

**Abstract**

The extreme right's influence on cultural politics is an issue that has received limited attention up until the last decade, when in various European countries these establishments started being elected to government. To date, most studies in this area have focused on the use of history or attitudes towards multiculturalism, although fewer have addressed cultural policy itself. Nonetheless, there is lively debate about the character of the cultural policy of the extreme right or radical populist right and the relative novelty of its attitude in relation to the nationalism and authoritarianism typical of the conservative right. This article analyses the emergence of the VOX political party in Spain, which certainly represents a radicalisation of the cultural authoritarian tendencies that preceded the Spanish right. However, the party has also introduced

themes of the alt-right and clearly prioritises culture as a tool for cultural battles, as nativist nationalism and bullfighting.

**Keywords:** cultural policy, Spanish nationalism, far right, nativism, alt-right

## **Introduction**

The study of the extreme right's influence on cultural politics is a topic of growing interest. Initially, case studies were limited to countries in which the extreme right received a lot of media attention for its opposition to state policy, cultural policies aimed at high culture, or the recognition of cultural diversity, as is the case of France (Almeida, 2017) or the Nordic countries (Harding, 2021). However, in recent years, after the extreme right accessed power in various countries at the subnational or national levels (Antón-Mellón & Hernández-Carr, 2016), this interest has expanded to other countries such as former Eastern bloc countries and those in the Visegrád Group, because of the effects this illiberal turn has had on culture (Bonet & Zamorano, 2020).

This article starts with the initial conceptualisation of VOX ('voice' in Latin) as a far-right party and goes on to analyse its cultural policy. Although methodologically this is a case study, the analysis will be articulated by comparing the discourse of VOX on culture and State actions along with other right-wing currents, especially with the other main Spanish nationalist right-wing party, the Partido Popular (Popular Party), or PP. Thus, here we study the characteristics of this discourse to understand if it can be assimilated into other currents on the traditional conservative right, or if it remains closer to contemporary currents, such as right-wing populism, the alternative right, or the alt-right. Although they all may share common traits, the former is closer to an authoritarian vision of culture, while the alternative right is more like a populist position. Regardless, the origins of both cases are based in their reactions against feminism and the demands of minorities and environmentalists, all in the context of a Fordist model crisis and the emergence of post-materialist values (Norris & Inglehart, 2019).

Moreover, the rise of the extreme right no longer depends on elitist or racist discourses of a biological nature but rather, on debates from cultural studies such as cultural relativism or notions of cultural hegemony, which they have adopted as part of their theses (Rueda, 2021; Taguieff, 1988). Despite this theoretical proximity, the alt-right of Anglo-Saxon origin is still undertaking a crusade against gender theories, critical theory, and cultural studies which it considers take globalist, anti-male, and anti-white elite perspectives (Hermansson et al., 2020: 107). This type of cultural inversion or reverse cultural populism that transfigures social dominants into the supposed culturally dominated has spread through the concepts propagated by the North American extreme right and has more recently been imported into Europe by other extreme right networks and political parties (Wieviorka, 2023). The Spanish extreme right (and its academic supporters) perceives this current as a threat to ‘Western culture’, as a virus inoculated into Spanish society (especially among the university and intellectual elites) responsible for the bad image of the country both internally and externally (Ibáñez, 2023). Thus, one of their mainstays is to hold this current responsible for the survival of the Spanish Black Legend and the supposed marginalisation of Spanish culture (Cf. Holzenthal, 2023). In addition, the Spanish alt-right also adds —some topics related to anti-Spanish conspiracy theories (Cf. Holzenthal, 2023) to the victimist discourse already present in the Anglo-Saxon world (and among its internal cosmopolitan elite allies). This position is reflected in the attitude towards cultural policy as a lever to reverse this supposed marginalisation of national culture.

Thus, a relevant aspect of the radical right’s resurgence is its cultural dimension. Without denying its material aspects, its cultural facets arise from a polarisation of values between a progressive sector and a conservative sector that has become radicalised, with the latter representing the ‘losers’ or those ‘forgotten’ by globalisation (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). In this context, the victimist discourse of the extreme right (who position themselves as harmed by a conspiracy between intellectuals and certain elites and protesting minorities) links with and updates a conspiratorial and idealist theory of history where the culture—in a broad sense—of supposed elitist minorities is considered central to understanding the social domain (Rueda,

2021). In response to this supposed grievance, the extreme right claims to defend freedom of expression, not as speech against the powers that be but as the freedom to offend minorities. Hence, the discourse of political incorrectness is presented as a resistance to a supposedly dominant culture and in this way, they build a specific understanding of leadership, authenticity, and sincerity (Dudda, 2016).

This discourse is far from being completely new and is linked to the conservative revolution of the 1920s in Europe, which saw Western civilization threatened by Anglo-Saxon modernisation and socialism (Cagni & Massot, 1993). There are also some links to the neoliberal and neoconservative reaction of the 1970s and 1980s in the United States which focused on fears of the supposed material and moral decline of the nation as the result of the predominance of minorities, including contemporary creators (DiMaggio & Pettit, 1999). On the other hand, the current extreme right shares with its predecessors an ethnic and xenophobic nationalism, which specialists have called nativist (Akkerman & Sarah de Lange, 2016). In addition, they share an obsession with obtaining or recovering a mononational and monocultural state, meaning that the extreme right concentrates its forces on marginalising or eliminating national minorities via assimilation or physical expulsion (Mann, 2009; Mudde, 2007). Thus, the current extreme right understands that the so-called cultural battle is essential to generate discourses against national minorities, immigrants, or feminist women in order to reverse their achievements and relative prominence in the public sphere since the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Alcaide Lara, 2022). This framework contextualises the discourse of the far-right formation, VOX, that burst onto the electoral scene in 2018. This political party is now beginning to assume responsibilities in cultural policy, both at the regional and local levels, thanks to pacts with the conservative right. This is a relatively new and little-studied phenomenon, and therefore this article will allow us to understand the main characteristics of this formation's discourse and underline its innovative aspects in relation to the conservative right's cultural policy, as well as the changes it may introduce in the Spanish cultural policy debate.

To evaluate this research question, we analysed the discourses and programmes of recent VOX cultural policy proposals. Firstly, we look at the main lines of cultural policy from the programmes they presented in the 2019 and 2023 general elections. At the regional level, we obtained this data from the action programmes published in the official newspapers of the Junta de Castile and Leon. At the same time, we also undertook an analysis of the profile of senior cultural officials in Castile and Leon and the Valencian Community, the two communities in which VOX is responsible for the Department of Culture. This analysis of cultural policy was carried out within the framework of the xxxx project (anonymized reference). Given the difficulty of conducting interviews with representatives of the extreme right, we opted for a documentary-style analysis based on three different sources: (a) discourses in parliamentary headquarters (state and regional) and in electoral campaigns; (b) documents from electoral programmes and government; (c) exploitation of news about VOX and culture in state and regional newspapers (from both Castile and Leon and the Valencian Country).

### **VOX: from neo-Francoism to the extreme alt-right**

VOX emerged in 2013, as a group that split off from the PP (the conservative right), within the framework of the economic crisis of 2008 (Ferreira, 2019) and the subsequent public spending cuts that inaugurated a decade of austerity that especially affected cultural policies (Rubio & Rius-Ulldemolins, 2015). 'VOX's initial speeches criticised the supposed 'lukewarmness' of the PP when confronting the wave of calls for Catalan independence, thereby justifying the need for them to form a new right-wing populist party. Thus, the creation of VOX ended the Spanish exception of the absence of a far-right party up until that point (Barrio, A., 2019). The party emerged during the regional elections of Andalusia and the Valencian Community in 2018, as well as in the 2019 general elections (Arroyo Menéndez, 2020). Since then, an intense debate has developed regarding the causes of this vote outcome and the nature of the party's proposals.

In some cases, the nature of VOX as a right-wing populist party has been discussed, describing it as conservative right-wing (Barrio, Astrid, 2020) while in others, it has been understood as xenophobic and authoritarian extreme right (Ferreira, 2019). However, in every case, it has been highlighted that, unlike neo-fascist or neo-Nazi parties, VOX does not propose a violent or extra-parliamentary route to establish its objectives (Acha, 2019). Nevertheless, its intention is certainly to deprive immigrants of their rights and to recentralise the powers of the Autonomous communities. Of note, this would imply constitutional reform or, in any case, a very radical re-interpretation of the Constitutional Court's role (Argelaguet Argemí, 2011; Maiz & Losada, 2009). However, the objective of this current article is not to contribute to this more general debate but rather, to understand the nature of 'VOX's cultural policy, or more precisely, its understanding of what is or is not culture, as well as the instrumentalization of culture for ideological purposes.

Regarding 'VOX's cultural policy objectives, its main proposal to recentralise the State of the Autonomies by granting a more central role to the Ministry of Culture so that it can reverse the devolution of the 1980s and 1990s, is similar to those developed by the conservative right PP (Rius-Ulldemolins et al., 2021). In VOX we can also find continuity in the use of a Spanish nationalist interpretation of culture to promote a 'Spain brand' that marginalises the national and linguistic diversity of the country (Rius Ulldemolins & Zamorano, 2015). Thus, the cultural policy of the PP focuses on the promotion of Spain both at an external level (through cultural and foreign policy) and internally, by promoting Spanish culture and the history of Spain as a way to foster Spanish national identity in the Basque Country, Catalonia, and Valencia (Pla Boix, 2010; Zamorano & Rius-Ulldemolins, 2016).

Finally, the cultural policy developed by the PP (2011–2018) was far from being aimed at promoting the interculturality or plurinationality now characteristic of Spain; on the contrary, it presented an image of cultural homogeneity. Therefore, one of the PP's priorities has been the promotion of the cultural identity phenomena of 'Spanishness' and the so-called National Festival, that is, bullfighting. Thus, In 2011, the management of bullfighting performances was

transferred from the Presidency Office to the Ministry of Culture, thereby opening up the possibility of subsidising these performances through cultural funds and then classifying them as Assets of Cultural Interest. This process contrasts with the prohibition of bullfighting in Catalonia, promoted by a popular legislative initiative signed by 180,000 citizens and approved by the Parliament of Catalonia in 2010. In this sense, we can see how cultural policy has been instrumentalised as part of a process of nation building that also opposes the democratic legitimacy of parliament. Hence, in the promotion of a homogeneous identity, recentralisation, and national branding based on the Spanish language or bullfighting, we can observe a continuity between the cultural policy of the PP and VOX. Indeed, the latter is a 'radicalisation' of the cultural policy of the Rajoy government (2011–2018) in the sense that it prioritises these axes above other nuclear elements of cultural policy such as promotion of the arts. This is even more evident if we take the first popular governments of Aznar (1996–2004) as a reference, in which continuity can be observed with respect to the cultural policy of Felipe González's socialist governments (Rubio Arostegui, 2005). In summary, State recentralisation, authoritarian nationalism, and the rejection of internal cultural diversity are part of a shared trend in the way the PP and VOX define cultural policy, with the latter having emerged largely as a radical split off group.

Nevertheless, as we shall see, there are some peculiarities to 'VOX's cultural policy, some of which are shared by the populist extreme right. One of them is the promotion of nativism and the purity of national culture as contrasted with the influence of foreign cultural phenomena. Indeed, in VOX's discourse, the cosmopolitan and animal rights activist critics of bullfighting are painted as part of a conspiracy of global elites whose aim is to threaten genuine expressions of national Spanish identity. On the contrary, VOX present tradition, especially that of rural environments, in the opposite way by presenting it as a vindication of those 'forgotten or marginalised' by elites. Finally, VOX also presents a critical discourse against 'progressive' creators (which the PP had restricted only to filmmakers) and their supposed domination of the public sphere, which the party intends to counteract without hesitation or fear of the reaction of

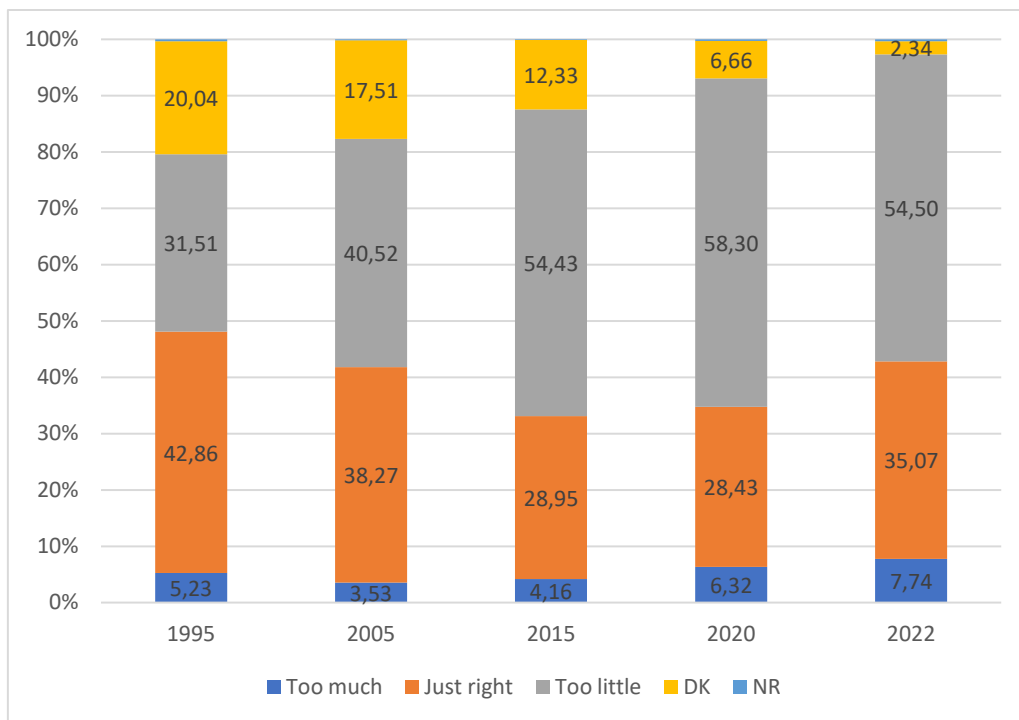
these supposed elites. In this sense, as in other countries, the discourse of the current extreme right presents itself as libertarian and uses direct and sometimes populist language to stage performances against what they suggest is the tyranny of the ‘politically correct’ (King, 2022). However, in addition to a commitment to ‘morally correct’ art, shared with fundamentalist Christian currents such as the El Yunque organisation in Mexico, a strong moralism regarding factors such as gender identity or sexual behaviour appears alongside this transgressive spirit (Leyra Curiá, 2020; Ortiz, 2008).

Another characteristic of VOX’s cultural policy, which is far from historiographical rigor, is the nostalgic use of the Spanish colonialist past. This mythical vision of a nation with a past full of conquests underpins nationalism and offers a renewed and projective vision of the country which flies in the face of a still insecure future for certain layers of the populus (Boym, 2001). For this reason, their cultural battle places great emphasis on the importance of recovering the myths of 19th century nationalist historiography that marked the State’s nation building (Casquete Badallo, 2023). Some of these myths have supported a new stage of unapologetic Spanish nationalism, with pride in the mythology of the colonisation of the Americas, the Spanish Empire, or the reconquest of the Muslim kingdoms, among others (Ríos Saloma, 2008). In fact, VOX are using these historical landmarks to foster a hostile attitude towards immigrants of Moroccan origin, with antagonism towards the Arab world being one of the axes of historical memory fostered by Spanish 20<sup>th</sup> century dictatorships such as that of Primo de Rivera (1923–1930) and Franco (1939–1978; García Sanjuán, 2022; Rodríguez-Temiño & Almansa-Sánchez, 2021). Moreover, like other far-right parties, VOX also intensively uses social networks to spread its message, especially regarding cultural and historical memory (Esteve-Del-Valle & Costa López, 2023). In these cases, like in other European countries, an illiberal memory is constructed based on denying the crimes of the Franco dictatorship, rehabilitating its perpetrators, and demonising its victims (Gavriel, 2023). Specifically, in Spain this process is based on the construction of ‘internal enemies’, especially Basque and Catalan nationalists (Ribera Payá & Martínez, 2021).

## **Cultural spending in Spain and the emergence of the extreme right**

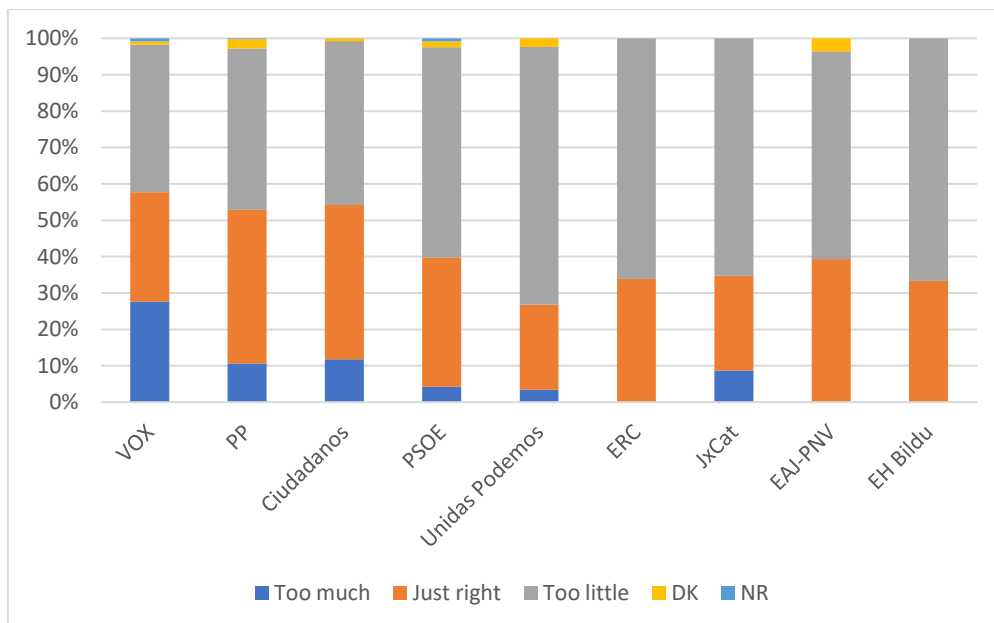
According to data from the survey on fiscal policy, generated by the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (Sociological Research Centre) or CIS, which has been regularly updated since the political transition and holds longitudinal data from 1995 to 2022, the cultural policy in Spain has been, historically, strongly supported by its citizens. In these studies, interviewees are asked for their opinion on various sectors of public spending, including cultural spending. The latter has always received broad approval from citizens, with support for cultural spending expanding from 1995 to 2015, although support somewhat declined thereafter (see figure 1). Regarding the attitudes of VOX voters towards cultural policy, citizens who said they had voted for this party in the last general election were generally in favour of spending more or the same amount on culture, but were also least in favour of expanding cultural policies. Thus, almost 30% said that too much is spent on culture and more than half said that Spain should not spend more (see figure 2).

Figure 1. Evolution of public opinion on cultural spending in Spain from 1995 to 2022.



Source: Elaborated by the authors based on data from the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (Sociological Research Centre or CIS) from 1995 to 2022.

Figure 2. Public opinion on cultural spending according to 2022 general election vote recall.



Source: Elaborated by the authors based on data from the CIS (2022).

Thus, this data confirms how the left–right and Spanish nationalist–nationalist autonomies axes are relevant to explaining the degree of public support for cultural spending (see figure 2) and how the conservative, and especially, extreme right-wing voters are less favourable of cultural spending. This means that Spanish nationalist extreme right voters tend to align with the most sceptical positions or are sometimes even hostile towards State-sponsored cultural initiatives (which are still relatively uncommon but have constituted a new trend over the last four years), thereby also aligning with the tendencies of certain elements of the European extreme right. Given the above, at this point, here we again raise the questions we aim to examine in this manuscript, namely (a) to what extent this tendency among the VOX electorate corresponds to the party’s cultural policy; (b) to what degree we can establish homology with the cultural policy of the European or US extreme right (Rius-Ulldemolins, 2023); and (c) whether some of their attitudes or measures can be characterised as populist or not.

### **Analysis of the discourses in 'Vox's electoral programmes (2018 and 2023)**

#### *Analysis of the discourse on culture and cultural policy in the 2018 VOX programme*

In the programme presented by VOX in the 2018 general election, called “100 necessary measures for Spain”, only nine of these points referred to education and culture and, of these, four aimed to promote the Spanish language internationally or oblige its use in communities with a co-official language (VOX, 2018). Furthermore, its specific cultural policy measures only contained one proposal to promote patronage (measure 66) which instrumented that this public activity would be aimed at “promoting roots in the land, folkloric manifestations and traditions of Spain and its peoples within the perspective of Hispanidad.” This highlights VOX’s

focus on Spanish ethnonationalism and a neocolonial instrumentalization of culture in its foreign promotion. The party then introduced discourse regarding the protection of hunting and its fight against the relegation of the rural world. In other words, it combined a broad notion of culture centred on traditions and neo-ruralism that presents traditional culture as the authentic root of identity and the spirit of the people—the vision of culture as *kultur* analysed by Norbert Elías (Elías, 2010). Hence, VOX conceives culture as an asset to which access should be encouraged, for example, by families, stated thus: “Establish bonuses proportional to the number of family members on all types of basic supplies such as electricity or gas, or access to cultural goods” (VOX, 2018:16). Reference is also made to the notion of culture used to rationalise the idea of using European culture as a justification for closing borders (measure 96) and, in the same sense, to rationalise prioritising immigration from Spanish-speaking South American countries because of their “ties of friendship and culture with Spain” (measure 33; VOX, 2018). Thus, as we can see, the party’s conception of culture is that of ‘sets’ that unite or separate, thereby justifying policies on accepting or excluding migrants, following the logic of the cultural turn in racism (Taguieff, 1988).

#### *Analysis of the discourse on culture and cultural policy in the 2023 VOX programme*

In the VOX programme for the 2023 general election, the use of the word culture (including derivatives or its use in compound form) was observed 33 times in its 381-point, 178-page dossier (Cf. VOX, 2023c). However, of note, the word culture was only used as a synonym for cultural heritage (“assets of cultural interest”, point 78) or, on rare occasions, in the sense of the arts. For example: “We will lead the formation of a Southern European axis for [...] border protection, defence of the primary sector, or culture” (point 288), “Spain cannot look only towards Europe. We will promote the Iberosphere as a space for political, economic, and cultural exchange” (point 305), “We will promote cultural initiatives [...] to publicise the civilising work of Spain in America” (point 311), and “Implementation of parental content filters for gender education in schools, libraries, or public cultural centres” (point 356). As we can see, culture as artistic heritage, cultural employment, or cultural industries are of very little

interest to VOX and when culture is relevant to the party, it is contrasted with another phenomenon: cultural exchange ties with Latin America, rhetoric against the cultures of immigrants, dependence on Europe, and Black Legend of Spain, and controlling access to cultural content considered unsuitable for minors. Culture is always presented by VOX as being against something; that is, cultural action is conceived primarily as a tool for cultural battle and as an instrumentalisation of culture for political purposes.

It is also significant that the concept of art does not appear anywhere in the 2023 dossier, only the conception of art linked to craftsmanship in relation to the promotion of “traditional and deep-rooted crafts, a vigorous inheritance from our grandparents” (point 44) or in the “dignification of the crafts and the arts through vocational training” (point 60). Thus, their conception of culture is completely associated with the idea of *kultur* and not with art as a sphere of activity specialised in aesthetic and symbolic production that emerged in the 19th century (Ariño, 1997). On the contrary, for VOX, the idea of culture as an element of risk to identity or to human dignity still prevails. The party’s use of the concept of cancel culture—a term promoted by far-right networks, first in the US and later, in Europe—is also notable. Thus, they develop the image of a conspiracy between the media and academic elites against freedom of expression. For example, they state, “The increase in the power of digital companies [...] imposes the cancellation culture that punishes those who do not continue with the progressive consensus” (point 162). Similarly, VOX also reaffirms one of the current theses of the extreme right in France and the US regarding the predominance of a progressive or left-wing elite (p. 155), with the following statement that proposes (without developing how) that: “Universities must be rescued from all totalitarian ideological impositions and their cancel culture” (point 59).

Cultural diversity was also presented in the 2023 general election programme as a risk or threat to the unity of the homeland: “One of the greatest cultural treasures of our homeland are the different languages spoken in its regions and provinces, and which have been used tortuously by separatists as a segregating element to create barriers between Spaniards” (p. 9). On the contrary, it appears that to VOX, one’s own culture—considering the homogeneous

definition of Spanish culture—is the objective that should be promoted, especially the Spanish language, thus they state: “We will promote the Spanish language abroad through the Cervantes Institute, defence of character, culture, and Spanish symbols around the world; especially in Latin America” (point 24). The party also proposes the promotion of national symbols, in their most restrictive and institutional expression: “especially the Flag, the Anthem, and the Crown. Knowledge of the cultural manifestations of our Nation and Hispanity will also be promoted” (point 63), “a purpose that the cultural dissemination of the State must be set as the main objective” (point 66).

However, VOX have also added, with increasing intensity, a populist, extreme-right discourse (not in social terms but rather, mainly in the nation’s opposition to globalist elites) to these objectives. The latter could also be included in a conceptualisation of the extreme right as nationalists versus minorities and authoritarians (Morillo, 2023). Likewise, most voters in this sector related to the illiberal extreme right represented by Jorge Buxadé. Thus, VOX has been assuming a discourse of rejection of entities that, in this context, they classify as globalist elites. Indeed, in his speech in the European Parliament, Buxadé stated that:

Europe is his nations; it is the economic and social progress of the Member States, not a power hijacked by elites at the service of a globalist agenda. Europe is an area of freedom, not a swamp of self-proclaimed vulnerable groups who want to impose their particular dictatorship on the majority of Europeans. [...] Europe is solidarity between European nations and not criminalising Hungary, Poland, Italy, while they shower European money on Morocco so that their products illegally invade our supermarkets. Europe is respect for the Charter of the United Nations, life, family, and the dignity of all men. Europe is freedom of thought and not cancel culture. It is a cross in every town, from the North Cape to Ceuta and Melilla (Buxadé, 2023).

This speech is a compendium of the extreme right, nationalism, hatred of foreigners (the so-called invasion of Moroccan products with the absolution of the cities of Ceuta and Melilla),

vindication of Christian fundamentalism, and a populism focused on criticising cultural and political elites and minorities who, according to this view, seek to govern the majority. Thus, VOX presents an ethno-nationalist and right-wing populist vision of multiculturalism as the result of a conspiracy between political elites with consequences for everyone else, stating that:

Pedro Sánchez and his government have been allies and promoters of all globalist policies. and multiculturalism that supports the disorderly arrival of millions of illegal immigrants. The consequences have not been suffered by those who have imposed these policies from their offices and mansions with private security, but by the Spanish families who suffer insecurity and degradation in their neighbourhoods (p. 63).

Therefore, immigration is clearly identified as a security risk and Islam is contrasted with ‘our culture’. This is reflected in the party’s rejection of what is seen as a threat to the continuity of the nation and the imposition of integration, which is seen as assimilation into Spanish culture: “In the face of the failed multicultural model imposed by the elites of Brussels, European nations have of betting on cultural integration policies. Multiculturalism weakens social cohesion and, consequently, the general will to defend the nation. Every immigrant has the inalienable obligation to integrate into the host country, and not the other way around.” VOX also proposes repressing the spread of Islam by closing “mosques or worship centres that propagate ideas that are contrary to our culture and identity such as Islamic radicalism, jihad, or contempt for women and our customs.” (point 214).

Thus, one of their few specific proposed measures regarding culture and the arts is the rejection of a European programme to promote sustainable architecture, also seen as a conspiracy of the elites against national identity: “We therefore reject globalist projects such as the so-called New European Bauhaus promoted by Brussels bureaucrats, which, with the alibi of climate fanaticism and the energy efficiency of buildings, seeks to standardise the reality of our cities” (VOX, 2023c: 43). Therefore, VOX demands the “rehabilitation of regional styles and the protection of traditional facades” from this “uniformising and denationalising conspiracy” of

the European Union elites (*idem*). Hence, in the face of globalisation, which they understand as an external threat to their own culture, the party proposes a vindication of Latin America, following a neo-imperialist logic, along with a nostalgic recovery of the Franco-style Spain brand, recovered from the PP's nationalist reformulation of external cultural politics (Rius Ulldemolins & Zamorano, 2014). In this sense, VOX denounces a supposed conspiracy against the heritage of the Spanish empire and proposes that "We will fight the attempts to erase the Spanish legacy in America. We Spaniards do not have to apologise for our past. We will promote cultural and educational initiatives, both inside and outside our borders, aimed at combating the 'Black Legend' and making the civilizing work of Spain known in America" (VOX, 2023c: 144). In other words, it proposes that internal educational and cultural policy should be made a tool for nation building, and externally, for nation branding.

Finally, although VOX's programme does not mention a single specific measure for artistic creation, cultural industries, or architectural and artistic heritage, it is explicit regarding education designed to turn it into an instrument for nation building and to fight against sub-state nationalism, presented as: "unitary educational contents as an element of national cohesion" (point 46), "elimination of autonomy in education and recentralisation" (point 47), a "unitary and centralised university entrance test" (point 48), "imposition of Spanish as the language of education and elimination of immersion in co-official languages" (point 49), "persecution and sanction of centres that develop immersion in Catalan, Basque, or Galician" (point 50), the use of "common curricula throughout the State and elimination of regional competence" (point 62), and "inclusion of the 'deeds and exploits of our heroes' to turn history into an element of socialisation in Spanish nationalism" (point 63). Therefore, their educational programme is clear in its return to a unitary, centralising, and repressive conception of cultural diversity in Spain, a trend that, although linked to the standardising tendency of the PP through laws, in this case, goes further to imply repealing what is established in the Statutes of Autonomy of the Autonomous Communities.

As we have seen, VOX's electoral programme was a vehicle for its ideology, but it presented few concrete measures and lacked a specific section dedicated to culture itself. They attempted to remedy this weakness by presenting their cultural programme at the headquarters of the Carlos de Antwerp Foundation in June 2023, where VOX's discourse on cultural policy was more clearly outlined (although the specific measures remained less clear). At this conference, the party's leader, Santiago Abascal, presented great continuities with his neo-traditionalist logic, with some twists adjusted to the new anti-globalising extreme right and the conspiracy theories of cancel culture typical of the alt-right. In a long speech, Abascal outlined some of the party's positions. Imitating the alt-right and aligning with ultra-right blogosphere of USA, respectively, he started by first denouncing what, for VOX, is the cancel culture and 'woke culture' of the left (Hermansson et al., 2020; Perrin et al., 2014). In fact, he repeated some of the topics disseminated in these circles, such as the supposed cancellation of creators for not agreeing with politically correct thinking, a phenomenon for which he only gave Anglo-Saxon examples and which he described as an 'outside disease' affecting national culture:

Monty Python, Agatha Christie's novels, and Roald Dahl's stories, Harry Potter, and many more authors and titles are suffering the ravages of a dark time where the ghost of cancellation not only travels across countries of the Anglosphere, and not only covers literature and cinema, but also music, humour, the plastic arts, absolutely everything. This social pathology that treats adults as minors, and more serious, that treats children as degenerated adults, has already arrived in Spain (minute 2:58 et seq.).

In fact, his 15-minute speech was mainly directed at this topic, and mentioned censorship 7 times, cancellation 4 times, and kidnapping once, while also starting and ending on

this topic. The speech simultaneously elevated creativity to a national collective entity, that of the national genius: “Spain is its culture, its art, its literature [...] a creative genius like that of Spain does not have to endure cancellations” (minute 8:12 et seq.; VOX, 2023a). Thus, when faced with this supposedly unhealthy and pathological situation, Abascal presented VOX as the bulwark of defence against such influences, which were presented as ‘foreign’. However, he then used one of the clichés of conservative accusations against the Spanish cultural industry and its political instrumentalisation: “And I don’t forget Spanish cinema. It must also be promoted and rescued from anyone who tries to appropriate it as a method of political propaganda or as a system to steal everyone’s money”. Thus, in the speech he again made a veiled threat to cut cultural spending: “But the subsidy professionals, those who have made the cultural industry the lucrative business of a few, abandon all hope.” (minute 11:05 et seq.). Therefore, as we can see, VOX denounces the culture of cancellation but promises to apply an ideological filter in the distribution of aid, with a concealed threat to cut cultural spending.

Furthermore, despite presenting itself as a victim of cancellation, the party openly aims to cancel shows they consider progressive or against their morals. Indeed, in the central closing speech of their campaign in Madrid on 22 July 2023, Abascal said, “[...] and the first thing is to change the cultural policies of the left. So, know that we have come here to cancel your cultural programmes. We have cancelled them, we are going to cancel them, and we will cancel them, so that they have no doubt. And we will do so by defending the interests of all Spaniards, not the interests of the leftist sect that has hijacked culture in Spain” (VOX, 2023a). This represents a discursive paradox (in that they promise cancellation while simultaneously denouncing cancel culture) that, nevertheless, reflects the combination of a demand inspired by the North American alt-right together with a conservative authoritarian discourse characteristic of a Spanish extreme right.

### **VOX in government: the case of Castile and Leon and the Valencian Community**

The government of the Junta of Castile and Leon was the first in which VOX assumed responsibility for culture. Their first measure was the appointment of Gonzalo Santoja, a Professor of Hispanic Philology, known for his political career that evolved from communism in the 1980s to the extreme right from the 2010s, and for his specialisation in the history of bullfighting. In his first intervention, he established eight priority axes, four of which corresponded to promoting the Spanish language and nativist cultural ethno-nationalism: ‘First words of our universal language, the Spanish that unites us’. / ‘Fueros and municipal charter or the epic of freedom’. / ‘Spanish dialogues or the genius of Spain’. / ‘A great congress of Spanish literature’ (Junta Castilla y León, 2023). His other points referred to heritage as wealth, sport as a necessity, and tourism as a means for local development. However, the absence of any reference to the promotion of cultural industries, artistic creation, or community culture stood out in his presentation. On the contrary, in a 28-page speech, he painted a historical picture of Castile and Leon as a nation struggling against the “Muslim invasion and conquest” (idem, p. 646), a context of struggle in which “the Castilian and Leonese man laid the foundations for the creation of a free society” (idem p. 648) and in which Castile continues to be a benchmark: “I don’t like the expression of ‘empty or emptied Spain’, I prefer ‘the Spain that resists’” (idem, p. 650).

For Santoja, this resistance against the enemies of the national cultural identity takes shape in the defence of bullfighting, which he nominates a constitutive part of Spanish culture: “Let the rest of Europe see itself in this balance. The bull, guardian of the pasture, guarantees an absolutely unique and incomparable reserve of biodiversity, values far above the slander of campaigns that, based on hypothetical animal suffering in the final moments of the fight, attack our traditions and ways of life” (idem, pp. 657–658). Finally, another of the axes he presented

was placing blame for the lack of funds for culture upon the shoulders of Catalonia, which he describes as a “selfish community”, stating “Well yes, of course, [...] the most Spanish provinces are the most punished provinces. How tremendous this has been! How tremendous this has been! How well the Catalan independentists have played their cards” (p. 687). To this conspiratorial discourse in which Spanish culture is cited as a victim of Europe and Catalonia, the VOX spokesperson contrasts Santoja’s discussion thus: “You are a revolutionary, councillor, a revolutionary: making Spain! When nations dissolve, [...] you and centuries of shared history carry meaning”, continuing, “As you say, Mr. Councillor, let Europe look at the balance of the bull in the pasture, in its biodiversity, in the face of globalist nonsense, and its climate religions” (VOX spokesperson, p. 675–676).

Hence, the special nature of VOX’s cultural management stood out, especially with the establishment two research awards related to bullfighting “that allow not only to expand knowledge of it, but also to disseminate its historical, scientific, cultural, and socioeconomic values in society” (Junta of Castile and Leon, 2023). The community arts awards later incorporated another category because “the relevance of the artistic and cultural fact of bullfighting, its contribution and impact in different areas of society deserves to be considered with the rest of the activities”. (...) Other work in this field implemented by the party was also recognised by the Castile and Leon Awards for their contribution to knowledge, art, or humanism (Martínez Merino, 2022). Finally, the inauguration of cultural events was used by the Vice President of VOX as an opportunity to develop discourse on culture from an authoritarian populist perspective. In this way, according to the VOX Vice-President of the Junta of Castile, García-Gallardo, the project of global equalisation in the field of culture “pushes us, too often, to the crude imitation of the worst of the Anglo-Saxon world”. He gave this reason for demanding “freedom and the broadening of culture” in the face of the “inquisitorial desires” of a “prevailing ‘wokeism’” that, according to this depiction of conspiracies, constitutes a “cultural kidnapping [...] by elites who want to weaken the bases of our society and our life together” (García-Gallardo, 2023). However, government action within the framework of governance is

far from rhetoric; because of various technical, budgetary, or administrative reasons, as well as the relationships with the stakeholders of each public policy, not all populist discourse can be implemented. Above all, the party's policies must be feasible as a consequence of their communicative rationality. Indeed, this feasibility criterion in politics guarantees the implementation phase of public policies (Majone, 1992).

*VOX and cultural policy in the Valencian Community: anti-Catalanism as a cultural battle*

In the Valencian Community, VOX's programme did not refer to culture and therefore, its priorities towards cultural institutions, cultural professionals, or cultural industries are unknown. However, in their only point that referred to culture, VOX made its priorities clear: "the defence of our own traditions, customs, and institutions against the false Catalan countries." It should be noted that the absolution of 'one's own' does not imply the promotion of the Valencian language or one's own traditions but simply, the desire to separate a language that the Valencian Academy of Language, an official institution according to the Statute, recognises as shared with Catalonia (Flor, 2011). Thus, the priority of VOX's cultural policy in the Valencian Community was to turn the language issue into a problem and thereby, make this cultural battle—understood as a cultural confrontation against cultural and linguistic minorities—part of its cultural policy programme. Therefore, it is unsurprising that those selected as regional cultural managers had no experience in this area but rather, individuals with an anti-Catalanism stance and media influence were prioritised, thus explaining the appointment of Paula Añó as Regional Secretary of Culture. She was previously unknown in the Valencian cultural world but had briefly risen to media fame for her participation in an anti-Catalan independentist television programme (Martínez, 2023). Añó is a member of the Free Centre for Art and Culture, an entity that presents itself as a cultural association but which is actually a part of a foundation created in 2015 to promote Spanish nationalism in Catalonia. In her first speech she stated that she had identified the Catalan entities that she would stop financing and that her priority was also to fight the cultural battle against Catalanism in Valencia (Belarte, 2023a).

Despite the above, VOX did not develop an electoral programme as such for the Valencian Community but rather, only 12 poorly elaborated talking points of which, only one was definitely related to culture. Thus, rather than implementing a specific proposal or measure in the Valencian Community, VOX made a political proclamation to “defend our own traditions, customs, and institutions against the false Catalan countries.” (VOX, 2023b). This declaration was accompanied by the following text: “We will vindicate our traditions and celebrations by providing them with the legal protection and institutional aid they deserve. We will invest in the conservation of the historical–cultural heritage of the region, guarantee national identity and, as an economic and tourist engine, its future. We will defend the traditional institutions of Valencia, Castellon, and Alicante” (idem). Once the elections were won by the left bloc in May 2023, the two right-wing parties announced a pact to form a government and published a seven-page document of “Joint Agreement between the Popular Party and VOX for the government of the Valencian Community” containing 100 measures, albeit without any explicit accompanying cultural proposals (VOX & PP, 2013). Specifically, in line with the aforementioned electoral programme, the text included the promise of approval of an Identity Signs Law that “protects the values, customs, and traditions of the Valencian Community as an essential part of the plural wealth of Spain.” However, its only proposed measure was negative, in the form of censorship, with them stating that: “For this reason, we will eliminate subsidies to entities or associations that promote Catalan countries” (idem: p. 2).

Therefore, as described above, VOX defined a situation in which, according to their perspective, the signs of identity and traditions were presented as being threatened by the ‘other’ (conceptualised as the Catalan enemy or the Valencian Catalanist). This position, which is in accordance with the Blavera ideology (Flor, 2011), states that ‘everything Catalan’ is an enemy of ‘what is proper’ (with this ‘other’ enemy encompassing leftist governments, especially ‘the Catalanists’, or at least the part of the community that supports such views), with VOX presenting themselves as saviours or restorers of the traditional order. Another of the fundamental characteristics of VOX’s cultural policy is its neotraditionalism and, in particular,

as we have seen in the case of Castile and Leon, its defence of bullfighting, which it understands as an essential piece of Valencian and Spanish identity. In this case, they present the decline in attendance to bullfights as the result of a conspiracy and present themselves as a victim of contempt directed at them by the State, themselves controlled by cultural elites. Thus, in his presentation as Valencian Minister of Culture, Vicente Barrera vindicated his status as a bullfighter and announced his intention to promote bullfighting in Valencia as follows: “As you know, I come from the world of culture, of art, but my activity has been silenced for too many years. We have even been persecuted and mistreated for many years by the administration, which itself had the obligation to defend us. Because I know what I’m talking about, in my case we are going to treat the entire culture equally” (Garsán, 2023). This demand for equality can only be interpreted as equating the arts with bullfighting and in so, increasing the funds and attention devoted to this activity.

## **Conclusions**

The debate on VOX’s cultural policy discourse oscillates between its interpretation as a radicalised version of a nationalist and authoritarian right or as an extreme right-wing cultural policy. Firstly, at a general level, VOX’s cultural policy fits into Mudde’s classification of the extreme right where, although they do not propose the establishment of a new regime, they do undertake an offensive against political pluralism, anti-majority institutions, and the protection of minorities (Mudde, 2007). Unlike other European far-right formations, and despite its historically anti-Muslim rhetoric, the party’s discourse does not focus specifically on hatred of immigrant culture or multiculturalism (Almeida, 2017; Harding, 2021). In this sense, it is not that its conception is integrative, but quite the opposite: VOX’s main objective is to weaken the rights of national minorities and their educational and cultural autonomies, with the promotion of dominant Spanish nationalism throughout the state territory without exception. This is

especially true in territories such as Catalonia that have turned their cultural uniqueness into a symbol of national identity (Crameri, 2008). Thus, it is understood that in the two communities in which VOX are responsible for culture, they have directed their efforts mainly towards two objectives: (a) justification of a practice that has become a nationalist symbol but simultaneously generates strong social debate: bullfighting; and (b) the attack of Catalanism, in other words, turning cultural policy into an instrument of cultural war.

From our point of view, this cultural policy is not aimed at creating hegemony throughout Spain because most people do not have a favourable opinion of bullfighting, nor do they reject the idea of internal cultural diversity. Nor is it itself a public policy aimed at promoting cultural industries or contemporary creation, given that its discourse omits the creative sectors or urban high-culture audiences (which they only make some vague references to with regard to protection of the arts). In this sense, we did not identify any positive measures among VOX's rhetoric beyond a vague promise of tax exemptions and a more tangible threat of cutting subsidies to entities considered to be aligned with left-wing or Catalanist discourses. In this sense, we noted that the communications and proposals we analysed were not designed to seduce professionals in the creative sector or the citizens most favourable to cultural spending (who, as we saw in figure 2, tend to be more left-wing national minorities).

Thus, we understand that VOX follows the strategy generated by the extreme right in the US, of drawing a social and cultural divide, abandoning the segments of the population most connected to contemporary culture, or directly seeking public confrontations with cultural creators (Rius-Ulldemolins, 2023). Therefore, the party does not try to compete for these votes, but instead seeks to gain loyalty from a sector of the population that, like the supporters of Trump or Brexit, are convinced that they must recover what they believe 'belongs to them'. In other words, the symbols and traditions of the nation-State (and its neocolonial ties) and manifestations of this monopoly of the cultural public sphere (Murdock, 2020). Hence, VOX's proposal is not altogether hostile to culture in the populist sense of calling consecrated culture or

cultural heritage into question. On the contrary, it is favourable to its conservation as long as it is considered part of the cultural heritage and reinforces cultural nationalism.

Nevertheless, VOX's cultural proposal also contains novel elements such as inversion of a vindictive discourse on minorities which, similar to the alt-right, they turn into a dominant discourse that they compare to a 'rebellion'. Thus, if populism is the symbolic inversion of domination, making the socially dominated appear dominant, the discourse of right-wing extremism is populism in reverse: the social dominants present themselves as symbolically dominated in order to claim, à nouveau, their symbolic domain. In this sense, resignification of the fight for the rights of minorities in the context of supposed cancel culture gives the extreme right a language and an allegedly transgressive image (Rey, 2022). Overall, the reality is that VOX's cultural policy is largely negative and focuses on eliminating linguistic rights organisations and censoring work in which gay and lesbian themes appear; that is, they adhere to the traditional censorship characteristics of authoritarian regimes or illiberal democracies.

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