A fence of opportunity

On how Vox's radical right populist narratives frame and fuel crises in the border between Spain and Morocco

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This article deconstructs the parliamentary discourses regarding two migratory incidents in Ceuta, May 2021, and Melilla, June 2022, when hundreds of people attempted to cross the fences that separate Morocco from Spain. Most of them were immediately deported, many injured, and several died. This analysis compares the density of populist, anti-populist, re-bordering, and de-bordering references in forty-five speeches at the Spanish Congress regarding both tragic events. Vox speakers articulate a distinct discourse that instrumentalises these incidents to convey a sense of existential crisis and to (re)define a populist right-wing political identity based on moral hierarchies, a homogenising conception of society and the exclusion of a dangerous "other." Meanwhile some parties applied a populist logic to promote de-bordering views and others combined re-bordering and de-bordering claims without imposing a populist frame. This was an opportunity to exhibit a progressive sense of place in borderlands contrasting with Vox's reactionary one.

Keywords: border, migration, populism, Spain, Morocco, radical right, parliamentary discourses, power-geometries, borderlands, crisis, content analysis

1. Introduction

Territorial borders are core components of right-wing populists' multi-scalar strategies (Biancalana et al. 2023). Borders are basic elements of political conflict in contemporary democracies. They are directly connected to issues such as immigration and defence and constitute spaces where citizens can be mobilised and where political identities are constructed (Mazzoleni 2023, 5–9). Borders

have become increasingly salient in the European public sphere due to successive crises. The 2015–2016 "Refugee Crisis" brought an increased hostility towards displaced populations in most European Union (EU) countries (Krzyzanowski et al. 2018). Later, the COVID-19 pandemic legitimised certain bordering practices and was instrumentalised by radical right parties who blamed migrants for the spread of the disease and strain on public health services (Reynolds 2020). Brexit, the invasion of Ukraine and the war between Israel and Hamas have also contributed to the centrality of borders in public debates.

Radical right populism is also responsible for (and benefits from) this increased salience of territorial borders. Populism can be understood as a sort of "democratic illiberalism" (Pappas 2019) that reflects a moral and antagonistic interpretation of society (Mudde 2004). It is based on the discursive articulation of chains of equivalential grievances and demands (Laclau 2005) and the selective highlighting of boundaries to (re)construct antithetical collective political identities: an in-group – the people– versus out-groups – usually including the elites, migrants, and minorities. Borders contribute to establishing an antagonistic and moral distinction between "the people" and the "other." These are necessary elements in the construction of populist heartlands, and in the (re)interpretations of the sovereign demos. At the same time, populist tropes and rhetoric are tools for those who seek to create, modify, or strengthen borders (Olivas Osuna 2022).

The Spanish autonomous cities of Ceuta and Melilla constitute the southernmost (and only) EU land border with an African country. This is a paradigmatic case through which to analyse the discursive utilisation of perceived migratory and refugee crises by populist radical right parties. The 10-metres tall fences that separate Ceuta and Melilla from Morocco symbolise the great divide between the Global South and North and constitute visible manifestations of the notion of "Fortress Europe" (Queirolo Palmas 2021). Although comparatively speaking Spain displays more lenient pathways to citizenship than many other EU member states, it also provides an example of "crimmigration" tactics – process of merging immigration and criminal laws that produces a stratification and facilitates the deportability of migrants that befall into the "irregular" status– (Wonders 2017, 9–10, 20). "Border games" (Andreas 2000) reflecting unfulfilled sovereignty aspirations and attempts to control refugees and migrant flows can be frequently observed there. Unfortunately, these borders have also turned into scenarios of humanitarian calamities that illustrate the problem of racialised, gendered, and hierarchical representations of migrants and asylum seekers (Aris Escarcena 2022). The unlawful, and borderline lawful violence by state and non-state actors used to prevent border crossers is somewhat tolerated by the Spanish government. Spain partially abdicates its jurisdiction and enables Moroccan security forces to temporarily share its monopoly over violence in Spanish territory,

and forcefully remove and even beat those who are attempting to jump the fences (Super and Ballesteros-Pena 2022).

On 18 May 2021 around 10,000 people crossed irregularly the border between Morocco and Ceuta, triggering immediate mass deportations and a diplomatic incident. A year later, on 25 June 2022, dozens of refugees were killed or injured when trying to enter Melilla. Spanish Government thanked Morocco for having forcefully avoided the mass crossing of the border. Both incidents are recent examples of human rights violations that sparked great controversy and a variety of interpretations among political parties and civil society. These discrepant views were manifested in the sessions conducted at the Spanish Congress for each of them.

This article examines how political parties frame these two events and whether members of the parliament of populist radical right parties construct their bordering narratives in a *sui generis* manner. Firstly, it outlines theoretically the constitutive value of the border in the processes of populist othering and identity negotiation. Secondly, it briefly introduces the case-study and the two incidents that motivated the parliamentary debates on the Moroccan-Spanish border. Thirdly it explains the dataset and methodology used – 45 speeches at the Spanish Congress and a computer assisted content analysis using MAXQDA software–. Fourthly, it discusses the quantitative and qualitative results and visual representations of the deconstructions of the speeches of Vox and the rest of political parties confirming some of the arguments in the literature on radical right populism. Finally, it concludes that the relationship between populism and the border is complex and that "border crises" elicit very different narratives depending on the ideological stance of the party.

2.   The border as a territorialised space of power: An inclusion or exclusion tool?

Democracies are territorially defined and earn their legitimacy for being sovereign centres of collective action (Connolly 1991, 201). The definition of the in-group, "us", requires a definition of a "constitutive outside," the out-group, "them", those who do not belong (Mouffe 2005, 56). Bordering discourses help distinguish the self and the other and justify moral divides between territorialised communities (Scott 2020). By corralling people into constricting boundaries, political leaders try to re-define affective attachments, by weakening some pre-existing identity traits and strengthening others (Mostov 2008, 41–42). Thus, territorial borders serve to generate and modify collective identities by diverting the attention away from in-group differences and exacerbating those with out-groups. The

border also constitutes a territorial space of power and a tool in the reworking of authority and influence (Allen 2009). It is instrumental in the definition of "power-geometries," that is, the shaping of the relational space of power and the struggles on mobility control – of people, goods, services, capital, and ideas – between different groups based on power differentials and the generation of relations of dominance, solidarity, cooperation, and empowerment/disempowerment (Massey 1993; Werner et al., 2018). Furthermore, the territorial border is what defines the borderlands, which are localised spatial units where material and symbolic struggles regarding the control of mobility take place.

In a context of growing flows of information, goods and people, the notion of "place" has been often posed as a somewhat reactionary "source of stability and an unproblematical identity" (Massey 1993, 63). According to this perspective, bordering discourses are a method of sorting or ordering people into power and moral hierarchies. The person on the move across state lines becomes a "stranger", who does not belong, to the eyes of those who associate their community and identity to spatial boundaries (Simmel 2008). Alongside overt constructions of discrimination, sometimes it is possible to find other more subtle forms of discrimination that are often neglected in the literature (Rubio-Carbonero 2020). Labels such "expat", "refugee" and "illegal immigrant" elicit (and reflect) different attitudes towards people. However, this defensive conception of spatial relations is not the sole possibility. A "place" does not need to be always conceived as static and bounded by a frontier which separate a people from an "stranger" or "other". Places can be also constructed as intersections in "networks of social relations and understandings" what implies a more dynamic conceptualisation that acknowledges its links with the wider world. From this point of view, the border does not need to be attached to exclusion and may be associated with a more global and progressive sense of place (Massey 1993, 66). Borders, borderlands and the sense of place attached to them have become central in Western political discourses against the backdrop of an accelerated globalisation and the growing concerns regarding the management of migration from the global South to the global North.

In this context, right-wing populists build their electoral-winning discourse on the hardening of the state border to prevent the arrival of migrants and refugees. They have been successful in normalising discourses based on nationalism, racism and Islamophobia that fuel resentment and fear against immigrants and asylum seekers (Wodak 2015; Krzyżanowski et al. 2017). These parties have used the state border in their representation of power-geometries involving the return of a space of power (the territorial sovereign state) and the struggle of "the powerless people" against "the powerful elites" and "the empowered migrants". They dichotomise reality and erase territorial and identity ambiguity. Right-wing

populist parties have contributed to the spread of what Van Houtum calls "borderism", which is a "discriminatory politics of b/ordering and othering that essentializes and politicizes the value of human beings on the basis of the bordered (id)entity they are born into, reside in, and/or travel from" (Van Houtum 2021, 40). Nonetheless, they display an important degree of flexibility and ambiguity when instrumentalising borders to selectively include/exclude international actors (Biancalana and Mazzoleni 2020; Lamour 2021; Olivas Osuna 2022).

The power differentials that bordering discourses produce tend to mirror and reinforce the moral hierarchy that populist leaders seek to establish between the "us" or "in-group" –who hold the legitimate control on who can cross the border and the "them" or "out-group" –the illegitimate elites who are unwilling to control mobility and the migrants who do not have the right to cross– (Olivas Osuna 2022). Bordering policy proposals are usually intertwined with moral judgements on the degree of deservingness that justify the targeting of specific groups (Chauvin and Garcés-Mascareñas 2014, 426). Via the instrumentalisation of passions and perceived crisis, populist radical right parties try to turn outsiders and political adversaries, into "enemies" (Mouffe 2005, 56–59; Olivas Osuna 2021, 836–838) and trigger a reaction in mainstream parties (Stavrakakis et al. 2018).

While much of the literature focuses on how media reproduces a logic of exclusion when covering the asylum seekers and immigration (Krzyzanowski et al. 2018; Terrón-Caro et al. 2022), this article concentrates on parliamentary speeches and how politicians reflect the border. It analyses the debates in the Spanish Congress elicited by the two abovementioned incidents in Ceuta in 2021 and Melilla 2022 to understand to what extent the border becomes a key discursive resource (Lamour and Varga 2020). By comparing the speeches of all political groups, it is possible to explore the hypothesis of whether populist radical right parties – in this case Vox – make a distinctive use of the border promoting exclusionary identities and a reactionary sense of place. Conversely, the rest of the political parties would be expected to refer to the border as (a more global and progressive) meeting place which is part of a wider network of interconnections (Massey 1993). Likewise, this article investigates the hypothesis of whether "crises" –in this case border tragic events – are windows of opportunity for populist leaders, who take advantage of decreasing levels of institutional trust to foster grievances and justify radical measures (Weyland 2003; Roberts 2015; Moffitt 2015). Finally, it tests the assumption that re-bordering proposals rely mostly on a populist discursive articulation while de-bordering claims do not.

3.   Tragedy at the southern gates

Melilla and Ceuta are autonomous cities and part of Spain since the XV and XVII centuries respectively. Two parallel fences in Ceuta and Melilla, built between 1996 and 1999, became a key element in a containment programme, supplemented with a camp-based reception system for Sub-Saharan immigrants (Aris Escarcena 2022). Since 2005, Spanish authorities have conducted summary deportations of those caught trying to swim to these cities or jumping the fences (González García 2019). Despite the continuous complaints by organisations defending the rights of refugees and migrants and the tragic incidents related to the enforcement of this policy, "hot returns" to Morocco were ruled as legal by the European Court of Human Rights in 2020. Spain's heightened external border enforcement and internal bordering practices can be considered as a product of the EU stance on immigration (Wonders 2017). The fences surrounding these Spanish enclaves, the sole physical borders between the EU and an African country, play a key role as buffer and work as a "first line of defense" in the control of migration flows into Europe. This fence has also provided an identity-building instrument, an opportunity for residents to reinforce their "European-ness" (Soto Bermant 2017). This case is also particularly relevant as Morocco – alongside Turkey – has become a key example of the externalisation of Europe's borders (Ferrer-Gallardo and Gabrielli 2022).

This paper focuses on two specific incidents. The first one was triggered on 18 May 2021 when about 10,000 people – including over 1,000 children – crossed the border of Ceuta irregularly, apparently facilitated by the decision of Morocco to suspend temporarily the enforcement of the border controls agreed with Spain and the European Union. This incident is considered the largest attempt to irregularly cross the southern Spanish border, surpassing other previous major coordinated attempts to reach the Canary Islands and Andalusia by boat. Spanish Vice-President Carmen Calvo claimed that Spain's borders had suffered "an aggression."[1] Several analysts accused Morocco of blackmailing Spain and the European Union in the context of diplomatic tensions regarding sovereignty of West Sahara. Witnesses declared that the agents of the the Moroccan Gendarmerie did nothing to prevent the incident and even invited people to cross

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1. RTVE. 18 May 2021, Marruecos llama a consultas a su embajadora en España y Calvo tacha de "agresión" la ola migratoria, https://www.rtve.es/noticias/20210518/marruecos-llama-consultas-embajadora-madrid-escalada-tension-precedentes-ultima-decada/2090901.shtml

the border.[2] Spain mobilised the armed forces to control the arrivals and thousands of summary deportations to Morocco took place immediately. Two people who had presumably attempted to reach Ceuta swimming that day were found drowned.

The second event took place on 25 June 2022, in Melilla when another coordinated mass attempt to cross the border ended up with at least 23 deaths and dozens of people injured by the violent intervention of Moroccan security forces. Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez claimed that this was an "attack to Spanish territorial integrity" and blamed human trafficking groups for triggering the incident.[3] This tragedy provoked tensions within the ruling coalition. *Unidas Podemos* openly criticized the Minister of Internal Affairs, Fernando Grande-Marlaska. Opposition parties and the Spanish ombudsman questioned the management of the so-called crisis and connivance with Moroccan police brutality. Human rights advocates denounced the excessive use of force and lack of public accountability from both governments. Spaniards were also shocked by what most media described as a "massacre."

4.   Data and methodology

The systematic analysis of discourses helps understand the structures and functions of "underlying" ideologies and diverse characterisations of in-groups and out-groups (Van Dijk 2006). Through verbal communication populist radical right leaders shape identity and politics. This article uses a computer assisted content analysis technique to measure and compare populism and bordering references in the discourses of political leaders. Most previous studies on the supply-side of populism have either relied on the use of software to count keywords in texts (Pauwels 2011) or used a "holistic grading" approach that consists of an expert assessment and the attribution of a single score to an entire speech (Hawkins 2009). In this research, syntactic units – sentences – are individually analysed and recorded whenever they match the criteria corresponding to any of populism/anti-populism or re-bordering/de-bordering codes defined previously.

2. RTVE, 18 May 2021, La crisis en Ceuta eleva la tensión diplomática entre Marruecos y España a niveles inéditos en la última década, https://www.rtve.es/noticias/20210518/crisis-ceuta-tension-marruecos-espana-sin-precedentes-decada/2090879.shtml

3. RTVE. 25 June 2022, Sánchez responsabiliza a las mafias del violento salto a la valla de Melilla: "Fue un ataque a la integridad territorial"https://www.rtve.es/noticias/20220625/sanchez-responsabiliza-mafias-del-salto-valla-melilla-fue-ataque-integridad-territorial/2385407.shtml

Overall, 2,014 segments were coded in a text corpus of 45 speeches and 78,870 words (see Table 1). The analyses cover the speeches of all parliamentary groups in the plenary sessions that debated the two abovementioned border incidents in the Spanish Congress of Deputies (sessions on 26 May 2021, 23 June 2021, 25 June 2021, 9 March 2022, 29 June 2022, 30 November 2022 and December 2022), as well as the speeches of Vox leaders in other Congress sessions related to migration – i.e., proposals to suspend the concession of visas to citizens of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Mauritania (15 February 2022), to enact a formal declaration of the "migratory crisis" as a National Security situation (17 May 2022), to take urgent measures to against irregular migration (21 June 2022), and to introduce stricter residency requisites (20 December 2022)–(Congreso de los Diputados 2023).[4]

Given the variable length of the speeches, this paper compares the density of each of the codes (number of references / 1,000 words). On the one hand, populism traits in speech are subdivided into five sub-codes that capture five attributes of this construct which have been highlighted across the literature: antagonistic depiction of the polity, moral interpretation of the people, idealised construction of society, popular sovereignty, and reliance on charismatic leadership (Olivas Osuna 2021). "Anti-populism" codes aim to capture "pluralist" or "liberal democratic" traits in communication alongside the same five dimensions. They reflect non-binary conceptions of the polity (Anti-pop Antagonism), the acknowledgment of the moral legitimacy of other political actors (Anti-pop Morality), a pluralist and nuanced portrayal of society (Anti-pop Society), a notion of sovereignty bounded by laws and formal rights (Anti-pop Sovereignty), and the endorsement of the mediating role of political parties and institutions in the relationship between the leader and the people (Anti-pop Leadership).

On the other hand, re-bordering frames are coded according to twenty sub-codes that capture, for instance, allusions to the use of violence by migrants, the need to strengthen borders, threats to national sovereignty, critique to supra-national organisations and NGOs working assisting migrants and refugees, de-humanising comments, proposals for deportation and hindering citizenship processes, etc. – and 13 sub-codes that include justifications of migration flows, explicit rejections of xenophobic discourses, allusions to the vulnerability and needs of migrants and refugees, critiques to border controls, requests to facilitate residency and asylum, etc. (Figure 2). Border codes were created based on an examination of the literature and then refined inductively during the stage of exploratory coding of speeches. Populism and bordering references appear often intertwined (Olivas Osuna 2022) and these codes are not considered mutually

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4. Database is available (open access) at Zenodo: https://zenodo.org/records/10638542 (Olivas Osuna 2024)

exclusive. Therefore, sentences can be assigned to various populism and border sub-codes.

Table 1. Speeches at the Congress of Deputies analysed and number of coded segments

Party	Speaker	Date	Word count	De-bordering references	Re-bordering references	Anti-populist references	Populist references
VOX	LÓPEZ ÁLVAREZ	23 May 2021	472	0	7	0	6
VOX	GIL LÁZARO	26 May 2021	335	0	6	0	9
VOX	ESPINOSA DE LOS MONTEROS	23 June 2021	1256	1	19	0	6
VOX	ORTEGA SMITH	25 June 2021	1159	7	13	0	12
VOX	CONTRERAS PELÁEZ	15 February 2022	1781	0	38	2	14
VOX	ORTEGA SMITH	9 March 2022	2475	3	38	0	26
VOX	GIL LÁZARO	9 March 2022	336	0	6	0	5
VOX	OLONA CHOCLÁN	17 March 2022	1232	0	31	0	20
VOX	DE MEER	21 June 2022	902	0	17	0	15
VOX	ORTEGA SMITH	30 November 2022	1803	1	36	1	25
VOX	DE MEER	20 December 2022	1697	2	24	0	21
PSOE	GRANDE MARLASKA	26 May 2021	886	5	6	2	1
PSOE	GONZÁLEZ LAYA	23 June 2021	451	0	1	2	2
PSOE	MARÍ KLOSE	23 June 2021	694	0	2	10	7
PSOE	GRANDE MARLASKA	25 June 2021	7147	10	18	9	3
PSOE	GRANDE MARLASKA	9 March 2022	5111	18	40	24	10
PSOE	GRANDE-MARLASKA	29 June 2022	418	3	8	1	0
PSOE	GRANDE MARLASKA	30 November 2022	8726	36	84	11	17

Table 1. *(continued)*

Party	Speaker	Date	Word count	De-bordering references	Re-bordering references	Anti-populist references	Populist references
PSOE	SERRADA PARIENTE	30 November 2022	2287	5	16	3	13
PSOE	GRANDE MARLASKA	21 December 2022	2708	4	9	1	18
PP	GUTIÉRREZ DÍAZ	9 March 2022	2894	4	28	10	2
PP	GARCÍA DIEZ	23 June 2021	828	0	0	0	5
PP	GUTIÉRREZ DÍAZ	9 March 2022	2894	4	28	10	2
PP	VÁZQUEZ BLANCO	25 June 2021	857	1	11	2	9
PP	BERMÚDEZ DE CASTRO	29 June 2022	491	5	8	2	2
UPN/ PP	GARCÍA ADANERO	30 November 2022	722	2	3	0	1
PP	VÁZQUEZ BLANCO	30 November 2022	2483	12	21	0	22
PP	VÁZQUEZ BLANCO	21 December 2022	2629	32	14	2	37
UP	PISARELLO PRADOS	23 June 2021	880	3	0	0	20
UP	CORTÉS GÓMEZ	25 June 2021	830	19	0	2	1
UP	SANTIAGO ROMERO	30 November 2022	2298	46	5	8	4
Cs	MARTÍNEZ GRANADOS	23 June 2021	789	3	0	4	2
Cs	GUTIERREZ VIVAS	25 June 2021	1232	5	3	3	4
Cs	GUTIÉRREZ VIVAS	30 November 2022	2581	2	20	6	9
ERC	CARVALHO DANTAS	26 May 2021	376	11	0	0	2
ERC	CARVAHLO DANTAS	25 June 2021	257	3	0	2	0

Table 1. *(continued)*

Party	Speaker	Date	Word count	De-bordering references	Re-bordering references	Anti-populist references	Populist references
ERC	CARVALHO DANTAS	30 November 2022	2047	36	1	1	17
JXC	ILLAMOLA DAUSÀ	23 June 2021	844	0	0	2	7
JXC	ILLAMOLA DAUSÀ	30 November 2022	2590	38	3	0	11
PNV	LEGARDA URIARTE	30 November 2022	2094	18	10	0	0
EHB	IÑARRITU GARCÍA	25 June 2021	2024	9	0	1	1
EHB	IÑARRITU GARCÍA	30 November 2022	2439	32	8	1	2
CUP	VEHÍ CANTENYS	30 November 2022	679	12	1	0	10
F. Asturias	MARTÍNEZ OBLANCA	23 June 2021	757	0	8	3	5
F. Asturias	MARTÍNEZ OBLANCA	30 November 2022	479	1	4	0	7
			78870	393	595	125	412

5. (Re/De)bordering discourses and the populist logic of articulation

The content analysis of the abovementioned forty-five speeches on the Ceuta and Melilla incidents shows that the discourses employed by the speakers of parties that are usually classified as populist – such as *Vox, Unidas Podemos* (UP), *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* (ERC), *Cadidatura d'Unitat Popular* (CUP), *Junts per Catalunya* (JxC) and *Euskal Herria Bildu* (EHB)(Meijers and Zaslove 2020; Norris 2020)– differ widely from those of the rest of the parties in Spain (Figure 1). The discourses of Vox, a populist radical right party (Rama et al. 2021), are extremely different from those of left-wing and secessionist populist parties regarding borders in the context of these, so-called, migratory crises. While Vox speeches exhibit the highest density of re-bordering allusions and the lowest of de-bordering ones, the other populist parties display the opposite distribution, numerous de-bordering references and few re-bordering ones. The discourses of non-populist parties such as *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* (PSOE), *Partido*

Popular (PP) and *Ciudadanos* (Cs) were closer to the average. CUP, Vox and *Foro Asturias* were the parties with more populist references and Cs, Foro Asturias and PSOE those with more anti-populist references in their speeches (Figure 1). Additionally, the tone and style in Vox speeches is more hyperbolic than that of the other parties.
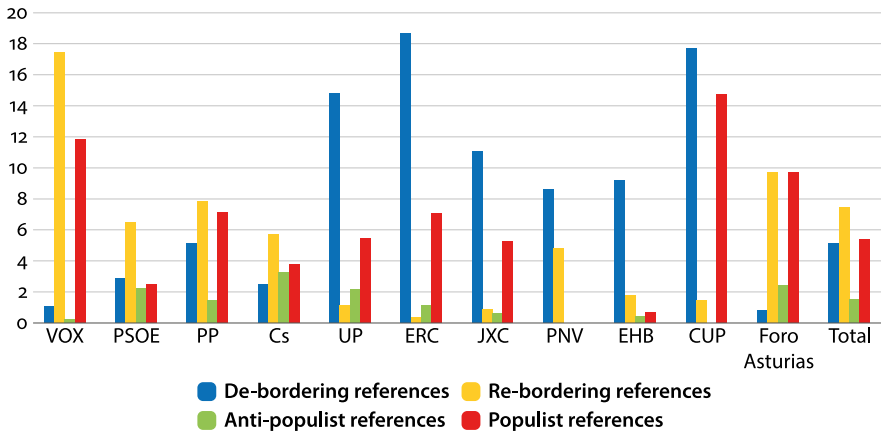

Figure 1. Density of coded segments per political party (coded segments/1000 words)

Morality appears as the most prominent dimension of populism in the speeches about these borderlands. Attempts to morally delegitimise political adversaries by alluding to hidden motives and unethical (or even criminal) behaviour are not unusual in Spanish parliamentary debate (Olivas Osuna and Rama 2021). Although most parties use this rhetorical strategy, the density of morality references in the transcripts of Vox leaders doubles the average of the rest of the parties (Figure 2). For instance, Vox accuses the government of "cowardice," "stupidity," "treason," "abandoning the border" and refusing to "defend Spain from Morocco." According to several Vox speakers, this North African country blackmails Spain and is secretly planning to invade Ceuta and Melilla. They also accuse the government of letting down Spanish security forces. Morality is used as element to re-affirm the territorial space of power and limit mobility. Government parties, PSOE and UP, respond by accusing some of the radical right MPs of illegal activities and by repeatedly linking Vox to the Francoist dictatorship (Figure 2).

The density of antagonistic populist references in Vox discourses is more than six times higher than the average of the rest of the parties analysed (Figure 2). Vox speakers describe the border crises as a sort of war and people crossing as weapons in the hands of Morocco. For instance, Ortega-Smith MP compares

Figure 2. Density of coded references (coded segments/1000 words)

the attempt to jump the fence in Melilla with the Russian Invasion of Ukraine. These discourses mirror public statements of Vox by its leader, Santiago Abascal, describing migrants and refugees as "soldiers" and "human battering rams" used by Morocco.[5] Vox requests the mobilisation of the armed forces, against what they consider to be a threat to Spanish sovereignty. Migrants and refugees that attempted to cross the fences are called "raiders" (*asaltantes*) and fighting analogies such as "knocked out", "ring", and "low blows" are employed. Other parties, such as PSOE and PP also use populist antagonist expressions such as "violent attack" and "aggression," when describing the 2022 forceful attempt to cross the fence in Melilla. For instance, Minister of Internal Affairs Grande-Marlaska claims that the Police and Civil Guard were attacked with stones and fences were broken. It is worth noting that most parliamentary groups, except Vox, CUP and PNV, include in their allocutions calls for strengthening cooperation with Morocco and other international players (Anti-populist Antagonism)(Figure 2).

The differences regarding their portrayal of society are even more acute. The density of populist allusions in the speeches of Vox is more than fourteen times higher than that in the rest of the speakers. Vox defends an anti-pluralist nativist conception of society and essentialises culture. For instance, Contreras Peláez MP refuses to accept as Spaniards some young Spanish citizens of foreign descent: "The nation is not a stamped paper, the nation is a moral community…, a historical enterprise and cannot be open to anyone" and Olona Choclan MP alludes to "incompatible cultures." They caricaturise African cultures and depict the interests of Spanish working classes as unitary and threatened by migration. References to a populist sovereignty and leadership are very infrequent in the speeches analysed, even among populist parties. This can be partially explained by the specific topic of the plenary sessions, but it may also reflect a less salient role of the appeal to popular sovereignty in Vox than in other radical right parties (Heinisch et al. 2020; Olivas Osuna 2022).

In sum, the populist discursive elements – mainly morality, antagonism, and an anti-pluralist conception of society – used in the representations of power relationships in these borderlands confirm the constitutive role of space in this geography of power that Vox tries to construct discursively (Massey 1993; Rodgers 2004).

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5. El Confidencial, 19 May 2021, Abascal afila su discurso contra la inmigración en Ceuta: "Son jóvenes en edad militar", https://www.elconfidencial.com/espana/2021-05-19/abascal-vox-critica-sanchez-ceuta-marruecos_3088311/

Vox's stance regarding borders is unique at the Spanish Congress. The frequency of re-bordering references is substantially higher than that of any other party – more than twice that of the conservative PP – and that of de-bordering references a fraction of that of any other major party in Spain (Figure 2). Vox presents migration as a threat to safety and security of the people in Ceuta, Melilla, and Spain in general. Among the other parties there were some references to insecurity but largely focused on the safety of the police forces that were injured during the forceful attempt to enter Melilla in 2022. Vox is the only party that uses cultural differences to justify barriers. It presents migration as a threat to identity and as an existential problem that endangers the survival of Spain. Vox alone uses the term "illegal immigrants", requests limiting residency and citizenship and alludes to integration problems. Most de-humanising comments come from Vox MPs, a majority of whom do not acknowledge any suffering or harm caused to migrants (Figure 2).

Most parties refer to the violence employed by some of the people trying to cross the border in Ceuta and Melilla. However, only Vox attempts to criminalise them. Most other parties do it mainly to justify the forceful action of the police forces, and to complaint about the scarcity of resources available to them. Expressions such "invasion", "brawl" and "avalanche" are also used by non-populist parties, which may be partially attributed to their utilisation in the Spanish press news and reports on both incidents (Terrón-Caro et al. 2022). However, these parties largely adopt a more dispassionate tone to describe these violent acts. Some speakers even partially justify the attacks by the desperation and hardships suffered by those trying to enter Europe. Vox aside, there appears to be a conscious effort by all parties to humanise those crossing the border. The term "deportation" is usually avoided and most parties, including Vox, euphemistically allude to "rejections" or "(hot) returns" when referring to people expelled after crossing the border.

Most speakers, except those from PSOE, severely criticise the action of Moroccan security forces but do not oppose the externalisation of border protection. The Minister of Internal Affairs Grande-Marlaska avoids speaking of the many people killed in the Melilla incident and insists that no one died within Spanish territory. Many MPs refuse to believe this claim and criticise Grande-Marlaska for implying a different value to the lives depending on whether they are lost on one side or other of the fence. This is an example of how these physical boundaries contribute to establishing of hierarchies of humanity (Fassin 2007; Aris Escarcena 2022) and power-geometries (Massey 1993). PSOE representatives in these debates, and in media declarations, seem to prioritise the relationship with the Moroccan Government, and try to minimise the abuses suffered by the victims of the tragedy at the Melilla border.

The intersection of populism and border codes also helps to understand how radical right parties, like Vox, employ populist tropes to underpin re-bordering claims and establish power hierarchies and exclusionary narratives. Vox, more than any other party, instrumentalises the violence employed by those trying to cross the fence to impose a simplistic populist antagonistic framing of the incidents (Table 2). Vox is the only party that shows a clear intent of moralising the border in the speeches analysed. They use references to violence, insecurity, human traffic mafias to delegitimise migrants, NGOs, international elites, Morocco, and the Spanish Government. This discursive reconstruction with references to "illegal immigrants" and "human traffickers" coincides with that observed in other borderlands (De Genova 2017). Populist moral references are mostly associated to de-bordering messages in other parties. The PP, for instance, accuses the Government of lying and attempting to hide the humanitarian problem, while ERC and CUP try to undermine the image of Spanish police forces.

Vox depicts a populist homogenous society with a culture and way of life incompatible with that of those that cross the fence, who additionally provoke safety and insecurity issues (Table 2). The border plays a unifying function and homogenises complex and heterogeneous realities (Van Houtum and Van Naerssen 2002, 126; Laclau 2005). Vox argues that cultural factors make immigrants to commit in average more crimes than Spaniards and use the expression "invasion by substitution", applying the "Great Replacement" theory used by populist far-right leaders (Bergmann 2020). Vox argues that Moroccan government plans to gain control in Ceuta and Melilla by getting many of its citizens to reside in the two Spanish enclaves and then reclaiming sovereignty over them. Vox MPs also speak of "massively importing people" from cultures that are the "opposite" of "European civilisation", and of cultures where "the woman is the slave of the man." While Vox requests strengthening borders and barriers to residency, as means to fight a presumed migration "pull effect", others demand strengthening collaboration with the countries of origin to improve their conditions so that the people can choose to stay. Gutiérrez Diaz (PP) speaks of the protection of the "right to migrate" and the "right to not migrate." Nonetheless, Vox's discourse at times shows some nuance and acknowledges that legal migration may be good for the country.

Figure 3 provides a visual representation of the association of populism, anti-populism, re-bordering, and de-bordering references in the speeches of the representatives of the four parties with higher representation in the Congress (at the time these incidents took place). It shows a very different articulation of the border and populism across different political parties. Vox's re-bordering claims are deeply intwined with morality, antagonism, and society populist references. PP MPs link re-bordering, de-bordering, and morality references. Meanwhile, PSOE

Table 2. Most frequent Populism and Re-bordering code intersections

Populism codes	Re-bordering codes	Code Intersections	VOX	PSOE	PP	UP	Cs	Others
Antagonism – Pop	Migrants use violence to cross	32	23	8	1	0	0	0
Antagonism – Pop	Sovereignty and rights protection	24	14	5	2	0	2	1
Morality – Pop	Safety and insecurity	18	17	0	1	0	0	0
Society – Pop	Safety and insecurity	15	13	0	0	0	0	2
Society – Pop	Culture/identity protection	14	14	0	0	0	0	0
Morality – Pop	Sovereignty and rights protection	13	8	0	3	0	0	2
Morality – Pop	Migrants use violence to cross	10	7	1	2	0	0	0
Morality – Pop	Defend / strengthen borders	9	8	0	1	0	0	0
Morality – Pop	Human traffic mafias	9	7	0	1	0	0	1
Morality – Pop	De-humanising migrants / refugees	8	7	0	1	0	0	0
Antagonism – Pop	Safety and insecurity	8	8	0	0	0	0	0
Antagonism – Pop	Existential threat and survival	7	6	0	0	0	0	1
Morality – Pop	Culture/identity protection	6	6	0	0	0	0	0
Antagonism – Pop	De-humanising migrants / refugees	6	5	0	0	0	0	1
Morality – Pop	Critique of NGOs	6	6	0	0	0	0	0

MPs' speeches also combine de-bordering with re-bordering narratives, but link them, superficially, to both adversarial (Antagonism-Pop) and conciliatory messages (Anti-pop Antagonism). Finally, UP MPs construct a strong de-bordering discourse by combining calls for cross-border collaboration (Anti-pop Antagonism) with moral populist accusations against Vox.
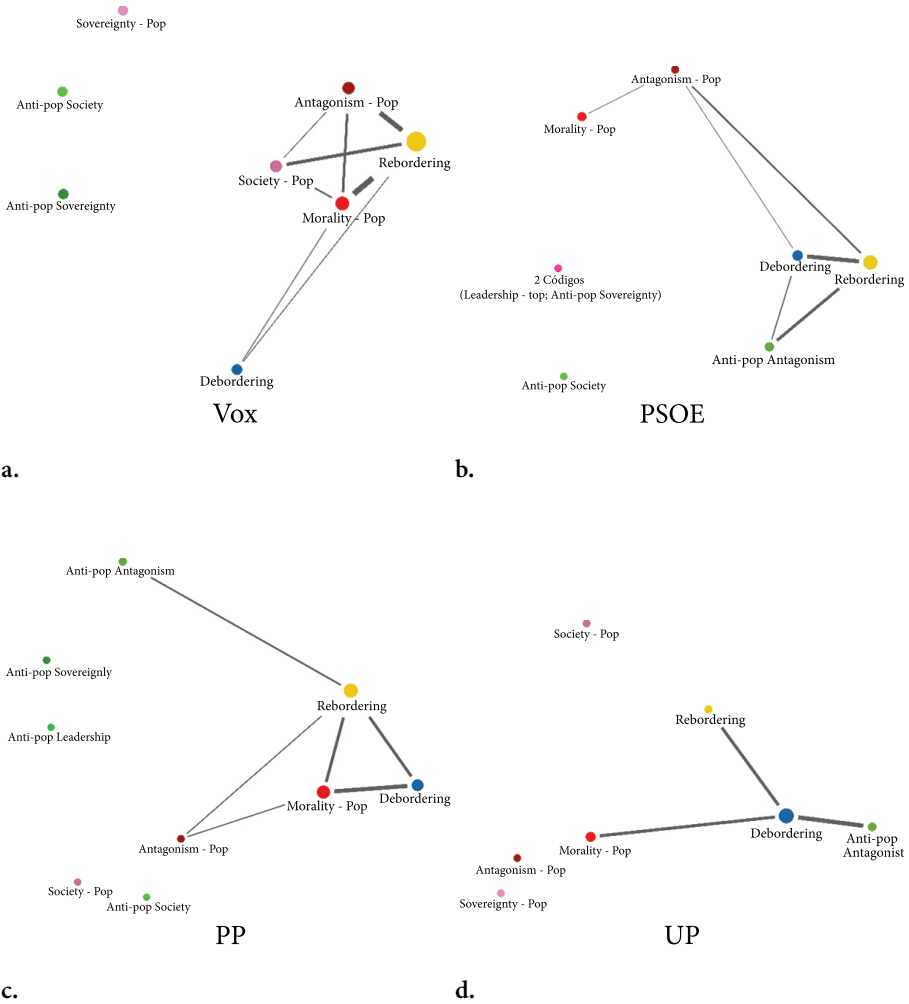
Figure 3. Visual representation of code dispersion and association. Lines correspond to code intersections (thickness represent frequencies of intersections)

The proximity/dispersion of codes observed (Figure 3) confirms that Vox has a distinct way of articulating re-bordering narratives that is grounded on, but at the same time fuels, populist discourses (Olivas Osuna 2022). Likewise, this research shows that re-bordering narratives do not always appear wrapped in a populist logic or style and that populism can also be associated with de-bordering proposals.

Overall, in their discourses on the border between Spain and Morocco Vox lawmakers reproduce the notion of a bounded place in which a culture need to be safeguarded against external threats. Vox leaders not only request Spaniards' unity versus a "dangerous other" but present themselves as protectors of society (Gemignani and Jiménez Carrasco 2023). They use the border to establish chains of equivalential grievances and to unite "the people" against "immigrants" and "international elites" that defend multiculturalism. In their parliamentary speeches they refer to vulnerable groups – such as the elderly, women, people living in poor neighbourhoods or in the borderland towns Ceuta and Melilla – and present them as victims of "mass immigration". Power-geometries can be also seen in the ambivalence of the discourses of populist politicians that choose to stress the border in certain discourses and omit it in others. For instance, actively favouring movement across borders of certain elites and rejecting that of vulnerable groups (or *vice versa*).

Vox frames these tragic incidents as major political crises by presenting migrants as a sovereignty, security, and cultural menace. Vox MPs accuse the Spanish authorities, NGOs, Morocco, and international elites of ill-intentionally provoking these migrations. The parliamentary performance of Vox leaders attempting to instil fear in the public and attributing blame to the government and elites fits patterns previously identified in the populism literature (Moffitt 2015; Wodak 2015; Homolar and Scholz 2019). The discursive construction of crises is a process in which other parties who react to populist rhetoric also participate (Stavrakakis et al. 2018).

While this populist radical right party tries to depict these border incidents as an existential crisis and as a Moroccan operation to take control of both autonomous cities, the other parties frame them differently. For instance, PSOE speakers claim that these were not "migratory crises" but "border crises" as a means to justify the special measures and the expulsion of many of the people arrived. Ciudadanos speaker, Gutierrez Vivas, argues that this was not a "migratory crisis" but a "humanitarian crisis", seeking to bring attention to the grave consequences of the poor management of the incidents by the Government.

While the radical right Vox shows a clear attempt to instrumentalise these crises to consolidate a political identity based on the rejection of immigrants and the elites favourable to multiculturalism, radical-left UP uses Vox stance on the border to promote an alternative one based on the rejection of what they call "extreme right" and "ultraright" and the association of Vox with Francoism and economic elites. Most parties do not try to instrumentalise this border conflict in an openly identitarian fashion.

6.   Conclusions

The border is indeed a key element in the construction of group identities. The way in which politicians articulate the notion of border and refer to migrants and refugees reflect their conception of society, collective self, and sovereign people. Via the analyses of political speeches regarding two tragic high-profile incidents at the border between Morocco and Spain (and the European Union), this article suggests a great disparity among different political parties and illustrates the complex discursive relationship between populism and the border. Although radical right populism makes re-bordering narratives a key element in their speeches, populist discourses (with a different ideological leaning) can be also used to strongly advocate for de-bordering policies –as was the case of UP, ERC and JXC in this study. At the same time, both re-bordering and de-bordering ideas may be defended without relying on populist rhetoric. The more technical and dispassionate stance adopted by most PSOE and PP representatives attest to this.

The tragic incidents in Ceuta in 2021 and in Melilla in 2022 became a window of opportunity for Vox to generate a sense of moral panic with hyperbolic populist discourses that reflected a reactionary sense of place, as well as the representation of power-geometries based on the return of the territorial space of power and the struggle on mobility control (Massey 1993). Vox tried to turn these attempts to cross the southern border by thousands of people into an existential threat for Spaniards and a justification for draconian measures regarding immigration. This article confirms that the border is a key discursive resource for right-wing populism which is articulated in an ambiguous or flexible mode to justify the crossing of some people and the exclusion of others (Lamour and Varga 2020; Lamour 2021).

The remaining political parties distanced themselves very clearly from Vox and adopted an either more technical angle or made a passionate critique of police actions. Most speakers – except those from Vox and Foro Asturias – emphasised the humanitarian dimension of the problem and expressed concerns for the situation of helplessness of the people in transit. Therefore, these unfortunate events can be also construed as a window of opportunity for those who wanted to push a de-bordering agenda, expose the danger of radical right narratives, and stress that the people attempting to cross the border were not the cause of the problem, but victims of it. Paradoxically, de-bordering claims were used to set a discursive fence around Vox. Despite Vox's efforts to dehumanise those desperately trying to reach the EU and frame these incidents as grave threats for Spain, the references to the vulnerability and needs of migrants and asylum seekers were the most frequent of the border-related codes recorded in the study. In this case, no imitation or "populist outbidding" processes can be observed among any of the major

parties (Olivas Osuna and Rama 2021). On the contrary, most of them dissociated themselves from Vox's simplistic anti-immigration discourse by recognising the complex power relationships and asymmetries at this border and by raising awareness about the powerlessness of those who try to cross it.

The analysis corroborates that radical right populist leaders tend to moralise the border as means to exacerbate resentment and justify exclusion. Vox uses the border and the pretended existential crisis to promote a populist political identity, based on a binary essentialist, and exclusionary conception of society and its borders. They try to pit the people against "illegal immigrants" who endanger their security and way of life, and against those they perceive that facilitate their arrival, such as NGOs, international elites and mainstream parties. Meanwhile, non-populist parties and other populist parties convey a more "progressive sense of place." They acknowledge power asymmetries and structural constrains to the displaced populations' agency. They suggest the fluid nature of borderlands, loci of complex social and political interaction.

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