

**The Resurgence Of The Far-Right Wing In Spain:  
Revealing the dispute for the meaning of Spanish nationalism**

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## ABSTRACT

Spanish political forces have continuously ignored the existence of Spanish nationalism in order to counter the peripheral nationalisms movements defying the central State. The controversy behind the definition of Spanish nationalism is rooted in the political tensions that emerged during the democratic transition. The inability to reconceptualize Spanish nationalism due to deep ideological confrontations led to an attempt to dissolve the concept into the trend of constitutional patriotism. The emergence of VOX, led by Santiago Abascal, and its accelerated irruption in the central and regional parliaments during multiple of the 2018 elections have challenged the basis of the constitutional patriotism agreement. This paper analyses VOX's political discourse to enlighten the unfinished discussion of the concept behind Spanish nationalism. First, Spanish nationalism is described from a historical perspective, considering its evolution since Francoism until today. The second part of the paper analyses the discourse of Santiago Abascal during the electoral campaign for the General Elections of 28th April 2019. The party's leader speech uncovers a traditional Spanish nationalism closer to the pre-democratic period than to the current constitutional patriotism discourse. Furthermore, Abascal's speech is disseminated following the classification of nationalism proposed by Maíz (2003): organicist, cultural and pluralist. Within this context, VOX's discourse is framed within the cultural nationalism as a result of its thin ethnic exclusivity based on language, culture and tradition. Meanwhile, the mainstream Spanish political discourse has been more connected to a pluralist nationalism that promotes heterogeneity and multiculturalism within an environment of cohesion and coexistence. In conclusion, VOX's central speech and its increasing popularity proofs the failure of reconceptualizing Spanish nationalism through constitutional patriotism and the enduring connection between Spanish nationalism and the pre-democratic period.

**Keywords:** Spanish nationalism – Castile – Catholicism – Constitutional patriotism – Cultural nationalism

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and the following four decades of dictatorship under Francisco Franco contributed to shape the meaning that Spanish nationalism has had until now. Inherited traditional values such as Catholicism and the Castilian language as a symbol of Spanishness were imposed and reinforced; the State determined the absolute meaning behind being Spanish and condemned any digression as anti-Spain. The death of the dictator in 1975 and the rapid transition towards democracy had to confront the difficulties of reforming the legal, institutional and political frameworks to resemble those of a democracy. Nevertheless, the discussion and reconstruction of Spanish nationalism did not find consensus among the political forces involved. The tensions between right-wing parties, supporters of the Francoist Spanish nationalism; and left-wing parties, defendants of pluralism with an emphasis on peripheral nationalisms, were not resolved and Spanish nationalism was considered buried on the birth of the 1978 Constitution. The German style of constitutional patriotism was adopted, and the word nationalism was reserved to refer to the peripheral nationalisms (Basque, Catalan, Galician). Consequently, scholar and political attention has focused on the study and analysis of peripheral nationalisms and their segregation movements, while Spanish nationalism has been considered non-existent—an idea fed by several social, political and academic sectors. Nevertheless, the emergence of VOX and its ultra-conservative but revolutionary speech has hinted an uncomfortable truth: Spanish nationalism is an unfinished issue of the democratic Spain and constitutional patriotism cannot contain it. VOX's discourse has been articulated on the traditional aspects of Spanish nationalism such as the radical exaltation of the nation and its unity, the identification of the enemies of Spain labelled as the anti-Spain, and a more current xenophobia with a special emphasis on the Islamic community to address immigration as in other European countries. This paper explores the elements of VOX's discourse through the speech of its leader, Santiago Abascal, during the symbolic party meeting in Vistalegre (Madrid) and the following events of the electoral campaign period for the general elections (April 2019); and the autonomic, local and European elections (May 2019). Moreover, the discourse is then viewed according to the classification of nationalism proposed by Maíz (2003), that offers a more complete framework to study national than the mainstream ethnic-civic theory of Kohn (1994). In order to approach this issue, this paper will first review the meaning behind Spanish nationalism and its evolution from Franco's dictatorship until today. Then, it will introduce the conceptual framework of contemporary nationalism based on the combination of ethnic-civic and thick-thin nationalism theories. Finally, an analysis of the dynamics of Santiago Abascal's discourse based on four key speeches: the first and largest event of VOX in Vistalegre (October 2018, Madrid), the organised event as a symbol of protest in Barcelona against the Catalan independence movement (March 2019, Barcelona), a discourse part of the general elections' campaign at the historical capital of Castile (April 2019, Burgos), and the closing campaign event for the autonomic, local and European elections (May 2019, Madrid).

# 1. WHAT IS SPANISH NATIONALISM?

## *Spanish nationalism during Francoism*

The defeat of the Republican government by the Francoist insurgents during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and the following thirty-six years of authoritarian regime were employed to rebuild and reinforce the idea behind Spanish nationalism. The conservative-traditional nationalism that had existed until then, that emerged during the Ancient Regime, was given a continuance during the authoritarian rule of General Franco. Two inherited pillars helped to sustain and fill the idea of Spanish nationalism, on one hand, Catholic religion, and on the other hand, the Castilian language (Muro and Quiroga 2004). Catholicism had been a main trait of the idea of “being Spanish” for the last centuries (Payne 1961); the marriage between Isabella I of Castile and Ferdinand II of Aragon in the 15<sup>th</sup> century symbolised the union of the kingdoms<sup>1</sup> and was followed by the critical historical events of the colonisation and evangelisation of America and the expulsion of Jewish, that gave them the title of the Catholic Kings. Religion was entangled in every aspect of the life of the society and being non-Catholic was unconceivable as the Francoist regime linked the idea of Spain and Spanish to Catholicism. On the other hand, the search for homogeneity and uniformity across Spain required a unique language to strengthen the country and the nation, only one and inseparable from each other. Castilian became then the language that symbolised, along with religion, the cultural unity of all Spanish people<sup>2</sup>. The language served two purposes, the one just mentioned, and the domination of the remaining peripheral languages (mainly Basque and Catalan), along with the attempt to eradicate both the language and their idea of nation. In addition, any symbolism apart from the language reflecting a non-valid nationalism, such as flags or anthems, were forbade and systematically persecuted. Moreover, Spanish nationalism was complemented with the identification of what constituted an attack to Spain and therefore could be classified as “anti-Spain”. This included a wide range of “enemies” such as non-Catholics, those who considered themselves something else but Spanish such as Galicians, and any political tendency that was not a part of the regime such as republicanism, leftism, communism, anarchism, etc. (Muro and Quiroga 2005). Such given guides to label those who did not endorse all the principles that Francoism considered as integral of Spanish nationalism—and their oppression and stigmatisation—became one of the roots of the

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<sup>1</sup> It has often been stated that the marriage and consequent union of the largest kingdoms of the Iberian Peninsula is the starting point of the idea of Spain. Nevertheless, Joseph Pérez (2007) argued at his book *Isabel la Católica: ¿Un model de cristiandad?* that the marriage between the two royals did not imply the union of the kingdoms, that always maintained their respective borders and taxes, among other political and legal separations. Thus, although the discussion whether Spain as a nation was conceived after their marriage is still open, the argument of Spain as a State being the product of such marriage may not seem correct from all perspectives.

<sup>2</sup> Muro and Quiroga (2005) mention the peculiarity of the Castilian language as a symbol of Spanish nationalism. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Castilian was incorporated as a feature of Spanish nationalism by the liberal wing, opposed to the conservative wing, who were focused on the importance of Catholicism and centralisation of the State. However, Castilian language was later adopted to promote unity by Miguel Primo de Rivera during his dictatorship (1923-1930).

inability to reach a consensus regarding the meaning behind Spanish nationalism once the dictatorship ended.

### *Spanish nationalism during the Transition*

The fall of the regime precipitated by the death of the dictator and the transition towards a democratic state led the definition of Spanish nationalism to a state of disarray. Confined by the strict ideas of Francoism, the type of Spanish nationalism that had lasted for almost forty years was found not suitable by the political forces coming from the regime and the long-time oppressed opposition. Discrepancies rapidly emerged due to the confrontation of the main political sectors involved in the democratic transition that could not conceive the same idea of Spain. Those who in the past were labelled as “anti-Spain” found inadmissible to succumb to the continuity of a nationalism that perpetuated their repulsion. The political spectrum then, from a conservative right, heirs of the regime, to a diverse left, was the reflection of antagonists trying to reach an arduous compromise. The right-wing, with Alianza Popular among others, was opposed to the demystification of Spanish nationalism, based on the constant imposition of Catholic religion in education and a tenacious defence of Castilian as the main language over the peripheral ones (Muro and Quiroga 2005). This insistence finds its reasons on the need to “Castilianise” the regions that were more prompt to break Spanish nationalism, such as Basque country and Catalonia<sup>3</sup>. On the other hand, the left-wing parties, such as Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE) or Partido Comunista de España (PCE), were irremediably influenced by the discomfort that the content of Spanish nationalism cause them and advocated for the recognition of peripheral nationalisms in contraposition to the centralisation of Spain. The complexity to find a common solution was, by far, a clear representation of how the transition to democracy was undertaken, by suddenly joining political forces that were on opposite sides of a civil war and dictatorship that had only ended, and by attempting to portrayed those who came from the Francoism regime as devoted democrats.

The collection of differences was eventually solved through a constitutional pact, resulting in the Constitution of 1978. The Constitution cautiously reproduced what Spain was, and still is, a group of contrasts and divergences trying to harmonise their disconformities, but silently and under a fictitious unity of heterogeneous homogeneity. The chosen model was a state based on the political decentralisation of its regions, called “autonomías” (Núñez Seixas 2001).

The term “nation” was exclusively reserved to refer to Spain, while the regions with historical, cultural or linguistic differences, mainly to the Castilian base<sup>4</sup>, were referred

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<sup>3</sup> Muro and Quiroga (2005) exemplified the importance given to Catholicism by the right-wing parties with the immigration policy by Partido Popular (PP). The party, concerned by the lack of cheap labour in Spain, opened the door for a large amount of immigration from Latin America. The decision to prioritise Latinos over North Africans was due to the similarities in religion and language, that would guarantee a more homogenic society that followed their Spanish standards.

<sup>4</sup> González Navarro (1993) discusses the meaning behind being Spanish around the idea of being “Castilian”, and concludes that Spain is in fact no more than an association of three elements: the Castilian Spanish, the one that dominates the state, the “Castilianised” Spain, and the “non-Castilianised” Spain.

as “nationalities”<sup>5</sup> (Muro and Quiroga 2004). The state became non-denominational although the funding to religious education and other religious sectors was kept through multiple agreements. Therefore, freedom of religion was established and although the state did not officially profess any religion, Catholicism was still of great importance as materialised in practice. The discord regarding the language was solved through an uneven distribution, declaring Castilian the official language except in the nationalities that had their own language (Galicia, Basque Country and Catalonia), where it had to coexist as co-official language<sup>6</sup>—undermining then the right-wing project of “Castilianisation” of all regions of Spain.

One of the key characteristics of the Constitution is, as Núñez Seixas (2001) highlighted, the ambiguity of its content and language being able to evade a restricted definition about terms such as “nation” and therefore pleasing, to some extent, all parts involved in the construction of the democratic Spain. Political decentralisation and lack of clarity characterises a Constitution that partially recognises the national character of certain regions, without addressing the issue of sovereignty, while maintaining the unity of the Spain under the assumption that Spain is the only actual nation that at the same time includes within it multiple historical, cultural and linguistic realities that could be considered nations only as part of a great nation; hence, avoiding a prolonged conflict with peripheral nationalisms, pleasing the anti-centralists on the left-wing, and guaranteeing the indissoluble unity of Spain to the right-wing<sup>7</sup>.

#### *Spanish nationalism today: democracy and constitutional patriotism*

The political pact based on the 1978 Constitution eventually developed in what is known as “constitutional patriotism”. The refusal from the right-wing to reconcile with the past and to abandon a Spanish nationalism based on National-Catholicism, and the distinctive anti-Spanish attitudes of the left-wing to avoid remembering Francoism, found a legitimate arrangement in the loyalty to the 1978 Constitution. The idea of constitutional patriotism, born in West Germany to reinvent German nationalism and distancing it from the Nazi past, attempts to build a universal set of values far from citizenship or race, but based on the democratic precepts of the rule of law and the fidelity to the Constitution as a source of justice and equality that unites citizens; thus, the identity that emanates from the Constitution is the respect and endorsement to the democratic values and the emergence

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<sup>5</sup> The description of Spain as a nation and other regions as nationalities is still an issue of major controversy. González Navarro (1993) also discusses the meaning of Spain and being Spanish, under the title *España, una nación de naciones*, from the perspective of the language used in the Constitution. The sentence “Spain is a nation of nations” has been widely used to define what constitutes Spain. The uncertainty regarding the difference between nation and nationalities that the Constitution uses has encouraged an agitated debate over the years—especially recently since the peripheral nationalisms have claimed their right to their own sovereignty—where personal interpretations have been the rule. While there is no consensus regarding whether the nationalities (Galicia, Basque Country, Catalonia, etc.) are in fact nations, they have been commonly called “historical nations”, a term that has its roots on the political system of the Spanish II Republic. Political leaders such as Joan Reventós (Partit dels Socialistes de Catalunya) has labelled this classification as mainly an attempt to “please everyone”. In other words, to half-recognise some regions as nations while claiming Spain as the only political figure entitled of sovereignty.

<sup>6</sup> As mentioned at the Article 4 of the Constitution (1978).

<sup>7</sup> As mentioned at the Article 2 of the Constitution (1978).

of a collective responsibility of social integration and cohesion (Michelman 2003). Müller (2006) discusses the crucial contributions of the German Philosopher Jürgen Habermas to the concept of constitutional patriotism. Habermas considered constitutional patriotism the only possible alternative for national pride in Germany without encountering the memory of Nazism. That involved the displacement of any legitimacy, such as religious, to concentrate all pride in the democratic essence of a renewed Germany, where sovereignty became the sole source of legitimacy. The principles of solidarity and universality embedded in constitutional patriotism are, for Habermas, the core of a patriotism that unites the society without appealing to a historical past. This reconceptualization of nationalism, however, although prosperous in Germany is, as several authors have criticised, non-transmutable to other countries and therefore not a universal concept but rather a cultural particularity suitable for the post-Nazi German context (Müller 2006; Muro and Quiroga 2005; Núñez Seixas 2004). Constitutional patriotism in Germany was founded over the foundation of a common will to move forward and heal the wounds of a dramatic past; nevertheless, Spanish democracy was instead built over the disagreement and incapacity to make peace with the past and reach a common understanding. The 1978 Constitution serves then not only as the basis of patriotism, but as an instrument to conceal a type of nationalism incompatible with a modern democratic society; it symbolises the end of Spanish nationalism and the erased of its existence. As Núñez Seixas (2001) states, the current non-existence of Spanish nationalism seems to be based on a social consensus due to the shift to the new political system of democracy.

Ironically, although the 1978 Constitution establishes that Spain is a nation—and the only one—the word nationalism has been eradicated from the language when referring to Spain, as if the combination of Spanish and nationalism was incompatible. The word nationalism has been exclusively reserved to refer to peripheral nationalisms (essentially Basque and Catalan), with a characteristic negative connotation due to their challenge to the constitutional order and therefore to democracy. Consequently, peripheral nationalisms have been perceived as anti-democratic and, following the logic of a blurry but perennial Spanish nationalism, anti-Spain (Núñez Seixas, 2004).

## **2. TYPES OF NATIONALISM AND ITS DISCOURSE**

The articulation of the nationalist discourse has used different strategies to build the meaning behind the nation and mobilise the society. Among them, nationalism has traditionally emphasised a homogeneous community (based on the same language, race, religion, etc.) with a moral responsibility with the motherland, and the constant reiteration of historical events, often leading to its mythification, to confront the current establishment seen as a period of decadence compared to the past golden age, where the claimed nation was glorious and to where the nation must return (Caiani and Della Porta 2011). Nonetheless, nationalism, as an ever-changing phenomenon that varies from diverse social and historical context, has kept transforming and evolving, producing different types of itself. Scholars have attempted to divide nationalism into different ideal typologies, aware that their classification is merely intended to represent ideal types since

pure cases are hardly ever found. This paper explores two typologies: the dichotomy ethnic-civic and the three contemporary nationalisms by Maíz (2003). The ethnic-civic spectrum has been widely used by scholars, and although criticism has been raised by others, it is still a common framework in the analysis of nationalism; therefore, it is here developed. Nevertheless, this paper suggests applying instead the three typologies described by Maíz (2003) that involve the ethnic-civic distinction while also contemplating several other elements that build a more complete framework to understand the expression of nationalism today.

### *Ethnic and civic nationalism*

The introduction of the distinction between two types of nationalism, ethnic and civic, constituted a major perspective change into the study of nationalism and nation. Hans Kohn (1944), founding father of the ethnic-civic differentiation, argued the contrasts between Western and Eastern European nationalisms, being the first based on universal values of democracy and freedom, while the second claimed historical and cultural roots as the basis of the society. Ethnic nationalism is therefore the instrument and justification for a homogeneous ethnic society, where the existence of the nation is considered timeless, and culture and traditions are restricted to only one perspective, such as the use of a certain language or the profession of a certain religion, resulting in the exclusion of those who do not share the stipulated principles. Liberal democracies, like those established in the West (United Kingdom, United States, etc.), on the other hand, were seen by Kohn as the manifestation of a nationalism that did not try to evoke a common historical or cultural uniqueness among its citizens to justify their belonging to the country, but instead used the endorsement of universal and modern values such as liberty to cohere a heterogenic society (Kohn 1944). This distinction, however, has been subject of several criticism and reformulation due to its lack of geographical precision, the stress given to the traditional-modern dichotomy that the ethnic-civic nationalism implicitly carries, or the practical impossibility of observing pure models and thus considered them as merely ideal-types (Lecours 2000). In this context, Breton (1988) argued that while the distinction serves as a tool for analysis, its content is purely theoretical and considers nationalism as a static reality rather than as an ever-changing and uncertain sensibility subject to alterations and contradictions. Nonetheless, and considering its problematic theoretical deficiencies, the ethnic-civic dimension is still widely applied to the analysis of nationalism.

The transformation of a Spanish nationalism that glorified cultural traits towards a constitutional patriotism that exalts the modern values of democracy and the rule of law has constituted the shift from a mainly ethnic to a civic nationalism that coexists with traditional ethnic features. Muro and Quiroga (2005) reviewed the political discourse of Spanish nationalism throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The authors explored the multiple elements that conformed the nationalist discourse, pointing out the several stages of identity-building. Since the 20<sup>th</sup> century until the end of Francoism, Spanish nationalism was constructed on the undeniable basis of an ethnic nationalism that left few, if any, space for civic elements. The oppression materialised through the exclusive use of Castilian language, Catholic religion and the obliged devotion towards Francoism symbols filled Spanish nationalism with essentially traits of ethnic nationalism.



Nevertheless, the new institutional order, founded on the grounds of the Constitution, and the following grip on constitutional patriotism led Spanish nationalism to achieve a remarkable civic inclination; however, whether it is in essence civic is an argument that the authors reject based on the influence of mainly religion and language on several governmental policies. The tension between the central government and the peripheral regions, or what it has been commonly known as the centre-periphery model<sup>8</sup>, due to the desired linguistic homogeneity by the right-wing has shown the limits of the civility confined within this neo-Spanish nationalism. The authors attribute the impediment to form a pure civic nationalism on the relentless need to justify the existence of Spain as a political community based on its common history. It is critical to restate here the impact that the antagonism between left and right wing has, not only for the dilemmas over a unify identity after Francoism but as the reason for the inevitable blend of both civic and ethnic elements within the constitutional patriotism Spanish identity. The reluctance of the right-wing to renounce to a certain cultural homogeneity based on Catholicism and the constant rejection of the left-wing causes a nationalism loaded by both elements under the label of constitutional patriotism.

*Beyond dualism: three typologies of contemporary nationalism*

Although the ethnic-civic theory is widely used to analyse and classify nationalisms, it still lacks specificity due to the rigidity of its framework. A second relevant pair applied to the study of nationalism has been the thick-thin ethnic contrast. The distinction between thick and thin depends on the importance that a certain element is given in people's life. Scholars have used these two categories to theorise about multiple issues such as ethnicity (Hale 2004), populism (Caiani and Della Porta 2011; Jagers and Walgrave 2007), and patriotism (Kostakopoulou 2006). Nevertheless, Maíz (2003) goes beyond these two limited categories and offers a new conceptual framework combining both the ethnic-civic and thick-thin elements to create a more complete categorisation of contemporary nationalism. The author argues that although the essence of nationalism is ever-changing and adaptable to different social and historical contexts, three new typologies can be obtained from the study of contemporary nationalism discourse: organicist nationalism, culturalist nationalism and pluralist nationalism. The first, *organicist nationalism* is linked to the thick idea of a homogeneous community, whether biologically or culturally, and represents a pure ethnic nationalism. The discourse emphasises not only race or language but also values and in some cases religion, that unify and consolidate an equal society. This social uniformity carries an extreme rejection towards foreigners and those who are different, either excluding and considering them as enemies or, domestically, forcing the assimilation of cultural minorities into the majority until their identity is completely diluted. Organicist nationalism, appropriated by fascism mainly, does not promote political participation or representation of interests. Democracy is left aside since the only interest is the preservation of the nation. Furthermore, *cultural nationalism*

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<sup>8</sup> As Stapell (2007) develops, the centre-periphery model has been the framework to explain the geographical identity formation after Francoism. The political decentralisation model adopted in the 1978 Constitution and the following dynamic of the State have created a view based on Madrid as the centre from where all policies are articulated and the periphery (other regions) as the takers or contestants.

follows the organicist nationalism postulates of one nation, one culture and one language, but rejects the homogeneity of the ethnicity due to biological or deterministic values, therefore portraying a thin nationalism. This type of nationalism stresses the exclusion of those that are different without emphasising the role of enemies. However, although cultural pluralism and multinational states are also fiercely rejected, there is space for political participation and pluralism. Finally, the less common type of nationalism, labelled as *pluralist nationalism*, supposes a radical change from the last two. Pluralist nationalism maintains the values of the community (language, history, etc.) while uses them as the base for political actions. Unlike in civic nationalism, pluralist nationalism does not abandon the specific culture that defines a community, but instead accepts the multiculturalism and political plurality that exists within one state. Any kind of political decentralisation such as federalism is typical of pluralist nationalism, that uses democracy to discuss and negotiate among actors. The state is then based on a pact of coexistence and solidarity, and cohesion is not achieved through cultural homogeneity but tolerance.

### **3. THE NATIONALIST DISCOURSE OF SANTIAGO ABASCAL**

The period of lethargy in which Spanish nationalism was plunged has been interrupted by the arrival of VOX. The party, founded in 2013, was imperceptible during its first years when the Spanish political arena was still dominated by a declining bipartidism. However, the party was cautiously growing and increasing forces in front of those who claimed the death of Spanish nationalism. Nevertheless, the 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2018 elections for the Parliament of the Autonomous region of Andalucía turned the Spanish political scene with VOX winning 12 of the 109 seats and entering the Parliament as a key for the right-wing coalition. This event was shortly followed by a call for early elections in February 2019 by the Socialist government of Pedro Sanchez, who entered the Spanish government through a motion of censure that resulted into a weak government. Thus, general elections took place the 28<sup>th</sup> April 2019, with the Socialist Party of Pedro Sanchez revalidating its leadership but with doubtful supports to create a coalition. However, the focus of the election was neither the instability of a future coalition nor the political fragmentation, but the underestimated win of 24 seats out of 350 by VOX, entering the Congress of Deputies as the fourth political force. Moreover, the 26<sup>th</sup> May 2019 a long-lasting political campaign was closed with the concurrence of three elections: local, regional and European. VOX won seats in the European Parliament, in 9 out of 13 regions that called for regional elections, and in several city halls, achieving majority and therefore taking control on few of them.

Santiago Abascal, a former Partido Popular (PP) member, was designated leader of VOX in September 2014. Abascal's political career has been influence by his family history. Descendent of active politicians in the Basque Country during Francoism and later with Alianza Popular and PP during the democracy, his family encountered the threats of the terrorist group ETA due to their political affiliation. As soon as Abascal reached the legal age, he became a member of PP, having several positions within the party, as well as an active parliamentarian at the Basque Country Parliament from 2004 to 2009 representing PP. Abascal's shift from PP, the party which his family has belong to, to the leadership

of VOX is the result of the internal crisis that PP has experienced since the economic crisis. The traditional parties of the democratic period, PP and PSOE, faced a period of complexity during an economic crisis that severely hit Spain. The parties, unable to stop the unemployment rate from increasing, and peripheral nationalisms from growing, began to experience the increment of critical voices from different wings of their own party. A part of the conservative section of PP decided to break with the party, which was failing to represent their interests, and founded VOX as a result. Santiago Abascal's incorporation to VOX and his emergence as its charismatic leader was a turn for the fate of the party. Social and political unrest due to an ever-lasting economic crisis and austerity policies were redirected towards the concern on immigration and the peak of the Catalan independence movement. The inability of PP to promote rigid policies to stop these issues left Santiago Abascal a large scenario to speak up. The leader continued its discourse focusing on the exaltation of the nation, the attack to that nation and the excess of immigration, and it rapidly gained popularity around those discontented with the soft approach PP has having. The nationalist discourse led by Abascal has been exacerbated and awoken the ghosts from the past, with a discourse based on the Spanish nationalism that was believed to be inexistent but appeared to be reborn.

#### *The exaltation of the nation under attack*

The nation constitutes the main and most important element of Abascal's discourse. The bulk of its ideology revolves around the idea of Spain as a unique and unwavering nation; the position that the nation has is key. The State is only a political and legal framework founded on the nation, without the nation there is no State. The nation is the beginning and the end and the fact of belonging to the nation is what gives meaning to its people. Nevertheless, the greatness of the nation is challenged, and its existence threaten; therefore, requiring an urgent salvation. The danger that the nation faces justifies the presence of VOX:

*“Spain is not going to stop now until it regains its greatness, its dignity and its destiny, snatched and humiliated.” (Abascal 2018)*

One of the most significant literary figures that Abascal uses across his multiple speeches is the personification of Spain. The tactic of referring to “Spain” as a living entity was observed before by Grad and Martín (2003). The authors analysed the differences among nationalist discourses in the Spanish parliamentary debates and noticed a similar trend among them. There was a constant personification of places, such as Spain, through metonymies. In addition, the authors pointed that the use of the term “Spain” and the pronoun “we” seemed to implied unity and homogeneity and a rejection to the national diversity of the State; thus, Abascal constantly reiterates the figure of Spain as a living entity able to feel humiliation and owner of characteristics such as dignity.

The nation is not static, it is alive. This idea is also reflected on the slogan the party uses to describe itself: “La España Viva” (the alive Spain), evoking the usually referred as Francoist slogan of “Viva España” (Long live Spain) by simply changing the order of the

words<sup>9</sup>. In this context, VOX emerges only as a representation of Spain, as an instrument to defend this living Spain:

*“VOX is the great Spain, the happy Spain, the decent Spain, the free Spain which you cannot [defeat] and you will not be able to [defeat].” (Abascal 2018)*

*“VOX was created because Spain does not resign itself to be killed, to be suicided, or to deadlines, or to a coup d’état. And if some want to kill Spain, we will prevent it because Spain is neither discussed nor talked or negotiated. The unity of Spain is defended to the ultimate consequences.” (Abascal 2019c)*

The description of Spain as “decent” implies an association of the values that VOX defends as the only valid vision of Spain; therefore, recovering the Francoist idea that there is only one possible interpretation of Spain, the one that advocates for certain values, and that the rest of them are incompatible with Spain itself. The use of this type of evaluative adjectives pretends to create a dichotomy between the “good” Spain and the “bad” Spain. This is a reminiscence of the idea of the “two Spains” (“las dos Españas”), a common literary figure that was used by Francoism after the Spanish Civil War (de Lucas del Ser 2003). This duality is another manner of exaltation of the nation that Francoism, and now VOX, used to remark the nation that they wanted, the one that represented their chosen values and the only one portrayed as correct. Similarly, the discourse of Abascal refers to the “dead Spain” (in opposition to their “alive Spain”) of the opposition parties, mainly those at the left-wing, seen as the losers of the Spanish Civil War:

*“They represent the dead Spain, which is an absolutely defeated Spain, a Spain that we will not allow to return. A Spain that has wanted to embarrass us, so that we do not have self-esteem, that we are ashamed of our history, that we are ashamed of our parents.” (Abascal 2019a)*

The unity of the nation is attacked when the traditional values are challenged. One of the pillars maintaining the unity and homogeneity is the use of Castilian language. However, the existence of peripheral languages (Catalan, Basque and Galician) that legally coexist with Castilian in other regions breaks the harmony; different languages express different cultures and could lead to different national identities. The prevailing need to protect the unity based on the existence of only one nation is jeopardised by the existence of other languages. VOX perceives that as an effort to erase the Spanish national identity in favour of peripheral nationalisms, which are in essence antinatural and imposed to the population:

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<sup>9</sup> The exaltation of the nation during Francoism was reinforced by symbolism, including the use of slogans. Among them, “Arriba España” or “Viva España” were common chants to emphasise the greatness of Spain. For instance, Virto Ibañez (1986) noted how during the Spanish Civil War and according to the rules of “Guardia Civil” (Spanish military force), citizens were obliged to respond “Viva España” when an official approached them in the same way or when facing any type of authority, and the rejection was sentenced with an imminent execution. The aftermath of the use of the slogan by the dictatorship is still palpable through the refusal of those that identify themselves as left-wing. Candelas Candelas (2014) discussed this peculiarity on a book named “Cómo gritar Viva España desde la izquierda” (How to chant Long live Spain from the left-wing).

*“...to be able to educate your children according to your convictions. So that in Spain children can be schooled in their mother tongue, especially when this is Spanish.” (Abascal 2019b)*

*“The alive Spain wants freedom in capital letters, freedom to enjoy the fruit of our effort without being confiscated by a politician to pay for translations in the Senate, when we all understand each other in a common language.” (Abascal 2018)*

On the other hand, the second pillar representing the idea of Spain is Catholicism. Catholicism is here more than faith; it does not strictly mean the devotion to the religion but rather it represents the cultural basis of the nation. As Demerath (2000) argued, Catholicism has evolved from a religious to a cultural meaning, and this had happened in several European countries such as Sweden. A new form of religion, cultural religion, is created, where also individuals may not practice or belief, identify themselves with that religion on the grounds of culture. In this sense, Abascal’s discourse intertwines religion with the idea of nation. Spanish traditions are mostly originated from Catholicism; thus, the Spanish is to be understood as Catholic<sup>10</sup>. It is therefore an unquestionable element of Spain, the homogeneity of the nation lies in cultural uniformity, and this emanates from Catholicism:

*“They [the other Spain] go against our way of life, they hate Easter, they hate the [Spanish] traditions, the way of life of the countryside people, they hate that we identify with our homeland. And that is why they will lose, because the love to the homeland, to the family, [the love] to the religious feelings are neither old nor modern, they are eternal.” (Abascal 2019a)*

*“We like the Europe that respects our way of life because this type of Europe is much more European than that other Europe that is soulless, bureaucratic, elitist and now Islamised.” (Abascal 2019c)*

The combination of this ultra-nationalist speech and the mainstream constitutional patriotism is crucial. Since the end of Francoism and the transition towards democracy, constitutional patriotism has been the most accepted discourse among all the political forces and the Spanish society. The 1978 Constitution has acted as a symbol of the unity of the nation, without the need of a nationalist discourse. For instance, the threat of separatism by the peripheral nationalism has been rejected based on the 1978 Constitution, rather than appealing to the unity of the nation; thus, challenging the constitutional basis might be perceived as an ultimate challenge to the harmony and the unity. Abascal endorses this discourse and uses the 1978 Constitution to reaffirm the unity

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<sup>10</sup> José Luis Villacañas is the author of the book *Imperiofilia y el populismo nacional-católico* (2019), a work created to criticise *Imperiofobia y leyenda negra* (2016) of María Elvira Roca Barea. Villacañas describes Roca Barea as “Roca Barea says that she is Catholic but is not believer. Because being Spanish is being Catholic. This has allowed the recomposition of the link with the Catholic Church, but not through the creed, but through the traditions.” (Zas Marcos, 2019). This description illustrates what is meant by cultural religion in the specific case of Spain.

of Spain and repudiate the political parties that represent peripheral nationalisms and openly reject the 1978 Constitution:

*“...we had to endure that the president of the Congress allowed what was a conspiracy against the Constitution as if it were an oath of the Constitution ... it was an explicit declaration of defiance of the Constitution, national coexistence and the unity of Spain.” (Abascal 2019b)*

Nevertheless, Abascal’s words were then followed by a crucial clarification:

*“and that’s why the twenty-four [parliamentarians] of VOX, in an explicit statement of what is important, before swearing [the Constitution] said “by Spain”. Because that is the constitutional basis. Spain without national unity, the Constitution has no value.” (Abascal 2019b)*

The 1978 Constitution is there removed as the constitutional basis of Spain to be a mere instrument working for the unity of Spain. The shift in the discourse is critical: the unity of Spain receives the highest importance, over the 1978 Constitution, that only contains or safeguards the unity, but that is unconceivable without unity. This is then, the rupture of the mainstream constitutional patriotism, where the nation and its unity are placed over the Constitution and all the values it represents. This is probably also the most remarkable exaltation of the nation of Abascal’s discourse. The unity of the nation is everything and all elements revolve around that; the Constitution only serves the nation and no values are meaningful if the nation is broken. Abascal breaks the agreement expressing that pluralism or democracy are not the essence of Spain, but the Spanish nation itself.

### *The historical past*

An idealisation leading to historical transformations to use history as a political strategy has been a constant in nationalism discourses (Finlayson 1998). History legitimise the existence of the nation and ties its people to a past that defines them. The construction and reconstruction of the Spanish history are centre on two historical events: The Reconquista and the colonisation of America by the Spanish Empire, with a critical emphasis on the role of the Catholic Kings<sup>11</sup>. The succeeding decadence of Spain as a great nation is then due to the loss of the colonies, and any form of Spanish nationalism has been trying to claim its dignity based on a romanticised past of the colonisation and the importance of the Spanish empire at that time. During Francoism, such events were constantly emphasised while the defeats were minimised or avoided<sup>12</sup>. The political forces of the transition period influenced by the existing tensions decided to leave the emphasis on the historical past aside, while the revindication of the “Spanishness” (la Hispanidad) was discretely left to only be celebrated the 12<sup>th</sup> of October, named the

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<sup>11</sup> Francesconi (2009) mentions how Francoism used its discourse to emphasise the importance of the Catholic Kings and the need to recover the greatness of that period.

<sup>12</sup> The Francoist regime redesigned the educational system of Spain to serve the objective of raising the future generations on the National-Catholicism ideology. All elements regarding the nation were enhance and the pessimism towards Spain was eradicated. History as a subject played a critical role on the educational system, from the prehistory to the contemporary times. All was designed to led students to value the greatness of the nation (González Pérez 2005).

Spanish National Day, to commemorate the arrival of Christopher Columbus to America. Nevertheless, Abascal radically opposes that renouncement and recalls the links between Spain and America:

*"We think very little about everything that unites [us with] our brothers on the other side of the Atlantic ... for us, Spain is also there in America ... we want to be part of that world that is ours and that gives us sense as a nation." (Abascal 2019c)*

Through his discourse, Abascal tries to stress the connection that Latin America and Spain has: language, religion and culture. Latin American countries are descendants of the Spanish colonisation, cornerstone of the historical past, and legitimator of the nation. This is an emphasis on the nation as a historical and social product (Finlayson 1998), the nation is not artificial, but an inevitable outcome of such events; thus, it stresses the idea of Spain as a unique nation due to the historical past that ultimately gives Spain its value. Spain is then, once again, understood in only one set of terms: the Spain that is descendant of the Spanish Empire and that shares its values and its pride. In addition, the idea of the Spanish Empire is reinforced by the special focus on Castile. Castile, the main kingdom of the Spanish Empire, is seen as the centre of Spain and the country is in turn built around Castile. Castile is the source of the common language, of the religion and the cradle of the nation:

*"Come on Spaniards of Burgos, come on Spaniards of the lands of the Cid, come on Spaniards of the head of Castile, without fear of anything or anyone, for Spain, all for Spain, long life to Spain." (Abascal 2019a)*

The centrality of Castile has an indirect consequence: Castile represents the Catholic Kings, The Reconquista from the Arabs and the evangelisation of America. Castile is catholic. Therefore, the conquests of Castile, in the name of Catholicism, are the conquests of Spain and therefore Spain is linked to Catholicism as part of its identity:

*"The alive Spain demands that the European Union and any international organization respect to our sovereignty, our identity and our laws. We want Europe, we are Europe, with more rights than anyone because we saved it from the Islamic advance in seven centuries of reconquest." (Abascal 2018)*

*"... [the Reconquista] of course, it existed, and we are very proud of it, and we will not allow our King to have to ask for forgiveness because a mosque in Seville says it, nor will we ask for forgiveness for the great work of the Spanishness, no matter how many times the president of Mexico asks for it." (Abascal 2019a)*

### *The enemies of Spain*

The discourse of the identification of the enemies of Spain has two sides: the inner and the outer. The inner enemies will be discussed first, as they occupy a more central role on Abascal discourse due to historical reasons among others. As Jagers and Walgrave (2007) argued, an emphasis on the homogeneity of the community leads to the consequent stigmatisation of those who do not fit the pattern and therefore are portrayed as enemies and blamed for the current misfortune. The precise and limited characterisation of Spain that VOX insists on, based on the Castilian values, creates a situation of antagonism to

those that disagree. Secularity, republicanism, socialism or the defence of a decentralised State are not compatible with the Castilian Spain and therefore the “valid” Spain. Abascal’s discourse then, following this characteristic trait of Francoism, points out those that constitute the Anti-Spain:

*“We have come to point out the culprits of the division, of the confrontation and the ruin of Spain, and to fight against them.” (Abascal 2018)*

*“That is why we have a government accomplice of the migratory invasion, that is why we have a government that is contributing to the treason in Catalonia, that is why we have a government that continues with historical revanchism, and that is why we have a government that continues with the slow suicide of the State of the Autonomies, because they do not love Spain.” (Abascal 2018)*

The explicit identification of enemies contributes to complete the fabricated reality of the “two Spains”. The political strategy of emphasising a “valid” Spain requires to also designate those who do not fit into the description; it creates the antagonists of the “two Spains”, where only one is in fact entitled to be called “Spain” while the other constitutes the anti-Spain. Abascal explicitly names two key facts: historical revanchism and the State of Autonomies. The first reflects the historical confrontation between right and left-wing parties regarding the Spanish Civil War and the dictatorship<sup>13</sup>; the second exemplifies the refusal to any form of state decentralisation—the unity of the nation demands unity in all terms. The State of Autonomies divides the nation into different regions, expressing differences and plurality between them, and therefore leading to segregation and confrontation. Abascal stresses that those who agree with such model do not love Spain, as decentralisation is the prequel of separatism.

Moreover, a clear difference is observed on Abascal’s discourse when addressing the enemies of Spain. While the enemies are given specific names with negative connotations to reinforce the rejection towards them. For instance, the association between terrorism and separatism, and the party’s opponents in the specific areas of Catalonia and Basque Country. Mentioning both regions at the same time aims to strength that association. The past connection between the pro-independence movement and terrorism in the Basque Country is a forced and intended analogy to refer to the Catalan movement:

*“Like the pro-terrorist separatists, who have attacked us, insulted us, attacked in Barcelona, in Tarragona, in Lérida and in Gerona, as we call them when we speak in Spanish. And those who have done [the same] in Álava, in Vizcaya, in Gipuzkoa and in Navarra. Those are also the same ones that the president of the government*

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<sup>13</sup> This confrontation has resulted on a controversial Historical Memory Law to clarify the events that took place, such as deaths and tortures. Nevertheless, the law has been harshly criticised by the right-wing parties as a search for revenge. Núñez Seixas (2004) describes the relationship between Spain and its historical memory as tortuous in the sense of a combination between difficult and perverse. For the author, that relationship reflects the limits of constitutional patriotism in Spain. Unlike in the German case, political forces in Spain have been unable to reach a consensus regarding history and how to approach it; thus, it has resulted on opposite sides aiming for different interpretations and uses of the history. The right-wing has advocated for the forgiveness and forgetting of history to avoid their responsibilities and hide their pride. On the other hand, the left-wing has vindicated the need to know the details of the atrocities that were perpetrated, and the recovery of bodies buried in ditches due to mass murders.



*has placed his hopes to guarantee his re-election, relying on the enemies of Spain.”*  
(Abascal 2019b)

Nonetheless, Abascal is radically opposed to the negative attributes that have been given to the party and their members. The association between VOX and fascism, xenophobia or sexism is rejected with a decisive argument: they do not represent fascism or xenophobia, but Spain. Spain is all the values they defend and any offence to them is nothing but Anti-Spain:

*"How is it possible that Spain is a collection of fascists, that Spain is full of fascists, homophobes, xenophobes, retrogrades, sexists? What is really happening?... what is happening is that there is a Spain that is alive and standing, and much stronger than what the enemies of Spain thought." (Abascal 2019a)*

### *Immigration*

Immigration is in Abascal's discourse the outer enemy. While the inner enemies are domestic ones, the outsiders are the threat from foreign countries, the unknown. Both inner and outer enemies threaten Spain but not equally. The inner enemies are Anti-Spain because they belong to Spain but want to break the national unity and reform the country; on the other hand, the outer enemies are invaders who want to impose a different lifestyle. The discourse is completely different; the targeting of the inner enemies creates an antagonism scenario. However, the outer enemies are represented as the foreigners against Spain, where Spain is now not divided, but unified in one vision, the Catholic and Castilian Spain:

*"... now there is no longer Don Pelayo, nor El Cid, nor Burgos is the head of Castile, nor of the lands of El Cid. And it does not exist because the advocates of multiculturalism, the accomplices of massive and illegal immigration go against our identity." (Abascal 2019a)*

As with the inner enemies, the outsiders are also given pejorative terms to reinforce negative feelings. Immigration is preceded by the adjectives "massive" and "illegal" to create the perception of an invasion or an uncontrolled crisis to unleash panic. The refusal to multiculturalism for the outer enemies is the refusal of pluralism for the inner enemies. There is a persistent redefinition of Spain, only one and restrictive. Moreover, Abascal uses below the word "our" to refer to the customs and law that immigration is threatening even though "our" only involves the Castilian description of Spain.

*"...and they [the Congress] will have to listen as we defend borders and regulated immigration. And whoever comes to live with us does so by asking permission, knocking on the door, saying that he's coming to help, to respect our customs and to respect our laws." (Abascal 2019b)*

It is also important to notice how the words "regulated immigration" are used. Denying the entrance to any type of immigration, even to those that legally live in Spain would be used by their opponents as an undeniable xenophobic statement. Nevertheless, although regulated immigration is accepted, the leader emphasises that in any case, the respect of "our" customs and laws is a requirement. Although not explicitly mentioned during the discourse, Abascal has repeatedly stated that all immigrants are not the same and that the

Islamic population represents a specific threat to the traditions of Spain<sup>14</sup>. At last, Abascal's discourse states that the rejection to immigration is to guarantee the freedom and security of Spaniards:

*"The alive Spain wants security and wants freedoms. She [Spain] wants our grandmothers to be able to walk down the street without a criminal, Spanish or foreigner, foreigners being the majority, robbing their purses."* (Abascal 2018)

Several elements of this statement just define Abascal's vision of immigration. First, the threat of immigration is the threat to security and freedom. Immigrants impose their traditions, their laws and lifestyle and eventually restrict the freedom of the local population. Second, that immigrants are equalise to criminals; immigrants are in general low income, low educated and rebellious people. And third and most important, that immigrants are now called foreigners, because immigration itself is not the problem, but foreigners, because the valid Spain is the Spain where only decent Spanish live.

#### **4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The discourse of Santiago Abascal is sustained by four pillars: the exaltation of the nation, the idealisation of the historical past, the antagonism with the Anti-Spain and the rejection of immigration. All pieces legitimise, defend or exacerbate the constituent element, the nation. Spain is the nation, product of a historical and social context that shaped what Spain is today and gave sense to it. The nation is neither artificial nor constructed, but indisputably natural. The nation is presented as a living entity, that has traditions, a culture, an identity and that is able to feel emotions. Nonetheless, the discourse cannot be understood based on a vague description of Spain or appealing to the mere love to the motherland. Spain is only to be defined as the Castilian Spain, the Spain that colonised America, that is Catholic, and that speaks Castilian. The rise of this ultra-nationalism is no more than the re-emergence of the Francoist discourse. A discourse that wants to impose one vision of Spain as the truth, and where the ones against it have no space. Moreover, it questions the actual agreement of the 1978 Constitution from a nationalist perspective and the following implementation of constitutional patriotism as a solution. The core idea of constitutional patriotism requires a social and political consensus of the past, the present and the foundational values of the State. Nevertheless, the radical confrontation between the right and left-wing political forces in Spain did not allow such consensus, and rather used constitutional patriotism to cover the unfinished and unpleasant task of defining Spanish nationalism after a long and dark period. The 1978 Constitution proclaims pluralism, democracy and decentralisation, while vaguely describes whether Spain is in fact a mononational or a plurinational state. This ambiguity created to please all political forces during the transition is also a source of conflict in the present. The 1978 Constitution lacks precision and therefore is subject to interpretation.

Furthermore, the nationalism of Abascal's discourse, as expected, cannot be completely enclose on a particular frame. Ideal types describe specific characteristics aware that the

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<sup>14</sup> On a conference in the Canary Islands in 2018, Abascal stated that *"It is not the same an immigrant from a brotherly Latin American country, with the same culture, the same language, with the same world view, than an immigrant from Islamic countries."* (Sosa 2018)

complexity of the reality does not follow strictly defined rules. In this sense, Abascal's discourse is a blend of several traits from different types. The stress on the nation is built upon three elements: the language, the religion and the history; therefore, from this perspective, it would be more appropriated to be classified as organicist (thick ethnic nationalism) or cultural (thin ethnic nationalism). The argument could turn towards organicist nationalism due to the involvement of religion and the consequent claim of certain values. Nevertheless, the evolution of religion from a faith-based belief towards a symbol of culture and tradition, developing into cultural religion, changes the core of the discourse. Religion is not seen as the imposition of the faith and a lifestyle according to such rules, but the reflection of culture and the articulation of the society based on the traditions of the religion. Moreover, the racial aspect that organicist nationalism claims is not present in Abascal's discourse. The nation is not justified in racial or biological terms but in historical and cultural values. For instance, the distinction that Abascal (and the right-wing parties) makes between Latin American and Islamic immigrants proves that the race is not the focus of the discourse. Thus, the limited and thin ethnic nationalism of the discourse corresponds to the cultural nationalism type. Similarly, the approach towards the nationalisation of the State distance itself from the radicality of the organicist nationalism, based on expansionism, ethnic cleaning or genocide. Instead, Abascal promotes the integration of immigration through assimilation and linguistic standardisation based on Castilian. As the race is not present, the aim is not to clean the society but to impose homogeneity based of culture and language. Thus, the pluralism that is rejected is the cultural and national pluralism rather than the ethnopluralism. Nonetheless, two factors slightly approach Abascal's discourse to an organicist nationalism. First, the accentuation on the enemies of the nation where the importance is not the us/them differentiation but the enemy/patriot dichotomy. Abascal directly targets the so-called enemies and makes them responsible for the miseries of the nation, but most importantly, they are enemies regardless the nation's situation, because their ideology is against Spain and only aims to the destruction of Spain. This extremist argument is more characteristic of an organicist nationalism that intends to achieve a drastic exclusivity. And second, a lack of interest on democracy and individual rights. Although the direction to reach the presidency is clearly democratic with no doubt, the discourse seems to neglect plurality to the point that individual rights would be restricted. The implementation of such limited vision of Spain would also require the limitation of linguistic or religious diversity. Regarding to pluralist nationalism, the similarities are non-existent; there is no claim for diversity, tolerance or decentralisation. Abascal's discourse moves from organicist to cultural nationalism being more comfortable in the second one.

In conclusion, this paper has explored the discourse of Santiago Abascal arguing that it is in fact the re-emergence of the old Spanish nationalism spread by Francoism. This situation reflects the limits and relative failure of Spanish constitutional patriotism, due to the inability of the political forces to reformulate an inclusive and plural Spanish identity. Therefore, and according to Maíz (2003) typology, Abascal's discourse is mainly claiming a cultural nationalism, with few traits of an organicist nationalism, but abandoning any characteristic of the pluralist nationalism that the 1978 Constitution

intended to display. The lack of attention towards Spanish nationalism due to an agreement to redirect the attention to peripheral nationalism, and portrayed Spain as a completely civic State is only feeding the growth of this archaic Spanish nationalism. The forgotten but never disappeared Spanish Francoist nationalism takes advantage of the social and academic desire to exclusively condemn peripheral nationalisms.

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