



**FAR-RIGHT POPULISM AND
ANTI-VAX MOVEMENTS IN
SOUTHERN EUROPE:**

A COMPARISON OF SPAIN,
GREECE, PORTUGAL AND
CYPRUS.

Daphne Halikiopoulou, Marina
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PREAMBLE

The past decade marked the end of the marginalisation of far-right populism in many Southern European countries. The economic and cultural insecurity generated by the Eurozone crisis and the migration crisis, saw several populist actors become a force to be reckoned with in the political system at both national and international level. But did these dynamics continue through the subsequent COVID-19 crisis and how similar or different are the narratives of the far-right parties on issues such as the vaccination, the lockdowns and the use of face masks? Have these parties supported, or even more incited, anti-vax movements and protests regarding the measures taken by the governments to tackle the pandemic? To answer these questions, we compare far-right parties and anti-vax movements in four Southern European countries, namely Greece, Portugal, Spain and Cyprus. Our findings suggest that despite the socio-economic and cultural similarities between these countries, the response to far-right populist rhetoric was not uniform. Ergo, policy recommendations regarding the creation of a 'cordon sanitaire' against these forces should focus on a range of factors, including measures for consensus- and trust-building.

'Crisis' is a vague term which may include a bundle of disparate phenomena, such as economic crises, migration crises or even crises of faith in democracy, and which has often served as a breeding ground for social and political unrest (Moffit, 2014; Stern, 2021; Zakaria, 2013). Cas Mudde (2019) mentions that the fourth wave of far right was built on the premise of three crises, namely the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the Great Recession of 2008, as well as the 2015 migration crisis. Additionally, though the ongoing pandemic did not at first function as a 'window of opportunity' for radical and extreme right parties, it gradually became a powerful weapon for attacking government strategies aimed at tackling the spread of the virus (Stern, 2021).

Nevertheless, this linkage between crisis and the far-right says little about the contingent reaction of European far-right parties, or to put it differently, does not ensure their homogeneous response. This is because of two different reasons. First, under the far-right umbrella fall both the extreme right —which rejects democracy as such— and the radical right, which

accepts democracy, but challenges fundamental institutions and values of liberal democracy (Mudde, 2019; Halikiopoulou and Vasilopoulou, 2016). Second, the fourth wave of the far-right is characterised by considerable heterogeneity. Therefore, the parties within this group may be differentiated on several ideological features and strategic approaches (e.g. religion, LGBTQ rights etc).

On the other hand, times of crisis might generate social movements, which assert the protection of individual and collective freedoms (Della Porta, 2020). That was also true during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, when several anti-vaccination movements emerged seeking the abolishment of the obligatory vaccination and the requirement for presentation of the vaccine certification to commute, work, or even shop. But neither those anti-vax movements came in uniformity, as some of them had very low impact and others have been hijacked by far-right parties (van Dongen and Leidig, 2021; McNeil-Willson, 2020).

What were the strategies of far-right parties in Southern European countries? Did they all have similar narratives and reactions? Did they successfully exploit the pandemic 'crisis frame', and what weapons did they use (e.g. conspiracy theories, religion, anti-immigration rhetoric)? Did they incite or promote anti-vax movements? This policy report answers these questions by examining the trajectories of far-right parties and anti-vaccination movements in four Southern European countries, namely Greece, Cyprus, Spain and Portugal.

Our main finding is that despite their common starting point, i.e. the pandemic crisis conditions, far-right political actors and anti-vax movements presented considerable differences regarding both their success and their narratives. Thus, policy makers, pundits and experts from civil society should not treat the far-right challenge as homogeneous. On the contrary, they should take under consideration the individual characteristics and focus on tackling the roots of the popular discontent and unrest, such as the feeling of democratic deficit.

This policy report proceeds as follows. The first section clarifies the terms 'far-right' and 'social movements', as well as their lin-

kage with the outbreak of a crisis, such as the COVID-19 crisis. In the second section, we analyse the reaction of both far-right parties and citizens (anti-vax movements) in four Southern European countries, namely Greece, Portugal, Cyprus and Spain. The last section summarises the main findings of the report and proceeds with the policy recommendations regarding the strategy on the creation of a cordon sanitaire against these polarising political forces.

FAR-RIGHT POPULISM

The 'far-right' is an umbrella term which includes both the *extreme right* and the *radical right* (Mudde, 2019; Halikiopoulou and Vasilopoulou, 2016; van Dongen and Leidig, 2021). Both subgroups are anti-systemic, oppose the post-war liberal democratic consensus and share authoritarian and nativist principles. Nevertheless, the extreme right is pro-violence, rejects democracy per se and stands against popular sovereignty and majority of rule. On the other hand, the radical right does not reject the essence of democracy, but opposes several elements of liberal democracy (e.g. separation of powers and minority rights). To put it in the words of Cas Mudde (2019): "While the extreme right is revolutionary, the radical right is more reformist. In essence, the radical right trusts the power of the people, the extreme right does not."

Two other characteristic features of the current, fourth wave of far-right politics are its internal *heterogeneity* and its mainstreaming, both of which are expected to substantially differentiate the responses of the European far-right parties to the ongoing pandemic and to bring them closer to other right-wing parties (Wondreys and Mudde, 2020).

On the other hand, populism is one of the most mistreated and politically exploited notions. The phenomenon—which is related to the radical right and not to the extreme right—has been defined in various different ways, such as an ideology (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2012), a political strategy (Weyland, 2021) and a political logic (Laclau, 2005). In this report, populism is seen as "a strategy to get to power and to govern, simultaneously as a political and performative style, and as a set of ideas and discourses about politics" (de la Torre and Mazzoleni, 2019:95). Key elements of the phenomenon are its thin-centred character, its anti-elitism and its focus on the juxtaposition between the pure and homogeneous people and the corrupt elites (Bonikowski et al., 2019; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2012; Halikiopoulou, 2020; Müller, 2016:3).

METHOD & CASE SELECTION

The Eurozone crisis proved that the responses of far-right and/ or populist parties may significantly vary even among Southern European countries, which share a number of common characteristics regarding their history, institutions and political culture. But was that the case during the COVID-19 crisis? Were far-right parties equally able to exploit the health crisis? And what were their narratives? Did they focus on conspiracy theories and religion or did they pay attention to immigration, emphasising their nativist claims? Furthermore, did the COVID-19 crisis trigger the emergence of anti-vaccine movements and what was their relationship with far-right parties?

To answer these questions, we study far-right parties and anti-vax movements in four Southern European countries, namely Greece, Cyprus, Portugal and Spain. Based on this comparison we expect to draw conclusions that could be useful tools in the effort to understand and deal with the far right.

GREECE

During the last decades, Greece has suffered from economic recession and political instability. These conditions along with the refugee crisis has created the fertile ground for the rapid rise of far-right political forces. After the fall of the far-right party LAOS, during the May 2012 elections, the Golden Dawn (GD) a new, more extreme, racist and xenophobic party entered the parliament. The party enjoyed parliamentary representation until 2019 and in 2020 it was convicted as a criminal organisation. During the 2019 elections, the Greek Solution, a new far right party which also uses nationalistic and xenophobic rhetoric entered the Greek parliament. Despite the electoral decline of the far-right it is evident that the support base of populism and far-right is much larger. Thus, the response of the political sphere during the pandemic and the links between far right and anti-vaccination movements need to be addressed and further studied.

The far-right party “Greek Solution”

Vaccination & conspiracy theories

The majority of Greek political parties in parliament had a consensus over the government’s vaccination strategy and the measures against COVID-19. However, the position of the far-right party Greek Solution was more ambivalent. On the one hand, the party’s leader Kyriakos Velopoulos did not openly oppose the vaccination. On the other hand, however, he did emphasise the importance of not forcing citizens to get vaccinated. Despite the relatively mild narrative against vaccinations, it is evident from numerous public statements of Velopoulos that he was sceptical towards the vaccines, leaving an open window to conspiracy theories.

Migration/ nativism

In addition, the party incorporated its anti-immigration narrative and nationalistic ideology to the anti-vaccination views of its leader. During one of his

parliamentary speeches in December 2020, Velopoulos stated, “I will never make my father a guinea pig, I can make my own body whatever I want, but the body of my friend, my uncle, a citizen, a Greek, I will not make it a guinea pig”.

In addition, he declared “I do not want to be vaccinated with every Hassan that our prime minister wanted”, implying that he will not accept to be treated as a foreign non-Christian citizen or a refugee. In his attempt to connect the anti-immigration narrative to the COVID-19 vaccinations, he further noted “Coincidentally, indirectly or directly, they take money and then make speeches on the TV to tell us how dangerous the coronavirus is and lock us in our homes. What is the job of Mrs. Linou¹ who has an NGO? What’s the job of Majorikinis² doing AIDS research to talk about the coronavirus? What business does Sypsas³ have to go out and terrorize us?” (Kathimerini, 2020). This statement reveals Velopoulos’ disapproval of the government’s scientific team. It implies that the health of the citizens is not the primary agenda of the government, but rather other interests are at stake, such as the promotion of NGOs which are involved with refugees. Undoubtedly, by blurring the lines between the pandemic and the refugee crisis, Velopoulos, is indirectly pointing the finger towards refugees, reinforcing the so-called “enemy against the Greeks” narrative.

Lockdowns & other restrictions

Velopoulos was also vocal against other government Covid-19 measures such as the obligatory use of masks. He characteristically stated that imposing a vaccine and imposing a mask entails authoritarianism, the opposite of democracy: “We do not say ‘yes’

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3 Nikos Sypsas, Professor of Infectious Diseases at the National & Kapodistrian University of Athens

or 'no' to masks. But in children under 12, we have questions about the obligatory use of the mask... Those who have children are protesting" (Naftemporiki, 2020). The leader of Greek Solution has in many cases expressed his doubts against the decisions of scientists and the scientific facts presented, by declaring that they are contradictory. *The same applied to the obligatory use of masks.*

It should also be mentioned that the party and its electoral base have close ties with the Greek Orthodox church. During the lockdown measures the government announced the closure of the churches to the public. Velopoulos expressed his disagreement with the measures, accused the government of being Christianophobic and simultaneously used an anti-Muslim rhetoric. He specifically declared "I wonder... I cannot go to church, but everyone went to the Polytechnic. What is the law that decides to close the churches while the mosques are open? You cannot apply the law *ala carte*" and added "I believe that these people do not believe in God... I do not accept Christianophobia" (Aftodioikisi, 2021). In addition, in his capacity as a salesman,⁴ he was selling a hand cream called "Byzantinon", which according to Velopoulos was a remedy against viruses and COVID-19 (Iefimerida, 2020). Semantically, the name of the cream itself correlates the historic roots of the Greeks, with the Orthodox Christianity and the pandemic.

The connection between the far-right parties and the anti-vaccination movement needs further study. However, some initial data reveal a link between the efficiency in vaccinations and the electoral base of an area. According to data published in Kathimerini newspaper, municipalities with low vaccination rates had high rates support for far-right parties including the Greek Solution and Golden Dawn (now convi-

cted as criminal organisation) in the last national elections, in many cases exceeding 10%. Nationwide support for these two parties did not exceed 6.63% (Kathimerini, 2021).

Anti-vaccination movements

It should be mentioned that in Greece anti-vaccination movements were strong, well organised and largely connected to the Orthodox church, as well as the far-right ideology. Cases of priests leading anti-vaccination movements, by spreading fake news and propaganda were registered. In addition, many priests did not comply with the anti-COVID-19 measures imposed by the government and urged the believers to do the same.

However, the most prominent anti-vaccination movement was the self-proclaimed "Guardians of the Constitution". The group opposed vaccines and public health measures in general. Its narrative is constructed around Article 120 of the Greek Constitution, which declares among others, that the observance of the Constitution is left to the patriotism of the Greeks, who have the right and obligation to resist by any means against anyone who attempts to overthrow it by force. The group has links with the far right and its organisation resembles that of the military forces. Their actions aim to replace state structures. In one case a junior high school principal was handcuffed by members of the group, placed in a car, and driven to a police precinct, with the accusation that the principal implements unconstitutional measures (TO BHMA, 2021). It should be mentioned that this group was also active during the economic crisis, opposing the economic measures adopted by the government.

⁴ K. Velopoulos, during his career as a journalist has hosted numerous TV shows, where he was promoting and teleselling products such as books, supplements, alternative medicine items etc.

CYPRUS

The far-right party ELAM

Parties in the Cypriot parliament demonstrated a strong consensus over the government's vaccination strategies. The far-right party National Popular Front (ELAM), despite its origins, ideology and past rhetoric, adopted a relatively moderate narrative against vaccinations. Specifically, ELAM was initially established as a sister party of the Greek neo-Nazi Golden Dawn (GD) in 2008. Its request to be registered as "Golden Dawn-Core of Cyprus" was denied by the Ministry of Interior and the party changed the request to "National Popular Front". ELAM exhibits nationalist, populist, anti-immigration and anti-communist rhetoric. However, the party has increasingly distanced itself from extremism, occupying more mainstream ground and moving closer to the centre of the political spectrum. This explains the party's moderate narrative against vaccinations, by not openly supporting conspiracy theories and disproving scientific facts.

The far-right party of Cyprus ELAM did not cultivate an extreme narrative concerning the government's COVID-19 vaccination strategies. Instead, the party's narrative against vaccines is moderate and mostly related to vaccination enforcement measures rather than the vaccination itself. At the same time, however, the leader of the party Christos Christou did declare that he himself is not vaccinated. He further noted that because vaccines were only developed recently he is not sure about their future health consequences. Christou also stated that "It is the right of every person to choose whether to be vaccinated or not" (Kathimerini Cyprus, 2021).

Moreover, the party published a public statement announcing their official position against mandatory vaccinations. Specifically, the statement noted "We believe that the citizens of the Republic of Cyprus have both the judgement and the will to choose the way in which they will ensure their health. Compul-

sory medicine was practised only in dictatorial regimes and can have nothing to do with the concept of the freedom of will of each individual" (ELAM, 2020 a). ELAM also accused the government of becoming a police state, indirectly accusing it for authoritarian practices.

Therefore, on the one hand ELAM did not go as far as to deny the existence of the pandemic, or the validity of scientific facts and the significance of the vaccinations. On the other hand, however, the party's narrative which centred on one's freedom to choose whether one wishes to be vaccinated or not, is contradictory with its rhetoric against the freedoms and rights of the refugees and immigrants. Furthermore, during COVID-19 ELAM suggested closing the borders to the Turkish controlled area in order to ensure the health of Cyprus' citizens (ELAM, 2020b), enhancing its xenophobic rhetoric.

In sum, the narrative of protecting people's rights and freedoms is a new element to the party's political positioning, proving once again ELAM's attempt to become more mainstream. Still, populist, xenophobic and nationalist rhetoric are still evident in its narrative. Moreover, it should be mentioned that the political consensus in the Cypriot parliament over the vaccinations and the measures against the pandemic, as well as the overall limited politicisation of the subject, contributed to the efficiency of the government's vaccination strategy. Further analysis is needed in order to estimate the factors contributing to the effective vaccination strategy of the country in comparison to other Southeastern European countries.

Lockdowns & other restrictions

ELAM opposed other anti-COVID-19 measures taken by the government, such as the mandatory use of masks and other restrictive measures. In particular, via a press release, the party declared its opposition

to the government's decision to impose the mandatory use of masks in the primary schools, as well as the control of SafePass, through the CovScan Cyprus application prior to entering shops and public buildings. It should be mentioned that the press release concluded with the statement "ELAM's firm position is that the decrees, which the other political parties erroneously authorised the Government to issue unilaterally, must be terminated immediately and the decisions must pass through parliamentary control". Through the later statement the party denies the government's decisions to apply policies without the consensus of the parliament (ELAM, 2021).

Anti-vaccination movements

In Cyprus no major anti-vaccination movement was registered. However, cases of violent attacks have taken place. These include, for example, an explosion at a primary school in Lemesos which the police attributed to anti-vaxxers (ADD DATE OF EXPLISION). Another incident which also occurred in Lemesos, but a different school included a fire in a classroom started by anti-vaxxers who wrote on the walls "Hands off our children, traitors" (VORIA.gr, 2021). It should also be mentioned that shortly after a protest outside the Presidential palace, a large anti-vax protester group attacked the building of the Sigma TV station with Molotov cocktails (Proto Thema, 2021). This suggests that the link between anti-vaccination movements and the far-right in Cyprus needs to be further studied.

PORTUGAL

Portugal has long been immune to far-right parties (Mendes and Dennison, 2020). Neither the Eurozone crisis nor the 2015 migration crisis functioned as a 'window of opportunity' for the various players located to the right of mainstream right-wing politics (Carlisle, 2005). Yet, this exceptionalism ended with the emergence of the populist radical right-wing populist party Chega (Enough), which in 2019 secured one seat in the Portuguese Parliament and 1.3 per cent of the popular vote. Additionally, the electoral support for this "populist, far-right and Eurosceptic" party (Rooduijn et al., 2019) showed an upward trend in the January 2022 general elections, when Chega finished in third place, winning 12 seats and 7.2 of the vote (Ministério da Administração Interna). But what was its narrative during the ongoing COVID-19 crisis?

Pundits agree that Chega is paradigmatic of a far-right party, which combines populism, nativism and authoritarianism (Marchi, 2019; Mendes, 2022; Afonso, 2021). Nevertheless, as the far-right responses to COVID-19 crisis are abundant (van Dongen and Leidig, 2021), it is noteworthy to study the specific characteristics of its rhetoric and its position amidst the implementation of a number of measures taken by the Costa Cabinet in order to tackle the pandemic. Has it been in favour or against vaccination? Did it support the lockdowns or the use of face-masks? Has the party been related to the emergence of anti-vax movements in the country? By answering these questions one more piece in the European far-right puzzle will have been added.

Migration / nativism

Being a radical-right populist party, it is not surprising that Chega focuses, among other issues, on immigration. In fact, given the low salience of immigration in Portugal (Carvalho and Duarte, 2020), the party's anti-immigration rhetoric has turned against the 40,000-60,000 individuals belonging to the Portuguese Roma community (Ciganos) and their welfare

dependency. Hence, following the outbreak of the pandemic there have been many instances where Chega's leader, André Ventura targeted that vulnerable social group.

The party has even gone so far as to propose the creation of a "specific confinement plan for Roma communities during the COVID-19 pandemic", arguing that the measure was absolutely necessary given that the Ciganos have "a lot of difficulty in respecting the rules of confinement" (Euractiv, 2022). This proposal, as expected, sparked opposition. Nevertheless, Ventura, in a May 2020 statement, defended it, stressing that: "Compliance with the law cannot be reserved only for a few. No minority, ethnic or racial, can be considered above the law and the public force cannot be afraid to intervene or act with the eternal pretext of racism and xenophobia" (Lusa, 2020).

The party has also emphasised the Chinese responsibility for the spread of the virus, which André Ventura (2020) in an article in *Correio da Manhã* named "China virus". Furthermore, the leader of the party accused the Chinese communist regime of "negligence", mentioning that "the attempt of the Chinese Government to hide the spread of COVID-19 has become a powerful weapon in the spread of the virus" (Almeida, 2020).

Vaccination & face-masks

Chega never clearly stated its opposition to the COVID-19 vaccine, but it never but it never supported it either. Initially, André Ventura, who was infected in 2021, stated that he would be "the last Portuguese to take the vaccine" because he did not want to take advantage of his political status. But then, he shifted his position declaring himself distrustful of the effectiveness of the vaccines and asking for more information (Martins, 2021). The leader of Chega has also admitted that both among the party members and its electorate there is "a very strong anti-vaccina-

tion front” (Figureiredo, 2021).

Additionally, several times he denounced the obligatory presentation of a digital certificate or a negative Covid-19 test in order to enter restaurants, working places or hotels, arguing that the measure “violates the Constitution of the Portuguese Republic and proves to be notoriously disproportionate to the ends it seeks to achieve” (Vaccine certificate requirement “unconstitutional”, 2021). This attitude —especially in relation to the mandatory vaccination of workers— has also been adopted by the syndicates, as well as the left-wing PCP (Portuguese Communist Party) and other minority parties, such as Iniciativa Liberal (Donn, 2021).

Chega also opposed the mandatory use of face-masks in public spaces. Along with the Liberal Initiative (IL) it repeatedly voted against the relevant bill that made the use of masks compulsory for “people aged 10 and over when accessing, circulating in or remaining in public spaces and public roads” (LUSA, 2021).

Lockdowns & other restrictions

Chega also maintained a blurred position regarding its support towards the implementation of emergency measures aimed at addressing the spread of the virus (e.g. lockdowns, restrictions on mobility, working hours). More precisely, despite the fact that the party agreed on the increased risk for public health, in a 2021 statement, André Ventura, highlighted that he would “demonstrate head on against new restrictions that sacrifice mobility, businesses or families” and that the Government should rather have strengthened the national health system in time than impose restrictions on people (TPN/LUSA, 2021).

This remark was in line with the party’s shift on declaring Portugal in a state of emergency. Initially, the party voted in favour of the presidential decree declaring a state of emergency (18 March 2020). But

on April 16, during the vote to extend the state of emergency for 15 days, Chega abstained. And this adversarial approach was to be maintained immovable each time the President of the Republic, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa submitted for authorisation from the Parliament a decree (Decreto) that would renew the state of emergency (13 issues till March 2021). Additionally, in August 2021, Chega organised in Porto a demonstration against the COVID-19 restrictions.

The declaration of the state of emergency provided for limitations and restrictions on the rights to freedom (Presidência da República, 2020). It also prohibited, to a necessary and proportional extent, a number of other activities, such as driving on public roads or travelling, unless it was necessary for performing professional activities, assisting other people, reaching health premises, supplying goods and for other serious reasons (Portugal: President Declares State of Emergency over COVID-19 Pandemic, 2021).

Conspiracy theories

The party was also, indirectly, involved in conspiracy theories regarding the safety of the vaccines. More specifically, in August 2021, a Facebook account that allegedly belonged to Chega’s Vila Real district, posted a message peddling that André Ventura had not yet got vaccinated because of fears government officials intended to poison him (Santos, 2021): “Do you doubt that if André arrived at the vaccination centre, full of employees of António Costa’s socialist government, wouldn’t they try to inject him with poison as soon as they realised it was him?”. And it concluded by saying that “Lady of Fátima is with him” and would not allow “one of her chosen ones to succumb to a disease created in China to destroy Chega”.

After the post went viral, the party leadership distanced itself, arguing that the account belonged to militants and was not the official one (Sá, 2021). Additio-

nally, it was announced that Chega filed a complaint with the police against those responsible for the fake page (Figureiredo, 2021).

Anti-vax movements

On the other hand, no significant anti-vaccination movement has emerged in Portugal since the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020. According to “Our World in Data” (Mathieu et al., 2021), the country has one of the highest rates of vaccination against coronavirus (22,9 million doses and 91.4% fully vaccinated, in March 2022). The Southern European country has also the highest public support for and trust in vaccines of any EU member state, with over 95% of the population considering vaccines “safe” and “important” (Villareal & Suárez 2019). This success has been ascribed by the person who led the vaccination campaign, Henrique Gouveia e Melo, to the fact that “politics has been kept out of it” (Santora and Minder, 2021).

The only example of organised opposition against COVID-19 vaccination has been the “Popular Action” (Ação Popular), a movement that requests the exclusion of children and young people under 18 years old from the vaccination programme. In any case, this social group has never gained considerable influence or official support from far-right political actors.

SPAIN

Spain was one of the countries hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. More than 100.000 people lost their lives to Covid-19 and the total number of cases exceeds 11 million. Spain's healthcare system faced significant problems even before the pandemic broke out. As a result of the policies that were implemented after the financial crisis hit, Spain had one of the lowest healthcare budgets in the EU in the years before the pandemic (Royo, 2020).

As of April 2022, more than 85% of the population has been vaccinated. This is a fairly large percentage, especially if one considers that Spaniards were not overwhelmingly in support of vaccination. A study that was conducted in 2021 found that almost a quarter of the population (22.43%) was not willing to be vaccinated (Eguia, Vinciarelli et al., 2021).

VOX

The most important far-right political party in Spain in recent years has been VOX. VOX began as a centre-right party with a conservative discourse. However, its political identity had shifted towards nativism and populism long before the pandemic hit. VOX performed poorly in both national and European elections in the first few years after its launch in December 2013. In 2018 though, the party managed to secure 10.97% of the votes in the Andalusian elections, a result that was probably a consequence of the Catalan pro-independence movement. In the regional, national and European elections that were held in 2019, VOX showed that it had established itself in Spain's party system, although its electoral base is not equally spread in the country. The party shares many attributes of other populist radical right-wing parties in Europe: a strong anti-immigration rhetoric, support for law & order and distrust, if not outright hostility, towards forces that are considered harmful to national unity (Rama, Zanotti et al., 2020).

Migration / nativism

The issue of immigration has never been very popular in Spanish political discourse. According to a study, anti-immigration is not one of the most fundamental issues for VOX (Rama, Zanotti et al. 2020). However, one should not assume that the party does not have a clear, very hostile view of immigrants. VOX officials have claimed that Spain is "under attack" from immigrants, and Muslim men in particular seek to "colonize" it. Furthermore, immigrants are seen as responsible for widespread violence in recent years. It should be noted that VOX distinguishes between immigrants of European origin and those from outside the European continent. Regarding the pandemic, VOX has not tried to create links between the issue of migration and the spread of the virus.

Vaccination & face masks

VOX hasn't been critical towards the use of face masks to halt the spread of the virus. Its stance towards vaccination however has become more complicated. On the one hand, VOX has criticised the vaccine distribution scheme set up by the EU as being slow and ineffective. This critique is part of a broader distrust against the EU and supranational organisations. On the other hand, VOX's rhetoric leaves some room for those who are unsure or sceptical when it comes to vaccinating. This is not surprising, as it has been shown that scepticism towards vaccination against COVID-19 is much higher among VOX supporters than those of other parties in Spain (Zanotti & Dugarte 2022).

Lockdowns and other restrictions

Since 2020, the measures taken to tackle the pandemic have proven to be a fertile ground for populist opposition from VOX. On 14 March 2020 the Spanish government, which consisted of PSOE and UP, declared a state of alarm which was in fact one of the strictest to be implemented in Europe. VOX,

which occupied 52 seats in the parliament, initially supported the measures taken by the government and voted in favour of the lockdown and its first extension on 28 March (Magre, Medir & Pano, 2021). However, it later adopted a hard stance, opposing lockdowns and criticising the government for what it perceived to be an inadequate response to the pandemic (Stern, 2021).

In October 2020, VOX tried to pass a motion of no confidence against the government, the fifth in the country's history since the transition to democracy but failed to attract any support from other parties (Rama & Olivas, 2020). Furthermore, the party organised demonstrations against the government which attracted a small number of people. It should be pointed out that VOX prioritised criticism against what it perceived to be an inadequate response to the pandemic, instead of an alleged attack on personal freedom (Stern, 2021). Another interesting point about VOX's strategy after the very first period of the pandemic was its reluctance to adopt an anti-science stance (Magre, Medir & Pano, 2021).

Conspiracy theories

VOX didn't try to create links between immigration and the pandemic. However, its leader didn't shy away from using conspiracy theories to explain the origins and the spread of the virus. Abascal claimed that the virus had been created in China and its spread was the result of purposeful actions. He even went as far as claiming that the World Health Organisation (WHO) was, in fact, manipulated by China. It should be noted that Abascal blamed China during his speech for the vote of no confidence which was mentioned before (Osuna & Rama, 2021).

Anti-vax movements

In general, there doesn't seem to be a large anti-vaccination movement in Spain, even though there have been marches in major cities where people

protested lockdowns and vaccines. In some cases, the protest turned violent, and the police responded, arresting some of the protestors. The government then called for social unity and responsibility so that the pandemic could be effectively deal with.

COVID-19 & FAR-RIGHT IN THE EU: A UNIFORM REACTION?

The political tumult that followed the outbreak of the pandemic did not come in uniformity as the analysis of Greece, Portugal, Spain and Cyprus cases shows. Despite the globalised character of its spread, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in similar, yet distinct reactions from the part of the radical and extreme right populist parties, confirming the “heterogeneity” hypothesis during this fourth wave of far-right. Put differently, European far-right narratives did not follow a single rule. On the contrary, their reactions were diversified based on their specific interests, audiences and national contextual factors (Figure 1).

More specifically, all four parties —after their initial support— expressed their opposition to government measures, such as the lockdowns. Nevertheless, the rationale behind their stance was distinct. In some cases, the far-right party opposed the lockdown because it would bar the public from worshipping (Greece) or/ and because of the presumed special treatment that immigrants and other minorities were receiving (Portugal and Greece).

Additionally, it is observed that not all far-right parties tried to link migrants with the spread of the virus. In Portugal, for instance, the scapegoat has been the Roma community (los Ciganos), while both the Spanish VOX and the Cypriot ‘ELAM’ did not try to blame immigrants for the expansion of the pandemic. Contrarily, the ‘Greek Solution’ openly adopted a stronger anti-immigrant narrative, which in many cases the leader of the party, Kyriakos Velopoulos, even combined with nationalist and nativist discourse.

Another point of differentiation has been the use of conspiracy theories as a tool for the exploitation of citizens’ fears regarding the virus. The Portuguese ‘Chega’ (at least officially) and the Cypriot ‘ELAM’ did not instrumentalise these tales, while the ‘Greek Solution’ and ‘VOX’ used them for different purposes.


Furthermore, despite the fact that all parties adop-

ted blurred positions regarding vaccination and they opposed mandatory vaccination, they exhibited differences not only in connection to the safety of the vaccines, but also the willingness of their members to get vaccinated. It is interesting that their reluctance sometimes has been incited by their anti-immigration rhetoric, sometimes by their nationalist and nativist rhetoric and sometimes by the lack of evidence regarding the safety of the vaccine against COVID-19.


Finally, a high degree of diversification is observed in reference to the anti-vaccination movements and their linkage to far-right parties. The most moderate reaction has been recorded in Portugal, while in Spain, Cyprus and Greece there were several incidents of protests or even violence. In any case, despite their similarities, these movements had different success and interconnection to the radical and extreme right parties.

Figure 1: Far-right parties in Greece, Cyprus, Spain and Portugal


THE CASES: GREECE, CYPRUS, SPAIN, PORTUGAL




ΠΑΣΟΚ
GREECE



ΕΘΝΙΚΟ ΛΑΙΚΟ ΠΡΟΝΤ
CYPRUS



VOX
SPAIN



CHEGA
PORTUGAL

FAR RIGHT PARTY	GREEK SOLUTION	NATIONAL POPULAR FRONT	VOX	CHEGA!
AGAINST GOVERNMENT MEASURES (LOCKDOWN, FACE MASKS ETC)	YES	YES	YES	YES
AGAINST VACCINATION	Blurred position Sceptic towards vaccination & Against mandatory vaccination	Blurred position Sceptic towards vaccination & Against mandatory vaccination	Blurred position Sceptic towards vaccination & Against mandatory vaccination	Blurred position Sceptic towards vaccination & Against mandatory vaccination
ANTI-IMMIGRANT	YES	YES	NO	YES (focus on Ciganos)
RELIGION	YES	NO	NO	(OFFICIALLY) NO
CONSPIRACY THEORIES	YES	NO	YES	(OFFICIALLY) NO
Anti-vax movements	YES- Guardians of the Constitution	YES (individual cases, limited extent)	YES	YES-POPULAR ACTION (limited extent)

Source: Authors' own elaboration

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The heterogeneous narratives used by the far-right parties during the COVID-19 crisis clearly show that any initiative to protect democracy against authoritarian political forces cannot be monolithic either. Different audiences entail not only different grievances and fears, but also different strategies and electoral fortunes of radical and extreme right populist forces.

Therefore, in the face of any strong tumult and crisis (economic, migration, health), the EU should equally focus on both contextual and national factors. More specifically, among the parameters that should be taken into account are included the following:

- **The nexus between far-right parties and civil society**, as the latter could function either as a counter force or as an enabler of extremism (Lundberg, 2021).
- **The relationship between the positions of the far-right party (supply-side) and the specific preferences of the voters (demand-side)**, as it could be misleading to draw the conclusion that the absence of strong opposition regarding specific issues (i.e. vaccination safety) stems from the ideological orientation of a party.
- **The balance of powers within the specific party system**, as a strong non-populist right-wing party could absorb a relatively large volume of discontent and/ or to shift the political agenda.

Additionally, as the study of the four cases clearly demonstrated:

- In Europe, the nexus of religion and politics seems to continue to be strong. This is an observation that cannot be ignored by the policy makers at both European and national level. That would further facilitate radicals and extremists to capitalise on religious feelings and fears.

- Proper information regarding vaccination and disengagement of politics and ideologies from the national vaccination programmes could debilitate anti- vaccination movements.

The COVID-19 crisis has been a multifaceted crisis, as was the case with the Eurozone crisis ten years ago. Both showed the limits and the vulnerability of the liberal democracy against the challenges generated by the highly globalised environment within which parties and voters act and interact. Ergo, it would be utopian to believe that European democracy can be effectively shielded against far-right politics so long as the roots of citizens' fears exist.

The demand-side of radical and extreme right politics is related directly with issues of democratic deficit, social justice, responsibility and effectiveness of the incumbents. So, policies taken closer to the people, policies that are characterised by transparency and accountability, are of great importance.

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NOTES

NOTES

Lined area for taking notes.

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