

Politicising the Pandemic Recovery? Opposition Strategies against the Spanish Government's COVID-19 Measures



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ABSTRACT

This article examines Spain's COVID-19 pandemic recovery from the perspective of politicisation as a form of political activity. The main argument is that politicisation must be considered more broadly as a part of democratic politics, as distinct from the too narrow theoretical framework of European Union (EU) politicisation. The analysis builds on recent conceptual research into politicisation and asks: Has Spain's pandemic recovery become politicised and, if so, in what way did this politicisation occur and to what extent have politicising strategies been used? In Spain, political parties have not openly engaged in conflict about the country's membership of the EU, but they do have a clear tendency towards a deeply partisan and highly polarised approach to domestic politics, aggravated since the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis focuses on opposition strategies during the period from the beginning of March 2020 to the end of December 2023. The main conclusion of the analysis is that politicising strategies were used by the opposition parties in contexts that gave them opportunities to exploit the situation in a novel way. On those occasions, it is possible to identify four different dimensions of politicisation. This illustrates that by attempting to utilise novel ways of acting politically, politicisation effectively becomes an intervention in the current state of affairs for political purposes. This conclusion can provide a useful conceptual framework for future research into pandemic recovery in a comparative sense and also into the concept of politicisation within democratic politics in general.

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The Democracy Index 2021, published by *The Economist*, reviewed the effects of COVID-19 pandemic measures on democracies worldwide. Notably, it downgraded Spain from a ‘full democracy’ to a ‘flawed democracy’, mainly as a result of a ‘weaker score on judicial independence’ (*The Economist* 2022, 62). In the European Commission’s *Rule of Law Report* on Spain, it was stated that the ‘prolonged’ lack of reform of the judicial body overseeing the independence of judges and courts in the country – the Council for the Judiciary – had made the country ‘vulnerable to politicisation’ (*European Commission* 2021, 2). In 2022, as Spain prepared to reassume the presidency of the Council of the European Union (EU) with effect from 1 July 2023, the Commission further insisted on the need to solve the diagnosed problems relating to this judicial body. However, the necessary reforms proved impossible to initiate, because the two major left- and right-wing political parties were unable to reach agreement on this sensitive issue in what had become a highly polarised and partisan political environment. In particular, the main opposition party, the centre-right People’s Party (PP), refused to negotiate with the leading government party, the centre-left Socialist Workers’ Party (PSOE) (*Suanzes* 2022).

It is against this background that this article’s key question – Has Spain’s pandemic recovery become politicised and, if so, in what way did this politicisation occur and to what extent have politicising strategies been used? – needs to be considered. EU institutions have a very specific way of defining ‘politicisation’, usually framing it within the context of anti-European sentiment at the national level. However, the EU’s institutional actors form just one dimension of politicisation within a multi-level political system. As De Wilde and Lord (2016) have illustrated, domestic political actors play their own role in EU politicisation and, consequently, controversies within the EU include domestic conflicts as well. Even so, there is an assumption that EU politicisation mainly consists of disputes between Eurosceptics and pro-Europeans. In previous literature on Spanish pandemic politics and the effects of EU politicisation, scholarly interest has mainly focused on the responses of the smaller ‘populist’ parties and the increase of dogmatic ideological positions (e.g. *Magre, Medir & Pano* 2021; *Plaza-Colodro & Miranda Olivares* 2022). But although recent research has shown that EU-related issues have become increasingly prominent in Spanish parliamentary and media discourses (*Marcos Marné* 2023), there is no evidence of any serious public debate about the country’s EU membership. Similarly, in the post-pandemic context, there are also no signs of a significant buildup of Euroscepticism (*Marcos Marné* 2023, 311).

In this article, politicisation will therefore be examined from a broader, conceptual perspective. As a result, this case study can be seen as a further contribution to recent conceptual research into politicisation, highlighting a multi-faceted approach and, in particular, the interactions of political actors and their strategic use of concepts and ideas in a multi-level context (*Oleart & Haapala* 2022, 5). The analysis builds further on the ‘political activity’ approach to politics (*Kauppi, Palonen & Wiesner* 2016), which considers politicisation as a form of acting politically or as an act that ‘turns a matter into a political issue’, which had not previously been considered as such in the context in which it was analysed (*Wiesner, Haapala & Palonen* 2017, 11). In this sense, politicisation is here understood as a novel way of acting politically in an effort to ‘give a new momentum to the existing debate’ (*Palonen* 2022, 88) for the purpose of securing political benefit, although it does not always end up realising in practice.

The reason for choosing to focus on opposition actors is justified by two specific aspects within the particular context of the COVID-19 pandemic. First, national governments generally benefited from a political consensus during the early phases of pandemic management (see Vuorelma & Lehtonen in this special issue). Consequently, these governments had no real reason to engage in politicising activity, in the sense of challenging the existing state of affairs during the pandemic recovery. The opposition, however, had a potentially greater strategic interest for encouraging politicisation, not least because their opportunities to challenge government policies during the pandemic had been often interrupted by emergency measures in many countries. Second, choosing to analyse the government-opposition dynamic in Spain is particularly relevant, since the effectiveness of the country's multi-level political system requires the ability to make political alliances. Spanish democratic politics is famously partisan (Barnes, McDonough & López Pina 1985), and this aspect was further amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic. The ability to make bipartisan compromises and alliances was weakened dramatically, which was seen most clearly in the stalemate relating to the reform of the judicial system, which in turn was a major factor in Spain receiving a weaker score in The Democracy Index 2021 and in the European Commission's growing concern about politicisation during the pandemic.

The analysis focuses on the period that starts with the national government's declaration of a 'state of alarm' (*estado de alarma*) in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 and ends with the completion of Spain's presidency of the Council of the EU, which ran from 1 July to 31 December 2023. The selection of this period is justified by the option it gives for the inclusion of the local, regional, national and European levels in the analysis.

From the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020, the left-wing minority coalition government was faced with the unprecedented task of managing the emergency, which had been recognised by the royal decree declaring a 'state of alarm' (Velasco Caballero 2020). This involved creating a de facto 'single command', which superseded the powers of the autonomous regional governments. Initially, there was widespread acceptance of the state-of-alarm measures across party lines, due primarily to the severity of the situation and the uncertainties relating to the spread of the coronavirus. In its communication about its pandemic management, the Spanish government relied heavily on war-like metaphors (Castillo-Esparcia, Fernández-Souto & Puentes-Rivera 2020, 5). As Timo Pankakoski's article on pandemic metaphors elsewhere in this special issue notes, this was a common approach in many countries and was seen as a way to gain authority and legitimise emergency measures. Over time, however, the regional governments in Spain started to criticise this centralised approach to pandemic management. In particular, there was a growing conviction that the multi-level system had increasingly revealed a 'lack of coordination, both between experts and decision-makers and between different agencies and levels of administration' (Otero-Iglesias, Molina & Martínez 2020, 12). Importantly, these criticisms did not at first follow the traditional left-right division. Regional governments of the same political persuasion as the (left-wing) national government also adopted critical positions, demanding devolution of the relevant competencies (Otero-Iglesias 2020).

The regional governments were finally successful in their demands, and the national government agreed to shift to a more decentralised method for the management of the second wave of infection. From this point onwards, the pandemic was managed

by a ‘minimum’ application of the state-of-alarm provisions, under which all the regional governments were obliged to establish curfews and impose restrictions on meetings, gatherings, and so on. The directives relating to this minimum application followed the advice of medical experts and were sanctioned by the national government. This gave rise to a variety of different approaches among the regional governments. While some adopted more restrictive policies with a focus on the need for security and responsibility (e.g. the Communities of Valencia, the Basque Country and Cantabria), other regional governments not only adopted laxer and more flexible measures but also requested the revocation of the legal framework established by the national government’s state-of-alarm decree (e.g. the Communities of Madrid and Castile and Leon). In particular, the president of the Community of Madrid, Isabel Díaz Ayuso (PP), emphasised the need to give back ‘freedom’ to citizens and to eliminate all ‘abusive’ restrictions.

This article has the following structure: in the next section, I will elaborate on the different meanings of politicisation and outline the research approach applied in this article for focusing on political activity; a brief summary of previous political crises in Spain and the multi-level political system will then be given as background for the analysis of pandemic politics; in the subsequent section, an analysis of the opposition’s criticism of the COVID-19 pandemic measures will be presented, divided into smaller sections that consider the four identified dimensions of politicisation, each illustrating the politicising strategies involved; in the penultimate section, the results of this analysis are discussed and the possible re-conceptualisation of the relevant politicising strategies is considered. The paper concludes with reflections on these findings and their potential contribution to conceptualising politicisation in further research on pandemic recovery and democratic politics.

THE MEANINGS OF ‘POLITICISATION’ AND THE POLITICAL ACTIVITY APPROACH

‘Politicisation’ as a term has become increasingly (over)used, not only in scholarly debates but also in policymaking and the media. For example, EU policies are described as being at ‘risk of politicisation’, caused by national political conflicts (Angelucci et al. 2024). Politicisation was also considered as an explicit ‘threat’ to science during the COVID-19 pandemic (Druckmann 2022). In many cases, politicisation is talked about as a negative phenomenon without any clear evaluative criteria. However, if we wish to make sense of the politics behind the phenomenon, it is important to interpret politicisation in context (Oleart & Haapala 2022, 5). In this article, politicisation is approached as a form of political activity, an aspect of politics, driving and constituting it in a manner that requires interpretation before its analysis (Wiesner, Haapala & Palonen 2017, 10).

In the recent past, EU studies literature has been dominated by research on politicisation. Various controversies relating to the EU, not least a series of political crises and an assumed ‘democratic deficit’, have prompted numerous scholarly analyses of the seeming increase in politicisation, including the polarisation and salience of contentious politics on the theme of European integration (e.g. De Wilde, Leupold & Schmidtke 2018; De Wilde & Zürn 2012; Hooghe & Marks 2009; Hutter, Grande & Kriesi 2016). In this sense, EU politicisation has been studied as a purely analytical concept that ‘reveals’ the phenomenon when observed empirically. In

recent scholarship, however, the commonly assumed divide between Eurosceptics and pro-Europeans has been challenged as being conceptually too narrow to explain the various forms of politicisation that have been identified (see esp. [Kauppi, Palonen & Wiesner 2016](#)). By paying special attention to the concept, political theorists have re-interpreted politicisation in various contexts to show the concept's variety (e.g. [Haapala & Oleart 2022](#); [Wiesner 2021](#)). The 'political activity' approach takes into consideration the actors and their context(s), as well as broadens the scope beyond the EU to include other contexts.

This article will defend the contention that politicisation is a dimension of political activity that requires contextualisation before it can be analysed (see [Wiesner, Haapala & Palonen 2017](#)). In cases where politicisation is explicitly expressed, it is easier to identify the associated speech acts (see [Palonen 2019](#)). Broadly speaking, however, the phenomenon is a form of political activity that must be first identified as politicisation in a context where there are opportunities for political actors to challenge the status quo and use it strategically for their own political purposes ([Wiesner, Haapala & Palonen 2017, 11](#)). Consequently, it is assumed here that politicisation can take place whenever the political conditions provide opportunities for novel ways of acting politically. After identifying this politicisation, the analysis focuses on how the political actor(s) articulate politicising strategies in a manner that seeks to bring them advantage.

I intend to approach politicisation in the Spanish case from the perspective of political activity within the context of recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. This approach can potentially open up new avenues of scholarly investigation relating not only to the politicisation of pandemic recovery contexts in a comparative sense, but also to the role of politicisation in wider democratic politics. The political activity research approach highlights the fact that there is no ready-made analytical apparatus for revealing the various political actors and their controversies as politicisation. Mainstream analytical tools like the 'polarisation' and 'salience' of controversies surrounding the EU do not always apply. Instead, the key feature of such controversies is the political struggle over meanings and the contested interpretation of definitions ([Wiesner, Haapala & Palonen 2017](#)). As an aspect of political activity, politicisation can in general be identified as attempts to re-conceptualise the status quo, which can have both negative and/or positive implications, depending on the interpretation ([Oleart & Haapala 2022, 5](#)). [Palonen \(2019, 250\)](#) has noted that while politicisation is commonly interpreted by scholars as a form of 'disorder' when it comes to political affairs, it can just as easily be understood in terms of speech acts generating new political activity. For example, something that was not previously considered a matter of political contestation may be used to create that effect, but it can then also be further interpreted as an innovative way of doing politics.

To interpret politicisation as speech acts that may generate new contestations, the political activity research approach aims to identify political strategies used in a specific context. This involves considering the various political actors and the debates in which they take part, assuming that their speech acts contribute to the ongoing controversies under examination. In this article, the analysis of political strategies aims to illustrate how the opposition criticised the Spanish government's pandemic management for their own political benefit.

PREVIOUS POLITICAL CRISES AND THE MULTI-LEVEL POLITY IN SPAIN

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Before the analysis in section ‘A Political Activity Analysis of Opposition Strategies as Politicisation’, I will here briefly summarise the previous political crises and the multi-level political system in Spain, which will serve as relevant background information for the analysis. The pandemic recovery or reconstruction period for the foundation of the ‘new normal’ turned into yet another political crisis, whilst at the same time incorporating elements from previous ones (Plaza-Colodro & Miranda Olivares 2022) that had been brought about by the Eurozone’s austerity measures and the Catalan independence referendum, both of which had transformative effects on the party system (Orriols & Cordero 2016). In addition, the nature of the multi-level polity must also be considered in the analysis. Although the extraordinarily serious health care crisis caused by the spread of the coronavirus was accompanied by an economic downturn, the main challenge relating to the COVID-19 pandemic in Spain was the issue of collaboration between the different levels of government (Navarro & Velasco 2022, 192).

The Spanish polity has a regionalised and decentralised structure. Under the terms of the 1978 Constitution, modern democracy in Spain was formulated within the framework of a State of the Autonomies (*Estado de las Autonomías*). In other words, the Spanish state consists of a unity of regions or Autonomous Communities (ACs). Notwithstanding a number of reforms in recent decades, the ACs remain constitutionally ambiguous entities, primarily because of the need to satisfy both regional and nationwide political parties (Aja 2014, Chapter 1). At the same time, they have assumed more responsibilities and wider competencies than ever before (Colino 2020). The ACs now manage approximately one-third of public spending in Spain, and they do so in the most visible spending areas for their constituents, such as health care and education (Herrero-Alcalde & Tránchez-Martín 2015, 3). Consequently, it can be said that the ACs are the main managers of the welfare state in Spain.

Over the years, the power relationship between the ACs and the national government has been gradually determined by two fundamental arbitrators in the process of the construction and development of the State of the Autonomies. The first arbitrator is the Constitutional Court, which is charged with the settlement of the vast number of jurisdictional conflicts relating to the distribution of policy competencies (Aja 2014; Aja & Colino 2014). The second arbitratory element is formed by the concession of regional policy competencies made by the nationwide parties in exchange for parliamentary support in the national parliament (*Cortes Generales*), which is based on an asymmetrical bicameralism composed of a lower chamber called the Congress of Deputies (*Congreso de los Diputados*) and an upper chamber called the Senate (*Senado*). At the same time, it should also be noted that the Spanish model of co-government is primarily based (although with some exceptions) on the central government–regional government relationship and does not encourage inter-regional collaboration (Mathieu 2008). Even though the Congress of Deputies is not formally an assembly of territorial representation (a function typically assigned to upper chambers), it has functioned as such for certain (although not all) regions with their own cultural and political singularities. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, this trend has been further amplified in Spanish multi-level politics.

The financial crisis in 2011 transformed the traditional Spanish party-political landscape. As Borriello (2017) has illustrated, the Eurozone's austerity measures adopted in Italy and Spain were accompanied by the failure of mainstream parties to communicate their political nature, which deeply affected the legitimacy of these parties in the eyes of the electorate. In 2010, the government led by the Spanish Socialist Workers Party (*Partido Socialista Obrero Español* or PSOE) introduced a series of austerity measures, including drastic wage and welfare cuts, to meet the demands of the markets and the EU. These austerity measures resulted in new rifts inside the traditional left- and right-wing parties, resulting in the fragmentation of the bipartisan system, which usually saw the PSOE vying for power with the People's Party (*Partido Popular* or PP). The subsequent multi-party system introduced new regional parties to the political mix. Originating from social movements opposed to austerity measures, these movements later transformed into nationwide political parties, such as the far-left Podemos (an anti-austerity party) and the centre-right Ciudadanos (a liberal party promoting territorial centralisation). The rise of the far right in Spain, especially the Vox party, has its roots in Catalan separatism and is also a response to the anti-austerity Podemos party. The presence of both Vox and Podemos in national and regional parliaments is now firmly established, and they had candidates at the general election and the European elections in 2019. In recent years, Podemos has been a supporting party in the national minority governments of the PSOE. The post-pandemic saw the decline of the liberal Ciudadanos party and the rise of the influence of Vox with the PP.

In the first decade of the 21st century, a process of ambitious devolutionary reforms was initiated, especially in Catalonia and the Basque Country. The reaction of the Constitutional Court to the reform of the Statute of Autonomy for Catalonia in 2011 marked a turning point in the roadmap of the Catalan independentist parties towards a pro-independence stance. During the pandemic, however, Catalan separatism became less prominent in national political debates (with the exception of the proposed amnesty law in recent coalition government negotiations), and in the most recent regional elections in May 2024, the independentists lost the majority in the Catalan parliament. Yet notwithstanding their separatist aspirations, it is interesting to note that the Catalan pro-independence parties also played a supporting role in the formation of the PSOE-led coalition governments at the national level from 2018 to 2023.

All the factors presented above have remained active and are therefore relevant to the following analysis of the politicisation of the pandemic recovery in Spain. These factors have often taken new shapes and forms, but without conforming to the typical Eurosceptic versus pro-European divide. The general consensus in Spain about the EU can be explained by the symbolic value of Europe as an idea, a value that dates back to the country's transition to democracy. Europe became a symbol for modern democracy in the post-Franco era, but its subsequent decontestation has left the issue of further European integration without public debate and intellectual content (López Gómez 2014, 89). Even the Catalan separatists, who were the cause of a major political crisis in the country in 2017 and reappeared more recently on the political agenda as a result of the proposed amnesty law, are also pro-European. Consequently, the pandemic crisis in Spain followed the traditional logic: the EU was not to blame. The Spanish case therefore confirms the general pro-European outlook of the pandemic recovery, as identified by Vogt and Värttö in their comparative analysis elsewhere in this special issue.

A POLITICAL ACTIVITY ANALYSIS OF OPPOSITION STRATEGIES AS POLITICISATION

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As in many democratic countries, initially in Spain, there was also a broad political consensus about the pandemic management necessary to control the spread of the coronavirus. However, after the first wave of the pandemic had passed, criticism by regional governments systematically increased, and the right-wing opposition in the national parliament gradually withdrew their support for the government's national pandemic management measures. As a result, unity over pandemic policy was replaced by various forms of political contestation. In the analysis below, these contestations are examined from the perspective of politicisation as political activity, with a special focus on how the right-wing opposition challenged the status quo of the government's political agenda.

The analysis aims at answering the question: Has Spain's pandemic recovery become politicised and, if so, in what way did this politicisation occur and to what extent have politicising strategies been used? Politicisation as a form of political activity requires interpretation in a specific context (Wiesner, Haapala & Palonen 2017). I will therefore begin the analysis by looking at the pandemic management context in Spain and showing how it provided opportunities for politicisation, following which I shall illustrate the different dimensions of politicisation within the opposition's strategies that were activated.

THE OPPOSITION STRATEGIES IN CONTEXT

On 14 March 2020, the national government's management of the pandemic began with the setting up of the so-called 'single command' embracing all the regions of Spain, following the declaration of a 'state of alarm', based on the provisions for a state of health emergency as foreseen in the Constitution. Addressing the Congress of Deputies on 18 March, Prime Minister Sánchez explained the government's commitment to science-based decision-making and democratic procedures (Sánchez 2020), corresponding to the classical-modernist model of policy performance, as discussed in the article by Vuorelma and Lehtonen elsewhere in this special issue. The aim of the government was therefore to legitimise the emergency measures by appealing to the principles and values of liberal democratic government.

The single command was based on Royal Decree no. 463/2020. However, this decree contained a number of interpretative ambiguities. In contrast to the management strategies adopted by other European countries with similar territorial structures, such as Italy or Germany (see, e.g. Casula & Pazos-Vidal 2021), the Spanish government took over the single command of the country's entire territory and imposed strict pandemic measures, including restrictions on the free movement of citizens to avoid community transmission of the coronavirus. This radical approach was due in part to a lack of precedents for managing epidemics on such a grand scale, which meant that the government was forced to adopt innovative measures, which included the declaration of a state of alarm (Velasco Caballero 2020). It was not long before the legality of the state-of-alarm decree was questioned, based on interpretations that saw the lockdown measures as violating the fundamental rights of citizens, which is not permitted by Spanish law, even in the event of a state of alarm. Opposing views, including the Spanish Ombudsman (*Defensor del pueblo*), claimed that these rights were merely being limited, not violated (Cebada Romero & Dominguez Redondo 2021). The single command was also politically controversial,

because it centralised the response to the pandemic and therefore directly affected the powers of the regional governments. This gave rise to visible conflicts in the media between different regional governments and also between some of the autonomous regions and the national government. This contextual novelty gave opportunities for politicisation, which, as will be shown below, were soon exploited by the opposition.

Another contextual aspect of Spain's management of the pandemic that provided opportunities for politicisation was the fact that the minority coalition government of Pedro Sánchez (PSOE) had only recently taken office on 13 January 2020. The country had not been governed by a coalition government in the previous 80 years, and its formation had been preceded by a political deadlock lasting 9 months, following two inconclusive general elections in 2019. The government only won its inaugural vote in the Congress of Deputies by the narrowest of margins, with 167 votes for and 165 votes against, so that its democratic legitimacy was susceptible to criticism from the start. This left-wing minority government, led by the centre-left PSOE, relied on support from the far-left Podemos party and the regional centre-left pro-independence Catalan Republican Party (ERC) (Gehrke 2020).

Further opportunities for political conflicts during the pandemic arose from the holding of regional elections in many of the ACs. Some of these elections were expected; others were not. The previously planned Catalan regional elections were held in February 2021, just a few weeks after the outbreak of the third wave of infection. After years of bitter confrontation between the region and the central government in Madrid, the elections nevertheless resulted in an outcome that was favourable to post-pandemic recovery cooperation between the AC and the national government (Auciello Estévez & Jovell Codina 2021). In the AC of Murcia, however, an unexpected vote of no confidence was motioned on 10 March 2021, by the PSOE and Ciudadanos, leading to the overthrow of the right-wing government led by the PP.

Finally, these various controversies led to the leadership of the pandemic recovery being challenged in national political debates by Isabel Díaz Ayuso (PP), the (regional) president of the Autonomous Community of Madrid. Initially, the nationwide right-wing opposition led by the PP had relatively little chance of making their mark on the pandemic measures initiated at the national level. Consequently, the opposition had more to gain from potential politicisation than the left-wing government. Hence the critical strategy adopted by President Ayuso. In this respect, it is particularly noteworthy that in 2021, she was the politician with the second most minutes of appearance on national television news (after the prime minister), ahead of the national leader of her own party at the time, Pablo Casado (GECA 2021).

DIMENSION 1: THE APPEAL TO THE CONSTITUTIONAL COURT

In the Spanish Congress of Deputies, the opposition was led by the centre-right PP. However, it was only the far-right Vox party from the opposition that filed an appeal to the Spanish Constitutional Court to challenge the legal basis for the national government's pandemic management. This parliamentary group, which had more than 50 deputies, asked the Court to rule on the constitutionality of the national government's declaration of a state of alarm and its subsequent prolongations, as well as the validity of the lockdown measures that had been taken.

As explained in section ‘Previous Political Crises and the Multi-Level Polity in Spain’, the Constitutional Court is regarded as an important arbitrator of multi-level politics in Spain. It is consulted to interpret the Constitution and to determine the competences of the regional *vis-à-vis* the national levels of government in matters relating to policy issues. The Vox appeal can be interpreted as a politicising strategy, because it challenged the status quo of the role of the Constitutional Court in Spanish democratic politics. The real aim of the appeal was not to obtain a verdict on the constitutionality of the legislative competences involved, but to provide justification for the party’s antagonistic rhetoric against what it claimed were ‘authoritarian’ measures and to discredit the national government’s authority as unlawful. In short, it was an effort to change the government-opposition dynamic in a way that would give the right-wing opposition legal authority to contest the pandemic measures.

On 14 July 2021, the Constitutional Court ruled that the national government’s declaration of a state of alarm in March 2020 was indeed unconstitutional. In contrast with the declaration of a state of exception (*estado de excepción*), the national government has exclusive competence to declare a state of alarm by royal decree and to maintain it for up to 15 days. But if the government wishes to extend the state of alarm beyond the initial 15-day period, it needs authorisation from the Congress of Deputies. In other words, the national government must inform the Congress of Deputies of the measures it wishes to adopt and, if the executive wants to extend the alarm period beyond 2 weeks, it must have the support of a parliamentary majority. The Congress of Deputies extended the state of alarm fortnightly on six occasions between 14 March and 21 June 2020. However, the minority government had failed to choose the correct legal mechanism to render the measures constitutionally legal.

In short, Vox successfully used a legitimate arbitration tool recognised by the Spanish political system – an appeal to the Constitutional Court – to obtain a verdict that supported its critique of the left-wing national government’s lockdown measures, implemented through the declaration of a state of alarm. In terms of a politicising strategy, the verdict justified the Vox claim that the state of alarm was unconstitutional, which opened up new possibilities for further contestations.

DIMENSION 2: AN UNEXPECTED GOVERNMENT- OPPOSITION ALLIANCE

In the AC of Murcia, a vote of no confidence in the regional government was motioned on 10 March 2021. This was the result of a sudden and unexpected alliance between the centre-right Ciudadanos party and the centre-left PSOE party for the purpose of overthrowing the right-wing administration led by the PP. The motion involved accusations of corruption and the abuse of power in relation to the region’s pandemic measures, but it was also an expression of the deep political distrust that existed in Murcia (Mármol 2021). The vote of no confidence was instigated by the Ciudadanos party, which was the PP’s partner in the Murcian right-wing government. The vote was successful, and the government subsequently fell. Afterwards, however, the Ciudadanos party suffered heavy losses in the subsequent local and regional elections.

The actions of the Ciudadanos party in Murcia can be interpreted in terms of a challenge to the status quo, since it decided to align itself with the PSOE in opposition to the government of which it had initially been a part. In other words, a centre-

right party (Ciudadanos) challenged the governmental agenda of another centre-right party (PP) and joined forces with the regional opposition led by the PSOE, which was also the leading party in the national government. By supporting the vote of no confidence with Ciudadanos, the PSOE gained a new and important political alliance at the regional level. However, this politicising strategy cost the Ciudadanos party dearly at the subsequent election, and they sustained heavy losses. It is partly explained by the verdict of the Constitutional Court that came afterwards, declaring the national government's measure unconstitutional. But the immediate repercussions in other regions also affected the future of the party at the national level. As in Murcia, Ciudadanos were also partners in coalition governments with the PP in the ACs of Castile and Leon, Andalusia and Madrid.

In particular, this situation had important implications in the AC of Madrid. The AC's president, Isabel Díaz Ayuso (PP), decided to dissolve the regional parliament and call a snap election in May 2021. This came as a reaction to the possibility of a vote of no confidence initiated by the co-governing Ciudadanos party, following that party's initial success in Murcia. Some opposition parties in the AC tried to avoid the snap election through filibustering tactics, but the Supreme Court of Madrid eventually ruled that the election could proceed (Romero Caro 2021).

During the first wave of the pandemic, the Mayor of Madrid, José Luis Martínez Almeida (PP), employed the rhetoric of responsibility, presenting himself as someone who was willing to support the national government's measures and would therefore collaborate with the local left-wing opposition in the capital. The popularity generated by this attitude was possibly the main reason that led to his appointment as the spokesperson for the People's Party apparatus, which illustrates that his discourse was more in line with that of his party's executive at that time.

Just a year later, this had all changed. In April to May 2021, the electoral campaign of President Ayuso in Madrid started a new phase of political contestation. It was characterised by extremely antagonistic language towards the national government. She used insulting phrases such as 'socialist authoritarianism' to describe the government's pandemic management. Initially, President Ayuso's base of support was to be found among the more affluent citizens of Madrid. Towards the end of the first period of the state of alarm, demonstrations in favour of its termination took place in the city's wealthier neighbourhoods. The demands of these spontaneous demonstrations were not articulated in any organised way, nor was it possible to identify a concrete list of demands. The AC president was one of the only politicians to openly support such demonstrations, claiming that the national government wanted to instil fear amongst the population. Before initiating the snap election in April 2021, she demanded that she be 'left to her own devices' to govern freely. At the heart of this approach was a contrast between authoritarianism and democracy, which had been previously used by the far-right Vox party, but not as effectively.

DIMENSION 3: POLITICAL LEADERSHIP: AUTHORITARIANISM VERSUS FREEDOM

After the vote of no confidence initiated by the Ciudadanos and PSOE parties, the PP-led regional government in Murcia fell. This sparked off the snap election in Madrid, which saw its incumbent regional president, Isabel Díaz Ayuso (PP), challenge the

political leadership of the PSOE-led national government. Referring to the Ciudadanos alliance with the PSOE in Murcia, President Ayuso saw this as being symptomatic of the rise of ‘socialism’ in Spain. This, she claimed, would have several ‘unacceptable’ consequences, such as tax raises, indoctrination in schools, the closures of bars and restaurants, and coercion in the way people should think and live. She blamed the Sánchez coalition government for ‘damaging’ Spain and said she could not ‘allow Madrid to lose its freedom’ (Díaz Ayuso 2021). Noticeably, she did not explicitly demand the devolution of competencies, as many other regional presidents had done in their criticism of the central government’s measures (cf. Otero-Iglesias 2020). Instead, her strategy was to challenge the national government’s political leadership, relying heavily on the ‘authoritarianism vs. freedom’ dichotomy.

Denouncing the ‘authoritarianism’ of the national government had been already used as a tactic in the rhetoric of the far-right Vox party. Vox claimed that the ‘socialist-communist’ government was hiding the true number of deaths and withholding scientific information with regard to vaccines. The far-right party leaders in the regions all shared this narrative of a ‘totalitarian plan’ hatched by a ‘socialist-communist’ cabal, using this extremist claim to tar all left-wing governments – both national and regional – with the same brush. However, it should be noted that at this point, Vox did not have a role in any of the regional governments.

During the pandemic, President Ayuso also regularly criticised the assessments made by Fernando Simón, the director of the Centre for the Coordination of Health Alerts and Emergencies, who was responsible for the national government’s Ministry of Health. In this way, she accused the national government of lying about the data relating to the epidemiological state of the AC of Madrid, and she even went so far as to appeal to the courts about the decisions taken by the national government and the Interterritorial Health Council.

In May 2021, the PP won a landslide victory in the AC of Madrid, following which it formed an alliance with the Vox party to govern in the region. Although Vox initially supported the government’s declaration of a state of alarm in March 2020, it was the first party to break the parliamentary consensus in the Congress of Deputies with the appeal to the Constitutional Court. The fact that the party did not have any governmental responsibilities, either at the regional or national level, undoubtedly played a major role in this decision.

President Ayuso’s campaign in the regional election for Madrid changed the entire dynamic of the right-wing opposition’s politics, not just in the AC but nationally as well. Her use of the Vox party’s belligerent rhetoric against the PSOE-led government can be interpreted as a politicising strategy. It was a novel way of using far-right rhetoric in regional politics to challenge the political leadership of the national government. She framed the discussion as a confrontation between the unified and authoritarian model of the national government and an alternative freedom model, as epitomised by her own regional government. Despite being the president of the AC of Madrid, she did not confine her rhetoric to the region or to the regional parliament alone. Throughout the election campaign, she repeated that the situation in Madrid reflected the situation in Spain as a whole and that the rest of the country should therefore follow Madrid’s lead in defending liberty and confronting the government’s ‘authoritarian’ measures.

DIMENSION 4: THE APPEAL TO EU INSTITUTIONS

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*Redescriptions: Political
Thought, Conceptual
History and Feminist
Theory*
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The leading party of the national government, the PSOE, experienced significant losses in the regional and local elections held in late May 2023. In a surprise move, Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez announced a snap general election on 23 July. Previously, this general election had been planned for December 2023 to coincide with the end of the Spanish presidency of the Council of the EU. Sánchez's decision was discussed by European leaders at their summit in Moldova, which took place immediately after the election announcement. The German Chancellor Olaf Scholz of the Social Democratic Party publicly declared his wish for the re-election of Sánchez, while the Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, representing the far-right Brothers of Italy party, expressed her support for Vox (Cué 2023).

The decision to hold the election in July instead of December was unexpected, but within the limits of governmental discretion. In the election, the PSOE was successful in securing votes from its core electorate, especially women and young people, who saw the PP-Vox alliance at the regional level as a threat to progressive post-pandemic policies at the national level (Hernández-Morales 2023). The national opposition party, the PP, now led by Alberto Núñez Feijóo, narrowly won a majority of the votes, but was not able to form a coalition government.

On 16 November 2023, the national parliament confirmed the inauguration of a new left-wing minority coalition led by Sánchez. After the election, the PSOE had been able to form a workable minority in the Congress of Deputies by negotiating a pact with the centre-right Catalan separatist party, Junts. This pact included the granting of amnesty for the Junts' separatist leaders. Several demonstrations against the proposed amnesty ensued, instigated by the right-wing opposition. In central Madrid, a march by 170,000 anti-amnesty protestors was heard to shout: 'Let Europe know!' (Ramos & Barragán 2023). One of the invited speakers at this event was a Portuguese MEP, Paulo Rangel, who declared to the crowd:

The European Parliament will support Spain's citizens in the streets. [...] We are not going to accept – because we do not accept it in Poland, Hungary and Romania – that there should be an amnesty law, which has only been agreed to buy votes in Parliament. This is a line that cannot be crossed. The amnesty law is not a problem in Spain; it is a problem for Europe. (ABC 2023; translation from Spanish to English by TH)

By explicitly framing the draft law as a European issue and claiming that political bargaining with separatists was undemocratic, Rangel portrayed the amnesty as a violation of the rule of law, comparable with the situation in other EU member states.

On 22 November 2023, the plenary session of the European Parliament (EP) debated a motion on the possible 'threat to rule of law as a consequence of the governmental agreement in Spain', proposed by the EP's largest political group, the European People's Party (EPP). In his opening address, the German Chairman of the EPP, Manfred Weber, justified taking up the Spanish issue by claiming that it was 'not a party political' question but a matter affecting the rule of law throughout Europe. The EPP called for the European Commission to assess the 'risks' of the amnesty pact between the PSOE and Junts as a way to form a new coalition in Spain. In his reply, the European Commissioner for Justice, Didier Reynders, told the plenary that he had received several letters and appeals from the public, as well as from Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), to investigate the provisions of the draft law, in order to

see if it adhered to ‘the fundamental values of the European Union’, especially with regard to ‘the rule of law and the separation of powers, as well as with the relevant provisions of EU criminal law, including those on terrorism, corruption and the protection of the financial interests of the Union’. Reynders said that the Commission would indeed review the proposed law and analyse it ‘carefully, independently and objectively’ to see that it complied ‘with EU law, including the fundamental values enshrined in the Treaty’ ([European Parliament 2023](#)).

In summary, the PP had reached out for support from its European political family, the EPP, who took the matter to the EP as a question of the rule of law. Despite the claim by Weber that this was not a party-political issue, it would clearly benefit the PP’s interests at the national level if the European Commission imposed financial sanctions on Spain for not complying with the rule of law. This would potentially affect the use of the European pandemic recovery funds, increasing voter dissatisfaction with the PSOE-led government.

This appeal to EU institutions can be interpreted as a politicising strategy, because it involves a novel interpretation of the EU’s possible role in Spanish domestic politics. Until relatively recently, it was considered unlikely that Europarties would intervene and express explicit support for domestic issues in the Member States (cf. [Kelemen 2017, 231](#)). However, with the European Rule of Law Mechanism, created in 2020 to deter countries such as Poland and Hungary from ‘breaches of the rule of law’ ([Nguyen 2020, 3](#)), it became clear that domestic political issues like the amnesty pact could find their way to the EU level. This was hardly the kind of ‘politicisation’ that the European Commission had forecasted for Spain in its *Rule of Law Report 2021*, which was more likely influenced by the deepening of partisan politics in combination with increased polarisation due to the authoritarianism vs. freedom discourse.

POLITICISATION AS RE-CONCEPTUALISATION IN THE PANDEMIC RECOVERY CONTEXT?

In the previous section, politicisation was analysed as an act inspired by the circumstances of a specific situation with the aim of trying to benefit from it politically. The starting point of the analysis was the assumption that politicisation can be identified in acts that aim at challenging the status quo by introducing a novel way of acting politically in the given situation. As ‘politics’ is here understood as linguistic activity and ‘politicisation’ as a form of political activity, these novelties can in turn be understood as re-conceptualisations of ideas and concepts that have been previously used. For this reason, it is also relevant to discuss if any of the four dimensions of politicisation presented above show any re-conceptualisations within the pandemic context.

The first politicisation dimension was the appeal to the Constitutional Court. The novelty in this case was the use of democratic means by the far-right Vox party to contest the constitutionality of the government’s pandemic management, with the aim of receiving legal support from the Court for its own claims that the government’s plan was ‘totalitarian’. In the Congress of Deputies, Prime Minister Sánchez explicitly justified the emergency measures the government had taken as being based on the principles and values of liberal democracy. The Vox’s politicising strategy succeeded in re-conceptualising the state of alarm as ‘authoritarian’, made possible by the support of the Court’s final verdict.

The second dimension of politicisation occurred when the co-governing Ciudadanos party created an unexpected alliance with the main opposition party, the PSOE, in the AC of Murcia. This led to the overthrow of the PP-led government following a successful vote of no confidence vote in the regional parliament. The novelty in this case was Ciudadanos' changing of roles from a regional government party to an opposition party. The justification for this action was the claimed corruption and inner dysfunctionalities of the government. In this way, the party's politicising strategy challenged the status quo of the existing government-opposition dynamic. It re-conceptualised the role of the opposition to that of a whistleblower rather than an overseer of government policies.

The circumstances of this second dimension had an impact on the regional politics in the AC of Madrid, where the Ciudadanos party also co-governed with the PP. The regional president, Isabel Díaz Ayuso, decided to call a snap election in Madrid and began her verbal attacks against the PSOE-led national government. This was the third dimension of politicisation, during which the Madrid president framed the actions of the Spanish government in terms of 'socialist authoritarianism', while depicting her regional government in Madrid as a defender of 'freedom'. The novelty here was that a regional president from a mainstream party challenged Prime Minister Sánchez's political leadership as being unfit for a liberal democracy by using a discourse adopted from the far-right Vox party. The re-conceptualisation in this case related to the nature of Spain's multi-level politics. This normally relies on political compromises and alliances between regional and national parties, but the approach now adopted by President Ayuso was far more adversarial, with important national implications. With the help of a joint narrative directed against the national government, PP and Vox co-governments at local and regional levels – something that had previously been unimaginable – became a reality after the elections in May 2023.

The fourth dimension of politicisation was the appeal to EU institutions. This politicising strategy involved a novel interpretation of the role of the EU and its possibility to intervene in Spanish domestic politics. The strategy shifted the negotiations to form a new Spanish coalition government to the European level, focusing on the question of amnesty for Catalan separatists in exchange for political support. The 'democracy vs. authoritarianism' dichotomy that had previously been used in domestic conflicts was here re-conceptualised as corresponding to 'Europe's other democratic deficit' (Kelemen 2017). By describing the Spanish government as a violator of the principles of democracy and the rule of law, the PP made Spain's domestic politics a subject for EU concern and transformed the role of the EU institutions into that of a referee, rather than being just one level of the multi-level polity.

CONCLUSION

Against the background of The Democracy Index 2021, which downgraded Spain to the level of a 'flawed democracy' and the European Commission's post-pandemic prediction of potential 'politicisation' as a result of the inability of the country's political parties to agree bipartisan judicial reform, the research question that I set out to investigate in this article was: Has Spain's pandemic recovery become politicised and, if so, in what way did this politicisation occur, and to what extent have politicising strategies been used?

Four dimensions of politicisation were identified, although this study does not claim to be exhaustive. In this particular instance, politicisation of the Spanish pandemic recovery was explored with reference to political moves within the government-opposition divide over a roughly 4-year period, limiting the focus to opposition strategies until the end of the Spanish presidency of the Council of the EU. However, the study also offers conceptual tools for further comparative research during the recovery period. In the future, it would also be relevant to turn the focus on the potential politicising strategies adopted by national governments, with the aim of identifying the occasions when it became useful for them to politicise in the post-pandemic context. Moreover, the study can be useful for rhetorical analysis of the politicising strategies involved as a means of achieving a deeper understanding of how these strategies were employed in political contestations.

As shown in section ‘Politicisation as Re-Conceptualisation in the Pandemic Recovery Context?’, politicisation often involves re-conceptualisations that can have impactful new meanings and practices for liberal democracies. This underlines my contention that it is also important and relevant to consider politicisation more broadly within the context of democratic politics. The dimensions of politicisation identified in the analysis showed that the use of politicising strategies could potentially further amplify the phenomenon, giving further opportunities to create situations in which actors can invent and use new politicising strategies. For example, the far-right Vox party used democratic political means, in the shape of an appeal to the Constitutional Court, to advance its own anti-democratic rhetoric against the national government. After the Court’s verdict declared the unconstitutionality of the Spanish government’s emergency measures, this antagonistic narrative was adopted by the PP in the AC of Madrid, who also benefited from its effects at the national and European levels. This demonstrates that politicisation is not necessarily linked to anti-establishment practices, as suggested by the mainstream theories of EU politicisation that focus on Euroscepticism and populism, but can sometimes take the form of chain reactions, providing new meanings for and new interpretations of democratic politics in various contexts.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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