Spanish Media and the EU Referendum: The Assault on an Enlightened Project

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Introduction

Spain is no country for Eurosceptics. The country's accession to the then EC in 1986, eleven years after the final collapse of the Franco regime (1939-1975), was rather experienced as an 'ascension' to a higher historical stage after almost forty years of dictatorial isolationism: an ascension which, as we will see, involved moving beyond an unspeakable, but still haunting irrational past for which Brexit operated as a highly malleable proxy. And the original enthusiasm does not seem to have substantially waned. Despite acknowledgment of the shortcomings of the EU (European Union) – accused in the Spanish press of mismanagement of the migration and economic crises (*El País*, 17 June 2016), of forfeiting its social dimension (*El País*, editorial, 25 June 2016) and of being ossified (de Quirós, *El Mundo*, 19

June), the EU, often conceptualized as the 'Common Home' or 'The common project',
continues to be regarded across the Spanish media and the political spectrum as the best
guardian of representative democracy, as a guarantor of the orderly process of globalization,
of productive economy and of social cohesion (*El País*, 23 June 2016; Piqué, *El Mundo*, 27
June 2016). This redemptive view of Europe is not shared by all – some dissenting voices,
particularly on the Left, have protested against the neoliberal austerity measures implemented
to solve the economic crisis and against the political dynamics of the institution, but rarely
against the Union itself.

Together with this perception of the EU, Spain's close links with, and its exposure and
vulnerability to the vicissitudes of, the British economy constituted a major influencing (and
worrying) issue in the media handling of the campaign and its final result: in fact, the Spanish
Stock Exchange (Ibex-35) suffered the worst fall of all European markets (12.5%) after the
referendum result was announced. However, one of the most salient factors in understanding
the Spanish media coverage is domestic: after six months of inconclusive party negotiations
following the December 2015 elections, the Spanish electorate was called to choose a new
government on 26 June 2016.

Unsurprisingly, the EU referendum featured highly in the Spanish campaign, not only
because of its potential impact on Spain and the whole of Europe, but also in relation to the
broader discussion of the appropriateness of referendums and 'going to the people' as
political instruments in modern representative democracies. The debate must also be
considered in the context of the demands for a referendum on independence by the ruling
nationalist coalition in the Catalan Parliament – demands which are supported by almost 75%
of Catalans (Moldes, *Ara*, 30 March 2017) but were ruled unconstitutional and opposed by

the Central Government in Madrid and by most of the Spain-wide parties. Another key feature of the electoral campaign was the growing ascendancy of the newly-formed left-wing multi-party coalition Podemos, the only major Span-wide political grouping to support an independence referendum in Catalonia and regarded by many as anti-establishment and 'populist' – another concept which, as will be seen in this chapter, became pivotal in the political and media interpretation of the EU referendum.

This chapter investigates the coverage of the referendum in the op-ed columns and news reports in four dailies: two Madrid-based, *El País* and *El Mundo,* and two based in Barcelona, *La Vanguardia* and *Ara*. The time frame covers the period 15 June to 3 July 2016. The analysis considered all pieces dealing with the EU referendum, a total of 166 in *La Vanguardia*, 94 in *Ara*, 174 in *El País* and 187 in *El Mundo*.

The project started with a quantitative analysis, which as Van Dijk suggests (1988: 169) must be the first methodological step in studies with extensive corpora. Special attention was paid to metaphors which, as Wilson (1990) and Charteris-Black and Musolff (2003) point out, can facilitate the comprehension of complex issues, but also contain a strong ideological component. Mio (1997) and Musolff (2004, 2006) have studied metaphorical language in political discourse; and authors such as Cammaerts (2012), Castelló and Capdevilla (2015) and León-Solís (2011, 2013) have carried out insightful studies of the use of metaphor in media and political reporting. The categorization of repeated elements allowed us to identify the most salient themes which, in turn, shaped a series of discourses which on occasions overlapped but very often clashed – depending on the editorial stance of the dailies.

The EU and Spain's (returning) hour of darkness

The Spanish Madrid-based media agreed on the high stakes set in play in Britain and Europe by the referendum which, unsurprisingly, was often conceptualized as a 'crucial vote' (Sahuquillo, *El País*, 22 June) and a 'turning point' in a moment of 'existential crisis' for the European Union (*El País*, 25 June; De Quirós, *El Mundo*, 19 June). In the days leading up to the vote the possibility of a Leave campaign victory was presented as a threat (Fresneda, *El Mundo*, 19 March) and its possible effects as a 'convulsion' (*El País*, 20 June). As will become clear in our analysis, this 'convulsion' was not seen simply as a political one: on the contrary, for the Spanish media it had a very clear *philosophical* dimension which endowed it with existential rather than (merely) geopolitical meaning. In Europe's returning hour of darkness, it signalled the catastrophic end of the triumph of Reason over irrationality and even superstition in the form of dread of the Unknown. As a result, a sense of foreboding and doom was disseminated, and an atmosphere of uncertainty and nervousness was created. It would be a 'blow' for the European project, *Ara* predicted (15 June 2016), and it would place the whole of Europe in 'check' (Navarro, *La Vanguardia*, 21 June). The impact could be 'brutal', *El País* warned on the eve of the referendum.

The actual result was accepted by all, but also interpreted in calamitous and ominous terms as a 'disaster' leading Britain and Europe to the edge of a 'dangerous abyss' (*El País*, 24 June); and as a 'tragedy' that had created 'a gaping breach' (Ramos, *La Vanguardia*, 27 June). In accordance with the conceptualization of the EU as a family, Brexit was frequently constructed metaphorically as a 'divorce' (Aranda, *Ara*, 22 June; López, *La Vanguardia*, 28 June); in line with the image of Europe as a 'Common Home', the allegory of a petulant Britain exiting Europe slamming the door was widespread – for instance, in the editorial of

La Vanguardia (25 June) – and graphically represented by the image of 10 Downing Street's closed door occupying *Ara's* front page (25 June).

These catastrophic tones were further maintained through a wealth of metaphors of natural disasters used to conceptualize the result, among others: a 'tsunami' (González and Maqueda, *El País*, 24 June); 'earthquake' (Aranda, *Ara*, 25 June a; Naím, *El País*, 27 June; Ramos, *La Vanguardia*, 27 June); 'gale' (26 June, *El País*); 'wave' (Ahrens, *El País*, 28 June; Aranda, *Ara*, 25 June b).

Europe and her foes

In all four dailies analysed explanations for the momentum and final victory of the Brexit option were offered. For example: Méndez, in *El País*, put it down to the alleged averseness among British people to dual (British-European) identity (17 June); the former Socialist prime minister, Felipe González, blamed the policies of 'austericide' of the EU (Marcos, *El País*, 24 June); whereas others saw the inequalities caused by globalization and the fears it generates as reasons for the pro-Leave momentum (Pérez, *La Vanguardia*, 26 June). In *La Vanguardia* former Swedish Prime Minister Carl Bildt (28 June) castigated British leaders' historically lukewarm support for an integrated Europe and their failure to present the EU in a more positive light; other authors attributed the result to downright Euroscepticism since the Thatcherite years (Masdeu, *Ara*, 26 June), 'fuelled by public schools' (Colomina, *Ara,* 27 June).

One of the salient features of the media coverage was the dissemination of a discourse in which globalized liberal democracy, represented by the EU, was assaulted by and finally left

reeling under the attack of populism. This was in particular a feature of the Catalan press: as stated by the editor of *Ara*, Brexit was the consequence of anti-immigrant populism and the revolt against the elites (Vera, 26 June). In *La Vanguardia*, the result was due to an

'explosive cocktail' formed by populism, immigration and poor economic growth (Ramos, 27 June) and to xenophobic populism (Foix, 29 June).

The Madrid-based press offered a different view: populism was seen as accompanied by nationalism of all types. In fact, more often than not these two political enemies were seen as one entity, forming a Two-Headed Foe which was defined, for instance, by *El País* in these terms: 'populisms, that is, often ultra and xenophobic nationalisms, that have transited from Euroscepticism to Europhobia' (17 June). As will be argued in this chapter, the link between nationalism and populism must be considered in the context of the strength of pro-independence Catalanism and the threat it was perceived to represent to the territorial structure of Spain. Even though Catalan nationalism can not in any way be described as Eurosceptic nor Europhobic, the demands for a Catalan independence referendum (regarded as a weapon of populism in the Madrid-based press, as will be seen) appeared to be enough to establish the connection.

Reality-based rationality versus deceptive emotion

A conspicuous feature of the Madrid-based press (not so prominent in the Catalan dailies) was the interpretation of both camps using binary contrasts. In *El Mundo* and *El País*, the two battling entities, the European Union and Nationalist Populisms (represented in Britain by Brexiters), were assigned contrasting values following a clear binary system, respectively – young versus old; more apathetic versus more committed (*El País*, 24 June); in class terms:

the wealthier, professionals, intellectuals and urbanites versus the unemployed, benefit-dependants and workers who see themselves as the victims of globalization' (Tubella, *El País*, 25 June); and, in geographical terms: dynamic and cosmopolitan London versus the rest of the country; and England and Wales on the one hand, as against Scotland and Northern Ireland on the other (Piqué, *El Mundo* , 27 June).

One noticeable binary contrast in *El Mundo* and *El País* was the dichotomy 'reality-based rationality' versus 'deceptive emotion'. This dual system was in turn grounded on the idea of Europe as 'the most successful common project in the history of Europe' (*El País*, 1 July), which provides a 'framework of progressiveness' (Martínez-Bascuñán, *El País*, 25 June) characterized by its 'open-mindedness and liberating spirit' (Alcover, *El Mundo,* 19 June), and its 'solidarity' (Martínez-Bascuñán, *El País*, 25 June). The ideas of 'framework' and 'project' are essential as they constructed the EU as a solid, forward-looking, long-term endeavour based on the principles of progress, and, very importantly, of reality-based Reason – that is, the driving values of the Enlightenment.

Six days before the Referendum, with opinion polls indicating an increase in the support for the Leave camp, a concerned *El País* put its trust in 'the rationality' of its 'British fellow citizens' (17 June). In contrast, the Leave (nationalist and populist) leaders were portrayed as looking for short-term fixes, playing with people's vulnerabilities generated in moments of crisis (Tortella, *El Mundo,* 25 June; Alcover, *El Mundo* 19 June) and driven by illusion, emotion and mendacity. Nigel Farage, Boris Johnson et al. were portrayed as demagogues with no scruples who employ 'flea-market selling rhetoric' (*El País*, 26 June, editorial) to manipulate people's emotions (Alcover, *El Mundo*, 19 June). Their arguments were

condemned as 'deceptively simple solutions for complex problems' (Tortella, *El Mundo*, 25 June); and, very prominently, as lacking in accuracy and veracity.

Immigration was one the key battlegrounds for the fight over truth in the Madrid press. Thus, the argument for the need for border controls was regarded as an 'alarmist message' (Guimón, 23 June, *El País*) – that is, exaggerated and not evidence-based. Farage's immigration proposals were 'toxic harangues', the Spanish term used to describe their aim being 'soflama', indicating an intention to stir up the audience, to rouse its passions (Sahuquillo, *El País*, 20 June). Raising the accusation to the level of mendacity, Carlin suggested that pro-Brexit politicians 'lied' (*El País*, 25 June) and other *El País* reporters sent around Britain to take the pulse of the voters condemned these 'fabrications' on immigration as 'exaggerated and *unreal* ideas based on the anti-immmigration discourse of Brexit supporters that exploits the *false* argument that immigrants abuse the British benefit system when *in reality* only 7% of them receive any benefit' (Sahuquillo, *El País*, 23 June, our italics).

The other main arena for scrutiny (and attack) of the 'emotional', 'deceptive' and 'simplistic' Brexit rhetoric was the economy which (presumably because of its quantifiable nature) was presented as the rational arena in which to counteract the anti-EU movement (Guimón, 17 June, *El País*) whose arguments were 'of a more visceral nature' (Méndez, *El País*, 17 June). After a long presentation of the possible effects of Brexit, de Quirós wrote in *El Mundo*: 'the rational thing for the United Kingdom is to stay in the Union and it should be expected that British pragmatism will prevail on 23 June' (19 June). On occasions the economic figures and statistics of the Leave camp were presented as a myth and denounced as 'unlawful, unfair and unreasonable' (the Spanish terms used to describe them, 'torticeras', meaning means

'unfair, contrary to the laws or reason'). Most notable among these was the claim that the UK would save £350 million a week by coming out of the Union that would be used to fund the cash-strapped NHS (Sahuquillo, *El País*, 21 June). In contrast to the 'more irrational' 'sentiments of belonging or identity' of the Brexit camp, the Remain movement was constructed as moved by 'tangible' economic arguments (Sahuquillo, *El País*, 23 June).

As opposed to the cosmopolitan, globalized image of the world represented by the EU, the idea of 'national control' was criticised by *El Mundo* and *El País* with one major argument which combined conservatism with nostalgia for a world that is not real any more. In this view, nationalist populisms (left-wing and right-wing) were characterized as movements of 'political melancholy' steeped in conservative 'reactionary' ideology (Martínez-Bascuñan, *El País*, 25 June) whose restricted framework of reference is that of the 'fatherland', with a vision of 'withdrawal' and in order to 'armour plate the country' (Sahuquillo, *El País*, 21 June). The motto 'Let's gain back control' was regarded in *El Mundo* as an 'old slogan' (Fresneda 19 June); but it was also seen as an 'illusion' as much for the impossibility of its realization in a globalized world as for its reference to the past (Naím, *El País*, 27 June). In line with this, the Leave camp was seen to be fed by the 'nostalgia of the elderly' (Gil, *El Mundo*, 19 March); Brexiters were regarded as morose and obsessed by an 'absurd imperial nostalgia' (Carlin, *El País*, 25 June), and as 'nostalgic for Empire' for thinking that 'leaving the EU the United Kingdom will regain the sovereignty and grandeur of the times of the Empire' (González, *El País*, 17 June). This idea of 'imperial nostalgia' was echoed in *La Vanguardia* (Buj, 28 June); and, very importantly, was seen as tinging Brexiters' perception of 'their present with negativity' (Carbajosa, *El País*, 28 June) – a notion that runs contrary to the joy of forward-looking Reason-led projects driven by the spirit of the Enlightenment.

These fake, deceptive, illusionary ideas were exposed (that is, reality-checked) right after the announcement of the referendum result, hailed as an 'irrational decision' (*El Mundo*, 24 June). With the sudden fall in the value of sterling the warnings given prior to the referendum were vindicated by the facts. By way of example, consider the contrast established between evidence and trickery:

> The devastating results of this search for 'control' did not take long to appear. The most dramatic is that the devaluation of the currency, which dragged the pound down to 1985 levels, has made the economy contract dramatically… 'To gain back control' is proving to be prohibitively expensive for the Brits. And even more so because it is a false illusion. In today's world the control promised by demagogues does not exist. This might be one of the first lessons Brexit will teach us' (Naím, *El País*, 27 June).

As noted above, this was a noticeable feature of the Madrid-based press. On only one occasion did this attack on the 'populist' discourse of 'mendacity', 'emotion' and 'closed nationalism' evoke some resonance in *La Vanguardia* in an article penned by José Antonio Zarzalejos, sometime editor of the Madrid-based daily *ABC* (2005-2008), one of the most conservative national dailies in Spain: 'The worst English supremacist nationalism has won, along with its emotive and isolationist arguments' (Zarzalejos, 26 June). In *Ara*, the emphasis on the dichotomized view that orders the world into nationalists and non-nationalists was not only avoided but also criticized (Culla, 26 June 2017).

Opportunities and Lessons: A European Catastrophe

The consequences for the EU of a UK exit vote (before and after the referendum) were expressed using a wealth of metaphors conveying a sense of vulnerability, including references to a 'house of cards' (the disintegration of the EU), 'the domino effect' on other countries; or the more medical 'contagion'. The actual result was received with shock and consternation in the Spanish media and across the political spectrum – with concern for the uncertain future of Britain ('The UK jumps on to rollercoaster', Aranda, *Ara*, 27 June) but most importantly for the future of the EU.

However, almost concurrently with the announcement of the result, an uplifting narrative became dominant: what was felt as a disaster could be turned into 'an opportunity for the future' (*El País*, 24 June). The four main political parties involved in the immediately preceding round of Spanish general elections advocated stronger economic and political European integration in the face of Brexit (González and Maqueda, *El País*, 24 June) with the centre and centre-left parties more concerned with the development of a more civically-minded, socially aware, reformist EU focused on re-enforced social democratic principles of equality (*El País*, editorial, 25 June and 3 July), the abandonment of which was seen as the cause of the ascendancy of populisms represented in Britain by the Brexit camp. The pro-independence Catalan newspaper *Ara* not only viewed the result as an opportunity to rebuild a more unified Europe with greater integration into the United States of Europe (Font, 23 June), but also celebrated the chance for Scotland to hold a new independence referendum.

The referendum as bone of contention

As noted above, the discussion on the suitability of referendums as a political tool to solve constitutional issues was central to the debate. For *Ara*, despite the unexpectedly adverse

result, referendums were still 'the best way of reaching collective decisions' (Vera, 26 June) and Catalonia should enjoy the same rights as Scotland in this respect. It argued that 'in due time, Europe will see that neither Scotland nor Catalonia are the problem, but the idea of democracy that prevails in Spain' (30 June).

In contrast, for *El Mundo*, *El País* (and to a certain extent *La Vanguardia*), popular plebiscites were *per se* a threat because of their potential misuse by populist movements. Thus, the solution put forward to protect the European Project against 'the populist onslaught' (*El País*, 3 July) was to undermine the very notion of the referendum (an aversion to referendums is not in itself a peculiarly Spanish feature: see for example: Leonard, *El País*, 30 June). This attitude was adopted by all the Spain-wide political parties except for the left-wing coalition Podemos. In Madrid, referendums were rejected on three main grounds:

a) For what was seen as their uncontrollable ability 'to open the floodgates to xenophobic populism and the worst type of nationalism' (*El País*, 20 June), that is, for their knock-on, copycat effect across Europe (*El País*, 2 July; de Quirós, *El Mundo*, 19 June; Suanzes, *El Mundo*, 24 June).

b) For the irreversibility of the result (*El País*, 23 June) which renders political negotiation impossible (*El País*, 1 July); and

c) For the binary nature of referendum questions, which makes them inappropriate for complex issues (Sahagún, *El Mundo*, 24 June).

The assistant editor of *Ara* rightly argued that 'David Cameron will most likely become

enemy number one of the Spanish political class' (Miró, *Ara,* 25 June) for having called not

one but two referendums (on Scottish independence and Brexit). In fact, the process of

Cameron's demonization had started before polling day. For *El País*, the Tory leader had

embarked on a 'frivolous and dangerous' adventure (20 June) to satisfy his political and

personal interests. After the result, the British Prime Minister was accused of 'temerity' (*El*

Mundo, 24 June) and irresponsibility (Piqué, *El Mundo*, 27 June). In both Madrid-based

papers and the Catalan daily *La Vanguardia* he was held responsible for Brexit (*El País*, 24

June; Sahagún, *El Mundo,* 24 June; Carol, *La Vanguardia*, 25 June).

The rejection of referendums as a suitable political instrument and the defence of the EU in

the Madrid-based papers and *La Vanguardia* went hand in hand with the defence of

Representative Democracy. For Sáenz de Santamaría, the Conservative Spanish Deputy

Prime Minister, referendums should not be called to make 'important decisions. Mainly

because the political representatives are there to deal with and manage critical issues

precisely because citizens elect them in democratic elections' (Segovia and Cruz, *El Mundo*,

24 June). This was echoed by the then Socialist candidate to the post of Prime Minister,

Pedro Sánchez, who noted (claiming clear ownership of the process): 'We are now seeing

what referendums produce, they transfer to the citizens solutions that political parties must

offer. Politics, like life, is not all or nothing. We need to reinforce representative democracy'

(*El País*, 26 June (b)). In the press, this idea was encapsulated by *El País* in its 23 June

editorial: 'the time-honoured British parliamentary system proves that representative

democracy has the virtue of making reversible decisions, which is more difficult in a

referendum, vulnerable as these are to base passions, reductionism and populism'. This

stance must be considered in the context of the rejection of a Catalan referendum on

independence on the part of the Madrid-based media and most Spain-wide political parties except for Podemos – it should be seen as a strategy to link together and delegitimize referendums, populism and nationalism.

Conclusion

The amount of coverage of the EU referendum provided by the dailies analyzed in this chapter (and by the Spanish media in general) was truly remarkable. This is hardly surprising as Brexit potentially jeopardized what was seen as an Enlightened project celebrated almost unanimously (albeit in different degrees and with variations) for having delivered countless political and economic benefits to Spain. However, this must also be seen in relation to the internal political life of the country. Thus, the Madrid-based press's stance against 'populist nationalism' should be regarded as a reaction against the left-wing coalition Podemos, on the one hand, and Catalan nationalism on the other. In this account, both had simplistically found an enemy whose elimination would solve all societal problems: 'the establishment' in the case of Podemos and the Spanish state in the case of the nationalists. And both were denounced for their defence of the referendum as a means to solve the independence question in Catalonia. In line with the official position of the Spanish government and most political parties, *El País* and *El Mundo* sustained a defence of Representative Democracy and steadfastly upheld the notion of the unsuitability of referendums for the resolution of constitutional questions. In response to the Brexit result, *El País* claimed that 'contrary to the idea disseminated by nationalist politicians (irredentist nationalisms, such as the Catalan one), direct consultations of the people constitute a serious mistake as they see themselves forced to choose between situations that produce complex consequences' (26 June). The

same applied to Podemos, the only Spain-wide political grouping in favour of holding an independence referendum in Catalonia.

La Vanguardia adopted an intermediate position: while aligning itself with the Madrid press in regards to referendums, it avoided establishing a direct link between populism and nationalism. Finally, albeit lamenting the results and their consequences for the European project, the pro-independence and pro-referendum Catalan newspaper *Ara* maintained an unwavering defence of referendums as a legitimate mechanism which respected the democratic convictions of the people.

This study has shown that the coverage of the EU referendum in Spain constituted a striking example of the 'domestication of the news' (Gurevitch et al, 1991), that is, the interpretation of foreign or global events using domestic frames which, on the one hand, bring the news experientially closer to the reader but also (as was the case here) facilitate the use of those events as substitutes for national debates. This chapter has shown that 'domestication' did not imply one homogeneous Spanish view, but a range of ideologically-grounded interpretations in which the independence of Catalonia featured as highly as the future of the EU. 'Home', as several journalists point out, is after all the 'Common European Home', the 'common project' which can reject the parochial, the atavistic, the emotional and the irrational and nourish opposing views within a superordinate rational frame – the frame of Enlightened European modernity.

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