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Spain: The evolution of Civil Society's mobilisation since 15M

1 Introduction

A well-known Spanish saying reads "After a storm comes a calm", which is used to describe marine cycles, and also to popularly define going from very intense (and sometimes complex) times to other calmer ones. In this case, we can employ the above-cited saying to define a change in the social mobilisation context in Spain, and to describe going from a period of civil society's frenetic and frenzied activity to one of calm and certain paralysis (but not the disappearance) of mobilisation.

The Spanish political context is marked by being a relatively young democracy. After a 36-year dictatorship (1939–1975) and a period of transition (1975–1978), Spain has witnessed a period of stability with a representative democracy system analogous to other European countries. In this young democracy, it has been considered, at least until recently, that there was still some room for improvement as far as the mobilisation of civil society was concerned, with the presence of a "strong" and rooted civil society (García 1997; Subirats 1999). However, in 2011, Spain witnessed civil society's intensive political activity process after the appearance of the so-called *Indignados* movement or 15-M. This movement spread after the mobilisations held on May 15, 2011 to demand a "real democracy" and to call for a more participatory democracy. In initial phases, occupations known as *acampadas* became a well-established form of permanent protest in dozens of Spanish cities (Della Porta/Mattoni 2014; Feenstra 2020; Glasius/Ishkanian 2018; Kaldor/Selchow 2013; Simsa/Totter 2017). These camping occupations were not only set up as a method to place pressure on the Spanish Government, but also as a place to self-organise, where democratic experiences were put into practice in the public space. They were also a source of inspiration for mobilisations like Occupy Movement or the Hong Kong Umbrella Revolution (Hopke 2015; Romanos 2016).

As a result of this initial phase of protests in Spain, the movement remained active for a long period, and showed a high level of experimentation. All this led to the proliferation of numerous citizen initiatives, demonstrations, actions to halt home evictions, monitory bodies, self-management initiatives, hacktivism, boycotts, peaceful sieges on Parliament and citizen legislative initiatives and, finally, to the formation of new political parties (Flesher Fominaya 2020; Postill 2014; Romanos 2014; Simsa/Totter 2017). In 2013, activists linked with 15M began to participate in forming political parties. Of these, the participation in the 2014 European elections of political parties like Podemos or the Partido X stood out. For the forthcoming 2015 Local Elec-

tions, many municipalist political parties were formed and obtained electoral victories in important cities like Barcelona, Madrid, A Coruña, Cádiz and Zaragoza (Font/García-Espín 2019; Marzolf/Ganuza 2016; Ordoñez et al. 2018; Romanos/Sádaba 2016; Subirats 2015a, 2015b). These initiatives came to be known as "cities of change" in the hope to provide new space for further political experimentation by encouraging greater participation locally (Martínez/Wissink 2021).

Nonetheless, this intense frenetic mobilisation moved from civil society spaces to representative structures and gave way to a very different scenario from 2020. The present period can be defined as a calm one, at least in terms of mobilisations. Indeed civil society activity in this context is passing through phases which Tarrow's classic work (1989) defines as protest cycles. That is, alternating between the rise and fall in social mobilisation by now passing through a certain demobilisation process. This is happening after a very long participation period that has led this context to be defined as civil society's political laboratory (Feenstra et al. 2017; Flesher Fominaya 2020; Gerbaudo 2016; Postill 2014).

The reasons to explain this trend are complex and varied. On the one hand, we find some activists' electioneering option and the leap from mobilisation to institutions, which contributed to civil society to demobilise. On the other hand, repression is another of the dynamics that has conditioned civil society's mobilisation. We must not forget that both institutionalisation and repression aspects are considered in Tarrow's Theory of Protest Cycles to be key aspects in demobilisation (Tarrow 1989). Finally, apart from these phenomena, there is another unexpected and complex event that impacts coexistence: today's pandemic. We go on to analyse the impact that all this has on mobilisation in the Spanish context (2015–2020).

2 From streets to institutions. The electoral leap

The political 2011–2013 period was marked by civil society's strong mobilisation. Protest actions and self-organisation initiatives took place during this period when civil society demonstrated a constant reinvention capacity (Calle Collado 2016; Feenstra et al. 2017; Monterde et al. 2015). Nevertheless, some activists believed that political and institutional changes in certain matters were too slow, such as housing policies, the marked fight against inequality, reforms in the electoral system or promoting participative processes. This explained the qualitative leap in the adopted strategy as many electoral initiatives began to be launched, particularly from 2014. Paradoxically (or perhaps not), those people who reported limits of representative democracy and deficits in the system participated in them (Flesher-Fominaya 2014; Simsa/Totter 2017; Tormey 2015). One of the arguments used to take this leap from mobilisation to institutionalisation was based on a "glass ceiling" which citizens hit every time they saw how their demands became real policies.

From this point, 15M activists came together to create new political parties to participate in the electoral process (Flesher Fominaya 2020; Ibarra-Güell et al. 2018; Lobera 2019; Prentoulis/Thomassen 2019). The first party to be set up in 2013 was Partido X, which was clearly inspired by technopolitics. However, it was Podemos that appeared early in 2014 to be the first party to enjoy European and national electoral success (Torreblanca 2015). This populist political party's electoral success proved to be the definitive drive to the electoral option and encouraged many local political parties to form in 2015. Hence the so-called citizen platforms appeared with various denominations that became popularly known as "cities of change" (Rubio-Pueyo 2017). Of these, we find the very well-known Platform of Ada Colau, a former spokesperson of the PAH (Platform for People Affected by Mortgages), who was elected as Mayoress of Barcelona with the platform Barcelona en Comú (BeC) in 2015 and 2019. Another very known platform was the Ahora Madrid, which led former judge Manuela Carmena to become Mayoress. Other electorally successful "cities of change", included Cádiz, Zaragoza and La Coruña, among others (Font/García-Espín 2019; Marzolf/Ganuza 2016; Ordóñez et al. 2018; Romanos/Sádaba 2016; Subirats 2015a).

This period was generally a time when the number of new registered political parties was significant. In fact, if we look at the data of newly registered parties corresponding to the Spanish Ministry of Internal Affairs, we can see a phase of exponential growth of new parties. Between 2009 and 2010, 295 new political parties were registered. This figure more than doubled in 2014 and 2015 (coinciding with European, National, Regional and Local elections) because 618 new parties registered (Tormey/Feenstra 2015)[85].

This institutional leap led to electoral successes and new opportunities for some civil society groups to take their claims from streets to institutions. However, in turn, this brought about a certain debate about the effects that this would have on civil society and on the potential shrinking of the public space, a debate that tends to appear when civil society groups decide to opt for an electoral way.

Sceptical visions of parties' transforming possibilities certainly do not lack political thinking. Some thinkers consider, for instance, that the dynamics of both social movements and civil society are not transferable to political parties and representative institutions because they are defined by different logics and dynamics (Cohen/Arato 1994; Habermas 1996; Keane 1998). For decades, others have contemplated that political parties present a natural trend towards not only hierarchical organisation, but also the consolidation of aristocratic and oligarchical tendencies, as a result of their consolidation as "methodical organisation of electoral masses" (Michels, 1st 1911, 1998). In short, by means of logics that tends to be moved away from the concerns which normally characterise transforming social mobilisations.

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[85] See Registro de Partidos: https://sede.mir.gob.es/nfrontal/webpartido_politico.html (10th October 2022).

Several works also point out institutionalisation as one of the main causes that drives civil society's demobilisation (Jung 2010; Przeworski/Sprague 1986; Tarrow 1989). The classic work by Tarrow indicates institutionalisation as an essential factor in the decline of protest cycles. Moreover, there is the work by Przeworski and Sprague (1986) with their study about the *History of Electoral Socialism,* in which this trend is seen. According to these authors, the pact culture and representative logics frustrate transforming politics, while they "demobilised those potential efforts —cooperatives, councils, and commons— that could not be channelled through elections" (Przeworski/Sprague 1986:183). It should not be forgotten that some studies show how institutionalisation is not irremediably linked with fragmentation and decay of social movements. When focusing on the German Environmental Movement, it observes a contrary trend and a positive maturation process (Rucht/Roose 2001). Obviously, this is a complex phenomenon and one with many consequences. In the Spanish case there is the initial electoral success of these new political parties, which has dwindled with time, but not without obtaining excellent results. Podemos, for example, managed to form part of the Spanish Government in January 2020 despite its growing loss of votes (from 20.68 % in December 2015 to 12.84 % in November 2019) (see epdata 2019). In the 2019 local elections, BComú managed to hold the office of mayoress (as the second political force and thanks to a policy of pacts). This was different for places like Santiago de Compostela, Ferrol, A Coruña, Zaragoza, and even Madrid which lost the office (see El País 2019).

Many electoral initiatives have led to diverse results and made it possible to observe certain progress during the 2015–2019 period (as well as some disappointments)[86]. The "cities of change", for instance, have made progress in aspects like promoting citizen participation and transparency, commitment to environmental policies, curbing of lobbies or prioritising citizens' basic material needs, which have been expanded. The institutional leap has also made it possible to take civil society agendas to the representative space. Accordingly, we can interpret this advance as a maturation process that resulted from a leap "from 'occupying squares' to 'occupying institutions' as a new strategy" (Thomson 2021:321).

That said, we should also bear in mind the fact that the institutional leap had a certain effect on mobilisations and civil society cannot be denied. In human terms, after this leap, many people have focused on institutional politics. The actors engaged in mobilisation are expected to show strong commitment to, and spend plenty of time on, it. So it is logical that time will influence the succession of decisive moments and other calmer ones in protest cycles.

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[86] Several empirical studies on the impact of these initiatives have been recently published. See, for example, Blanco et al. 2020; Feenstra/Tormey 2021; Martínez/Wissink 2021; Mota Consejero/Janoschka 2022.

During the present acceleration of calm in the mobilisations lived in Spain, other factors have had an impact that we should stop and think about. Matters, such as the so-called "Gag Law" passed in 2015 and today's world pandemic, have shaped a time in which going to the streets to protest has become almost exceptional action. We now reflect on these matters.

3 Gagged citizenship

The growing institutionalisation process of social movements, especially those about 15M, were accompanied in parallel by Spanish Organic Law on Protecting Citizen Security (known as "Gag Law"), which came into force on 1 July 2015 after being presented in 2013 with the Government of Mariano Rajoy. In general terms, this law was taken as a clearly repressive reaction to the citizen mobilisations taking place in Spain due to 15M of 2011, and as an attempt to control the possibilities of the public expressing its social discontent and the reappropriation of public spaces, basically as an attack against Spanish citizen's individual liberties[87]. In fact, 15M protests, which acted as an emerging source of collective disgust with the economic crisis that began in 2008, appeared to be the very framework for this law being set up (Martínez 2018). The typification of the crimes deriving from this law as being minor, serious and very serious directly corresponded to the actions that had become the leading acts of 15M; for example, strikes, pickets, meetings not being communicated, escraches performed on politicians, etc. (Olmo/Lozano 2015).

To date, the "Gag Law" has been directly questioned by the Spanish civil society, the mass media and NGOs, and not only in its own state, but also by international organisations and media. Most agree that this law reverses citizen liberties associated with a Rule of Law like the Spanish one (Bilbao Ubillos 2015; Garrido 2019), and also point out the impossibility of a European Union Member State allowing penalisations of this type in the Criminal Code (CC). The fear of this law hiding an attempt to undermine the right to expression and meeting in the interests of a specific ideological objective is felt by civil society and the mass media alike. Hence with the arrest of Spanish rapper Pablo Hasél in February 2021, debate about freedom of expression was

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87 It is worth pointing out that this law made the so-called "hot returns" practice legal. This practice refers to the possibility of the Spanish Civil Guard denying immigrants being identified on the border, rejecting their request for asylum and them being immediately returned to their country of origin. On 20 July 2015, the UN Committee of Human Rights approved some Final Observations on this law, which urged the Spanish Government to revise these dispositions, and voiced its fear of this organisation leaving the concepts employed in it as ambiguous. This could result in the complete reversal of Human Rights in Spain, and also in police actions that would be most difficult to supervise and restrain. Moreover, they stated that the "hot returns" practice breached the right to asylum.

rekindled with thousands of citizens taking different protests to streets throughout Spain, which has, in turn, reactivated debate about police violence and abusive conducts by the police force.

By examining the main crimes which people have been fined for or charged with based on this law while it has been in force provides us with some clues as to the current state of social rights in Spain. These crimes have particularly been for "extolling terrorism" (Art. 578 of the CC), "Slandering the crown or State institutions" (Arts. 490.3 and 491 of the CC) and "Offending religious sentiments" (included mainly in Articles 524 and 525 of the CC). As we can see, these are crimes in which the conception of the honour and image of certain State institutions is considered more important than citizen's individual freedom. Indeed, the situation of lack of protection which this law leaves citizens in is worth highlighting, where the novelty lies in "ignoring the judicial process in penalising «anti-establishment attitudes», suppressing the human factor that a trial implies and substituting it for an immediate fine that cannot be appealed" (Peinador Pérez 2017:221), to which the pleadings period for the statements made by authorised officers is added.

The report *Spain: social activists and the right to information: in the spotlight. An analysis of the Spanish Organic Law on Protecting Citizen Security* (Amnesty International 2017) warns about the disproportionate restriction to freedom that this law represents for Spain because it regulates freedom of expression, meeting and information. It also points out that it reduces mechanisms to control possible abuse by the State police force, which is another of the strong social criticisms about the Gag Law. Since it came into being on 31 December 2017, 80 fines a day have been placed by applying the two most influential articles of this law, which is the equivalent to almost €25 million (Amnistia Internacional 2018). Until 2020, 19.5 of all imposed sanctions refer to matters like: holding public spectacles or recreational activities prohibited by the authority for public security reasons; disobeying or resisting the authority; denying to identify oneself; not showing the police force and security corps respect and consideration (see Reviejo 2020).

Since this law was passed, it has led to the population's discontent and many civil society organisations and associations have constantly campaigned to demonstrate its disproportional application. The various cases that have come about since it was passed, some of which have been widely covered by the mass media, demonstrate a central objective of citizen demobilisation by means of fear and reinforcing self-censorship, and cutting the right to social activism and to express ideas and information[88].

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[88] The documentary Scissors vs. Paper (Gerard Escuder 2018) closely examines the effects of the Gag Law and censorship on contemporary Spain by presenting different cases relating to the world of theatre, music, art, twitters, journalists, among others.

3.1 Civil society against the Gag Law

During the gradual shrinkage of the space in which civil society has recently acted in Spain (2015–2020), many actors have made the effort to put forward a tireless framework of citizen's responses and reactions to the Gag Law. Even before this law was passed, organisations like the *Third Sector Platform* assumed the task of reporting this repressive law by presenting a document of the contributions made to the Citizen Security Law (2014) so that civil society and citizens' voices would be heard in this law (see Plataforma Tercer Sector 2014). They pointed out that the text could be improved in juridicial and technical terms, and it abused inconclusive legal terms, which could lead to arbitrariness and an ample margin to interpret this law's application. In the Law domain, organisations like *Judges for Democracy* and the *Free Association of Lawyers* previously warned about the risk of this law converting those citizens who protest into State enemies. In fact, civil society also emphasises the law's lack of foundation because it is not based on either a citizen insecurity context or a high criminality risk, which the government contended at the time, rather on fear discourse as an excuse to shape repressive legislation "and to disguise the real intention of perpetuating the stigmatisation of the vulnerable groups that already suffered social exclusion (poverty, immigration, mental disorders) in parallel to criminalising political dissidence increasing" (Comisión Legal Sol 2015:109). It was a clear political intention to promote the social demobilisation that had taken place in Spain with 15M, a movement that had already endured political and state repression at that time by converting fear into a repressive strategy (Camps/Vergés 2015), which this law now attempts to reinforce.

In 2017, the *No somos delito/We are no crime*[89] platform, made up of more than 100 organisations, activists, jurists and social movements against reforming the CC, the Law on Protecting Citizen Security and the Law on Private Security, launched a Draft bill with 10 basic principles backed by 15 jurists and more than 20 associations. The 10 claimed principles included the effectiveness of the presumption of innocence, transparency and guarantees when applying the law, the equality principle and that of non-discrimination, personal data protection, eliminating crimes registers, establishing effective and independent investigation mechanisms, eliminating any type of physical punishment by civil servants and banning hot returns, which has been vehemently reported by *SOS Racismo/SOS Racism*[90] and ratified by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). Generally speaking, these 10 points clearly reflect the social concerns that stem from the strategies developed by the Spanish State, especially blaming, punishing watching and expelling the most excluded people (Camps/García 2015). Consequently, protests have shrunk in Spain, which is something that Green-

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[89] See: http://nosomosdelito.net/ (10th October 2022).
[90] See: https://sosracismo.eu/17m-2018-ley-mordaza/ (10th October 2022).

peace has assumed the task of reporting with its well-acclaimed ironic campaign launched in 2018 against the Gag Law[91]. It came in the form of "Protest Box" in an attempt to reveal that "protesting" in today's Spain is a "luxury" that very few can afford.

With the fifth anniversary of this law (2020), more than 200 organisations that fight for rights and fundamental freedom in Spain were included in the manifesto driven by Amnesty International[92]. Some were the *Platform that Defends Freedom of Information* (PDLI)[93], *Defending Those Who Defend,* as well as the *Avaaz* civil organisation that continues to fight this law ever since the Government announced its intention to pass it by also assigning constant supervisors to particular cases that have appeared in accordance with its application. Moreover, organisations that are closely linked with 15M, such as PAH (Platform for People Affected by Mortgages), have also and frequently voiced their explicit rejection of the Gag Law, and have had to face sanctions resulting from applying this law in different cities.

As we have seen, the gradual institutionalisation of citizen movements, along with the shrinking public space for civil society's protests in Spain as a result of increased repression, means that "Spain is immersed in a political cycle in which the legal architecture has allowed any form of political dissidence to be criminalised by means of reforming the Criminal Code and passing repressive laws" (Bonilla 2019:45). These organisations' role reflects the dangerous effects of repression in Spain, which is weakening civil society. Moreover, with today's pandemic, many of these organisations warn that the Gag Law has acted as a framework to assert repressive measures against citizenship (Defender a quien defiende 2020), which we look at later on.

Nonetheless, it is worth pointing out one specific case in this social repression context that stands out from the other events included as part of this law to allow us to move towards a turning point. We refer to the case of rapper Pablo Hasél, accused of slander and calumnies against the crown, and also extolling terrorism. He was arrested in February 2021 by the Police Force of Catalonia while he was at the Rectorate of the Universitat de Lleida surrounded by demonstrators. With this arrest, a series of concentrations and protests took place all over Spain, most of which were announced by Llibertat Pablo Hásel/Freedom for Pablo Hásel (@LlibertatHasel). This initiative was promoted for the rap cause, and by other anti-capitalist and anti-fascist organisations. Some of these concentrations ended up in altercations and police charges, and such action is being studied. Upon his arrest, the Unidas Podemos political party requested the Spanish Ministry of Justice his reprieve, while the governing PSOE

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91 See: https://es.greenpeace.org/es/sala-de-prensa/comunicados/greenpeace-lanza-una-ironica-campana-contra-la-ley-mordaza-para-denunciar-que-el-gobierno-ha-convertido-la-protesta-en-un-lujo/ (10th October 2022).

92 See Manifesto: https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSc2W1frcOCr_ZDPWTDmA-HRpwg VJrvPqBAewtq3qmrMrnTXuQ/viewform (10th October 2022).

93 See: http://libertadinformacion.cc/5-anos-de-leyes-de-mordaza/ (10th October 2022).

party announced a reform of the CC to avoid such cases. On 18 February 2021, PDLI registered a manifesto to defend free expression at the Spanish Parliament. Perhaps the social impact of all this might even act as an indicator of change in Spanish civil society's response to the repression it has lived in recent years because, despite the restrictions set up due to today's pandemic, it has protested in the streets. Indeed, we must consider how this exceptional pandemic situation is affecting citizen mobilisation by taking a general photograph of today's context.

4 Citizen mobilisation during the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a shock for both the population and governments worldwide because it has absolutely affected different social spheres (Žižek 2020). In this context, it is worth analysing the conditions that stem from the pandemic affect citizens and their organisational capacity; namely in a confinement context: restricted mobility, fewer social interchanges and human contact; many empty streets; curfews. What is the social mobilisation status in Spain? In general terms, it is a novel context in which different challenges and problems can be contemplated. We believe it is key to consider if a rearticulation potential appears with social movements or, otherwise, if the present conditions in Spain further weaken the possibility of citizen mobilisation apart from the aforementioned repression background.

We find an ambivalent situation. On the one hand, during the first months of today's pandemic (and confinement), civil society links were reinforced and began to respond to arising social needs, especially those of more vulnerable groups. Here we refer to certain practices like soup kitchens, support from neighbours, and different groups with matters like health care. Many of these practices have continued as the months have passed, and State support and care networks have been set up. On the other hand, we observe how the State of Alarm considerably increased police street vigilance, and how not being able to meet and restricted mobility have resulted in social street protests disappearing (especially during the first months of the pandemic at the start of 2020). Later however, all kinds of reactions from extreme right-wing groups were voiced, which oppose the Spanish Government's pandemic management. These groups were encouraged by political parties, like Vox, among others, and they occupied the streets of Madrid and other Spanish cities on different occasions to protest about face masks, and to ask sectors like the hotel trade and the economic sector to reopen, which were the worst hit by the pandemic. To better understand these two phenomena, we now go on to contextualise the social situation of the pandemic in Spain.

Ever since the pandemic began, the Institute of Advanced Social Studies (IESA) of the CSIC (Spanish National Research Council) has published two reports to study the effects of COVID-19 on Spain. These reports are called ESPACOV-I and ESPACOV-

II (*Estudio Social sobre la Pandemia de la COVID-19/Social Study about the COVID-19 Pandemic*),[94] which were published in May 2020 and February 2021, respectively. With the results obtained in the second report, the IESA-CSIC highlights three keys that lead us to think about the situation that citizen mobilisation is in today: loss of public confidence, pandemic fatigue and its particular incidence in youths; a healthcare crisis being politically lived. The population's clearly worsened emotional state is stressed as one of the immediate consequences of the pandemic because despondency affects youths the most. In fact 78.7 % of those surveyed clearly indicated being concerned about catching COVID-19. We can interpret this concern as a reason why fewer social meetings are organised, which evidently affects organisations and associations.

This fear of catching COVID-19 implies fewer physical meetings with other people, a situation that inevitably reduces street protests. We find one example of such when the 2021 8M (International Women's Day on 8 March) strike was being organised in Spain. It sparked a whole series of debates by the mass media and political parties as to whether it was advisable to prohibit, or not, meetings on this date. Finally, the Spanish Autonomous Community of Madrid cancelled the concentrations communicated for this date. The nationwide feminist movement organised different alternatives to mass concentrations, and those that went ahead attempted to meet healthcare indications.

Another matter to arise from this report is the fact that the Spanish Government has progressively lost citizen's trust from the time when the data in the first report phase were recorded (April 2020) to the second report (February 2021). Moreover, it would appear that trust in Spanish Autonomous Communities increased compared to the Spanish Government. The mean scores applied to assess the Spanish Government's management dropped in all the ideological groups. Trust in citizens also dropped because a collective failure to control the third pandemic wave of infection (January-February 2021) was perceived. Citizens considered that some groups which did not respect measures were on the increase and harmed the rest of society.

The indicators employed in ESPACOV II allow a marked ideological component to be defined in citizens' views about the different pandemic dimensions. Those surveyed on the right-wing ideological spectrum believe that the time to achieve economic recovery and the time needed to get back to a similar lifestyle to that known before the pandemic would be longer. A general reading of these data allows us to deduce a difficult context for the life of the different kinds of social movements, organisations and associations. On the extreme right-wing's greater social mobilisation, we deduce that these ideological positions trusting less scientific community prescriptions means that occupying streets to protest is not conceived as a real health

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94 Both reports can be consulted via this link: https://digital.csic.es/handle/10261/211271 https://www.iesa.csic.es/espacov-ii/ (10th October 2022).

risk, unlike those closer to the left-wing ideology who perceive it is a real risk. Although more mistrust in political institutions apparently appears, which could imply discontent prior to mobilisations, both restrictive measures and the generalised fear of catching COVID-19 act as repellents of meetings and encounters, which could favour the rearticulation of such movements. Nonetheless, we move on to look closely at two aspects: the strength of neighbourhood movements as care networks; the extreme right-wing occupying streets to protest about government measures.

4.1 Neighbourhood movements and mutual support networks

The COVID-19 confinement period in Spain started on 15 March 2020 and ended with the initial opening phase from lockdown until the "new normality" was achieved in June 2020. The State of Alarm outlined a new scenario of uncertainties, when many social problems dating back years ago became worse. Such problems are related to housing quality, rental rates, precarious job contracts, some social groups' vulnerability (e.g. the elderly), and even problems accessing online education or telework, to name just a few. Many families lost their source of income, while lots of groups were no longer cared for and awaited the State to react, which it did eventually, but took too long. At a time of forced halt, the social links between neighbours were essential for managing this new situation.

This allowed the care networks in districts to be reinforced, including individual initiatives to setting up groups of neighbours to attend to people in their area by maximising prevention measures while awaiting institutions to respond[95]. It can be generally stated that the pandemic has led the forms that sustain life in today's system to be questioned (García-Petit 2020). The very philosophy of these networks, which is linked with self-management and reaching out to those affected, led to a quicker and more efficient response than that given by social services. This reflects the fragile basis of the Spanish social and health systems. Changes in districts' consumption patterns, like using small nearby shops having apparently increased, clearly demonstrate the return to group awareness. As Della Porta points out: "Faced with the State's evident shortages and, what is more, with those of the market, social movement organisations are set up (which also occurs in all the countries affected by the pandemic) as mutual support groups by promoting direct social action to help those most in need. This brings about resistance to respond to the solidarity need" (Della-Porta 2020).

Solidarity and support from neighbourhood and social groups' self-management have flooded Spanish cities, and those areas with the most significant initiatives are

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95 See: https://www.elsaltodiario.com/coronavirus/mapa-ola-iniciativas-apoyo-cuidado-mutuo-barrios-autogestion-desborda-inaccion-institucional (10th October 2022).

Madrid, Catalonia and the Basque Country. Most of the actions that these neighbourhood associations perform centre on distributing food, as well as material like face masks and sanitisers. They also accompany vulnerable groups like the elderly who live alone. However, these are not their only actions. For example, the Regional Federation of Neighbourhood Assocations of Madrid (FRAVM) offers information about job and housing offers in its *Neighbourhood Guide of Coronavirus Crisis*. It has also shown its support to the public health sector ever since the pandemic began by demanding more investment and rejecting its privatisation. Madrid is also stressed with the 2020 First European Citizen Award going to the neighbourhood network called Somos Tribu Vallecas, the first space of district solidarity and mutual support set up in Madrid to face COVID-19.

In Barcelona, *Xarxes de Suport Mutu* were set up and reinforced, and these mutual support initiatives emerged from districts' organisational fabric. Many of them were already operating, and were joined by lots of people interested in collaborating when the pandemic began[96]. Not only legal counselling, private classes, handing out school materials and food, but also gender violence problems have been dealt with by these associations, which generally report lack of public services' efficiency. Other cases to appear in the Basque Country are the resistance box BiziHotsa, an initiative involving the alliance of feminist groups, women's associations, antiracist and anticapitalist groups, Basque Country cooperative networks, Trade Unions and citizen networks. The intention was to raise €60,000 to cover the most vulnerable population's urgent needs as part of today's healthcare crisis, including legal advice for women victims of chauvinist violence, and those who must fight with the papers and bureaucracy expected by the social aid proposed by different regional governments.

Basically, the pandemic has outlined a scenario in which social problems and inequalities have worsened, whose key reaction has appeared from civil society and neighbourhoods' self-management. These neighbourhood actions have been essential for cushioning the negative effects of the pandemic on many vulnerable people, particularly during its first months (and confinement). These networks' efficiency has highlighted not only the gradual dismantling of public sectors like health care or education, but also the abandonment situation that the most vulnerable groups face. This situation has reinforced citizen self-management forms based on solidarity and mutual support and, at the same time, as previously mentioned, has also led to the extreme right reacting on streets. In other words, it would appear that at a common point at which public powers' slowness to react is noted, many people have organised self-managed social networks and jointly worked from their districts, whereas other sectors have occupied streets to report the Spanish Government's bad management and to doubt scientific community guidelines.

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96 A map of the mutual support initiatives in Catalonia can be consulted via this link: https://suportpopular.org/mapa-de-xarxes/ (10th October 2022).

4.2 Citizen's reaction to the pandemic

As mentioned in the first section of this report, citizen mobilisation has undergone a marked institutionalisation process in recent years in Spain (2015–2020). This has been accompanied by the repression cycle brought about by the Gag Law being passed, which has had clear effects on the articulation possibilities of street protests. In short, the public space being conquered by citizen movements has been interrupted by the global pandemic state since the beginning of 2020. Although this context promotes reinforcing neighbourhood support networks, it makes citizen mobilisation in the public space difficult. So, it can be deduced from these three factors converging that social citizen protest has diminished, which has partly been the case.

Nevertheless, it is worth pointing out that, given a pandemic context which conditions street protests, the Spanish right-wing reaction to the pandemic management measures taken by the Spanish Government has been voiced on the streets. Indeed today, the vast majority of the organised protests and calls mostly covered by the mass media stem from more right-wing ideological positions that are against how the Spanish Government has managed the pandemic. If we look again at the ESPACOV-II results, which indicate more right-wing people's mistrust of the scientific community and the government to manage today's pandemic, as well as the perception that socio-economic recovery will take a very long time, we logically understand that the more Spanish right-wing mobilisation on streets during the pandemic comes from these perceptions.

It is worth stressing the role that political parties like Vox or PP have played to incite public opinion about discontent with such management. One study that analysed the toxicity of messages from Spanish parliament members on Twitter during the State of Alarm points out that significant differences were noted in the tone of the messages sent by political parties during this period. For example, the most toxic political party was the extreme right-wing Vox, followed by right-ring PP (Guerrero-Solé/Philippe 2020), which sent messages in a more "inflammatory" tone. This can be interpreted from the opposition objective to the PSOE-Unidas Podemos coalition government, and as an attempt to get the citizens who think like they do to occupy streets. The time when this type of inflammatory messages started being sent was when feminist strikes 2020 8M were announced nationwide. Indeed, protests were organised as usual in different places on the Spanish map despite the first signs of COVID-19 being present in Spain. A few days after the 8M protest marches, the State of Alarm and confinement were officially declared. Political parties like Vox accused the Spanish Government of not avoiding the virus from spreading by forbidding 8M protest marches. This is a matter of debate which has been repeated with the 2021 8M call. Right-wing parties advised banning such meetings, whereas left-wing ones took a more moderate stance. To a great extent, the criticisms of the opposition's stance actually masked strategies to detract from the feminist movement (Juárez et al. 2021),

which adapted very well to the healthcare requirements required of the 8M protest marches in 2021.

It seems paradoxical that the political party in charge of mobilising people to streets in Spain, and which also defies healthcare measures and confinement by making various demonstrations, is also the party that urges to criminalise the feminist movement. Indeed, on 23 May 2020, Vox called for mobilisations in different Spanish cities so that citizens could protest in their cars about the way the Spanish Government was managing the crisis due to the coronavirus pandemic, and stated that the same government was using the crisis to promote a "socialist-communist" agenda. The platform *Stop Confinamiento. Plataforma de Afectados por el Estado de Alarma/Stop confinement. Platform for People Affected by the State of Alarm*[97] joined these mobilisations.

Overall, more cases involving the right-wing have indicated a scepticism stance about the expert scientific community; for example, the governments of Donald Trump in the USA and of Bolsonaro in Brazil. With the former, Trump's voters also rejected wearing face masks and occupied public places, such as the storming of the US Capitol in January 2021 in Washington. Similarly, to the toxic inflammatory messages sent by parties like Vox in Spain over social networks, Trump has actively retweeted and shared blatantly false information about COVID-19 which, up to a point, led right-wing voters to occupy streets on different occasions. Misinformation, discrediting the scientific community and inventing conspiracy-like theories have enabled the right-wing to make progress with its political agenda worldwide (deCook 2020).

In these contexts, the measures taken by the Spanish Government based on healthcare scientific community recommendations have been interpreted by the right-wing as impositions that restrict Rule of Law's liberties. With such argument-based logic about social rights being cut, such as the right to meetings or mobility, the Spanish right-wing has rearticulated its presence on streets and in the mass media. In today's context, even wearing a face mask, or not, seems to be political and ideological action. In short, if the progressive institutionalisation context of the citizen movement that originated from 15M, along with the repression deriving from the Gag Law, have both helped to keep social protest away from streets, then the pandemic and the restrictive measures from scientific community recommendations have helped the right-wing to rearticulate its discourse to oppose the Spanish Government and to encourage its voters to participate in street protests.

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[97] See: https://www.stopconfinamiento.es/ (10th October 2022).

5 Conclusion

The Theory of Protest Cycles offers a framework that allows us to understand evolution from an intense social mobilisation phase in Spain, one decade ago, to another somewhat demobilisation phase, in which civil society's forms of organisation have been transformed (2015–2020). The leap from the street to the institution has undoubtedly been accompanied by opportunities. Civil society's political agenda is being transferred to that of institutions, and the movement is also going through a maturing phase. At the same time, and logically, the energy of the street protest is also affected. Ten years ago, civil society mobilisation evolved both institutionalisation and repression phenomena allow part of this evolution to be understood, to which the logical depletion that comes with mobilisation processes can be added. Moreover, the pandemic emerging transforms all social life, and evidently alters the way civil society acts with it; its main concerns, the ways it coordinates, its challenges.

By way of conclusion, citizen movements conquering the public space have been interrupted and have, to a certain point, been made worse by the world pandemic that we have been immersed in since the start of 2020. Although this context promotes neighbourhood support networks' reinforcement, it also makes citizen mobilisation in the public space difficult. It can, thus, be deduced that fewer social protests by citizens derived from the convergence of these three factors, and that the Spanish political laboratory from 2011 to 2014, marked by creativity, experimentation and constant action, has witnessed a new phase appearing in which the public space has been transformed. We still have to wait and see if the traces left by 15M will leave their mark in the long run, with which Spanish democracy will be reinforced and improved. The long and short of it is that we will have to wait and see if mobilisation will allow at least some steps towards "real democracy" demands to be taken in the future.

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