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'Barking, biting, or just ... growling'? Unidas Podemos and Spain's reaction to the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine

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Abstract Existing literature argues that populist parties often moderate their populist tendencies upon acquiring power. Most studies on populism and foreign policy, especially since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, focus on right-wing cases within European states or the European Parliament. This article instead examines whether this pattern applies to the left-wing Unidas Podemos (UP) during its role as junior partner in Spain's minority government led by the socialist PSOE (January 2020–July 2023). Despite the Europeanisation of Spain's foreign and security policies, the country has long been viewed as ambivalent toward Russia, particularly after the 2014 annexation of Crimea. Since 2022, however, Spain has firmly supported Ukraine and condemned Russia's actions, making this case an especially relevant setting for our analysis. Drawing on Angelos Chrysosogelos' thesis that populist parties often 'bark more than they bite' after gaining power, particularly in foreign policy, we argue that UP's stance on Ukraine amounted primarily to symbolic 'growling': frequent, issue-dependent rhetorical dissent, especially on hard-security questions, that strained both coalition and intra-UP relations but did not alter Spain's policy outputs.

Introduction¹

There is now a vast literature on populism, including journals dedicated to its academic study,² and this scholarship has increasingly extended to questions of foreign policy (FP). One strand of this work argues that, once in office, populist parties tend to moderate their populist tendencies, particularly in FP.

¹ Earlier drafts of this article were presented by Laura Gil-Besada to the 27th *IPSA World Congress of Political Science* (15–19 July 2023, Buenos Aires, Argentina), and by Stelios Stavridis to the 4th *Workshop on Security and Stability in the Mediterranean and the Middle East* (30 May–1 June 2024, Athens, Greece). All translations into English are by the authors. All online references were last accessed in February 2026.

² For example, see the *Journal of Populism Studies*: <https://jps.populismstudies.org/> or *Populism*: <https://brill.com/view/journals/popu/popu-overview.xml>.

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, most academic studies on populism and FP have focused on right-wing cases, whether within European states or in the European Parliament (EP).³ This article shifts the focus to a left-wing populist political grouping and asks whether Unidas Podemos (UP) moderated its populist tendencies during its time as junior partner in Spain's minority coalition government led by PSOE (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party) between January 2020 and July 2023. More specifically, we address the following question: to what extent, and in which specific issue areas, did UP diverge from PSOE on Spain's Ukraine policy during this period, and did any of these divergences have an observable impact on the government's policy outputs? This topic has received limited scholarly attention, which underscores the importance of our study. In this context, we build on Angelos Chrysosgelos' (2021a) thesis that populist parties tend to *bark more than they bite* after gaining power, especially in FP.⁴

Spain is a particularly salient case because, despite the Europeanisation of its foreign, security and defence policies, Madrid has often been portrayed as somewhat ambivalent in its stance toward Russia, notably after the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the ensuing war in Donbas. However, since Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion, Spain has been a staunch supporter of Ukraine and has firmly condemned Russia's actions. This makes Spain an especially relevant case through which to assess UP's participation in the Spanish government during that period from a populist perspective.

Conceptually, we distinguish between bite and bark. By *bite*, we mean actions that change Spain's FP outputs or break the coalition. By *bark*, we refer to overt rhetorical dissent or 'no' votes that do not produce any change in policy outputs. Empirically, we examine parliamentary transcripts, official records and gazettes, press coverage, parties' public statements, and roll-call behaviour in the Spanish Congress in order to trace positions across six domains: condemnation, humanitarian support, military aid, European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) integration, sanctions, and reactions to Zelensky's parliamentary address. Overall, we demonstrate that Chrysosgelos' thesis also holds for UP in relation to the war in Ukraine. Its divergent positions on weapons deliveries, NATO, sanctions, and accession signalling did not translate into policy change. Thus, we argue that UP's response amounted to little more than 'growling' – abstentions or soft distancing – rather than substantive action or biting, understood here as vetoes, negotiated retreats by the executive, or even a coalition break-up.

The war in Ukraine is particularly revealing in the Spanish context because it highlights clear FP differences between the country's two coalition partners. PSOE is now a conventional European social-democratic party, although it was anti-US and anti-NATO before its 1986 'transatlantic conversion.' In fact, that very shift had led to the creation of Izquierda Unida (IU), one of the key components of the UP coalition, which remains anti-NATO and anti-EU.

³ See Section 2. As for the case of non-European states, particularly the United States, it lies beyond the scope of this study.

⁴ This approach has now become a 'trendy topic' in the academic study of populism and FP. For a recent example, see: Monteleone, Müller and Coutto (2026).

The PSOE-UP coalition government formed in 2019 was a 'first' in post-Franco Spain, as previous governments had consisted exclusively of either minority or majority administrations of a similar political colour. Led by PSOE Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, the government under review included Unidas Podemos, itself a coalition of smaller parties and groupings: primarily Podemos, Izquierda Unida (including the Spanish Communist Party, PCE, the core of IU), En Comú Podem, and Galicia en Común (see [Table 1](#)). In a different coalition form, this model continues to the present.⁵ Within UP, Podemos, the alliance's main component, first gained prominence in Spain's 2015 general election, after winning several seats in the EP elections the previous year (Orriols and Cordero 2016). Numerous scholars have categorised this radical left-wing coalition grouping as 'populist' (Kioupkiolis 2016; González Castro 2021; Olivás Osuna 2021; Ramírez Nárdiz 2023; see also Caravantes 2021; Vampa 2020).

In addition to this coalition, and in order to secure Sánchez's investiture, PSOE also received support from parliamentary groups that did not form part of the minority government, including independentist or nationalist parties from Catalonia, the Basque Country and Galicia – Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC), Junts per Catalunya (JxC), EH Bildu, Partido Nacionalista Vasco (PNV) and the Bloque Nacionalista Galego (BNG) – as well as other smaller groupings (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (Country Office for Spain and Portugal) 2023, 1). [Figure 1](#) provides an overview of the parties represented across the political spectrum during the 2019–2023 legislature.

To date, there has been little analysis of intra-coalition discrepancies on the war in Ukraine. Existing commentary prior to Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion noted tensions between the coalition partners on other dossiers (such as Venezuela or Western Sahara), and argued that UP had 'resigned' itself to leaving full control of FP to PSOE (Xuclà 2022). This reflected a 2019 agreement between the leaders of PSOE (Pedro Sánchez) and UP (Pablo Iglesias) on the so-called 'state policies' ('políticas de Estado'), which placed FP under PSOE leadership. The same point was repeated after the 2022 invasion (Vallín 2022), but without offering any analysis as to why. Therefore, the literature lacks a systematic study of Spain's left-populist coalition partner (UP) on the war in Ukraine, one that maps intra-coalition divergence across issue domains and tests whether dissent altered policy outputs. This article aims to fill that gap.

This article proceeds as follows. The next section (Part 2) reviews the scholarship on populism and FP. Part 3 presents the methodology. Part 4 traces Spain's stance toward Russia up to early 2022, with particular attention to its perceived ambivalence in opposing Putin's expansionist policy after the 2014 annexation of Crimea. Part 5 analyses Spain's response from February 2022 to July 2023, showing that the government remained fully aligned with the EU and NATO even as UP, the junior coalition partner, repeatedly voiced rhetorical divergence from PSOE. These disagreements did not translate into

⁵ After snap elections in July 2023 and several months under a caretaker government due to inconclusive coalition negotiations, a new minority government was formed in October 2023, comprising a coalition between the PSOE and SUMAR (a successor to UP). Consequently, UP as such has ceased to exist.

Table 1. Groupings comprising the Confederal Parliamentary Group of Unidas Podemos–En Comú Podem–Galicia en Común in the Congress of Deputies during the XIV Legislature of Spain (2019–2023) Source: Authors’ elaboration.

Groupings that composed the Confederal Parliamentary Group of Unidas Podemos–En Comú Podem–Galicia en Común in the Congress of Deputies during the XIV Legislature of Spain (2019–2023), with a total of 33 seats*:

Broader grouping (national)	Unidas Podemos	Podemos (20)
	Unidas Podemos	Izquierda Unida** (3)
	Unidas Podemos	Independientes (Alianza Verde) (1)
Broader grouping (Catalonia)	En Comú Podem	Barcelona en Comú (2)
	En Comú Podem	Esquerra Unida Catalunya (1)
	En Comú Podem	Iniciativa per Catalunya Verds (1)
	En Comú Podem	Podemos (3)
Broader grouping (Galicia)	Galicia en Común	Esquerda Unida (1)
	Galicia en Común	Podemos (1)

* Unidas Podemos initially had 35 deputies in the 2019–2023 legislature, but this number decreased to 33 following two departures from the group. Check the additions and removals here: https://www.congreso.es/en/grupos/composicion-en-la-legislatura?p_p_id=grupos&p_p_lifecycle=0&p_p_state=normal&p_p_mode=view&_grupos_gruposView=true&idLegislatura=XIV&idGrupo=204&mostrarFicha=true&last_search=1.

**Izquierda Unida is a coalition that brings together various regional parties, each of which includes multiple organisations within its structure. For example, Izquierda Unida-Madrid integrates, among others, the Communist Party of Madrid (Partido Comunista de Madrid, PCE) and the Union of Communist Youth of Spain (Unión de Juventudes Comunistas de España), while Izquierda Unida of Castilla-La Mancha includes, among others, the Communist Party of Castilla-La Mancha. This federal configuration allows the regional federations of Izquierda Unida to bring together regional parties and organisations that share a common ideological base.

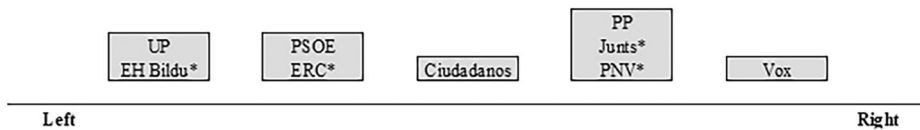


Figure 1. Simplified political spectrum of Spain’s 2019–2023 legislature, including parties with four or more seats. Source: Authors’ elaboration.

*Nationalist or pro-independence party

changes in Spain’s foreign policy outputs. Part 6 concludes and outlines avenues for future research.

Literature overview: Populism and foreign policy

The intersection of populism and foreign policy has increasingly become a focus of academic attention. The literature converges on two broad premises: first, populism does affect external action; second, those effects are contingent on host ideology and context, while the empirical evidence remains uneven and is rarely organised around comparable outcomes (Chryssogelos 2021a; Destradi, Cadier, and Plagemann 2021; Gratius et al. 2021; Verbeek and Zaslove 2017). Populism, often described as a ‘thin-centred ideology’, is content-light and typically attaches to a ‘host’ or thick ideology that supplies programmatic content (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013; Neuner and Wratil 2022). At the same time, populism continues to be defined in different

ways and assessed through diverse approaches. These include ideational, discursive, or foreign policy change perspectives, whether treated separately or in combination, and usually with attention to specific national, regional, and historical contexts (Chryssogelos 2021b, 4). Given space constraints, this article does not provide a comprehensive review of the literature on populism or an in-depth discussion of its relationship to foreign policy (see Chryssogelos 2025). Instead, it offers a brief overview.

Most definitions of populism as a thin ideology contain a division between 'the people' and 'the elites': the former are regarded as morally pure, whereas the latter are regarded as significantly less so, both at the national and international levels (Destradi, Cadier, and Plagemann 2021, 667; see also Betti and Gratius 2021, 36–45). Much of the literature on populism 'share[s] a common core: the triad of people, elite, and general will' (Thiers and Wehner 2022, 2). 'The people' is an abstract and diffuse social construction that leaves plenty of room for populist leaders to stretch, manipulate, and construct its meaning, while 'the elite' generally refers to the political and economic elite of the country; at the global level, references often shift to a 'cosmopolitan elite' (Thiers and Wehner 2022, 2; see also Wehner and Thies 2021). Populism is frequently centred on the preservation or revival of a country's native values and traditions, framed in opposition to a cosmopolitan elite perceived as undermining the sovereignty of the people, whether at the national or regional level (see Chryssogelos 2021b). As for the 'general will', it reflects the populist leader's claim that *only they actually know* what the people really desire and want (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017).

Regarding populism as a thick ideology, 'right-wing populism refers to the ethnic nation' (Nesti and Graziano 2022, 186; see also Ramírez Nárdiz 2023), and is typically associated with nativism and anti-immigration politics (Mudde 2013), anti-globalization (Mudde 2007; Rodrik 2018), and, in Europe, Euroscepticism (Mudde 2007; Taggart and Szczerbiak 2004). Some movements also espouse anti-American or pro-Kremlin stances (Chryssogelos 2017). Left-wing populism, by contrast, identifies 'the people' in socio-economic terms, for instance as the working class exploited by a 'bourgeois elite' (Nesti and Graziano 2022, 186). Accordingly, left-wing populist movements tend to be egalitarian, foregrounding redistribution, social rights and anti-austerity politics in opposition to neoliberal governance (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013; Ramiro and Gomez 2017).

As far as populist parties' positions toward Russia⁶ are concerned, the literature has devoted far more attention to right-wing populism than to its left-wing counterpart (for instance, on the Spanish radical right and Ukraine, see Marcos-Marne 2023). The literature reflects a core ideological contrast: the populist right often represents Putin as the embodiment of a strong, populist right-wing leader defending national interests and identity, which can generate a form of symbolic affinity; left-wing populists, by contrast, are more commonly framed as 'anti-imperialist internationalists' and as structurally sceptical of NATO and Western security agendas, which can produce a different, often anti-militarist, path to Russia-related positioning (Chryssogelos 2021b, 7, 17).

⁶ For an analysis of Putin's use of populism to justify his policy toward Ukraine, see Tipaldou and Casula (2018).

Beyond this left-right distinction, a broader strand of scholarship highlights that Russia has sought to cultivate relations with parts of the European populist spectrum. Rohac, Zgut, and Györi (2017, 11) argue that:

[a]lthough the rise of populism in Europe reflects domestic political realities, it has also become a factor in the geopolitical conflicts on the continent. ... It is not a conspiracy theory to point out that the Kremlin and Europe's populists' interests are aligned.

Hungary provides one example of how such overlaps may emerge: populist rhetoric was employed to rationalise a revisionist FP that included the politicisation of the diplomatic machinery, confrontation with traditional allies, and the diversification of partnerships toward Russia and China (Visnovitz and Jenne 2021). This creates a recognisable 'Russian connection' within the populist surge in Europe, but it does not imply a uniform pro-Russia line: comparative research shows that populist parties remain heterogeneous across countries, ideological families, and specific issue areas. Against this backdrop, the following paragraphs map how this heterogeneity appears on the populist left across different institutional arenas.

In the European Parliament, populist left parties displayed the lowest assertiveness towards Russia before February 2022, but became more assertive after the full-scale invasion (Holesch, Zagórski, and Ramiro 2024). Even so, they have remained the most divided on sanctions while converging more strongly around support for international law. These divisions are not random: they correlate with parties' socio-cultural profiles, with socio-culturally progressive parties 'more inclined to support an assertive stance towards Putin's authoritarian and traditionalist Russia' (Wagner 2025, 629).

At the national level, populist left positions toward Russia and Ukraine remain heterogeneous (Wondreys, March, and Pytlas 2025). Even so, the comparative literature identifies several recurring tendencies: far-left parties are broadly portrayed as 'anti-militarist' in their responses to the war because 'while they condemned and criticised Russia, they also criticised the West's role in the conflict' (Fagerholm 2024a, 847). In a similar vein, Fagerholm (2024b, 18) suggests that 'the more populist a far left or far right party is, the more likely it is to express sympathy with Russia'.

Finally, office-holding can reshape these orientations. Comparative studies similarly find that populist rhetoric and EU-scepticism predict lower support for Ukraine, yet 'many strongly populist and European Union-sceptical parties take moderate pro-Ukraine positions when in government' (Hooghe et al. 2024, 460). This pattern aligns with the broader literature on populism and FP, much of which focuses on right-wing cases and shows that populist parties often moderate their positions once they assume power. The impact of populism on FP varies by case, policy area, and mediating factors: 'geopolitical contexts, domestic institutional conditions, coalition dynamics and, especially, the duration in office have mediated the influence of populism on foreign policy' (Destradi, Cadier, and Plagemann 2021, 676). In practice, the distinctive mark of populist governments often lies more in discourse and style, with limited change to core policy lines when in office: in Poland, change was concentrated in practices rather than content (Cadier 2021; Cadier and Szulecki 2020); in Italy, symbolic public posturing did not produce directional shifts given constraints such as

coalition dynamics (Coticchia 2021; Verbeek and Zaslove 2015); and in Greece, the effects were largely rhetorical and symbolic, yielding a 'bark more than bite' pattern, especially on FP issues (Chryssogelos 2021a; 2021b).

The literature reviewed above points to three findings. These, in turn, lead to the following expectations, which we explore in detail in our article. First, comparative findings show that, more often than not, populist parties in office engage in symbolic rather than substantive dissent. When coalition dynamics limit unilateral action, when multilateral commitments raise the costs of deviation, and when time in office is limited, populist dissent is more likely to take the form of symbolic differentiation (referred to in our study as 'growling'), rather than of durable output change. Given that UP was the junior partner, that Spain is deeply embedded in the multilateral system, and that UP's time in office was limited (2020–2023), we expect UP's divergence from PSOE to be frequent at the rhetorical level and concentrated in low-cost arenas, such as parliamentary speeches or non-binding motions, while having little or no observable effect on Spain's foreign policy outputs.

Second, studies of the European populist left after February 2022 point to a distinctive combination of stronger anti-militarist and anti-NATO predispositions with a continued attachment to international law and humanitarian commitments, producing uneven assertiveness across issues. On this basis, we expect UP's greatest rhetorical distance from the government to cluster around hard-security and coercive domains – military assistance, NATO and EU integration, and sanctions – while alignment should be greater on condemnation of the invasion, humanitarian support, and the defence of international law.

Third, because UP is an alliance of parties and factions with uneven ideological profiles and FP traditions, we expect observable internal variation in both the tone and the targets of dissent. More radical components and figures should articulate stronger 'growling,' while others should adopt more pragmatic or coalition-compatible positions, producing contestation within UP even when overall policy outputs remain stable.

The following sections will further illustrate this dynamic, from the still underexplored perspective of a left-wing populist actor in a coalition government. This approach is original, and therefore contributes to the literature, because comparative research has devoted far less attention to how left-populist participation in coalition governments has affected FP decisions. The case of the SYRIZA-led coalition under Prime Minister Tsipras in Greece differs in key aspects, not least because it was a coalition between a left-wing party and a right-wing one (see Chryssogelos 2021a). Our case on UP therefore adds detail on how dissent is channelled under coalition and international constraints in a Western European setting. We analyse UP as junior partner in a PSOE-led government (2020–2023), tracing dissent and its translation, or non-translation, into policy outputs across six domains: condemnation of the invasion, humanitarian aid, military assistance, EU and NATO integration, sanctions, and reactions to Zelensky's parliamentary address.

Methodology

This study combines qualitative process tracing with systematic analysis of recorded votes in the lower house of Spain's Parliament, the Congress of

Deputies, over the lifetime of the PSOE-UP coalition (January 2020–July 2023). The research design is a single-case study focused on the junior partner, UP, and its positioning on Spain's response to Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Our objective is not to analyse all FP activity during this period, but rather to identify, classify and compare UP's stances on Ukraine across different issue domains and arenas, and to assess whether and how dissent translated into policy outputs.

We assembled the chronology of events and public positions using primary institutional sources and contemporaneous reporting. Parliamentary transcripts ('Diarios de Sesiones') and official records and gazettes ('Boletines'/BOCG) were used to recover debates, committee interventions, formal motions, and leadership statements. Press coverage and parties' public statements were consulted to organise announcements, ministerial remarks and intra-party reactions into a coherent account. Roll-call behaviour in the Spanish Congress and relevant committees was collected exclusively from the Congress archives and official voting records. In the main text, we report only aggregate patterns and representative votes.

To structure the evidence, we organised votes, motions and salient statements into six recurring policy domains: (1) condemnation and war framing; (2) humanitarian and macroeconomic support; (3) military and security assistance; (4) EU and NATO integration and membership signalling; (5) sanctions and other coercive measures; and (6) reactions to President Zelensky's parliamentary addresses. Allocation to these domains was based pragmatically on the dominant policy content indicated in titles and operative clauses. For each item, we recorded the stance taken by PSOE and by the UP parliamentary group and, where relevant, by individual UP components. Alignment or divergence is described qualitatively in the narrative. Abstentions are treated, where the context supports such an interpretation, as a form of distancing when PSOE adopted a clear 'for' line; where UP splits internally, we report the majority position within the group. An internal UP split is recorded when no single majority position existed within the UP delegation (e.g., equal division between 'for' and 'abstention'). Policy impact is operationalised narrowly: we examine whether UP's dissent corresponded to any change in, or blockage of, governmental policy outputs, such as weapons deliveries, sanctions positions, or treaty ratifications. In the absence of such effects, we characterise the behaviour as 'symbolic differentiation.'

The approach has several limitations. Not all parliamentary decisions generate recorded electronic votes; where votes were not individually recorded, we rely on the *Diario de Sesiones* and official summaries. Treating abstentions as divergence may overstate distance in cases where abstention signals conditional agreement. Finally, the design identifies correlations between dissent and outcomes rather than causal effects. Our claims about 'symbolic differentiation' therefore rest on the combination of observed voting behaviour and the absence of any actual policy change.

The next section provides the broader context by examining Madrid's response to the initial phase of the war in 2014 and earlier.

Spain's relations with Russia prior to the 2022 invasion

To contextualise Spain's reaction to the 2022 invasion, we first trace Spanish FP towards Russia in the post-Franco period. The aim is to sharpen the contrast with Spain's full support for Ukraine since 2022 and to show why discrepancies between UP and PSOE matter. Since joining NATO and the EU, Spain's FP has often been described as fully Europeanised (Barbé 2022). There have, however, been notable exceptions, such as the pro-US 'neo-con' policy pursued by Partido Popular (PP) Prime Minister José María Aznar during the 2003 Iraq war, which was rejected by all other parties and by a large majority of Spaniards (Hummel 2007, 30–33).

In Spain, the pacifist dimension has been particularly associated with the left, broadly defined. With regard to NATO, including during the Cold War, a significant split emerged in the mid-1980s (as noted above): on one side stood PSOE, following its 1986 'conversion' to Atlanticism; on the other, the rest of the left, beginning with the PCE. As a result, these other parties formed a new coalition, IU, to oppose what they saw as a fundamental shift (see essays in Ayer 2016), despite the subsequent approval by referendum and the recognition of Atlanticism as a preliminary step towards EU membership. At the same time, several observers have pointed to a relatively 'ambivalent' Spanish approach towards Russia:

Since the re-establishment of diplomatic relations with Russia, Spain has maintained an independent policy that has sometimes led to conflicts of interest with NATO ... All the parties that have governed Spain have privileged the relationship with Moscow. ... [In short,] Spain has not always followed the line set by Brussels as far as its relationship with Russia is concerned (Moreno Barahona and Priego 2022, 106).

After Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, such reservations still persisted, even though Mariano Rajoy's right-wing government supported the EU and the wider international community in condemning Moscow's decision to annex Crimea, to intervene in the Donbas, and to wage a 'hybrid' war in the region. By early 2022, when Russia launched its full-scale invasion, the conflict had already resulted in more than 14,000 casualties (Barbé and Mestres 2014, 6).

Spain's PP Prime Minister from 2011 to 2018, Mariano Rajoy, was reluctant to support sanctions (Europa Press Madrid 2014). Madrid was initially described as 'keen to avoid tensions with Russia,' which helps explain its 'ambiguous' stance. However, its position gradually shifted, becoming more critical as it increasingly aligned itself with 'Berlin and Paris' (de Borja Lasheras and de Pedro 2017, 20). Even so, Spain soon resumed contacts with Russia, including military-level visits, while simultaneously increasing its contributions to NATO deployments in the Baltic states (de Borja Lasheras and de Pedro 2017, 20–21). Powell and Encina (2023, 2) further note that the 2014 Spanish External Action Strategy – published shortly after Russia's annexation of Crimea – still referred to Russia as a potential 'strategic partner' of the Atlantic Alliance.⁷

⁷ See also the 2009 Strategic Partnership Agreement signed between Zapatero and President Medvedev (Sánchez Andrés and de Pedro 2015: 4).

Spain's domestic politics were central to the government's positioning. Madrid consistently emphasised the principle of territorial integrity, not only with regard to Ukraine but also in relation to Catalonia.⁸ For instance, 'in 2014, the focus [in Madrid] was placed on delinking the Catalan process from the Scottish referendum scheduled for 18 September 2014 and thus delegitimising any unilateral declaration of independence, such as that of Kosovo or more recently over Crimea' (Barbé and Mestres 2014, 5–6). Sánchez Andrés and de Pedro (2015, 1–2) argue that:

The roots of the Spanish position towards Russia lie in a degree of historical inertia and are the result of a combination of political and economic considerations [for instance, trade, tourism, investment]).

Nonetheless, Spain ratified the EU–Ukraine Association Agreement in 2014⁹ and did not oppose sanctions. Ferrero-Turrión (2020, 201–202) accordingly describes:

[t]he Spanish government's attitude towards the sanctions policy towards Russia has been ambivalent. ... moving between ... on the one hand, the maintenance of unanimity in the [European] Council, and on the other, their growing economic and commercial interests as a result of the economic crisis ... continuing doing business [sic] with Moscow, especially in infrastructure and tourism, two essential sources of income for the current Spanish economy.

As for PSOE, then in opposition, its stance centred on rejecting domestic analogies with Catalan independence. PSOE Secretary General Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba criticised the government's comparison between events in Kyiv and Catalonia:

I don't know if that's the best comparison. I think we have to talk about what is happening in Catalonia. (Antena 3 Noticias 2014; La Vanguardia 2014).

Podemos, also then in opposition, showed signs of sympathy towards Russia rooted in their ideological perspective, which views Russia as an alternative to what Podemos described as 'the hypocrisy and abuses of the liberal order'; it was 'the only main Spanish party calling for an immediate, unconditional lifting of sanctions on Russia' (de Borja Lasheras and de Pedro 2017, 23).

Spain's public opinion, although beyond the scope of our article, was generally disengaged from the issue and comparatively open to engagement with Russia. Some segments of Spain's public opinion accepted elements of Moscow's narrative according to which Russia was merely responding to Western geostrategic encirclement. This was partly linked to 'rampant' anti-Americanism, dating back to US support of the Franco regime during the Cold War, and partly to ideological legacies, particularly during Spain's post-Franco

⁸ See Spanish Foreign Minister Alfonso Dastis's visit to Kyiv on 30 October 2017 at the height of the Catalan independence debate. For more details, see: Kinson (2017).

⁹ For details of the Agreement, see Van der Loo, Van Elsuwege and Petrov (2014). Ukraine's then President Viktor Yanukovich's November 2013 decision to suspend its signing was a key trigger of the Maidan mobilisations (Diuk 2014; Shveda and Park 2016).

transition to democracy, when the PCE strongly advocated Eurocommunism (de Borja Lasheras and de Pedro 2017; for more on Eurocommunism, see Donofrio 2013).

In sum, Spain's pre-2022 policy combined Europeanised alignment with episodes of caution, ambivalence and pragmatism: more inertia than initiative. This is especially visible when contrasted with Spain's more active role in the EU's policies towards the Mediterranean or Latin America. Emphasising this earlier, at times lukewarm, response is important in order to appreciate the contrast with the current Spanish government's full support for Ukraine since 2022, to which the next section now turns.

Spain and Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine: comparing and contrasting reactions between the government coalition partners

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Madrid expressed full support for Ukraine's independence and sovereignty. It strongly condemned Russia's war of aggression, especially in light of the Russian armed forces' repeated targeting of civilian infrastructure and other non-military sites, causing significant casualties,¹⁰ as illustrated by the bombing of the Mariupol maternity hospital in March 2022 and the massacres in Bucha in April 2022. Spain has fully aligned itself with, supported, and engaged in the decisions and actions of the EU, NATO, other Western nations, and most of the international democratic community.

Just over a year after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Powell and Encina (2023, 1–2) argued that:

Spain's response has reflected the country's position as a strong and dependable ally of NATO and as a Member State of the EU that is fully committed to the defence of their values and interests ... fully committed to the defence of Ukrainian national sovereignty and territorial integrity

They also contrasted this stance with the lukewarm response of PSOE Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero to Russia's 2008 war in Georgia and the tepid condemnation by PP Prime Minister Rajoy of the 2014 annexation of Crimea and partial occupation of the Donbas (Powell and Encina 2023, 1–2; see also above).

Powell and Encina (2023, 2) suggested that two factors could have produced a different Spanish response to Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine: 'pacifist inclinations of many PSOE voters and the fact that their coalition partner (Podemos) initially seemed to favour a diplomatic solution to the conflict instead of providing military support'. They noted, however, that this did not occur. Instead, they provided a detailed account of Spain's political, diplomatic, military, financial, economic, and humanitarian contributions to Ukraine. Their study nevertheless remains relatively brief and does not explore in depth the differences between the two coalition partners. Molina (2022, 101–104) has argued that 'Spain does not currently have a specific policy towards Russia', or that 'Spain's relationship with Russia is marked by

¹⁰ There are plenty of studies on the subject, see *inter alia*: Marchuk and Wanigasuriya (2022).

distance.’ This interpretation does not fully take into account the collective security and defence implications of Spain’s EU and NATO memberships.

To focus on the main subject of this study, we first examine the areas in which the two government coalition partners converged, before tracing those in which their positions diverged, albeit without leading to a coalition break-up.¹¹ Madrid’s responses to Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine can be grouped under six broad headings. These range from areas of alignment (such as the condemnation of the invasion and the provision of humanitarian assistance to Ukraine) to domains where the coalition partners expressed clear disagreement (particularly on military support, NATO, EU membership, and sanctions).

First, Spain’s government condemned the invasion as a violation of international law and called for a diplomatic solution to the conflict. As Foreign Minister José Manuel Albares (2022) wrote ahead of NATO’s June 2022 Summit in Madrid:

The mass graves in Bucha, Ukraine, during an illegal, unjust and unjustifiable war in Europe and the use of energy flows or of irregular migratory movements as instruments of pressure on our own countries are threats and attacks that break up all the existing geostrategic paradigms taken for granted by the international community for decades.

At the political level, both UP and PSOE **agreed on condemning Russia’s invasion of Ukraine**. PSOE pledged ‘full support for the Ukrainian government and its citizens’ (PSOE 2022a). UP and IU likewise issued statements condemning Russia’s actions while calling for diplomatic solutions. Podemos advocated for the ‘immediate cessation of troop deployment’ and de-escalation, highlighting that any violation of a nation’s territorial integrity constitutes a breach of international law (Podemos 2022), while IU echoed this position (Izquierda Unida 2022). By February 2023, PSOE and UP remained aligned in their condemnation of the Russian invasion: both parties supported a unanimous parliamentary vote (344–0–0),¹² on a clause within a broader motion,¹³ denouncing the ‘unjust invasion’ as a breach of international law and a source of significant humanitarian suffering.

Second, Spain’s government made an early commitment to **humanitarian aid and support for Ukrainian refugees** at the national, EU and international levels (Azcárraga Monzonís 2022). Politically, both coalition partners supported this approach. PSOE pledged financial and humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, alongside support for refugees arriving in Spain (PSOE 2022b). UP also backed assistance for Ukrainian refugees, but stressed that people fleeing other wars and humanitarian crises should be treated equally, rather than privileging

¹¹ There are many studies on the impact of the invasion on individual countries (including on Spain) or groups of states, both in general terms or on specific policy areas such as the economy, energy, food supplies, tourism, or refugees. For instance, see: La Moncloa (2022); DatosRTVE (2023); Feás and Steinberg (2022); Korosteleva (2022); Guichard, Machado, and Maystadt (2022); Milios (2022); Escribano (2022).

¹² See voting details of the clause: https://www.congreso.es/webpublica/opendata/votaciones/Leg14/Sesion242/20230309/Votacion008/VOT_20230309144230.pdf.

¹³ See the motion: https://www.congreso.es/backoffice_doc/prensa/notas_prensa/96781_1678105166743.pdf.

those coming from Ukraine alone (Negrete 2022). It also took part in pro-refugee campaigns across Spain (Diario de 2022).

This consensus was also reflected in legislative action. In March 2023, the Congress' Committee on International Development Cooperation approved a non-binding motion¹⁴ urging the Spanish government to reinforce humanitarian aid, especially for countries facing food insecurity as a consequence of the war in Ukraine. The resolution – introduced by PSOE – was adopted without opposition: 27 members voted in favour (including UP) and 7 abstained.

Third, Spain's government launched multiple **military initiatives** in support of Ukraine, including the provision of supplies, training, and equipment, whether unilaterally or through NATO and the EU's European Peace Facility Fund.¹⁵ This issue marked **one of the key divergences** between the two coalition partners. Under the 2019 coalition agreement, decisions on so-called 'state policies' fell within the PSOE's remit, including the decision to send weapons to Ukraine (Vallín 2022; see also above). While PSOE initially hesitated, it eventually aligned itself with the European consensus in favour of bilateral military assistance to Ukraine. UP, by contrast, consistently opposed arms shipments and argued instead for diplomatic solutions. As a result, military aid became a major point of contention, not only between PSOE and UP but **also within UP itself**.

In the immediate aftermath of the invasion, the government was reluctant to send weapons to Ukraine outside established European mechanisms. Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez initially signalled his unwillingness to engage in direct arms shipments (Cruz 2022a). However, as several European countries, including socialist-led Portugal, began supplying military aid, the Spanish government revised its stance. By March 2022, Sánchez decided to send arms bilaterally to Ukraine, reversing his earlier position (Cruz 2022b; Romero and Muñoz 2023).

In contrast, UP firmly opposed arms shipments from the outset. Both Podemos and IU issued statements in February 2022 calling for non-military solutions, with Podemos also advocating international restrictions on arms sales in conflict zones (Izquierda Unida 2022; Podemos 2022). Izquierda Unida (2022) urged Spain not to 'directly or indirectly contribute to fuelling this conflict'. Podemos (2022) emphasised the need for 'strategic autonomy' within the EU and called for an 'independent European cooperative peace and security architecture', while also advocating diplomacy and 'world peace'. Podemos spokespersons stated that 'you cannot wage war in the name of peace' (Servimedia 2022a). Izquierda Unida (2022) similarly described diplomacy as 'the sole means to resolve conflicts.' This anti-war stance was consistent with

¹⁴ See the motion: https://www.congreso.es/public_oficiales/L14/CONG/DS/CO/DSCD-14-CO-839.PDF.

¹⁵ See <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/european-peace-facility/>. On EU support to Ukraine via this mechanism, see: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/european-peace-facility/#ukraine>. For a global assessment a year or so into the war, which also includes Spain's contribution, see also Mills (2022); Esplá (2022); González (2023). For more details, see the Spanish Ministry of Defence's dedicated webpage: <https://emad.defensa.gob.es/operaciones/operaciones-nacionales/80-OTRAS-OPERACIONES/81-UAMAM-UCRANIA/index.html>.

Podemos's broader pacifist ideology, including its opposition to NATO and militarisation.

Despite this shared public rhetoric, internal divisions within UP soon surfaced. In a press conference in Congress, Jaume Asens (En Comú Podem), president of the UP parliamentary group, partly distanced himself from the broader UP position: he insisted that 'the resistance of the Ukrainian army is legitimate' and that it was therefore also 'legitimate for the international community to provide assistance to the state that has been attacked' (Servimedia 2022a). At the same time, he sought to downplay tensions by describing them as a matter of 'different sensibilities', endorsed Sánchez's cautious approach, and argued that, while military aid could be legitimate, it should remain secondary to economic sanctions in order to avoid 'escalating the conflict' (Servimedia 2022a).

These intra-UP tensions deepened in March 2022 after the government decided to send arms bilaterally to Ukraine. Spanish government Second Deputy Vice-President (and Labour and Social Economy Minister) Yolanda Díaz (Galicia en Común), together with ministers Alberto Garzón (Izquierda Unida) and Joan Subirats (En Comú Podem), opposed the arms shipments but accepted that it was ultimately Sánchez's decision, in line with the coalition agreement mentioned above (Chouza and Cué 2023; Vallín 2022).

In contrast, Spain's Minister of Equality, Irene Montero (Podemos), declared that 'No to war' would be the slogan of the feminist demonstration on 8 March 2022.¹⁶ Meanwhile, Podemos Secretary General and Minister of Social Rights, Ione Belarra, opposed the decision to send arms to Ukraine and launched a campaign for a 'European Front for Peace' (Vallín 2022). This opened what was described as an 'obvious rift' within UP: Podemos adopted a hardline anti-military stance, while Yolanda Díaz and other non-Podemos UP members sought to distance themselves from it (Vallín 2022).

Minister of Consumer Affairs and IU leader Alberto Garzón warned that if these internal divisions were not addressed, they could lead to early elections and potentially destabilise UP (Vallín 2022). The split within UP became even more visible when Ione Belarra referred to PSOE as a 'party of war' after Sánchez authorised bilateral arms deliveries to Ukraine (Ríos 2023). This statement heightened tensions within the UP-PSOE coalition, prompting Yolanda Díaz and others within UP to engage in damage control efforts. Although Podemos later withdrew the 'party of war' label, and Sánchez and Belarra made a joint public appearance in an attempt to project unity, tensions between Podemos and the other factions of UP persisted for months (Ríos 2023).

The government's decision to send Leopard tanks to Ukraine in early 2023 deepened these divisions further. UP asked the Spanish Ministry of Defence to disclose detailed information on the weapons supplied to Ukraine (El Periódico 2023). Belarra warned that sending tanks would 'only contribute to the escalation of the war' and could trigger an 'unpredictable and very dangerous response' from Russia (Ríos 2023). Enrique Santiago, Secretary General of the Communist Party of Spain, Deputy Spokesperson of the UP parliamentary group, and Secretary of State for the 2030 Agenda, cautioned against a

¹⁶ International Women's Day is celebrated on 8 March.

'catastrophic stalemate' that could result from increasing military involvement and the risks associated with the participation of nuclear powers (Ortiz 2023). Podemos spokesperson Pablo Echenique denounced what he called 'NATO's war frenzy,' arguing that further arms deliveries would only fuel the conflict and serve the interests of 'warlords' (Europa Press Nacional 2023). Former Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias went further, questioning whether Spain was ready for a war with Russia, and warning of 'young Spaniards returning in wooden boxes' (Ríos 2023). By contrast, Yolanda Díaz sought to avoid open confrontation by advocating for diplomatic solutions without explicitly supporting or opposing the arms shipments (Ríos 2023).

Further tensions arose over Spain's commitment to increasing defence spending and allowing additional US destroyers to be stationed at the Rota naval base. To avoid exacerbating divisions within the coalition – especially given UP's intention to oppose the measure – PSOE bypassed parliamentary approval and finalised the decision through executive action in January. In doing so, it avoided another public clash between the coalition partners (Ríos 2023).

Fourth, with regard to **Ukraine's relationship with the EU and NATO**, including possible future membership, the Spanish Prime Minister emphasised that no valid comparison or equivalence could be drawn between Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Ukraine's right to self-defence (Ruiz Sierra and Rodríguez 2023). As a result, he stressed the importance of EU and NATO support for Ukraine, including the prospect of future membership. A number of such commitments have been repeated since the invasion, culminating in Ukraine obtaining EU membership candidate status in June 2022. To underline this stance, Sánchez inaugurated Spain's rotating Presidency of the Council of the EU on 1 July 2023 from Kyiv. As reported in *Le Monde* (2023), he reaffirmed the EU's support for Ukraine's accession during a joint press conference with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, stating that his presence in Kyiv on the first day of Spain's Presidency demonstrated a clear political commitment on the part of the EU. Addressing the Ukrainian Parliament, he acknowledged that Ukraine's European aspirations had been one of the triggers for Russia's invasion. He described the EU's decision to grant candidate status to Ukraine as a just recognition, while also acknowledging the challenges that lay ahead, particularly in the context of the ongoing war.

At the political level, the issue of Ukraine's **potential EU membership** further highlighted the divisions between UP and PSOE. Most UP deputies abstained in a national parliamentary vote in May in support of Ukraine's EU candidacy, while one deputy voted against it (Barro 2023; Constantini 2022). In the same month, UP deputy Lucía Muñoz Dalda used her intervention in the Foreign Affairs Committee to argue that Ukraine's accession should not be delinked from peace negotiations, warning that framing EU membership as a wartime issue risked deepening the conflict.¹⁷

Similarly, from the outset of the 2022 Russian invasion, UP adopted a critical position towards NATO. Podemos (2022) framed the alliance's 'policy of enlargement towards Eastern Europe' as being 'at the heart of this conflict'

¹⁷ See: https://www.congreso.es/public_oficiales/L14/CONG/DS/CO/DSCD-14-CO-683.PDF#page=21.

and argued that it was perceived by Russia as ‘a military threat.’ Podemos (2022) rejected the **possibility of Ukraine joining NATO**, stating it was ‘neither feasible nor a solution,’ a position broadly aligned with Russia’s rhetoric. Izquierda Unida (2022) echoed this view, labelling NATO a ‘destabilising factor’ and calling for its dissolution, while advocating for an independent European security policy and a neutral Ukraine. The divide between PSOE and UP was highlighted at the June 2022 NATO summit in Madrid. While the summit was promoted by Sánchez, Podemos distanced itself from it, calling for a ‘peace summit’ as an alternative (Chouza 2022; Coll 2022). This response was consistent with the left’s traditional opposition to NATO and its history of organising ‘counter-summits’ in protest against the Alliance (Romero and Muñoz 2023). Podemos’ ministers publicly declared they would not attend the NATO summit (Barro 2023).

Tensions deepened further in September 2022, when the Spanish Congress of Deputies voted on Finland and Sweden’s accession to NATO.¹⁸ At the coalition level, PSOE voted in favour *en bloc*, whereas the UP confederal group did not cast a single ‘yes.’ Its members either voted ‘no’ or abstained. In the final single-reading votes of 15 September 2022, each protocol passed by 290 votes in favour, 11 against, and 47 abstentions. Within UP specifically, 7 deputies voted ‘no’ and 26 abstained, making the split not only one between the PSOE and UP, but also an internal divide within UP itself, with IU voting against and most Podemos and En Comú deputies abstaining. This outcome encapsulates UP’s strategy of symbolic dissent on security integration: the group remained united only in refusing to endorse a ‘yes’ vote, but split between outright opposition (IU) and abstention (mostly Podemos and En Comú), while leaving the government’s pro-NATO course intact. By April 2023, UP’s anti-NATO stance remained unchanged, with IU parliamentarian Enrique Santiago reaffirming their vision of ‘a world governed by multilateralism, where military alliances like NATO [will] disappear’ (Santiago 2023).

Overall, UP’s resistance to Ukraine’s EU and NATO membership prospects functioned more as low-cost signalling than as policy leverage: Spain backed Ukraine’s EU candidacy, ratified the Nordic NATO accessions with large majorities, and maintained an unambiguous pro-NATO and pro-EU line. As a result, Spain’s Euro-Atlantic stance remained intact.

Fifth, Spain’s government has also supported and imposed **sanctions against Russia**, mainly in the economic and financial spheres, but also in relation to energy supplies. This practice, which began after the 2014 annexation of Crimea and later gained full momentum (see above), expanded significantly after 2022. It has continued ever since, with new sanctions progressively being introduced.¹⁹ At the political level, PSOE fully backed **sanctions against Russia** from the outset, viewing them as a crucial response to the invasion (Cué 2022). However, UP quickly became critical of these measures (Cabanillas

¹⁸ For Finland: https://www.congreso.es/en/busqueda-de-iniciativas?p_p_id=iniciativas&p_p_lifecycle=0&p_p_state=normal&p_p_mode=view&_iniciativas_mode=mostrarDetalle&_iniciativas_legislatura=XIV&_iniciativas_id=110/000109; for Sweden: https://www.congreso.es/en/busqueda-de-iniciativas?p_p_id=iniciativas&p_p_lifecycle=0&p_p_state=normal&p_p_mode=view&_iniciativas_mode=mostrarDetalle&_iniciativas_legislatura=XIV&_iniciativas_id=110/000108.

¹⁹ Full details of EU sanctions against Russia since its 2014 annexation of Crimea are available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions-against-russia/>.

2023). The issue of sanctions generated friction not only within the coalition, but also with other political actors, including Catalan and Basque independentist parliamentarians (Cabanillas 2023). By May 2022, Podemos had reaffirmed its opposition to sanctions during a meeting of the Congress' Foreign Affairs Committee, arguing that they were meant to 'intensify military fervour and confrontation', did not serve European interests, and ignored international fora (Constantini 2022).

This position was formalised in a non-binding proposal registered on 12 September 2022 before the Congress' Plenary by the UP parliamentary group.²⁰ The text urged the Government to prioritise immediate diplomatic negotiations and to halt measures seen as prolonging the conflict, explicitly naming economic and energy sanctions on Russia as well as arms deliveries to Ukraine. It linked sanctions to inflation, soaring energy prices and gas shortages, and argued that they primarily benefited the arms industry (especially US firms) within a NATO-driven discourse of rearmament. Although the initiative did not prosper, it placed on the parliamentary record an alternative UP position on coercive measures and military aid, illustrating coalition-level divergence over sanctions and reinforcing the broader pattern of symbolic differentiation by the junior partner.

Overall, UP made its stance clear, but it did not affect policy outcomes: Spain maintained its participation in EU sanctions, while UP signalled distance through a non-binding proposal that was ultimately not adopted by Congress.

Sixth, Spain organised **Ukrainian President Zelensky's virtual parliamentary address** as part of his tour of democratically elected legislatures. From the outset of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, President Zelensky addressed numerous parliaments worldwide *via* videoconference, including the EP and the national legislatures of the US, the UK, Canada, Japan, Norway, France and Germany. While a growing body of scholarship has analysed the rhetoric and discourse of these speeches (for instance, Humeniuk 2023; Hasanah, Try Gustary and Prasatyo 2024; Kim 2025; Maia Polo, Saxena, and Alexopoulos 2024; Matsuoka and Matsuoka 2022; Nosova and Hordecki 2024; Tetekpor, Azamede, and Tetekpor-Yooman 2022), the reactions of parliamentarians and political groups have received much less attention. In some instances, parliamentarians from extremist parties boycotted these speeches, as occurred with the Communist Party of Greece and the Italian Five Star Movement in their respective parliaments (Peoples Dispatch 2022; SWI 2022).

In Spain, the process had begun during a parliamentary debate condemning Russian aggression in Ukraine, when the PP's foreign affairs spokesperson proposed inviting President Zelensky to address the Spanish Congress *via* videoconference in March 2022 (Europa Press Nacional 2022). The proposal was supported by the PSOE's foreign affairs spokesperson and later endorsed by the Foreign Affairs Committee Chair, also from PSOE. Subsequently, President Zelensky addressed both chambers of the Spanish Parliament simultaneously by videoconference on 5 April 2022 (Powell and Encina 2023). His speech underscored the impact of the Russian invasion on Ukraine, drawing

²⁰ See: https://www.congreso.es/en/busqueda-de-iniciativas?p_p_id=iniciativas&p_p_lifecycle=0&p_p_state=normal&p_p_mode=view&_iniciativas_mode=mostrarDetalle&_iniciativas_legislatura=XIV&_iniciativas_id=162/001083.

parallels with Nazi Germany's bombing of Guernica in 1937 during the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), and highlighting the human suffering caused by the war in Ukraine. He called for stronger international support, particularly in the form of sanctions and military aid, in order to defend democracy, human rights and European values against Russian aggression. Zelensky also specifically named Spanish companies such as Maxam, Porcelanosa and Sercobe in order to denounce the fact that they were still operating in Russia (see also below).

The speech elicited varied responses from Spanish parliamentarians. Overall, it was well received and met with near-unanimous applause. Deputies from mainstream parties, including among others PSOE, PP and Ciudadanos, as well as two parliamentarians formerly affiliated with a faction of UP, wore blue-and-yellow ribbons representing the Ukrainian flag, a gesture absent among UP and members of other independentist parties, including ERC, EH Bildu and CUP (Guirado 2022). Pedro Sánchez replied to Zelensky's speech. He praised Ukraine's defence of freedom and democracy against Russian aggression and asserted the country's territorial integrity, which in turn prompted varied reactions. PSOE and UP gave Sánchez a standing ovation, the PP offered mild applause, Ciudadanos expressed its general support for Spain's policy towards Ukraine, ERC and EH Bildu remained indifferent and extreme-right Vox refrained from clapping (Casillas Bayo 2022).

A controversial point in Zelensky's speech was his naming of specific Spanish companies still operating in Russia. PSOE acknowledged the unexpected mention of these companies (Servimedia 2022b). PP did not object to Zelensky's reference. Parliamentarian Cuca Gamarra (also PP Secretary General) justified it by pointing to the pressure faced by a president fighting for his country's freedom (Servimedia 2022b). While UP members, ERC and Bildu expressed satisfaction with these references, Vox was displeased with the criticism of Spanish businesses: it argued that it was inappropriate to single out and denounce companies from a country that was helping Ukraine (Servimedia 2022b).

Another contentious point was Zelensky's reference to the bombing of Guernica. PSOE did not publicly object, and PP found the reference appropriate (Servimedia 2022c). However, Vox leader Santiago Abascal criticised Zelensky for comparing the bombing of Guernica with the civilian massacres perpetrated by Russian troops in Bucha, suggesting that a more appropriate historical reference would have been the executions at Paracuellos del Jarama, where thousands of Nationalists (supporters of Franco) were killed by Republican forces during the Spanish Civil War (Lázaro 2022; Miró 2022; Powell and Encina 2023).

Reactions within UP to Zelensky's speech were mixed, reflecting internal divisions among its parliamentarians. Enrique Santiago attended Zelensky's speech but did not join the applause. Representatives of other left-wing parties outside UP, including CUP and BNG, were also present but similarly refrained from clapping. They invoked institutional respect while voicing disagreement with Ukrainian policies, such as the banning of 11 political parties linked to Russia, including Ukraine's Communist Party, and the alleged tolerance of Nazi groups within the Ukrainian military (Calleja and Morillo 2022; Casillas Bayo 2022; Europa Press 2022; Sauer 2022).

Other UP members attended but openly criticised the speech, including Alberto Garzón. He stated that while he respected Zelensky institutionally, he condemned the suppression of political activities in Ukraine, arguing that such actions undermined democratic values (Calleja and Morillo 2022). IU reinforced this criticism on social media, arguing that Ukraine's banning of political parties and attacks on trade unions were considered undemocratic (Calleja and Morillo 2022). Álvaro Aguilera, Secretary General of the Spanish Communist Party and IU in the Madrid autonomous region, further criticised Zelensky, labelling him a 'danger to peace' and calling for an internal debate within the party (Calleja and Morillo 2022). Finally, UP parliamentarians Roser Maestro and Miguel Ángel Bustamante boycotted the event, citing their 'anti-fascist conscience' as the reason for their absence (Calleja and Morillo 2022).

The main points of contention for UP regarding Zelensky's speech were its scepticism towards NATO's 'militaristic' responses, its emphasis on diplomatic solutions rather than weapons shipments, and its criticism of Zelensky's domestic policies, especially the banning of certain political parties in Ukraine. Although prominent UP figures, such as Enrique Santiago and Alberto Garzón, voiced these objections, no major consequences actually materialised following their criticisms. Therefore, Powell and García Encina's suggestion (2023, 3) that the UP parliamentary group 'valued Zelensky's words very positively', despite opposing arms shipments to Ukraine, is not entirely accurate. Our analysis points instead to a more nuanced and complex reality. In short, Zelensky's address functioned as a high-salience, low-cost signalling arena for partisan differentiation, but it did not produce any substantive change in Spain's external positions or policy outputs.

Conclusions

This article examined how Spain's left-populist junior coalition partner, UP, reacted to Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine across six policy domains. Table 2 provides a concise comparative summary of the similarities and differences between the stances of PSOE and UP.

The first expectation (symbolic differentiation) is strongly confirmed. Across policy domains, UP repeatedly 'barked' and at times 'growled,' but did not 'bite.' While PSOE consistently aligned Spain with EU and NATO decisions and maintained a clear pro-Ukraine line, UP frequently diverged at the rhetorical level without producing observable policy change. Where UP pursued differentiation, it did so through symbolic and low-cost arenas: parliamentary speeches, reframing in public statements, abstentions, or 'no' votes that did not block executive decisions. Thus, UP's stance amounted to symbolic signalling rather than substantive obstruction, understood here as vetoes, negotiated retreats by the executive, or a coalition break-up. This pattern – frequent rhetorical divergence with negligible policy effect – is consistent with the broader academic literature on populist parties and their stances once in office, particularly considering UP's role as a junior partner in a PSOE-led government, Spain's EU and NATO membership, and UP's limited time in office (2020–2023). Although UP voiced clear contestation, the government's actual policy outputs remained unchanged: condemnation of the invasion, alignment with EU sanctions, humanitarian and refugee reception policies, bilateral and

Table 2. Comparison of PSOE and Unidas Podemos' responses to Russia's invasion of Ukraine (February 2022–July 2023). Source: Authors' elaboration.

	PSOE	UP
Condemnation of the invasion	Yes	Yes, emphasis on calls for diplomacy
Humanitarian aid and refugee support	Yes, both	Yes, both, emphasis on equal treatment for all refugees
Military assistance	Initially hesitant, then sent weapons to Ukraine (aligning with EU and NATO)	Opposed arms shipments, supported non-military solutions
NATO and EU membership prospects	Yes, both	Opposed NATO enlargement, at times calling for its dissolution, supported neutrality for Ukraine
Sanctions against Russia	Yes	Initially supported, later critical of sanctions
Zelensky's speech to Spain's Parliament	Supported	Variety of responses, mainly critical

European arms packages (including Leopard tanks), and support for Ukraine's EU candidacy. Relations were strained, but the coalition endured, allowing UP to register principled dissent while leaving Spain's external line unaffected.

The second expectation (issue-specific dissent) is also confirmed and reveals a clear distribution of disagreement. UP aligned with PSOE on condemning the invasion and on humanitarian and economic support, but systematically distanced itself in hard-security and coercive domains, such as military assistance, sanctions and EU and NATO integration. This pattern mirrors comparative findings on the populist left's anti-militarist and anti-NATO predispositions combined with continued commitment to international law and humanitarianism after February 2022.

The third expectation (intra-UP heterogeneity) is likewise supported. UP's multi-party structure generated internal variation in both the intensity and the targets of dissent. Podemos adopted the most uncompromising line against military aid and NATO, while other components (e.g., Galicia en Común and En Comú Podem) were more pragmatic, recognising the Spanish Prime Minister's authority while still expressing reservations. Episodes such as Ione Belarra's labelling of PSOE a 'party of war' – a remark later retracted – illustrated both the salience of internal factionalism and the coalition-management costs produced by stronger 'growling,' which prompted repeated public clarifications and intra-cabinet coordination.

The Spanish case therefore supports the central comparative claim – derived largely from studies of right-wing populists in office – that governing populist parties tend to privilege rhetorical contestation over actual disruption of foreign policy outputs. By testing these arguments on a left-wing populist junior coalition partner, our analysis extends their scope and refines them in two ways. First, it specifies a distinct left-populist issue profile: dissent is concentrated in hard-security and alliance-related questions (military assistance,

NATO and EU integration, sanctions) rather than in humanitarian commitments or support for international law. Second, it shows that the constraint mechanisms highlighted in a literature focused predominantly on the populist right – junior partner status, dense multilateral commitments, and little time in office – operate similarly on the populist left, fostering a stable equilibrium of 'barking and growling without biting.' UP's wartime behaviour thus does not challenge existing theories, but instead helps to clarify their boundary conditions by illustrating how left-populist ideology shapes the domains in which dissent emerges, while other constraints – notably coalition status, multilateral commitments and time in office – determine whether that dissent translates into policy change.

Future research could extend this analysis in several directions. A follow-up study of political reactions in Spain after July 2023 in relation to the war in Ukraine would be valuable, not only in light of the current PSOE–SUMAR coalition government, but also because of developments on the Ukrainian military front and the impact of US President Donald Trump's second term since January 2025. Shifts in the composition of a populist actor – especially within a coalition of smaller parties and groupings – could reshape incentives and coalition management, and therefore warrant renewed analysis of agenda-setting, dissent and policy outputs.

A complementary line of inquiry could assess whether UP's wartime positioning contributed to the diffusion of populism in Spain, for example through issue-linkage around refugees (Ukrainian and non-Ukrainian) or by connecting mobilisations such as the feminist march of 8 March 2022 to the war in Ukraine. Similarly, an analysis of UP in the EP could prove fruitful. For instance, in March 2022, despite broad support in the EP for a resolution calling for the launch of Ukraine's EU accession process, IU and most Podemos representatives abstained, with Podemos' parliamentarian Miguel Urbán voting against it, arguing that the EU was 'accelerating the militarisation of Europe and strengthening NATO's role' rather than pursuing peace (The Objective 2022; see also Holesch, Zagórski, and Ramiro 2024, 8). Future research could also compare UP with other populist parties within Europe, whether left or right, as a useful counterpoint. Along similar lines, a comparable study could be conducted on the war in Gaza. Such future research would be particularly valuable if it also incorporated the interaction between populist parties and public opinion preferences.²¹

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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²¹ See, for instance, Agenda Pública (2024).

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