

Why is it so difficult to address the Russia issue in Spain, and what should be done?

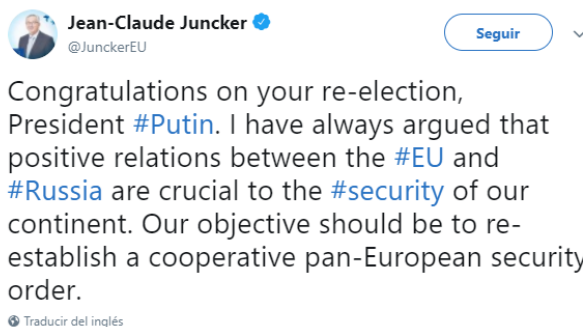
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How the Integrity Initiative could speed up its impact and influence in Spain

Russia is one, if not the most, divisive and contentious issue in the Spanish foreign policy debates nowadays. There are other contentious and emotional issues such as Venezuela or Cuba. But in these cases, there is a mainstream consensus among the main political parties (PP, PSOE, Ciudadanos-Cs) and one dissonant voice (Podemos-Ps). When it comes to Russia, pro-Russian-minded narratives are transversal and often pervading at all levels. The following are among the most recurrent ones: i) “poor Russia” was humiliated by the West in the 90s ii) the West broke the agreements on NATO expansion iii) Russia has a *natural* right to have a *natural* area of influence iv) Kosovo -which is particularly sensitive issue for Spain- is the origin of all problems, etc.

Spain’s commitment to NATO and EU’s common position towards Russia is not at risk. But many within the strategic community (Government, diplomatic service, political actors, journalists, and analysts) are willing to reinforce dialogue and explore ways to restore the relationship with the Kremlin. **A tougher line from the EU or NATO is mostly seen as counterproductive or even dangerous by most of them.** With some exceptions, the concerns caused by the Russian sudden meddling in the Catalan issue are quickly disappearing. Spanish officials seem satisfied with the explanations given by Moscow insisting on its official position supporting Spain’s territorial integrity and the fact that the Kremlin has nothing to do with the massive Russia-linked Twitter activity on Catalonia. From this viewpoint, the Russian operation has been partly successful and costless.

The view expressed by Mr Juncker in a recent tweet is probably shared by many in the Spanish FP community



The debate in Spain tends to be framed in terms of choosing Russia either as a friend/ally or enemy, i.e. a choice between cooperation and conflict. They don’t seem to understand that the real key choice is how to turn Russia into a cooperative neighbor and not an aggressive one. It goes without saying that in Spain the idea that the Kremlin feels at war with the West is widely considered as baseless and alarmist.

Some key elements to be considered

- From a security perspective, North Africa and Sahel are Spain's main concerns. Russia's growing projection in the Mediterranean Sea has not yet triggered any serious debate and attention in Spain. Depending on how it is presented, Russia could even use this as a PR tool in front of some Spanish audiences (presenting Russia as a stabilizing factor and security-provider in conflict-prone countries).
- Russia is mostly seen in Spain as a potential source of investment, tourism and business opportunities.
- President Trump is highly unpopular among Spanish audiences, including elites. If the US undertakes any bold step, either in the Korean peninsula or regarding the Iran nuclear deal, a very negative reaction (even mass demonstrations if there is a war are foreseeable). Left-wing sectors, Podemos in particular, are trying to agitate the streets to regain some lost momentum. Anti-US feelings are historically strong though latent at the moment and can be used by forces which are also sensitive to Russian narratives.
- The view about Trump affects NATO as well. Knowledge about the Alliance is rather limited in Spain (including journalists) and overall image tends to be negative.
- From historical perspective, Russia has never been a neighbor or a security issue in the Spanish Foreign Policy. Only tenuous relations in the early XIX century or the Soviet Union intervention in the Spanish civil war (1936-39) can be mentioned.
- The Russian Embassy is quite active and has outreach among Spanish key people particularly in Government, MFA, MoD and business sector. They have more difficulties reaching the press, though some conservative media are more and more assuming narratives coming from Russia (e.g. Putin as the savior of Christian communities in Syria).

What are the main difficulties?

- 1) **Russia is not perceived as problem affecting Spain's national security.**
 - Ukraine is not necessarily seen as a European security related issue, but more as a purely post-Soviet affair.
 - Skripal issue: it can be applied the same logic as when the press reports about a brutal assassination and it is presented as a "mafia dispute" (*ajuste de cuentas*). Then people seem definitely less concerned than when it is presented as the killing of an average citizen. Following this reasoning, many in Spain can think that Russians went too far but only "former Russian spies" should be truly worried.
- 2) **There is a poor understanding of today's Russia and in particular the nature of its elites** both among Spanish elites and the public opinion. Stereotypes and romanticized views about Russia are much spread. As a result, those having a rather limited knowledge tend to think that they know Russia (and the so-called Russian soul) very well and reject other views even if expressed by Russian critical scholars.
- 3) **In international politics, Spain tends to always support and adopt a conciliatory tone and pushes for dialogue.** This is a reflection of the Spanish political identity when

projecting abroad combining a lack of self-confidence in its own capacities and lack of ambition. Tough approaches are left for domestic affairs. Even critical analyses and voices about Russia are sometimes not welcome as are seen as counterproductive and in fact contributing to worsening the relationship with Moscow. Russian diplomats regularly complain to their Spanish counterparts about critical analyses published by Spanish think-tanks and media.

- 4) **Disinformation and fake news have become a highly politicized issue in Spain.** Media-standards are not the best in Spain; information -particularly in public-owned media- tends to be biased and political TV talk-shows (*tertulias*) dominate the media panorama in the country. First steps of the PP-led Government to address the fake news issue are perceived by many as an attempt to limit the freedom of speech of those critical to the Government. Recent prosecution of some rap singers has reinforced this perception.

What is required? What should be done?

Increasing the knowledge about today's Russia: a better understanding of Putin's agenda, goals and regime's nature would contribute to raise awareness.

Expand and solidify the network of likeminded individuals: despite the complaints of the Russian Embassy in Madrid, there are few individuals working on this issue in Spain. The more engaged they are among them the better in terms of impact and results. The political context is not particularly propitious for them. Links with European colleagues help reinforce their legitimacy in front of Spanish audiences.

More people and voices from more sectors are badly needed: for instance, in one hand it was positive that *El País* reported extensively about the Russian meddling in Catalonia. But on the other one, it was negative that almost only *El País* reported about it. In the end it seemed as a fight between *El País* and RT in Spanish. Other media, particularly those in the left, were reluctant to jump on the issue as it was perceived as promoted by the current Government led by Mr Rajoy in order to attack the pro-independence forces in Catalonia.

As mentioned above, the Russian embassy or pro-Russian narratives have difficulties to reach the mainstream media in Spain. However, the criticism about Russian intervention in Ukraine or Syria rarely affects the coverage about bilateral relations between Spain and Russia. There is almost no pressure or correlation. It is also a reflection of the lack of confidence and understanding of Spain's (potential) role shaping the EU or NATO policies.

Sectors: political parties, MPs, journalists, MoD, influential Twitter users.

Messages should be tailored to the audiences:

- The conservative audiences should be of particular concern at this stage as they might be sensitive to Kremlin messages about "traditional values". Those individuals already identified in key positions who have leverage over these audiences should be more involved with the Integrity Initiative. More must be identified.
- Moderate left wing audiences are also very important.
- Ciudadanos party, which is running ahead in recent polls, is particularly receptive to this issue, but more work is yet to be done to solidify their position. They are

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increasingly linking their Foreign Policy views to those of Mr Verhofstadt and Mr Macron.

- Gay and lesbian associations could be approached. Spanish society is proud of being one of, if not the, most open-minded regarding sexual minorities. The knowledge about Kremlin-instigated homophobic campaigns is limited. A partnership for some activities with civil society actors concerned with this issue like Human Rights Watch or Amnesty International could be explored.

Individual meetings or closed-door workshops are more targeted and therefore will probably have a bigger impact.

Infographics in Spanish to be spread on social media could help a lot.