

The Judicialization of Character Assassination in Spain: A Mediafare Approach

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Abstract : Over the last few years, Spanish progressive politicians have been the target of numerous attacks on their reputation, led by actors linked to the far right and vested interests. This article examines the media coverage of criminal lawsuits against progressive politicians that have been suspicious of lawfare. We understand mediafare (or media warfare) and lawfare as two intertwined types of character assassination. Even if the targets are deemed innocent, the media coverage of the lawsuits and the trial is so overarching that it can have an immediate effect on public opinion. It is media coverage which gives the accusations the necessary “massiveness” for the character assassination to be effective (Bielsa and Peretti, 2019: 10). Lawfare character assassination campaigns are not unidirectional, but relational; they only work if the media echoes them (Padua Andrade, 2018). To account for this complex intertwining, we have retrieved 354 news items from three quality newspapers that represent a wide ideological spectrum: eldiario.es (left-wing), El País (centrist) and El Mundo (conservative), and added OKdiario, which follows a far-right editorial line. The case study focuses on three progressive female politicians: Irene Montero, former Minister of Equality; Ada Colau, former Mayor of Barcelona, and Mónica Oltra, former vice-president of Valencia’s regional government.

Keywords: character assassination, lawfare, mediafare, judicialization of politics, far-right.

1. Introduction

Spain is witnessing a moment of national outcry after Begoña Gómez, Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez’s wife, was indicted in a case of alleged corruption. This led Sánchez to address citizens in two separate letters, the first suspending public duties and asking for some time to reflect, threatening with stepping down from power due to the unfair harassment that the conservatives and the judges were putting on his wife. The lawsuit was filed by the pressure group Manos

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Limpias (Clean Hands), which presents itself as a trade union and has far-right links. The evidence is based on a collection of press clippings published by ultraconservative digital newspapers, even if the Supreme Court states that news stories do not qualify as proof for opening criminal complaints.⁴ A 2014 recording from a conservative People's Party (PP) minister revealed plans to “politically kill” Sánchez by targeting his wife. These elements make the case suspicious of lawfare.

The article examines the media coverage of three emblematic lawsuits addressed against three progressive female politicians. The main argument is that lawfare and mediafare a strategy of character assassination aimed at destroying the reputation of political leaders through courts and the media. The targets under examination are Irene Montero, former Minister of Equality (Unidas Podemos); Mónica Oltra, former Vice-President of the autonomous government of the Valencian Community (Compromís); and Ada Colau, former Mayor of Barcelona (Barcelona en Comú). We have used content analysis for analyzing 354 news stories in four major newspapers across the ideological spectrum. In all three cases, the plaintiffs were linked to far right and interest groups and the evidence provided was rather weak and dubious. That is why all three cases have sparked great debate about lawfare and the judicialization of politics in Spain. After enduring lengthy legal proceedings and recurrent media exposure, all three leaders were declared innocent of the charges. However, their reputation had already been damaged and, while it is not possible to establish a causal link, none of them remains in office.

Lawfare is often discussed in the context of two broader phenomena, the politicization of the judiciary and the judicialization of politics. The politicization of the judiciary takes place when there are political efforts to turn the courts partisan by electing ideologically alike judges to key positions who can then make biased interpretations of the law (Ferejohn, 2002). A well-known example is that of the USA, where Republicans have tried to appoint only conservative justices in the Supreme Court by blocking Democrats' candidates and their efforts to enforce an ethics code in the process.⁵ The other side of the coin is the judicialization of politics, which consists of using the courts and the law as means for resolving political disputes. One example is the growing use of litigation as a political strategy (Dent, 2021; Ramos, 2021).

Martín Pallín (2022) considers that, in Spain, the political, judicial, and economic (far)right has imposed a judicialization of politics. The politicization of the judiciary has come in the form of a seizure by the conservatives, who have repeatedly blocked the renewal in due term of key institutions. The renewal of the Constitutional Court reached an agreement in December 2022 when it was three months overdue. However, the renewal of the General Council of the Judiciary (CGPJ), which veils for the independence of the judges and elects those of the Supreme Court, has been overdue for over five years with still no agreement. Recently, Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez announced an ultimatum and urged the opposition to unblock the process by July 2024.

⁴⁴ https://www.eldiario.es/politica/supremo-prohibe-anos-abrir-causas-begona-gomez-basadas-noticias-periodisticas_1_11318014.html

⁵ Maya Yang, 2024. Republicans vow to block Democrats' effort to enforce ethics code in supreme court – live. *The Guardian*, 12 June. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/live/2024/jun/12/biden-republican-democrat-supreme-court-latest-updates#:~:text=Republicans%20in%20Congress%20are%20vowing,lavish%20gifts%20and%20travel%20opportunities>.

Both lawfare and character attacks are not normatively confined to one side of the ideological spectrum. However, there is a recent trend by which far-right parties and opaque foundations linked to vested interests abuse the courts with the goal of damaging progressive leaders' reputation. The judicialization of politics has reached such lengths that Pedro Sánchez's administration is seeking to pass a law that forbids political parties to act as popular accusation.

This article examines the following research questions: What is the role of the media in cases suspicious of lawfare addressed against female progressive politicians in Spain? How is the reputation of the targets damaged through mediated character attacks? Do the attacks have a gendered nature and, if so, how is it constructed? Are there any differences between the coverage of newspapers with different editorial lines? The following lines provide the conceptual and methodological sections, as well as the findings and conclusion of the article.

2. Literature Review

Character Assassination

There is evidence of an unfolding personalization of politics in western democracies over the three last decades (Enli and Skogerbø, 2013). Thus, public attention increasingly focuses on the leader above broader political structures, such as the party (Pedersen and Rahat, 2021; Weiss Yaniv and Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2016). Leaders do not only get greater attention to their public and professional life, but also to their intimate and private one. The intimization of politics focuses on the politician as a person and the public scrutiny of its personal relations and space (Staney, 2012). This personalization and intimization of politics has facilitated the use of character assassination campaigns focused on individual leaders (Samoilenko et al., 2018).

Character attacks are public and purposeful communicative acts aimed at destroying a person's reputation and credibility (Vollenweider and Romano, 2017). The main goal of character assassination attacks is to damage the reputation of the target by undermining public trust. While character is focused on somebody's personal traits, reputation is a matter of how public opinion makes sense of those traits. Reputation does not necessarily correspond to personality but refers to what others make out of this perceived personality. In character assassination, character and reputation are intertwined since character attacks are aimed at influencing others' perception of a person's reputation.

Character refers to a relatively stable set of a person's traits rooted in a culture's moral, cognitive, behavioural and emotional standards" (Samoilenko et al., 2020: 51). Therefore, character attacks can be addressed to the target's ethical and moral standards, intellectual and professional abilities, social affiliation, practices and or emotional stability (Icks and Shiraev, 2014: 4). While character attacks are usually addressed to individuals, these individuals can stand for a larger group insomuch they represent a specific ideology or practice. Therefore, the individual and the collective dimensions of the attacks are closely intertwined.

Aristotle's modes of persuasion in rhetoric are relevant for identifying how a person constructs its character and, thus, how this can be attacked. This is why they have been used in character assassination literature (Samoilenko et al., 2020). *Ethos* refers to the impression that a person

makes in the audience and how this affects its perceived reputation and credibility. Therefore, ethics and morality are central to the public perception of ethos (Smith and Eberly, 2018: 133). *Logos* appeals to the audience's reason by providing proof of a persons' qualities and abilities through logical reasoning and evidence, such as diplomas, prizes, or work experience. Finally, *pathos* attempts to appeal to the audience's emotions and feelings, such as empathy, compassion, fear or hatred. All in all, character assassination can manifest itself through attacks to the target's credibility and reputation (*ethos*), the evidence that backs these elements (*logos*) and/or emotional appeals against its persona.

The literature has identified different types of character attacks (Samoilenko et al., 2020). These include (1) name-calling the target, (2) making allegations about someone's shortcomings in terms of personality or behavior, (3) ridiculing or mocking any aspect of the target, (4) fearmongering by presenting the target as an enemy or a threat and thus a source of fear, hatred and/or disgust, (5) exposing the target by publishing private information that reveals personality or behavioral misdeeds, such as immorality or crime, (6) disgracing the target by taking its honor or status away, performing public rituals of humiliation and expelling them from the community they belong to, and (7) erasing of the public presence of the target by manipulating narratives and evidence.

Character attacks can have a gendered nature. Icks et al. (2020) have identified three categories of attacks: (1) the target's affiliation to a real or imagined group (for instance, race, gender, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation...), as well as the (2) behavior and (3) personality traits associated with it. There is a body of literature that examines character assassination campaigns based on the target's sex, gender, or sexual orientation, which involve public expectations of the proper ways of being and behaving in society (Shirayev et al., 2022). For instance, female politicians have been criticized for behaving in a masculine way – with Ronald Reagan calling Margaret Thatcher “the best man of England”, but also for being too feminine or just inappropriate –Finland's Prime Minister Sanna Marin endured harsh public scrutiny after a recording of her partying was released. The modern idea that there are two separate spheres, the private and the public one, and that women belong to the first, comes from the Victorian era (Shirayev et al., 2022: 27). Women were expected to take care of domestic life, while public life such as politics were a domain “naturally” assigned to men. Female politicians, nowadays, still report being victims of character assassination campaigns based on their gender (expectations). A case that drew worldwide attention was that of New Zealand's Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, who stepped down from power amid rumors of continuous hatred and death threats.⁶

The success of a character assassination campaign is influenced by the credibility of the attacking source. This credibility depends on the social perception of the source, its prestige, trustworthiness and the possible hidden interests it might have when conducting the attacks. This is relevant in cases suspicious of lawfare since the judiciary is a pillar of democracy and is generally respected. The judiciary is the second most trusted institution in Spain with a 4.98 score, after the Constitution (CIS, 2024) and ahead of both the media (4.12) and political parties (3.82).⁷ Even so, Spain is one of the countries of the European Union with the lowest perception of judicial independence, with

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/28/abuse-death-threats-and-riots-new-zealand-reckons-with-a-toxic-political-discourse?ref=upstract.com>

⁷ CIS, 2023. Encuesta sobre Tendencias Sociales (III). Retrieved from chrome-extension://efaidnbmnribpajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.cis.es/documents/d/cis/es3424marmt_a

less than 40% of the population considering it good or fairly good.⁸ This is due to people's perception of an intromission by the government and politicians, as well as vested interest (*ibid*). The following lines will examine the concept of lawfare and how it can function as a type of character assassination aimed at damaging the reputation of political leaders under the umbrella of perceived judicial independence.

Lawfare as Character Attack

The term lawfare (also known as *guerra judicial* in Spanish) has been gaining popularity in public debates during the last decade. The most iconic case has been that of Brazil's President Lula da Silva, who faced charges of corruption in 2014 and had to endure a pre-trial detention, being banned from running for election (Salgado, 2021).

The notion of lawfare comes from military jargon. At the turn of the century, US Air Force colonel Charles Dunlap (2001: 1, 2) talked about "use of law as a weapon of war" used by other countries with the goal of discrediting US-led interventions abroad with military goals. Dunlap would end up redefining lawfare as a neutral strategy focused on the use of law as substitute for traditional military actions while pursuing operational goals (Ansah, 2010). Now unlinked from its military origins, lawfare refers to "the abuse of legal instruments for purposes of political persecution, destruction of a public image and disqualification of a political adversary" (Zannini, 2020).

The literature has identified different indicators of lawfare, the main one being judges' acceptance of cases based on insufficient or poor evidence. This is key, because opening a case is a pre-requisite and the very first step in a trial. Martín Pallín, lawyer and emeritus judge of the Supreme Court, has criticized the misuse of the law by judges with political purposes.

"Judges have the legal obligation to outright reject all those lawsuits that are clearly unfounded and from which, due to their content, it can be inferred that their sole purpose... is to achieve the opening of criminal proceedings, which will be then insistently amplified by the far-right media." (Martín Pallín, 2022)

Another strategy is the recurrent filing of lawsuits against the same political leader. This is what Vegh Weis (2023) has called "dripping". The goal can be twofold, giving the impression that cases are piling up because the defendant is extremely corrupt, but also increasing the odds of finding a judge who would open or reopen the case based on dubious evidence. Even in these cases, it might be difficult to assert the complicity of judges, although Martín Pallín (2022) considers that the motivation behind reopening cases that have already been dismissed by the public prosecutor is "to maintain a judicial suspicion to the end", after electoral contests. Thus, following a "political timing" is key in lawfare (de Paula and Andrade, 2019).

One of the key debates in the discussion of lawfare is whether it requires bad procedural faith (Montaner, 2022). However, such "bad" faith can be difficult if not impossible to prove. The extent to which judges are complicit can vary in degree and from case to case. Furthermore, this paper argues that it can be oversimplistic to reduce lawfare to a mechanism unique to the judiciary.

⁸ European Commission, 2024. EU Justice Scoreboard. Retrieved from chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/84aa3726-82d7-4401-98c1-fee04a7d2dd6_en?filename=2024%20EU%20Justice%20Scoreboard.pdf

Lawfare can function as long as the plaintiffs know how to strategically use legal procedures to their advantage. Here, lawfare is understood as a strategy of character assassination aimed at damaging the reputation and credibility of political leaders through the abuse and manipulation of legal instruments.⁹

For the political and legal death to occur (Vegh Weis, 2023: 14), a formal conviction is not necessary. What matters is that the case is presented as persuasive enough to be 1) accepted by a judge, 2) covered by the media and 3) able to influence public attention. Therefore, lawfare involves not only the judiciary, but also the mobilization of other stakeholders, such as the mass media and other political actors. The pressure from the media, public opinion and rival parties, especially when their own party is not supportive enough, is enough for the candidates to step down from their role or to fall out of favor.

Mediafare as Character Attack

Lawfare, as a character assassination campaign, is not unidirectional but relational; it only works if the media echoes it (Padua Andrade, 2018). The media are key for constructing the trustworthiness of the plaintiffs and the attacks, giving the accusations the necessary public visibility for the character assassination to be effective. “Without [its] massiveness, the discrediting is reduced to old village gossip” (Bielsa and Peretti, 2019:10). Mediafare (short for media warfare) refers to the role of the media in supporting, enabling and amplifying cases suspicious of lawfare.

In politics, the media play a key role in the process of labelling who is corrupt and who is honest. Media coverage is key for portraying the defendants as morally and legally guilty regardless of evidence. Even if the defendants are deemed innocent, the media coverage of the lawsuits and the trial will have already constructed a criminal framing of the target. “The publication of a photo taken at the courtroom door... under the heading “new criminal charges against x” might be enough to disseminate the notion that the accused is guilty” (Vegh Weis, 2023). Mediafare can contribute to the stereotyping and negative symbolization of the defendants but of the political class in general, giving the impression that all politicians are the same no matter what they say and, more importantly, normalizing corruption as something inherent to politics and inevitable.

Used as a political weapon, mediafare serves as a type of character assassination aimed at destroying political opponents’ reputation through subversive campaigns (Bielsa and Peretti, 2019; Samoilenko, 2021). The ultimate goal is to influence public opinion and modify voting behavior (Sigelman and Shiraev, 2002), so the plaintiff/attacker can conquer new spaces of power. While this could be used for counter-hegemonic purposes, when these spaces are reappropriated by the far-right, it can lead to illiberal consequences.

3. Methodology

We argue that the judicialization of character assassination has been particularly tough on female leaders in positions of power. That is why our case study focuses on lawsuits against three female

⁹ The term lawfare is used here as a strategy, while the case studies are not presented as unequivocal cases of procedural bad faith but as cases suspicious of lawfare.

politicians who belonged to far-left parties while they were in power. They are Irene Montero, former Minister of Equality (Unidas Podemos); Ada Colau, Barcelona’s former mayor (Barcelona en Comú), and Mónica Oltra, former vice-president of Valencia’s regional government (Compromís). The lawsuits under analysis are:

Leader	Party and Role	Timing and Accusation	Plaintiff	Context
Irene Montero	Unidas Podemos Minister of Equality	2 February 2021-29 July 2022 Misappropriation of public money. Using a personal adviser from the Ministry of Equality as a private nanny	-Former Podemos’ lawyer -Far-right party Vox -Conservative association Juristas Prolege	In April 2021, a former lawyer of Podemos sent a letter to the judge instructing the Neurona Case, which investigated the possible illegal funding of the party. In the letter, she stated that Irene Montero used a personal adviser from the Ministry of Equality, paid with public money, as a personal babysitter. She was not indicted due to her immunity.
Mónica Oltra	Compromís Vice-president and Minister for Equality and Inclusive Policies of the Valencian government.	16 June 2022-2 April 2024 (8 June 2023 new evidence supporting her innocence) Using her Ministry for covering up her ex-husband’s sexual abuses to a warded minor	-Failed attempt by a conservative association led by former Vox’ leader Cristina Seguí -Victim of sexual abuses, represented by José Luis Roberto, lawyer and leader of the neo-Nazi group España 2000 - Vox joins the popular accusation	Oltra was sued in June 2022 by a warded minor, accused of allegedly tracing a purposeful plan for covering up the sexual abuses that her ex-husband committed against the minor, and for which he was convicted. After enduring great media and political pressure, she was forced to resign a few days later.
Ada Colau	Barcelona en Comú Mayor of the city of Barcelona	19 January-25 November 2022 Giving subsidies to charities connected to her without a public tender	-Failed attempt by the conservative lobby Abogados Catalanes por la Constitución -ATCD, Opaque Association for Transparency and Democratic Quality	Colau received 15 criminal lawsuits and complaints while in power and faced the 2023 municipal elections with five of them still open. She also received over 1800 administrative complaints since 2015 (twice as many as former administrations). The lawsuit was identical to one filed the previous year by another opaque association, and which had been dismissed by a judge.

Table 1. Authors’ own evaluation.

Sampling

The authors retrieved newspaper articles about the three lawsuits from three quality newspapers that represent a wide ideological spectrum: Eldiario.es (left-wing), El País (center-left) and El Mundo (conservative). To that, we have added the alt-right digital newspaper OKDiario, which does not qualify as quality media yet represents the voice of the ultra conservatives and the far-right.

Media coverage was followed for roughly a year in each case, from the day in which the news broke until the full/provisional legal ruling. The timeframe was selected according to Carvalho's (2008) notion of "critical discourse moments". The case of Irene Montero was followed from the 2 February 2021 (when the news broke) to the 30 July 2022 (a day after the case was archived since extending the search longer did not through any other results). The case of Mónica Oltra was followed from the 16 June 2022 to the 8 June 2023, from the day in which the news broke until the police released new evidence that supported her innocence a week after the regional elections. She was declared innocent in April 2024, but this data is yet to be incorporated. Finally, the case of Colau was followed from the 19 January to the 25 November 2022, since the judged opened the case until it was filed.

We conducted a keyword search on MyNews with the goal of finding all the coverage of these lawsuits in the selected newspapers. In MyNews, we tried different key word combinations in the search until we found the one that showed a higher number of news stories after applying a filter of 40% relevance. The resulting news stories were submitted to a second round of qualitative evaluation, discarding repeated and irrelevant results. The selected keywords were Montero+niñera (nanny); Oltra+abusos (abuses) and Colau+asociaciones (charities).

We analyzed 354 news items (Montero N=166, Oltra N=142 and Colau N= 46). The case of Mónica Oltra received the highest media attention, with 390 news stories. After a close reading, we selected 143 news stories around key moments. For the other two cases, we coded all media coverage. Ada Colau's lawsuit received the lowest media attention and this can be due to different reasons, such as the high amount of lawsuits she received, which meant that the coverage was more scattered, but also to the administrative rather than personal nature of the lawsuit, which made it less appealing.

Coding

The data has been analyzed through a quantitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004; Neuendorf, 2016). We designed four broad categories: (1) framing judiciary procedures, (2) framing of the defendants, (3) framing of other actors and (4) framing main sources of information. However, this paper is based on the results of the second category, framing the defendants through character attacks.

All news stories were manually coded following both a theory-driven and ad hoc open coding. At a first step, the existing literature on character assassination (Simmons, 2021; Samoilenko et al., 2020) guided the initial draft of the coding categories. Then, these categories were adapted to each case study after a process of close reading of the data. We ended up with these four categories: (1) coverage of the judiciary procedures, (2) coverage of the defendants, (3) coverage of other actors and (4) main sources of information. However, this paper discusses only the second category, the

coverage of the defendants, which is the one more closely related to character attacks. The tables below illustrate the codes. The types of attacks that were common to all three cases appear in bold:

Dimension	Type of Character Attack	Categories (and subcategories)
Character Attacks to Irene Montero	1.A. Name-calling	Absent / Present
	1.B. Class-based attacks	Absent / Present
	1.C. Sexist attacks	Absent / Present
	1.D. Attacks on feminism	Absent / Present
	1.E. Anti-men	Absent / Present
	1.F. Fearmongering (source of fear, hatred, disgust)	Absent / Present
	1.G. Immoral/ unethical traits or behavior	Absent / Present
	1.H. Disgracing and taking status away	Absent / Present
	1.I. Attacks on credibility /reliability/ lack of transparency	Absent / Present
	1.J. Attacks on authenticity (saying vs. doing)	Absent / Present
	1.K. Ridiculing in pictures	Yes / No
	1.L. Attacks on emotional state	Absent / Present

Table 2. Irene Montero’s coding sheet. Author's elaboration.

Dimension	Type of Character Attack	Categories (and subcategories)
Character Attacks to Mónica Oltra	1.A. Name-calling	Absent / Present
	1.B. Attacks on personality: power-hungry	Absent / Present
	1.C. Attacks on personal traits: wicked	Absent / Present
	1.D. Attacks on feminism	Absent / Present
	1.E. Attacks on emotional state	Absent / Present
	1.F. Fearmongering (source of fear, hatred, disgust)	Absent / Present
	1.G. Immoral/ unethical traits or behavior	Absent / Present
	1.H. Disgracing and taking status away	Absent / Present
	1.I. Attacks on credibility /reliability/ lack of transparency	Absent / Present
	1.J. Attacks on authenticity (saying vs. doing)	Absent / Present
	1.K. Ridiculing in pictures	Yes / No

Table 3. Mónica Oltra’s coding sheet.

Dimension	Type of Character Attack	Categories (and subcategories)
Character Attacks to Ada Colau	1.A. Name-calling	Absent / Present
	1.B. Attacks on personality	Absent / Present
	1.C. Fearmongering (source of fear, hatred, disgust)	Absent / Present
	1.D. Immoral/ unethical traits or behavior	Absent / Present
	1.E. Disgracing and taking status away	Absent / Present
	1.F. Attacks on credibility /reliability/ lack of transparency	Absent / Present
	1.G. Attacks on authenticity (saying vs. doing)	Absent / Present
	1.H. Ridiculing in pictures	Yes / No
	1.I. Attacks on ideology	Absent / Present

Table 4. Ada Colau's coding sheet. Author's own elaboration.

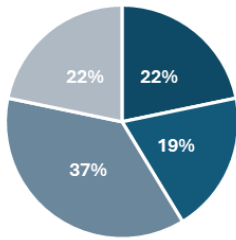
The initial intercoder reliability test was independently and separately conducted by each of the three researchers on 15% of the news articles (N=55) from the total corpus (N=368). These were randomly selected and proportionally distributed according to the specific corpus of each case (Montero N=25, Oltra N=21, and Colau N=9). The reliability calculation was performed using the *ReCal3 0.1* software (Freelon, 2013). The obtained Krippendorff's Alpha coefficients are $\alpha=0.81$, with an 88.9% coding agreement, for the corpus of news articles about Irene Montero; $\alpha=0.84$, with an 89.9% coding agreement, for the corpus of news articles about Mónica Oltra; and $\alpha=0.86$, with a 91.4% coding agreement, for the corpus of news articles about Ada Colau.

4. Findings and Discussion

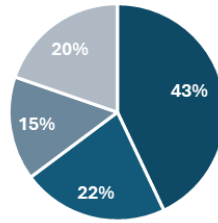
This paper analyzes the media coverage of lawsuits addressed against progressive female politicians in Spain in cases suspicious of lawfare. The goal is to look at lawfare and mediafare as two intertwined types of character attacks. When the media is complicit in cases suspicious of lawfare, they produce a double harassment of the targets both in courts and in the media. The degree to which the judiciary and the media consciously and purposefully contribute to lawfare and mediafare is hard, if not impossible, to identify. Judges might open a case with the goal of scrutinizing politicians, thinking that they have the obligation of veiling for democracy in the face of the slightest evidence. Similarly, the media might and reproduce character attacks for a variety of reasons, whether it does so with clear ideological goals, based on idealized watchdog role or as a consequence of a lack of resources and quality. However, it is important to stress that the attackers in cases suspicious of lawfare are the plaintiffs, often in representation of political and vested interest groups. Therefore, lawfare and mediafare are public communication strategies in which the plaintiffs manage to successfully manipulate key institutions, such as the judiciary, the media or political parties, for their own strategic goals.

One of the key strategies of mediafare consists in a disproportionate coverage of the lawsuits against political leaders. While sometimes newspapers might increase their coverage with the goal of defending the targets, high levels of coverage usually respond to the papers' purposeful amplification of the magnitude and reach of the case. In this respect, the data shows that the ultra-conservative digital newspaper OKDiario copes around half of the coverage in the cases of Oltra and Montero. This also corresponds to a significantly higher number of character attacks, twice as many as ElMundo in the cases of Oltra, and four times as many in the case of Montero. Ada Colau also receives the highest amount of attacks from OKDiario, but it is interesting to see that the center-left paper ElPaís gets her case the highest amount of coverage and ranks second in the amount of attacks. A possible explanation is that both Oltra and Montero were in coalition governments with the left-center socialist party PSOE and ElPaís' editorial line is close to this party. This could be a reason why its coverage is less aggressive. However, Ada Colau was then Barcelona's major and a rival of the socialist party, and could be perceived as a threat to the paper's interests.

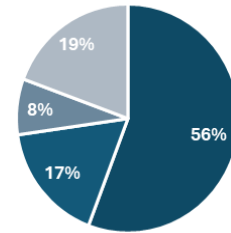
Coverage of Colau's Case



Coverage of Oltra's Case

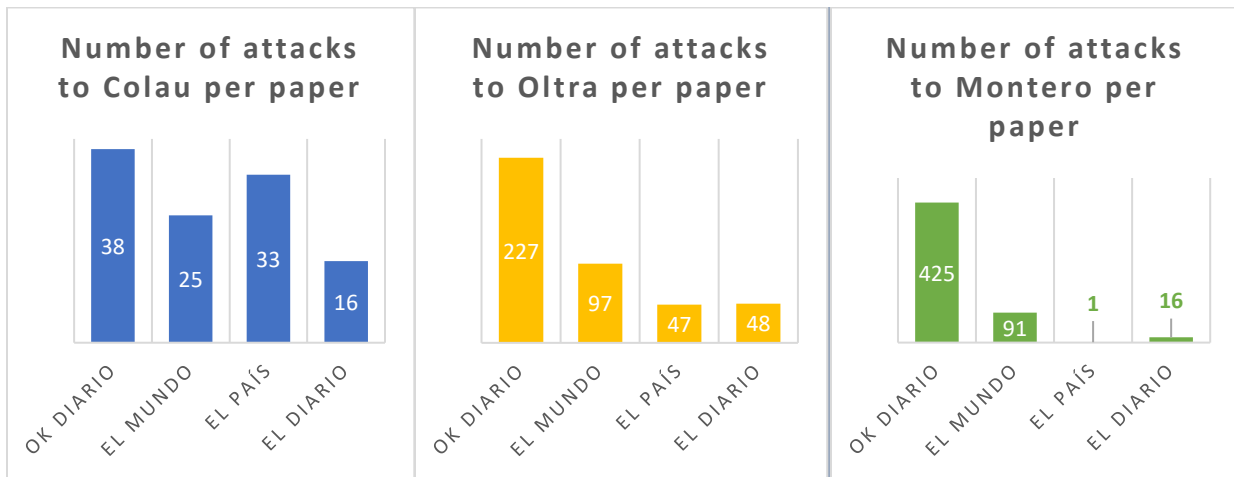


Coverage of Montero's Case



■ OK Diario ■ El Mundo ■ El País ■ El Diario ■ OKDiario ■ El Mundo ■ El País ■ El Diario ■ OK Diario ■ El Mundo ■ El País ■ El Diario

Chart 1, 2 and 3. Total amount of coverage per newspaper.



Charts 4, 5 and 6. Total number of attacks to the targets per newspaper.

The following lines explore the main character assassination attacks that the papers used against Irene Montero, Mónica Oltra and Ada Colau during litigation. The ways in which newspapers mediate the defendants during the trials can influence people's perception about their culpability, framing them as corrupt, damaging their reputation and, ultimately, expelling them from the political game. The data is organized according to Aristotle's modes of persuasion, which are often used in character assassination literature: *ethos* attacks, aimed at damaging the target's public credibility and reputation, and *pathos* attacks, aimed at provoking a negative emotional response in the audience. These two types of attacks are intertwined, and the defendants can use emotionality as a way of damaging the politicians' reputation, the same way that they can attack a politicians' personality with the goal of producing an emotional response of fear, anger or disgust. While interconnected, this distinction is useful for identifying the main character element that is under attack.

Ethos Attacks

The campaign against Spain's Prime Minister by targeting his wife in a case suspicious of lawfare is not isolated but part of a broader campaign against a young generation of leaders that accessed power by constructing an image based on morality, transparency and integrity and calling for a renewal of politics and a crusade against pervasive corruption. The data reveals that these same

values are the core target of lawfare and mediafare character attacks. In fact, the data shows that *ethos* attacks are the most common character attacks.

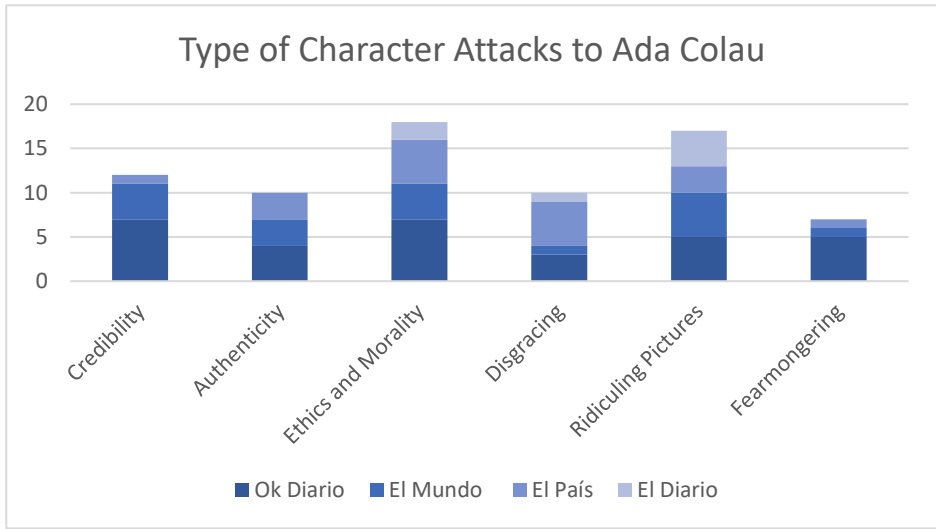


Chart 7. Type of attacks against Ada Colau by newspaper.

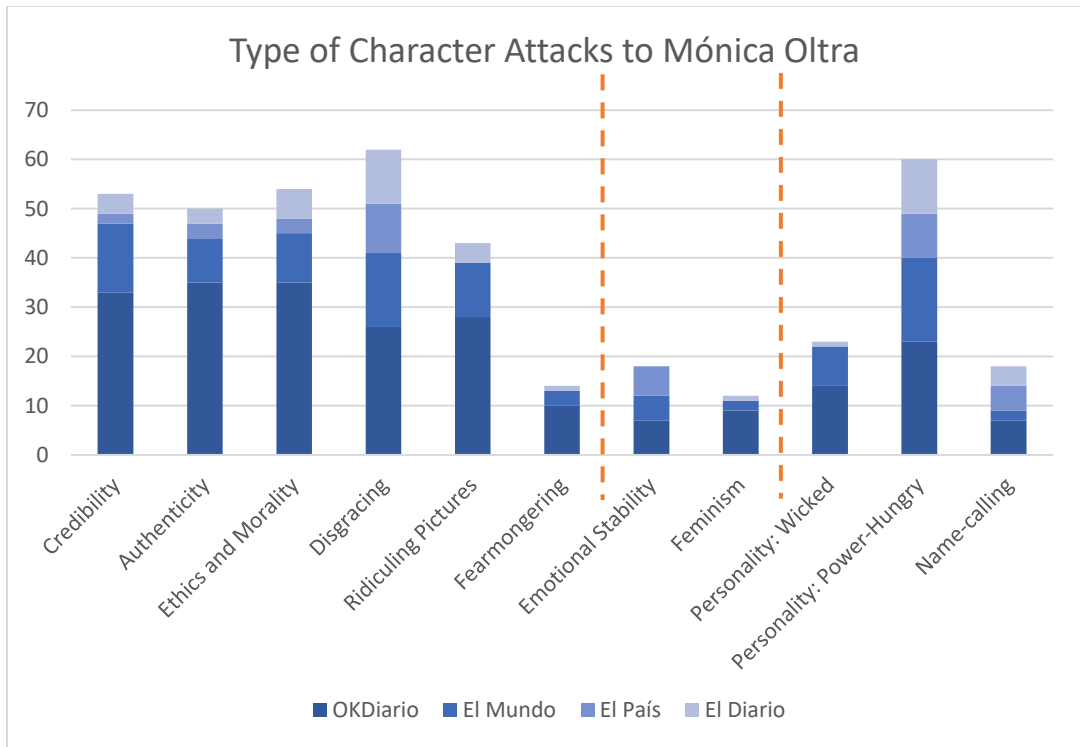


Chart 8. Type of attacks against Mónica Oltra by newspaper.

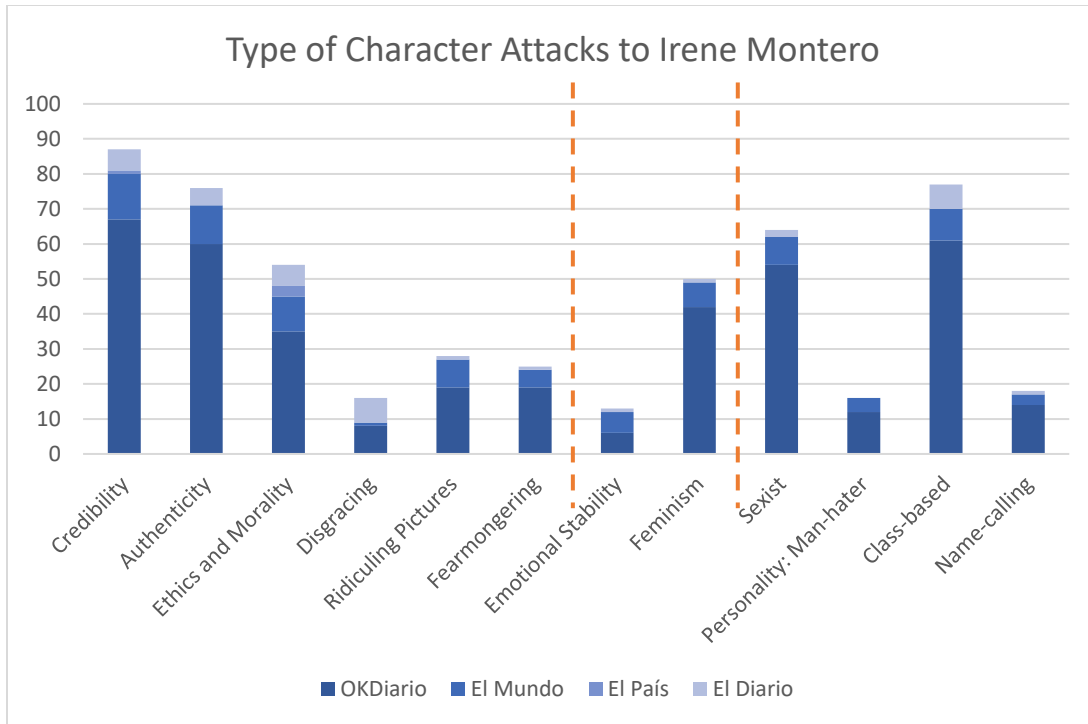


Chart 8. Type of attacks against Irene Montero by newspaper.

The *ethos* of a politician has to do with the personal characteristics, skills and experiences that make him or her appear as credible. *Ethos* can be constructed through appeals to their personality, their professionalism, their authenticity, or their style, among others, and the attributes and behaviors associated with them. In order to construct and keep their reputation, leaders must successfully appear as moral, credible and authentic to their constituents.

The three leaders under scrutiny belonged to three young leftist parties, Irene Montero’s Unidas Podemos, Mónica Oltra’s Compromís and Ada Colau’s Barcelona en Comú, which created strict ethical codes upon their foundation that urged their leaders to step down if they were indicted.¹⁰ The data reveals that one of the most common attacks is based on their ethics and morality. In the press, the leaders are questioned and shamed for breaching their party’s ethical code. This leads to a framing of the leaders as unethical and morally corrupt. For instance, the far-right media portrays Montero as “cynical” and immoral (OKDiario, #133), while Colau is framed as morally dubious by allegedly encouraging the judge to indict her councilors instead of herself (OKDiario, #21). In Oltra’s case, it is the “moral superiority of the left” as a whole that is questioned (OKDiario, 58). It is precisely because the leaders are constructed as morally corrupt that they can be seen as politically corrupt. In this sense, a lack of ethics functions as a prerequisite for corruption, creating a false yet powerful correlation between their alleged personal flaws and their fitness for politics. In the case of Ada Colau, this is main character attack against her. Colau is highly criticized for not stepping down and thus violating her party’s ethical code: “Salary caps or public agendas. Colau’s code of ethics clashes with reality,” states a headline (ElPaís, #29). In the case of Oltra,

¹⁰ In the case of Ada Colau, there seemed to be an agreement of her breaching her party’s ethical code, while Oltra’s case it was not clear whether her party had changed the code in her benefit. In this line, Podemos had already changed its Ethical Code back in 2018 in the light of what the party had labelled a campaign of judicial harassment.

this is the third most common type of attack, with the conservative PP asking: “Mazón asks Compromís to clarify "if its code of ethics is still in force" (ElDiario, #55).

One of the key elements of the intimisation of politics is to show a consistency between a leader’s public and private persona: a sincerity that traverses their political and personal self (Coleman, 2006). In other words, politicians need to convince their followers of the fact that they really are who they pretend to be if they want to be trusted. Taken together, authenticity and credibility constitute the most common character attacks. The media constructs Montero, Colau and Oltra as having changed once in power and, thus, having lied to the constituents by saying one thing and doing another. These attacks are constructed by identifying inconsistencies in the leaders’ narrative, such as campaigning for other politicians to step down if indicted but not applying this rule to themselves. The underlying idea is that the targets ended up being as corrupt as the rest. This has important implications by normalizing corruption and destroying any hopes of an honest political leadership. In the case of Oltra, there is a recurrent framing of her as a liar, both in the press and by the public prosecutor. This is illustrated in the following excerpt: “The prosecutor in the face of Monica Oltra’s evasive responses: "For more than two years you knew nothing of this serious accusation against the father of your children?"” (ElMundo, #114). Mónica Oltra got famous for wearing T-shirts to the regional congress with the face of conservative leader’s from the PP accused of corruption saying “Wanted. Only alive”. However, the media echoes social media memes of Oltra wearing the same T-shirt, but with her face on it (ElPaís, #59; ElMundo, #70).



Mónica Oltra’ meme (OKDiario, 86)

Ada Colau is also accused of lying and trying to avoid testifying despite promising that she would be transparent (ElMundo, #19). Finally, Irene Montero’s credibility is questioned by presenting evidence of incongruences between her ideals and her personal life, with the far-right OKDiario accusing her of having a partner who does not take care of kids (OKDiario, #62) and who is both machista and violent (OKDiario, #111).

In some cases, the alleged crime that the targets are accused of serves as a way of questioning the authenticity of their values. For instance, Podemos got known in its origins for its anti-casta discourses against the political class. Therefore, class-based attacks a key role in the destruction of Irene Montero’s perceived credibility and authenticity.

While they (Podemos, Montero) were in the opposition, this yearning was hidden under the fallacious mantra of returning to the "people" what belongs to the people, a basic thesis of any populist movement, as if they alone represented the citizenry. The coming to power of a party that nourished itself on the denunciation of a corrupt establishment as means of creating its social base has corroborated that its objective

was not to put an end to the privileges of what they called the "caste", but to coopt them". (ElMundo, #8)

Irene Montero (UP) is the only leader who receives class-based attacks, which appear in almost 50% per cent of the news items but solely in the conservative press (El Mundo and especially OKDiario). The narrative is constructed around the idea that power changed Podemos' leaders, including Montero and her partner Pablo Iglesias, who soon betrayed their ideals and joined the elitism of the political bourgeoisie. Known as the "nanny case", the lawsuit against Montero frames the alleged use of a political advisor as a private nanny, paid with public money, as a clear sign of their privilege and their betrayal to the people. Classist attacks are articulated around Montero being a false communist, having joined the political class (la casta) and behaving as a bourgeois woman, living in a villa (or "casoplón", in reference to her polemical purchase of a big, detached house in the outskirts of Madrid) and enjoying having servants. This can be seen in the following excerpts: "Cantó (Ciudadanos) says that Montero and Iglesias' 'nanny' shows that they are 'the Marquises of Galapagar are the authentic caste'" (ElDiario, #9), denounced for creating a "court of servants" (ElMundo, #146).

Ethos attacks also come in the form of gendered attacks framing the targets as fake feminists. The far-right media constructs Irene Montero (Unidas Podemos) and Mónica Oltra (Compromís) as fake progressive leaders and fake representatives of women, thus inauthentic. Questioning their false feminism is a way of achieving this. For instance, Montero is compared to "real feminist women", who are defined as those who have to juggle between work and taking care of the kids with little resources and support. However, Montero appears as a privileged woman who has an army of servants at her service, including several nannies. Her feminism is also questioned for hiring a female nanny, rather than a male one, thus following gender stereotypes.

But what conception do these people have of women's equality? What the Minister of Equality did is precisely to denigrate three women, used as domestic servants and subjected to her whims. (OKDiario, #153)

In the case of Oltra, the conservative media questions her feminism for purposefully neglecting the victim of her ex-husband's sexual abuse, siding with male abusers rather than with female victims. This can be seen in the following excerpt, quoting a female leader from the conservative PP: "Ayuso reveals the real Oltra: 'A supposedly feminist woman who protects and hides the abuse of a minor'" (OKDiario, #46). She is accused of neglecting and re-victimizing a young girl from an administrative point of view, since veiling for the wellbeing of the guarded minor fell under Oltra's competences (she was then ex-minister for Equality and Inclusive Policies of the Valencian regional government). However, she is also accused of getting personally involved in silencing and leading smearing campaigns the victim, framing her as a liar. "The vileness that (Oltra) exhibits is proportional to that of the left and all those feminist associations that have been uncovered. It is, quite simply, sickening." (OKDiario, #83)

Irene Montero is the leader who receives the highest number of gendered attacks, which can be explained by her position as Minister of Equality. Something unique to Montero's case is the pervasiveness of sexist attacks aimed at questioning her professional skills. Montero is referred to as Pablo Iglesias' wife (Iglesias was then Second Deputy Prime Minister), even if she was a Minister herself (OKDiario, #14), and thus in power thanks to the man she sleeps with. Her lack of professionalism is also apparent in the ways in which she would have chosen the advisors of the Ministry of Equality, made up of her female buddies and protégées. Lidia Falcón, leader of the

Spanish Feminist Party, is quoted stating that “Irene Montero's ministry is a joke of girlfriends who go there to play” (OKDiario, #50).



“Irene Montero in Chile with her advisors” (in its feminine form), (OKDiario, #155).

Montero is the only leader that is also framed as clearly anti-men, leading policies that damage not just male privilege but also men’s rights. The goal of this strategy is to question women’s fitness for politics, framing them as a danger to existing gender roles. This can be seen in OKDiario’s headline “Taliban Heteropatriarchy” (#111).

Gendered attacks are pervasive in the coverage of lawsuits against Irene Montero and Mónica Oltra, yet not in the case of Ada Colau. This is not to say that Colau has not been victim of gendered attacks, but that these attacks do not appear in the media coverage or this specific lawsuit. One explanation could be that gendered attacks are more likely to appear in cases that are related to political leaders’ private life, her children’s babysitter in the case of Montero and her ex-husband’s abuses, in the case of Oltra. In the case of Colau, the 15 all lawsuits against her are linked to her management of the city and the allocation of resources, rather than to her personal life. Therefore, it is a specific example of the so-called “urban lawfare”, which attacks Colau because of the model of city she wanted to build through progressive policies in terms of public housing, rent control, superblocks, transportation, public management of key resources such as water, or measures against touristification (Montaner, 2022).

When a character assassination campaign against political leaders is successful, they are expelled from the electoral game or from politics altogether. The goal is to leave void that can be then filled by politicians aligned with the plaintiffs’ interests. Attacks to Montero, Oltra and Colau’s lack of ethics go hand in hand with disgracing campaigns. The press spread of disgracing attacks takes place by giving voice to the opposition’s requests for the defendants to step down from power. In the case of Oltra and Colau, conservative and far right leaders led a noisy campaign against the two indicted leaders, questioning their integrity, that of their parties and, in the case of Oltra, that of the regional Compromís-PSOE coalition government. In fact, the most common attack against Oltra was based on a disgracing campaign and she ended up stepping down in what she called a case that would become part of the “political, judicial and media infamy” of the country. The case of Montero was slightly different because she was never formally indicted due to her immunity as Minister of Equality. While there were opposition leaders who asked her to step down, disgracing took place mainly through the conservative People’s Party (PP) successful opening of a congressional investigation against her.

Pathos Attacks

Character attacks are personal attacks. Icks et al. (2020) note that character attacks can be addressed against a person's moral standards, intellectual or professional abilities, and emotional stability. The data shows that ethos attacks to the leaders' ethical and moral standards are common across all three cases, while gendered attacks only appear when the lawsuit has a personal (rather than administrative) nature. In gendered attacks, both ethos and pathos intertwine as modes of persuasion. Therefore, they should be further contextualized within gendered debates that support a separation between emotions and reason, positioning women as too emotional and unreasonable, thus, unfit for politics. This is important when framing the three female leaders as corrupt, since their emotionality can take over rational choices leading to their alleged engagement of corrupt practices. This narrative is present in the cases of Mónica Oltra (Compromís) and Irene Montero (Unidas Podemos).



Irene Montero (OKDiario, #134) Mónica Oltra (El Mundo, #70) Ada Colau (ElDiario, #15)

The data shows that media coverage attacks Irene Montero (UP) and Mónica Oltra's (Compromís) emotional stability. In the case of Montero, this is done in one out of four news stories. The framing of the leaders in the pictures helps constructing them as emotional beings, as "women on the verge of a nervous breakdown", citing Pedro Almodóvar's famous movie. The use of ridiculing images that capture the leaders seemingly experiencing extreme feelings of joy, shame, or despair, are common across media outlets, regardless of their editorial line. These extreme emotions play a relevant role in the construction of the defendants' guilt. Images of sorrow can be read as the leaders' non-verbal acknowledgment of their wrongdoings, while images of extreme joy can be read as dissonant and, thus, indicating that the leaders are either wicked or experiencing a state of emotional instability. This is the same emotional instability that could have blinded them from making rational choices when they allegedly engaged in corrupt behavior. An outstanding example is that of Mónica Oltra:



"With a standing ovation for their leader, with hugs and with a music band, as if nothing had happened. Dancing and in a true act of reaffirmation, to the

rhythm of the music: ‘We are a nuisance and that is why they want us to disappear’ (El Mundo, #51).

While insults are a clear example of *pathos* attacks due to their temperamental and emotional appeal, direct name-calling is not common in the press. The only leader who receives a significant number of insults is Irene Montero, and they all appear in conservative papers. She is framed as being cheeky and a dork (*caradura*, #23; *unos jetas*, #29; *tiene la cara de cemento armado*, #152), unburdened (*desahogada*, #23), and making a fool of herself (*hacer el imbécil*, #136). All these insults are linked to her personality. While Mónica Oltra only receives direct insults on a few occasions, she is portrayed as a power-hungry and wicked leader who purposely hurt the victim of her ex-husband’s sexual assault with the goal of protecting her reputation and holding to power. Oltra is accused of telling workers of the regional Ministry of Equality, which she led, to attack the victim’s reputation so she is not trusted. This crime is framed in the conservative media as equivalent to the sexual abuses committed by her ex-husband, accusing Oltra of being disgusting, as can be seen in the following excerpts: “Perhaps the most ‘disgusting’ case that can be found at this time in national politics is the one that splashes Monica Oltra’ (OKDiario, #2); “We are facing a particularly reprehensible case” (ElMundo, #3); “A behavior that is ‘simply vomitous and disgusting’, concludes the director of OKDIARIO” (OKDiario, #82).

Fearmongering consists of constructing Montero, Oltra and Colau as sources of fear, hatred, and disgust. This is achieved by linking the defendants to causes or groups able to still fear in part of the population. In the case of Irene Montero, both herself and Unidas Podemos are linked to authoritarian leaders or states (Venezuela, Iran), as well as to terrorist groups such as former terrorist band ETA. They are also framed as being against monarchy, communists, and illiberal, as well as defending squatters and gender ideology. This strategy is used by the ultraconservative paper OKDiario, but also in the left-leaning press by citing conservative leaders without questioning them.

"Podemos trivializes violence", says Begoña Villacís (from the conservative party Ciudadanos), and they language that they use to do so - she has no doubt when listening to Rafa Mayoral - reminds her of that language used by the PNV or Batasuna when justifying terrorism. (OKDiario, 29)

As he (Casado, leader of the conservative PP) said, Podemos is a "communist and populist" force that "has beaten" Sánchez in some territories a year ago. "There is no European government with a minister or vice-president as radical as Pablo Iglesias", he added. (ElDiario, 26)

In the case of Ada Colau, the coverage associates her to “radical” groups, such pro-independence movements, to the anti-capitalist left, squatters and even to organized violence (ElDiario, #15; OKDiario, #26). She is also framed as defending causes that are key in the far right culture wars, such as the LGBTIQ+ and the feminist movements, pro-animal rights advocates or environmental activists.

5. Conclusion

This article has examined the press coverage of lawsuits against three progressive female politicians in Spain, namely Irene Montero, Mónica Oltra, and Ada Colau. The main argument is that these lawsuits are part of a double strategy of character assassination through lawfare and

mediafare by which plaintiffs linked to the far-right and vested interests attempt to destroy the reputation of progressive leaders. Despite being declared innocent of the charges, the leaders' reputation can be damaged forever.

One key strategy of mediafare identified in this study is the disproportionate coverage of lawsuits against political leaders. While some newspapers may increase their coverage to defend the targets, high levels of coverage are often a result of purposeful amplification by the papers. The data revealed that the ultra-conservative digital newspaper OKDiario had a significant amount of coverage in the cases of Oltra and Montero, with a higher number of character attacks compared to other newspapers. The center-left paper EIPaís also had a high amount of coverage in Ada Colau's case, possibly seen as a political rival due the paper's editorial alignment with the socialist party PSOE.

Character attacks were categorized into ethos attacks, which aimed to damage the targets' public credibility and reputation, and pathos attacks, which aimed to provoke a negative emotional response in the audience. Ethos attacks focused on the leaders' ethics and morality, with the media questioning and shaming them for breaching their party's ethical codes. This led to a framing of the leaders as unethical and morally corrupt, which were seen as an indication of their political corruption. Attacks on authenticity and credibility were also common, with the media constructing the leaders as having changed once in power and betraying their ideals. Inconsistencies in their narratives were highlighted to portray them as corrupt as the rest, thus normalizing corruption as something inherent to politics. Gendered attacks were present in the cases of Montero and Oltra, framing them as fake feminists and questioning their authenticity as progressive leaders. In the case of Montero, gendered attacks also had a clear sexist nature by which she would be in power not because of her own merits, but because of the man she slept with, that man being Pablo Iglesias (then Second Deputy Prime Minister).

Finally, pathos attacks aimed to spark hatred, and disgust towards the targets. This was achieved by linking them to causes or groups that could instill fear in the population, such as authoritarian leaders, terrorist groups, or radical movements. Fearmongering tactics were used to associate the defendants with these groups and ideologies, portraying them as sources of fear and danger. This strategy was used hand in hand with a negative framing of the leaders as too emotional and, thus, unfit for politics. It is precisely this excess of emotionality that could support the "truthfulness" their corrupt behaviors, compromising their ability to make reasoned decisions. The narrative, therefore, seems to reinforce the idea that women are unfit for politics.

Overall, character attacks in the media can have significant consequences for the targets. Successful character assassination campaigns can lead to their expulsion from the political game or from politics altogether. The media's role in spreading disgracing attacks and giving voice to the opposition's requests for the defendants to step down can contribute to their downfall. Further research is needed to explore the long-term effects of such attacks on the targets and the implications for democracy and political discourse. Efforts should be made to strengthen judicial independence, promote ethical and quality journalism, and raise awareness about the role of the media in cases suspicious of lawfare. Only by addressing these issues can we ensure a fair and transparent political system that upholds the principles of democracy.

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