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Spanish Fake Sovereignty: From Privatising the Nation-State to Becoming a Digital Colony

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ABSTRACT Giving policies pompous names, such as 'Digital Spain 2025', 'National Artificial Intelligence Strategy' (ENIA) or 'Spain 2050', the Spanish government wants to roll out a new sovereign power deployed outwards and integrated into the global digital, financial and military sphere. The article argues that this process, which requires handing over legal, social, financial, and economic powers to private corporations, has transformed the country into an incipient 'digital colony,' a territory for data mining and the surveillance of society situated on the periphery of the capitalist world economy. On the way to becoming a digital colony, the privatisation of nation-building and popular sovereignty has involved discriminating against minority nations and executing repressive law enforcement policies.

1. Digital Sovereignty

Over the last decade, 'digital sovereignty' has become a popular concept in public discussions on digital policy (Pohle & Thiel, 2020). However, in many countries, it turned into an empty signifier to introduce lateral demands vis-a-vis the state's foreign policies and diplomatic affairs (Rafik, 2021) or even to pursue antagonistic national agendas (Lehuedé, 2022). In the same way, digital capitalism takes on different forms, each country's position in the global economy influences the margins of *manoeuvre*, thus affecting their 'digital sovereignty.' Nation-states and areas as disparate as China, Russia, Europe, the United States, Brazil, and the Arab world embrace the same framework of capitalist exploitation yet have different ways of understanding politics, the state, democracy, society, and concepts such as freedom of expression. Therefore, sovereignty differs depending on the political system in consideration (Floridi, 2020). At the same time, the recurrent crises of the capitalist system have placed certain new institutional actors in a privileged position to influence national technological developments, such as sovereign wealth funds, large asset managers, banks and investment funds (Fernandez et al., 2020; Lianos & McLean, 2021). These financial players help Silicon Valley companies become reticular and internationalist powers in search of profitability, trying to conquer markets from transport and

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automobiles (Marx, 2022) to energy (Greenpeace, 2020), real estate (Frost et al., 2019), as well as health (Powles & Hodson, 2017), and education (Williamson, 2017). Digital sovereignty thus comes to serve as a measure of countries' integration into global capitalism.

Current conceptualisations of the term continue to favour the dominant actors' approach, instrumentalising a vision that reinforces imbalanced power relations with the Global South and systematically avoids frameworks, such as the dependency theory (Fischer, 2022). However, digital sovereignty has also been the way out for many countries who want to maintain a critical stance towards Silicon Valley (Becerra & Waisbord, 2021). To the above factors, we must add the recent geopolitical struggles, which are contested and produced in divergent ways (Glasze et al., 2022). Among the most prominent is the competition between Big Tech firms and between states for controlling cyberspace (such as the Sino-US trade war, the 5G rollout crisis or other cybersecurity issues) (Akcali Gur, 2022; Budnitsky & Jia, 2018). All of the above factors birthed numerous models of digital sovereignty, each with different characteristics and particular conceptions of hegemony (for a Gramscian take, see Anderson, 2017).

Although there is no declared position on digital sovereignty due to the country's hegemonic role in the digital economy, the United States has advanced a political agenda oriented towards maintaining its dominance. The US Cloud Act, introduced in 2018 under the presidency of Donald Trump, is a good example. Under certain conditions, this law enforces that cloud providers request the transmission of data on non-US citizens or companies to US authorities, thus allowing American judges to collect data from electronic communications (Brincourt, 2021) and boosting surveillance practices (Smith, 2021). In other countries, however, the situation is quite different, and we have seen strategies wholeheartedly aimed at preserving national autonomy. The most prominent case is China, one of the world's centres for manufacturing high-tech machinery and providing digital services. Since the Third Plenary Session of the 18th CCP Central Committee in 2013, the country has been trying to address its Achilles' heel—a significant reliance on foreign companies' intellectual property in its production. As a result, China launched a series of digital sovereignty strategies closely linked with industrial policy plans to minimise this. The most notable one is 'Made in China 2025', which aims to upgrade the country's infrastructural power through substantial public investments in areas such as artificial intelligence, advanced robotics, and the creation of platforms that provide smart city solutions in any metropolis on the planet. (Hong & Harwit, 2020; Malkin, 2020). In short, Beijing's adaptation of digital capitalism is characterised by a strong overlap between the country's large private corporations (Alibaba, Baidu, Tencent) and the economic planning policies dictated by the Communist Party (Vila Seoane, 2019; Zhang, 2020) to shape digital innovation in its interest (Beraja et al., 2022; To, 2022).

At the same time, the particularities of Russian digital capitalism, marked by state-nationalism and the monopoly status of some companies promoted by the state, determine the country's digital sovereignty strategies and its integration into the neoliberal global economy (Bannykh & Kostina, 2021; Dzarasov & Gritsenko, 2022). The country's success is remarkable: even if Russian platforms are losing ground to their Western counterparts or Chinese platforms, the country is still the central node of post-Soviet digital networks due to its centralised transport and energy infrastructures, on which most Internet infrastructures are built (Glasze et al., 2022). In India, which has extensive experience in promoting sovereign infrastructures and democratising access to digital services, the government of Narendra Modi understood digital sovereignty as a way of

building infrastructures for the surveillance and punishment of poor people. As a result, a government-led digital identity system that does not rely on American platforms to advance economic management or social control has been created (Jain & Gabor, 2020; Vila Seoane, 2021). Since the end of the Cold War, Latin American countries have taken one of the most democratic paths towards digital sovereignty, emphasising the need to end technological dependence on the North and develop their own industries (Avila, 2021). For this region, digital technologies shouldn't be oriented towards the search for profitability but towards socialist and/or democratic ends, such as redistributing the fruits of technological progress. As a result, digital sovereignty has been predominantly identified with decolonial perspectives—or indigenous-centred approaches (Mohamed et al., 2020; Walter & Suina, 2018).

Finally, the European Union is now portrayed as a region at the forefront of liberal regulation of the digital economy through legal instruments to guarantee consumer privacy—see standards such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)—and through an economic agenda focused on the regulation of US technology companies through interventions in the field of competition and taxation. These policy interventions assume that global capitalism works and offers prosperity as long as individual data property rights are ensured, imposing this way the notion of 'the sovereign consumer.' In this sense, the European Union has discursively positioned itself as the vanguard of digital sovereignty (Roberts et al., 2021). However, different authors have emphasised the self-referentiality of this agenda and placed European digital sovereignty in a more critical perspective, arguing that its mentality is technocratic and anti-democratic (Cancela & Jiménez, 2020). It has also been criticised for being inconsistent and incapable of uniting the different positions within the EU (Kaloudis, 2021; for a case study on Germany, see also Oppermann & Lambach, 2022). Another problem with European digital sovereignty is the enormous diversity of competing interests that reflects the clashes between the region's centre and periphery. Faced with pressure from domestic industry interests in the digital economy, Germany and France have launched an autonomous campaign to boost their own companies in the new digital markets, innovation policies and rules in line with the needs of their national industries. For example, the ambitions and political trajectory of its current president Emmanuel Macron have given rise to the French Republic being portrayed as a Start-up nation, i.e. a private entrepreneurial ecosystem aimed to enhance competition across countries (Villani, 2018). Unlike in other European countries, the German proposal for digital sovereignty has revolved around Industry 4.0 (Bilbao-Ubillos et al., 2020) by promoting 'technological sovereignty', or protectionist FDI policy, and 'European champions', understood as state aid and direct involvement in the economy (Gill & Biscahie, 2022, p. 17). The aim of a joint effort by German employers and the government is to integrate industrial manufacturing production systems with a set of digital technologies to ensure that national companies can regain the pieces of the market conquered by the Silicon Valley, but faces resistance due to its strong mercantilism (Germann, 2022). Lastly, Europe's most ambitious bid for technological sovereignty depends on a joint digital industrial policy strategy launched by Germany and France, the so-called Gaia-X Plan (Rusche, 2022). Although there is some friction between the two, Balleis (2021) has revealed an enormous dependency on the information and communications industry of the US and Chinese manufacturers and service providers. Any conceptualisation of digital sovereignty in Spain must be subject to an analysis of its particularities, closely linked to other agendas as well as of the limits a peripheral European region has to advance its interests.

2. The Spanish Case

In the following section, we will show how Spain's digitalisation strategy and, in parallel, its digital sovereignty agenda requires the privatisation of resources, institutions and capacities of both the dominant nation and the minority nations that make up the Spanish state. This agenda is integrated within a global neoliberal nation-building, hence, nation-branding and nation-positioning strategy (Jiménez & Garai-Artetxe, 2023) that leads to the privatisation of sovereignty which in turn implies a process of de-democratisation (Goikoetxea, 2017).

The following subsections describe the main features of the Spanish digitalisation strategy. On the one hand, it aims to maintain private ownership of technological infrastructures, continuing with the privatisation process initiated in the country between 1980 and 1990—whose maximum exponent was the telecommunications networks, the basis of today's digital economy (Villena, 2019). On the other hand, as with Germany and France, the Spanish Government has been trying to ensure the primacy of Spanish national capitalists against foreign players in Silicon Valley and, in parallel, promoting strong private alliances between both industries. To this end, the state has pursued public-private agreements as governance mechanisms: first, the state hands over infrastructures to large national firms, who then enter into more informal partnership agreements with the US giants.

We shall show that the public-private governance strategy has not achieved the objective of securing Spain's position in the global digital economy (López & Martínez, 2021), on the contrary, it has transformed the country into an incipient digital colony. The reasons for the latter vary, as we will see, but one of them is that the digitalisation process of the Spanish Government was aimed at neutralising any alternative visions of digital sovereignty, such as the ones developed on open software and public digital platforms which imply opposing to collective digitalisation carried out by public administrations (see the case of RedIRIS in Lorite, 2020) and to data commons strategies pursued in municipalities like Barcelona and other cities and Autonomous Communities (see Roqueta-Fernàndez & Cozzo, 2023). At the same time, this process has reinforced de-democratisation by putting (digital) sovereignty in private hands. According to our general hypothesis, Spain privatises popular and state sovereignty by re-centralizing the minority nations' political and institutional capacities. In this sense, the few examples of decentralising public power to peripheral regions have only been aimed at attracting foreign capital, not at repopulating or attracting talent to rural areas or impoverished territories and communities. At the same time, new institutions for the digital era, such as the future Algorithm Evaluation Agency, will be based in Madrid, strengthening territorial and political re-centralisation. Lastly, narratives around national security have served as a subterfuge to justify the Spanish double movement when shaping its digital sovereignty agenda (Roqueta-Fernàndez & Cozzo, 2023).

2.1. Public-Private Partnerships

Spain's digital sovereignty agenda has never been an autonomous or leading strategy since it has pivoted around the economic and political issues determining its position in the European Union. From the beginning, digitalisation's governance mechanism for matching both fields, sovereignty, and national security, was that of public-private partnerships

(PPPs). According to this neoliberal ideology, increasing business internationalisation and attracting foreign investment is the only way out of the crisis. In the early 1990s, these agreements accounted for 0.03% of Spain's GDP; in 2008, this figure was 0.4% (Pérez & Solera, 2017). Far from being a tiny amount, PPPs accounted for 10% of government investment, i.e. the state was reneging on one out of every 10 euros. Other data suggests that between 1990 and 2009, more than 1,300 public-private partnership contracts were signed in the EU, amounting to more than 250 billion euros. During the same period, while the UK led the way in implementing PPPs at the European level, Spain was the second Member State in the ranking with 11% of the total economic volume. More than a decade on, this figure has multiplied considerably (Kappeler & Nemoz, 2010). Between 2000 and 2018, the European Investment Bank invested 5.176 billion euros in 30 public-private projects in Spain. More recently, the European Next Generation funds —linked to the draft General State Budget 2021, which amounts to 26,634 million euros and a lasting recovery—rely mainly on PPPs. Thus, the public agenda of digital sovereignty was initially oriented towards corporate interests, internalising the neoliberal logic of international institutions (Goikoetxea, 2017). Let us consider an example of the PPPPs' general logic: OECD calls for developing a policy agenda where the public sector promotes and produces innovation. This has to be done within a framework of action based on public-private collaboration, where the government should generate spaces for collaborative private governance by advancing new organisational structures and taking advantage of the synergies of both actors to increase tools and resources, share risks and work together for innovation (OECD, 2015). A corporate governance model of this kind has been proposed by the European Commission (2004), the World Bank (2018) and the United Nations.

The theoretical frame of PPS is developed from the concept of the 'Relational State,' which is, not coincidentally, the opposite of what the Strategic-relational theory of the State (Jessop, 2014) proposes in its normative dimension since the 'Relational State' is just a term to refer to how private hands govern the state. In their wording, the 'civil society'—the population altogether—enters the government to run the state. However, if we analyse the actors entering collaborative relations, it is not civil society (unions, social movements, cooperatives) but corporations and private entrepreneurs. The 'Entrepreneurial State' formed this way fosters an innovation ecosystem through different mechanisms of public-private collaboration (Mazzucato, 2018), producing an ecosystem of privatisation of all public institutions, spreading scarcity, precariousness and insecurity as the data and research of the latest decade show (Goikoetxea, 2017, 2014). This theoretical and working framework indirectly privatises services or public investment. It follows a logic of austerity justified in terms of the failure of the public or Keynesian state as the provider of public resources or fiscal space to carry out strategic investments (Gabor & Arauz, 2021). Others have argued that PPPs are about the direct relationship between a general crisis and the need to apply the force of the state to be the guarantor of capitalist property rights, defining it as a 'Public-Private State' (López & Martínez, 2021). In Spain, aided by the rhetoric of digitalisation, this public-private alliance has handed over state power to the Ibex-35, as we will now show.

During Mariano Rajoy's almost seven years as the head of the government, public tenders worth 69.5 million euros were awarded to Telefónica for the digitalisation of Spanish universities (Ribas, 2020). In total, during the 12 years following the outbreak of the 2008 crisis, the Spanish administration handed over at least 4.57 billion euros to

Telefónica through 1,800 public tenders (Cancela and Villena, 2021), contracted mainly by the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Justice or the Ministry of Universities, but also by the Ministry of Education and Health (in theory, competency of the regional administrations). In addition, other data suggests that the Spanish state has awarded 1,200 contracts for Microsoft licences, subscriptions, products or services (including computer products and services), amounting to 793 million euros (Cancela & Ribas, 2021). This phenomenon is supported and extended by deploying what Hibou (2012) calls 'governance by tender', a process of offloading that aims to reduce direct interventions in the economy through privatisation programmes.

Thanks to the PPPs, a large part of the budget for the technological development of administrations is coordinated by the Ministry of Economy and the central government. This leads to a process of re-centralisation, not just because regional administrations have few economic resources for this purpose, but because the central funding has been withdrawn, which in turn neutralised regional decision-making power, undermined funding sources and seriously affected local spending capacity. The central state's political strategy is based on two pillars: continuing with the blockage of the transferences agreed on by the organic laws of the Statutes of Autonomy and converting exclusive competencies into concurrent competencies. This way, the central government neutralises the regional administrations' institutional and political capacities (including digitalisation) to govern their population as shown by the cases of Galicia, Basque Country-Navarre and Catalonia-Valencia when analysing the latest laws on local administration, finance, education, health and fiscality (Goikoetxea, 2017). The spending ceilings of many local administrations and the centralisation of the state bureaucracy outside their territories which decide the specifications for contracting software, hardware or platforms (van der Heijden, 2022), determine the digital sovereignty of these regions and minority nations and subject them to the neoliberal art of government by re-centralisation. Therefore, it is challenging to develop local bottom-up alternatives that tend to produce more radical or open software (Monge et al., 2022), as well as non-centralised government rules (Roqueta-Fernàndez & Cozzo, 2023) that could lead to democratisation processes and an enhancement of popular sovereignty, hence, digital sovereignty.

Let us go on with the argumentation of our first hypothesis with a recent example: the 'Agenda Digital para España.' This plan was approved by the Council of Ministers in 2013 and implemented by the Ministry of Energy, Tourism and Digital Agenda and the Ministry of Finance and Public Function. Tied to Brussels' efforts to strengthen the European position in the digital economy, it had as its main task 'increasing the participation of Spanish companies in the most relevant initiatives in the digital field: Smart Cities, Cloud Computing, Big Data' (Gobierno de España, 2013, p. 28). However, the profiles of the officials in charge of implementing the plan seemed to conflict with the underlying idea that digital technology is synonymous with progress. The people tasked with this plan were minister José Manuel Soria, who previously privatised the public airport company Aena and who, due to his relation to the energy industry, was accused of 'commodifying the Sun' (Corrales, 2013); and Luis de Guindos, who privatised the public bank Bankia and thus set the economic conditions for shifting the costs of the 2008 crisis onto the public budget (Guamán et al., 2016). Therefore, digital sovereignty was associated from the very beginning with Spain's neoliberal governance. When Spain was bailed out in 2012, Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy argued that 'there was a danger of losing sovereignty', but he quickly accepted the bailout and continued on the path of 'austerity' (Ruiz, 2012). As Rajoy

explained, the Digital Agenda 'is aligned with the rest of the policies and structural reforms aimed at promoting economic recovery' (La Moncloa, 2015). However, the first public statements around digital sovereignty associated it with state support for large companies. This rhetoric was in contradiction with the policies carried out in the last decades by his party grounded on the privatisation of all these companies and was also in contradiction with his government's promotional national security agenda and cybersecurity strategies, as can be seen in the statements of the conservative Secretary of State for Digital Affairs, José María Lassalle (2017). According to what they did and not what they said they did, over the last decade, just after the financial bailout, a rampant weakening of the public sector has taken place, reinforcing the weight of the private sector through digitalisation (Cancela, 2019).

Under the guise of 'modernisation' or 'digitalisation', we are being sold the idea of applying the capitalist principles of competition to public administrations and the governing practices of outsourcing and subcontracting basic services. The examples mentioned above reveal how the neoliberal-financialised conception of control over the autonomous communities' and minority nations' political and institutional capacity leads in every sphere to de-democratisation and loss of popular sovereignty. The ability to self-govern is taken away from regions and minority nations by neutralising and rationing budgetary decisions regarding digitalisation. Thus, digital sovereignty has never been identified with an 'Entrepreneurial State' leading industrial policy but with its outsourcing to the Spanish capitalist elite, part of which are also certain minority nations' elites, especially the financial ones (as shown in Azkune, 2018; Goikoetxea, 2017).

2.2. The Oxymoron: Spanish Nation-Building through Privatising (Digital) Sovereignty

The re-centralisation trend that swept nation-states all over Europe is also paralleled at the global level. Corporations monopolised not only economic powers but political ones. Silicon Valley is now managing to introduce its neoliberal discourses and policies to the European governance system of dictates and supervision, prompting the creation of new markets based on the private digitalisation of the public administration (Collington, 2021; Sobrino-García, 2021). This narrative prevents local or regional initiatives from advancing alternative forms of development to the market. The entire programmatic agenda of the Spanish government is based on the implementation of a major change 'that modernises and streamlines the instruments of investment and public-private collaboration, with a governance that allows actions to be well articulated with the Autonomous Communities and local governments' (Gobierno de España, 2021). This form of governance has the objective of establishing a new centralised control through 'accountability' led by the central government in Madrid, in which autonomous communities cannot exercise their sovereignty to promote autonomous projects of development (Convery & Lundberg, 2016). This latter requires a reinvigorated nation-building strategy plainly shown on every Spanish investment plan and programmatic agenda performed under the Spanish flag and the slogan 'España Puede' (Spain can). In addition, this nation-building strategy by the dominant nation is also displayed by policies with titles such as 'Digital Spain 2025' (Ministerio de Economía, 2022a), recently updated to 'Digital Spain 2026' (Ministerio de Economía, 2022b), the 'National Artificial Intelligence Strategy' (Ministerio de Economía, 2021) or 'España 2050' (La Moncloa, 2021b). Other nation-states have carried out this

nation-building strategy, but in the case at hand, the question is how much space, decision-making power and institutional capacity the minority nations have vis-à-vis the dominant one within a particular state (for a case study on education, see Saura et al., 2022). On this note, as shown by Roqueta-Fernández and Cozzo (2023), and Jiménez and Garai-Artetxe (2023), the dominant Spanish nation is not only re-centralising political competencies, but also using repressive digital technologies to silence minority ones.

The top-down/state-driven agendas mobilise the 'Spanish homeland' against peripheral approaches, giving rise to what Fourcade and Gordon (2020) define as an algorithmic-driven 'high modernist state'. As these examples suggest, the relationship between the dataist state (reified with narratives around the Spanish *patria*) and digital corporations offering Big Data and artificial intelligence services to guarantee national digital sovereignty ends up, paradoxically, handing over the delivery of traditional public services and core governance functions to big business. Forms of sovereignty that put national liberation struggles rather than capitalist property relations at the centre must be eliminated, as we have seen with the Catalan independence process and the repressions that involved imprisonment and forced exile of hundreds of people, as well as the suspension of the Autonomy according to the article 155 (Bernat & Whyte, 2020). State nationalism within plurinational states, as outlined in the study, means that new sources of data are exploited to provide solutions to technocratically imposed social goals; targets are set by the dominant nation and based on its needs, or more specifically, those of a certain stratum located in Madrid. In the capital of Spain, neoliberal-type indicators, ratings and standards are imposed top-down, from the centre to the periphery and updated endlessly as if decisions took place through a dashboard managed by bureaucrats of the dominant nation in charge of policymaking.

As Pistor (2020) has correctly argued, statehood in the digital age takes on different and new forms along with those traditionally acquired by the nation-state, with its corresponding control over territory and people. These emerging institutional figures are based primarily on data, not so much on law, through the massive capture of information that the citizens of a territory produce and share when they access digital platforms. These firms extract it through all sorts of surveillance tools, such as sensors in smart cities, CCTV cameras or any other device that, thanks to the internet of things, can extract data from phones, computers, cars, and houses—interventions that were present in the vision of digital sovereignty deployed by the Spanish State, from the beginning of the Digital Agenda in 2013 to the present day. In this respect, more problematic is the long history of racism, colonialism and state violence inherited from the Spanish nation-building process over the last centuries, as shown in the examples of extrajudicial killings, torture, rape, illegalisation of political parties, closure of media, prisoner dispersal, and the incarceration of political representatives, as in the Basque Country and Catalonia (Bernat & Whyte, 2020; Zubiaga, 2013). As was argued by (Jiménez & Cancela, 2021a; Jiménez & Cancela, 2021b), one of the most important particularities of the digitalisation of the Spanish state is the 'surveillance punitivism', deployed experimentally during the last two decades in Ceuta and Melilla, the southern border separating Europe and Africa. In this geographical enclave, the idea of the Spanish homeland and how bordering technologies are used to produce otherness (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013) is shown in all its dark splendour. A 'migration control industry' made of fences, walls, cameras, drones, and militarised patrols has emerged by creating partnerships with corporations like Indra and Telefónica, thus profiting from the detention and expulsion of asylum seekers and

refugees. Bautista et al.'s (2022) analysis of almost 3,000 public contracts and close to 1 billion euros shows that Spain functions as a laboratory where new technologies are tested, from drones to step detectors, computers, communications interception equipment, biometric recognition programmes, radars and video cameras that are later acquired by foreign states for the repression of migrants. One may argue that Spain's 'digital sovereignty' is 'sovereign' in the sense that it uses cutting-edge artificial intelligence technology, with biometric readers, state-of-the-art cameras, and drones with which the Guardia Civil surveys and punishes migrants trying to gain irregular access to the Spanish 'sovereign' territory. At the same time, some minority nations within Spain are eager to hold referendums and potentially leave it (Azkune, 2018; Goikoetxea, 2017). A constant in both situations is that the advanced technology does not belong to the population, as shown in the Catalan Referendum of 2017, and its deployment is not decided by either the political representatives or the popular majority (Roqueta-Fernàndez & Cozzo, 2023).

In Schumpeterian Workfare Regimes, the homeland is mobilised as an extension of technologies to justify solving problems such as poverty or civic misbehaviour through technological solutionism and organised violence (Jiménez & Cancela, 2021). In other words, Spanish 'punitive solutionists' 'use the vast surveillance infrastructure of digital capitalism to curb our daily activities and punish any transgressions' (Morozov, 2020). In this sense, technologies are cultural devices, sources of soft and smart power, which allow the Spanish homeland narrative to succeed. To achieve this, the Spanish government entered a partnership with private security companies by financing software systems and automation solutions (Calatayud, 2020) aimed at 'increasing the efficiency and productivity of police services' (Cancela & Jiménez, 2021). Part of it is to promote an 'anti-secession and anti-terrorism' state-of-the-art campaign that uses artificial intelligence, big data, wireless connectivity, autonomous systems and robotics to prevent uprisings in conflict zones (Layton, 2020). The Spanish state has always had a predilection for labelling non-violent actions by Catalan or Basque pro-independence supporters against national sovereignty as terrorist activities, turning criticism of the political regime into a matter of national security (Bernat & Whyte, 2020; Zubiaga, 2012, 2013). Accordingly, democratic struggles for national liberation and popular sovereignty will continue to be identified as acts of terrorism. This is because dominant nations and concretely dominant nations' elites still run the local, regional, and state territories in the post-national and post-sovereign global era. Their political and economic elites are privatising the state, the regional, local, and national territories, and their political institutions, at a time when the State Security Forces are being radicalised in the direction of Vox-style Philo-fascist parties. Powerful social blocs are privatising the homeland through digital surveillance, thus reinforcing the solutionist ethos of intelligence services and other government agencies (Cancela & Jiménez, 2020). The Catalangate case, where the Spanish national intelligence service used Israeli software to monitor pro-independence leaders (Scott-Railton et al., 2022), is an excellent example of the latter.

3. Spanish Fake Sovereignty

The outcomes of the Spanish digital sovereignty strategy have been twofold: on the one hand, the country has strengthened its peripheral position in the digital world economy, increasingly turning itself into a colony of the US digital giants or large Chinese

companies; on the other hand, it has consolidated national strategic sectors aimed at the surveillance of dissent, which has been achieved by militarising the basis of its digital economy. We argue that this approach for legitimising digital sovereignty and the Spanish homeland as a whole is a fictional narrative where the country projects itself as a powerful autonomous agent in the digital economy, while the reality is quite the opposite: Spain is losing positions in the digital economy and reducing its national capacities for developing its industrial sector autonomously.

3.1.   Towards the Digital Colony

We argue that Spain's digital sovereignty strategy is fake not only because it has avoided any focus on developing a sovereign technological infrastructure but because the platforms deployed do not belong anymore to Spanish national giants, such as Telefónica or Indra, since they have acted as a subterfuge to attract foreign investment from Big Tech companies. As we will demonstrate, this strategy turned Spain into what the academic literature has defined as a 'digital colony' (Ávila, 2018; Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Kwet, 2019; Young, 2019): an undeveloped country situated on the periphery of the capitalist world economy and a territory for data mining and the surveillance of society. This culminates the alliance between Big Tech and states by signing public-private agreements aimed at, quixotically, guaranteeing its digital sovereignty.

In the eighties, thanks to the push from the social democratic government of Felipe González, the State delegated its sovereignty (political capacity and authoritative decision-making power to govern) to the telecommunications giant. It seems that developing a technological infrastructure with Spanish characteristics meant privatisation and liberalisation. After nearly 40 years, the current social democratic Government of Pedro Sánchez and its minister of Economy, Nadia Calviño, continued this national agenda by attracting Silicon Valley cloud providers to set up in the Spanish territory. The underlying idea is that they can provide the infrastructure for Telefónica to become an intermediary between the US giants and small or medium-sized national companies. During the pandemic of 2020, this process culminated with the galvanisation of the state by Big Tech with Telefónica's mediation. This company assumed an economic and diplomatic role, becoming the platform that lays out a red commercial carpet for foreign firms. Telefónica is now working with Microsoft to sell cheaper licences to SMEs and with Google and Amazon to rent their cloud services to its customers. At the end of the first phase of the coronavirus pandemic, when cloud services were fundamental to further developing teleworking and offshore digital services, Google and Telefónica signed an agreement for the former to migrate its applications to the North American platform. Google Cloud services are being used to boost Telefonica's digital capabilities, i.e. to use third-party hardware to operate and offer such capabilities to other companies in areas like machine learning, artificial intelligence or data analysis (Lorenzo, 2020). In addition, in April 2022, both of them announced an agreement through ElevenPaths (a start-up acquired by Telefónica, whose founder, Carme Artigas, is the current Secretary of State for Digital Transformation) and Chronicle (Google's cybersecurity company) to offer more powerful and flexible security analytics services to companies in Europe and Latin America. At the same time, the telco's cybersecurity unit has achieved 'security competency status' from Amazon Web Services to offer professional security services to customers, making Telefónica a consultant that helps with the design solutions in Amazon ecosystems (Jiménez,

2020). Studies in radical political economy (Shaikh, 2016) would point out that Telefónica has been defeated in the process of inter-capitalist competition and had to adopt the 'regulatory capital' of Big Tech in order to lower costs and preserve some branches of its digital business model in Spain, which ends up fortifying Telefonica's national monopoly.

Our central conclusion regarding Spain's digital sovereignty is that its telecommunication companies used to be powerful giants with a strong presence in Latin America and Europe (Millan, 2019) but are now forced to exploit Silicon Valley infrastructures to survive in the global digital market.

Digital sovereignty, therefore, is limited by Spain's capacity for action to develop its industrial policy. This position can be considered peripheral or technologically underdeveloped in terms of world systems theory. Based on labour division, Spain focuses on lower-skill workers (many of Telefónica's employees are not engineers), labour-intensive production (there is still a vast amount of precarious female teleoperator work in the South), as well as raw material extraction (data is extracted from Spain to California). Due to this system, core countries are focused on high-skill (Silicon Valley companies hire the best engineers from the Spanish universities) or capital-intensive industries (have developed the means of production of the twenty-first century) to exert dominance over the peripheral ones, making the latter dependent on the former (Amin, 1974; Dos Santos & Santos, 2020; Gunder Frank, 1966).

As Goikoetxea et al. (2022) has argued in more philosophical and political terms, the digital world is not immaterial. Therefore, we cannot explain the discourses around digitalisation by themselves; we need to understand its materiality: whether we ideologically accept it or not, the technological infrastructures that connect us to the internet are material and do not belong to us but to private corporations. For example, two-thirds of the Ibex 35 listed companies host their data in the Amazon cloud. Additionally, given Telefónica's centrality in the Spanish state and its control of material infrastructures, it can be argued that Silicon Valley partially controls the country and that it wields technological power similar to the deployment of military bases across Spanish territory. Data centres are the material space that displays the correlation of forces in the digital arena: Amazon has built a campus of three data centres in the region of Aragon through its subsidiary Amazon Web Services. According to the company, its logistics platforms in the area will represent an investment of 2,500 million euros over the next 10 years and generate 1,300 new jobs. Google and Microsoft have confirmed that they will open three and one new cloud regions respectively in Madrid along with Telefónica (Cano, 2020). IBM will also set up another three in the Spanish capital, its most significant investment in Spain, and they will mainly supply digital capacities to CaixaBank (Figuls, 2021). To top it all off, Orange will open five new data centres, investing 24 million euros for its new data centres in 'peripheral Spain', trying to take advantage of the low price of land, construction or the sale of buildings (Lorenzo, 2021). More recently, Facebook (now called Meta) announced the creation of almost 2,000 jobs to boost the metaverse lab in Madrid and a data centre in La Mancha.

The extent to which Spain's peripheral position is embodied in these investments can be seen in the fact that Spain ranks 30th out of the 50 most developed markets in data centres, and first in Southern Europe. It is also expected that this centre sector will raise its direct investment in new centres in Spain to 6.3 billion by 2026—to which at least another 10 billion will be added in indirect investment. Regarding the centralisation of these infrastructures, if the current installed capacity in the country amounts to 113, 103 MW, that is, 91% of the total is in the area of the Spanish capital, Madrid (Jiménez, 2022b).

In addition to the figures of foreign technological investment, which show Spain's industrial and productive subordination to Silicon Valley, another important pillar for mapping Spanish dependence is financial subordination, where the scope for state actions is restricted by the conditions imposed by expanded capitalist reproduction on a global scale (Alami et al., 2022). Spanish Socimi Merlin Properties leads the investment in data centres, with 596 million euros budgeted to build four assets in Spain and Portugal (Santamarina, 2022). Other investment funds, such as Blackstone—through its recently acquired QTS—, Pimco, Damac, Compass and Prime Data Center are also evaluating opportunities to purchase land. Damac, a Dubai real estate company specialising in luxury properties, will invest around 1 billion in data centres in different Spanish geographies. Singapore's sovereign wealth fund, GIC, has also managed to enter the data centre market in the country through an alliance with Equinix (Jiménez, 2022a). Furthermore, the US fund Thor will build Madrid One, a campus with ten buildings on a 225,000 m2 site in the municipality of Fuenlabrada (Arroyo, 2022).

Given that the gross profitability of data centres' assets can reach between 14% and 18%, much more than offices, logistics or shopping centres, real estate platforms speculate that this infrastructure will grow by 500% in Madrid and Barcelona (Pareja, 2022). In line with that, Telefonica has signed an agreement to sell 11 of its 23 data centres in the Americas to Asterion Industrial Partners, an investment fund, for a total of 550 million euros. In addition, it has accelerated the sale of 2,029 towers in Ecuador and Colombia for a total of approximately 290 million euros; one of its subsidiaries in Germany has also sold 10,100 towers for 1.5 billion euros to the telecommunications infrastructure company Telxius, in which the company itself holds a 50.01% stake. At the same time, this firm has commissioned Société Générale and Greenhill to explore the sale of the 100,000 fibre optic submarine cable business within its subsidiary Telxius, which has been deploying this infrastructure with Google, Microsoft and Facebook to connect in Europe and California through the Basque coast.

These data again confirm our main two hypotheses: the de-democratisation process that centralisation implies as regards territorial and social cohesion, shown in detail by Goikoetxea (2014), which in this case leads to a loss of power and control, hence, popular sovereignty, by the peripheral nations. In this context, the Spanish state plays a key role in processing global capitalist class relations and securing the general conditions for accumulation within national territories. Again, if Spain's digital sovereignty strategy is fake, it is not only due to the presence of foreign private technology firms, but also to the foreign private investment funds' financing the digital development in the country, but its re-centralisation in terms of competences, resources and territories (Goikoetxea, 2017).

3.2.   *The Militarised State*

One of the lessons of the world-system school (Hopkins & Wallerstein, 1982) is that the reliance on economic control by a dominating capitalist centre (core) is possible because of the political relation with peripheral and semi-peripheral areas (periphery). In this direction, Fraser and Jaeggi (2018) argue that geopolitics and the military are two important edges, alongside economic exploitation and political expropriation (means of colonial plunder), to explain the conditions of possibility that guarantee the accumulation of capital. This reality has been brought to the fore by what the media (Hernandez, 2022)

and Brussels think tanks (Mollet & Riekeles, 2020) call the 'war economy'. Under these circumstances, the primary aim of Governments for enhancing their sovereignty—be it in the digital or military realm—has shifted from acting autonomously without the United States to protecting EU member states and asserting common European interests through long-lasting dependence on the US geopolitical and technological agenda (von Ondarza & Overhaus, 2022). For example, in the last NATO world summit, which took place in Madrid, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez called on the right and left for a 'national agreement' to reach 2% of defence spending by 2029, double the current level, which would mean an increase of around 13 billion euros. Along with galloping inflation and the energy crisis, the Keynesian framework imposed in the months following the pandemic has given rise to an innovative form of 'military Keynesianism' (Custers, 2010). To become more digital and digitally sovereign, the decisive action towards complete digital transformation taken in Spain has been to strengthen state-owned military technology firms. After announcing the purchase of an additional 10% of the capital of the public enterprise Indra, which reached 28% of the shareholding, the Spanish government has proposed Telefónica and Criteria Caixa take a stake in the company's capital in order to create a hard core, aimed at taking executive control and implement a strategic plan focused on the air and defence sector (Marco, 2022). After this decision, Indra reported a profit of 39 million euros in the first quarter, 76% more than in the same period last year. In this sense, the company has reported that all items on its income statement grew at a double-digit rate year-on-year, reaching a new record in the public procurement portfolio (Millan, 2022). In the middle of last year, the State also removed the barriers for channelling money from the Next Generation funds to public companies, eliminating the 50% limit on subcontracting in the commissioning of own resources and turning the defence sector into a strategic asset. In this sense, the Ministry of Defence has designated Indra as the national coordinator of many industrial projects, acknowledging that it had closed the 'planning' for the Spanish industry to make its contribution to the development of the demonstrators of the different technological pillars (Pons, 2020). Furthermore, the public firm Ingeniería de Sistemas para la Defensa de España (Isdefe), which reports to the Ministry of Defence, was commissioned the management of 4.3 billion aimed to digitise the public administration (Martínez, 2022).

The Spanish State's militaristic drift and its relationship with digital sovereignty became much more evident during the NATO summit when the first strategic concept since 2010 was coined in a 16-page document (Stoltenberg, 2022). Western bloc's military and containment policy was fine-tuned to include countering China, and memorandums of understanding were promoted to apply the latest technologies, such as autonomous weapons, in wartime scenarios. For example, NATO countries declared the creation of 'the world's first multi-sovereign venture capital fund' to invest in start-ups and other entities working on technologies 'with great military potential'—including artificial intelligence, autonomy, big-data processing, biotechnology, and human enhancement. In this context, (Iliadis & Acker, 2022) have warned that the rise of militaristic discourse will only continue the dependence on Silicon Valley, albeit on firms dedicated to the military, not just the clouding business, such as the surveillance and data mining platform Palantir. 'The message was straightforward: innovate or die. Adopt Palantir technologies as the US military has done, or risk domination' (Lynch, 2022).

The Spanish state (La Moncloa, 2021a) is pushing in this direction when associating national security and economic growth with sovereignty. It has been evident since the

President Pedro Sánchez paradigmatically abandoned the concept of 'digital sovereignty' to speak instead of 'strategic autonomy' (much more adapted to the military linguistic) in a non-paper published together with the (Kingdom of the Netherlands, 2021). Sanchez's move towards a new concept for understanding Spanish digital sovereignty was not original: the EU's common security and defence policy was launched in the 1998s as a quest for 'autonomy' even if more than 24 years later, its efforts have failed to achieve any of the significant objectives proposed (Schuette, 2022). Similarly, when Mariano Rajoy's Digital Agenda identified digital sovereignty in 2013 as a way to continue post-crisis structural adjustments in 2007, the new economic consensus in post-pandemic and militarised Europe instrumentalises digital technologies by associating it with modernity, albeit in this case tying it to military agenda. The European 'autonomy' advocated here assumes that the only form of sovereignty is to tie economic, foreign and military policy to US companies, US military, and participation in US-controlled international institutions (Arteaga et al., 2021). In short, Spanish digital sovereignty, or strategic digital autonomy, has merged with the militarisation of the state in a context of economic crisis and war (Musto, 2022).

4.   Conclusions

Due to the financial crisis of 2008, the digitalisation agenda of the Spanish state has been focused on creating neoliberal governance mechanisms to continue privatisation through public-private agreements. At the same time, an imaginary vision was created around the Spanish homeland that rejected all alternative local or regional initiatives and framed alternative constructions as a problem for national security. Both dynamics gave rise to a path towards state-centralised digitalisation, which has taken place hand in hand with US tech giants, thus placing the country in a peripheral position and increasing its economic dependence on foreign investment. Firstly, the article has demonstrated that the country's digital sovereignty is neither entirely Spanish nor sovereign. Then, we analysed the sense in which this sovereignty is fake, as well as the extent to which it is Spanish and democratising. To that end, we delineated how sovereignty is understood by national elites, namely, as a legal, economic and formal mechanism for capital accumulation through privatisation and centralisation of the state. We have also noted that those who understand it as a mechanism for spreading democracy—enhancing the population's capacity to govern and decide for themselves using their own political or digital institutions—are repressed. Finally, we have illustrated two main cleavages: privatisation within the nation and the suppression of minority and peripheral nations. This is why future studies will need to work with two closely linked concepts: one which refers to national sovereignty and the other to popular sovereignty. In a world still divided by nation-states, sovereignty—and very much digital sovereignty—will continue to be linked to internal conflicts and democratic processes since public deliberations and popular referendums will depend on the political, institutional and technological capacity that the population can achieve in order to territorially and digitally govern themselves in a global fiercely capitalist era.

Disclosure Statement

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