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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Repression in Disguise: Effects of Covert Repression on the Erosion of Social Movements in Post-Indignados Madrid

**Mert Arslanalp**

*Department of Political Science and International Relations, Boğaziçi University*

**Gomer Betancor Nuez**

*Department of Sociology II, National Distance Education University (UNED)*

**ABSTRACT:** The growing securitization and criminalization of social movements in Europe raise concerns about the erosion of public freedoms. Yet scholarship often emphasizes overt repression, neglecting the effects of more covert strategies. This article examines post-Indignados Spain to analyze two such mechanisms taking an infra-political lens: administrative repression through fines and intensified police infiltration. Focusing on Madrid's housing movement, climate activism, and squatted social centers, it investigates how these practices shape repertoires and organizational capacity. Drawing on interviews with activists, legislative analysis, and secondary data on protest rights, the study finds that both mechanisms foster demobilization, weaken civil disobedience, and undermine organizational structures. Administrative repression generates ambiguity and atomization, while infiltration breeds distrust, eroding horizontal and participatory organizing. Nevertheless, movements create new forms of solidarity and organizational capacity to counteract these effects. By advancing research on these underexplored strategies, the article illuminates the relationship between repression and movement dynamics, contributing to debates on securitization, public freedoms, and the resilience of collective action in contemporary Europe.

**KEYWORDS:** Infra-politics, Police infiltration, Protest repression, Social movements, Spain

**CORRESPONDING AUTHOR(S):** [mert.arslanalp@bogazici.edu.tr](mailto:mert.arslanalp@bogazici.edu.tr), [gbetancor@poli.uned.es](mailto:gbetancor@poli.uned.es)

## 1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, European democracies have witnessed an escalating trend toward the securitization and criminalization of dissent, particularly targeting social movements and youth-led protests. Frequently justified in the name of public order, anti-terrorism, or national security, this trend has progressively reshaped the boundaries of legitimate political participation (Calvo and Portos 2019). While the expansion of penal governance and preventive policing is observable across the continent, Spain represents a particularly critical and illustrative case. In the aftermath of the Indignados (15M) cycle, the Spanish state has developed increasingly sophisticated forms of repression aimed at containing contentious actors (Bernat and Whyte 2021; Calatayud 2016; Calvo and Portos 2019; García 2014). Specifically, the deployment of administrative sanctions, intensified surveillance, and covert police infiltration has become central to what Bernat and Whyte (2021) conceptualize as “criminalization as a strategy of power”, which systematically erodes civil liberties even under formal democratic rule.

These developments are not merely national anomalies but reflect broader shifts in global governance logics, where law is instrumentalized not only to punish but also to pre-emptively neutralize dissent (Arslanalp and Erkmen 2020; Earl and Braithwaite 2022; Gillham and Noakes 2007; Tertychnaya 2023). The Spanish case is emblematic of this dynamic, particularly since the enactment of the 2015 “Ley de Seguridad Ciudadana”, commonly referred to as “Ley Mordaza” (Gag Law), which institutionalized legal ambiguity and discretionary enforcement as tools of social control (Olmo and Lozano 2015). The result is a normalized environment of low-intensity repression, frequently covert, ambiguous, and routinized, whose corrosive effects on collective action are both profound and insufficiently understood.

Whereas overt forms of repression, such as police violence and mass arrests have long been the focus of academic research on state responses to dissent (Davenport 2007; Earl 2003 and 2011), more subtle, covert, and bureaucratic forms of repression remain comparatively understudied. Yet, mounting evidence suggests that these covert modalities of repression are not merely ancillary but constitute central mechanisms of political suppression in contemporary democracies (Boykoff 2007; Ferree 2004; García 2014) in ways that depart from traditional “negotiated management” model (Della Porta and Reiter 1998; McPhail, Schweingruber, and McCarthy 1998). Unlike overt repression, these tactics aim not to eliminate protest through spectacular displays of force, but rather to gradually undermine it by eroding organizational capacities, disrupting internal cohesion, delegitimizing actors, and inducing self-censorship over time.

In the Spanish context, administrative sanctions, particularly those enabled by the “Ley Mordaza”, have been instrumental in producing a chilling effect that blurs the lines between legality and illegality. Parallel to this, covert police infiltration, often framed under the guise of intelligence operations, has introduced distrust, fear, and organizational fragmentation within protest networks. Despite growing documentation of these practices by watchdog organizations, legal defense groups, and activist collectives, their long-term, cumulative impacts on the strategic resilience and organizational vitality of social movements remain significantly undertheorized within mainstream repression studies. This article addresses this gap by investigating how covert repression, specifically administrative sanctions and police infiltration has affected the strategic choices, organizational infrastructures, and resilience of social movements in post-Indignados Madrid based on semi-structured interviews with movement activists and other key informants as well as secondary sources.

This question is particularly relevant in a context where legal ambiguity, discretionary enforcement, and surveillance-oriented policing increasingly constrain traditional repertoires of contention. Taking an infra-political lens (Scott 1990; Marche 2012) that seeks to shed light on the hidden, micro-effects, this study provides an empirical analysis of how these repression instruments operate not only at the legal and institutional levels but also at the relational, affective, and organizational levels within activist communities.

By foregrounding how activists experience these forms of repression, the analysis reveals that state control is exercised not solely through visible coercion but also through the subtle erosion of trust, autonomy, collective coherence, and predictability.

In doing so, this article offers three key contributions to the literature on repression and social movements. First, it demonstrates that covert repression is not peripheral but constitutive of the contemporary repertoire of state control in liberal democracies. Second, it expands the understanding of repression by centering the everyday, relational, and affective consequences of legal-bureaucratic instruments like administrative sanctions and infiltration. Third, it contributes to ongoing debates on the resilience and erosion of social movements under conditions of sustained low-intensity repression. Ultimately, this paper seeks to fully incorporate the covert modalities of repression into the analysis of contentious politics in democratic regimes.

In what follows, we first discuss theoretical debates on covert and infra-politics of repression, then situate our specific focus on administrative repression and police infiltration in this wider scholarship. We then elaborate on our methods, contextualize how two instruments of repression evolved in Spain, and conclude by discussing the findings of our research on activist experiences of repression.

## **2. Moving beyond police violence: Covert repression and its modalities**

Public and academic debate on protest repression predominantly focuses on overt forms of police violence and large-scale criminalization. After decades of seeming pacification under “negotiated management” in Western Europe and the US (Della Porta and Reiter 1998; McPhail et al. 1998), scenes of coercive policing have returned. Some suggest a shift toward “strategic incapacitation” coupled with highly militarized police force as protests became more transgressive and disruptive with the rise of the Global Justice Movement (Gillham and Noakes 2007; Gillham 2011; Wood 2014). Others suggest that the earlier decline in police violence reflected the decline of transgressive protesting at the time (Soule and Davenport 2009). Either way, mass social unrests since the Global Financial Crisis of 2008 and escalating climate movement heightened authorities’ threat perception. The institutionalization of emergency measures and securitization since 9/11 further enabled militarized policing against peaceful protest (Gillham 2011).

Centering on overt forms of police repression, however, leads us to ignore how overt repression is embedded in a larger repertoire of state practices that raise the costs of participation in collective action following Tilly’s (1978,100) definition of repression. Repression can be visible or invisible, state or non-state, coercive or indirect (Boykoff 2007; Earl 2003; 2011). While police crackdowns represent a direct and physical form, states may also employ methods such as restricting resources or using legal and administrative tools that are not visibly coercive (Earl 2003; Boykoff 2007). Despite these typologies, however, literature still privileges physical force as the central form of repression (Earl 2011, 265).

However, high-intensity police action presents a dilemma for public authorities, given its contradictory outcomes. While violence may deter participation by increasing its costs, it can also provoke mass backlash by causing moral shocks (Aytaç, Schiumerini, and Stokes 2018; Demirel-Pegg 2020; Francisco 2004). Gezi Park protests in 2013 exemplify this dynamic, as violence against a small protest triggered nationwide mobilization.

Successful protest containment often requires less visible strategies. Earl (2003, 48) defines “covert repression” as a form of repression whose agents and purposes “are intended to be unknown to the general public.” Nevertheless, the relationship between covertness and public visibility is complex. Some forms, like surveillance and infiltration, may be strictly hidden, yet their general possibility may be publicized to sow fear.

Indeed, in police states, the strategy takes its efficacy from the public knowledge that it is unobservable yet ubiquitous. Meanwhile, there are other types of repressive action that may not be strictly covert but nevertheless hard to notice such as tax policies towards NGOs that may channel activism towards less confrontational forms (Earl 2003). Such policies are observable, but their repressive effects are rarely visible to the public. In this paper, we explore administrative fines as a repressive tool, whose deterrent power comes from being known yet its specific instances are disguised and highly targeted. This atomization of suffering consequently limits the possibility of collective outrage from the larger public.

## **2.1 Administrative repression**

Authorities increasingly use a variety of legal-administrative instruments to deter protest activity or channel it into less threatening forms. Administrative repression involves bureaucratic sanctions such as fines, permit denials, bans, and regulatory constraints. Unlike criminal sanctions, which require judicial procedures and must meet higher evidentiary standards, administrative sanctions can bypass judicial processes. This allows authorities to impose penalties unilaterally, often with considerable discretion. These legal-administrative forms of repression, however, remain understudied (See Earl and Braithwaite 2022). Yet such tools curb protests while reducing reliance on police force. For example, spatial restrictions through permit systems limit visibility of protests and avoid public backlash (Arslanalp and Erkmen 2023; Mitchell 2013). Others study preventive protest bans which suspend protest rights locally in uneven but impactful ways (Arslanalp and Erkmen 2020) and undermine protesters' ability to generate favorable public opinion (Tertychnaya 2023). Restrictive administrative regulations on civil society funding and activity, increasingly common under "foreign agent laws" introduced since the 2000s, impede organizations through inspections and sanctions, if not prosecution (Robertson 2010; Bakke et al. 2020).

The Spanish case, examined below, shows a different modality: instead of bans, authorities arbitrarily fine protesters for transgressing the "proper" boundaries of protesting. Already used after Indignados under existing laws, the 2015 "Gag Law" institutionalized this administrative repression as a key tool (Calvo and Portos 2019). The literature highlights its constitutive features using different concepts such as "soft repression" (García 2014), "bureau-repression" (Olmo and Lozano 2015), "penalization" (Calvo and Echeverría 2023), and "punitive decriminalization" (Calatayud 2016). García (2014) highlights how identity checks, fines, and bureaucratic intimidation "camouflaged" attempts to contain mobilization. Underlining the administrative/bureaucratic nature of the repression as opposed to the use of police violence or criminal prosecution, Olmo and Lozano (2015, 1314) uses the term "bureau-repression" defined as "the utilization, by different institutions of control and public order, of the repertoire of administrative sanctions [...] to criminalize, repress, penalize and ultimately defuse protest." Meanwhile Calatayud (2016) points out that the shift from criminal prosecution to administrative sanctioning constitutes a form of punitive decriminalization. Legal reforms shifted some actions from criminal to administrative law, appearing liberalizing but in fact extending punitiveness by expanding arbitrary punishment. Unlike criminal law (with its stronger due process), administrative law gives police wide discretion with minimal scrutiny.

Overall, this form of repression lowers the costs of enforcement for the state while raising the risks and uncertainties for activists. As we show below, it deters by inducing self-censorship and weakening movement capacity without the visibility and controversy of overt repression. We also highlight that administrative repression is also relational and affective: It disrupts trust within movements, drains organizational resources, and fragments networks.

## **2.2 Infiltration and internal disruption in social movements**

Surveillance and infiltration by the state have long been tools for managing and neutralizing collective dissent. Surveillance not only collects information, but also exercises power by shaping behavior, inducing self-censorship, and undermining the trust that underpins collective action (Gillham and Marx 2000). Infiltration in particular plays a dual role: it allows real-time monitoring of activists' strategies while sowing suspicion, fracture, and demobilization within movement spaces (Marx 1974).

As Monahan (2010) argues, contemporary surveillance regimes are increasingly integrated, participatory, and interconnected, blurring the lines between state and civil society. Infiltration becomes effective not only through surveillance but also through performative disruption of solidarity, as agents pose as deeply rooted participants, subtly directing decisions or fueling internal conflicts. These dynamics are especially pernicious in movements relying on horizontal or informal networks, where trust is essential for coordination and resilience (Nalepa and Pop-Eleches 2022). The cumulative effects extend beyond operational disruption: they undermine collective identity and democratic spirit. Infiltration often leaves lasting fractures and disengagement among participants (Lubbers 2015).

Understanding these dynamics is essential to grasp the full spectrum of repression in contemporary democracies, where control is increasingly exercised not through visible force, but through the manipulation of intimacy and the erosion of internal cohesion. Structurally, infiltration reshapes repertoires, pushing groups from disruptive tactics toward clandestine or low-risk symbolic protest. Research on demobilization confirms covert surveillance and agents provocateurs limit repertoire and disrupt communication, leading to reduced scale and diversity of protest actions (Demirel-Pegg 2017).

The strategic insertion of undercover agents into intimate and social networks disrupts information flow, creating zones of “inactivity” where movements once flourished. This is evident in the use of sexual infiltration to create ‘docile bodies’ within activist communities (Loadenthal 2014), and in the intelligence-led policing framework of the UK's Special Demonstration Squad and its successor National Public Order Intelligence Unit (NPOIU), which institutionalized infiltration as central to preventive disruption of movement activity. These practices, now scrutinized by the Undercover Policing Inquiry, have influenced other European states, where narratives of ‘home-grown extremism’ justify covert operations against environmental, climate justice, and housing movements (Bonino and Kaoullas 2015; Schlembach 2018).

Covert infiltration undermines trust and cohesion. When activists cannot distinguish genuine participants from undercover agents, they calculate participation risk based on fear of discovery rather than on the movement's goals, inducing self-censorship and abandonment of high-risk tactics. Emotional and psychological costs of infiltration are severe. Historical cases, from Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO) to post-Indignados Madrid, show covert operations instill fear, anxiety, and ontological uncertainty. Psychological trauma is documented, especially among those deceived into intimate relationships, and false narratives are spread to criminalize dissent (Anderson 2014), inhibiting collaboration and feeding cycles of demobilization.

These tactics extend beyond the apparent competencies of law enforcement, as they target non-violent, legally protected protest under the pretext of public safety. They are also intertwined with technologies of digital repression such as data tracking, online monitoring, or clandestine applications/de-encryption, forming an integrated apparatus of repression that extends online and offline (Earl, Maher, and Pan 2022).

In Spain, police infiltration has increased and become more sophisticated in recent years. The documentary *Infiltrados* (La Directa & 3Cat 2025) revealed four undercover agents in Catalonia and the Valencian Community using false identities to gather political and social information through active participation in assemblies, sabotage actions and sexual relations with activists (El Salto País Valencià 2025). This practice is

not new; journalistic investigations have revealed historical cases such as that of Marta “la estupa”, a national police agent who, since her graduation in 1985, remained infiltrated in multiple social spaces in Madrid for more than two decades, eroding internal cohesion and trust among activists (Muñoz 2024b). Given the organizational and psychological impact of these operations, in January 2025 a group of affected individuals published a practical manual for detecting and unmasking undercover police officers, systematizing indicators of suspicion and prevention strategies that highlight the shortcomings of state espionage methods (Muñoz 2025; Muñoz 2024a).

### 3. Research design: Data and methods

In this study, we employ a qualitative methodological approach to examine the emerging mechanisms of covert repression shaping social movements in post-Indignados Madrid. Our central question asks how activists experience administrative sanctions and police infiltration and what ways these less visible repressive strategies affect their repertoires of action and organizational capacity. To address this, we conducted semi-structured interviews with seventeen key informants from grassroots collectives, human rights organizations, and protest rights advocacy groups. These primary data are complemented by secondary sources (news reports, NGO and state reports, video documentation, and activist testimonies) that provide contextual depth and triangulate findings.

To investigate covert repression, we used purposive sampling with two categories of key informants: (1) representatives of human rights and right-to-protest organizations, often lawyers with long-standing links to movements, and (2) activists directly affected by repressive practices. First, we identified key informants as individuals with sustained, high-level involvement in organizations or collectives defending protest rights, actors who stand out for their extensive activist background and specialized legal knowledge, often practicing lawyers who combine professional insight with militant commitment. They not only provided information but also acted as analytical collaborators and gateways to wider networks. In this sense, our interlocutors embody the figure of the activist-intellectual, organic intellectuals who fuse lived experience of grassroots mobilization with analytical reflection, in line with Gramsci's theorizing about intellectuals who emerge from their social environment and speak on its behalf (Gramsci 1971).

We focused on activists in movements most affected by these repressive practices, the housing movement, climate activism, squatted social centers, and Palestine solidarity, primarily in Madrid (with one interviewee from Barcelona) due to our contextual knowledge and access to participants. In the Spanish context, and for the purposes of our analysis, climate activism and the housing movement are particularly relevant because they have been among the most active and influential arenas of non-violent civil disobedience in the post-Indignados period. Within housing activism, PAH-linked groups and local housing assemblies have relied on anti-eviction pickets (Stop Desahucios) as a core form of direct action—both to physically halt evictions and to gain time for case-by-case legal defense strategies to unfold. In climate activism (focusing here on Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion, and excluding groups such as Futuro Vegetal whose repertoire is more overtly disruptive), activists have prominently deployed sit-ins that block traffic, alongside interventions and blockades targeting corporate headquarters and sites of economic decision-making. In both fields, these repertoires have mattered not only for their tactical content but also because they have been propelled by the large-scale entry of a new cohort of activists, contributing to the renewal of collective action repertoires in Spain.

Within this stratum, we included spokespersons with structural knowledge and individuals who personally experienced repression. This dual approach allowed us to analyze both the meso-level of organizational dynamics and the micro level of lived experience. Finally, we ensured demographic diversity to capture varied ways covert repression shapes participation and strategy. Nevertheless, our sample is not large enough to make comparisons across movements regarding their experiences with repression.

Access to organizations and informants was facilitated by one author's prior engagement with Madrid-based activist milieus, including a research stay in Madrid and earlier research on the city's recent social movement history. These earlier engagements involved exploratory, low-profile 'floating observation' across movement settings and a longer process of immersion in everyday activist spaces, which helped build relationships and mutual recognition (Cognetti, 2022; Olivier de Sardan, 2015). This pre-existing familiarity eased entry to the field and strengthened our reflexive handling of positionality and the research relationship, thereby reinforcing the critical stance adopted throughout data collection and analysis (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

**Table 1- Sample of interviewees**

<i>ID</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Type of organisation</i>
E1	M	Environmental
E2	W	Right to protest
E3	W	Environmental
E4	M	Trade union
E5	M	Trade union
E6	W	pro-Palestinian group
E7	W	pro-Palestinian group
E8	W	pro-Palestinian group
E9	M	Right to protest
E10	M	Anti-repression
E11	M	Environmental
E12	M	Anti-repression
E13	W	Right to protest
E14	M	Right to housing
E15	M	Squatted social centre
E16	M	Squatted social centre
E17	M	Squatted social centre

**Source: own elaboration**

As part of our research design, we review post-Indignados legal instruments, especially the 2015 amendment to the Organic Law on Citizen Security. Through document analysis, we examine formal provisions and enforcement logics, focusing on how administrative norms create ambiguity and sanction dissent. This legislative review is complemented by qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with activists. Narrative data are transcribed and coded thematically to capture firsthand accounts of how new legal measures translate into daily risks and tactical adaptation. Finally, to enhance validity and depth, we triangulate our interview findings with secondary sources, including reports by civil society organizations, peer-reviewed legislative analyses, and studies of policing and protest dynamics, thereby constructing a layered, mixed-methods framework for understanding repression in post-Indignados Madrid.

In conducting this study, we adhered to the highest ethical standards (Ethics Committee National Distance Education University, Spain). Given the politically sensitive nature of covert repression, we anonymized participants and stored transcripts securely. To avoid inadvertent identification, we report our sample only in the broad movement categories described. Finally, we acknowledge two main limitations: our findings refer exclusively to the Spanish context and, more specifically, to Madrid.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 *The institutionalization of administrative repression*

The rise of administrative repression of protesters in Spain occurred in response to the *Indignados* protests, which began on May 15, 2011, with the first encampment in Puerta del Sol square in central Madrid. Taking place against the backdrop of austerity measures following the worst economic crisis of Spanish democracy since 1978, the protests spread nationwide and developed into a sustained protest cycle that lasted until 2015 (Portos 2021). This cycle brought many ordinary citizens, often with no prior history of activism, into the streets. Loosely connected through social networks, they were nonetheless willing to engage in disruptive and innovative repertoires that marked a departure from the routinized forms of protest that had characterized Spanish democracy over the previous thirty years (Portos 2021; Romanos 2014; Romanos and Sádaba 2022).

The initial violent police response triggered public outrage and contributed to the expansion of participation (García 2014, 304), as movement organizers were adept at seizing the opportunities afforded by both the widespread discontent and the timing of local elections. Since *Indignados* enjoyed broad public legitimacy, at least initially (Muñoz and Anduiza 2019), subsequent policing had to be more restrained and as a result, authorities over time began resorting to tools beyond direct physical force and mass arrests to deter participation and channel protests into less disruptive forms. Among these, the imposition of administrative fines on protesters became a central strategy. Reports from Comisión Legal Sol, the legal committee of the Puerta del Sol encampment, cast some light on the preliminary scope of this strategy. Between May 2011 and December 2012, at least 929 fines, totaling approximately 300,000 euros, were issued for infractions such as disturbing the peace, disobedience, resistance to authority, violation of city ordinances, or organizing unreported gatherings (cited in Olmo and Lozano 2015: 1320–21). In 2013, police were instructed to impose fines for *escrache* protests directed at politicians.

Authorities, initially, relied on a mix of local and national laws to fine protesters. Protests without prior notification were commonly deemed illegal, while vague clauses in the Citizen Security Law, such as “disrespecting authority”, were also used to sanction demonstrators (Interview with E2). Municipal bylaws regulating public space on issues such as noise, sanitation, and safety were similarly invoked to restrict protest activity (Calatayud 2016, 56). Municipalities, particularly, cited “civic” laws to prohibit protest in certain squares and streets, as well as to regulate the use of megaphones or the posting of flyers (Calatayud 2016, 67–68). Given that the occupation of public space was one of the key innovative and disruptive tactics used by the *Indignados*, these spatial regulations were particularly effective in constraining protest.

Beginning in 2013, the conservative Rajoy government initiated a series of legal reforms designed to expand the powers of state authorities. These changes affected both the criminal code and the Organic Law on the Protection of Citizens’ Security (Ley Orgánica 4/2015), which replaced the 1992 version. The revised law has been widely criticized for fully entrenching the stealthy mechanisms of bureaucratic repression to suppress dissent. It expanded police discretion to impose fines under ambiguous legal categories, increased the severity of administrative penalties, and broadened the list of protest-related infractions. Activists and legal experts

widely agree that a key motivation behind the new law was to define specific sanctions targeting the repertoires introduced by the Indignados. One lawyer emphasized that the previous version of the law “did not have infractions related to demonstrations” beyond general categories like disobedience and public disorder. The new law, however, introduced specific fines for disruptive tactics, such as the occupation of buildings under foreclosure that the housing movement widely utilized (E1 and E2).

Under the revised law, fines could reach up to 600,000 euros. Non-criminal administrative disobedience was punishable by up to 30,000 euros, including a 600-euro fine for “lack of respect” toward police officers. One particularly significant offense defined in the law is “holding unauthorized protests near critical infrastructure,” which carries penalties of up to 600,000 euros. The occupation of public or private buildings was also reclassified as a very serious administrative offense, even when it did not meet the threshold for criminal prosecution. The law further blurred the legal distinction between organizers and participants, enabling authorities to charge the latter under more severe categories of infraction.

According to one study, the number of sanctions issued under the Citizen Security Law increased from 11,062 in 2015 to 44,790 in 2016, 48,561 in 2017, and 48,922 in 2018 (Calvo and Echeverría 2023, 10). Between July 2015 and January 2016 alone, 6,200 penalties were issued for “disrespecting the police”, not all of which occurred in the context of protests (Sánchez, 2016, cited in Calvo and Echeverría 2023, 10). While disaggregated data specific to protest-related fines is lacking, Ministry of Interior data covering seven relevant infraction categories, some of which may also occur outside protest contexts, show that between 2016 and 2023, a total of 213,295 sanctions were issued, totaling 58,276,442 euros in fines. However, the true impact of this form of repression lies not merely in the number of sanctions, but in the chilling effect they produce on would-be protesters, as we discuss below.

These shifts in the Citizen Security Law toward a more repressive framework were accompanied by changes to the criminal code, moving in two opposite directions. On the one hand, some minor offenses were “decriminalized” and converted into administrative infractions, a process Calatayud (2016) calls *punitive decriminalization*. Moving it from the domain of criminal law to administrative law increased the room of maneuver for authorities while lowering the severity of the punishment, as administrative sanctions are subject to much weaker evidentiary threshold than criminal prosecution, thus giving the sanctioning authority a broader leeway without appearing as repressive as they would when arresting and criminally prosecuting people. On the other hand, other changes expanded the grounds for criminalizing protests. These include changes such as broadening the definition of disobedience/resistance to public authorities to include passive resistance, introducing “breach of peace by group action” as a new criminal offense that could be charged as aggravated offense, and penalizing the distribution of public messages inciting disturbances. According to lawyers and right-to-protest activists, the criminalization of recording or disseminating images of police officers has been particularly impactful. As one activist remarked, “many people are now even afraid to take a photo of the police,” let alone share it publicly. This is the “perfection of repression” according to him (E1), particularly because as another lawyer noted this change makes it significantly harder to identify abusive police behavior (E2).

However, it is important to emphasize that administrative repression has not become the exclusive modality of protest control in the post-Indignados period. For example, the Spanish state responded to the Catalan mobilization for independence (2017–2019) with high-intensity repression involving police violence, criminal prosecutions under sedition and terrorism charges, extensive surveillance, and central government interventions that temporarily suspended regional autonomy (Bernat and Whyte 2021; Balcells et al 2021; Jiménez and Fariás 2025). Thus, administrative repression must be understood as part of a broader ecosystem of repressive tools, selectively and unevenly deployed depending on the perceived threat that different categories of protesters pose to the established order.

## 4.2 The increasing role of police infiltration

Police infiltration has emerged in recent years as a prominent, yet largely opaque, instrument of repression against social movements in Spain. In Madrid, this covert practice has been deployed without explicit legal authorization or judicial oversight, in direct contradiction to Spanish law, which limits undercover operations to the investigation of terrorism, organized crime, or drug trafficking. Nevertheless, successive revelations have exposed the National Police's infiltration of various social and political collectives under the guise of political militancy (García 2023; Muñoz 2024a; Méau de and Muñoz 2025). It was also revealed that the police engaged in legal and illegal surveillance of almost a hundred Catalan and Basque deputies (Jímenez and Farías 2025).

In Spain, there have been numerous documented cases of police infiltration into activist organizations and social movements between 2020 and 2025, with particularly deep operations in Madrid. An undercover agent joined an anti-repression network in 2020, maintaining his cover for three years, participating in strategic meetings and establishing close interpersonal links to obtain sensitive information. Another assumed the identity of a university student to infiltrate neighborhood assemblies and educational spaces for two years, even participating in solidarity actions and protests. After being discovered in 2024, the agent allegedly sent threats to his former colleagues, illustrating the coercive consequences of this tactic (Muñoz 2025b). The most extreme case was that of a police officer who was infiltrated for more than six years in Madrid, even in support groups for families of people suffering state repression (Muñoz 2024a).

These operations follow international patterns in which infiltration reshapes the repertoires of movements and inhibits high-risk activism. As Loadenthal (2014) points out, the use of intimate relationships, sometimes of a sexual nature, represents a form of “emotional weaponry”, intended to deepen trust and increase information gathering, while maximizing psychological damage. The performative dimension of infiltration, whereby agents simulate emotional and political commitment, is a particularly damaging form of destabilization (Nalepa and Pop-Eleches 2022; Anderson 2014). The emotional and psychological consequences are profound: activists report feelings of betrayal, shame and anxiety, which erode their capacity for mobilization and long-term commitment (Demirel-Pegg 2017). Multiple interviewees describe how the climate of constant low-intensity pressure (whether through fines, surveillance, or the mere threat of infiltration) induces what one activist called *psychological warfare*: “There’s always that breath on the back of your neck. You know the state has you in its crosshairs” (E10).

The aftermath of these exposures has had tangible organizational effects. Movements have reported severe damage to interpersonal trust and internal cohesion. Often, agents did not simply disappear; instead, they “deactivated” themselves, maintaining online contact and leaving activists in a state of lingering paranoia about who might still be compromised. In one such case, as an activist recounted: “When [the infiltrator] broke up with their partner in our group, they suddenly became extremely active in the collective. We thought they were just trying to win her back. But looking back, it’s clear they needed access to information, because they no longer had it at home” (E10). This kind of ambiguity has sown discord, fractured longstanding alliances, and prompted the implementation of internal care structures designed to address collective trauma and rebuild resilience (Muñoz 2025a). Such mutual support mechanisms became essential for restoring trust and sustaining political engagement under conditions of insecurity.

These Spanish cases echo findings from other European contexts, such as the UK’s Special Demonstration Squad, where infiltration was institutionalized within intelligence-led policing models (Bonino and Kaoullas 2015; Schlembach 2018). As in those cases, infiltration in Spain has operated outside democratic accountability, targeting non-violent movements engaged in legally protected protest. While formal complaints have been filed against undercover agents and their superiors (citing violations of moral integrity, the unlawful

disclosure of secrets, and obstruction of civil rights) judicial responses have been slow and inconsistent. As of early 2025, no formal investigations had begun in Madrid, despite mounting evidence (Muñoz 2025b).

Ultimately, infiltration operates as a covert demobilization strategy. By inducing fear, mistrust, and fragmentation, it limits participation and redirects movement energies away from confrontation and toward self-protection. As Anderson (2014) argues, such tactics “mute dissent” by attacking the relational core of activism. Understanding these dynamics is crucial to analyzing how repression operates in contemporary democracies: less through visible force, and more through the erosion of solidarity, trust, and hope.

### ***4.3 Infra-politics of administrative repression: Movement experiences and responses***

The new regime of administrative repression has shaped the mobilization patterns and practices in the post-Indignados period. These effects are difficult to isolate by observing the aggregate patterns of protesting considering that the end of the Indignados protest cycle in 2015 was a result of the complex constellation of factors. In any case, the very concept of cycle implies that mobilization always ups and downs. Therefore, as one seasoned environmental activist underlined “it would be wrong to isolate Ley Mordaza as the single variable” (E1). But an infrapolitical lens that explores the publicly invisible experiences of repression within movements and how activists navigate the new landscape is particularly useful to capture the effects of administrative repression.

Primarily, activists we interviewed, underlined what they called the “chilling effect” that has taken hold among ordinary citizens, who are not organized members of movements yet joined Indignados protests in droves often through social networks. As one activist explained, this chilling effect is a result of the arbitrariness and unpredictability of weather and when one could get fined when joining a protest, considering that many people learn that they were fined with a letter they receive weeks after the protest:

“There is a certain sense of caution, now, like: *'If I go to a protest, could I get fined beforehand?'* A fine used to make sense. It was like, *'Hey, you got a fine because you parked illegally or got into some trouble.'* You could be detained; something could happen. But now, there's this awareness that *'nothing might happen, and suddenly we have to pay €600. I can get into trouble without meaning to, without even knowing it.'*” (E1)

Likewise, a long-standing anti-repression human rights activist, highlights that “people now ask first about the legal consequences before deciding whether to attend a protest. This was not the case a decade ago” (E12). Moreover, unlike movement organizations, which have developed internal legal training on gag law over time, unorganized citizens often confuse administrative and criminal law according to activists:

“Not everyone distinguishes between what's actually part of the Gag Law and what's about broader issues like freedom of expression. In many of the recent arrests in the past few years, which are not under the Gag Law, people still associate them with it.” (E2)

This confusion around potential consequences of recent legal changes, further bolsters the deterring effects of administrative repression for protest participation among masses. Indeed, our interviewees consistently report experiences of emotional fatigue, anxiety, and, in some cases, withdrawal from activism. A striking example comes from one anti-repression activist (E 10), who recounts how a fellow activist experienced severe psychosomatic symptom on the day of a protest: “He called me saying, *'Dude, I've been throwing up all*

morning, *I can't leave the bathroom.*' The minute the protest ended, the vomiting stopped. He realized it was pure fear, pure psychological pressure. He said, '*Fuck, they got me this time*'".

Expansion of administrative fines under Ley Mordaza, however, has not only affected ordinary residents but also shaped how movement organizations carry out their activities in several different ways. According to activists, these effects are observable on the resources, repertoires, and organizational structures of movements.

First, some organizations, for example in the housing movement, got sanctioned by fines amounting to thousands of euros, which imposed a significant burden on organizational resources. As one activist lawyer stated this drain on resources also led to changes in their repertoires "we have a lot of groups that have changed their activity because they have so many fines and they cannot do what they used to do, they have to find money to pay the fines or find lawyers to support" (E2). In many cases, the lawsuits last more than a year and the administrative bodies charge you before the lawsuit is finalized. Even when the appeals courts decide in favor of the protesters, as this lawyer explained, the process may last years, crippling the capabilities of movements.

As fines impose a drain on the resources of the organizations, organizations have to consider their protest tactics carefully. The risk of being fined is now always on the table when organizations discuss their action plans (E1). This is particularly true for more "spontaneous" disruptive actions that were prevalent during Indignados protests and continue to be a key repertoire for environmental activists for some movements. As one anti-repression activist observes, "there is a clear tendency to prioritize communication campaigns, online activism, and highly mediated actions over direct confrontations with the state" (E10).

Movements, therefore, shift away from high-risk disruptive actions toward more symbolic, less sanctionable forms of protest or at least reduce the number of times they carry out such actions. As an activist told us, this is even the case for some environmental movements for which disruptive action is not only a protest tactic instrumentally chosen among many others but constitutes a core dimension of movement identity. Yet, not only such movements are now more selective with disruptive action due to its high financial costs but they also apply for official permits when they organize large popular assemblies that aim at attracting broader crowds so that they can get a secure space for people who do not want to take risks (E3). The fines, therefore, are effective in channeling protests into more predictable, conventional, and institutionalized tactics of protesting. Such tactical adaptation, however, has potentially long-term consequences for effectiveness of protests, considering that disruption and innovation are key determinants of effective protest repertoires.

As previous points on tactical adaptation suggest organizations nevertheless try to navigate the new repressive context, many of which also remain under the radar. An infra-political lens illuminates these everyday strategies of resisting repression just as it casts light on otherwise unobservable effects of repression.

One of the most salient adaptations has been the institutionalization of legal defense structures within activist spaces. A lawyer points out, "The creation of legal teams, fundraising for fines, and collective support for sanctions have become routine elements of mobilization dynamics" (E9). In fact, crowdfunding campaigns for legal expenses are now an expected part of activism. As an activist lawyer explains, "It is almost automatic now; any protest comes with a parallel financial campaign to cover eventual fines" (E2).

This legal infrastructure, however, not only mitigates the financial impact of sanctions but also acts as a buffer to sustain mobilization under threat. The organizations and networks of legal support that were founded during the Indignados protests continued to exist and support organizations in the post-Indignados period. They provide legal consultation prior to the preparation of a protest event to discuss the legal implications and also support organizations in challenging the fines at the courts. The legal defense teams also gather evidence and documentation on administrative misconduct and abuse of powers from different protest events to build legal cases for strategic litigation at the Constitutional Court and if necessary, at European Court of Human Rights (E2).

Besides legal and financial strategies to build organizational resilience, movements also take action to prevent repression from crippling their manpower. One common strategy is to circulate their members between riskier frontlines and less risky backstage roles as one activist, who was fined and was in the process of litigating the sanction, recounted:

“I was choosing not to be in the front lines of the actions and not to take the same roles and fortunately from our view for doing a civil disobedience action we need to cover many roles that are as important as being in the frontline... so basically we give the same importance to the care work, the psychological support after the actions, or outreach we do when we are protesting. All of these roles are low-risk roles, so you can still do those...I think this gave us a lot of resilience when we faced this repression...” (E3)

Nevertheless, all these strategies also show how administrative repression, by targeting activists' economic vulnerabilities, has fostered a defensive ecosystem oriented around legal survival rather than proactive contention. But they also show that repression does not uniformly lead to demobilization. As activist lawyers emphasize, it also fosters innovation: “The threat of sanctions forces us to be smarter, more creative, to find cracks in the system where resistance is still possible” (E9). Similarly, another one highlights that some activists have redefined their identities around being *permanent resisters*, integrating legal defense, media activism, and symbolic protest as central components of their praxis (E2).

#### ***4.4 Infra-politics of police infiltration: Movement experiences and responses***

In response to repeated cases of police infiltration, particularly in Madrid-based social movements, activists have progressively embedded a multifaceted security regime aimed at safeguarding both their internal dynamics and broader political work. This aligns with scholarly findings that emphasize how infiltration is not simply a matter of intelligence gathering, but rather an exercise of power that disrupts the organizational and relational fabric of contentious actors (Gillham and Marx 2000).

Thematic analysis of the tactical adaptations adopted by social movements in response to undercover policing reveals two principal strategies: the formalization of internal security protocols and the deliberate reconstruction of trust through collective spaces. These responses have been designed to reclaim the terrain of dissent in the face of covert repression that seeks to induce paralysis through fear and suspicion (Anderson (2014).

Firstly, the social movements analyzed have established formal procedures for managing access to information and for the gradual integration of new members. As one activist explained, “We have protocols to prevent the police from infiltrating the collective and accessing sensitive information. There are things that everyone can know and others that require a certain level of experience and trust before they can be shared” (E11). Similarly, another respondent noted that “we started taking security protocols for new members much more seriously” (E10). These selective information flows reflect what Nalepa and Pop-Eleches (2022) describe as defensive adaptations to a climate of embedded surveillance, where discretion becomes a tool of survival. In practice, these protocols limit the circulation of operational details to the most senior participants and require potential activists to undergo a probationary period marked by supervised participation. This represents a notable departure from the ethos of horizontality and radical inclusivity that characterized the Indignados cycle (Flesher Fominaya 2015), underscoring how infiltration reshapes the very repertoires and values of movement organizing (Demirel-Pegg 2017). At an organizational level, this context has led some groups to become more insular and suspicious, particularly regarding new members, which directly undermines movement renewal as

one activist criticized: “Some collectives now only accept people already embedded in other trusted spaces. This is a mistake. We risk shutting our doors to fresh energy precisely when public outrage is growing” (E10).

Secondly, movements have consciously created support forums to heal the rifts caused by discovered infiltrations and prevent debilitating paranoia. These forums combine facilitated listening sessions with collective reflection and, crucially, draw on external resources. One interviewee recounted: “Once the infiltration was discovered, we created spaces to share and listen to each other sincerely within the collective, in order to rebuild lost trust and not fall into paranoia” (E11). These affective strategies resonate with recent literature that emphasizes the emotional and psychological toll of infiltration (Monahan 2010; Loadenthal 2014), particularly when intimate relationships are involved, a tactic documented in both Spanish cases (Muñoz 2024; El Salto País Valencià 2025) and broader European contexts (Lubbers 2015; Schlembach 2018). As stated in the *Manual for Uncovering an Undercover Police Officer* (La Plataforma 2025), “It has been fundamental to have the support of centers specialized in attention to victims of political violence.” By integrating collective care practices into security responses, these groups are not merely managing risk, they are reasserting the legitimacy and moral coherence of their activism in the face of state-imposed ontological insecurity (Cunningham and Noakes 2008; Nalepa and Pop-Eleches 2022).

The medium-term consequences of police infiltration vary across analytical dimensions but converge on the erosion of trust and the fragmentation of collective action. Organizationally, infiltration generates suspicion that paralyzes decision-making processes. Leadership structures are forced to absorb additional layers of deliberation, transforming formerly fluid interactions into cautious vetting procedures. As one activist put it: “Seeing that someone I trusted was deceiving us created paranoia about who to trust” (E11). These patterns mirror the findings of Gillham and Marx (2000), who argue that infiltration exerts control not through force but by inducing self-censorship and behavioral modulation.

Paradoxically, however, infiltration has also catalyzed new solidarities. As one respondent noted, “Seeing how we are all being repressed in the same way has driven us to unite and resist together” (E11). Shared experiences of covert repression have led to joint assemblies, collective security training, and mutual legal support initiatives. These outcomes illustrate how repression can sometimes generate what Almeida calls “threat induced contention”, where state repression provokes inter-organizational alliances and renewed strategic innovation. It also generates new forms of defiant and resilient subjectivity: “We are not doing anything wrong. We are simply protesting something that affects us all and we will not let the state's strategies intimidate us” (E11). This is consistent with Anderson’s (2014) argument that moral conviction and legitimacy claims serve as antidotes to state efforts at delegitimization and repression through covert means.

## 5. Conclusion

This article has examined how grassroots movements in Madrid experience and respond to covert repression, focusing on two key modalities, administrative sanctions and police infiltration, through the analytical lens of infra-politics to uncover their less visible, offstage effects. Rather than centering only on spectacular state violence, the study highlights more mundane mechanisms of control: bureaucratic fines, symbolic criminalization, and infiltration that erodes trust from within. Far from marginal, our study shows that these practices have become commonplace and from activists' perspective expected features of how the Spanish state approach movements, consequently shaping their organizational logics and tactical repertoires. Movements have adapted not only tactically (through legal literacy, security protocols, and decentralized structures), but also emotionally and symbolically, by rebuilding trust, reconstructing collectives fragmented

by suspicion, and developing practices of care and accountability. These adaptive strategies highlight the dynamic interface between repression and resistance, long emphasized in social movement studies (Almeida 2003; Tilly 1978; Earl 2011).

The paper advances repression–dissent scholarship in two ways. First, it draws attention to underexplored modalities of repression such as administrative repression and police infiltration that are becoming increasingly widespread in contexts of democratic erosion and backsliding. Second, it moves beyond analyses of aggregate outcomes on protest cycles (Earl 2011) to unpack micro-level implications for organizations and activists. In line with recent findings that tactical adaptation is a key response to repression (Arslanalp and Erkmen 2025; Biagini 2017; Grimm and Harders 2018), we find that Madrid’s movements have become more selective in deploying disruptive tactics in the face of arbitrarily imposed fines. They also rotated leadership roles to protect individuals, invested in legal support structures, and diverted resources to solidarity funds. Taken together, this study and the wider Spanish case literature (Olmo and Lozano 2015; Calvo and Portos 2019) suggest that a distinctive pattern is consolidating in post-Indignados Spain, and especially in Madrid, where the cumulative, low-intensity effects of administrative sanctioning and undercover policing not only constrain movement repertoires and organizational tactics, but also raise the perceived biographical and material costs of engagement, thereby making entry into activism increasingly difficult for younger would-be participants while fostering a shared climate of mistrust and anticipatory self-limitation linked to the possibility of police infiltration.

As mentioned earlier, it must be noted that strategies of repression are not uniform across territory or event. Authorities may use some of the outlined strategies more expansively and intensively as they had done with the expansive surveillance of Catalan elected officials through mobile phone spyware. They also resort to much more overt forms of police repression and judicial criminalization. The local context of protesting, whether covert strategies work, and how threatening the specific movement is perceived by authorities all matter. Therefore, we call for greater attention to the proliferation of different modalities of repression and how they interact with each other.

Furthermore, drawing on Scott’s (1990) infrapolitical lens, the paper illuminates activists’ affective experiences in the face of repression as another crucial dimension of its micro-level implications. These “offstage” dynamics reveal that repression has ambivalent and contradictory effects at the micro-scale as well: while intended to fragment and demobilize, it can also generate new solidarities, organizational innovations, and heightened political awareness. This paradox of repression is particularly evident in the collective memory and shared diagnostic frameworks that emerge around experiences of surveillance and infiltration. The testimonies collected here recount both fear, exhaustion, and withdrawal, and renewed vigilance, care, and responsibility. In some cases, repression catalyzed deeper politicization, as groups redirected efforts toward legal advocacy, anti-repression campaigns, or safer modes of participation. These practices constitute not only defensive responses but also spaces of innovation under pressure.

At the same time, the effects of covert repression are uneven across individuals and organizations. Some activists withdrew permanently due to emotional exhaustion or fear of reprisals; others reinvented their participation in more anonymous, encrypted, or decentralized forms. This underscores that resilience is not uniform, likely to be shaped by legal precariousness, gendered experiences, and prior protest histories. We lack sufficient data to unpack the causal patterns producing these uneven effects that future research should explore more systematically. Moreover, the blurred boundary between legal and extra-legal tactics, between administrative harassment and infiltration, fines and surveillance, complicates movements’ ability to sustain continuity and transmit knowledge across generations. Such “slow violence” undermines not only immediate action but also organizational memory. Comparisons with other European contexts (e.g., Lubbers 2015;

Bonino and Kaoullas 2015) show that Madrid's experience reflects a broader pattern in which infiltration and covert surveillance weaken solidarity and fuel mistrust within movements.

In line with the objectives of this special issue, the Madrid case demonstrates how everyday forms of repression condition the very possibility of collective action in contemporary democracies. Yet it also highlights the creativity and resilience with which movements navigate these constraints. Taken together, the findings support the premise that what remains offstage powerfully organizes what becomes visible, and the state's covert actions as much as its overt repression shape the terrain of visibility, vulnerability, and strategic ambiguity in which contentious interactions unfold.

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### **Authors' Information:**

**Mert Arslanalp** is an Assistant Professor of Political Science and International Relations at Boğaziçi University. He received his PhD in Political Science from Northwestern University. He was a visiting research fellow (2023-24) at Universidad Carlos III de Madrid with a fellowship from The Scientific and Research Council of Turkey. He is currently the PI of the Boğaziçi University team in the Horizon Europe Project SOS4Democracy: A training program for improving research on illiberal systems and finding ways to build more robust democracies (2023-2027). His research and teaching focus on the comparative study of social movements, protest repression, authoritarianism, and urban politics with a regional focus on Turkey, Latin America, and Southern Europe. His research got published in *Democratization*, *South European Politics and Society*, *Territory, Politics, Governance*, *Third World Quarterly*, and *Turkish Studies* among others.

**Gomer Betancor Nuez** is a Research Fellow in Sociology at UNED (Spain) specializing in social movements, youth activism, and the long-term dynamics of contentious politics in Spain. His work has developed an original research agenda on protest diffusion, spillover effects, activist biographies, and diachronic approaches to collective action. His articles have appeared in journals such as *Social Movement Studies*, *Political Studies Review*, *Labor History*, *Journal of Youth Studies* and *Employee Relations*. His trajectory includes competitive distinctions such as the UNED Postdoctoral Fellowship, the Margarita Salas fellowship at Complutense University of Madrid, the UNED–Santander Transfer Award, and the José Castillejo mobility grant. He also leads a work package in the Horizon Europe NOMADIC project on tourism-related transformations and community resistance.