

Spanish opposition party launches deepfake video in election campaign

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Pedro Sánchez and his wife at a campaign rally in Fuenlabrada last weekend. Photograph: JJ Guillen/EPA

View image in fullscreen Pedro Sánchez and his wife at a campaign rally in Fuenlabrada last weekend.

Photograph: JJ Guillen/EPA

Opposition deepfake video sparks outrage in Spain ahead of election

Video shows AI likenesses of people linked to Pedro Sánchez's Socialist party appearing to admit to wrongdoing

A political ad from Spain's main opposition party that used a deepfake video of the prime minister's wife has sparked outrage and set off a wider debate on AI, as the deeply polarised country gears up for general elections next month. Launched this week across the social media channels of the conservative People's party (PP), the video used artificial intelligence to manipulate the likenesses of various people linked to Pedro Sánchez's Socialist party and appeared to show them admitting to acts such as soliciting prostitutes and taking kickbacks.

An AI-generated version of Sánchez's wife, Begoña Gómez, for example, speaks about receiving a university post thanks to her husband's job, while a deepfake of the former Socialist president José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero speaks about hiding jewellery in a safe. Both lines are nods to ongoing investigations in which Gómez and Zapatero have denied any wrongdoing. View image in fullscreen A still from the People's party AI-generated video featuring a deepfake of Begoña Gomez. Computer-generated: @ppopular/X The Socialist party was swift to respond to the video, which by Friday had racked up nearly 2m views. "It's telling people a colossal lie, and for a party to do it on its official accounts seems intolerable to me," Óscar López, Spain's digital transformation minister, told the broadcaster TVE on Friday. While the video noted at the bottom – in tiny, nearly transparent font – that it had been created with AI, López pointed to the wider risk. "It's very easy for anyone who isn't used to AI to confuse that video with reality," he said. "And call me crazy, but that seems extremely serious to me." On Friday, one of those whose likeness was used in the video filed a legal challenge against the PP, calling on the party to immediately take down the campaign advert. In a court complaint, Leire Díez, a former Socialist party member, reportedly accused the PP of defamation and digital identity theft, after the video used her likeness to hint at accusations that she worked to undermine judicial and law enforcement in order to help the Socialists. A majority of the nine legal experts consulted by the newspaper El País concurred that what the PP had done was not illegal, given that the video was labelled as AI-generated and that the overall tone was one of political satire. "Given the context, everyone knows those people didn't say those things," Íñigo Navarro, a former dean of the faculty of law at Madrid's Comillas Pontifical University, told the paper. But the legality of the video was just one aspect, said Juan Antonio Lascaraín, a professor of criminal law at the Autonomous University of Madrid. "It's quite another matter to ask whether it's appropriate, exemplary or ethically and politically correct." Many sought to contextualise the videos within the wider effort – under way by officials across much of the world – to crack down on the impact of disinformation. "It's truly regrettable that the official account of a party that claims to want to govern and revitalise democracy is using AI-generated deepfakes in its campaign," said José Javier Olivas, an associate professor who researches populism, conspiracy theories and AI biases at Spain's National University for Distance Education. He pointed to the wider backdrop of the election campaign, in which both mainstream parties have sought to rally voters by stoking emotions and attacking the morality of their rivals, but he said the video was a "red line" in terms of how campaigns normally unfolded. skip past newsletter promotion

after newsletter promotion "You're using the images of other people, putting words in their mouths that they're not saying, [and] this qualifies for disinformation," he said. The use of AI to generate or enhance political ads has also become a talking point in the US ahead of next month's midterm elections. A recent report by a research group based at Wesleyan University in Connecticut identified more than 200 such ads, the vast majority of them tied to the Republicans. "AI is making its way into the 2026 midterms in a big way this year," said Erika Franklin Fowler, a

co-director of the Wesleyan Media Project. “For comparison, we identified less than \$50,000 in spending on AI-generated ads in the 2024 cycle. Much of the AI use is not disclosed through any type of disclaimer.” In Spain, the PP has brushed off criticism. “If there had been malicious intent to make people believe that the characters who appear there are real, then we’d have a problem,” Borja Sémpér, of the party, told reporters. “But everyone can see that this is a way of using digital tools to highlight the hypocrisy in which the Socialist party operates.” Most polls suggest the PP will win the 29 November general election but will need to rely on the support of the far-right Vox party to form a government.

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