

INTERVIEW

Only the Beginning - On European regime's crisis. Podemos & Left Populism. Confrontation rather than Moderation

Friday 6 October 2017, by [GILMARTIN Eoghan](#), [URBAN CRESPO Miguel](#) (Date first published: 30 September 2017).

Podemos MEP Miguel Urbán talks about Europe's political crisis — and why the left must meet it with radicalism, not moderation.

From Syriza's victory to Le Pen's second round showing, Europe has undergone a series of electoral earthquakes in recent years. But in Spain, one of the epicenters of the populist surge, a key point of debate on the Left is now whether "the window of opportunity" for rapid political advance has closed. According to Íñigo Errejón, one of Podemos's leading figures, his party must now adjust itself to the rhythm of a "slower more normalized political cycle" which will be focused much more on institutional politics [1]. Having failed to secure the *sorpasso* by overtaking the centre-left PSOE, Errejón believes Podemos must now be open to cooperation with them through entering a relationship of "virtuous competition" rather than outright opposition.

Miguel Urbán, leader of Podemos in the European Parliament and a prominent member of its Anticapitalista faction, doesn't agree. He argues that the continent's regime crisis is, in fact, only beginning. Defending the party's left populism, Urbán believes that the European left's route to victory at the polls will not come through moderation but rather through confrontation with the political center.

He discusses this, as well as the push for independence in Catalonia and the re-election of Pedro Sanchez as leader of PSOE, with Jacobin contributor Eoghan Gilmartin.

Eoghan Gilmartin

In a recent speech you discussed why Spain was one of the few countries in Europe that has not seen a surge in support for the far-right. You quoted Marine Le Pen's explanation: "because Podemos exists." How do you view this relation between right and left wing populism?

Miguel Urbán

Ten years ago a far-right party with parliamentary representation was the exception not the norm in Europe. Clearly we now find ourselves in a different context defined by austerity and the financial crisis, but also by a crisis of Europe's post-war political systems. This is exemplified by the continent's social-democratic parties. In moving to the neoliberal center in recent decades, they have abandoned the social and class interests they were created to represent, leaving large sections of society feeling unrepresented by the political system in the process.

The acceleration of the neoliberal project after 2008 has deepened this crisis such that in the electoral field — though not the social — there is now a degree of polarization comparable in intensity to the 1930s. Yet such polarization is much more diverse and contradictory than the

classical antagonism between fascism and communism. For example, it can even take the form of a confrontation between the extreme right and the right as it is responding more to the opposition between the inside of the system and an outside. What we have is a popular revolt against the establishment and the wider political regime.

Clearly with the far right you end up with a contradictory form of revolt which combines anger at growing social inequality with identitarian and xenophobic elements. Yet it can occupy this pole of protest across much of Europe in part because austerity has produced an imaginary of scarcity amongst the majority of the population — a sense that there is not enough for everyone. This lends itself to a terrain of political confrontation not only directed against the political system but which also pits the poor against each other. We have the second-to-last against the last, the native against the immigrant.

By contrast in Spain the polarization of the political field was determined through the cycle of popular mobilizations beginning with 15M then the Mareas [anti-austerity “waves”], PAH [anti-eviction struggle] and later Podemos. This imposed a logic of class struggle, which rather than demand the exclusion of particular sectors from existing forms redistribution, sought to criticize the inadequacy of this redistribution itself while, at the same time, pointing towards the elites as the cause. These movements also proposed a collective response to the crisis. You can see this in slogans such as *juntos podemos* [together we can] and images of neighbors organizing to block evictions.

In Europe populism has traditionally been a reactionary phenomenon. Unlike in Latin America or in the United States with the People’s Party in the late 19th century, we have no tradition of progressive populism. This is what we in Podemos have tried to construct as a vaccine against the popular right — speaking not so much of left against right but of those from below against those from above, of the popular classes against the elites.

EG

Why do you think such a left populist challenge has failed to emerge in many parts of Europe?

MU

Partly, as Perry Anderson explained in a recent article, because the extreme right is much more credible in its confrontation with the EU than the Left. Also, the Left is seen in many parts of Europe as part of the establishment. For example why has the Five Star movement had such success in Italy, a country with one of the strongest Communist and left-wing traditions in the world? This must be understood in terms of Rifondazione’s decision under Bertinotti to enter a social-liberal government under Prodi in 2006. Without this discrediting of the Left as an alternative, the sense that they are all the same, part of the system, you cannot understand how the Five Star movement could reach 30 percent at the polls within ten years. And it hardly exists as a party. It is held together by a blog and a Facebook page. There is no structure, nor any interest in having a structure.

Clearly their strength is not maintained by either their political achievements nor by any supposed coherence of their platform. Instead it is an expression of the anti-establishment revolt in Italy, which is not decreasing but growing. It is quite possible that in the elections next March, the combined strength of Renzi and Berlusconi will not be sufficient to govern. The window of opportunity for populist forces has not closed but rather, across the West, we are confronted by crises of political regimes that are only just beginning.

In this context the danger for parties such as Podemos or the extreme right is to try to normalize themselves, to appear like just another party. What counts electorally is not moderation but the ability to oppose the center from the outside. A key point of debate is whether such an anti-

establishment protest vote can be sufficient enough to win state power. I think so. I think it is still increasing and there are examples such as Trump, Syriza and the near victory of the Freedom Party in Austria which show it is possible.

EG

Recently, Pedro Sánchez won back the leadership of the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) by at least discursively moving to the Left. After the coup against him led by the party's old guard and their corporate allies, he even seemed to take on this role of the outsider in the primaries. How does his victory fit into this picture?

MU

The so-called "Sánchez effect" has little to do with Sánchez himself, who is primarily interested in his own survival. His win is more indicative of the growing revolt amongst socialist activists against their own party hierarchies. We have the example of Benoît Hamon in France who won 70 percent of the vote against centrist Manuel Valls with a radical program, and obviously Jeremy Corbyn is another.

I like Ulrich Beck's idea of zombie institutions and this is exactly what social-democratic parties became after abandoning those constituencies they were meant to represent. Their only *raison d'être* has been to secure the continuation of the neoliberal regime and they have even been willing to sacrifice themselves as parties so as to save the system. Look at the Hollande presidency or the Dutch and Irish Labour Parties who implemented austerity. Sánchez's win in the primaries is the activists' revolt against this zombification.

But this does not mean Sánchez now controls the party machinery. There are many complicated balances internally as power is also distributed amongst regional barons. [Party right-winger] Susana Díaz and her allies still govern in Andalucía, Castilla La Mancha and Extremadura, and so still control a massive network of patronage. And since Sánchez's re-election we have not seen PSOE turn left. They did abstain both on our motion of no confidence against Rajoy's government and on the vote on CETA which they had previously supported — but these are cosmetic changes.

I'm not necessarily against an agreement but it has to be based on our program and not theirs. Moving closer to PSOE and moderating our discourse so as to reach an agreement would leave us looking like one more party in the game.

EG

How has Sánchez's victory affected Podemos's outlook? Eight months ago at its congress, the party chose to take a more radical path, turning away from cooperation with PSOE towards a position centered on social struggle.

MU

For the most part the proposals at Vistalegre dealt with whether to position ourselves as a force that is more inside or outside of the political system. Our analysis in the Anticapitalistas, which was accepted by the majority grouping in the leadership led by Pablo Iglesias, was that we needed a new cycle of mobilization to break the current deadlock — to tip the balance of power in our favor and away from the existing institutional forces. Podemos's greatest period of autonomous political initiative came just after the Vistalegre congress: the anti-corruption campaign around the tramabus, the motion of no confidence and the mobilizations that accompanied it.

It is too early to say how Sánchez's victory will affect this line but there are some very bad signs. Few people thought Sánchez would win. If Susana Díaz and the party machine had won, it would have further fomented the polarization between us and the regime. Now the majority in the

leadership believe Sánchez has produced a wave of political hope not just among PSOE activists but among a wide sector of ex-socialist voters who Podemos have been trying attract. Therefore, their analysis is that to appear unresponsive or indifferent to these expectations would damage Podemos.

However, for me, it would be better to look at the example of France Insoumise and Hamon. Hamon also generated such hope amongst party members. He got an initial jump in the polls and won the backing of Toni Negri and the French Greens with his proposals on basic income and ecosocialism. But Mélenchon did not move, did not adapt his campaign to this, and in the end was seen as the more credible challenge to the neoliberal center.

And it wasn't Mélenchon who robbed most of Hamon's voters but Macron. Mélenchon secured the votes of those who normally abstain, many of whom he was competing with the Front National to attract. Podemos must also compete more for those who abstain than for the support of classic PSOE voters. It would be very difficult to break their connection to the party without a new cycle of social mobilization, while, on the other hand, moving closer to the PSOE would do nothing to capture the protest vote.

EG

Is it possible Podemos could generate an amount of anti-establishment support but without ideological commitment or a clear sense of what a process of political transformation would entail?

MU

Ok, but we Marxists have to understand what period we are living in. For example, on this 100th anniversary of the Russian revolution. We can look back with nostalgia or we can think through how to adapt as Marxist revolutionaries to a non-revolutionary moment. There is a popular saying in Spain, "if you are ten steps ahead of the people, you are leading the way but if you are a hundred steps ahead, you have lost them." I want to be ten steps ahead.

As a Marxist I have no problem with a formation like Podemos or the logic of above and below. Populism involves a form of confrontation that clearly divides the political field between opposing camps — "us" and "them." But, before populism, Marxism also defined the political field in terms of sharp divisions and so I feel very comfortable delimiting a "they," the elites, from "we," the popular classes.

What Podemos has shown is a capacity to set the political agenda in Spain. PSOE have felt obliged to debate topics and proposals we have put forward. And in framing our discourse in terms of above and below, in concentrating not on the scarcity of resources but how they are distributed, we have determined the political field is polarized along class lines. This has allowed us to speak about quite revolutionary themes such as the reduction of work, to work less so everyone can work, and the need for a new productive model which points towards the type of wider transition required.

Podemos is not a revolutionary party but it is an anti-elite, anti-neoliberal formation with a mass constituency. It has been able to express popular anger through the ballot box but in itself this clearly is not enough. We must avoid the mirage of electoralism and a purely institutional politics. We need a new accumulation of social and political forces which is able, through a fresh wave of struggles, to open up a constituent process. We in Podemos have to work with other actors to forge links and generate new autonomous class-based institutions.

EG

Catalonia will attempt to hold an independence referendum from Spain on October 1st amidst a crackdown from the Popular Party (PP) government in Madrid who claim it is unconstitutional. How do you view this process?

MU

The October 1st referendum must be seen as a reaction to the damage the PP inflicted with their legal appeal in the Constitutional Court against the 2006 Statute of Autonomy for Catalonia. A few days after the court's ruling against Catalonia's autonomy there was a mass demonstration in Barcelona around the slogan: "We are a nation, we decide." Although there was such an immediate public reaction to this ruling, the PP has made no effort to find a framework for negotiation since it came to power in 2011.

Catalonia has exhausted not only this route to securing federalized status but also its search for a negotiated referendum with the Spanish state, as was achieved in the cases of Québec and Scotland. Thus from a democratic perspective, the only option remaining is to recognize the legitimacy of this referendum on October 1st. It should be the Catalan citizens who decide whether or not to separate from the Spanish state, to arrive at a new type of relation, based not on force but on the free will of all the peoples of the state.

Against those from above who are terrified of this referendum as a kind of cataclysm, we from below must look to it as a moment for democratic reinvention, an opportunity to redefine the logic of participation in a politics amongst equals. I believe that the free celebration of the referendum with all possible guarantees, will contribute — whatever its result — to the deepening of democracy. It will be a stimulus for those of us outside of Catalonia to continue struggling against the regime and the Troika for the right to decide on everything that affects our lives, our rights and our freedoms.

P.S.

* Jacobin. 09.30.2017:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/09/only-the-beginning>

* ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Miguel Urbán is a Member of the European Parliament for Podemos. He was one of the party's co-founders in 2014.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Eoghan Gilmartin is a translator, activist with Podemos and Jacobin contributor based in Madrid.

Footnotes

[1] http://www.huffingtonpost.es/2016/11/22/entrevista-inigo-errejon_n_13148184.html