

INTERVIEW

Spanish State: “To Win in Government, Podemos Needs to Win in the Streets”

Thursday 28 November 2019, by [GILMARTIN Eoghan](#), [URBAN CRESPO Miguel](#) (Date first published: 27 November 2019).

Podemos’s deal with the PSOE promises Spain’s first left-wing coalition government since the 1930s. Yet with European and corporate elites already throwing up obstacles, Podemos’s hopes of forcing through change rely on it building its power outside the institutions.

“This government will be the best vaccine against the far right.” So claimed Unidas Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias [1] on November 12 as he reached an initial agreement to form a coalition with the center-left PSOE. The deal was signed just two days after Spain’s snap general election — the fourth such contest in four years. But the election results weren’t all good news; in fact, they saw an unprecedented surge for the far-right Vox party, [2] as well as high abstention among left-wing voters.

In this context, the new governmental pact is an achievement for Podemos, but also a rather precarious one. Talks over a more detailed program for government are still ongoing — PSOE leader Pedro Sánchez also still needs to secure the votes of the Catalan and Basque regionalist parties if he is to be voted back into the prime minister’s office. Yet the signs are that by Christmas Spain could have its first left-wing coalition since the Second Republic in the 1930s.

The European Union and Spain’s corporate elites have been swift to rein in any potential signs of a turn to the Left. Last week the European Commission’s finance chief Pierre Moscovici called for new “structural reforms” in the face of a possible economic slowdown, as well as €6.2 billion further cuts in 2020. His message to the future government: “you can be serious and left-wing too.” Meanwhile the head of the CEOE (Spain’s business association) warned that “ideological formulas [for government] rather than practical ones, would not be beneficial for the economy or businesses. [3]”

Under pressure from these economic and political elites — and forced to operate within the constraints of the EU’s Fiscal Compact — it seems the coalition faces an uphill battle right from the outset. But there are also internal reasons for a probable lack of radicalism. Indeed, compared to 2015, when a pact between the two parties was first mooted, the balance of forces in the coalition has strongly tilted against the radical-left Podemos and in favor of the establishment PSOE. Four years ago, Pablo Iglesias’s party had 69 seats in Congress — just 19 less than the historic party of the center-left. Now, after four grueling years in the institutions and internal splits, Podemos has shrunk to just 35 MPs — while the PSOE has 120.

To discuss the challenges facing the Spanish left, and the significance of the far-right surge, Eoghan Gilmartin sat down with Podemos co-founder Miguel Urbán, a member of the European parliament. For Urbán, Unidas Podemos’s position in government can be used to secure social gains — but only if it is backed by serious mobilization in the streets, reviving the powerful anti-austerity movements

of recent years.

Eoghan Gilmartin (EG)

Governing with the PSOE is going to present enormous challenges for Unidas Podemos. The initial pre-agreement does not specify much in terms of policy — so how would you evaluate the deal? And what are the risks and opportunities for Unidas Podemos in this new scenario?

Miguel Urbán (MU)

This agreement was far from Sánchez's first preference and only came about thanks to a serious miscalculation [4]. He called November's repeat election believing that PSOE would improve upon its result in the previous vote in April. He thought this would allow him to govern alone as a minority or via some sort of governing pact with the [liberal to right-wing] Ciudadanos or the conservative Partido Popular (PP).

The electoral result, however, ruled out these options. The PSOE lost 700,000 votes, and three seats, meaning it couldn't form a single-party government. At the same time, Ciudadano's vote collapsed — removing it as a viable coalition partner — while Vox's surge meant that the PP could not risk a governing pact. Such an agreement would have left Vox free to make further inroads into its right flank.

Instead leading figures in the PP suggested the party would at most abstain, allowing the PSOE to form a government in exchange for Sánchez's resignation. It was at this point that Sánchez turned to his left. This was a massive U-turn — within a matter of months, he went from claiming he would have "sleepless nights" if there were Podemos members in his cabinet to offering Pablo Iglesias the job as deputy prime minister.

In terms of what the agreement means, we still do not have a program for government — only a rather short declaration that lays out various priorities for the proposed coalition. But even this document has several concerning elements. First, we have agreed to "budgetary control" — itself is a rather ambiguous term. But what this means in practice for the European Union has already been spelled out by the European Commission. It is demanding that any future increases in Spain's revenue go towards paying down the national debt.

Whatever is finally agreed between Sánchez and Iglesias, ultimately the future government will still be tied to Brussels's Fiscal Compact. Indeed, the European Commission and the Troika will have its own representative within the cabinet — the Economy Minister, Nadia Calviño. She was formerly director-general for budget of the European Commission and will now become the first deputy premier, with Iglesias holding the position of second deputy premier.

A second point of concern is Catalonia. The agreement talks about working towards improved "social coexistence" within "the parameters of the constitution." But the Catalan crisis isn't about coexistence: it's a political problem and needs political solutions. This is what Podemos has always stood for — the need to recognize the Catalan people's right to self-determination.

This can't be ignored. Even for the coalition to proceed, it needs the parliamentary support of the Catalan sovereigntists. It won't have a majority otherwise — so Sánchez will need to make at least some concessions to the Catalan left.

EG

What policy commitments need to be in the final program that were not in this initial statement?

MU

There are a series of measures that we have always insisted on when negotiating with PSOE, such as repealing Spain's undemocratic gag laws and neoliberal labor reforms, as well as introducing rent controls, an anti-eviction law, and a new tax on the banks, so as to recuperate the 60 billion euro lost in rescuing them in 2011. And more generally we need progressive tax reform — targeting the wealthiest parts of society to help strengthen the welfare state and ensure things like our public pension system are protected.

All these measures have been supported by Sánchez — but only when the PSOE was in opposition or during election campaigns, and never in government. They were glaring omissions from the initial pre-agreement. So we'll have to see if they make it into the final coalition deal.

EG

In terms of advancing such progressive policies, where will the greatest resistance come from — Brussels or Spain's corporate sector?

MU

Our adversaries are always the same — the oligarchies and elites who govern but don't stand in elections. These include the European Commission and the Troika but also the CEOE [Spain's business association], Banco Santander, and the IBEX 35 financial sector. My concern, though, is whether we can consider the PSOE an ally in confronting these elites. I don't think it is. It has been a fundamental part of Spain's establishment for decades.

Spain's corporate elites are likely to fiercely resist any reforms. But Sánchez can expect a certain degree of breathing space from the European Union, at least in the beginning. It cannot afford to be as aggressive as it was with the Syriza government in Greece — not least because a PSOE-led coalition is a much more moderate prospect. With the European Union facing problems of governability and instability across the continent, it needs administrations that it can work with.

The question is how long this will last. All the indications suggest we are heading towards a new economic crisis. In such a context, with Brussels no doubt demanding renewed austerity so as to socialize the losses, Podemos will find itself in a difficult position. It will be the junior partner in this coalition and will need a strong left-wing presence in the streets that is able to leverage pressure against the government.

We need to strengthen the autonomy of social movements and the extra-parliamentary left so that it is not only the oligarchic powers that are making their weight felt. Otherwise, we risk leaving the field open for the far right to channel popular anger and capitalize on a future crisis.

EG

You mentioned that to have a majority in Congress the coalition will need at least the abstention of the pro-independence Catalan party, Esquerra Republicana. Unlike in February when Esquerra refused to back Sánchez's budget and triggered elections, this time around it isn't making major demands. For example, it is not demanding an independence referendum or the release of its jailed leader Oriol Junqueras — sentenced last month to thirteen years' imprisonment for sedition. Is it fair to say an agreement looks much more likely now?

MU

Yes, there does seem to be greater scope for a deal — not least because Esquerra has changed direction over the last year. It is now hoping to become the main party of government in Catalonia. So, at times it has seemed more interested in an agreement even than Podemos's leadership is.

Indeed, Esquerra's parliamentary spokesman, Gabriel Rufián plead with Podemos to accept an agreement with the PSOE over the summer. But only six months before, he had voted against the [PSOE/Podemos] budget deal and allowed Sánchez's government to fall. It is hard to reconcile Rufián's statements from early this year and his more recent ones.

EG

The other major development in the elections was the surge for the far-right Vox party, which became Spain's third-largest on 15.3 percent of the vote. You have just published a book on the party [5]. How would you explain its rise — and where does it fit into the wider European far right?

MU

We normally view the far right in Europe as if it was a single political family and so to understand Vox a lot of people simply look towards Marine Le Pen as a comparison. But I think it is more useful to look to Jarosław Kaczyński's Law and Justice Party in Poland, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, or even Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil.

Whereas Le Pen and Matteo Salvini push a more populist line around social protectionism, Vox is an ultra-neoliberal organization and profoundly conservative in moral and cultural terms. Its roots can be traced to the neoconservative movement in Spain, founded at the turn of the millennium by the likes of [former PP prime minister] José María Aznar and his FAES think tank. This is where Santiago Abascal and Vox's other leaders come from.

Similar to Bolsonaro and the Brazilian dictatorship, Vox has reappropriated a certain Francoist mythology — reformulating it for a contemporary context. It talks, for example, about the need for a new "reconquest" of Spain — connecting this old Francoist trope with contemporary Islamophobia.

In this respect, Vox is the expression of a certain radicalization of the traditional Spanish right. Whereas Salvini and Le Pen have succeeded in winning over ex-left-wing voters — normally after a long period in abstention — and in channeling a more generalized anti-establishment rage, Vox has not. Its breakthrough has been based on radicalizing the existing right-wing vote around questions like Catalonia, immigration, and opposition to the feminist and LGBT movements. When you look at the polling data, it is incredible how few votes transferred between Left and Right in the last elections.

This also explains why they have no interest in cultivating a more popular image — why for them, being posh and aristocratic is not a problem. Vox's leadership is focused primarily on this dispute over the right-wing of the political field. Hence it openly boasts that it has met with City of London executives — explaining that it has reassured them they have nothing to fear from Vox's advance.

This is not something Le Pen would ever do. But Vox has no interest in appearing anti-establishment or a threat to the status quo. It also does not question the European Union in any way — it is less Eurosceptic than Euro-reformist.

It is true that in the final days of the campaign Vox began to deploy a certain social rhetoric, but one which was more reminiscent of Spanish fascism, as well as more recent neo-Nazi groups like Hogar Social. One example was its spat with the pop star Rosalía after she tweeted "Fuck Vox." Their response was to post a picture of her in a private jet with the message: "the only people who do not need the homeland are the rich." This phrase comes from Ramiro Ledesma, one of the main theorists of 1930s Spanish fascism.

We'll have to see if Vox will try to incorporate more of this type of rhetoric going forward. But that

will probably depend on the more Falangist sectors within the party gaining greater weight.

EG

You have spent five years now in the European Parliament. What has your experience been like there and what have you learned about the European Union from inside its institutions?

MU

Unfortunately, it has confirmed my worst expectations. The parliament has no real say in the major decisions being taken at a European level. It lacks any means of oversight or control over the European Central Bank and the Eurogroup [the council made up of European finance ministers] which together decide the economic policy within the eurozone. The balance of power within the parliament also leans very much to the right.

This has been an institutional system that has been in crisis for the last decade — with Brexit as just one further example of this.

My time here, though, has also confirmed the idea that the European Parliament can serve as an important platform to ensure greater exposure for certain causes and social struggles. It can also act as a space from which to build alliances between various radical forces from across the continent.

We have to not only avoid a naive pro-EU stance that embraces this elite construct, but also the dead-end of identitarian nationalism. If we are to build an alternative to neoliberalism, which will begin with disobeying the strictures being imposed from Brussels, this cannot be done from Greece or Spain alone. Rather, it will require coordination across the continent — however difficult and uneven that is.

INTERVIEW BY Eoghan Gilmartin

P.S.

• Jacobin, 11.27.2019:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/11/miguel-urban-podemos-psoe-coalition-spain-government>

• 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 writer, translator and Jacobin contributor based in Madrid.

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.lavanguardia.com/politica/20191112/471552240392/sanchez-iglesias-proyecto-tan-ilusionante-10n.html>

[2] ESSF (article 46936), [Vox: the new face of the far right in the Spanish State](#).

[3] <https://www.hoy.es/nacional/sanchez-envia-mensaje-20191120145155-ntrc.html>

[4] <https://tribunemag.co.uk/2019/11/gambling-spains-future>

[5] <http://sylone.oxatis.com/la-emergencia-de-vox-c2x30514650>