

EUROPEAN ELECTIONS

European Union: “One foot in the institutions, a hundred feet in the street”

Tuesday 14 May 2024, by [MARRA Hélène](#), [URBAN CRESPO Miguel](#) (Date first published: 1 May 2024).

In the context of the European parliamentary elections, marked by the rise of militarism and the worrying progress made by the far right, Hélène Marra interviewed Miguel Urbán, MEP and an activist in Anticapitalistas in the Spanish state.

Hélène Marra - Could you introduce yourself and tell us about your political trajectory?

I am Miguel Urbán, Member of the European Parliament since 2015 and an activist in *Anticapitalistas*. I have been involved in political activism since 2013. I have been involved in different movements: student, anti-colonial, for the right to housing, the occupation movements or the anti-war movements. I was one of the founders of Podemos. I also write regularly in various media outlets, from Spanish media such as *El País* and *Público*, to international media such as *La Jornada* in Mexico. I am also a member of the experts committee of the journal *Viento Sur*.

The issue of the media seems to be very important in your activism?

Yes, it forms part of it. I have always tried to combine activism with political reflection, I have written, co-authored or coordinated a dozen books published in Spain and abroad. I have just published “Trumpismos neoliberales y autoritarios. Una radiografía de la extrema derecha internacional” (“Neoliberal and authoritarian Trumpisms. An X-ray of the International Far Right”) with Fondo de Cultura Económica, the Mexican publishing house. So, I have always tried to combine my political activities with the construction of public debate not only through opinion pieces and columns but also through media interviews. These are fundamental tools in the political work that we have done over the years, using the institution as a kind of megaphone and also as a way to enter certain spaces where it would otherwise be very difficult to have access.

A month ago, I spent several days at the Rafah border: it took me almost two months of negotiations with the Egyptian embassy to gain access. When they surrounded and attacked the city of Diyarbakir in Kurdistan for 98 days, I was able to enter, even though the press did not enter, because I was an elected member of the European Parliament.

When Berta Cáceres, the feminist, indigenous, environmentalist and anti-capitalist leader, was murdered, Gustavo, the main witness, a Mexican comrade who was with her and who managed to escape because he was presumed dead by the assassins, could not leave Honduras because of the involvement of the Honduran government at the time in the assassination. I went to the country and, with a committee, although I was the only member of Parliament, we managed to get Gustavo out of the country.

We have followed the issue of the fight against repression, both in the North and in the Global South, using the status of the MEP to attend trials, to exert political pressure on issues of

criminalisation or on threats against human rights defenders.

When the military was on the streets of Chile during the 2019 uprising, I was the only non-Chilean elected official to visit the country. I was able to accompany the military checkpoints at night; we held a press conference that had a lot of impact in the country, exerting strong international pressure on the case of repression in Chile.

I was on search and rescue boats in the Mediterranean when Salvini was closing ports, preventing rescued people from entering. I spent more than a fortnight in the Mediterranean without being able to enter the port, despite my status as a Member of Parliament, but in the end, we managed to disembark and be welcomed in Spain.

We were able to visit all the borders, both in Europe and in the South: we went to Sudan, Niger, Mali, Senegal, Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, all countries that we would not have been able to visit if we had not been members of Parliament; I accompanied the first migrant caravan that left Honduras to Tijuana, Mexico. I was able to participate in the international committee in support of the audit of the Greek debt during the first Syriza government. We were able to follow the situation in all the exiled persons' camps that existed at the time, in Idomeni, Lesbos, Moria, and other Greek islands. We have obtained, for the first time in twenty-five years, the recognition by the European Parliament of the humanitarian emergency in Morocco, criticising and denouncing the situation of detention in the case of Omar Rádi, a comrade linked to the Fourth International.

So you used the institution in an unconventional way?

Yes, we have chosen not to lock ourselves into the institution by pretending to be the best parliamentarian possible, but we have used the parliamentary institution in the best possible way to do things that they do not want us to do, such as denouncing free trade agreements, trying to build networks with the countries of the South precisely to reject these agreements, all this with money from the European Union! With varying degrees of success, we have tried to be a kind of "Trojan horse" within the institutions, also denouncing the institution itself, the militarism that is now so important. We have tried to have internationalist activity by exploiting this space to support struggles in the Global South. And we paid for it: I was detained by the Mossad when I was a member of parliament, I was denied entry to several countries such as Morocco.

Eduardo Bolsonaro, Bolsonaro's son and the main leader of *Bolsonarismo*, released a twenty-one-minute video threatening me precisely because of all the work being done against the far right in Brazil. They entered my house to threaten me, my children and my partner; I have been the victim of several attempted attacks at the doors of the European Parliament and outside them.

Of course, all this does not serve to achieve improvements in the European Union's directives and, moreover, the European Parliament is not even a Parliament: in the best of cases, we co-legislate, but we do not have our own legislative initiative without the Commission. I think that this is a very strong democratic flaw in this anti-democratic system that is the European Union, but I also think that the correlation of forces prevents us from having anti-capitalist proposals that can be presented to Parliament. So, we made a lot of use of the institutions themselves and the space that we had and, most importantly, we created our own space.

Do you mean that all the internal work, of the committees, of the parliamentary groups is not that important, that we can't change Europe from within?

Far from it. In order to build a real European, socialist, ecofeminist project, we must get rid of the European Union, not hope to be able to reform it. Since Maastricht, the European Union has become

the tool for constitutionalizing neoliberalism, which is presented as the only possible policy. When the Syriza government relented by signing the memorandum after the referendum, Weber, the spokesperson for the European People's Party in Parliament, ended his speech by saying that "the example of Greece shows that it is not possible to have a left-wing government in the European Union, and that this will serve as a lesson to Podemos and Spain." I agree with him.

I think that we must continue to pursue a left-wing policy in an internationalist logic of disobedience to the European Union treaties and the construction of an alternative European project, in opposition to the logic of identitarian closure proposed by the far right.

How can we break with the European institutions?

The institutions are built against us and against our interests. Having said that, I think the logic, and we have always said this as anti-capitalists, is to put one foot in the institutions and 100 feet in the street. The challenge for us is to use our foot in the institutions to promote the processes of struggle and self-organization. For example, there is a programme in the European Parliament that provides for one hundred and ten trips per year to bring citizens to the European Parliament in order to bring them closer to the institution. So, there are one hundred and ten trips a year, they pay for all the tickets, the food, the accommodation, and then they show them the European Parliament for two hours, and then a Member of Parliament usually makes a short speech.

We used all these trips to bring conflicts, strikes, unions, repressed people, to be able to use Parliament as a loudspeaker for the struggles and offer them media coverage. Bringing striking workers into a place where they are not usually found attracts the media, it gives legitimacy to these struggles. We even brought comrades from the libertarian, anarchist unions, who don't believe in institutions but who participated because they saw that it was useful, and that we weren't trying to gain a political advantage. We brought in Extinction Rebellion, all the comrades who are criminalised in Europe for practising climate civil disobedience.

When we brought collectives into struggle, we tried to coordinate them with other countries, with other unions or with other European collectives, to use the European Parliament as a means of coordinating struggles. For example, we have worked with Turkish trade unions through a company called Dielinke; we then worked on issues of solidarity with Spanish companies that were violating workers' rights in Turkey, organised rallies, and even a strike in support of them in Spain, linking Spanish unions with Turkish and Kurdish unions.

That does not mean that we have not done parliamentary work. We wanted to show that we could do parliamentary work contrary to what they say, but that it was not the only work that could be done, quite the contrary. In this sense, we have even been disturbing in the way we dress, violating the dress code of the institutions. I remember the first speech in the European Parliament, when Syriza won, when I called Mario Draghi, then President of the European Central Bank, a financial terrorist and asked him how he could sleep at night with what he was doing. The only thing the *Financial Times* reported was that Mario Draghi had been interrupted by a man in a T-shirt!

Another example: the first activity I did when I took office as a Member of the European Parliament was to go with the comrades of the European coordination to block the European Central Bank, to participate in the Occupy Frankfurt actions, this was the first formal activity I did as a newly elected MEP at the time and, from there, that's what marked the activity we had.

You have mentioned the experience of Podemos and Syriza several times, what is your assessment of it today?

I was one of the founders of Podemos at the time. I think that at the end of 2015, when Syriza won, a slogan was created in Greece “Syriza, Podemos, we will win”: this is what was said at the time, because the Greeks were aware of the need not to be the only government that criticised austerity. In this context, I think that the fear that Podemos could take power and make an alliance with Syriza in an anti-austerity, albeit not anti-capitalist, framework played a very important role in the effort to discipline Greece. I think there was an attempt to discipline Greece in order to discipline the rest, to give an example of what could happen to anyone who tried to make a policy different from the one the Troika demanded at the time. I think that Syriza’s defeat in 2015 has not been analysed properly, precisely because it was a defeat for the entire European left. It changed the political cycle we were living in.

At that time, there was a rise in the processes of struggle not only in Greece and Spain, but also in Portugal, where the Bloco and the PCP (Portuguese Communist Party) won 23% of the vote in the elections. There had been very large mobilizations all over Europe, such as that of the Portuguese collective “Que se Lixe la Troika” (“Fuck the Troika”); in Italy, there had also been a very interesting process: the Five Stars also represented a certain annoyance of the people with the anti-democratic and austerity policies of the Italian technocratic governments. In France, there was the launch of La France insoumise and the Nuit Debout movement. All of these movements were disciplined through the Greek defeat. The left failed to properly read what was at stake in the Greek battle. If this was experienced as a very solitary battle on the part of the Greek comrades, their defeat was not solitary, their defeat was global. This has changed the political cycle in such a way that the anger, the protest, the protest vote has shifted to the far right. With a different outcome for the situation in Greece, we might not have had Brexit in the UK. The defeat of Syriza thus prefigured the defeat of Podemos by provoking internal divisions during the campaign.

When the majority of the left broke with Syriza, Iglesias went to campaign for Tsipras while I went to campaign with Unidad Popular (Popular Unity): two members of the Podemos executive were therefore running two different campaigns at the time. The defeat of Popular Unity was also a defeat for the most left-wing theses. At that time, the situation was very difficult and we tried to relaunch Plan B, which was an initiative to try to learn the political lessons of the defeat in Greece and promote greater European coordination, through different initiatives: the first one in Madrid, which worked quite well; we had also carried out actions in France, Sweden, Denmark, Portugal, and so on, but we did not succeed in stabilising a coordination framework different from the classic reformism of the European Left Party. The reading of the Spanish population, but also of several Podemos leaders, was that the Syriza hypothesis of winning power and trying to break with austerity was not possible. This encouraged the attempt to reach an agreement with the Socialist Party to co-govern and to be more “respectable” in the eyes of the establishment, so that they would hit us less and be able to achieve reform or any improvement. And this was the framework that determined the break of *Anticapitalistas* with Podemos, because the strategic hypothesis on which Podemos had been founded, that is, non-subordination to social liberalism and therefore to the Socialist Party, was eliminated.

This is what has happened in other European countries, in France with France Insoumise, which is now trying to refocus, and in Italy with the process of institutionalization of the Five Star Movement.

Yes, but, in the Spanish context, the Socialist Party is the guardian of the monarchy and the political regime of 1978, born of the pact with the Francoist elites, which has an even more regressive connotation in our country than in other social liberalisms such as in France and elsewhere. This is not only an ideological issue: subordinating us to them also eliminates us electorally, not only socially and politically. In other words, we think that the two great risks faced by Podemos were to moderate and normalize, to resemble a party like any other that governs in a minority with the

Socialist Party.

Finally, I think that part of Podemos' defeat and subsequent capitulation must also be read in a European logic of cycle change in the face of the defeat of the anti-austerity moment, illustrated by the experience of Syriza in Greece.

How do you see the European elections? It is undeniable that there is a very strong reactionary surge, accompanied by militarization and new conflicts such as in Ukraine or the genocidal war in Palestine. How do you see things?

The situation is very bad for humanity, it is very bad especially for the popular classes and it is very regressive for any anti-capitalist or simply anti-neoliberal project. Since 2015, we have witnessed a sharp shift to the right of the entire European political arc. We are living in a moment of global disorder; we are facing a real crisis of the capitalist regime by the junction of the neoliberal crisis and its authoritarian mutation with the ecological crisis and the logic of scarcity that this entails. The decline of the US empire and the emergence of a kind of new period of inter-imperialist conflicts at the global level, for increasingly scarce resources, also generates a neo-extractivist and neo-colonial logic. Indeed, 80% of the raw materials we need for a so-called ecological transition to "green capitalism" in Europe are outside our continent. In this sense, Europe, faced with competition and the need for new inter-imperialist confrontations, has embarked on a logic of rearmament. As Mr Borrell, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, says, Europe must be able to speak the language of power, not the soft power of human rights but the language of weapons, the language of war. To sustain the European Union's fever and mercantilist and commercial pressure, armies are needed in Africa, so that they can be moved to territories in dispute with other powers, old or new. This rearmament process is therefore not so much about disputing the Ukrainian chessboard with Russia as it is about disputing the world chessboard, disputing Africa more than Ukraine, because Africa has much more of the raw materials needed by Europe than Ukraine. The problem, then, is that Ukraine is being used as a pretext by European elites to strengthen their own interests as elites in this framework of inter-imperialist conflicts.

It is also in this context that what is happening in Palestine must be interpreted. This crisis of the capitalist regime also means a crisis of the regime of the liberal model of governance born after the Second World War; Everything about the international human rights framework, the international legal framework is being shattered. There is no longer an entity, everything is a fiction: what we saw at the Mexican embassy in Ecuador, where the Ecuadorian government allowed sovereignty and the Treaty of Vienna to be violated, is precisely an example of this breach of international law.

The signing of the European Migration Pact puts an end to the right to asylum and is part of the same crisis of regime where what is being called into question is precisely the model of liberal democracy, of separation of powers. At the same time, we are witnessing the emergence of an increasingly strong authoritarianism on a global scale, with a questioning of the right to protest and the use of increasingly repressive tools.

The only thing left of liberal democracy is to vote every four years; For the rest, what exists is a veritable dictatorship of the market, it is the element towards which we are increasingly clearly moving because it is the easiest element to compete with, in this intermediate imperialist model marked by scarcity and ecological emergency. In this context, the far right will most likely become the leading force in nine European Union countries, several of them being central countries such as France, which has already been the leading force in the European elections since 2014, and Italy again, where the leading force, in the 2019 elections, was Salvini with 34% and now it will be Meloni. The escalation that Netanyahu is provoking in Palestine and in the region, Iran, Ukraine,

what is happening in Latin America, all this is part of a whole, of this crisis of regime and the increase of intermediate imperialist conflicts. In addition, in this year 2024, there are elections in half the world. In particular, the US elections are going to be very important because Trump's victory could lead to an acceleration of all these processes.

We cannot rule out that the chain of imperialist conflicts at the regional level could eventually drift into an open global conflict, and that would be a third world war with nuclear weapons, which would lead to a devastating scenario.

What would then be our main task?

I think that at the moment the main task is not so much to think about elections, but rather to think about how we can rebuild an anti-militarist internationalism that breaks with all imperialisms, that is independent of imperial interests and distant from our empires or competitors, that can have class independence and argues that one of the most important elements at the moment is an ecosocialist anti-militarist policy; to also reflect on the link between the climate crisis and the increase in war and armed conflicts. There is nothing that accelerates a world in flames more than remilitarization and war; there is nothing that accelerates the climate collapse scenario more than investing scarce resources in raw materials essential for a so-called transition, in weapons.

Therefore, I think it is necessary to have an adequate reading of the all-important historical context we are facing in order to understand that today the main contradiction that arises is that of capital or life, and this is what is now in play; it is no longer even capital versus labour, the opposition is now between capital and life. The coronavirus crisis has been a test of what we could face, a test we have lost: we have been subjected to a real shock doctrine, we have not even been able to question the private ownership of some pharmaceutical multinationals in the face of a common good for people's lives. This should make us pause: either we confront the temple of private property and start talking about access to common resources, strategic controls of sectors of the economy and a peaceful world, or what we will do is throw more gasoline on the fire and accelerate this unbridled train to the climate and ecological suicide of life itself that capitalism has become.

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• SUNDAY 12 MAY 2024:

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article8520>

• *Translated by **International Viewpoint** from [Revue l'Anticapitaliste](#).*