

Spanish State: Podemos votes against a moderate turn at Vista Alegre II

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“Las razones por las que nació Podemos no se han moderado, nuestras políticas no se pueden moderar”

The reasons for the birth of Podemos have not moderated, so our policies should not become more moderate.

Miguel Urbain, Podemos MEP, 14th Feb Carne Cruda radio station

How the first congress led to a messy debate at the second one

Podemos held its second congress at Vista Alegre, Madrid, last weekend (February 10-11). Over 8000 activists attended and 155,000 of its members voted online out of a database of about 450,000 supporters.

The first congress, which followed the great breakthrough of the new left populist movement in 2014, saw the joint leadership of Inigo Errejon and Pablo Iglesias establish the party as a centralised, presidential ‘big electoral war machine’. They brushed aside the criticism of one of the founding currents, the Anticapitalistas (ACs) and ensured it was kept out of any leadership structures. The ACs’ main critique was the way this electoral war machine was going to gut the dynamism of the 600 or so local branches and limit the political debate and development of the membership. A centralised, hierarchical leadership without an organised plural debate and relying mainly on online consultations would store up problems for the future.

Sometimes the radical left does get it right. The centralised leadership blew up into two factions and the party structures could not manage the debate in a sober way. Today the two main currents have recognised to different degrees that the organisational model of Vista Alegre was not fit for purpose. They called for reinforcing the branches and developing a more plural leadership.

Of course quite a lot of impetus for this shift of opinion came from the split that has developed between Errejon – the so-called number two and his great friend Iglesias. If you are no longer likely to be in the leadership bloc you quite quickly become enthusiastic for a plural approach. The

organisational changes decided at the congress are still limited. Iglesias can still decide on consultations with the base without getting a majority in the national committee and can also dissolve local or regional structures. Nevertheless today Podemos is a plural party with open tendencies.

But why did the dream team break up?

Behind the Errejon/Iglesias split

Essentially it was the loss of the million votes for Unidad Podemos between the December 2015 and the June 2016 general elections that triggered the disagreement. Errejon thought the negotiations for a 'progressive' government with the traditional social democratic party, the PSOE, were handled badly. There is a now notorious clip from a parliamentary debate showing Iglesias denouncing the PSOE as the party of the 'lime pits', a reference to the dirty war against the Basque separatists when the PSOE government of Felipe Gonzalez used death squads. In the clip Errejon, sitting beside Iglesias, literally recoils in disgust at his leader's inflammatory language. Iglesias was correctly against any deal for a PSOE government coalition that included the new, bourgeois liberal party, Ciudadanos. From that time it was clear that Errejon was organising his current and it led to messy disputes around the sacking of one of his people from a key post and the party primaries in Madrid.

Since then the document produced by Errejon's current, Recuperar el illusion (recover hope) has set out three key differences with Iglesias. First a general understanding of left populism that is underpinned by the concept of 'transversalism'. Inspired by the late Marxist, Ernesto Laclau, it dispensed with the categories of class and exploitation and instead focussed on constructing a hegemonic subject - the people - that would be built by constructing a narrative bringing together disparate demands.

The people would be opposed to the caste or the elites and the key was to refuse the left/right categories and search to bring together all the different social layers, particularly the middle classes. Class struggles and material interests are subordinated to an over-ideological notion of politics where communication and the media are central. Now although Iglesias bought into a lot of this theorising - and still shares much of it - he has gone cooler on the notion of transversalism. It is hard to find a reference in his conference document whereas it runs through Errejon's.

The second difference is around the model of the party. Here Errejon actually takes up some of the criticisms that the Anticapitalistas have made from the beginning. His document proposed to reduce some of the powers that the secretary general has and to assert the need for a plural leadership. The final area of disagreement is about what type of opposition is necessary today against a Rajoy PP government that is backed by the PSOE and Ciudadanos. Errejon wants to work constructively in the institutions and wants to win over people who do not yet support Podemos by not antagonising them with too much talk of struggle and resistance. He rejects Iglesias's call to go into the trenches of struggle and his talk of Podemos MPs being 'institutional activists'.

This is best summed up by the way Errejon talks of Podemos presenting a smile in its actions whereas Iglesias argues that people who are exploited and are struggling do not need or want to smile at their enemies but wish to put the fear of god into them with their power and strength. The conflict even took on a symbolic form when Errejon and his team would use the V for victory sign and Iglesias continued to use the clenched fist in his meetings.

In practical terms Errejon sees an electoral alliance with the communists of Izquierda Unida (IU) as just another way of alienating the middle ground he wants to win over. Iglesias has strongly

defended this alliance that was made in the June general election and says votes were lost because Podemos presented a vacillating and softer line and lost some of the most disaffected people.

Limits of Iglesias's critique of Errejon

So on one level this was a clear choice, although based on political tactics rather than ultimate strategy. Iglesias could be said to have a more left Eurocommunist approach, suggesting that in order to get control of the institutions you have to organise hard struggles in opposition. He has a better political instinct for the real relationship of forces. Particularly given the PSOE support for Rajoy, Podemos should be the clear opposition not send contradictory messages by cuddling up to the PSOE.

But despite the PP spokespeople denouncing Iglesias as leading Podemos to the Leninist left, he has continued to support Tsipiras's leadership in Syriza and is against the idea of a constitutional 'rupture' as put forward by the Anticapitalistas. Furthermore he still operates in a presidentialist way. He certainly improved his vote during the campaign up to the conference by threatening to walk away if he lost on any of the documents. In some ways, he is much more politically inconsistent and less strategic than Errejon. But he retains more support among the more working class supporters of Podemos. He and some of his key collaborators come from the Spanish communist tradition unlike Errejon and many of his team.

What were the results of Vista Alegre II?

Errejon was roundly defeated at the congress. His political document received 33.7% against 56% for Iglesias and 9% for the ACs, there was similar vote on the Organisational, the Ethics and the Equalities documents. On what became the crucial contest – the vote on the leadership slates – Iglesias won 60% of the seats to Errejon's 37%. In the run up to the congress, the Errejon people thought it would be much closer, indeed the consultative vote on the arrangements for the congress was pretty close and the Madrid primaries last year were also better for him. All the press and TV gave a more positive spin to Errejon than to Iglesias – correctly identifying him as the moderate choice. I saw a friendly half an hour interview with him on the main channel a couple of days before the congress. Sanchez, the ex-leader of the PSOE who hopes to return also publicly stated he could work with Errejon. After the congress the PSOE spokesperson said the door was now shut since Podemos had gone to the hard left.

The congress welcomed representatives of various groups of workers who are in struggle such as those from Coca Cola, Telemadrid, Vodafone and the CGT telemarketing sector. Loud support was given to an imprisoned Andalusian farmworker leader, Boldano. Policies were passed against the CETA and TTIP proposals being presented to the EU. Throughout the congress, the crowd showed a certain alienation from the way in which the two main tendencies had conducted the debate by chanting Unity, Unity many times. Indeed the way in which politics for Podemos leaders have become synonymous with the media and social media rather than being an organic part of party activity was clearly shown in the whole debate. Some people have also criticised the short turnaround for the debate with Xmas coming in the middle of the two month period. More time was needed for a proper discussion of the documents.

Role of the Anticapitalistas

What of the third current, the Anti-capitalistas ? They won an average of 10% for their documents and 13% of the votes for the national leadership. Unfortunately the latter only translated into two seats because of the Desborda method – a complicated points system which ends up exaggerating the weight of the majority currents. Normally they should have around 9 seats. Nevertheless both activists and the mainstream press (see particularly an article in the *Huffington Post* by Raul Solis (09/02/2017 [\[1\]](#)) recognised the important role played by the ACs. Apart from anything else they were able to bring more political questions onto the agenda since they were not involved in a fight for who would have the power inside the leadership.

So ecosocialism, feminism, the debt and education were all topics that the ACs led on – indeed 3 out of the 5 topics most voted for debate were put forward by them. Their consistent position on the need for a more democratic, branch based Podemos turned outwards to struggles has stood them in good stead. Their real influence is under-estimated in the online voting since they are in the leadership of significant regions like Andalucía, Madrid, Navarra and Barcelona and they have well-known national figures like Miguel Urbain and Teresa Rodriguez. Miguel was interviewed several times on national TV during and after the congress, his appeal to go beyond the media spectacle and to develop a plural leadership got some of the biggest cheers of the weekend.

It has to be understood too that the progress made by the ACs was a result of engaging with this left populist movement. Other left currents might have walked away after the severe rebuff they suffered at the first congress and the difficulties of working within the presidentialist/online structures that were adopted. They worked and built Podemos in a loyal way whilst maintaining a clear political profile. Their current for the congress Podemos en Movimiento was organised in a more democratic and dynamic way than the big two. Although there was a possible political opening to join the Iglesias list, the ACs maintained their political independence. Their post congress analysis is that it was important that the Errejón line was defeated but that the Anti-capitalist strategy is not the same as Iglesias's and that Podemos has benefited from the existence of their current. Undoubtedly their intervention has helped establish a much more plural party post Vista Alegre II than after Vista Alegre 1.

Lessons for the Left

Certainly there are some lessons for understanding how to build new parties to the left of Social Democracy and how radical left currents can participate constructively inside them. For example the ACs have worked around the problem of the presidentialist/electoralist/online nature of the party structures. If we looked at the way much of the radical left have intervened in the Momentum you could say that – without excusing Lansman's manoeuvres – it was rather heavy-handed and not very flexible with regard to new radicalising forces.

Obviously a big difference with the Corbyn movement in Britain is that the origins of Podemos in the Spanish state was the huge indignados movement whereas here it was essentially an internal party leadership campaign that unexpectedly emerged. Furthermore the definition and development of that current has to come about within the well-worn structures of a party dominated by the opposition to Corbyn which makes it even more difficult for openly radical left currents to operate. However Vista Alegre has shown that new left movements will inevitably produce right, centre and left currents. The important thing is to develop ways of functioning that can keep those forces – who all agree on building an anti-austerity alternative to social democracy – together. It is the responsibility of the radical left to break with certain ways of intervening that make it more difficult

to achieve that.

How the Spanish media and government may be writing off Podemos rather hastily

Much of the Spanish state media rubbed their hands in glee at the open warfare between Iglesias and Errejon, predicting a split and the end of the Podemos dream. One columnist even suggested that Rajoy, whose congress took place on the same weekend, had won not just one congress but two, since he considered an Iglesias victory would help the right. That prediction may be a bit hasty. A recent survey by the Spanish CIS polling organisation found Podemos had a majority among voters aged between 18 and 44. Despite the negative media coverage of warring leaders, the party remains second in the polls. This reflects the fact that Podemos voters are voting against the elites as much as voting for a leader like Iglesias. On the very weekend the media was presenting the quiet triumph of Rajoy there were news stories of two big corruption cases involving PP leaders. If Sanchez fails to win back the leadership of the PSOE, which is likely, then Susanna Diaz will cement the alliance with Rajoy and even more space could open up for a fighting opposition. The Rajoy government still has to reduce its deficit and more cuts are planned.

Within the overall right ward shift in politics, one source of hope is a new left party with 5 million votes after just 3 years of life, that has 60 odd MPs and has just voted down attempts to take a more moderate line. Those young activists like Iglesias, Errejon, Teresa Rodriguez and Miguel Urbain who set up Podemos a few years ago should be saluted. It is no accident that the populist polarisation in the Spanish state has been to the left and not to the hard xenophobic right as we have seen in France or elsewhere.

Dave Kellaway, 15th Feb 2017

P.S.

* Socialist Resistance. 16th Feb 2017:

<http://socialistresistance.org/podemos-votes-against-a-moderate-turn-at-vistalegre-ii/9707>

Footnotes

[1] http://www.huffingtonpost.es/raul-solis-/la-cordura-de-los-anticap_b_14635506.html?ncid=engmodushpmsg00000003