

# **Late, but finally here: Anti-Euro left-wing populism rising in Spain**

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There has certainly been a turning point in the Spanish political sphere in the last months. Before 2014, it was not so easy to talk about populism in Spain, or at least not at the same level as in other European countries. However, with the opportunity of the European elections, new political parties emerged both from the left and from the right, damaging the Spanish bipartisanship, shared between the socialist PSOE (Partido Socialista Obrero Español/Spanish Socialist Workers' Party) and the conservative PP (Partido Popular/People's Party). Among the newly created parties, Podemos (We can) has certainly been the most successful in the European elections, getting 5 seats in the European Parliament. This party has been criticized for being populist and demagogue, criticism done especially from the leader of UPyD (Unión, Progreso y Democracia/ Union, Progress and Democracy) Rosa Díez, who also tends to be populist, and sympathizers of PP. Have these criticisms being legitimate? What kind of people does Podemos' populist speech attract? These are some questions that will be answered throughout this article.

In the previous article, UPyD was considered to be populist because of certain characteristics. It is a party which represents itself as the delegate of the people, defined as a homogeneous group of citizens whose rights are being attacked by the political elites and the dangerous minorities, which in the case of UPyD were the nationalist regions of Spain. The leader of the party is also charismatic, as the party could not be conceived without Rosa Díez. Moreover, the members of the party often recur to sentimentalist speeches in order to touch the feelings of the Spanish citizenship and therefore be able to manipulate them. However, in the European context, there are two other characteristics that are generally linked to populist parties, and therefore, when European leaders or journalists talk about populism, they talk about parties which share either or both characteristics, euroscepticism and xenophobic ideology, and UPyD has neither of them.

Before 2014, these kinds of political parties did not proliferate in Spain. In fact, no parties with any political relevance showed to be Eurosceptic, Podemos' creation

supposing and important change. Podemos was created just in the eve of the European elections, defending leftist reforms in the Spanish society and politics, promising to be the real follower of the Spanish left, because according to its leader Pablo Iglesias, PSOE does no longer represent the Spanish left. Apart from those populist attributes UPyD also shares, Podemos has to add to its list of populist characteristics its Euroscepticism and its intention to get out of the Euro and the Eurozone. On the other hand, it should not be forgotten that, unlike UPyD, Podemos does not attack a national minority, but only political and economic elites.

Of course, when talking about a populist party, it is unavoidable to refer to its leader, who in this case is Pablo Iglesias. His name itself is a lucky coincidence, as the founder of the PSOE was also called Pablo Iglesias. He shares a peculiarity with another populist politician, Silvio Berlusconi, as both of them became famous through their appearance on television. Some of his most remarkable appearances on TV have been on the programme “El gato al agua”, aired on *Intereconomía*<sup>1</sup>, where he had debates about different topics of political interest with people who had a right-wing political conviction, against whom he defended socialism and communism. Thanks to the fame he achieved through his appearance on the media, he could create the political party Podemos, which attracts voters from the left disappointed with PSOE and people disenchanted with the political system. The party follows the ideology of the 15M movement, which united people discontent with the Spanish political situation and asked for a greater representation of the people and combated against corruption. Thus, these people see an alternative to the system in Podemos. Moreover, Euroscepticists may have seen on him an alternative to Europe, as he has proposed, as well as Marine Le Pen has done in France, getting out of the Eurozone in order to have a more competitive currency. Besides the Euroscepticism and his criticisms against the rest of the political parties, his charismatic speech has had the ability to attract a wide range of voters, obtaining five astonishing seats for the European Parliament the first time Podemos has run for elections.

Populists use a different speech from that used by other politicians. The populist language tends to be more direct, and they also use sentimentalisms in order to manipulate the audiences. To observe how Pablo Iglesias’ speech could be considered

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<sup>1</sup> *Intereconomía* is a right wing TV channel where conservative ideologies are promoted, and “El gato al agua” a debate programme aired in that TV channel.

populist, here is an example: “They want to criminalize the young people and the demonstrators. You are not only from the right, you are stupid.”<sup>2</sup> First of all, he already introduces two of the people whom he aims to represent: the youth and demonstrators, people unhappy with the system. Then, he makes clear that the people against whom he fights are people whose ideologies come from the right, opinion he has very directly expressed. Moreover, he uses passionate words as well in order to make it more attractive for the people who hear him. That is why he is naming those who are criminalizing the youth and demonstrators stupid, in order to catch the attention of the viewers. This passionate speech can also be observed in Pablo Iglesias’ discourse in the European Parliament in the presentation of the his candidature to the presidency of the European Parliament<sup>3</sup>, where he started his speech referring to the most tragic moment of the European history: the Second World War. He used this example to express that Europe is returning to have xenophobic and fascist politicians who are being very successful, and that these xenophobic attitudes should not be permitted. Although we may agree with his opinion in this aspect, it is not about what he says, but how he says it, trying to move the feelings of the people who are listening to him, so he can manipulate them too.

Using this sentimentalist language, Pablo Iglesias is trying to attract a certain kind of voters: generally young people, leftists and people disenchanted with the Spanish political and economic situation. However, who did really vote for Podemos? There are some discrepancies concerning the age of the voters. Some writers say the majority of the voters are mainly young people<sup>4</sup>, while others defend that most of the voters are 35 years old or older.<sup>5</sup> It is necessary to wait until a more exhaustive study of the age of the voters is done to clearly state the overall age of the voters. However, most newspapers agree that Podemos’ voters are mostly highly educated and that they are leftists who are

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<sup>2</sup> “Pretenden criminalizar a los jóvenes y a los manifestantes. No solamente sois de derechas, además sois gilipollas.” In “Mejores momentos de Pablo Iglesias, candidato de Podemos”, Youtube, May 12, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IWV-n55oI4U>.

<sup>3</sup> “Discurso Íntegro de Pablo Iglesias en el Parlamento Europeo”, Youtube, June 1, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CJYQEGxXI-o>.

<sup>4</sup> Sara Montero, “Joven, licenciado y desencantado con la izquierda: así es el votante medio de Podemos”, ABC, May 27, 2014, <http://www.abc.es/espana/20140527/abci-podemos-votante-medio-201405261926.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Francesco Manetto, “La gran mayoría de los votantes de Podemos tiene más de 35 años”, El País, June 1, 2014, [http://politica.elpais.com/politica/2014/06/01/actualidad/1401652287\\_552889.html](http://politica.elpais.com/politica/2014/06/01/actualidad/1401652287_552889.html); “El perfil del votante de Podemos”, El País, May 31, 2014, [http://elpais.com/elpais/2014/05/31/media/1401571468\\_769193.html](http://elpais.com/elpais/2014/05/31/media/1401571468_769193.html).

disenchanted with the traditional Spanish left<sup>6</sup>, PSOE and IU (Izquierda Unida/United Left).

The main problem with the Spanish political reality is not the new parties which are emerging, but the loss of credibility of the traditional parties, mainly of the two parties around which bipartisanship was erected, PSOE and PP. Not only have they lost their credibility on their ability to cope with the Spanish economic crisis, but politicians from both parties have been involved in corruption, being totally comprehensible that new parties have seen their opportunity to emerge. For the young (and not so young) voters, observing how their political delegates have been accused of corruption has encouraged them to vote for another party who may also respond to their political beliefs and is still “clean”. In fact, in order to enhance their connection with the people, Parliamentarians of Podemos have decided to earn less than 2000 € in the European Parliament<sup>7</sup>, underlying the fact they are not there to become rich and steal money, but to represent the people. If we add to the loss of credibility of traditional parties the charisma of Pablo Iglesias, his direct and emotional speech, and the fact that he has earned popularity among leftists thanks to his ability to win debates against people with a right-wing political orientation, it is comprehensible that he has become so popular among leftists and young people.

Moreover, Podemos has attacked some controversial procedures undertaken by the party on the government, PP, such as its reform against abortion, while Podemos offers a free abortion<sup>8</sup>, and combats against the expropriation of houses of people who cannot pay their debts. Because of the crisis, many families have lost their jobs and therefore have not been able to pay their mortgage, consequently losing their houses, these expropriations being criticized by the Spanish media and society in general. Podemos, proposing that these expropriations should be illegal, has attracted a range of voters who

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<sup>66</sup> Montero, “Joven, licenciado y desencantado con la izquierda: así es el votante medio de Podemos”; “Metroscopia: El 30 % de los votantes de Podemos provienen del PSOE”, Electomania, June 2, 2014, <http://electomania.es/metroscopia-el-30-de-los-votantes-de-podemos-proviene-el-psoe/>.

<sup>7</sup> “El partido Podemos confirma que sus parlamentarios europeos cobrarán menos de 2.000 euros”, El Periódico, May 26, 2014, <http://www.elperiodico.com/es/noticias/europa/podemos-confirma-que-sus-parlamentarios-europeos-cobrarán-menos-2000-euros-3282808>.

<sup>8</sup> “Así será un país gobernado por Podemos”, ABC, May 27, 2014, <http://www.abc.es/elecciones-europeas/20140526/abci-gobernara-podemos-201405261237.html>.

not only share the leftist view of the party, but also those who are living a precarious situation in Spain, who are certainly not a minority.

Of course, in order to make this possible, the economic situation of Spain needs a dramatic change, and therefore Podemos proposes to get out of the Eurozone in order to “democratize the economy”<sup>9</sup>. Even treating this issue, he uses populist arguments to defend his position, by saying that the economic system needs an urgent change in order to assure that children are not starving and that families have an economic security to maintain their homes and sustain their families<sup>10</sup>. This is an issue of concern for the European Union, as they are proposing dropping out of the Euro. He expresses that what Spain needs is a change, he asks for more state power in monetary aspects, which is delegated to the European Union through the Euro, and hence thinks getting out of the Euro could be necessary.

Most of the criticisms done to Podemos and Pablo Iglesias, naming him populist and demagogue, have come from the right-wing, from people who sympathize with PP, but also from UPyD, who also has many populist characteristics. Rosa Díez, the leader of UPyD, has compared Podemos’ propositions to those made by Syriza and Beppe Grillo, left-wing populist parties in Greece and Italy, and even to those made by Marine Le Pen<sup>11</sup>, although Le Pen leads a right-wing and conservative party in France. Dylan Thomas defined alcoholic as “someone you don’t like who drinks as much as you”<sup>12</sup>, and something similar seems to happen with populism. Populist seems to be someone who is as populist as you but whose ideology you do not share and who has been more successful than you in the elections, as we should not forget that UPyD, party that was created in 2007, obtained four seats in the European Parliament while Podemos, which was running for the first time for the elections, obtained five.

Certainly Podemos and Pablo Iglesias have many populist attributes, as he is telling what young people, people in precarious situations and leftists discontent with the

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<sup>9</sup> “Para democratizar la economía”. In Marién Kadner, “Pablo Iglesias: ‘Lo que tenemos claro es que este Euro no sirve’”, El País, May 23, 2014, [http://politica.elpais.com/politica/2014/05/23/actualidad/1400863156\\_284091.html](http://politica.elpais.com/politica/2014/05/23/actualidad/1400863156_284091.html).

<sup>10</sup> Idem.

<sup>11</sup> “Rosa Díez, contra el líder de Podemos: ‘Pablo Iglesias defiende a ETA y no la autodeterminación’”, Vozpopuli, June 4, 2014, <http://vozpopuli.com/actualidad/44403-rosa-diez-contra-el-lider-de-podemos-pablo-iglesias-defiende-a-eta-y-no-la-autodeterminacion>.

<sup>12</sup> Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell, *Twenty-First Century Populism. The Spectre of Western European Democracy* (Palgrave MacMillan: New York, 2008), 2.

traditional parties want to hear. However, they are not the only ones in Spain. UPyD also uses populist strategies, although it has not been as successful as Podemos in these last elections. Certainly, the rise of Podemos has been a surprise for other Spanish political parties and for the Spaniards themselves, and although it is necessary to be careful with populism, traditional parties may also regard the rise of this party as a call of attention. They should realize that they should change many aspects of their political campaigns and the way they have acted if they want to maintain the support of the Spanish citizenship. If not, the bipartisan system may disappear, and PP and PSOE may lose the power they have obtained until now. So, although Podemos and UPyD can be considered populists, if the rise of these parties serves for the improvement of the actions of the majoritarian parties, we should at least thank them for that.

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