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Spanish state

Podemos: between populism and social movements

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The ballots which Spanish voters will cast in the municipal and regional elections on the 24th of May, will be the litmus paper for the potential of the party to get to the highest positions in Government, as SYRIZA did. Meanwhile, Web-sites and social networks pages are filled with slogans such as “Podemos gaÑ±ar Madrid”, “Podemos gaÑ±ar Andalucia” (“We can win Madrid”, “We can gain Andalucia”). With 30% of support, and the thousands of people, which Podemos gathers for its demonstrations, this is far from unlikely.

There are several factors, which make Podemos a successful platform. Firstly, it uses the discourse of participation, a “new way of doing politics”. Secondly, it critiques austerity. Thirdly, it emerged from 15M, the mass protest movement, which mobilized people in response to the country’s economic crisis. In addition, crucial was the ability of leaders and organizers of the party to be present on mainstream media – TV and radio. Although the party does not call itself left-wing, a huge part of its members have a long-term experience in left-wing movements.

For a lot of Spanish people, as well as for a lot of activists outside of Spain, who are following Podemos, the main source of the information is the mainstream media, which is representing only the leadership of the party. To understand the everyday life of the party, see the problems and contradictions it meets, LeftEast’s Aliona Liasheva spoke to Jaime Pastor, member of Podemos and editor of Viento Sur, a left-oriented academic journal. [\[1\]](#)

Aliona Liasheva: You are one of the main organisers of the initiative Por el cambio en Grecia (“For the change in Greece”). It was an initiative to support Greek comrades during the last parliamentary elections. Can you tell us more about this initiative? And explain how you see the collaboration between the two parties?

Jaime Pastor: The idea of creating such an initiative and writing the manifesto “With the Greek people, and for a change in Europe” comes from the understanding that the future of Podemos is very much linked to the future of SYRIZA. The interdependence inside the European Union and the Eurozone is very strong and the only chance to change the situation in Europe is to extend the struggle against austerity. For our countries austerity became the topic around which the left could unite people. The success of SYRIZA in fighting austerity depends to a large extent on the political situation in other countries and solidarity coming from those countries. So the manifest we made is not a manifest to support SYRIZA, it is the manifest to show the support to Greek people, who are also willing to change Europe. This initiative is an attempt to rebuild a new internationalism against the Troika, against the German government.

AL: What about other countries and political forces, which could join this internationalist movement?

JP: In the past we were always looking in the direction of France. But now we can see that the left in France is weaker than before and right-wing parties are rising. We could say that countries like Portugal, Italy have big potential, German trade unions as well. Apart from that we are not too optimistic in the present context. But it is important to take into account that a victory of the left in Spain could be a big step forward, it is bigger than Greece. The situation is more likely to be changed in the case of an anti-austerity government coming to power in Spain. In addition, we are thinking to rebuild a Europe-wide movement with other aims than anti-austerity, for example with a strong emphasis on the anti-TTIP campaign. Its purpose would be to unite people from countries in Western and Eastern Europe.

AL: In Madrid, I do not see Podemos to be present as a political movement in the urban space of the city, at

least it is way less visible than the anarchist movement. For instance, you rarely see a violent-white poster in the streets of the city. But at the same time, Podemos came into my virtual reality very quickly, through facebook and youtube channels. Is it just my experience or it is the way the party works?

JP: Yes, you are right, Podemos could be called a virtual party, which managed to become an electoral party. Virtual, because it is based on *círculos* (Spanish for circles), which are communities of activists, formed as virtual communities within one and the same region. They use online-communication discussions to make decisions, such as choosing a candidate, who will represent them at the local elections. Anyone can join a *círculo*, even people without a Spanish passport. But although they are a very progressive kind of an instrument, in my opinion, virtual tools have limitations in the current situation. Our experience shows that virtual tools are not enough to create a democratic debate and foster participation. It is important to make the *círculos* not only virtual, but also real. As we can see from the experience of 15M we need a hybrid of the real and virtual. Communication can happen both on the internet, but also in squares, like assemblies.

AL: Can you tell more about the leadership of Podemos? What is its relationship with the social movements and the common members?

JP: There is nothing to hide; Podemos is a party with a strong leadership. Those people formed the party; they are coming from the United Left, the anti-globalisation movement, also from organisations such as the Anti-capitalist Left and other Marxist organisations. The main problem of the leadership is that they want to maintain the more simple discourse to win as many votes as possible, but this is not enough. They could win the election with this ambiguous discourse, but what comes next?

We should take into account that the development of Podemos is still going on and hopefully it is going in the direction of a more pluralistic organization. There is an open debate going on. A lot of members of Podemos are trying to develop a program for change, for the new constitution of Spain, new relations with Catalonia, and a strategy for solving the debt problem.

We see that now the crucial question for the future of Podemos is to engage with activism, so that more people with the spirit of May15 can get involved. This will give an opportunity to leave the model of a party based on leadership and develop an activist party, with a pluralistic leadership with strong social-democratic demands, not only on the national, but also on the international level. I am not a social democrat, but it is what we can demand for the time being.

AL: Which geographic regions support Podemos?

JP: Madrid is the center of the movement, with many activists especially those with a background from the 15M movement; that is why the elections in Madrid are a hot topic now. Apart from that, Andalucía, the biggest region in the country supports Podemos. The situation in Catalonia and in the Basque country is specific, as right-wing forces are stronger there. And I mean right-wing forces inside Podemos. The people in every community are very heterogeneous. But in Madrid members of Podemos are mostly on the left.

AL: Who are the voters of Podemos in terms of age, class, and political background?

JP: There are studies, which show that the majority are people who define themselves as middle-class, but the question is what does middle-class mean in a country, which is in such a deep crisis? They are rather people with high cultural capital, often aged 25-50, and mostly living in urban settings. So, no surprises. Politically the people who vote Podemos, are mostly those who are in-between the social democrats and the United Left, of course, also people

from the Popular party, and people from UPID.

AL: We saw that during last month Podemos has lost a bit of support? Is it because of the new party Ciudadanos?

JP: Ciudadanos is becoming a political actor competing mainly with the People's Party, the center-right party, so mostly the people supporting them are those, who turned away from the People's Party, also Ciudadanos are competing with Podemos for the center right voters, which is not the majority of Podemos voters.

AL: What kind of prognosis can you make for the future of Podemos?

JP: The future of the movement is still very unclear. At present we are in a contradictory situation, because we can see that the social movements are focused on the electoral perspective, they are waiting for the results of the next election. And I see it as a big problem, because the results of the electoral success are quite limited, as we can actually see in the case of Greece.

But at the same time, the future of the story I am telling you will depend to a large extent on the local and regional elections, which are quickly approaching. The candidates, who will win seats in Madrid and Barcelona can move Podemos away from what we have now, to a virtual party with a strong leadership, or alternatively to a more pluralistic leadership model and an activist kind of a party.

[1] Original publication in [LeftEast](#).