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# 'I want my sovereignty back!' A comparative analysis of the populist discourses of Podemos, the 5 Star Movement, the FN and UKIP during the economic and migration crises

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**ABSTRACT**

The multiple crises that the EU has faced over the last decade have provided fertile ground for the emergence of new political movements, often labelled as 'anti-system', 'populist' and 'Eurosceptics'. One defining characteristic of these parties is their claim to represent 'the people' and their reliance on the idea of sovereignty. This article aims at examining how these populist parties have framed sovereignty in relation to the economic and migration crises. It argues that the binary opposition between EU integration and national sovereignty does not tell the whole story, and that the populist upsurge reflects instead competing versions of sovereignty at the national level. To test this hypothesis, we conduct a corpus-based analysis of the discourse of four leading populist parties between 2012 and 2017: the Front National, the UK Independence Party, the Movimento cinque Stelle and Podemos.

## Introduction

Europe has faced multiple political crises over the past decade. The sovereign debt crisis affected members of the Eurozone in the aftermath of the US financial crisis. This crisis as well as the austerity measures deployed to face it led to a deep economic recession, especially in Southern Europe. In 2015, as a result of increased politicisation, the migratory flows revealed the deep divide among member states on migration management. Since then, the so-called migration crisis has been one of the main challenges for both national governments and the EU alike. Furthermore, since the Brexit referendum in June 2016, the EU is in the midst of an existential crisis, with growing uncertainties about future developments of European integration. This multidimensional crisis is happening against the backdrop of a democratic malaise, as the basic principles of the representative process are profoundly questioned and public disaffection with political elites is structural (Dalton 2004; Bickerton, Hodson, and Puetter 2015).

This context has provided fertile ground for the emergence of new political movements as well as the mainstreaming of political parties that were previously confined to the margins of their national political systems (Brack and Startin 2015). These political

challengers – usually labelled 'Eurosceptics' and 'populists' – are found on both sides of the political spectrum and can articulate various ideological repertoires, ranging from the xenophobic, anti-migration stances (*Front National*, PVV) to the egalitarian, anti-austerity positions (Podemos, Syriza, *La France Insoumise*), as well as more ambiguous stances (*Movimento Cinque Stelle*). Their success was particularly spectacular in the debtor States on the periphery of the European economic space, with for instance two populist parties in a governing coalition in Italy since June 2018 and Syriza in power between 2015 and 2019. However, the success of the FPÖ in Austria (see Coman and Leconte in this issue) and the historic score of the AfD in the German legislative elections have shown that this trend is not limited to the Southern countries. These parties share a common opposition on the current European political system albeit for different reasons. They have managed to thrive in a context marked by the deep transformation of political systems and they have successfully mobilized dissatisfied citizens.

Despite their success (see Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2018 for an overview), these actors' understanding of sovereignty and the claims they make are largely under-researched within EU studies. The academic debate continues to focus on the conflict between Eurosceptics and pro-integration actors and to rely on the traditional opposition between the nation state and the EU, arguing that more European integration implies less national sovereignty and that any resistance to this process leads to a reassertion of national sovereignty (for a recent exception see Jabko and Luhman 2019). This traditional view of sovereignty opposed to the 'ever closer union' remains the dominant framework for understanding the contemporary crisis of EU integration and feeds fears about a populist Eurosceptic wave in Europe.

However, while new theoretical advances in EU studies challenge this narrative, recent research on populist and Eurosceptic parties demonstrates the heterogeneity of their stances towards the EU and suggests that Euroscepticism is perhaps best understood as a new dimension of national political space (Coman 2012; Brack 2018; Zeitlin et al. 2019). Although the opposition between supranationalism and national sovereignty (what Hutter, Grande, and Kriesi 2016 call the 'sovereignty dimension') is undoubtedly a structuring dimension in EU politics, we argue, along with the other articles in this issue, that this binary opposition does not tell the whole story. The populist upsurge does not merely epitomise a conflict between the national and the supranational levels but also reflects the existence of competing understandings of sovereignty.

This article examines the meanings that populist political parties attribute to sovereignty in the wake of the economic and migration crises. It seeks to provide a more in-depth understanding of the ongoing conflicts over the very meaning of sovereignty in contemporary European politics. To do so, we conduct a comparative analysis of four Western European political parties who have thrived in recent years: UKIP, National Front (FN), Podemos and Five Star Movement (M5S). These parties share a common populist and Eurosceptic stance but are on opposing sides of the ideological spectrum (M5S being an ambivalent case). Tensions between different types of sovereignty, in particular between popular and national sovereignty, should therefore diverge depending on their ideology.

## Crises, populist parties and sovereignty issues within the EU

The emergence and success of radical and populist parties in the EU is far from new. In the 1990's especially when the Maastricht Treaty opened the Pandora box of sovereignty, new parties emerged challenging European integration. Since then, with the development of the Economic and Monetary Union, the EU has moved far beyond the traditional conception of sovereignty. While political elites ratified the treaty revisions that allowed such a transfer of power, the path towards 'an ever closer union' unfolded without an in-depth citizen debate or consensus on the scope of these sovereignty shifts. Governments managed their newly 'shared sovereignty' without fully admitting to their domestic audience how controlled their autonomy had become (Wallace 1999). In contrast, over the past decade, various crises have shown how constraining the European level of governance can be while the sense of solidarity, identity and loyalty remains rooted in the nation state. The responses to these crises and the current disillusion with mainstream politics have fuelled the success of radical and populist parties across the political spectrum (Caiani 2018). They have created a new political space for right-wing and left-wing populist Eurosceptics, as European societies have come to see EU membership as a restriction on national sovereignty and democratic representation (Gomez- Reino and Plaza Colodro 2018).

These political movements appear as reactions to the crises of the current ordoliberal-inspired structure of European integration. At the functional level, European integration involves the primacy of the market and of its logic or, as Crespy puts it (2016), 'integration through marketization'. It occurs through the rise of technocratic organs and the development of a depoliticized narrative that exalts the rationality of supply-side economic policies and depicts globalization as an inexorable constraint while the EU acts as a positive external pressure (Borriello 2017). At the spatial level, European integration has contributed to a reorganization of decision-making with transfers of power to the supranational level together with a deep transformation of domestic structures, such as the ascendency of executives over legislatures and the growing detachment of national elites from society (Bickerton, Hodson, and Puetter 2015; Mair 2013).

Against this backdrop, the rise of populist and Eurosceptic parties appears in Laclauian terms as the advent of a populist moment, or, to put it differently, the re-articulation of frustrated social demands into a dichotomous opposition between 'the people' and 'the establishment' (Laclau 2005).[1] Populism has attracted much attention over the last two decades and the context of crisis as well as the success of these parties has triggered a renewed interest from scholars (a.o. Kriesi 2014; Mudde 2004; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2018; Taggart 2000). This literature shows that the reference to the people and to popular sovereignty as well as their opposition to the elite and the status quo are key characteristics of populist discourses. Similarly, research on party-based Euroscepticism demonstrates that the protection of national sovereignty is central in the opposition of Eurosceptic parties to the EU and that nationalism is the common denominator between left-wing and right-wing Euroscepticisms (Halikiopoulou, Nanou, and Vasilopoulou 2012). It has also explored the relation between populism and Euroscepticism, but so far, there is very little empirical research on the meanings given to sovereignty by populist and Eurosceptic actors in the EU context (apart from Laycok 2005; Wellings and Vines 2016). While this concept is central in their discourses,

we know little about what they mean when using it and on how they deal with the tensions between different dimensions of sovereignty, especially between popular and national sovereignty.

Whereas the rise of populist and Eurosceptic parties has traditionally, in the EU context, been seen as an opposition between national sovereignty and supranationalism, this paper contends that this binary conflict is not sufficient to understand the current political situation. The content of the opposition between the establishment and its challengers can vary, as it always consists of a specific combination of different conceptions of sovereignty. This issue's introduction presented four conceptions of sovereignty which may be in tension with each other: national, supranational, popular, and parliamentary sovereignties.

In times of crises, *national sovereignty* is put into jeopardy as the traditional national freedom of choice is replaced by a new form of statehood with diminished autonomy (Bickerton 2012). National sovereignty is often mobilized by Eurosceptic and populist parties as an argument against European integration, although they might do it for different reasons – whereas the populist radical left tends to oppose economic liberalization and the opening up of borders as threats to social rights, the populist radical right points out threats to national identity differentiate between the nation's own people and the 'cultural other'. These parties usually challenge *supranational sovereignty*, that is the idea of a 'shared' or 'pooled' sovereignty' (Wallace 1999). Populist discourses with references to *popular sovereignty* and the will of the people as the legitimating principle of any democratic polity abound. *Popular sovereignty* is consubstantial to the very nature of populism, whose core feature is the construction of 'the people' as a large powerless group and the claim to represent it against 'the elite', depicted as a small and powerful group that frustrates the people's legitimate demands (De Cleen 2019). Populist parties argue that this principle is undermined by the increasing importance of non-elected bodies in decision-making processes and the adoption of unpopular austerity measures by national governments. Finally, *parliamentary sovereignty* supposes the autonomy of parliaments in participating in the decision-making processes and in controlling the executives in the name of the principles of election and representation (it can then be seen as conflicting with popular sovereignty). In some countries like the UK, parliamentary sovereignty is key to understanding the debates on EU integration and national identity (Bogdanor 2016). But elsewhere as well, the empowerment of executive bodies at the expenses of the legislative branch due to European integration has further reduced democratic accountability at the national level (Bellamy and Kröger 2014; Crum 2013).

This article examines how populist parties have articulated these four meanings of sovereignty in their discourses during the economic and migration crises. We do so through an analysis of the discourse of the four political parties under study. We expect that their conceptions of sovereignty involve a complex entanglement of the functional and spatial dimensions, thus mirroring the complexity of the 'system' they pit themselves against. We argue that current conflicts within the European political space are much more complicated than a mere opposition between 'more integration' *versus* 'national retrenchment', and that these political challengers may articulate claims about the role of the people, of national parliaments in the decision-making processes, the autonomy of nation states, as well as about the institutional balance at the European

level itself. More precisely, we hypothesize that these parties, although at opposing ends of the political spectrum, have expressed their opposition to the EU and to the establishment as a form of dispossession of sovereignty. However, given the differences in national context and ideological repertoire, they articulate different conceptions of sovereignty, depending on whether they focus their opposition on the functional dimension of the system they are challenging (the primacy of the market) or on the spatial organisation of power (executive vs. legislatures/national vs. supranational). More precisely, we can expect right-wing populist parties to stress a vision of sovereignty that combines respatializing power with nationalism, i.e. a vision where nation and state should be congruent.

## Methodology and case selection

This research focuses on a comparison of four political parties: UKIP, the FN, Podemos and the M5S. The cases have been selected following two main criteria.

First, the national contexts should meet certain conditions, among which an important disruption of the party system by a populist challenger and a strong salience of the economic and/or migration crisis. Moreover, in order for our argument to be more generalizable, it was necessary not to limit our research to the 'EU periphery', where the impact of the crises was arguably harsher, but to include 'core' countries as well. The four countries we selected fully meet these conditions. Firstly, this is epitomised by the increasing influence of UKIP's agenda on the British political system (this reached its apex with the organisation of the Brexit referendum), the reinforcement of the FN in the past decade (culminating in the presence of Marine Le Pen in the second round of the presidential election), the transformation of the Spanish political system (from a bipartisan confrontation to a four-party system in a few years) and the progressive strengthening of M5S within Italy's political landscape up to its victory in the 2018 legislative elections.

Secondly, we compare political parties that cover the entire ideological spectrum to shed light on the diversity and complexity of the conceptions of sovereignty that are articulated by populist actors. First, Podemos can be situated on the radical left and represents a reflexive application of populism (Kioupkiolis 2016). Second, although different in their economic stances, both UKIP and the FN can be categorised as populist radical right parties (Brack 2015). Finally, the M5S embodies a middle ground between those two positions, being a catch-all populist party characterised by strong ideological indeterminacy (Mazzolini and Borriello 2017).

To compare the conceptions of sovereignty articulated by these four political parties, we chose to analyse their discourse on economic and migration issues, during two successive periods: 2012–2014, when we see the effects of the fast-burning phase of the Eurocrisis in the member states (Coman 2018) and 2015–2017, when migration issues were most salient, mainly due to the Syrian refugee crisis[2]. In each of these periods, the speeches have been selected based on the presence of at least one of the following key words: 'crisis', 'economy', 'euro', 'austerity', 'migration', 'asylum", 'border', 'Schengen'. Moreover, we have selected different types of discourses to avoid any bias because of a focus on a specific discursive practice: within the two periods under scrutiny, we have selected the interviews, press conferences and articles released on their websites, their

**Table 1.** General lexicometric characteristics of the corpus.

|  | PODEMOS | M5S | FN | UKIP |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Number of texts | 146 | 247 | 291 | 101 |
| Number of occurrences | 157475 | 112161 | 89419 | 36978 |
| Number of terms | 9472 | 8533 | 6298 | 3659 |
| Number of hapaxes | 4329 | 3712 | 2648 | 1496 |
| Average occurrences per text | 1078.60 | 454.09 | 307.28 | 366.12 |

manifestos for national and European elections, as well as their speeches and parliamentary questions in the EP. In total the corpus includes 785 texts, distributed as follows (Table1):

To analyse this large corpus of texts, we combine the main lexicography tools offered by the software *Iramuteq*: counting of frequencies, factor analysis, concordance and co-occurrence analysis.

The first two types of analyses are essentially of an exploratory nature. First, the counting of frequencies provides aggregate information about the corpus, as well as some elements of comparison between political parties. Within the framework of this analysis, we pay particular attention to the numerical importance of the two main keywords, 'sovereignty' and 'sovereign', as well as of words referring to political institutions and concepts ('parliament', 'referendum', 'nation', 'democracy', 'people', etc.) that might be related to the different conceptions of sovereignty. Second, we conduct a factor analysis that provides, for each political party, an inductive classification of the vocabulary into several clusters based on word proximity, which allows us to compare the main themes addressed by each party. Moreover, identifying the cluster(s) in which the terms 'sovereign' and 'sovereignty' appear gives us a preliminary insight into their surrounding lexicon.

The final two steps of analysis focus on systematically replacing the two main keywords ('sovereignty' and 'sovereign') in their context of use. This is the most important part of the analysis, considering that the meaning of words is fundamentally relational and depends, therefore, on the lexicon they are associated with (Bonnafous and Tournier 1995). On the one hand, we analyse the co-occurrences indexes of the most relevant terms and the most frequent 'repeated segments' (Salem 1988) of texts (such as 'popular sovereignty') in order to identify recurrent associations between specific terms (e.g. sovereignty and democracy). On the other hand, we conduct a concordance analysis, i.e. a systematic and qualitative analysis of the sentences in which the keywords appear.

## Framing sovereignty in populist discourse: corpus-based evidence

### 1. Preliminary exploration of the parties' discourses on sovereignty

A quick look at the table of frequencies confirms the importance of the concept of sovereignty for the four parties under study: the (relative) frequencies of use of 'sovereignty' and 'sovereign' are remarkable and rank them respectively among the 300 and 1000 most frequently used terms in each party's discourse (the nominal form being always more frequently used than the adjectival one). Moreover, the four parties use those terms in similar proportions, except for the FN, which displays a significantly greater number of occurrences: 'sovereignty' is the 29th most frequently cited term in
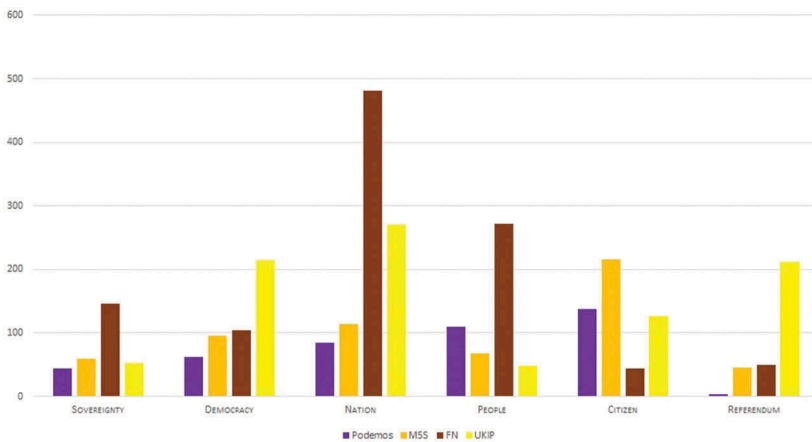
**Graph 1.** Relative frequencies (/100.000 words) of the lemmas closely relaated to the concept of sovereignty.

its discourse, and its relative frequency of use of 'sovereignty' and 'sovereign' (146) amounts almost to the sum of the relative frequencies of the other three parties (156).

Moreover, the exploration of the table of frequencies also reveals the frequent use that the four parties make of other lemmas[3] that might be related to the concept of sovereignty, such as: 'DEMOCRACY', 'NATION', 'PEOPLE', 'CITIZEN' and 'REFERENDUM' (Graph 1). However, there are considerable differences between parties. The use of 'NATION', unsurprisingly, is much more widespread on the right side of the political spectrum. Its frequencies of use perfectly reflect the range of ideological positions in our sample: Podemos (85), M5S (114), UKIP (270) and FN (481). Its massive overrepresentation in the FN's discourse is mainly due to the high presence of the adjective 'national' (347), which cannot be merely reduced to the frequent mention of the name of the political party itself within the discourse, since the segment 'front national' is repeated 'only' 118 times. Therefore, this number truly indicates a greater concern for the concept of nation, further confirmed by the presence of 'PATRIE' in the French party's discourse (52), compared to M5S (10), Podemos (2) and UKIP (0). Similarly, the pattern of 'REFERENDUM' refers to national contexts: while its massive presence in UKIP's discourse (211) is obviously related to the salience of the Brexit debate, its quasi-absence from Podemos' discourse (4) might be related to the slippery nature of the regional issues in Spain, and its somewhat intermediary use in M5S's (46) and FN's (50) discourse might be due to occasional references to Brexit, to the Greek referendum and to a possible exit from the Eurozone.

The factor analysis provides other relevant insights in the discourse of the four political parties (Graph 2). The analysis has generated a different number of classes for each of them, respectively, three (UKIP), five (Podemos and FN) and six (M5S). The general content of the classes barely varies from one corpus to another, as it always has something to do with migration, economy, or democracy and its crisis. However, the balance between migration and economic themes significantly differs depending on the position of the party on the ideological spectrum: the more a party is on the right, the
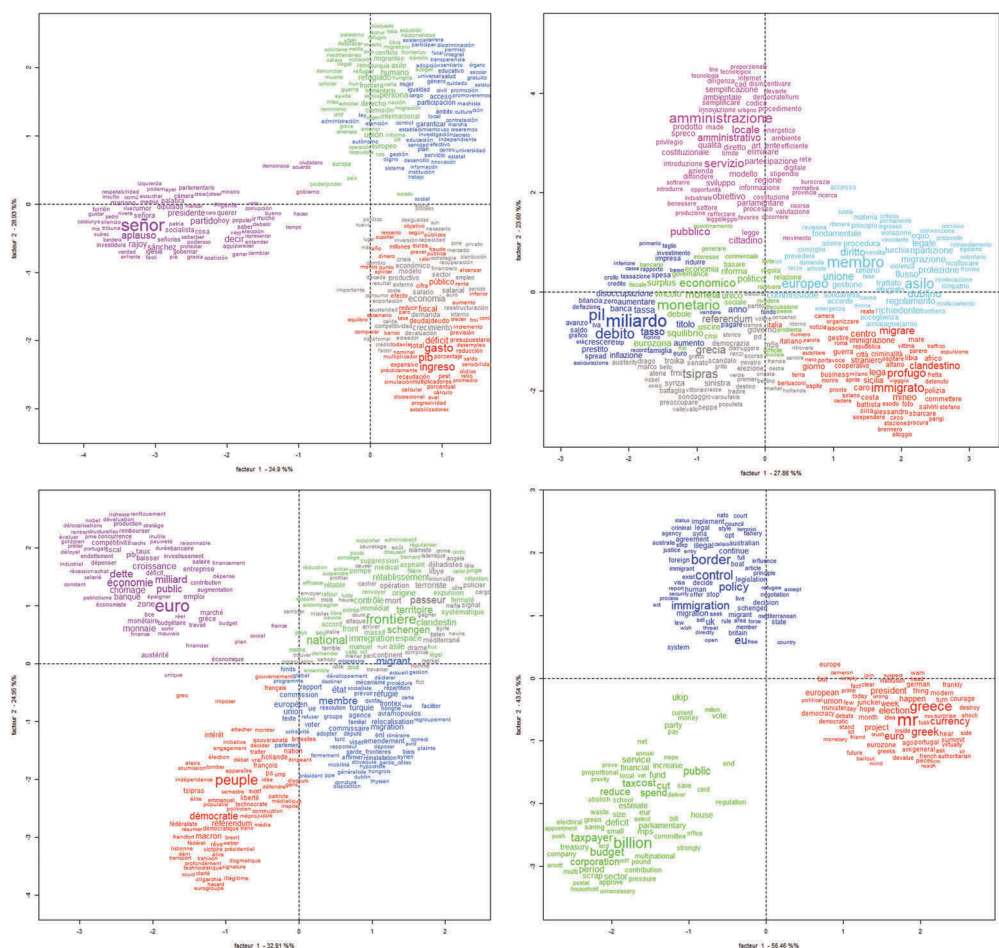
**Graph 2.** Representation on a two-dimensional space of the vocabulary categories generated by the factor analysis. (from the upper-left corner to the lower-right corner: Podemos, M5S, FN and UKIP) .

more it will focus on migration rather than on the economy, and vice versa. In that respect, the share of vocabulary classified under these categories is telling. While migration and economic issues represent respectively 54% and 24% of the vocabulary classified for the FN, the first category shrinks as we move towards the left: 40-21% (UKIP), 37-33% (M5S), and 20-38% (Podemos).

More importantly, 'sovereignty' is related to different categories of vocabulary depending on the party under consideration. In the FN's discourse, it is not specifically related to migration and economic issues; it rather appears in a general category that seems related to their anti-systemic stance, both at the national and European levels (red class on Graph 2). Among the most representative terms of that class, we find for instance 'people', 'democracy', 'nation', 'referendum', 'Macron', 'PS', 'UMP', 'technocrat-(ic)', 'Brussels', 'federalist', etc. At first glance, its conception of sovereignty appears as a concept transversal of its discourse, as it more exactly supports the party's general

conception of politics itself. Besides, this finding is consistent with the relatively higher salience of 'SOVEREIGNTY' compared to the other parties.

For the M5S, SOVEREIGNTY AND SOVEREIGN are clearly connected to economic issues. They appear in the third class (green one on Graph 2) that relates to the Eurozone crisis, as shown by the presence of words such as 'monetary', 'economic', 'currency', 'Eurozone', 'unbalance', 'surplus', 'constraint', 'austerity' and 'crisis' among the most representative terms of the class.

As for UKIP, only the adjectival form 'sovereign' appears in the classification, where it seems to be related to migration (blue class on Graph 2). Indeed, the most representative words of this class are 'border', 'control', 'EU', 'immigration', 'illegal', 'migrant', 'Syria', 'stop, 'boat', 'Schengen', etc. It is also within this category of vocabulary that we find the term 'Brexit'.

Finally, the term 'sovereignty' in Podemos' discourse appears in the class of deictic vocabulary[4] ('sir', 'party', 'Rajoy', 'president', 'today', 'chamber', etc.) and to domestic politics ('govern', 'investiture', 'PP', 'corruption', 'socialist', 'election', 'government', 'candidature', etc.) (purple class on Graph 2). This might indicate that the theme of sovereignty is related to the domestic political struggle of the party against what it sees as a collusion between socialist and conservative politicians, for which it uses the term 'turnismo'[5] (this term being also strongly represented in that class). However, since only 35 percent of the occurrences of "sovereignty" are categorised in this class, the relation to this aspect of domestic politics might not completely exhaust the meaning of the term in Podemos' discourse.

## 2. Which sovereignty in populist parties' discourses?

The parties under study mobilise all four types of sovereignty in their discourses during the economic and migration crises. However, they emphasize different kinds of sovereignty and attach various meanings to this concept. In general, whereas popular and national sovereignty are mentioned and developed more than supranational and parliamentary sovereignty, each party emphasizes a particular type of sovereignty. Table 2 shows that Podemos stresses the concept of popular sovereignty and M5S focuses mainly on economic sovereignty, while the FN and UKIP are mostly concerned with national sovereignty. However, the FN has also the greatest variety (it concentrates on national sovereignty but also on economic and popular sovereignty), which is consistent with the more central status of sovereignty within its discourse.

**Table 2.** Repeated segments of texts including the word 'sovereignty'.

| | |
|---|---|
| Podemos | Soberanía popular (13) · Soberanía alimentaria (4) · Soberanía economica (3) · Soberanía nacional (2) · Soberanía de los pueblos (1) · Soberanía de Europa (1) |
| M5S | Sovranità monetaria (17) · Sovranità nazionale (4) · Sovranità economica (4) · Sovranità monetaria e parlamentare (1) · Sovranità fiscale e monetaria (1) · Sovranità popolare (1) · Sovranità politica (1) |
| FN | Souveraineté(s) nationale(s) (17) · Souveraineté des Etats (14) · Souveraineté du/des peuple(s) (7) · Souveraineté monétaire (7) · Souveraineté économique (6) · Souveraineté territoriale (4) · Souveraineté politique (3) · Souveraineté de la France (3) · Souveraineté(s) populaire(s) (2) · Souveraineté limitée (2) · Souveraineté des nations (2) · Souveraineté budgétaire (2) · Souveraineté financière (1) · Souveraineté du peuple français (1) |
| UKIP | National sovereignty (5) · British tax sovereignty (1) · UK maritime sovereignty (1) · Greek sovereignty (1) |

## Popular sovereignty vs. its enemies

Unsurprisingly, popular sovereignty features as a key issue for populist parties except for UKIP. They broadly conceive popular sovereignty in its Rousseauist acceptation of self-determination and *popular control* over the main political decisions, which are legitimate only insofar as the people have taken part in their elaboration. They claim that the people have been dispossessed of their sovereignty (whether by the EU, globalisation and/or private interests) with the complicity of national political elites. Their proclaimed objective is therefore to regain this lost sovereignty: they constantly reassert this priority, using expressions of conflict inspired by the metaphor of war: sovereignty is 'under attack/assault', 'sequestred, 'threatened' and 'overstepped', and the people need to 'win it back'[6].

Regardless of how best to recover popular control, the FN, Podemos and M5S parties share a common concern for it, which is consistent with the populist logic they deploy. Interestingly, they sometimes *explicitly* depict this claim for sovereignty as part of a new cleavage that structures European politics, with on the one hand globalization, the pressure from the market and the EU as the Trojan horse of globalization and on the other hand, the defence of (popular) sovereignty. The FN emphasizes the cleavage between 'patriots' and 'globalists' (see also Ivaldi and al. 2017), while the M5S speaks of an opposition between 'sovereignty' and 'negative internationalism':

> "Two antagonistic worldviews are fighting: on one hand, the support for globalism and the process of globalised uniformization, on the other hand the defence of identities and sovereignties, of peoples and nations." (FN, Press statement, 10/07/2015)

> "The challenge of the future is between sovereignty and negative internationalism, which is eroding most of the social rights and social achievements obtained at the national level during the past years. The concept of sovereignty, as Jacques Sapir explained very well in several recent articles, if we really want to locate it ideologically at all, is to be located on the "left", unless the Italian regime's media consider that even the French Revolution was a "right-wing" historical process. In this great battle between sovereignty and negative internationalism, the traditional "left" has betrayed its own historical electoral basis and thus it is necessary that other actors, post-ideological, put on the helmet and step down into the trench." (M5S, Beppe Grillo's Blog, 14/06/2014)

Moreover, these parties do not only emphasize the sovereignty of the people as a *demos*, but point out that this loss of control is detrimental to the people-as-*underdog* (Stavrakakis 2017), i.e. to the economic conditions and social rights of ordinary people. To them, sovereignty is at least partially related to prosperity and economic development, which the EU is hindering. We find the same arguments in the opinions of these three parties when they mention popular sovereignty: the EU is presented as a political system where technocrats, banks, and lobbies control the economy and impose austerity against the will of the people.

> "If France has to make efforts, it should do so to recover its power and prosperity, i.e. recover its economic, budgetary and monetary sovereignty and not to comply to austerity and continuous deprivation imposed by the EU" (FN, Press statement, 29/11/2014)

> "By now, the EU is perceived as a system of European power in which technocrats, lobbies and well-off elites condition the decision-making process and, thereby, dismantle the

conquests of the Welfare State, foster the privatisations and the deregulation of the labour market, increase poverty and, finally, social inequalities.' (M5S, EP debate, 14/09/2016)

"[…] As a consequence, the European periphery is living a nightmare engendered by the monster that the sleep of reason of European construction has produced. It did get rid of its economic sovereignty, delivering most of the political instruments to a Europe that governs for interests that get each time closer to the interests of the global economic and financial elites". (Podemos, article, 18/082015)

Although they share some common arguments, there are key differences between these three parties' conceptions of popular sovereignty, due to their national contexts and ideologies. These differences mostly deal with the definition of 'the people' itself and the solutions to recover sovereignty.

First, given the harshness of the economic crisis and the subsequent austerity measures in Spain and Italy, Podemos and the M5S connect popular sovereignty with the need to recover the dignity of the people after the humiliation endured because of the EU's austerity programmes. Humiliation and dignity are recurrent in those parties' discourses: the M5S considers for instance that 'freedom, sovereignty, democracy and dignity are never negotiable for a people' (28/06/2015), whereas Podemos even speaks of its commitment to defend the 'sovereign dignity' of its country in the face of external powers (29/10/2016).

Second, the FN, Podemos and the M5S have different conceptions of the people itself, ranging from the most 'exclusionary' to the most 'inclusionary' (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013). The FN defines it in cultural and identity terms: it mostly connects popular sovereignty with the idea of an identity of the French people which must be preserved against European integration and 'uniformisation'. On the contrary, Podemos proposes a more inclusive and political definition of the people (conceived as being 'plurinational') and explicitly differentiates itself from the radical right by connecting sovereignty with social justice, not identity. For this party, it is crucial to advance a republican agenda that reconnects citizens with legislative institutions and re-establishes the social pact that has been broken by the elites. Between those two positions, M5S stresses a moral conception of 'the good people' betrayed by its own elites, without defining it in cultural or political terms.

Finally, although these parties share the same view on the need to regain political control over economic decisions, they strongly differ over the best way to do so in spatial and procedural terms. The solutions they put forward depend on the extent to which they equate the people and the nation (thus popular and national sovereignty) and on whether they consider that the will of the people should be expressed directly or through representation. These dimensions shall be analysed in the following sections.

UKIP for its part does not develop a strong narrative around popular sovereignty *per se*, as it defines the need to take back control strictly in national terms and in relation to migrant inflows. There are only a few exceptions to this: UKIP sometimes refers to the situation in Spain and Greece to denounce the way in which the 'undemocratic EU' takes control out of people's lives and does not respect the people's will. It also refers to the UK's economic situation, but mainly in terms of a national struggle for 'tax sovereignty' and 'maritime sovereignty'.

## National sovereignty and opposition to the EU

Populist and Eurosceptic parties do not make claims solely about popular control over decisional processes, but also about the need to defend or regain the sovereign power of the nation – state, understood as a territorially and/or culturally bounded entity. Indeed, all four parties oppose the EU as a process that undermines national sovereignty. However, they give different meanings to the idea of national sovereignty, depending on how they relate it to economic and migration issues and the extent to which they see the nation-state as the only possible path to regain political control.

The M5S and FN refer to national sovereignty in relation to economic and monetary issues in ways that are comparable although different. By contrast, Podemos barely mentions national sovereignty and when it does, it advocates for international or European alliances to recover economic sovereignty rather than for national retrenchment. Indeed, it is the only party that explicitly states that it would not consider an exit of the Eurozone and whose references to supranational sovereignty are positive. Because the UK is not part of the Eurozone, UKIP never refers directly to 'monetary sovereignty' and mentions the Euro only once in relation to sovereignty, expressing unambiguous support for European nations leaving the common currency.

For M5S, national sovereignty refers to monetary (and economic) sovereignty, which it argues has been given away to the EU by national elites without anything in exchange. The intertwining of functional (re-politicizing the markets) and spatial (re-nationalizing politics) logics in its discourse is blatant: one of stated objectives in its 2018 electoral manifesto was to 'bring sovereignty, which has moved to the markets, back within the nation-states, since it is the law that must prevail over the economy rather than the opposite'. The party concentrates all its criticism on the Euro, accused of holding down Italian competitiveness and of fuelling the crisis the country is facing. M5S stance on the solutions to this crisis is (notoriously) ambiguous. It calls for a new vision for Europe, based on solidarity and a true community in which Italy would negotiate the terms of its involvement (renegotiating the national debt, abolishing the Fiscal Compact, establishing Eurobonds, etc.). But it presents the referendum as the best tool to regain the country's sovereignty: the only possible way to democratize the EU is to let the people decide, be it on the membership to the Eurozone or on any treaty reform.

This is very similar to the discourses of the FN who equates the Euro with an absolute loss of national sovereignty and blames the common currency for French economic problems. The party speaks of a 'limited' economic, monetary and budgetary sovereignty due to European integration, which gives free rein to the forces of the market. But again, the EU is not the only culprit, since economic national sovereignty has been 'transferred by the UMPS to Brussels', to such an extent that 'it is now the European Commission which controls the actions of the government' (Press statement, M. Le Pen, 04/03/2015). These elements show that the FN has adjusted its priorities to exploit the new opportunities created by the economic crisis (Pirro and Van Kessel 2017). It has increasingly emphasised socio-economic issues, and sometimes calls for a Euro-exit, embedded in a more general claim to restore national sovereignty (Ivaldi 2018). However, the FN is more radical in its stances towards Europe than the M5S: it calls for a Europe of sovereign nations, rather than for a possible reform of European economic governance.

Moreover, there is a key difference between populist parties in the solutions they put forward to recover their country's economic sovereignty. While Podemos and the M5S explicitly connect regaining economic and monetary sovereignty to demand-side Keynesian policies and the possibility of running budget deficits to finance social spending, the FN is concerned with economic protectionism and lower taxes, especially for SME against the 'hypertaxation' promoted by Brussels (a claim similar to UKIP although the latter is not protectionist bur rather oriented towards trade).

> "The EU is about nothing more than the erosion of national sovereignty and the centralisation of powers in Brussels. [...] At the centre of this political project is an economic anomaly, the euro. This currency never was – and never will be – an economically-sound project. It was a political project and not an economic project. While this may make the federalists here feel fluffy and warm, it certainly does not make the people of Europe feel fluffy and warm as they are entering into an economic crisis. For the stifling of Europe's competitiveness and the euro as the common disease, the only medicine with a hope of curing Europe is a euro exit and a return to the original currencies." (UKIP, EP debate, 11/11/2015)

> "Actually, we are in a situation where the plane has no pilot. The automatic pilot is engaged, and it is losing altitude. The scenario of jumping off [the plane] is viable, but we do not consider it. First of all, our idea is to contribute, in Europe, to blow out the fire and then to take the control of the plane. The task is difficult, but we think that the scenario of jumping off is worse and we do not consider it, as it is possible and desirable to go on in a process of debt restructuration. This is the best scenario." (Podemos, interview, 05/03/2015)

> "In order to guide the exit from the Euro, a Minister of sovereignties will have to deal technically and juridically with the renegotiation of Treaties and the recovery of our national sovereignty in all the fields in which it has disappeared, notably in the monetary field. [...] The European cooperation will enable to scrutinize, during the negotiations, all the possible options to re-establish the Member States' monetary sovereignty." (FN, Political program, 2012)

> "If it was not possible to reach acceptable compromises in this direction [the reform of European economic governance], we believe it is indispensable to give the states their sovereignty back in the economic and monetary field." (M5S, Political program, 2018)

Furthermore, the GAL/TAN cleavage (Hooghe, Marks, and Wilson 2002) also determines the parties' understanding of national sovereignty. Indeed, while Podemos does not mention sovereignty at all within the context of the migration crisis – which it frames solely in humanitarian terms – the two radical right parties strongly focus on sovereignty and immigration, with claims of 'political sovereignty' or 'territorial sovereignty'. Both the FN and UKIP defend a Westphalian view of sovereignty, internally and externally (Krasner 1999). Through their opposition to the idea of free movement, the reform of Frontex (see the Delheixe and Duez paper in this issue) and the migrants resettlement plans of the EU, they fight against the delegation of power to any external authority and consider that each nation-state should maintain its sovereignty over its territory and domestic affairs. Similarly, UKIP advocated for a Brexit to recover the country's sovereignty in order to control its borders and limit migration flows. But it also develops claims regarding trade policy in which it defends a Westphalian conception on sovereignty: in UKIP's view, sovereignty cannot be shared or pooled as a country must have the sole right to frame its foreign and trade policy. Finally, M5S is in an in-between position. It connects sovereignty and immigration only once in the discourses studied

here but it clearly criticizes the reform of Frontex which it sees as a political interference in domestic politics.

> "In the face of the immigrationist madness of the Brussels technocrats, it is time to restore the national sovereignty of France as soon as possible by suspending the application of the Schengen agreements. It is essential for the safety of our compatriots, for the respect for our identity and the sustainability of our social model." (FN, Press statement, 14/02/2017)

> "Britain must have full control of immigration and asylum policies, and border control. We must be not be bound by any freedom of movement obligation, and we must be free to set and meet our own annual migration targets. The UK's full maritime sovereignty must be restored and we must have control of our maritime exclusive economic zone, which stretches 200 miles off the coast or to the half-way point between the UK and neighbouring countries. There must be no constraints on our fishing fleet other than those decided upon by the UK parliament. The UK must retake its seat on the World Trade Organisation and resume its sovereign right to sign trade agreements with other entities or supra-national bodies. We must have full rights to set our own tariff and non-tariff barriers consistent with WTO rules, and we must have left both the EU single market and the customs union." (UKIP programme, 2017)

> "Following the ruinous EU migration policies, they want to give more power to the Frontex agency in order to defend the European fortress and the Schengen space. The main criticism towards the proposal is the excessive intrusion into the Member States' sovereignty. [...] We believe these powers are excessive and we want any intervention on the territory of a Member State to be subordinated to its prior approval and/or explicit request." (M5S, EP debate, 06/07/2016)

### Parliamentary sovereignty against or within the EU

Parliamentary sovereignty is the type of sovereignty mentioned least in the four parties' discourses. As such, given the reluctance of populists towards representative democracy, this relative silence is not very surprising. However, there are here again differences between the four parties.

While the FN does not mention parliamentary sovereignty explicitly and considers the EP an accomplice in the limitation of France's national sovereignty, the M5S emphasizes the tools of direct democracy such as the referendum rather than parliamentary sovereignty.

The cases of UKIP and Podemos are quite different. In the UK, since the Glorious Revolution of 1688, the sovereignty of parliament lies at the heart of the constitution. The Parliament is the 'sovereign' law-maker and must not be constrained by higher laws (Loveland 1996). This understanding of sovereignty has been a thorn in the relationship between the UK and the European integration process since it clashes with the structure of the European political system as well as with the principle of primacy of EU law. Although UKIP does not refer to parliamentary sovereignty often, it still appears clearly in its discourse as it claims that the country should leave the EU to restore control over law-making. The only true sovereignty lies in the national parliament, which 'must resume its supremacy of law-making without restriction' (UKIP programme 2017).

In contrast, Podemos advocates for restoring parliamentary sovereignty at both levels. Parliaments embody popular sovereignty and the linkage between citizens and representative institutions must be improved to restore the people's trust in democratic politics. The party remains very critical of the current situation. At the national level, the

reform of the Constitution (with the amendment of article 135) challenged the country's sovereignty as it bypassed the parliament and imposed governmental measures that go against the interests of citizens. European integration entails the 'expropriation' of popular sovereignty, weakens parliaments and transforms elected representatives into casts. This loss of sovereignty has not be compensated at the EU level where there is a lack of locus for democratic representation. Therefore, Podemos opposes the EU as it is and aims to replace it with a democratic Europe, founded on sovereignty and social rights in which the EP has more power and can represent the sovereignty of the EU.

> "Unless we leave, our democracy, our law-making powers and our sovereignty will continue to be salamisliced away by the EU. Genuine reform is impossible." (UKIP programme 2015)

> "I was surprised by what you said about the EU, about the fact that article 135 is good, this renouncement to the sovereignty of the States of the Union that has not been properly replaced by spaces of democratic representation in Europe, where the only space of democratic representation is the European Parliament, which is at best a co-legislative assembly." (Podemos, Parliamentary debate, 02/09/2016)

> "But there is another way, there are alternatives to the policies of impoverishment and to the seizure of sovereignty. This [European] Parliament, in this critical time for Europe, must rise to the challenge. It must demonstrate sensitivity and become the epicentre of a democratic shockwave in the European Union, a shockwave that hinders the authoritarian derive of the Troika. This Parliament must express the original democratic legitimacy that reunites us: the voice of citizens, not the arrangements between elites. The Parliament cannot be a consolation prize or a golden pension." (Podemos, EP debate, 01/07/2014)

Overall, it seems that the EU as it stands is, for all four parties considered, a threat to sovereignty but the meaning of sovereignty varies from party to party (see Table 3 in annex for an overview). The tension between national sovereignty and supranationalism is only one aspect of these parties' opposition to the European political system, and not always the most important one. There are multiple and interrelated meanings they attach to the concept of sovereignty and therefore several types of sovereignty conflicts.

As expected, the spatial and functional dimensions of European integration are intertwined within populist discourses. The spatial dimension threatens sovereignty since it means surrendering powers to supranational institutions. This is particularly relevant for radical right parties in the context of the migration crisis when opposition to the Schengen area was central to their opposition to the integration process. But this is also the case for the M5S which pits popular sovereignty against supranationalism. The functional dimension is also essential to understand these parties' criticism of the EU: the bid to regain sovereignty is a call to restore control over the economy and the main issue is not European integration as such but rather the fact that it (together with national elites) has pushed for austerity programmes, and given precedence to the logic of the market over welfare programs. This aspect is more central in radical left populist discourses but with the economic crisis has also become very salient in the FN's discourse. Finally, although less prominent, parliamentary sovereignty is also relevant to understand the tensions within claims made by populists. The EU can here either be seen as a threat to representative democracy and the sovereignty of parliament or as a potential platform to reconnect the people with institutions if sufficient reforms are carried out.

**Table 3.** overview.

| Left → Right spectrum | | Podemos | M5S | UKIP | FN |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Salience of economic issues | | High | Medium | Low | Low |
| Salience of migration issues | | Low | Medium | High | High |
| Salience of sovereignty | | Medium | Medium | Medium | High |
| Sovereignty type | | | | | |
| Popular | Salience | High | Low | Absent | Medium |
| | Features | • People as inclusive, political and plurinational entity<br>• Austerity as constraint and humiliation<br>• Social justice and economic redistribution<br>• Popular will through representation<br>• Not equated at all with national sovereignty | • People as moral entity<br>• Austerity as constraint and humiliation<br>• Popular will through direct democracy<br>• Partially equated with national sovereignty | | • People as exclusive, cultural and national entity<br>• Austerity as constraint<br>• Completely equated with national sovereignty |
| National | Salience | Low | Medium | Medium | High |
| | Features | • Barely mentioned<br>• Subordinated to economic sovereignty and popular control<br>• Not associated with migration issues | • Strongly associated with economic and monetary issues<br>• Euro vs. national sovereignty → call for a referendum on Treaty reforms<br>• Barely associated with migration issues (ambiguous stance) | • Barely associated with economic and monetary issues (focus on trade policy)<br>• Strongly associated with migration issues: territorial sovereignty and cultural homogeneity<br>• Westphalian conception | • Strongly associated with economic and monetary issues<br>• Euro vs. national sovereignty → call for an exit from the common currency<br>• Strongly associated with migration issues: territorial sovereignty and cultural homogeneity<br>• Westphalian conception<br>• Call for a 'Europe of sovereign nations' |
| Supranational | Salience | Low | Absent | Absent | Absent |
| | Features | • Pooled sovereignty = positive<br>• Need for a democratic Europe based on social rights and popular sovereignty<br>• More power to the EP to enhance popular sovereignty at the EU level | | | |
| Parliamentary | Salience | Low | Absent | Low | Absent |
| | Features | • Parliaments as guarantors of popular sovereignty → need to enhance parliamentary powers at the national and EU level | | • National parliaments as supreme Law-makers<br>• Related to the domestic cultural and political history | |

## Conclusion

Since the outbreak of the economic and migration crises, populist and Eurosceptic parties have had new or renewed success across Europe. In EU studies, these parties tend to be studied from the angle of their opposition to European integration with sovereignty being analysed as a struggle over the degree of power transfer to the EU. However, the meaning of sovereignty for these parties is not clear cut. On the one hand, there are multiple types of sovereignty that can be in conflict. Indeed, as populists, they stress the need to defend the people against the establishment and the elites whereas as Eurosceptics, they often oppose the EU for the loss of national sovereignty or of parliamentary sovereignty. On the other hand, even one single type of sovereignty can refer to different meanings across populist parties.

This article analysed how populists understood sovereignty during the economic and migration crises. The ambition was to grasp the conflicts of sovereignty in EU politics by looking at the very meaning given to this concept by these parties and the tensions that can occur in their discourses. The analysis shows that the binary opposition between supranationalism and the nation-state has become too simplistic to understand these parties' stance on the EU. While all four parties framed sovereignty as being threatened and stressed a need to take it back, the article also shows we need to disentangle the various dimensions of sovereignty and the tensions among them in populists' discourses to understand their opposition to the European political system.

The four parties under study developed various understandings of sovereignty and articulated several of its meanings (popular, national, supranational and parliamentary). Three elements can be highlighted here. First, the relative emphasis given to sovereignty in relation to migration or the economy varies quite a lot. For the FN, sovereignty is a general issue, mostly connected to its anti-establishment stance while UKIP connects sovereignty with migration and develops a Westphalian view on the matter. The M5S and Podemos link sovereignty mostly to the economic crisis although for the latter it is also connected to national politics. Second, there are also divergences related to the emphasis on popular and national sovereignty as well as the articulation between these two types of sovereignty. Podemos clearly emphasizes popular sovereignty, while UKIP is mostly concerned with national sovereignty. The FN as well as the M5S tend to stress both. However, the most significant difference lies in how both types overlap in populist parties' discourses. For radical right parties, the nation and the people tend to be identical whereas for left populists, the interests of the state and of the people can diverge, especially in the context of European integration. M5S is an ambivalent case that confirms research stating that populist parties in Southern Europe represent the political identities of the people defined primarily along national lines (Chryssogelos 2018). Indeed, we found a strong emphasis on both national and popular sovereignty. But Podemos does not articulate claims linking popular and national sovereignty in the way the other three parties do, being the only party to advocate for a form of supranational sovereignty. Third, and in a related point, they also diverge in the solutions they put forward to regain sovereignty. Podemos and the M5S advocate for demand-side Keynesian policies at the national and EU-levels to recover economic sovereignty. The FN and UKIP are in favour of national retrenchment: national borders as the only solution to regain control.

These differences are mostly explained by the dimensions of the European political system they focus their challenge on, i.e. the spatial and/or functional dimension. The more a party views the loss of sovereignty as a result of the spatial dimension (the transfer of authority) the more it favours national retrenchment and focuses on national sovereignty (overlapping with popular sovereignty). The more a party considers the loss of sovereignty as a result of the functional dimension, the more it insists on popular and economic sovereignty and puts the emphasis on the people as an underdog. More generally, these divergences refer to the ideological position of the party. They may share a common opposition to the EU (the famous inverted U curve highlighted by research on Euroscepticism) and a populist stance. But their position on the ideological spectrum (left/right and GAL/TAN) determines the meanings these parties attach to sovereignty and the emphasis they put on each type of sovereignty.

The national context also needs to be taken into account. On the one hand, the Member states have been affected very differently by the crises and therefore, parties will develop different sovereignty claims depending on the particular context in which they operate. The impact of the sovereign debt crisis and of austerity programs has been considerably harsher in Spain and Italy than it has been in France, a core country of the Eurozone, and in the UK, which is not one of its members. Similarly, although migration has been politicized all over Europe, migration flows do not have the same effect in all countries. Accordingly, the discourses of parties, and the meanings they give to sovereignty, logically differ. In that sense it would be interesting to study the extent to which different populist parties operating in the same national context – such as M5S and *La Lega*, for instance – share similar conceptions of sovereignty which can be traced back to their national context. On the other hand and more generally, the claims parties develop depend on the opportunity structures in which they compete. They will focus on a different combination of meanings for the concept of sovereignty depending on the norms and dominant values of their national culture as well as on the model of capitalism of their country (see also Ivaldi and Mazzoleni 2019). Finally, political parties do not operate in isolation and need to respond to arguments from their competitors. In this article, given the comparative perspective, we focused on populist parties but future research should look at the interaction with mainstream parties. The various crises have created opportunities for all actors to reconfigure their ideas and discourses on sovereignty. As noted by scholars (Jabko and Luhman 2019), the success of populists who vehemently express sovereignty concerns and the recent crises have pressured pro-EU and mainstream actors to respond and may lead to more politicized discourses on sovereignty from their part. It would then be interesting to analyse empirically, through case studies (for a recent study, see Heinisch, Werner, and Habersack 2019) or with a comparative framework, the interaction between mainstream and populist parties, on the left and on the right, regarding sovereignty and its various meanings.

## Notes

1. In such a perspective, 'populism' is neither an ideology, nor a strategy, but a specific *articulatory practice* (Glynos and Howarth 2007): it unifies heterogeneous demands on the basis of their shared opposition to an enemy who is held responsible for their frustration. The upsurge of these movements takes the form of an opposition between 'the people'

(this unified aggregate of social demands) and the institutional structure described above, but they can articulate considerably different programmatic content, depending on their ideological repertoire and national context of emergence.

2. However, we did not fully respect this distinction between two periods, as we also decided to include a few significant speeches such as the interventions of Podemos during the debate on Rajoy's government investiture in early 2016, as well as all these parties' electoral manifestos over the period 2012–2018.

3. By using the concept of 'lemma', we mean that we have grouped together their main inflected forms (e.g.: 'democracy', 'democratic' and 'democratically'). In order to distinguish between lemmas and simple terms in the paper, we use capital letters to refer to the former.

4. The deictic vocabulary refers to the vocabulary that describes the context of enunciation itself, whether by specifying identity ('I', 'you', 'Mr President', etc.) or spatial/temporal location ('here', 'room', 'now', 'yesterday', 'this morning').

5. 'Turnismo' refers to the efforts made by the two main Spanish political forces since the democratic transition to preserve the limited rotation between themselves.

6. For a more detailed analysis of the role of war metaphors in the discourse of Podemos and M5S during the economic crisis, see Borriello and Mazzolini (2019).

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