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The normalization of left populism? The paradigmatic case of Podemos

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ABSTRACT

After a hopeful electoral debut, left populism in Europe has undergone relative normalization. While the literature on new parties might regard the persistence of left populist forces as a success, we deem instead that such an outcome should be considered against the backdrop of the initial left populist hypothesis. Based on a discussion of the existing literature and ten semi-structured interviews with party members, this paper analyses the case of Podemos in Spain as a proxy to assess the fortunes of left populism in Europe at large. We describe its political trajectory and explain its failure to go mainstream by reference to the interplay between, at a macro level, the structure of political opportunities and, at a meso level, its interpretation of the populist strategy. In particular, we focus on the paradoxical effects of the representative void, on the specific and unfavorable mutations of the populist moment in Spain for Podemos, and its own organizational and strategic shortcomings.



KEYWORDS

Populism; Podemos; Radical left; Spanish politics; Political parties

Introduction

Long regarded as a variant of populism restricted to the American continent, left populism got its foothold in Europe – most remarkably on its Mediterranean shore – in the wake of the Great Recession. Yet, left populism is already facing some bottlenecks in the Old Continent – a situation that contrasts sharply with the sustained growth of radical right parties. From Syriza’s troubled governmental experience and its recent electoral defeat to France insoumise’s downward spiral in the aftermath of the 2017 presidential election, left populism shares a common fate beyond national borders. This trend did not spare Podemos, which used to be the main magnet of left populism’s hopes in the European context. Its recent entry into the national government in alliance with the Spanish socialists came at high costs: on the road to executive power, Podemos lost two million votes since 2015, experienced harsh internal tensions, and progressively and largely abandoned the initial left populist strategy, readopting many traits of a classic radical left formation.

There are two ways to gauge Podemos’ performances. Following the classic literature on new parties, Podemos’ relative stabilization might be deemed as a form of success, considering that this scenario is the exception rather than the rule for new

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political contenders. In light of the initial majoritarian aspirations that Podemos drew from left populism theory, however, the same scenario might also be perceived as a resounding defeat by the actors themselves. Moreover, even though Podemos is the only entirely new party among the European cases of left populism, many of the organizational, ideological, and strategic tensions it experiences seem to hamper all left populist contenders alike, thus raising the suspicion of a more general trend affecting these parties *as left populists*. The present paper thus takes the evolution of Podemos as an 'extroverted case study', a proxy to scrutinize the exogenous and endogenous factors that may apply to European left populism at large. In order to seize the *qualitative novelty* of left populism, we deliberately depart from the factors (institutional, systemic or individual) that explain the sustainability of new parties in general and opt for a context-specific explanation. We argue that the best way to understand European left populism's trajectory is to look at the interplay between meso and macro-level factors, i.e. the way these movements have responded (organizationally, ideologically and strategically) to the political structure of opportunities of post-recession South European party systems. In doing so, we also try to supply a balanced account of the role played by structure and agency.

Based on a review of secondary literature and on the analysis of ten semi-structured interviews with party members, the paper shows that the setbacks endured by the *morada* (purple) formation stem from its difficulties to adapt its own discourse, strategy and organization to a rapidly changing environment in post-recession Spain. This environment is permeated by a major paradox: the previous model of political representation and mediation is crumbling *and* resisting at the same time, with both dynamics being potentially deleterious for a left populist contender. Equally, a number of evolutions in the Spanish political scenario progressively made the antagonistic questioning of the whole socio-political system that lies at the core of the left populist strategy less fruitful. In this complex context, we argue that several Podemos' internal choices hampered its progression by pushing it into strategic mistakes and organizational deadlocks. As a result, we contend that Podemos is the perfect example of why left populism, while well suited to irrupt strongly and quickly within a given political space in times of acute crisis, has a hard time maintaining and expanding its electoral momentum.

The paper proceeds as follows. In the first section, we present the puzzle of Podemos' (subjective) failure in view of the literature on the irruption and evolution of new parties. The second section is dedicated to our methodology and research strategy (Podemos as a paradigmatic and 'extroverted' case study for left populism) and the description of Podemos' political strategy and trajectory from its irruption in the Spanish political system to the present day. In the third section, we discuss the macro and meso factors that explain Podemos' fate.

Podemos: objective success or subjective failure?

According to the classic literature on political parties, the rise of a new political challenger such as Podemos is nothing staggering. Over the past forty years, in a context marked by the rapid change of party systems, the emergence of new parties has become commonplace and has been successfully explained by political scientists. Scholars have attempted to define 'newness' and to shed light on the factors that foster or hamper the entry of new players in party systems (Lucardie, 2000; Tavits, 2006). Most importantly for our purpose,

they have scrutinized the conditions under which new parties could build on their initial breakthrough in the long run and thus become full actors of their national political system (Bolleyer & Bytzeck, 2013). While there is consensus over the importance of the party's origin to explain its evolution, scholars disagree on the respective weight of various factors in explaining the success of new parties over time: institutional factors, socio-demographic variables, party system structure and contextual elements. In addition, scholars have also insisted on the importance of interactive factors – the accommodative or adversarial reaction of mainstream parties with regard to the new political challenger (Meguid, 2005) – as well as on the key role played by newness itself as a 'winning formula' (Sikk, 2011). Given their growing numerical importance across established and new democracies over the past decades, green and radical right parties have attracted most of the attention. The latter case displays an interesting paradox. While institutionalization can arguably be considered as a synonym of success, since it sustains the persistence of a party over time (Levitsky, 1998; Bolleyer, 2013), it might be seen as negative in light of its initial anti-establishment élan, which could alienate disgruntled voters the more the party becomes entrenched within the political system (Krause & Wagner, 2019).

To be sure, those factors explain a lot in Podemos' fate. Like any new party, it has inevitably lost in 'newness' over time. Like many anti-establishment parties, stepping into the institutions made it progressively lose part of its externality to the political system it criticizes. There is, however, another side to this story. For Podemos is not a new anti-establishment party like any other, but the most iconic example of a trend that has seen the emergence in Europe of a new type of strategy previously circumscribed to Latin America: left populism. Although Podemos is specific insofar its very creation was predicated on left populism theory, the adoption of left populist tropes in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis has also enabled relatively marginal political formations to swiftly boost their electoral support (Syriza, LFI) and radical left actors to win intra-party leadership (Corbynism). The equally rapid involution of left populist formations after their early successes – whether it manifests itself through the disappointing exercise of executive power, electoral stagnation or decline, or harsh internal tensions leading to party splits – calls for careful scrutiny. In this sense, their similarities call for an explanation that goes beyond the 'newness' of Podemos or the loss of their 'anti-establishment' nature and looks at the interplay between their context of emergence and their organizational, ideological, and strategic characteristics *as left populists*.

Moreover, while most of the literature favors objective definitions of new parties' success, we argue that a subjective approach, based on how the actors themselves evaluate the measure of their success (Dunphy & Bale, 2011), is more relevant in this case. Left populist parties aimed at conquering executive power and ultimately challenging the European ordoliberal design through the deliberate and reflexive application of a populist approach. For this reason, they have perceived as a relative failure what would otherwise have been considered as a resounding success. At best (Syriza), they have reached executive power, but failed to deliver on their most important electoral promises; at worst (Podemos, LFI), they have stabilized their national parliamentary presence, thus achieving *persistence* and avoiding *marginalization*, while failing to go *mainstream* (Stanley et al., 2019). In short, they have endured a process of 'normalization', which we understand here as encompassing several organizational and ideological evolutions, among which some are common to anti-establishment parties in general and others are specific to

left populism: (1) the partial institutionalization of party structures and loss of touch with social movements, (2) the repudiation of the initial alterity vis-à-vis the rest of the party system, and the rescaling of their ambitions, be them electoral or governmental (3) the relative stabilization/decline of electoral performances beneath their stated aspirations, and (4) the repositioning into a more classic position on the left-right divide.

For all these reasons, we argue that analysing left populism's recent trajectory requires a more *context-based* and *qualitative* approach than is usually the case for the radical right and green formations. Such analysis should be able to (1) take the initial ambitions of left populist actors seriously and explain why they have not been able to realize them, and (2) consider the factors specific to these actors *as left populists* that can, at least in part, explain the common patterns in their evolution. We contend that the best way to do so is to look at the interplay between, at the macro level of analysis, the structure of political opportunities (and the progressive narrowing of this window over time) and, at the meso level, the agency of these movements, which pays heed to the specific political *hypothesis* explicitly borrowed – and framed in these terms – by Podemos from the *oeuvre* of Ernesto Laclau in order to irrupt *ex nihilo* into the political arena: left populism.

Case selection and methodology: Podemos as a paradigmatic and 'extroverted' case study'

Among the few existing cases of left populism across Europe, Podemos appears as a paradigmatic case. The claim rests on the belief that Podemos highlights in an exemplary way some of the general characteristics defining left populism in Europe (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 80). Its insistence on the praxis-theory nexus, its rapid and out-of-ordinary electoral ascent, its negation of the old leftist symbolism and its capacity to incarnate 'newness' have been prototypical. As put by Heidegger, a paradigm can be discerned because it shines (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 80) – and, arguably, at the beginning Podemos shone, being one the most talked about political phenomena in Europe. Moreover, in terms of objective success, Podemos is situated halfway between LFI and Syriza: it disrupted its domestic political system to a much larger extent than the former, without experiencing the latter's troubled exercise of national executive power. By focusing on the evolution of Podemos, this paper also aims to furnish some hints on the ups and downs of European left populism at large. As well as being paradigmatic, Podemos can also function as a proxy to study a broader political reality and, although we do not provide any explicit and balanced comparison between two or more cases here, this in-depth analysis of a single case carries an indirect though intended comparative weight in the light of the similar dynamics inherent to the interplay between the left populist strategy and the European socio-political conditions. This implicit form of comparison – which Richard Rose (1991) synthesized as 'extroverted case study' (p. 454) – has been first popularized by Tocqueville (1946), who famously stated that 'in America [he] saw more than America; [he] sought there the image of democracy itself' (p. 14). Such a research strategy always pursues the ambition of generalizing part of its findings to a broader range of political phenomena (Lichbach & Zuckerman, 1997, p. 4), while allowing for the in-depth scrutiny of a specific context.

This type of qualitative analysis of Podemos' evolution is based on a discussion of the existing literature and ten semi-structured interviews with party members and ex-party

members, realized between mid-October 2019 and late January 2020. The interviewees – among whom are several founding members of the party – are mostly executives of the party at the national level or in several important Autonomous Communities (Basque Country, Castile La Mancha, Andalusia, Valencian Community). Most importantly, they cover the three main tendencies within Podemos (Pablo Iglesias' official line, Iñigo Errejón's national-popular project and the anti-capitalist sector). Despite playing an auxiliary role, these interviews, explicitly framed around the strategic, ideological, and organizational quandaries of the party in relation to the structural bottlenecks, helped us to trace back the main steps of its rapid transformation and the main exogenous and endogenous factors explaining this process. In other terms, they furnish an important hermeneutical element in so far as the self-interpretations of the key internal players are concerned. It can thus be said that their presence is more subterranean than it looks *prima facie*, as they led us to a better comprehension of the phenomenon in tandem with the existing literature.

Podemos and the left populist hypothesis

Few political subjects have represented such an explicit application of left populism as Podemos, which stands out as the clearest attempt at putting in practice the theoretical tools honed by Laclau over the past decades (see Laclau, 2005). This was acknowledged by the very founders of Podemos (Errejón, 2014; Iglesias, 2015, p. 14) and concretely determined by the centrality in designing Podemos' overall strategy of Iñigo Errejón, whose proximity to the 'Essex school' is clearly testified, among other things, by his intense dialogue with Mouffe (Errejón & Mouffe, 2016). Laclau treats populism as a political logic that presupposes a division of the social space into two camps. In short, a political practice tends towards populism when a plurality of demands is rendered analogous with respect to a common adversary such that their particular content is sacrificed on the altar of constructing a broader popular identity. Since populism is simply a logic and does not in itself designate any precise normative orientation, it is necessarily parasitic upon some substantive ideology. In a nutshell, left populism would thus amount to an antagonistic political practice, coalescing heterogeneous demands and normatively inspired by socialist ideals. Podemos translated these theoretical insights into a political strategy exhibiting a number of substantial differences vis-à-vis the radical left. By invoking the concept of 'transversality', it attempted to reach out beyond the declining circle of those who have already pledged their political allegiance to the left and successfully attracted a profile of supporters that distinguishes it from the established radical-left electorate (Ramiro & Gomez, 2017). This was achieved by adopting an altogether new symbolism and jargon – thus strongly downplaying the relevance of the left/right dichotomy –, by privileging the most popular demands and struggles while discarding those perceived as minoritarian (Franzé, 2015, p. 10), and by relying on the charismatic talent of its leader, Pablo Iglesias. By focusing on the production of a straightforward and easy-to-grasp popular identity to offer to the electorate, this approach contrasts sharply with the contemporary radical left, which is typically keen to preserve the autonomy of each demand/struggle/group involved, and is often perceived as tangled-up in internal doctrinal disputes far removed from real life issues. Another crucial difference lies in the fact that the radical left treated elections as simply mirroring the political capital accumulated in

the social sphere; conversely, Podemos thought of elections as moments of 'political acceleration', thus displaying a talent for engineering explosive and successful electoral campaigns. Antagonism, transversality, leader-centrism, and electioneering are thus the core characteristics defining left-populism as a specific political strategy.

From disruption to normalization: Podemos' shifts on the road to national government

After the initial successes registered in a period of deep socio-economic and political crisis, Podemos has suffered a phase of electoral downturns, internal tensions, and subsequent rescaling of its political ambitions. Podemos was born out of the willingness of several actors (mainly politicized intellectuals) to give a political legacy to the *Indignados*, the anti-austerity movement that originated in May 2011. Created in early 2014 with the aim to 'translate' this social thrust, Podemos performed surprisingly well two months later at the EU elections (5 MEPs, 8% of the vote). The party then grew exponentially until the 2015 general election, in which it obtained 69 seats (corresponding to 20.66% of the vote) – the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE) being only 340.000 votes ahead. Podemos had reached its apex. From there on, it experienced electoral reversals that unleashed harsh internal conflicts. The decline started with the failed *sorpasso* (overtaking) on the PSOE at the electoral repetition of June 2016. The PSOE, on the one hand, stabilized rather than collapsed (it lost five seats and remained by large the second party of the country). Podemos' performances, on the other, stagnated. Although in the meantime it had formed an electoral alliance with the radical left party Izquierda Unida, the cartel lost 3% of the vote share (amounting approximately to one million votes) previously represented by the two forces of the coalition. Yet, Unidos Podemos (UP – later renamed Unidas Podemos) still represented about 20% of the electorate. From there on, however, strategic issues (the choice of alliances, the ideological positioning and the discursive strategies) started tearing Podemos up. Those discrepancies famously came to the light during the Vistalegre II Congress of the party in February 2017, which sanctioned the victory of Pablo Iglesias' strategic line over Íñigo Errejón's.

The populist inclination of Podemos progressively faded away in two respects. The first one has to do with how radical the frontier erected with the whole political system is. On this account, the party progressively switched from an irreconcilable antagonistic relation to the Spanish political system born out of the 1978 democratic Transition to an agonistic opposition to some of its aspects, while sticking to most of its constitutional foundations (Franzé, 2018, pp. 67–69). Yet, disagreements arouse as to what approach was to be maintained with a fundamental piece of that system, i.e. the socialists, with Iglesias defending the most intransigent position. The second aspect is related to transversality, that is the capacity to present itself as different from and irreducible to the already symbolized system of political signifiers, and thus be able to articulate 'a people' out of ostensibly antithetical constituencies. On this front, too, the populist credentials of Podemos were reduced to the benefit of a repositioning of the party on the radical left of the political spectrum. The alliance with IU continued and the party's discourse recuperated a more pronounced leftist vocabulary and symbolism. Internally, this repositioning was hotly debated too, with Errejón upholding the transversal cause. The 'return' to the radical left was further fostered by the adversaries (in particular the PSOE), which were interested

in undercutting a new political divide (the 'old' vs the 'new') that could threaten the position they had secured in the Spanish political field since the democratic transition.

Meanwhile, the coalition underwent a steady decline in the polls, stabilizing itself between 10% and 15% of the vote share. In 2019, it ranged from 14.3% in the first general elections in April to the disappointing 10% in the EU elections in May. Most recently, in the electoral repetition of November 2019 following the failed negotiations with the Socialists, UP obtained 12.8% of the votes. This time around, the negotiations ushered the formation of a coalition government, with five ministers of UP, including the Vice-Presidency occupied by Iglesias. This represents a striking achievement in a country where the two major parties were used to govern alone through the parliamentary support of other minor forces. Even though it did not manage to go mainstream, Podemos was able to avoid the definitive marginalization common to many newcomers and 'fringe' parties (Stanley et al., 2019). Nevertheless, at the end of this six-year political cycle, Podemos is barely recognizable. From a transversal populist party hostile to the whole party system and aiming at winning an overall majority, it progressively 'normalized' and transformed into a renewed version of the Spanish radical left, although electorally stronger than its European counterparts, and whose only available strategy is that of a constant bargaining with the socialists from a minority position.

Explaining the rise and fall of Podemos

In order to explain the failure of Podemos at sustaining its initial impetus and going mainstream, it is necessary to scrutinize the structural environment in which it arose and evolved, which, although with different nuances, holds true in the Southern European context as a whole and applies to other left populist trajectories.

The macro conditions for the rise of left populism in the South of Europe are best understood as a combination of long-term and short-term crises. The political management of the financial crisis opened a populist 'moment', i.e. a specific conjuncture characterized by high politicization, creation of new political subjectivities and sudden electoral realignment. Beside the worsening material conditions of working and middle classes, the perceived convergence of political elites around austerity policies opened a vast breach between a large part of the citizenry and its representatives, thus accentuating the 'post-democratic' nature of contemporary politics (Crouch, 2004; Mouffe, 2005). Unsurprisingly, in the countries in which the association of centre-left parties with unpopular policies proved indelible, they virtually disappeared (Greece, France) or underwent a substantive downsizing (Italy, Spain), paving the way for the irruption of left populist insurgents. This situation, however, did not emerge *ex nihilo*. Rather, it accelerated and catalyzed the long-term erosion of party democracy, which had already fostered the coming of a populist *zeitgeist* (Mudde, 2004). In short, the model of representation in which traditional mass parties acted as agents of mediation between the citizens and the state, providing ideological coherence to the claims of specific constituencies and aiming to exercise power in the name of a perceived general interest, progressively faded away, resulting in a representative void (Mair, 2013). It was replaced by the advent of a new model of 'leader democracy' (Calise, 2016) in which 'liquid' or 'digital' parties (Gerbaudo, 2018; Urbinati, 2019) are eager to mobilize atomized voters through

a direct relationship between the leader and the basis, rendering the old party structures increasingly superfluous.

Overall, these evolutions considerably downplayed the significance of deep-rooted political cleavages and gave rise to a new line of conflict between populism and technocracy, much more volatile in nature and better suited to the configuration of the *void* (Bickerton & Invernizzi Accetti, 2017). The 'era of disintermediation' is indeed extremely favorable to populist parties' direct modes of communication and organization, bypassing intermediary bodies and disrupting traditional political allegiances. Here, however, lies the paradox: the era of disintermediation is both what enables populism to achieve quick success and what hinders it from stabilizing in the long run. The decline of traditional political affiliations may well be the condition of possibility for populist actors to articulate new demands and reframe political identities, but it also means that it is nowadays much more difficult to root those newly created affiliations.

However, the difficulties do not end here. The new political agents do not operate on a field bereft of all previous political bonds: the void is only relative. Although weakened, the traditional cleavages (with their corresponding institutions and affiliations) are still alive and impose limits on populists' operations. The erosion of party democracy is thus paradoxically both too incomplete and too advanced for populist actors. On one side, their progression is hampered by the relative resilience of traditional cleavages, which narrows the political space available. On the other, once they successfully irrupt onto the political scene, they have trouble stabilizing, owing to the extreme political volatility and, as we shall argue later, to their own lack of solid intra – and extra-party structures. This explains very well the dilemmas left populists are caught in. They might take note of the resilience of the traditional cleavages and decide to relocate themselves more clearly along those to build long-term party loyalties. By doing so, however, they run the risk of rapidly losing their transversal appeal, which was key to reframe political identities and live up to their own hegemonic ambitions. By contrast, they might be tempted to abandon any specific ideological and sociological *ubi consistam*, thereby lacking the classical levers to win the long-term loyalty of an electorate – the only guarantee of stability in an increasingly volatile context.

These paradoxes fully played out in the case under study. Podemos' fate can be best understood as the outcome of the complex interplay between the structure of political opportunities, which became growingly hostile, and its interpretation of the populist strategy, which we deem to have been characterized by remarkable inadequacies. The former, macro-level factor is context-specific and has to do with the peculiar mutations of the populist moment in Spain. As for the latter aspect, the meso-level, it is concerned with the strategic and organizational deadlocks encountered by Podemos. Some of these questions find a parallel in other left populist parties in Europe, although with different nuances which invite for further research.

The mutations of the populist moment

After the electoral repetition of 2016, the margins for Podemos' left populist strategy were further narrowed by a new phase of sedimentation of political conflicts – even if characterized by a higher volatility and unpredictability than before. Following Bruce Ackerman, Íñigo Errejón theorized this situation as a shift from 'hot' to 'cold' political times

(Errejón, 2016). In the latter context, the demand for political radicality and frontal opposition to the existing political system diminishes and the fluidity of political identities slows down. Although the feeling that the crisis was still ongoing remained widespread (40dB, 2018), the rise of other forces such as Ciudadanos and Vox and the crystallization of the new situation left less room for further gains. As hinted above, the traditional political apparatuses did not disappear with the crisis, making it exceedingly difficult to de-identify large segments of the electorate and rearticulate their claims through a populist discourse. More specifically, the socialist party was able to get back promptly many of the voters that had switched to Podemos in 2015–2016 (Orriols & Cordero, 2016), thereby showing its solid anchoring in several social segments and territorial areas. Between the general elections of June 2016 and April 2019, UP lost to PSOE over a million of its previous voters, amounting to more than 20% of its electorate (Garrido, 2019). Part of the endogenous and exogenous factors that had eroded the PSOE hegemony since Zapatero's second mandate – extremely adverse economic conditions, ideological-programmatic confusion and uneasy renewal of its national leadership, above all (Delgado Fernández & Cazorla-Martín, 2017) – seemingly faded away. After several years of opposition to Rajoy's government and a noticeable move to the left under the leadership of Pedro Sanchez, it was increasingly difficult to sell the electorate on the idea that the Socialist Party was colluding with the Popular Party – a slow transformation that ultimately led to Podemos' indirect endorsement of the PSOE as a newly legitimate progressive actor.¹

Moreover, the irruption of new actors on the right of the political spectrum reshuffled the cards. First, Ciudadanos emerged on the national political scene as the 'Podemos of the centre-right'. Second, the spectacular rise of Vox put an end to the absence of a far-right force that represented a 'Spanish exception' in the European context (Peres, 2019, p. 140). Those evolutions deprived Podemos of its exclusive role of political challenger and progressively favored the return to a left-right axis of political confrontation between two opposite blocks, although no longer configured in a (albeit imperfect, as the Spanish one always was) two-party system.² In this situation, Podemos was somehow naturally induced to switch back to a leftist symbolism. Things were made even more complex by the blazing up of the Catalan question, which completely obscured other political issues. On the issue, Podemos took an intermediate position that was little rewarding in a context of high polarization.³ These evolutions deeply complexified the political space by multiplying the axes of confrontation: left vs. right, old vs. new parties, technocracy vs. populism, and centralists vs. regionalists. In such a context, the task of building a transversal and radical force capable of challenging alone the dominance of the traditional elites became increasingly difficult. As a result, Podemos was faced with a double difficulty. On one side, it found increasingly hard to keep setting the political agenda of the country as it did at the beginning of its march, since other axes, less favorable to its own gamble, emerged in the national scenario. On the other, as for those axes that were instead congenial to it, Podemos was no longer the only political actor embodying them. Ciudadanos and later Vox also claimed the representation of the 'new' and of the struggle to a sclerotic political system.

Another issue accounts for leaving the populist door ajar. Despite the strategy of transversality attempting to go beyond left and right, Podemos by and large attracted left-wing voters, especially among young and educated urban dwellers (CIS, 2014, 2016a, 2016b). In

fact, Podemos has always been overwhelmingly perceived as located on the far left of the classical political spectrum by the electorate at large (CIS, 2014, 2016a, 2016b, 2019). This does not mean that the transversal appeal was useless. Without it, Podemos would have not managed to shake off the aura of marginality attached to the radical left and would have not achieved the support of many leftists for whom the category had no mobilizing power (Ramiro & Gomez, 2017; Rendueles & Sola, 2018, p. 40). It is precisely because it attracted voters that *generically* identified as progressive that the fading away of the transversal appeal did not fare too well. Faced with the upsurge of right-wing nationalism, and once the impact of the 2011–2013 protest cycle ebbed, the average progressive voter that was at some point enticed by Podemos was more interested in defeating the Right than challenging the socio-economic system as a whole (Schavelzon & Webber, 2018, p. 186; Villacañas, 2017, p. 166). As the socialists resisted the initial electoral assault of Podemos and endogenized some of its ideas,⁴ the latter backtracked to a more classical radical left register with a scarce inclination for finding a compromise, and the former won back the central stage of progressive politics in Spain.⁵ Despite no longer being against the whole political system, Iglesias indeed displayed a bold attitude towards the socialists once the top priority of a large chunk of his potential electorate switched to more modest ambitions. Coming back to our distinction on the two ways to interpret the populist positionality, Podemos showed itself highly populist in its intransigence towards the socialists once that approach no longer paid off electorally, and little populist insofar as the question of transversality is concerned, with the consequence of being increasingly perceived as politically fanciful.

Strategical and organizational deadlocks

However, it has not simply been a matter of exogeneous causes making for the reversal of Podemos' progression. Several elements ascribable to the populist approach are also to be closely scrutinized. The extremely voluntarist, vertical, and formal nature of Laclau's conception of politics has somehow diverted the attention of left populist leaders away from the necessary organizational work and territorial anchoring. Arguably, this issue is also strongly correlated to the newness of Podemos. Here, questions of inexperience, lack of personnel and unbalance between short-term and long-term tasks had a strong influence. Three problematic aspects stand out in this respect.

First, Podemos suffered from a Latin American tropism (Chazel, 2019) that led it to misinterpret its own context of emergence: as many founding members now easily admit,⁶ they considerably overestimated the degree of 'Latinamericanization' of Spain (i.e. the severity of the socio-political crisis and the fluidity of political identities) and underestimated the capacity of resilience of Spanish institutions and main political and social actors. In other words, even though Western European party systems certainly underwent a process of de-institutionalization over the past decades (Chiaramonte & Emanuele, 2017), Latin American left populist experiences took place in less articulated civil societies, whose role of 'armor' ensured to the hegemony of established political parties was inferior than the protective density of European 'fortresses' (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 235–238). In Spain, Podemos took a crisis of representation for a much more global regime crisis, thus overestimating the extent to which it could question the social order.⁷ Finally, the presidential systems of Latin America – as opposed to Spain's parliamentary system – facilitated

processes of political aggregation around individualities, while allowing to gain a more immediate political command. In Latin America, left-wing populism has therefore managed to access power with a speed unthinkable in the European context. By the same token, while the construction of a 'national-popular' camp has always been the paramount task of Latin American populisms, the translation of this strategy has showed mixed records so far in Europe. In particular, the attempt of Podemos to regain national symbols – such as the term *patria* – met with the strong embedding of these in a previous right-wing tradition. The historical centrifugal tendencies, the emergence of the Catalan issue and the intermediate position adopted by Podemos on the latter made the appropriation of such symbols less plausible. Moreover, by limiting its articulation to demands or political symbols, Podemos seems to have failed to articulate what Ostiguy calls 'the low', that is an excess that 'originates from the outside of the system of political meanings' (2015, p. 150). He refers to this as 'plebeian grammar', or as 'disorganized and emotive vitalism', which can take disparate forms such as references to football, music or any other national-popular expression (2015, pp. 149–151). Podemos' populism has instead displayed a somewhat cold and contrived form: a hypothesis generated in university classrooms, as many of them candidly had it. This clearly collides with what would seem to be a much more natural propensity of right-wing populists, who are more at ease with seizing symbols and references of national-popular import.

Second, the leader's centrality rapidly appeared as a double-edged sword. Initially, unmediated communication between a leader without ordinary oratory skills such as Iglesias and his supporters, was a key element in furnishing an element of political passion that the radical left was otherwise bereft. However, the dependence on charismatic figures can also become extremely deleterious as it tends to polarize potential sympathizers around the leader rather than around the political project that he embodies. This is particularly pernicious when a party is still 'young' and its volatility quite high. The limit of such a dependence openly came to the fore when controversies around Iglesias blew up (e.g. when he purchased an expensive residence). Between October 2016 and July 2018, Iglesias's evaluation significantly deteriorated not only among the electorate at large, but also among his own voters, making him the worst ranked leader in this regard (CIS, 2016b, 2018). Unlike many successful right-wing populist parties (Rassemblement national in France and Lega in Italy, for instance), the dependence on the leader was not counterbalanced by the presence of relatively strong party structures and regional baronies. In these conditions, any mistake of the party's leader inevitably redounds on the party as a whole.

Relatedly, the third element lies in the limits of its organizational model. Podemos proved extremely centralist and vertical, thereby neglecting the construction of intermediary structures and decentralized fiefdoms. This owes to a particular way in which populism was interpreted and put into practice by Podemos.⁸ *Mutatis mutandis*, populism took the place of what Gramsci, borrowing from military language, called war of movement, i.e. a phase of political conflict made up of deep and fast manoeuvres, a sharp challenge to the political system, capable of clearly pushing forward the front line. It is no coincidence that Errejón coined the expression 'electoral war machine' to refer to the type of party he was trying to construct when he occupied the role of Political Secretary of Podemos (Errejón, 2014). However, such an approach, while arguably key in re-establishing some centrality to radical politics and almost necessary for a previously non-existent subject, overlooked the pre-eminence that, in modern mass societies, Gramsci

attributed to the war of position or, put otherwise, to the process of slow accumulation and underground wear and tear of the political enemy (Gramsci, 1971, p. 238). The concentration on building up a vertical apparatus with an exclusively electoral focus aimed at generating immediate consensus achieved its proposed goal, which otherwise would have probably been out of reach. But it also had two major negative consequences. Firstly, it prevented Podemos from serenely managing its internal dissents, as it developed neither the intermediary structures nor an internally diffuse adequate political culture in order to channel a constructive opposition to the leader's line.⁹ In such an environment, a challenge to the leader could only be treated as an act of treason.¹⁰ Such internal quarrels, which received uncommon attention from mainstream media and thus widely reverberated, reversed the initial capacity to offer an appealing popular identity and restored the image of a pugnacious radical left force, self-absorbed in its internal differences. Secondly, the cultural, pedagogical and molecular work was postponed to a later stage that never was.¹¹ This imbalance made Podemos ill-suited to the cold times of politics and therefore unable to consolidate and dig cultural trenches, solidify the conquered ground, irradiate its influence to other sites of the social and create lasting institutions capable of sustaining their action over time. Concretely, this would have meant, among the other things, making the party, via twin organizations and through partnerships with other civil society actors, a prime mover in generating community bonds in the ambit of recreational activities; providing a useful institutional point of reference for ongoing social struggles of different sorts; creating new myths and symbols capable of consolidating a new political epic; recruiting talented individuals at national and local level (Errejón, 2016). Equally, Podemos has neither benefited from nor spurred enough the kind of underground culture wars around values and beliefs that assisted the rise of right populism and the alt-right elsewhere. All these tasks were only partly pursued and the consequent failure to systematically entrench the party in society exposed Podemos to the ongoing political volatility, since it did not build the networks of mediation and representation that are necessary to win the stable loyalty of a particular segment of the electorate.

Conclusion

This paper has analysed the factors that contributed to halt and reverse the initial rise of a textbook example of left populism in Europe: Podemos. At first, the populist approach represented a powerful tool for a new, ostensibly socialist-leaning group to forcefully irrupt into the political scene while differentiating itself from the repertoire of the existing radical left. Similarly, this strategy enabled other left-wing political actors in Europe to disrupt the structure of the party system in their respective countries, at least to some extent. The left populist hypothesis has undoubtedly proved extremely useful for those parties to reframe the contours of political identities. However, this approach interacted in complex and, in the medium run, unfavorable ways with the background context. In particular, the paradoxes of the void (the partial resilience of existing allegiances and institutions coupled by the difficulty to become entrenched in society at large) and the mutations of the populist moment in Spain (diminishment of polarization, heightened electoral competition, emergence of unfavorable issues) drastically reduced the room for manoeuvre. As a result, Podemos attempted to soften its iconoclastic thrust and

re-direct its struggle for hegemony from the political stage as a whole to the niche of the left, with the consequence of significantly downsizing the ambitions of its populist gamble – while nevertheless securing an undisputed predominance within the radical left and making it to national government in coalition with the socialists.

All in all, however, neither the fully populist strategy, nor the leftist afterthought, seemed to provide a satisfactory way out of what remains an irreducible paradox. Moreover, some instruments pertaining to the populist repertoire stayed and, we argue, are in themselves responsible for the misfortunes of left populism. Such an approach was compounded by the fact that Podemos was an entirely new subject in the national arena, a position that, as shown in the literature, may be favorable at the beginning once the cut-off point of political anonymity is superseded, but with potentially negative repercussions in the medium to long-run. In particular, the Latin American origin of many of Podemos' political intuitions led it to overlook the different social order it was taking issue with, grossly miscalculating the strength of its rivals and the degree of the crisis. Relatedly, an excessive dependence on the leader and the presence of a vertical and centralist structure made Podemos more exposed to electoral volatility and prone to disregard the work of construction of organization and insertion in different spaces of society. Consequently, the Spanish left populist party was unable to deal adequately with the relatively 'colder' times of politics, to handle its internal tensions serenely and entrench its presence nationally. Moreover, Podemos' current participation in national government might even accentuate these organizational flaws by channelling resources towards the party-in-office and further delaying the construction of intermediary structures.

To be sure, the responsibility of Podemos in its own relative failure should be mitigated by the many factors at play that were out of its control or common to any new political challenger, and it cannot be ruled out that future strategic adjustments will retrospectively make the current bottlenecks a mere momentary impasse. Still, it seems that Podemos' trajectory up to this point can be traced back to the complex interaction between the contemporary socio-political context, on one hand, and its peculiar mobilization of a populist approach, on the other. This holds true also for Podemos' European counterparts, as they also displayed similar features and parabolas although with different nuances and within their own peculiar national scenarios. In order to make sense of such similarities and differences, which would permit to better account for the viability, resilience, effectiveness and relevance of left populism in the Old Continent, the present work represents an open invitation for further research of a comparative kind between Podemos and other European left populist actors.

Notes

1. Interview with Antonio Estañ, Valencia, 7 November 2019.
2. Interview with Pedro Honrubia, Madrid, 4 December 2019.
3. As Dina had it, 'In such a polarized context, we positioned ourselves as the referee. Yet, team A or team B may well win a game, but the referee is the one who never wins' (Interview with Dina Boussetham, Coslada, 17 October 2019).
4. Interview with Ferran Martínez Ruiz, Valencia, 2 November 2019.
5. As an interviewee had it, 'Podemos moved, in four years, from trying to change the pie and eat most of it, to fight for a small piece of the unchanged pie' (interview with José García Molina, Talavera de la Reina, 26 October 2019).

6. 'Because we were thinking from a Latin American perspective, we did not take sufficiently into account the institutional density and the capacity of Spanish institutions to resist the crisis' (interview with Germán Cano, Madrid, 3 December 2019).
7. Interview with Jorge Lago, Madrid, 18 November 2019.
8. 'I think that in Spain, this strategy of building a broad party, transversal, in Latin American populist terms, was almost impossible, but we ended up with the hierarchical structure of populism. It is perhaps the worst of both worlds' (interview with Jacinto Morano, Madrid, 27 November 2019).
9. As explained by several interviewees, many members who initially agreed on the vertical design of the party as a short-term tool to win the elections, later asked for more internal democracy and turned against the current leadership, which was at risk of losing control over many territories (interview with Clara Serra, Madrid, 24 January 2020).
10. This was imputed by some to the majoritarian internal mode of decision-making, according to which the winning faction could win everything, leaving practically no room to internal minorities (interview with Jacinto Morano, Madrid, 27 November 2019).
11. 'We do not have training for executives. [...] You already have two or three charges, you take on the direction of your local section, and you have a public position because there are not enough candidates. This does not give you time to train the members. I think Podemos should settle, but when could it?' (interview with Valentina Torres Zorrilla, Bilbao, 1 December 2019).

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