

## Safeguarding the Status Quo: The press and the emergence of a new left in Greece and Spain

SYRIZA and Podemos, the two Southern European parties, have emerged as two major anti-austerity voices within the context of the Euro crisis, bringing left politics to the fore of the European public sphere. SYRIZA and Podemos have obtained significant electoral successes over the last few years, after having embraced the claims of the 2011 Indignados protests in Spain and Greece. This success was fuelled by civic resentment towards political corruption and the austerity politics imposed by Eurozone officials and national governments in an attempt to tackle the economic crisis. Their anti-austerity and anti-establishment politics are signaled by some to be at the root of a transformation of the political left in Europe and beyond (Jones, 2016; Cassidy, 2016). This chapter examines how the ascendance of SYRIZA and Podemos was portrayed in the mainstream press in Greece and Spain, respectively.

SYRIZA, a party formed through a coalition of Greek left-wing and radical-left parties in 2004, was the winner in the Greek general elections in January 2015 and has been in power through a coalition government since. This brought the two-party system (PASOK and New Democracy) that alternated in government since 1977 to an end. Meanwhile, Podemos was founded in early 2014 in Spain and has obtained remarkable results in the European Parliament elections in 2014, as well as in the regional, municipal<sup>1</sup> and general elections held in 2015, constituting the third most voted party at the national level (after the People's Party and the Socialist Party, alternating in government since 1982). In both countries, these elections marked a historical low for the established two-party systems.

Being the most significant political parties challenging austerity policies within Europe, Podemos and SYRIZA do not only contest hegemonic definitions of the crisis: they also pose a challenge to well-established national political landscapes, and by extension to the mainstream media discourses that have reproduced and legitimised them. Classic and contemporary works in media research illustrate how the mainstream media privilege the discourses of elites, and adopt their framing of issues (Gitlin, 1980; Glasgow Media Group, 1980; Wahl-Jorgensen et al. 2013). This has been especially the case in the construction of the Euro crisis (Doudaki, 2015; Mylonas, 2014; Berry, 2016). Through a textual analysis, we explore how the Greek and Spanish domestic press covered these parties during the electoral campaigns that confirmed SYRIZA and Podemos as significant political actors.<sup>2</sup> We start from the assumption that a crucial dimension of media power is the power to create the contexts of political life – and legitimise its actors –, since media discourses constantly provide us with interpretations of politics which normalise some definitions while discrediting others (Cammaerts & Carpentier, 2007).

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<sup>1</sup>Technically, local lists including candidates affiliated with Podemos.

<sup>2</sup>Although the analysis does not follow pre-existing categories, it is informed by Laclau and Mouffe's approach to discourse theory (1985), and Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis, inasmuch as we take the reports analyzed to be the 'outcome of power relations and power struggle' (Fairclough, 1989, p. 2). The choice of the newspapers for the study was based on the papers' ideological allegiances and circulation numbers. For Greece, these choices were *Kathimerini* (conservative, centre-right), *Ta Nea*, (centre-left, middle-class readership) and *Naftemporiki*, (daily financial newspaper). For Spain, the respective choices were the centre-right *El Mundo*, the centre-left *El País* and the conservative *ABC*. Our sample consists of all articles containing the words SYRIZA (in the Greek sample) or Podemos (in the Spanish sample) during the week preceding each of the key dates (18-24 May 2014 for both countries, and 18-24 January 2015 for Greece and 17-23 May 2015 for Spain).

In particular, we are interested in the discursive mechanisms employed by the national press to portray these parties as legitimate political actors and as (un)able to deal with the crisis. We also explore whether the newspapers' construction of these parties and their anti-austerity politics is filtered through dominant neoliberal narratives of domestic politics and crisis management. We do not take these media discourses to be closed and fixed systems of meaning. Our research, in fact, shows that there were differences, both among the different newspapers and between the two countries. However, there were also common practices through which meanings and interpretations of these two parties of the left were constructed. It is these commonalities that we focus on here.

### **Political context, the crisis (and how to solve it), and the media**

The current economic crisis has dominated European politics since it started in 2008. After a two-year period pursuing economic stimulus policies, a move towards austerity politics gained force following the Greek debt crisis in 2010. Either embraced by national governments (such as in the British case), or imposed by supranational organisations upon bailed-out countries (such as in the case of Spain and Greece), austerity became the standard political solution to bring state finances back in order.

Although readily applied by political leaders, strict austerity policies have asphyxiated the economies and social landscapes of Southern European countries, deepening problems of poverty and unemployment and hitting the already disadvantaged. After one bailout, and five years of austerity policies, unemployment continues to be above the 20% mark in Spain and the share of population-at-risk-of-poverty-or-social-exclusion above 25% (European Commission, 2016). The situation is worse in Greece, where unemployment rates reached 24.4% in January 2016 (Eurostat, 2016) and about 36% of the population is at-risk-of-poverty-or-social-exclusion (Eurostat, 2015).

Despite the obvious failures of austerity policies, financial experts, politicians, and supranational organisations have adhered to the doctrine of austerity almost en bloc. This doctrine dominated mainstream media discourses (Berry, 2016), in spite of the fact that critical economists (cf. Wren-Lewis, 2015) and civil society organisations such as trade unions (Picard, 2015) advocated for alternative remedies. Media coverage deflected from the structural and political problems within the euro-zone that were at the root of the crisis. Through privileging government leaders, bankers or economists as primary news sources, and downplaying the stakes and interests of citizens and civil society organisations, the mainstream media constructed the crisis as an exclusively financial or economic issue (Picard, 2015). At the same time, they legitimised austerity policies imposed by the Eurozone leaders and thus empowered the construction of the hegemonic neoliberal rhetoric (Doudaki, 2015; Mylonas, 2014).

These modalities of covering the crisis and (anti-)austerity politics need to be viewed within a broader context of neoliberal discourses supported and reproduced by the media. Austerity policies themselves, and the related privatisation, and deregulation of the economy imposed by creditors are an illustration of how 'the power bloc of the debt economy has seized on the latest financial crisis as the perfect occasion to extend and deepen the logic of neoliberal politics' (Lazzarato, 2012, p. 29), a logic which is supported and enabled by mainstream media.

The emergence of SYRIZA and Podemos as prominent political players brought anti-austerity politics to the centre stage, challenging the views held by established political parties, commentators, and the media. Taking into account the hitherto stability of the two-party system and the high degree of political parallelism in both countries (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), some reservations towards these new parties could be expected in the newspaper coverage. The following paragraphs will explore the ways in which these reservations materialised in the media.

### **The political Left and the threat of populism**

The origins of SYRIZA and Podemos differ significantly. Podemos was founded in early 2014, as a rushed attempt to create a new anti-austerity option for the European parliament elections. Founded in 2004, SYRIZA had already overtaken PASOK in the legislative elections in 2012 (from being the fifth party in 2009). In 2014, opinion polls indicated that SYRIZA could win the elections, breaking the duopoly of New Democracy and PASOK for the first time in fifty years. Newspaper coverage in the two countries reflected the different nature of the parties.

The strong, stable bipartisanship that had defined Spanish politics since the country's transition to democracy led to meager coverage for Podemos in the European election campaign (only 17 stories mentioned Podemos in our sample. Out of these stories, only one focused exclusively on Podemos). Eight stories forecasted Podemos to get one (maximum two) seats, relatively far from the five seats it finally obtained. There was no coverage of the party's suggested policies, apart from the two electoral commitments from its candidates: their refusal to fly in business class if elected to Parliament, and their pledge to limit their elected MEPs salary to 1,930 euros/month (instead of the 8,000 euros/month MEPs get). Although scant, coverage of Podemos in 2014 already shared traits with SYRIZA's media portrayal, a feature that would intensify in our sample from the elections in 2015.

Throughout our entire sample, the two parties were constructed as political risks and, by extension, voting for them as an unwise choice. Greek newspapers presented SYRIZA as a threat to the political stability reportedly achieved by the coalition government of New Democracy, PASOK and DIMAR. In both pre-election periods, 'stability' became a nodal point in the discussion of Greek politics, organising competing narratives on the country's future. Employed along with terms such as 'bailout program', 'sustainable path', and 'taken reforms', political stability acquired an economic meaning and came to signify the austerity measures imposed by Greece's creditors and adopted by the coalition government.

What is more, the construction of political stability as a path equivalent to austerity reforms is almost exclusively based on the use of institutional sources and financial experts. Introducing a short interview with Finnish PM, Alex Stubb, *Kathimerini* writes:

*Although Mr Stubb is not openly referring to SYRIZA, his message is clear. Greece must fulfill the whole program and its sustainable path without cancelling former reforms (Varvitsioti, 2015)*

Constructing the fulfillment of the bailout program as the only way forward for the country leaves no space for alternative interpretations. At the same time, the framing of Stubb's interview

constructs SYRIZA as ‘clearly’ a divergence from this ‘sustainable path’ and therefore a threat to stability. *Ta Nea* also warns that trying a new government under such conditions:

*is not something neutral, we are not talking here about a bottle of wine, but the country's direction after the coming elections. And given the medley of views within SYRIZA, this direction is not at all clear (Mitsos, 2014).*

In this process, the ‘market’ is constructed as an entity independent of human agency and therefore politically neutral. Market sources are, by extension, constructed as objective commentators. The Greek press often provided insights into how ‘foreign firms’ view the ‘political developments’ in Greece. For Credit Agricole, the French banking group, *Kathimerini* argues:

*The main threat is that anti-European parties will get a considerable number of votes, which will probably reverse part of the progress that has been achieved through economic reforms...the biggest threat is in Greece...if SYRIZA wins with a big majority (Kathimerini, 2014)*

SYRIZA is therefore equated not only to the ‘biggest threat’ for ‘progress’ but also implicitly described as an ‘anti-European’ party.

Similarly, Podemos’ politics and policies are repeatedly defined as ‘impracticable’, as ‘*left populism is incompatible with market social economy.*’ (Moscoso, 2015). Such claims invariably reinforce the idea that there is no alternative to the (austerity) economic policies currently in place, and that any attempt to formulate an alternative is either undesirable, or deemed to failure. Coverage in Spain also warned about the risks that a victory of Podemos candidates in the municipal and regional elections could bring upon international trade:

*If the surge of populism in Spain is confirmed, stability will be affected. This will reduce the trust of international investors, and will have unpredictable consequences (Alcázar, 2015)*

Juxtaposed to the master signifier of stability, SYRIZA (and its politics) is presented as a political risk and destabilising factor. The construction of the party as a political liability takes place through the organisation of a chain of equivalence, whereby SYRIZA’s left-wing politics are discussed along with ‘emotional fantasies’, ‘inexperience’, ‘indignation’, ‘extremism’, ‘anti-Europeanism’, and ‘populism’. The construction of SYRIZA as a populist threat to political and economic stability was further articulated through a process of personalisation, whereby Alexis Tsipras, the leader of the party, was discussed in parallel to Andreas Papandreou (PASOK), whose virtually fifteen-year reign in the eighties has been linked to excessive expenditures, overgrowth of the public sector and other policies considered partially responsible for the country’s current crisis. Such a comparison undermined SYRIZA policies as lacking in novelty and radicalism and implicitly constructed them as further risking the Greek economy.

The coverage of SYRIZA as an extreme political formation also constructed the party as the left equivalent of the far-right Golden Dawn. This theory of the two extremes, or the ‘horseshoe theory’ (Faye, 2004), dominated public discourse in Greece throughout SYRIZA’s evolution as a leading party (Anastasakis, 2013). Ideologically, this assumption undermined the party’s anti-austerity arguments as populist rhetoric and framed them as a political threat, thus serving the

interests of the coalition government. At the same time, it articulated a discursive equivalence between SYRIZA and Golden Dawn, which apart from undermining left politics also wrongly drew parallels between the inclusionary left-wing populism of the left and the far-right's racist, nationalist, and exclusionary rhetoric (Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, 2014).

In the absence of an extreme-right party in Spanish political institutions, Podemos was often linked with SYRIZA, an association that even journalists defined as 'recurrent' (Sánchez-Vallejo, 2015). The 'populist' label, however, was also used to link both parties to right-wing formations: 'Common sense (rather than fear) will win the battle against the populism of parties like Podemos, UKIP or SYRIZA' (González, 2015). Most importantly, though, Podemos was often framed as the equivalent of socialism, particularly (but not only) as advocated by Hugo Chávez in Venezuela. References to Podemos' 'totalitarian', 'Bolivarian', 'communist' or 'radical' nature could be found across the three newspapers. The association with Chávez was not entirely gratuitous: Podemos' founders had an academic interest in Latin America, had carried out research commissioned by the Venezuelan government in the past, and embraced what the leader of Podemos defined as Latin American 'theoretical tools' to interpret Spanish reality (Iglesias, 2015, p. 14). Podemos, however, never advocated for the instauration of a Bolivarian regime in Spain, and embraced social democracy as a political model instead. Similarly to SYRIZA's case in Greece, the party's novelty was discredited and presented as a mere replication of socialist or Bolivarian regimes, implicitly or explicitly constructing Podemos as devoid of political awareness and proposals. In this vein, commentators resorted to simplistic, reductionist, and derogatory characterisations of left-wing politics instead of discussing Podemos' policy proposals.

Populism – or demagoguery –, and its allusion to Venezuelan politics, was key in this discursive construction that ultimately presented Podemos as a threat not only to established politics, but even to democracy itself. An article in *El País* read:

*In Latin America, demagogues reach power, and take over the people's will, instituting tyranny. This happened in Venezuela, whose government inspired (and on occasion funded) Podemos' leaders. One would imagine that Venezuela's obvious tragedy would be enough for sound voters to be dissuaded from importing this political model. But soundness is not a virtue that is democratically distributed.* (Krauze, 2015)

If SYRIZA was covered as a threat to the Greek economic stability, Podemos' was constructed as a risk to the democratic system in Spain (Calleja & Mira, 2015; Jabois, 2015). There were voices associating Podemos with the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War too. In this vein, Sostres (2015), an extremely controversial right-wing commentator, warned in *El Mundo*:

*If we managed to save our lives, it would be the first time that the extreme left is in power and does not kill us all. Podemos is nostalgic of a horrifying bloodbath... Most of those who will not vote on Sunday will be hunted for in their houses on Monday. This is an imminent danger: firing squads are only a step-up from 'escraches'*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>'Escraches' are a form of protest consisting of standing outside the private houses of political representatives. In recent years it has been used by activists fighting against draconian mortgage clauses.

Such hyperbole, drawing links of equivalence between Podemos' populism and so-called left-wing authoritarian regimes, to the Republican faction in the Spanish Civil War, or to political systems with questionable democratic standards (such as Venezuela) constructs Podemos as an extremist, revolutionary party which would pose a threat to Spanish democracy. An extreme case formulation opposes Podemos' 'impracticable policies' and the threat the party poses to democracy on one side of this constructed spectrum, against the 'stability' and the democratic credentials of mainstream political parties. This construction does not only undermine Podemos' credibility as a legitimate political actor: it also contributes to justify the soundness of mainstream parties' policies (including austerity policies).

The press in both countries uses populism as a central signifier of political threat and a discursive mechanism for the delegitimisation of the left. Such anti-populist discourses, Stavrakakis and Katsambekis(2014) argue, have proliferated during the crisis and ultimately aim at the discursive policing and political marginalisation of emerging anti-austerity voices.

### **Affectivepolitics and the win of SYRIZA**

Anti-populist rhetoric and the construction of SYRIZA's anti-austerity politics as a threat to political and economic stability was prominent during the period before the general elections of January 2015 in Greece. At the same time, however, and given the fact that there were indications of a SYRIZA win, there was a slight change in the coverage of the party, or rather an addition of a further dimension in its discursive delegitimisation. This had to do with the drawing of a dichotomy between *affectivepolitics*, as reportedly expressed by SYRIZA and its voters, and *real politics*, represented by the political status quo. To the latter, SYRIZA was juxtaposed once again as inexperienced and lacking awareness. Stability in this period remains a nodal point against which the narratives of the forthcoming election are organised, but now this stability seems to be threatened not only by populism, but mostly by its emotional appeal.

In this context, there are two competing chains of equivalence constructed through the press coverage. On the one hand, SYRIZA is constructed as 'the tiny radical left party made of the utopian dream of lecture theatres, which suffered electoral bloating' (Georgakopoulos, 2015). The political propositions of the party are discussed in emotional terms, as 'lyrical promises', 'utopias', manipulations of the 'despair of the voters' and their 'hope'. Illustrative of this discursive trope is the following description of the party's pre-election campaign spot:

*SYRIZA's campaign draws from the value-tanks of the left, has empathy, passion, music that moves you...But how useful is the power of hope when it has no control over the reality it aspires to change? The discourse of SYRIZA blooms in ambiguity, blank points and inconsistencies. (Pagoulatos, 2015)*

On the other hand, 'inevitable reality' is expressed by the coalition government, and discussed along 'commitments' towards the European partners, 'Europe', 'necessary reforms'. 'Politics' and 'reality' are juxtaposed to 'the value-tanks of the left', 'empathy' and 'passion'. Interestingly, the predicted win of SYRIZA is mostly framed as a loss of the coalition government, caused by 'tactical' or 'strategic mistakes'. SYRIZA's win, in this context, is

constructed as the result of the manipulation of emotions rather than a ‘strategic’ or ‘tactical’ win. The party is still constructed as a risk but in that period

*The risk is that it's about a party of 3.5% leveraged to the hilt because of popular ire and populism* (Mitropoulos, 2015).

The construction of affect and emotions as a political undermines the politics of SYRIZA and the left as a legitimate political proposal to the economic solutions to the Euro crisis imposed by the Troika and implemented by the Greek coalition government. At the same time, however, it also undermines the everyday experience of citizens as a legitimate basis for politics. On the contrary, voters are constructed as emotionally driven and politically naive, at best, or ignorant, at worst.

### **Podemos and political inconsistency**

For Podemos, the period between the European Elections of 2014 and the local elections of 2015 also seemed to have enriched the discursive techniques of undermining the legitimacy of the party as a political alternative. The framing of the party as a populist threat continued, and was most prominent in the conservatives *ABC* and *El Mundo*, which still identified Podemos’ political project as ‘*authoritarian. An anti-capitalist project that goes against the basis of the system*’ (Camacho, 2015).

This discursive repertoire aside, there was a further practice of neutralising the party’s politics through the press coverage. Although Podemos did not officially participate in the municipal elections 2015, the party had already gained momentum and become more vocal in Spanish politics. This seemed to signal a move from its framing as being a threat – although this framing was not completely abandoned – to the neutralising of the political voice of the party through a double process. On the one hand, the newspapers constructed Podemos as a moderate party, which had abandoned its radicalism and novel ideas:

*Podemos’ manifesto has switched to the centre, abandoning their more radical ideas, such as the sovereign debt default, or the basic universal allowance* (Manetto, 2015)

*Podemos has been switching towards the centre in recent weeks, hoping to appeal to a wider sector of the electorate* (El Mundo, 2015b)

*Podemos has turned into one of the parties that it aimed to destroy* (Pérez-Maura, 2015)

Described as centrist in its politics, the party is no longer undermined because it stands in opposition to the stability provided by the existing status quo, but precisely because it becomes part of the status quo. By creating equivalence between Podemos’ political propositions and mainstream parties, the novelty of the party and the distinctiveness of its anti-austerity politics are neutralised.

This is further supported through the presentation of the other parties as equally changed. In an article in *El País*, the reporters describe how the legacy of the Indignados movement has trickled down to all parties in the Spanish political spectrum:

*After four years of the emergence of 15-M movement [Indignados], its political impact is still clear. Its legacy is reflected in the surge of Podemos, but also in the policy proposals in the manifestos of mainstream parties: the democratisation of politics, the fight against corruption, and the participation of citizens in political institutions are central issues in nowadays' political debates, and have been incorporated into the manifestos of all parties*(García de Blas & Gálvez, 2015)

Podemos is a party directly born from the Indignados movement, a relationship that has been highlighted both in the press and by the party itself. This relationship has attributed to the party an inclusive character, expressing the voice of the citizens. The suggestion that all parties had been equally transformed by the Indignados contributes to the neutralisation of Podemos' voice further, since it undermines its distinctiveness by muting its transformative anti-austerity agenda. At the same time, it further legitimises mainstream parties as attentive to the demands of the citizens participating in the protest movement and transforming themselves accordingly.

At the same time, the framing of the party as a threat did not subside. Indeed, *El Mundo* warned that the apparent moderation of Podemos was only a political manoeuvre, as

*they will not betray their radical origins, and are still infatuated with Latin American populism. Their economic ideas are based on a disproportionate increase in public spending that would necessarily bring our country back to the disastrous context that led to the current economic crisis* (*El Mundo*, 2015a)

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, we employed textual analysis to explore the pre-election press coverage of the two most prominent anti-austerity parties in Europe. The chapter has illustrated the role of the mainstream press in the discursive processes through which these new left parties and their anti-austerity positions are delegitimised as valid political alternatives in Greece and Spain accordingly.

Despite the variations in the coverage of the two parties, two main discursive tropes were identified, namely their construction as political threats to political and economic stability, and the delegitimation or neutralisation of their policies. This coverage drew upon an anti-populist discourse that drew parallels between the two parties and what was described as catastrophic populism, namely PASOK in the case of SYRIZA, and Latin American populism in Spain. The process of delegitimation occurred through systematically neglecting both. At the same time, the parties' policy proposals were systematically ignored and their rhetoric was presented as purely emotional, vague, utopian, unrealistic, or impracticable.

We do not argue that the field of representations of the two parties is restricted to these newspapers, as there are of course alternative narratives provided both in other mainstream and especially alternative media. Given the privileged status, however, of these media, exploring their coverage offers insights into the ways hegemonic ideas about the left are reproduced under conditions of financial crisis. Framing SYRIZA and Podemos as extreme populist or radical parties constructs, by extension, anti-austerity arguments as equally extreme political positions. This further legitimises imposed austerity policies and reifies neoliberal definitions and



narratives of the crisis. Consequently, this presentation of anti-austerity parties implicitly supports the traditional political actors effectively safeguarding the status quo. Such discursive struggles are, of course, open-ended and in constant flux– and always ongoing.

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