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Party Systems in Disarray, and the Emergence and Consolidation of New Actors in Southern Europe

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At the start of 2014, as the run-up to the May European Parliament elections started to gain speed, an unprecedented nervousness prevailed amongst EU political elites. The negative effects of crisis-management measures were acutely felt, recovery was not in sight in most member countries, and the Euro-crisis and its clumsy management had placed EU affairs at the centre of domestic politics like never before. Opinion polls showed a drop in support for the EU and its institutions, and Eurosceptic and Euro-critical parties were on the rise in almost all Member States. Brussels and national capitals were gripped by the fear that the quintessentially integrationist EU institution, the European Parliament, may become dominated or strongly influenced by the anti-European fringe as the result of a combination of protest votes, dismal turnouts, indifference, and disappointment in the traditionally pro-European constituencies.

Southern Europe, hard hit by five years of austerity, recession, unemployment and record emigration rates, had seen the largest drop in trust for national and European political institutions. The party systems of southern EU states arrived at the election year in very different circumstances. Following the dramatic ousting of their elected Prime Ministers, under overwhelming external pressure, Greece and Italy had, since 2012, undergone radical shake-ups of their electoral landscapes: "protest elections" (Verney & Bosco, 2013) were held twice (in 2012 in Greece, in 2013 in Italy), and resulted in technocratic cross-partisan governments. In both countries, some of the traditional main players (the Pan-

hellenic Socialist Movement – PASOK in Greece, Forza Italia in Italy) lost their position as the largest opposition parties to emerging forces from outside the political mainstream (Syriza, Movimento Cinque Stelle – M5S). The Greek and Italian party systems were being clearly reconfigured. By contrast, the two Iberian democracies, with their deeply wounded economies and societies, had adjusted to the shock by the more traditional mechanism of substituting socialist governments, tainted by the early management of the crisis, by the other traditional mainstream party of the centre-right. The two-party system established in Portugal and Spain shortly after their transition to democracy was weakened, polls showed a growth in other parties, but the leading actors remained unchanged, despite the visible divorce between large parts of the population and the governing political elite.

In the event, the European Parliament elections were not the sea change some had feared half a year before the elections. Turnout stabilised at a record low (after falling continuously since 1979), with Western and Southern Europe largely compensating for the dismal Central and Eastern European rates. Mainstream parties still managed to retain a substantial part of the vote, providing most of the MEPs. Eurosceptic parties of the populist radical right, despite successes in countries like Britain and France, remained a marginal, and divided, force in the new Parliament.

In **Greece**, Syriza, the coalition of the radical left, clearly won the European election under Alexis Tsipras' leadership with 26.5% of the vote, almost 4% more than the governing Nea Demokratia. PASOK, the junior partner in government, could do nothing to stop its decline, and with 8% of the vote, the coalition it led finished behind the xenophobic extreme right party Golden Dawn (9.4%). To Potami,

a recently-created centrist pro-European coalition, was not far behind PASOK, with 6.6% of the vote. The European elections, furthermore, were an opportunity for Alexis Tsipras, who became the candidate of the United European Left to the post of President of the European Commission, to both reaffirm his leadership in Syriza, and consolidate the party's turn towards Europe. The European Parliament elections coincided with the second round of local elections, where Nea Demokratia obtained 26.3% and a substantial part of local and regional power, whereas Syriza won just 17.7% of the vote taking two prefectures (the Ionian Islands and, crucially, Attica, the most populous) against Nea Demokratia's six. Given Syriza's weak territorial presence, however, that was considered a good result for Tsipras' party. The two May elections, therefore, consolidated Syriza's popularity amongst voters, as well as its reach beyond the left and into the centre-left, previously a source of PASOK supporters.

In **Italy**, the elections were the first nationwide test to Matteo Renzi's popularity as Prime Minister, and resulted in a widespread endorsement: with 40.8% of the ballots, the Democratic Party won a result better than that of any other party in an Italian nationwide election since Christian Democracy in the 1950s. The Democratic Party won the most votes of any single party anywhere in the European Parliament elections, and gained the largest number of MEPs. Renzi, the most successful Social Democratic leader in Europe, used his new prestige to increase Italy's influence with the designation of Federica Mogherini as the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and reinforced his position as Prime Minister at home. In the same election, Forza Italia, which ran an unprecedented campaign in terms of its anti-European tone, came a distant third, with 16.8%, nearly 5 points behind Beppe Grillo's M5S (21.1%). Comfortably consolidated as the largest opposition force, the results demonstrated that M5S' voter base was not as volatile as mainstream parties had hoped after its strong performance in 2013. The anti-European, xenophobic position in Italy was represented by Lega Nord, who obtained 6% of the votes, a modest result compared to similar parties in other EU countries.

Although it was not immediately apparent when the results emerged, the European Parliament elections were a turning point in **Spain**. The two main parties

that had dominated Spanish democracy for decades, the People's Party (PP) on the centre-right and Socialist Party (PSOE) on the centre-left, failed to get 50% of the vote with their combined results (26% PP, 23% PSOE); a bad result, but incomparable to the complete transformation of Italian and Greek politics since the previous election. Two parties that seemed to pose the biggest threat to the two-party system, the United Left (IU) (10.6%) and the centre reformist UPyD (6.5%), saw their prospects disappointed in relation to opinion polls during the crisis years – it turned out, in hindsight, that they were past their peak and about to enter a phase of decline. The biggest surprise was a newly created party, Podemos, which combined some of the energy of the new Spanish activism, the traditional far-left, a charismatic and media-savvy leadership and a new, progressive brand of populism. Created in January 2014, Podemos' rise had barely registered in the polls and media; their 8% of the vote surprised even their own leaders and activists. Podemos got all the attention, but a small party, Ciudadanos, which had been in the Catalan Parliament since 2006, managed to break out of its geographical origins and win a modest 500,000 votes, two-thirds of them in other regions, a new, nearly unnoticed presence in the political centre.

In **Portugal**, the worst-hit country in the euro-crisis after Greece and Cyprus, the party system remained stable. The opposition Socialist Party won with 34% of the vote, followed by the governing centre-right coalition, with 30%. Although some new actors did emerge, such as Partido da Terra and Livre, the correlation of forces was not substantially altered in the elections. Just like Spain, and given the depth of its crisis, Portugal was, in contrast with most EU countries, remarkable for what did not happen: no sign of a clearly anti-European, anti-immigration party emerging.

After the May elections, opinion polls until the end of 2014 confirmed many of the trends that emerged in the results. In Italy, Renzi's Democratic Party led the polls for the whole year, and M5S remained the second party. Forza Italia did not recover from its crisis and had to face the additional challenge of a resurgent Lega Nord. In Portugal, by the end of the year – and nine months before the general election – the Socialists enjoyed a 5-10% lead in the polls over the governing PSD, reinforced by the mayor of Lis-

bon António Costa's landslide victory to become the party leader in its first ever open primary.

In Greece, Syriza began preparing its arrival to power, and Alexis Tsipras was busy meeting EU leaders and international investors to reassure them of the party's commitment to preserve Greece's membership in the eurozone. With an impending crisis looming for March 2015, coinciding with the government's almost impossible task to elect a new President of the Republic, Prime Minister Samaras embarked on a risky course of bringing the presidential elections forward to December 2014. He failed to secure a sufficient majority and had to call a general election. So, at the year's end, Greece was heading toward early elections in January 2015, with all polls pointing to a Syriza victory.

In Spain, the results of the May election shook the country and opened a new phase. By November, some polls started to rate Podemos first in voting intentions, and they all showed roughly comparable support for Podemos, the PP and the Socialist Party. The two-party system was weakened beyond recognition, and the two major parties were not the only victims: voting intentions for the United Left and UPyD started a rapid descent, swept aside by the purple tide of Podemos, by far the favourite for younger voters, which was preparing to "take heaven by storm" (Torreblanca, 2015). Hopes that the Socialist party would crumble like PASOK had in Greece did not materialise – the new leadership of Pedro Sanchez, in fact, stabilised PSOE's popularity at above 20% – nor did the PP show any signs of losing its predominant position in certain core constituencies, such as those dominated by elderly voters. In this rapidly changing context, Spain was about to face a series of elections in 2015, concluding with national legislative elections in the autumn, which would confirm or disprove the depth of the change in Spain's party system.

At the end of 2014, Southern Europe had become an uncertain but vibrant political space, holding the promise of progressive policy change. François Hollande's troubles in France and his security-oriented, centrist move to appoint Manuel Valls as Prime Minister ensured Renzi's position as Europe's main progressive leader. On issues such as the treatment of irregular migrants and sea rescues, the Italian government started to adopt a differentiated stance in the European context. In other matters though, such

as economic reform, it quietly followed the line defended by Berlin and Brussels, although not without this causing domestic challenges. Meanwhile, the distinct possibility that the non-Socialist left could take power in Greece and mount a head-on challenge to the austerity paradigm concentrated all European eyes on Syriza. In Spain, the electrifying energy of the 15-M movement (*Indignados*) of 2011 seemed to finally have found a successful political party outlet in Podemos, one that could perhaps force deeper change than either of the two mainstream parties would ever have tried.

The big question at the end of 2014 was what the net result would be of the complete realignment of the Italian, Greek and (possibly) Spanish party systems. On the one hand, the new times seemed to contain the promise of a broader spectrum of policy solutions; of better connection between civil society organisations and new activism and the centres of political power and policy-making; of a real challenge to the old, corrupted ways of conducting politics; of tangible progress in rights, liberties, participation and accountability; and of a redress of the abysmal levels of trust in politics. On the other hand, the new scenarios re-opened the fears for the stability of the eurozone, in particular in relation to the Greek situation; of populist promises that may be disappointed, feeding the spiral of cynicism and apathy; and of increasingly unstable systems, where consensus and majorities would become more and more difficult to reach, with enduring consequences on governance. The initial fears in Italy and Greece, however, that the new party configuration would result in endless instability, were not confirmed in 2014; the political systems of Southern Europe, instead, proved able to accommodate the emerging forces and aspirations in society, and to re-imagine the political game with new actors.

References

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