

THE RISE OF POPULISM IN SPAIN — AN ANALYSIS OF HEGEMONIC STRUGGLES AND SHIFTS IN POWER RELATIONS

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In this paper I develop an explanatory approach to the specific social conditions of alternative variants of populism in Spain, focusing on how the hegemonic positions of different political actors have developed in Spain since the crisis-related reorganization processes. To approach these issues, I'm conducting a qualitative media and document analysis and expert interviews. Initial findings indicate that the euro crisis and the protest movements around the 15-M seem to have acted as a destitute moment in which the previous social and hegemonic order was called into question. The Spanish government reacted to this political uprising with more repression. This situation enabled new actors to enter the political arena and made new forms of politics (populism) necessary to achieve hegemony.

Keywords: *Populism, Hegemony, Crisis, Power actors, Spain*

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EL ASCENSO DEL POPULISMO EN ESPAÑA - UN ANÁLISIS DE LAS LUCHAS HEGEMÓNICAS Y LOS CAMBIOS EN LAS RELACIONES DE PODER

En este trabajo desarrollo un enfoque explicativo de las variantes del populismo en España, centrándome en cómo se han desarrollado las posiciones hegemónicas de los diferentes actores políticos en este país. Para abordar estas cuestiones, realizo un análisis cualitativo de distintas fuentes: leyes, informes, artículos de prensa, así como entrevistas a expertas y expertos. Los primeros resultados indican que la crisis del euro y los movimientos de protesta en torno al 15-M parecen haber actuado como un momento destituyente que puso en cuestión el orden social y hegemónico anterior. El gobierno español reaccionó a este levantamiento político con más represión. Esta situación permitió la entrada de nuevos actores e hizo necesarias nuevas formas de hacer política (populismo) para conseguir la hegemonía.

Palabras clave: *Populismo, Hegemonía, Crisis, Actores de poder, España*

Introduction – Topic and research question

Fourteen years after the outbreak of the global financial crisis, which developed into a European economic and monetary crisis, the European Union and its member states are still in a cycle of political and economic crisis. Particularly in the southern European states, this European crisis has not only called into question their economic status, but also many of the social and political consensuses of recent decades – in some cases even the legitimacy of the previous state order. Populist actors profit from these instabilities and challenge the political systems. Spain is in a process of political and cultural changes. It is particularly noticeable that in the last decade new actors, all with a strong socio-political resonance, have emerged. Spain is a particularly interesting case since it is one of the few European country cases in which two competing forms of populism (from the left and the right) have appeared. In parallel with the emergence of populist actors, the question of how this emergence should be understood is becoming increasingly important. My starting point for understanding the rise of the various populist parties in Spain are the socio-political conditions in this country. My analysis sheds light on how populism as a (new) form of politics goes hand in hand with the changed form of the state (towards authoritarianism) and the changed mode of hegemony (fragmented).

Based on this, I intend to answer the following research question: How have the power relations (power actors and hegemonic positions) developed in the course of the crisis-related reorganization processes in Spain? And in that context: in what way are these processes related to the emergence of populist actors? This study approaches the above questions by focusing on the period where these new party-political actors emerged i.e. approx. 2014 to 2020.

The following structure guides this article: In the section ‘Theoretical Perspectives on State, Hegemony and Populism’ I first look at existing research on the topic of populism. In a further step, I discuss some of my theoretical stance on state theory and hegemony and investigate how to assess populism from a state and hegemony theoretical perspective. The section ‘Methodological Approach’ deals with the operationalization of the concept and method of analysis. The section ‘Populism: A Question of Underlying Power Relations’ turns to the short empirical investigation of the Spanish case. Finally, I summarize the findings of the overall analysis and give a little outlook on further developments in the section ‘The future of populism in Spain’

1. Populism: A question of underlying power relations

The scientific field of populism research has existed since the mid-20th century. Scholars with a wide variety of approaches, such as Margaret Canovan, Stuart Hall, Ernesto Laclau, Cas Mudde and Karin Priester – to name some – have dedicated themselves to this controversial topic (Canovan, 1981; Hall, 2014a; Laclau, 2005;

Mudde, 2007; Priester, 2007). The topic gained renewed attention in the context of the emergence and strengthening of new populist actors. In recent years, a great deal of literature on populism has emerged and especially political science is intensively devoted to this phenomenon (f. ex.: Mudde, 2019; Mudde/Kaltwasser, 2017; Jörke/Selk, 2017; Müller, 2016).

The starting point is the seemingly biggest problem of populism research: to formulate a clear definition of its object of study. The more inflationary the term is applied, the more blurred it becomes. A very well-known approach is the idea-based approach (Mudde/Kaltwasser, 2017; also Priester, 2007).² According to Mudde and Kaltwasser the form populism takes depends on the “the socioeconomic and sociopolitical context in which populism emerges [...] This means that the thin-centered nature of populism allows it to be malleable enough to adopt distinctive shapes at different times and places.” (Mudde/Kaltwasser, 2017: 8).

However, how exactly this socio-economic and political context looks like and how it conditions populism ultimately remains unanswered. Due to the positivist scientific conception of these theories, the object of knowledge of the idea-oriented approach is primarily the empirical analysis and comparison of political forces that are described as populist, whereby the historical and structural context of populist forces is not or hardly included in the analysis (Boos, 2021: 41). To understand the emergence of populism, however, it is particularly important to analyze not only the phenomenon, but especially the conditions that give rise to it. Numerous time-agnostic research has highlighted that the rise of populism in recent years is not accidental but related to the political processes of recent years and attribute the emergence of populism to a neoliberal-post-democratic condition (f.ex.: Jörke/Selk, 2017, 2018; Fraser, 2017a, 2017b; Marchart, 2017; Mouffe, 2018; Stavrakakis, 2016, 2018).

The starting point for an analysis of actors classified as populists can therefore only lie in the respective social conditions and power-political contingencies. An analysis of populism is an analysis of the current balance of power. From this insight, a materialist and hegemony-theoretical analysis of populism – following Antonio Gramsci, Nicos Poulantzas and their further developments³ – contains potential for a contemporary analysis of populism.

To approach a materialist and hegemony-theoretical definition of populism in the current situation, especially in Europe, three concepts are of importance: authoritarian competitive etatism, fragmented hegemony and populism (Schafgans

² It can be distinguished at least between four different strands of definition of populism: idea-oriented, discourse-oriented, economic and cultural approaches.

³ In the context of materialist theorising, there are numerous academic debates on the explanation of populism. Most of them refer to the work of Poulantzas (2002) and Gramsci (2012): Book et al. (2020); Demirović (2018); Fraser (2017a; 2017b); Hall (2014a).

Muñoz, 2022). With recourse to Nicos Poulantzas and his updating by Lukas Oberndorfer, the new normal form of the state, which becomes dominant with neoliberalism, can be characterized in its current form in Europe as authoritarian competitive etatism⁴. Since the outbreak of the global economic crisis of 2007–08, the existing authoritarian elements in liberal democracies have become particularly acute. Authoritarian competitive etatism seems to be becoming the new normal form (Oberndorfer, 2017: 182). It is characterized by an etatist strengthening of the executives at the expense of the parliamentary legislatures and the judiciary, by increasing ad hoc decisions by these executives that take place without sufficient constitutional and legal foundations. This leads to an intensified isolation of the decision-making process, by the increased use of repressive surveillance mechanisms as well as by a restriction of the freedoms of the subalterns (Oberndorfer, 2012: 68; Yalvaç/Joseph, 2019: 793; Poulantzas, 2002: 231f.).

This transformation of the state or of state policy is caused by a split and a permanent instability of the hegemony of the rulers – neoliberal policy thus comes up against its limits. The mediation and fulfilment of the various demands of the different factions of the power actors on the one hand and the democratic connection of the subalterns on the other is becoming increasingly difficult (Yalvaç/Joseph, 2019: 800). One consequence of this is the increased compression and intensification of the social selectivity of executive institutions, especially to the detriment of possible claims and the inclusion of the subaltern. Competitive authoritarianism thus represents “a fundamental turn in the way a ruling bloc attempts to establish hegemony in capitalist class democracies” (Hall, 2014b: 123, own translation). It is a precondition for the mode of fragmented hegemony and the new forms of populist politics that emerge from it.

There is a shift in the form in which hegemony is mediated and a new form of domination prevails: fragmented hegemony. Dirk Martin and Jens Wissel (2015, 2018) assume that hegemony remains the central mode of power mediation and that the non-hegemonic techniques of power can themselves be mediated hegemonically. The current mode of power can be characterized as fragmented hegemony, a formation of rule in crisis. Following Gill (2000: 32), there is a shift in the weighting of consensus and coercion: ‘governing with coercion and fear, social and spatial fragmentation are increasing to a considerable extent’ (Martin/Wissel, 2018: 227). Coercion is armored with consensus and not (any longer) the other way round (Gill, 2000: 32).

Fragmented hegemony as a current mode of power mediation can be characterized as a hybrid form of domination that combines hegemonic with non-hegemonic mechanisms of domination. This form of hegemony can rely on the fragmented

⁴ Poulantzas uses the term authoritarian etatism to describe a new form of state that he saw emerging in the course of the economic and political crisis processes of the 1970s. Lukas Oberndorfer describes the current developments as “authoritarian competitive etatism” (Oberndorfer 2012).

and hybrid character of everyday understanding and contributes to its reproduction and persistence (Martin/Wissel, 2015). In this hegemonic constellation, populism seems to be successful because it offers the subalterns a supposed solution and at the same time profits from the fragmented hegemony. Populism represents an attempt at a kind of modernization of old and new actors and, following Heinz Steinert (1999), is a certain conflictive form of politics that reacts to certain crisis dimensions (Steinert, 1999: 22). It is based on the conflictive division of society into two antagonistic camps by appealing to the most disadvantaged sectors against the “elite”. How these two terms are defined and what concrete form populism then takes depends on the respective social conditions.

Authoritarian competitive etatism and the mode of fragmented hegemony have particularly come to the fore in the neoliberal handling of the European crisis. At the European level, the political space has been sealed off by European crisis management: for example, independent economic policy instruments have been eliminated and democratically problematic institutions and constructions have been created – such as the ESM, the Troika or FRONTEX – that are not formally part of the institutional structure (Werner, 2013: 247f.). At the level of nation-states, the relationship between national executives and the pan-European level has strengthened, weakening the influence of other nation-state actors. National political actors have renounced to some elements of sovereignty and are thus more isolated from domestic social processes, which of course has an impact on their hegemonic consent in terms of subalterns. In fragmented hegemony, only a few subaltern groups are hegemonically integrated in the form that, on the one hand, economic concessions are only made selectively to certain social groups and, on the other hand, demands from parts of subordinated groups (women, migrants, LGBTQ+) are taken up, but attempts are made to integrate them into a neoliberal promise. This state of neoliberal politics is defined by Nancy Fraser as “progressive neoliberalism”. In this, the social security of wage earners continues to be exploited but reinterpreted and presented as the progress of the demands of different social movements. The result is that subaltern groups become even more divided ideologically, politically and economically (Fraser, 2017b: 72f.).

When the global financial crisis finally developed into a euro crisis in 2011, these tendencies were further exacerbated and lead to an intense, abrupt and simultaneous multiplication of unsatisfied demands that affected very different areas of the social order. Since the ongoing crisis dynamics are destroying many different social spaces and consensuses, consequently the demands are also very heterogeneous. Populism as a certain form of politics that is constituted with the aim of achieving hegemony, especially under the conditions of fragmented hegemony, is an attempt to change the balance of power. In this context, the crisis is “not a given state” and not a “passive status quo to be defended” (Hall, 2014c: 119 and 104). The crisis has taken old and new actors beyond a passive point. To survive, it is necessary to renew oneself, to refocus forces and to realign oneself. In the current situation, populist politics is

successful because it provides subjective forms for parts of the population to deal with the current crisis and makes an offer to navigate the fragmented hegemony. Benjamin Arditi expresses the intertwining of populism and hegemony such:

“The specific difference that populism introduces vis-à-vis hegemony is the division of society into two camps to produce a relation of equivalence among demands and construct a frontier or antagonistic relation between them. This is why populism can be said to be a species of the genus hegemony, the species that calls into question the existing order with the purpose of constructing another” (Arditi 2010: 492-493).⁵

Populism as a political form fits perfectly into the partial and fragmented hegemony, as it adopts and at the same time transforms its logic in the form of antagonistic demarcation and division between two groups (“elite” vs. “people”): “It offers a [...] language to put these contradictions into words and a repertoire of attitudes to bear them” (Opratko, 2017: 124). The strategy of populism is also successful because it provides a moral framework that takes political processes and experiences and organizes them into evaluative categories such as “good” or “bad”. Populism is one of the ways in which the consent of the subaltern can be constructed by a project that seeks hegemony in such a way that it harnesses popular discontent, neutralizes opposing forces, splits the opposition and incorporates some strategic elements of public opinion into its own project of hegemony (Hall, 2014b: 124).

2. Methodological approach

The research question guiding this paper and my thesis is how the power relations (power actors, strategies and hegemonic positions) developed in the course of the crisis-related reorganization processes in Spain since 2014 and in what way these processes are related to the emergence of populist actors. For the analysis, the aim is to highlight the most important historical and material dynamics, to reveal the power and domination relations and to show its emergence from the interplay of both structural factors and contingent social processes (Caterina, 2017: 132). Which structural factors and historical developments have contributed to the development of populism in its specific form? The next step is to identify the actors struggling with each other in the conflict and to differentiate them based on their hegemony strategies and power sources. The main objective is to depict the mutual struggle of social forces for social and political hegemony (Buckel et al., 2014: 58, Kannankulam/Georgi, 2012: 40).

⁵ In this regard, he distinguishes between different types of hegemony such as “the institutionalist discourse,” whose essence is to maintain the status quo” (Arditi 2010: 493).

The data material for the elaboration of the context came mainly from secondary sources. To classify the actors and to describe the strategies and the power relations, I carried out a document analysis. In addition, I conducted guided interviews with experts. Consequently, by using different approaches to sources that are relevant for a qualitative policy analysis, I work with methodological pluralism. This methodological pluralism is suitable to mitigate possible deficits and methodological inherent shortcomings of qualitative data collection at least partially (Kaiser, 2014: 31f.; Syrovatka, 2016: 41). The corpus of the analysis includes laws, position and working papers and press releases, and articles in the Spanish-language press, which were collected with keyword searches in the online archives of the newspapers *ABC*, *El Mundo* and *El País* and supplemented by articles in other newspapers, as well as ten expert interviews conducted between 2021 and 2022. The interviews, the document and media analysis were evaluated in the sense of a qualitative content analysis (cf. Mayring, 2015; Kaiser, 2014). The aim of qualitative content analysis is to explore social facts and uncover causal relationships through systematic analysis (Bogner et al., 2014: 73).

Derived from the research question, further research guiding questions were formulated and analysis dimensions were created and finally various categories (codes) as a basis for the analysis of the texts and interviews. Although this category system is constructed based on theory, research question, and hypotheses, it is repeatedly supplemented and revised in connection with the empirical material during the analysis, so that many categories are also developed on the text itself (Kaiser, 2014: 101; Mayring, 2015: 51f.). With the help of qualitative content analysis, I identify the relevant actors, their strategies and their actions. Through coding, I place the individual elements in relation to each other and provide information about changes and development. I analyzed the primary sources with the help of MAXQDA software, which, among other things, makes it possible to digitally “code” the data based on personalized code systems.

3. Hegemonic struggles and rise of populism in Spain

The Great Recession of 2008 hit Spain economically hard, leading in turn to a political crisis characterized through a crisis of political representation. At first this crisis of political representation manifested through the emergence and rising of democratizing movements such as the 15-M movement as a protest against the erosion of the welfare state in the wake of the economic crisis (Alba Rico, 2011: 28; Haynes Campos, 2019: 139). Spanish political elites saw their legitimacy dwindle in a climate of intense social contestation and protest on an unprecedented scale. This situation eventually led to a populist moment (Tamames, 2021: 144f.). The protest movements revealed the hardening and reduced corridor of possibilities of the Spanish state apparatus ensemble: the demands of the population were increasingly marginalized and hardly or only very fragmentedly incorporated. Individual frustrations and

interests thus remain outside the channels of representation and negotiation – the representation of social interests in parliamentary democracy took less and less place (Errejón, 2011: 135). This happened especially as “[t]heir own hardening and the limited scope for political action due to the crisis make it impossible or difficult for state apparatuses to materially reintegrate societal demands” (Huke, 2016: 36f., own translation).

In response, authoritarian and repressive mechanisms have been employed. A good example of this is the “*Ley Orgánica de protección de la seguridad ciudadana*” (Law for the Protection of Civil Security).⁶ The so-called *ley mordaza*, but also the state’s handling of the crisis in Catalonia, suggest that securing power by the ruling actors was increasingly only possible through authoritarian strategies, as there was no consensus both within the ruling bloc and outside. The protest movements around the 15-M seem to have acted as a destituent moment in which the previous social and hegemonic order was called into question (Huke, 2016: 36). The Spanish government reacted to this “explosion of democratic claims” (Poulantzas, 2002: 277) with more repression, i.e. with a further shift in the weighting of consensus and coercion towards coercion, in the sense of the “vicious circle of post-hegemonic authoritarianism” (Solty/Gill, 2013: 93).

The fact that the authoritarian implementation of austerity policies – and thus an enforcement of the authoritarian competitive etatism – is leaving its mark on the Spanish social and political system became apparent in 2015 at the latest, when new actors reached the parliamentary stage:

The first was the left-populist party *Podemos* (“We Can”) that emerged in January 2014. The high proportion of intellectuals with a background in social philosophy or political science among the founders of *Podemos* is remarkable. Some of them also represent discourse and hegemony theory approaches in the wake of Gramsci and Laclau, such as Pablo Iglesias and Íñigo Errejón, who were also in direct exchange with the mothers of a neo-Gramscian theory of Populism Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffé, so that they play not only a reflexive but also a practical role in strategy formation at *Podemos* (cf. Errejón, 2014; Errejón/Mouffé, 2015). In the first phase, *Podemos* described itself as a left-wing populist party, that had emerged with the goal of governing. In the meantime, *Podemos* was third, second, or even strongest in the polls and even had a real chance of winning the November 2015 general elections (El País, 07.03.2015). Then, in 2017, a rift occurred in *Vistalegre II* (*Podemos’* Citizen Assembly) over the question of what the future strategy of the party would look like. Pablo Iglesias even said: “The great debate that we have to discuss in these months is whether *Podemos* has to continue being populist or

⁶ Among other things, this law criminalized many forms of protest by the new social movements by defining them as administrative offences and imposing very high. More on this in Caceres/Oberndorfer (2013).

not” (El País, 06.10.2016). This ultimately led to a rupture in the party and the adoption of more traditionally leftist postulates and strategies moving away from more transversal discourses.

Two aspects are important to understand this development in *Podemos*: first, the shock of what happened in Greece, and second, the creation of *Ciudadanos* and the national pressure. The intervention and blocking power of European institutions regarding the Syriza government was a great disappointment for leftist forces and was considered a forewarning for other countries, especially in southern Europe. This did not leave *Podemos* untouched. A co-founder of *Podemos* and former *Podemos* Commissioner for Culture and Education puts it this way in an interview:

“Pablo Iglesias and the people around him are terrified of becoming Tsipras, someone who is being beaten by Europe. So they think: I win power but at the cost of what, of coming to power and not being able to do anything and go down in history as a failure who has sold out his country, who has had to manage the defeat with the negotiation in Brussels and with Merkel and become a social democrat not because of ideology but because you have no social or national power to take your country’s policy further” (Interview 6, min. 10:40, own translation).

Also the appearance of *Ciudadanos*⁷ at the national level had an enormous impact on *Podemos*’ development. *Ciudadanos* was presented for the first time at the national level, in the parliamentary elections of 2015 and became already at this point the fourth strongest force. Many voices claim that behind the sudden strengthening of the party there was an interest of the economic and financial powers to use it as the best means to palliate the rise of *Podemos*. Of course, it is difficult to prove the coherency of this argument, but there are some statements that could be interpreted in this direction. For example, the president of Banco Sabadell suggested in a humorous tone “creating a kind of right-wing *Podemos*. Because the *Podemos* we have scares us a little, but a *Podemos* that is more focused on private initiative and on the possibility of developing the country, that would indeed be beneficial for us” (quoted in La Sexta, 26.06.2014, own translation). In the same tone, a PP deputy stated:

⁷ In this context, it is important to elaborate on the role and national expansion of *Ciudadanos*. *Ciudadanos* was founded in Barcelona in 2006 and has its roots in the *Ciudadans de Catalunya* (Citizens of Catalonia) civic platform. Initially, the party was active at the regional level in Catalonia, but quickly sought to spread nationally. In 2014 and 2015, the party sealed alliances with several smaller parties as part of its national implementation strategy. Overall, *Ciudadanos* can be located as a liberal to right-wing liberal party.

“There has been a bugle call from the establishment because everyone knows that Spain has much more at stake than it seems in this year’s elections. And Rivera is not seen as dangerous as Pablo Iglesias. He does not scare, and we have to continue to put on a show so that the change can bear fruit” (El Mundo, 22.02.2015, own translation).

Ciudadanos managed to present itself as an alternative to *Podemos*, which was also young and not corrupt, and did not belong to the old elites. In addition, *Ciudadanos* succeeded in making

“Podemos appear to public opinion as a traditional left-wing party, instead of being seen as a party that, although it was formed by left-wing people who did not hide it, had an aspiration beyond the left that had to do with modernizing, regenerating, democratizing this country” (Interview 6, min. 25:33, own translation).

This example is a good illustration of what is meant by populism as a special kind of hegemony: a variant to achieve hegemony that questions the existing order to create a new one (Arditi 2010: 492). The opposition to the populist strategy of *Podemos* was so great because *Podemos* strove to question the existing order, at a moment when, through the authoritarian hardening of the system and the mode of fragmented hegemony, it met fertile ground.

The emergence of *Ciudadanos* also highlighted the rupture of Spanish political right. These fissures became widely visible on the parliamentary-representative stage. Within the PP there were many who criticized the management of the Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy. Also for example, the former Prime Minister José María Aznar (El Mundo, 23.01.2015). After 25 years, in 2016, FAES, the Think Tank of the PP created 2002 by José María Aznar, separated from the PP. But the PP was also strongly criticized from outside the party by the most conservative right-wing sectors, such as the *Asociación Víctimas del Terrorismo* (El Mundo, 26.01.2015). In the same way the PP received criticism from more actors more situated at the neoliberal sector. As the president of Banco Sabadell who said that neither PP nor PSOE are representative of business interests in Spain (elPeriódico, 25.06.2014). This disaffection increased even more with the crisis in Catalonia.

After the 2015 elections the two traditional parties lost massive votes. *Podemos* and its *confluencias*⁸ became the third strongest force with 20.66% and *Ciudadanos* fourth strongest with 13.69% (El País, 20.12.2015). The political system transformed to a moderately pluralist party system (Rodríguez Teruel et al., 2016; Simón, 2016). Thus, none of the parties had the necessary number of seats to govern alone. “For the first

⁸ This is the name given to the regional parties that exist in alliance with *Podemos*.

time in almost 40 years, government formation proved impossible” (Rama et al., 2021: 11). Therefore, all the neoliberal forces – nationally and internationally – spoke out in favor of a government of PP and *Ciudadanos* (El Mundo, 13.10.2015) because the greatest fear was that *Podemos* would come to government (El País 23.11.2014a, 23.11.2014b; La Vanguardia, 22.03.2015). The dramatic loss of approval of the PP, but also of the PSOE, shows that the euro rescue policy had been bought with the massive medium-term loss of confidence among the population and made visible the deep hegemonic crisis of the neoliberal project and the traditional political order – a favorable breeding ground for populism to succeed.

After several attempts to form a majority coalition failed, new elections were held in June 2016. However, the constellation after this election differed only slightly from the previous (El País, 26.06.2016). After strong disputes within the PSOE – some parts were in favor of supporting Mariano Rajoy, others, such as the top candidate Pedro Sánchez, were against – ultimately the PSOE supported Mariano Rajoy’s re-election as head of government by abstaining. But there were not only internal reasons for this decision. Like in 2015, largely all neoliberal forces launched a major public offensive against *Podemos* – such as international banks and rating agencies, which threatened further downgrades and pressure. In Jordi Évole’s well-known *La Sexta* interview with Pedro Sánchez in 2017, Pedro Sánchez clarified even more sharply what this pressure looked like: “Certain progressive media such as El País have told me that if there had been an agreement between PSOE and *Podemos*, they would criticize it and go against it” or “There were business leaders who worked for there to be a conservative government” (quoted in *La Sexta*, 12.11.2017, own translation). The opposition to the party-political representative of the left-wing populist project was thus more important in the overall neoliberal-conservative project und than the manifold dissent between the different actors.

In 2017 the political crisis in Spain reached its peak with Catalonia’s independence referendum on October 1. Although the constant disputes over the latent aspirations for independence of the peripheral territories had been a structural part of the political disputes since 1978 in Spain, the mobilization cycle 15-M in 2011 and the subsequent emergence of *Podemos* and the *confluencias* had managed to cause interruptions in this political conflict. This is the reason why the Catalonia conflict, especially in September and October 2017, reignited these discourses and led to the emergence of two opposing camps: While many Catalans helped shape the referendum, thousands of Spaniards demonstrated against it, joining in shouts of “Grab it right away!” (“*A por ellos!*”) gathered outside police stations. The windows also became a scene of this confrontation: while thousands of Catalan independence flags hung from windows in Catalonia, the rest of Spain reciprocated with Spanish flags (Rubio-Pueyo, 2019: 7).

VOX soon entered the stage as the party that knew how to articulate this reaction in political form. During this time, membership in VOX increased by 20% in 40 days (El Público, 02.10.2017). VOX was established at the end of 2013 by a group of

political figures that included dissatisfied members of the PP. This fact was of great help to VOX in establishing connections nationally, internationally and with all kinds of foundations and think tanks (Rubio-Pueyo, 2019: 7; Mendes/Dennison, 2020: 11). Santiago Abascal, the current president of VOX, was also a former member of the PP. He had been party advisor for Esperanza Aguirre, the chief representative of neoconservatism in the PP, and was active in the foundation DENAES (Foundation for the Defense of the Spanish Nation). DENAES is originally born to the right of the PP has been a real breeding ground for VOX, whose leaders have taken seats on the board of trustees and it works as a networking hub for many political cadres, journalists, and revisionist academics (eldiario.es, 12.04.2020; Rubio-Pueyo, 2019: 8).

Another important personality in the VOX sphere is Espinosa de los Monteros. His background exemplifies many of the traits shared by the majority of VOX's top leadership: degrees from elite private universities, both in Spain and abroad, and professional experience in major financial institutions and multinational corporations. Javier Ortega Smith, lawyer and a former soldier, is another relevant figure who embodies perhaps the connections with the world of the more traditional extreme right, such as his family ties with the Francisco Franco Foundation (Rubio-Pueyo, 2019: 8; El Público, 29.03.2019; El Confidencial, 23.11.19).

Further, an important actor that supports VOX is FAES, mentioned above, which functioned as the official think tank of the PP until 2016, when it broke its ties with the party. Although the break was supposedly due to financial issues, as FAES was interested in seeking private donations, the rupture pointed to deeper political reasons. FAES had long been issuing highly critical views of Rajoy's government, and Aznar himself has repeatedly criticized the "weak" positions taken by Rajoy on Catalonia, his failure to "take deficit and reforms seriously" and his alleged inability to unify the right, especially after the emergence of *Ciudadanos* and then the strengthening of VOX (El Mundo, 20.05.2016). Since then, FAES has operated as an independent political actor, constantly pushing for a reconfiguration of the entire right-wing political field. FAES' rapprochement with the *Ciudadanos* and VOX parties can be observed, as can the increase in its criticism of the PP: Rafael Bardají, for example, was an advisor to the Ministry of Defense during Aznar' term of office. He headed later the international policy department of FAES and is now political strategist of VOX (El Mundo, 04.02.2019). Rubio-Pueyo (2019) describes the connection between VOX and PP as following:

"In this sense, the presence of VOX can be read as that of a useful instrument in that reconfiguration, either as a force destined to lead such an operation by itself, or as a threat or incentive capable of forcing certain sectors within the PP to react" (Rubio-Pueyo 2019: 10).

There is one point that should be mentioned and that distinguishes VOX from some other right-wing populist parties in Europe: their economic program is (at least for now) neoliberal. While it is true that VOX has tried to reach out to working class voters by for example setting up information tables in working class neighborhoods, using slogans such as “*la España que madruga*” (“the Spain that wakes up early”) or creating a trade union, *Solidaridad*, its economic program is conspicuously lacking in terms of protectionist measures beyond vague mentions of plans for reindustrialization and energy autonomy. The bulk of its economic proposals consist of tax cuts, deregulation and privatization (VOX, 2019).

Although the Catalonia crisis contributed significantly to the activation of the nationalist identity cleavage, which is a favourable terrain for the spread of certain discourses of right-wing populism (Haynes Campos, 2019: 140), it can be said that reasons for the emergence of VOX are even more profound: First, the rise of VOX is a consequence of a certain division within the political, economic and media elites, which, as we have seen, has its roots in the wake of the euro crisis. This goes hand in hand with the authoritarian competitive etatism. This transformation of the state or state policy is caused by a split and a permanent instability of the hegemony of the rulers. Second, this hegemonical instability results in the fact that the mediation and fulfillment of the various demands of the different factions of the rulers on the one hand and the democratic connection of the subalterns on the other hand becomes more and more difficult. The ascent of VOX is also a reaction to this fragmented hegemony, that first enabled actors from the left to attempt a social and political change. 15-M, *Podemos* or the strong feminist movement have opened a space, that is left open, because these actors have not been able to carry through to the end a process of ideological transformation. This generates an opportunity for other actors and VOX appears as a very strong reaction (Interview 6, min. 34:37, own translation). At the same time, the state’s authoritarianism made it possible for authoritarian discourses to become more acceptable and to find their way into the common sense of the population.

The 2018 regional elections in Andalusia marked a turning point for the regional party system as VOX entered a regional parliament for the first time. The party system evolved from a four-party system that emerged in 2015 to a five-party system with VOX at the extreme end of the right-wing bloc, previously dominated by the PP (Turnbull-Dugarte, 2019: 6). The results of the 2019 general election clearly showed that the PP was no longer the dominant party of the centre-right, but that the area of the right political spectrum was fragmented, including *Ciudadanos* and VOX. The clearest example of this turn occurred on February 10, 2019, when the three right-wing leaders closed together a multitudinous demonstration in Madrid’s Plaza de Colón. The so-called “Colón photo” with Abascal placed in a prominent position next to Casado and Rivera, marked the entry of VOX in the front line of national politics – an entry clearly facilitated by PP and *Ciudadanos* (Rubio-Pueyo, 2019: 10). The collaboration of the PP and VOX (and also *Ciudadanos*) in

some regions indicates that VOX has positioned itself in the mainstream of the right as a “respectable” government partner. “In achieving this, it has occupied a political sphere to which it was initially alien, eradicating or eclipsing its actors, reconfiguring its discourse in a broad way and combining continuities with abrupt, profound and surprising ruptures” (Casals i Meseguer, 2020: 380, own translation).

Ultimately in 2020, after two elections (in April and November 2019) with a first failed attempt to form a government and consequently the call for new elections, a coalition government was finally formed under the presidency of Pedro Sánchez. The current cabinet is composed of members of the PSOE and *Unidas Podemos* and is the first nationwide coalition government to be formed in Spain since the Second Spanish Republic.

4. The future of populism in Spain

Initial findings indicate that the developments toward neoliberalism, authoritarian competitive etatism and fragmented hegemony have intensified and solidified enormously during the crisis processes in Spain. The euro crisis and the protest movements around the 15-M seem to have acted as a destitute moment in which the previous social and hegemonic order was called into question. The Spanish government reacted to this political uprising with more repression. This situation enabled new actors to enter the political arena and made new forms of politics (populism) necessary to achieve hegemony.

The persistence of the right-wing populist party VOX and, until now of *Ciudadanos*⁹, could point to further lines of division between different factions that no longer felt at home in the PP government. With the (sustained?) establishment of three or at least two parties that can in any case be attributed to the neoliberal or conservative project, these fissures are becoming widely visible on the parliamentary-representative stage. This division could indicate that although these parties are programmatically close, which is why they also cooperate, they differ on other aspects: First, on the question of their strategy for dealing with hegemony and second, while the PP supports the current political order and system in Spain, VOX questions it.

The old model has not yet been consolidated, nor has anything new taken its place; the situation continues to be one of political stalemate. In this context, the question arises as to whether the various factions of the power actors will succeed in reconciling their interests in the long term. At least at the party-political level, there are some voices demanding this: Some PP members such as Jose María Aznar for example demand the integration of the PP with VOX, as they see a

⁹ The poll numbers for *Ciudadanos* could also point to heavy losses and even a disappearance from regional and national parliaments.

“risk of extinction” of the PP if it does not integrate with VOX in an almost equal relationship (El País, 02.03.2021). Similarly, the President of the *Círculo de Empresarios*¹⁰ Manuel Pérez-Sala said that he would have nothing against a pact between the PP and VOX if it resulted in a focused economic policy (elDiario.es, 08.04.2021). The almost disappearance of *Ciudadanos* could also indicate that the right is regrouping in Spain. Also, this could suggest an attempt to integrate VOX and combat its populist character.

Another question that remains unanswered for the time being is whether a left-wing government was possible and what this means for the balance of forces in Spain. One possible explanation could be that unlike in 2016, the cracks in the right-wing power actors were so strong that this time not even the opposition to a government with *Unidas Podemos* could solve the manifold dissent within the power actors – they represent a partial and provisional defeat of the right-wing polarization strategy.

The coming months and years will be decisive to see how this process develops. Some polls, and the last regional elections, indicate that this leftist government will not last long and the future of *Unidas Podemos* is in question. The impact of the Covid-19 crisis and the war in Ukraine on the balance of forces in Spain should also not be underestimated. The emerging question is how these developments will affect the hegemonic constellation and what this will mean for the future of populist forces in Spain.

¹⁰ Is an association designed to defend the rights of companies, based on the Business Roundtable model.

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Enviado: 23 de septiembre de 2022

Aceptado: 25 de noviembre de 2022

