

United or Divided We Stand? Perspectives on the EU's Challenges

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A Spectre Haunting Europe: The Transnational Cooperation of the New European Left

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Abstract

New parties situated to the left of social democracy have become increasingly relevant in the EU's political landscape in recent years, particularly after the start of the eurozone crisis. In 2015 we witnessed some of these parties making significant electoral breakthroughs, particularly Syriza, who came to power in Greece on an anti-austerity platform, a success followed, however, by a compromise with the country's international creditors. The present paper argues that these new parties form a relatively homogeneous movement that emerged at the turn of the century. For not only they share a broadly similar agenda and strategy but, indeed, are engaged in a process of transnational cooperation never witnessed before on the radical left at the EU level. This process takes place through new transnational structures, particularly the Party of the European Left. Thus, the paper aims to provide an overview of this new European left, with a focus on how the broadly common traits of the various new left parties are reflected at a transnational level by their main transnational structure, the Party of the European Left. The paper looks then at 2015, the most tumultuous year yet for the new European left, focusing on Syriza's compromise and how the movement has reacted so far at a transnational level to that compromise.

Introduction

The fall of communism in 1989 turned most radical left parties in Europe into largely marginal political actors (Giddens, 1994; Sassoon, 1998). As social democracy moved to the right (Heywood, 2003; Lavelle, 2008), neoliberalism prevailed as the dominant paradigm in Western politics (Harvey, 2010; March, 2011). However, this created a vacuum on the left that was partly filled in by the emergence, at the turn of the century, of a new European left situated *to the left of social democracy*¹ (March, 2011; Hudson, 2012). Thus, the first years of this century saw the creation of *new left parties* (NLPs) in several EU member states, such as

¹ This expression is preferred here to the more common one of 'radical left', given that – as shown in the first section below – the agenda of this new left is closer to traditional social democracy than to the radical, or revolutionary, left. It is, however, to the left of contemporary European social democracy, which has largely moved to the right on economic issues over the last three decades (Heywood, 2003; Lavelle, 2008). Thus, social democratic parties are referred to here as 'centre-left', while those to their left as simply 'left' or 'new left'.

Bloco (Left Bloc) in Portugal, *Syriza* in Greece, *Die Linke* (Left Party) in Germany, *Parti de Gauche* (Left Party) in France, and, most recently, *Podemos* (We Can) in Spain. Despite some differences (e.g. regarding their lineages or country contexts), these formations have broadly similar traits in terms of agenda and strategy, which distinguish them from both social democracy and the traditional – i.e. communist – parties of the radical left. Indeed, these NLPs are brought together by a broad ‘critical support’ to the EU that has enabled them to engage with one another in a sustained process of transnational networking and cooperation, mainly via the Party of the European Left (PEL) and the *transform! europe* network (PEL’s corresponding political foundation). This transnational process of networking and cooperation is what arguably renders NLPs, together with their transnational structures, as a relatively homogeneous movement, referred to here as *the new European left*.

The favourable context for this new European left has only been enhanced by the eurozone crisis that started in 2009 and the EU-wide ‘austerity consensus’ that followed (March, 2011; Farnsworth & Irving, 2012; Blyth, 2013). Indeed, some of the aforementioned NLPs, such as *Die Linke* and *Bloco*, scored relatively good electoral results around the start of the crisis. However, it was only in 2015 when, based on a staunch anti-austerity agenda, NLPs made real electoral breakthroughs, namely in the Southern member states where austerity has arguably had the biggest social and economic impact, such as Greece, Portugal and Spain. Thus, in less than a year, *Syriza* has come into power in Greece with the party leader Alexis Tsipras as prime minister, *Bloco* came third in the Portuguese general elections and is now part of a left coalition backing the Socialist minority government, while *Podemos* came third in Spain with over twenty percent of the votes (although the subsequent failure of any party to form a government will lead to new elections in June 2016). On the other hand, 2015 also saw the first major ‘retreat’ of a new left party in government: after six months of negotiations with Greece’s international creditors, the Tsipras government, elected on an anti-austerity platform, agreed on a new bailout entailing further austerity for Greece (Daley & Alderman, 2015) – a deal which Tsipras himself described as a ‘tactical retreat’ (“PM Tsipras”, 2015).

Nevertheless, with the electoral gains obtained last year by the three Mediterranean NLPs, we are arguably witnessing the best period after 1989 for left forces in the EU. But despite their increasing significance in the EU’s political landscape, NLPs and their transnational structures remain an under-researched topic in the academic literature. Hence, this paper aims to try and answer a few basic questions: How did this new European left emerge and what are its main features? Indeed, how does the transnational cooperation of this

new left look like, particularly with regard to the PEL? And how has this transnational cooperation developed so far in reaction to last year's developments around Syriza? The main focus of this paper is therefore the transnational cooperation of NLPs. The text is structured as follows: the first section outlines the historical background of the emergence of NLPs; the second section sketches the main characteristics that these parties share as a relatively homogenous movement; the third section describes the transnational cooperation of NLPs, with a focus on the PEL; the fourth section provides a brief account of the tumultuous year 2015 for the new left parties in Southern Europe, with a focus on Syriza's success and subsequent retreat in July 2015; the fifth and final section briefly discusses how the new European left has reacted so far on a transnational level to Syriza's retreat.

The emergence of a new European left after 1989

The 1989 collapse of Communist regimes in Eastern Europe turned most European radical left parties into largely marginal political actors (Giddens, 1994; Sassoon, 1998; Hudson, 2000). Overall, the average vote of these parties dropped from 11.26% during the period 1980-1989 to 7.58% during the period 1990-1999 (March 2011, 2-3). Thus, in the early 1990s, it looked like "social democracy was the only form of socialism left in Europe" (Sassoon 2010, xiv). Given the shift to the right – at least on economic issues – of social democracy (Heywood, 2003; Lavelle, 2008), this facilitated the consolidation of neoliberalism as the dominant paradigm in European politics (March, 2011; Cooper & Hardy, 2012; Harvey, 2010).

However, around the turn of the century, several economic, social and political factors led to the emergence of a new European left situated to the left of social democracy (Hudson, 2012). Firstly, the legitimacy of neoliberal capitalism and its pro-market policies were being increasingly undermined by the unpopular privatisations and cuts entailed by the Maastricht Treaty and particularly by the establishment of the European Monetary Union (Hudson, 2000, p. 77). Also, international developments such as the 1997-8 Asian crisis, Russia's default on its debt in 1998 or big corporate scandals like the 2001 Enron case only contributed to the growing disillusionment with the neoliberal consensus (Cooper & Hardy, 2012). Secondly, it was social democracy's abandonment of causes such as equality or the welfare state and its endorsement of neoliberal economics that created a wide political vacuum on the left that

needed to be filled in (Hudson, 2000, pp. 11-12).² Thirdly, the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999, illegal under international law and contrary to NATO's own Charter, was endorsed by the main social democratic parties in Europe, thus reinforcing the political divisions between the latter and an emerging new European left that opposed that military intervention (Hudson, 2000, pp. 217-218). Fourthly, the emergence at the turn of the century of the alter-globalisation movement (Klein, 2002) and particularly of markedly left-wing governments in Latin America (Kaltwasser, 2010) brought the first significant challenges to neoliberalism from the left after 1989.

Thus, from the late 1990s to the late 2000s, new left parties (NLPs) emerged in several EU member states, such as *Bloco* (Left Bloc) in Portugal, *Syriza* in Greece, *Die Linke* (Left Party) in Germany, *Déi Lénk* (The Left) in Luxembourg, *Parti de Gauche* (Left Party) and *Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste* (New Anti-capitalist Party) in France, and, most recently, *Podemos* (We Can) in Spain.³ Despite some differences (regarding their lineages and country contexts for example), almost all of these parties display broadly similar traits in terms of agenda and strategy that distinguish them from both social democratic parties and the traditional main forces of the radical left – the communist parties (CPs), in particular those that have not 'reformed' after 1989 (i.e. have not distanced themselves critically from the Soviet Union), namely the Greek and Portuguese CPs (Tsatsanis & Teperoglou, 2012, p. 23). The following section argues that these common traits and particularly the transnational cooperation of NLPs renders them as more than mere freestanding political formations with similar ideology that happened to be created around the same time but rather as a relatively homogeneous pan-European movement.

Sketching the general profile of NLPs

Firstly, despite being widely referred to as 'radical left' (indeed, 'Syriza' is the syllabic abbreviation of 'The Coalition of the Radical Left' in Greek), the NLPs' agenda seems closer to the traditional policies of social democracy (gradually abandoned by most

² However, this vacuum was also exploited by Green and radical right parties (Patton, 2006; Lavelle, 2008).

³ The absence of significant NLPs in Eastern European countries is mainly explained by two factors: firstly, the monopoly on the left still exerted there by social democratic 'successor parties'; secondly, the de-legitimization of socialist ideas during and following the communist period (March, 2011, pp. 112-114). However, over the last couple of years, new left formations have also been launched in several ex-Communist countries, such as United Left in Slovenia (2014), Workers' Front in Croatia (2014) and *Razem* (Together Party) in Poland (2015). But with the exception of the former, which has 6 (out of 90) MPs in Slovenia, the others are still marginal political actors with no local or national representation.

social democratic parties, particularly after the start of the eurozone crisis), such as high taxation of the rich and a strong welfare state (March 2011, p. 205). Thus, unlike with communist parties, the call for overthrowing capitalism and building socialism is rather marginal if not virtually absent – NLPs are explicitly rather anti-neoliberal than fully anti-capitalist and rather ‘Keynesian’ than ‘Marxist’ (Taylor, 2009). (The fact that NLPs are nevertheless deemed as ‘radical’, not only by their political opponents but also by most of the mainstream media, arguably indicates the move to the right – at least on economic issues – of the entire political spectrum during the last three decades or so of neoliberal hegemony.) More precisely, since the start of the eurozone crisis in 2009, NLPs have been focusing on opposing the EU-wide ‘austerity consensus’ (Farnsworth & Irving, 2012; Blyth, 2013). This came in stark contrast to social democratic parties, who have largely endorsed austerity and enforced it when in government (Guinan, 2013; Worth, 2013) – arguably an expression of a wider trend of Western social democratic parties over the last four decades to try and demonstrate their fiscal responsibility (Kraft, 2015).

Secondly, NLPs share a broadly similar stance towards the EU. If many communist parties – most notably, the Greek and Portuguese ones – oppose the EU altogether while practically all social democratic parties fully endorse it, NLPs offer – albeit to different degrees – a *critical support* to the European project (March, 2011, p. 204). More precisely, they are critical of the ‘embedded neoliberalism’ (Van Apeldoorn, 2001) of EU’s institutions, treaties and policies, increasingly prevalent, in their view, following the 1991 Maastricht Treaty (Hudson, 2000, p. 4). At the same time, NLPs aim to reform the EU from within rather than calling for an exit, for they see the EU as the only framework where neoliberalism can be challenged in a supranational Europe (Charalambous, 2011). This ‘reformism’ regarding the nature and potential of European integration has deep roots in the pre-1989 ‘Eurocommunism’ of parties like the Italian and Spanish CPs or the former Greek CP-Interior (the forerunner of *Synaspismos*, the formation that subsequently became the main component of Syriza) (Dunphy & March, 2013, p. 523). However, as suggested in the final section, this overall endorsement of the EU is now being increasingly questioned within the ranks of the new European left.

Thirdly, NLPs also differ from the traditional radical left in terms of strategy: they tend to be more willing to overcome ideological differences and compromise in order to enhance their electoral profile or/and push forward their policies (Hudson, 2000, pp. 14-15; March, 2011, pp. 19-20). In other words, they are more pragmatic, and that has been manifested in at least two ways: firstly, in the very process by which most NLPs were formed

– as coalitions of several left parties and movements that might have been previously divided on doctrinal (e.g. Maoist vs Trotskyist in the case of Bloco) or geographical lines (e.g. East vs West German in the case of Die Linke); secondly, in their readiness to participate in power – either locally, regionally or nationally – with centre-left parties (Bale and Dunphy, 2011), as shown, for instance, by Die Linke’s regional coalitions with the social democrats and the greens in the German states of North Rhine-Westphalia and Brandenburg or, most recently, by Bloco’s participation in the parliamentary coalition supporting the Socialist minority government in Portugal.

Fourthly, the traditional economic concerns of the radical left – i.e. poverty, unemployment, income inequality etc. – are not the sole focus of these parties’ agenda, which also includes New Left⁴ causes such as feminism, environmentalism, direct democracy and the rights of minorities (March, 2011, p. 19). This blend of economic, social and cultural issues enables NLPs to try and appeal not only to the working class voters disillusioned by the neoliberalisation of social democratic parties (Taylor, 2009, p. 6), but also to those layers of the white-collar electorate that are more concerned with ‘lifestyle’ or ‘identity’ issues (March, 2011, p. 35). Thus, it is this cross-class approach that also distinguishes NLPs from most communist parties before them, who continued to focus on ‘the revolutionary role of the working class’ despite gradually adopting some of the aforementioned causes.

Transnational cooperation of NLPs: The Party of the European Left

Ultimately, what brings NLPs together and arguably makes them a wider, relatively homogeneous movement (Hudson, 2012) is their transnational networking and cooperation. On the one hand, all NLPs are involved in the two broad and rather eclectic groups gathering virtually all the left forces in the European Parliament and the rather obscure Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe – the United European Left/Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL) and the Unified European Left (UEL) respectively. On the other hand, the main transnational structures that are arguably more specifically relevant to NLPs and which NLPs are *directly* engaged in are the Party of the European Left (PEL) and its corresponding

⁴ Unlike in the rest of the paper, the phrase ‘New Left’ refers here to the advent around the late 1960s of a libertarian and anti-establishment left, whose concerns extended beyond the traditional economic issues of the left to include non-class topics such as feminism, environmentalism, LGBT rights or direct democracy. The New Left challenged the hegemony of communist parties on the radical left, which due to their nearly exclusive focus on class politics and authoritarian tendencies were seen as obstacles to real social change.

political foundation, the *transform! europe* network. An additional structure, the European Anti-Capitalist Left, is an informal network of more radical left parties, including some NLPs such as Bloco (Portugal) or Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (France), which seems though to have a rather marginal and inconsistent presence. Hence, this section will focus on the PEL and, towards the end, the *transform!* network.

Founded in 2004, the PEL was a significant development for the European left, which was thus finally joining other major political families in establishing a transnational party (Hudson, 2012, p. 46). For, compared to these other political families that – with the exception of the radical right – had created Euro-parties in the early 1990s, this development came rather late, despite the left’s inherent internationalism. This is mainly explained by the memory of the Moscow-controlled ‘internationalism’ before 1989 as well as the ongoing ideological differences over the question of European integration (Dunphy & March, 2013, p. 523). Nevertheless, the PEL did not come from nowhere, but stemmed from the informal and loosely organised New European Left Forum, a series of semi-annual meetings established in 1991 as the first transnational project of the left to realign following the fall of communism.

Today, the PEL is formed of 30 member and observer parties from 23 countries. With the exception of Podemos and Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste, it includes all the NLPs mentioned earlier, with Syriza, Die Linke and Bloco arguably being the most committed to building the PEL (Dunphy & March, 2013, p. 524). Besides NLPs though, the PEL also includes some of the reformed Western communist parties, such as the French, Italian, Spanish and Austrian CPs or the Finnish Left Alliance, as well as communist successor parties in Eastern European countries like the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Estonia and Moldova (PEL, 2016).⁵ Therefore, the PEL is rather eclectic too, which has arguably hindered its potential for coherent and coordinated action (Dunphy & March, 2013, p. 522). However, unlike the GUE/NGL or the UEL, the PEL is nevertheless united by the aforementioned fundamental traits that NLPs as well as other left formations share in various degrees, particularly the first two traits.

Firstly, the PEL reflects the ‘not-that-radical’ agenda of NLPs. The Political Theses of PEL’s second congress in 2007 state that “The Party of the European Left has been created through the will of political parties that propose social and democratic transformation, and

⁵ Nevertheless, significant left parties are absent from, if not opposed to, the PEL: first and foremost, the anti-EU Greek and Portuguese CPs, but also Northern parties (grouped together as the Nordic Green Left Alliance) such as the Dutch Socialist Party or the Swedish Left Party, who are more critical of the EU than NLPs and, at the same time, suspicious of the presence of communist parties in the PEL (Dunphy & March, 2013, p. 529).

alternatives to neo-liberal policies” (PEL, 2007, p. 3). More precisely, such alternatives would amount to:

1) the need to have full and qualified employment, against precariousness of employment, (2) a leading role for public financial intervention, (3) the need to overcome the predominant, environmentally harmful, economic model, that over-comes both the overexploitation of human beings and of the world’s natural resources, (4) the need to keep the public sector in European countries and public services, (5) the urgency in guaranteeing an income and pension which is secure to live on and which guarantees all people a life with dignity. (PEL, 2007, p. 7)

Thus, in opposing neoliberalism rather than capitalism altogether, the PEL makes demands that seem closer to classic social democracy than to the traditional agenda of the radical left and its ultimate goal of replacing capitalism with an egalitarian socialist society based on the public ownership of the key sectors of the economy.⁶

However, the eurozone crisis that started in 2009 and the austerity policies that followed have arguably radicalised PEL’s position. Thus, the political document of PEL’s 2013 congress states the underlying aim to “strive towards a socialist alternative, a civilisation freed from capitalism, exploitation, oppression and capitalist violence” (PEL, 2013, p. 2). But while this expresses a more explicit opposition to capitalism, and not merely neoliberalism, there is still a lack of concrete proposals for overcoming it and building that ‘socialist alternative’. Instead, the more specific aims formulated here are still rather ‘reformist’ than ‘revolutionary’, such as the defence of public services, an increase of the minimum wage or a rise in taxes for the rich (PEL, 2013, pp. 11-12).

Secondly, the PEL is united in the critical support to the European project that – albeit in various degrees – all of its member and observer parties display, a convergence best reflected by their common manifesto in the 2009 European elections (the first one of its kind in over 30 years of radical left cooperation in the European Parliament). Thus, just like almost all NLPs, rather than opposing the EU altogether, the PEL aims to reform it from within. On the one hand, it does not oppose the EU because it believes that, given the already advanced level of economic and political integration, the left cannot achieve its goals, particularly its anti-neoliberal agenda, outside this supranational framework (Dunphy, 2004). On the other hand, it does want to reform the EU, which is seen as a construction built along

⁶ It might be quite indicative that in the 18-page document quoted above, which sets the political lines of the PEL, there is no occurrence of traditionally key terms/concepts of the radical left such as ‘socialist’, ‘communist’, ‘revolution’, ‘anti-capitalist’, ‘public ownership’, ‘public control’, ‘nationalisation’, ‘planned economy’ etc.

neoliberal lines (PEL, 2010; PEL, 2013). The *Agenda for a Social Europe* adopted at PEL's 2010 Congress pledges to 'oppose... neoliberal policies and structures applied to the EU via successive treaties up to and including the Lisbon treaty' (PEL, 2010, p. 1). More precisely, the PEL has been calling for "a reform of the current Economic and Monetary Union system by placing the European Central Bank under democratic control and replacing the current growth and stability pact" (PEL, 2007, p. 9).

The critical dimension of PEL's position towards the EU has enhanced after 2009, as austerity policies have been carried out across the continent. For the PEL, these policies "are aimed at undermining and destroying the social state", while the crisis in general "has been an opportunity for the neoliberals to push their reforms all the way with appalling violence and speed" (PEL, 2013, p.4). All this has been possible, it is argued, because the economic institutions of the EU – rather than the EU as a whole – have been designed to "safeguard exclusively the interests of big capital" (PEL, 2013, p. 3). However, the exit from the eurozone – not to mention from the EU – is not seen as an option (PEL, 2013, p. 12), although the reasons for that are not clearly specified. Instead, what the PEL has been recently calling for is "a transformation of the eurozone through a radical change of the architecture of the euro and European cooperation, oriented to an economy based on social needs" (PEL, 2013, p. 12). So, while becoming more critical of the EU since the start of the eurozone crisis, the PEL ultimately remains committed to the European project and the aim of reforming it from within.

Having said this, the PEL managed to bring NLPs and other left forces together in what has clearly been the most significant development so far of left transnational cooperation at the EU level. However, the PEL has been rather limited in its success, not only because of the prominence of national politics over European politics that all transnational parties are tackling with, but also due to problems specific to this party. Dunphy and March (2013, p. 535) identify two such problems: first, the ideological divisions over transnationalism itself, with NLPs like Bloco and Syriza pushing for its enhancement and older left parties like the French CP being more sceptical about it; second, the persistent failure to attract within its ranks important left parties in the EU, such as the Danish Socialist People's Party, the Dutch Socialist Party or the Irish Sinn Féin (not to mention the Greek and Portuguese CPs), which in turn means a relative lack of cohesion and coordinated action of the left in the European Parliament and beyond.

Finally, the *transform! europe* network is the recognised political foundation of PEL, which means that it is largely, but not exclusively, composed of the political foundations

affiliated to the parties that make up the PEL – most prominently, Syriza’s *Nicos Poulantzas Institute*, Die Linke’s *Rosa Luxemburg Foundation* and the French CP’s *Espaces Marx*. Therefore, *transform!* generally follows the same line and goals as the PEL, although it tends to be more open to and engaged with the various European left intellectuals, academic networks, trade unions and, in particular, social movements (Hudson, 2012, pp. 58-62) such as the Alter Summit (a broad left initiative against austerity launched in Athens in 2013 and gathering political parties, trade unions, NGOs, social movements etc.) or ATTAC (an alter-globalisation network launched in France in 1998 and currently having chapters in 35 countries across the world). As pointed out in the final section, *transform!* is directly involved in the various transnational initiatives on the left to realign in the aftermath of Syriza’s retreat in July 2015.

2015, a tumultuous year for NLPs: between advance and retreat

The eurozone crisis that started in 2009, and the wider global financial crisis that had started one year earlier, have been widely understood as a crisis of neoliberal capitalism (Skidelsky, 2010; Harvey, 2010; Duménil & Lévy, 2011; Overbeek & Van Apeldoorn, 2012; Bello, 2013). Given the anti-neoliberal agenda of NLPs, this crisis arguably provided them with a favourable context for electoral growth (March, 2011, p. 1; Visser et al., 2014, p. 541). Indeed, around the start of the eurozone crisis, NLPs such as Die Linke and Bloco obtained around ten percent in general elections in Germany and Portugal respectively.

However, it took over five years of EU-wide austerity in order for some of the NLPs to make electoral gains that would enable them to participate in power or at least influence in a significant way the formation of the government. For it was in the Southern, or ‘peripheral’, EU member states, where austerity had significant negative social (McKee et al., 2012; Matsaganis & Leventi, 2014; Matthijs, 2014; Knieling & Othengrafen, 2016) as well as economic (Semmler, 2013; Schui, 2014) effects, that NLPs made electoral breakthroughs in 2015: Syriza in Greece, Bloco in Portugal and Podemos in Spain (see Table 1).

Country	Party	Elections	Votes	Number of MPs
Greece	Syriza	January general elections	36.3%	149/300
		September general elections	35.5%	145/300
Portugal	Bloco	October general elections	10.2%	19/230

Spain	Podemos	December general elections	20.7%	69/350
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Table 1 – Results of Southern European NLPs in general elections in 2015⁷

Thus, in January Syriza won the general elections in Greece with an agenda (also known as the Thessaloniki Programme) centred around reversing all the austerity measures, increasing public investment and writing off most of the public debt (“The Thessaloniki Programme”, 2014). This victory triggered notable enthusiasm both in Greece and abroad (Sali, 2015; Dick, 2015), in what was deemed as the first major challenge to ‘neoliberal hegemony’ in Europe (Jones, 2015; Hansen, 2015). Together with the right-wing Independent Greeks (also opposing austerity) as a junior partner, Syriza formed a government coalition headed by Alexis Tsipras, Syriza’s leader since 2008. The same coalition formed a new government in September after the snap elections called by Syriza following the defection of 25 of its MPs due to Tsipras agreeing on a third bailout from its international creditors.

Syriza proved to be the most successful NLP in 2015 but not the only one. Later that year, in October, Bloco came third in the Portuguese general elections, with over ten percent of the votes, its best electoral result ever. After the winning right-wing coalition Portugal Ahead failed to form a government, Bloco joined the Communist Party and the Socialist Party in a historical left parliamentary coalition that currently supports the latter’s minority government. Finally, in December, Podemos also came third in Spain’s general elections, with over twenty percent of the votes, despite having been created only in 2014. However, the vote was so split between the left and the right that nearly five months after the elections Spain still does not have a new government, which is highly likely to lead to new elections in June this year.

At the same time, 2015 also saw the first major retreat of a NLP in government, which in turn led, as already mentioned, to the first major split in a NLP too – Syriza. As promised before and during the January elections, soon after coming into power the Tsipras-led government commenced negotiations with Greece’s international creditors⁸ for the reduction of the country’s debt and the repeal of the austerity measures taken by previous Greek governments. However, after six months of tough and highly publicised negotiations, the parties reached an agreement involving a new bailout (Greece’s third since the start of the eurozone crisis) and further austerity (Daley & Alderman, 2015). In other words, the Syriza

⁷ All the electoral results in Table 1 have been taken from <http://www.electionresources.org>.

⁸ Namely, the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund – commonly known together and referred to from now on as the *Troika*.

government signed an agreement that will make it virtually impossible for them to implement much of their anti-austerity agenda (the so-called Thessaloniki Programme).

Tsipras himself has described this agreement as a ‘tactical retreat’ (“PM Tsipras”, 2015), a ‘painful compromise’ (Tsipras, 2015) and even a ‘bad deal’ (Adamopoulos, 2015). The deal was approved by the Greek Parliament but led to the defection of 25 Syriza MPs unhappy with Tsipras’ ‘compromise’, who formed the new party Popular Unity. This split naturally pushed Tsipras into calling snap elections in September – which he won by a slightly smaller margin than in January – in order to secure a loyal set of MPs. Indeed, 2015 seems to have been the most eventful year so far for NLPs and the new European left as a whole: the first major electoral triumphs as well as the first major retreat of and split within a NLP. The final section of the paper tries to outline how the transnational left has reacted so far to that retreat.

After 2015: transnational realignment of the new European left?

After signing the deal with the Troika in July, Tsipras defended his decision by saying that one country cannot win alone against the Troika, but only a transnational front of the left can do that (Tsipras, 2015). Indeed, the idea of the need to create a ‘European front’ against austerity and neoliberalism in the EU had already been formulated by the PEL at its 2013 congress (PEL, 2013). After, Tsipras’ compromise with the Troika, similar calls for increasing transnational cooperation on the left came from other NLPs as well as their transnational structures.

Arguably the first such reaction came at the end of July, from two prominent members of Die Linke, Nicole Gohlke (federal MP) and Janine Wissler (regional MP): “Our politics must contribute to establishing, expanding and deepening pan-European networks of solidarity between political actors and activists in European, national, regional, and local movements.” (Gohlke & Wissler, 2015) Indeed, at a conference in Athens in March 2016, the president of the French CP and of the PEL Pierre Laurent said that “one country alone cannot change Europe” (Laurent, 2016). The same point had been elaborated one month earlier in a collective statement issued by *transform!:*

this defeat has been a consequence of the unfavourable balance of forces in the EU and the weakness of the Left in Europe (the Greek government was alone against the governments of all EU countries, the European institutions and the IMF), but also of the EU’s architecture

created by the European treaties... what is urgently needed is the change in the balance of forces in as many EU countries as possible, as well as the development of a broad European movement against austerity and for real democracy... under conditions of globalised capitalism, national self-determination can only be exercised where space is created for it by democratically institutionalised, transnational cooperation.” (*transform!*, 2016)

Furthermore, leading members of NLPs outside the PEL, namely from Podemos, Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste and Popular Unity, have issued a joint statement in September 2015 entitled “Austerexit”: “More than ever, an alliance of peoples is a necessity in order to confront the expanding diktats of austerity” (Besancenot et al, 2015).

While the appeal to create a transnational front against austerity and the Troika is not that new, this time more and more voices within NLPs and beyond are calling explicitly for a reassessment of the left’s ‘critical support’ to the EU. However, the extent of this reassessment varies widely from case to case. On the one hand, the “Austerexit” statement has a straightforward position in favour of exiting not only the eurozone but the EU altogether: “it is necessary to break with Europe, with its treaties and its banking system” (Besancenot et al, 2015). On the other hand, the aforementioned members of Die Linke merely call for a rethinking of the left’s commitment to the eurozone and the EU: “We must take this moment to rethink the central strategic premises that have guided our politics these past months, i.e. our principled “yes” to the EU and our categorical “no” to leaving the eurozone.” (Gohlke & Wissler, 2015)

A subtler difference seems to exist between the two main, interrelated events/initiatives launched so far, at the beginning of 2016, by prominent forces within the new European left, including most NLPs members of the PEL as well as *transform!*: the ‘Plan B in Europe’ summit in Paris and the ‘Plan B for Europe’ summit in Madrid.⁹ The first one was attended mainly by members of NLPs, particularly Parti de Gauche, Die Linke, Popular Unity and Bloco, who proposed a new strategy for the left: to continue working “towards a complete renegotiation of the European Treaties” but at the same time prepare a ‘Plan B’ – an exit from the eurozone (but not the EU) if further negotiations prove that “the euro cannot be democratised” (“A Plan B”, 2016). The second summit, in Madrid, was attended by more people and also included, besides NLPs, several trade unions and social movement. The

⁹ Although the most publicised and arguably active initiative/movement launched so far in reaction to last year’s events around Syriza seems to be the *Democracy in Europe Movement 2025* (DiEM25), led by the former Syriza finance minister Yanis Varoufakis, there is no direct involvement of any prominent member of any NLP in this project (yet). The only link between DiEM25 and the new European left is via *transform!*, whose coordinator, Walter Baier from the Austrian CP, has enlisted as a member of DiEM25. Indeed, there are currently talks about organising an Alter Summit conference in October 2016 with the participation of the ‘Plan B’ initiatives, *transform!* and DiEM25.

declaration that resulted from this summit seemed more moderate, merely calling for a clash with the EU establishment rather than considering the exit from the eurozone as an alternative plan: “we call for civil disobedience to the European institutions’ toxic rules, policies, treaties or any undemocratic dictates and to their arbitrary reinterpretation by the ruling elites” (“Declaration”, 2016). It remains to be seen whether the two initiatives can reach a convergent position.

While these developments in reaction to Syriza’s retreat last year are still extremely volatile, rather fragmented and markedly top-down, they represent nevertheless the signs of an ongoing process of realignment of the new European left (and not only). So far, this process seems to be defined by three main ideas: first, that the deal between the Syriza government and the Troika was ‘forced’ upon the former, thus showing the ‘neoliberal’ and ‘undemocratic’ nature of the EU establishment; second, that the European left needs to create a transnational front in order to oppose austerity, the Troika and the wider neoliberal EU establishment effectively; third, and probably the most disputed, that the left needs to reassess its commitments to stay in the eurozone and in the EU in general. It obviously depends on NLPs and their transnational structures reaching a common view of what this reassessment should amount and lead to whether they will be able to create a truly united European front against austerity, the Troika and the wider neoliberal establishment.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that a new European left – including here new parties as well as new transnational structures – emerged at the turn of the century and that this new left is relatively homogeneous in terms of its agenda (to the left of social democracy but not truly radical), strategy (more pragmatic than the traditional radical left) and position on the EU (‘critical support’ rather than wholesale opposition or endorsement). Its broadly common agenda and stance on the EU enable these new parties to engage in a process of transnational cooperation never witnessed before on the left at the EU level, mainly through the Party of the European Left and its political foundation, *transform!*.

Afterwards, the paper provided a brief account of the main events surrounding NLPs in 2015 (the most eventful year so far for the new European left), with a focus on Syriza’s electoral triumph and subsequent compromise with the Troika. It was then shown how this compromise, or retreat, has seemingly triggered a process of reflection and debate if not

realignment within the new European left, as shown by the launch of interrelated but still different initiatives such as ‘A Plan B in Europe’ and ‘Plan B for Europe’. It was argued that at the core of this process lies the acknowledgement of the need for the left to create a transnational front against austerity, the Troika and the wider neoliberal EU establishment, but also of the need to reassess the left’s commitments to the euro and the EU itself. Given their broadly similar fundamental traits, there is arguably a basis for NLPs and their transnational structures to increase their cooperation to the extent of creating a united European front of the left. However, how likely is for such a front to emerge – not to mention what form it would take and what alternatives it would put forward – is still very hard to say, as it largely depends, among other things, on reaching a common position on the vital question of the eurozone and of the EU as a whole. However, if a united transnational front of the left does emerge, it might represent a substantial challenge to the status quo in the EU today, especially if in the meantime other NLPs besides Syriza come to power in their countries.

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