

# Podemos (Spanish State): Iglesias, Errejón, and the Road Not Taken

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**At stake at this weekend's congress is whether Podemos will be a party that merely seeks to win elections or one that wants to transform society. *[A longer version of this article appeared in French. [\[1\]](#).]***

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This weekend, Podemos will gather for its second congress. The meeting, planned as a kind of internal and external catharsis, will bring to a head all the strategic debates that arose after the party's leadership imploded in March 2016. This division had, until last spring, been only latent, held primarily by the minority membership who had always opposed the party model and strategy codified at Podemos's first congress in Vistalegre in October 2014.

## The Three Souls of Podemos

The three factions within Podemos are represented by Pablo Iglesias, Íñigo Errejón, and the Anticapitalistas.

Until last spring, Iglesias and Errejón shared the leadership having pushed the Anticapitalistas to the margins at the party's inception in 2014. At the first party congress later that year, they successfully pushed for Podemos to aim for victory in the 2015 general election, establishing a centralized, homogeneous, and top-down organizational structure to achieve this goal. The result would come to be known as the electoral war machine or, simply, the Vistalegre model.

Although the split would not become visible until March 2016, a fight Iglesias and Errejón had been brewing for over a year. The two men fundamentally disagreed over the proper response to another upstart party, Ciudadanos, which championed democratic renewal and the fight against corruption from a neoliberal perspective. The media and big business praised it as a sort of right-wing Podemos and hoped it would divert social anger toward a pro-business alternative. Ciudadanos's unexpected strength represented the Vistalegre strategy's first real obstacle.

Errejón wanted to answer this challenge with soft politics, amounting to a relative ciudadanization of Podemos — reversing Ciudadanos's strategy of manipulating Podemos's slogans. After some hesitation, Iglesias decided instead to confront the new party, decrying it as a neoliberal party that supported the traditional parties. This debate marked the first time Podemos's leadership acknowledged that the road to electoral victory was more complex than expected.

The leadership breakdown opened an unprecedented period of public discussion, although the membership mainly served as passive spectators unable to join the debate. Thankfully, because of the divide within the leadership, internal discussion and plurality have become the party's norm, though it still suffers from the negative political culture and organizational dynamics of the Vistalegre model.

The split also regularized the Anticapitalistas and allowed for recognition of the role that some anticapitalist leaders played in the party's inception. As such, it signifies the demise of the so-called official account of Podemos's genesis that had been promoted after the 2014 European elections. This farcical party history erased the Anticapitalistas, allowing members of the leading group around Iglesias and Errejón to embellish their own contributions to the birth of the party — with the exception of Iglesias himself, whose central role in the creation of Podemos cannot be challenged.

These three currents all have radically different political projects. We can define Iglesias's as pragmatic-instrumental populism mixed with impatient Eurocommunism, which differs in form from the original iteration by embracing the prospect of electoral victory. His combination of rebellious rhetoric with a moderate governmental horizon takes the Italian Communist Party's Berlinguer era "historic compromise" with the Christian Democrats as its primary model — the policy of the historical compromise. Indeed, Iglesias uncritically embraces this legacy, failing to critically assess Syriza's experience in this context.

We might summarize Iglesias's proposal as belligerence in opposition, *raison d'état* in government. In this sense, he maintains his orientation toward moderation but has realized that Podemos's strength lies in its appearance as an anti-establishment force. As such, if the party were tamed, it would lose its social base, which Iglesias mainly anchors in the working and popular classes.

Iglesias's proposal prioritizes electoral and institutional activity. In contrast to his position at Vistalegre, however, social struggle now at least plays a role in the strategy. His fiery discourse and praise for social struggle have created a better environment for radical and movement-oriented ideas within the party. Suddenly, those who had called for something other than the triad of "communication-campaigns-institutions" recognize that the general secretary had been partially converted. No doubt, this is a valuable change of atmosphere.

On the other hand, Íñigo Errejón's political project is built on constructivist populism and aims to normalize Podemos. It calls for a peaceful transition in which the exhausted traditional parties are replaced with something new, exchanging elites, and very little else. Errejón wants to connect with the generational aspirations of young and middle-aged people, who are frustrated and broken by the crisis.

Errejón and his supporters' call for "transversality" has swung between a serious discussion about building a new political majority and an excuse to smooth over all traces of radicalism. Behind this core idea lies a project mainly aimed at the middle classes, using post-class rhetoric to emphasize meritocracy and to call for a smooth transition toward a better future. It is focused at an amorphous political center that has become the imagined center of gravity for the people.

The rationale is to attract "the missing ones," meaning to win over the voters who are not yet convinced that Podemos is trustworthy enough to run the Spanish state. As a result, it takes for granted that current Podemos voters will always remain loyal. However, they are likely to demobilize if the party forgets about them in its quest for respectability.

Errejón's strategy emerges from this understanding of political life, which he sees as polarized between a "soft us," built through gentle discourse that attracts the middle classes and less

politicized voters, and a “strong them.” His analysis, however, contradicts itself. The “gentle” nature of both the voting bloc he wants to build and the discourse it requires makes it difficult to sustain the polarization on which his strategy is based, no matter what symbolic, emotional, or identitarian strategies he uses to foster it. His lack of attention to social struggle makes it even harder to create a favorable climate for political polarization. Put differently, it is harder to polarize society using superficial discourse in a context of social passivity, than with rebellious language in a context of mobilization.

Errejón has always denied that his vision resembles the catchall of parties’ strategies, alleging that his proposal politicizes debate, emphasizing the difference between “us and them.” However, Errejón’s proposal really amounts to a populist-constructivist catchall. The end result will not differ very much from where the People’s Party (PP) or the Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party (PSOE) have taken the nation; it simply starts from a different point and thus takes a different path to the same destination. While conventional parties are legitimized entities that seek to enlarge their base of voters each election and prevail against a ritualized adversary, Podemos — and Ciudadanos — have to start from scratch. Errejón’s strategy aims both to expand the party’s social and voter base and to legitimate Podemos — if not absolutely, at least partially.

Recognizing the electoral war machine’s limits and the need to prepare for sustained political combat, Errejón now proposes the party work toward what he calls a “popular movement,” recognizing the importance of cultural and social activity to complement electoral and institutional strategy. Four tasks comprise this new project — which replaces the metaphor of the blitzkrieg with the siege — to invigorate civil society’s social, cultural, and leisure associations and networks; to set up a strong symbolic and cultural collective identity; to train cadres and technicians; and to use party branches to increase links both locally and nationally.

This approach has two important limitations. First, two years of the Vistalegre model have made this new strategy almost impossible to implement. The war machine pushed the rank-and-file membership away, emptied local branches, and created suspicions about organized civil society. Now, these excluded members are expected to revitalize their local parties and engage with civic institutions.

Second, social struggle — not to mention self-organization — plays no role in either the electoral strategy or the new popular movement. Therein lies a major inconsistency: on the one hand, Errejón correctly analyzed the political possibilities of 15-M after 2011, but, on the other hand, he does not see the need for a new social push — a new 15-M — to relaunch anti-austerity struggles and completely break down the establishment party system.

This is not to say that Errejón’s point of view completely excludes conflict, but he understands it mainly in terms of electoral and public-relation campaigns. As a result, he ignores the politicization of real conflict in communities and workplaces, surfing social struggle and sapping its energy with an artificially rebellious discourse that masks the weakness of his actual political and economic proposals.

Errejón has changed his priorities in preparation for a long-term struggle, but he persists on the road toward Podemos’s political normalization which would quickly temper the party’s ambitions for political and social change. His will to power is stronger than his will to change the world.

For this reason, it’s hard to imagine what might happen if Errejón successfully seized power. His ultimate goal goes no further than a generic policy of redistribution and democratization. Critically, he has pushed aside the decisive debate about bureaucratization and how to prevent an electoral mandate from being asphyxiated by the very state it was supposed to transform. This reveals an

important paradox in Errejón's political hypothesis: on the one hand, he has been Podemos's most strategic leader, but, on the other hand, he has turned strategy into a discussion about winning elections rather than about transforming society. Moreover, he has been the main architect of a party model based on strategy without strategic debate, where the core leadership makes decisions with no feedback at all from the membership.

Ultimately, Iglesias and Errejón differ in their degree of constancy and their ideological foundations. Iglesias has a more eclectic way of thinking and relies on a rather imprecise theoretical and strategic framework. He has been prone to political swings. This reveals the tension between his populist soul and his commitment to the heritage of Eurocommunism and the workers' movement — he is torn between his realpolitik strategy and a real, but constrained, radicalism.

Errejón's strategic point of view is more theoretically homogeneous and internally coherent. His political positions have been more constant and linear, with fewer unexpected dramatic turns. However, his refusal to emend his own working hypothesis has limited him.

In fact, when he has made sharp political turns, he tried to pretend that everything was going according to plan. For instance, when Podemos had to forge broad alliances with other political forces in Catalonia, Galicia, and País Valencià to prepare for the 2015 general election, Errejón falsely claimed this had appeared in the Vistalegre plan.

Errejón and his followers have refused to readjust their strategy, despite the inevitable twists of the political process and the realization that electoral victory will take longer than expected. This has deeply undermined their political strength. Once strategically and theoretically on the offensive, they now have to play defense.

Rapper, writer, and Iglesias supporter Ricardo Romero ("Nega") coined one of the most apt metaphors to explain the differences between Iglesias and Errejón. On September 9, he tweeted that "There are two Podemos (there always were) one that wants to be kinda like Coldplay and another that wants to be like Bruce Springsteen. Let's be like the #Boss." The comparison would be more useful if it contrasted the content of the two men's proposals. However, the musical analogy presents the difference as one of manners and style, which subsequently frames all debate around these issues.

Instead, Podemos should discuss which goals it wants to achieve as well as the strategies that can build a new political majority. The latter discussion only making sense if it is clear about its political purpose. It is not Podemos's style but the content of its project where in fact the debate needs to begin.

Beyond Springsteen and Coldplay, Podemos has at least one other important current: the Anticapitalistas, which has sponsored the Podemos en Movimiento list at the upcoming congress. A key player since the beginning, Anticapitalistas's strategy has always been to create a party built on the political potential that emerged up after 15-M, not only in terms of the electoral opportunity that had opened but also in terms of the new possibility for radical political and social change. The Anticapitalistas project attempts to synthesize radicalism's ambition with building a majority.

Anticapitalistas has served as a movement party within Podemos. As such, it opposed the Vistalegre model that tried to transform 15-M's legacy into electoral victory. It is organized around internal democracy and rank-and-file empowerment, focusing on external campaigns rather than internal quarrels. Its strategic perspective sees victory as a dialectical combination of self-organization, mobilization, elections, and institutional work — something deeper than just winning elections. To build this, Anticapitalistas has emphasized program discussions, which would allow the party to

present serious alternative policies. Questions like debt and the banking system have centered these debates, trying to learn from Syriza's fiasco — something Podemos's leadership has always refused to do.

Working against the party's main current since the beginning, this political wing has been central to Podemos's trajectory, despite its small institutional power which has only weakened after Podemos's expansion after the 2014 European election when Iglesias and Errejón were on the rise.

Without it, militant disaffection in the branches would have been even higher, democratic and movement-oriented counterweights to the leadership would have been nonexistent, and the attempts to organize membership and present different viewpoints would have become impossible. For these reasons, the support that the Podemos en Movimiento list wins at the congress will be crucial for the party's future — as a guarantee that no matter what adverse circumstances may come, the call of real political and economic change, internal democracy, and the break with austerity and the Spanish political regime will persist inside Podemos.

### **The Machine From Within**

Facing clear evidence of its limitations, both Iglesias and Errejón have admitted the need to change certain organizational and political aspects in order to democratize the current party structure. Iglesias has proposed some limited reforms that would amount to partial and selective democratization. Errejón, who considers himself at a disadvantage in this fight, has raised the banner of internal democracy and pluralism — even though he held them in low esteem when he was the party apparatus's strongman.

Both have defended the decision to build this disastrous party model as a necessary evil, an inevitable stage in an extraordinary situation where winning the general election had to be prioritized. There are two main problems with this justification: first, it presents the strategy as a choice forced by the situation. In reality, the approach corresponded to Iglesias's and Errejón's conception of politics.

Neither electoralism nor verticalism — not to mention the lack of internal democracy — were adopted as transitory or exceptional measures, but rather represented an attempt to set up a party controlled by a leading bureaucracy. Second, they can offer no real proof that the formula adopted in Vistalegre improved the electoral result. In fact, we might suspect the opposite: it seems reasonable to imagine that a more participatory party, with a more active membership and more credible leadership, would have won as many, if not more, votes.

We cannot blame the electoral war-machine model for Podemos's political and organizational problems. Any new party would struggle to consolidate its structure, settle recurrent quarrels, build cadres, and discourage careerism. But the leadership chose a model that exacerbated these difficulties to extraordinary heights. The hollowing out of the local branches and the acute decline of active membership illustrate this failure.

The dynamics of militancy and participation are always spasmodic. In every political and social movement, exhaustion, lack of interest, or the implicit delegation of responsibility to active members always depletes the initial crowds. What can be called "liquid militancy," using Bauman's famous concept of liquidity, is the political and organizational equivalent of a fragmented and individualized society with fragile biographies. The Vistalegre model's weakness is not simply that it failed to organize a major layer of activists. Rather, it did not try to do so — in fact, the party leadership worked hard to demobilize the branches, whose early momentum it always regarded with suspicion

and fear.

The process of internal oligarchization was swift and deep enough to intellectually knock out Robert Michels himself, and the party became an extension of the leadership. Anyone who did not agree was perceived as an intruder. Fear of democracy loomed over the Vistalegre model and its management. Oddly, Podemos's leadership never had much confidence in itself and rejected any kind of democratic confrontation, whether internal or external. It was frequently and unnecessarily self-defeatist in its use of clever procedures to pass proposals that would probably have been approved through more democratic methods.

In fact, the leaders took refuge behind a political structure designed to prevent rank-and-file members from influencing their decisions or the party's course. Ultimately, it became too constraining even for the leaders, who eventually found themselves presiding over a gelatinous mass with unstable lower structures that had to be artificially sustained from the top.

Despite taking Gramsci as a key intellectual role model, the leadership did not follow his lead when it came to organizational questions. In its public communications, Podemos very effectively created a counter-hegemony, but in organizational matters, the leadership set aside its quest for hegemony in favor of pure and simple domination. They were happy to prevail without necessarily convincing.

Eliminating both member participation and militancy became a major goal after Vistalegre. The formula to achieve this consisted of three elements. First, it adopted an online decision system. Far from being a creative attempt to involve people with less time, this was designed to bypass active membership and to legitimate the decisions already made by the party leadership through online plebiscites. Then, they adopted an internal winner-take-all election system. Consequently, leadership bodies became factional instruments instead of sites of political discussion and synthesis as dissenters were quickly excluded from any organic party activity. Finally, it established highly centralized structure that placed an autonomized leadership at the top and subordinated the local and regional bodies. These became appendages of the central leadership, lacking political legitimacy and organizational resources and, consequently, weakened and erupted in crises.

The local branches did not function as tools for political discussion and organizing. With no concrete role to play in the triumphal march toward electoral victory, they became empty frameworks, focused only on internal or external elections and torn apart by internal struggles.

At Vistalegre, Iglesias and Errejón designed an electoral-professional party sustained by a system of plebiscites without democracy aimed at weakening membership. Militants were not seen as a resource or as the project's primary source, but as an internal enemy who opposed the leading bureaucracy, which developed a kind of Schmittian political culture based on the distinction between friend and enemy. The latter — represented by any kind of dissenters — always had a dual nature: on the one hand, anonymous and abstract, reflecting the bureaucratic fear of militancy and, on the other, concrete, incarnated by Anticapitalistas.

This centralized communication machine based on fake referenda became the electoral war machine's organizational wing. Taken to its logical extreme, the party model codified in Vistalegre represented the impossible utopia of a party without militants, the political and bureaucratic equivalent of the capitalist utopia of the factory without workers — and not so far removed from the conservative fantasy of a democracy without people that Errejón rightly criticizes.

In its first steps, the electoral war machine closed any attempt to explore new possibilities and seemed to exhaust the whole political horizon. Led by a powerful and self-confident leadership, it became the only possibility. This model condensed all the classic problems that left-wing forces have

experienced: from bureaucratization and oligarchization to institutionalization and programmatic adaptation. For a while, it was easier to imagine the end of Podemos than the end of the electoral war machine: it seemed more likely that the establishment would bring down the newcomer than that newcomer would transform into a democratic grassroots party. Only a few voices called out that another Podemos was possible.

Today, the political and organizational model set up in Vistalegre has been deeply eroded because of its own contradictions. Podemos's leadership will certainly make some changes at this weekend's congress. But real change can only come from real criticism of what was decided in 2014, not from the justification that it was a necessary step in an exceptional situation. Without genuine criticism of the electoral war machine, Podemos will not be able to imagine a future for the party that goes beyond the simulation of change. The proposals made by Podemos en Movimiento, mainly driven by Anticapitalistas, aim to overturn Vistalegre and shift to another strategy and structure.

Nevertheless, Podemos cannot move backwards. The first party — the one of spontaneous self-organization and overwhelming enthusiasm prior to the 2014 European elections — will never come back. Thousands of militants and their hopes went away with it. Political mistakes cannot simply be rewound in order to take the right path. But it is useful to look back without nostalgia to find a way to launch Podemos politically and socially, giving it the freshness that was bureaucratically confiscated from it. Three elements seem crucial here: fostering democratic internal life, renewing focus on social activity, and developing a permanent and qualified strategic discussion.

## **High School of Strategy**

Every emancipatory party should work to become a high school of revolutionary strategy and raise the membership's political capacity. Podemos has been doing the opposite until now, with its hasty debates, rushed plebiscites, and discussions reduced to electoral strategy. The high school of strategy and the electoral war machine are antithetical projects. We should therefore regard the leadership's implosion as good news: it brought about real strategic debate.

At stake in the congress is how much the new Podemos will resemble the first. This will determine the degree of its strategic strength and the depth of its commitment to changing society. Three options are clear. The Anticapitalistas current represents a crystal-clear break from the political and organizational nightmare that should have never happened. Pablo Iglesias calls for continuing the current model, adding in some partial democratic readjustments and maintaining his anti-establishment rhetoric. These minor changes are compatible with his limited horizon of political and economic change.

Finally, Íñigo Errejón represents an attempt to reassert Vistalegre's political legacy as a lever to take another, perhaps definitive, step forward on the road to transforming Podemos into a party that channels social malaise in a harmless direction that in no way threatens the powers that be.

## **Josep Maria Antentas**

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\* Jacobin. 2.11.17

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/02/spain-pablo-iglesias-errejón-podemos-anticapitalistas-vistalegre-ciudadanos/>

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## **Footnotes**

[1] <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article40267>