

**B**orn as an anti-austerity party in 2014 from the street protest of the so called 15-M movement, Podemos established—by default—a tense relationship with the European Union. That year, the total newcomer took both the Spanish and European political arenas by surprise, gaining five seats in the European Parliament after just four months of life.

Since then, Podemos has often been categorised not only as anti-austerity, anti-establishment and left-wing populist, but also as a Eurosceptic party. In so far as taking a stance against austerity measures entails, somehow, taking a stance against Brussels's guidelines, the group could fairly fit this label. Since 2014, the party's interventions in the European Parliament have been systematically confirming its rebelliousness—especially through red-hot rhetoric—against the functioning and some policies of the EU.

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It is easy to understand why this party has been seen by many international observers as an extension of the widespread Euroscepticism that has burst into Europe, of which Brexit has been the ultimate expression. The upsurge of Podemos is deep-rooted in the broader conditions that have allowed the widespread rise of Eurosceptic feelings and the new wave of anti-establishment parties that has shaken Europe. Podemos has been made and shaped by those same processes that have given life to such diametrically opposed parties as SYRIZA and Alternative für Deutschland, the same circumstances that have brought the National Front and Golden Dawn back to life. All of these are grouped under the tag “Eurosceptics”. However, it still remains to be seen whether such a broad label can portray well enough Podemos's position regarding the EU.

## **Spain, the euro crisis and the Euroscepticism**

Euroscepticism without Eurosceptics”, that is how [El País](#) titled an article describing the lack

of “hard” Eurosceptic parties in Spain, given the current declining support for the EU among Spaniards. The Eurobarometer shows, on the one hand, that when Spaniards are asked whether the EU “is good or bad for the country”, the positive responses are above the EU average. Moreover, only [19% of the Spaniards have a negative image of the EU](#) (while the EU average is 25%). This is lower than France (32%), Greece (47%) or the UK (32%).

However, the euro crisis has affected attitudes toward the EU. [Support for the EU has shrunk in most member states](#). Spain, despite having been historically considered a [strong pro-Europe country](#), is currently facing an alarming collapse in trust in the EU, according to the [Pew Research Centre](#). The study reveals that Greece (71%), France (61%) and Spain (49%) are located in the first three places, surpassing the UK (48%).

The austerity measures implemented by the Spanish government under the guidelines of the EC entailed a substantial worsening of social conditions. The general dissatisfaction of Spaniards was first targeted against traditional parties (the Socialist PSOE and the Conservative Popular Party) and then, to a lesser extent, against Brussels. Even today, after almost three years of economic recovery, the persistent problem of unemployment in Spain—which still remains at critical levels ([17%](#)), above all among young people ([39%](#))—is calling into question the effectiveness of the measures and reforms pursued by Brussels.

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Since 2014, Podemos has successfully channelled much of this political dissatisfaction, mainly through an anti-austerity programme, thereby seducing some discontented sectors of the Spanish population, most of them well-educated young people—a different profile than most right wing Eurosceptic party supporters.

As the Pew Research Centre also reveals, those Podemos voters are, among Spaniards, the

most pessimistic about the future of the EU. Only [32% of Podemos party adherents favour the EU](#) and [44% of Podemos partisans want some EU power back in Madrid](#). Nevertheless, the Spanish case presents another peculiarity: these people are more liable to prefer the euro over a hypothetical return to the former national currency. That is precisely the limit that Podemos's "Euroscepticism" seems to respect, taking, again, distance from other Eurosceptic parties.

## Podemos: Eurosceptic or Eurocritic?

Many labels have been used indistinctly to classify the new anti-establishment parties; namely, Euroscepticism, Eurocriticism, Europhobia, and so on. There is not a clear consensus about how Podemos's position toward the EU should be understood. Moreover, different parties are often grouped under the general label of "Euroscepticism", neglecting a deeper understanding of them. [Taggart and Szczerbiak](#) have distinguished between soft and hard Euroscepticism. In this regard, Podemos's position can be referred as [Eurocriticism](#) or [soft Euroscepticism](#) rather than Euroscepticism or Europhobia.

Podemos's national leader Pablo Iglesias, during his 15 months as a member of the European Parliament, has strongly criticized the functioning of the European Union, focusing on issues such as the role of European institutions during the aftermath of the euro crisis, the refugee crisis and the LuxLeaks scandal, and clamouring for more democracy, more transparency and more sovereignty for member countries (to counteract EU pressure for austerity measures). Podemos's interventions are in general guided by anti-elitist and anti-neoliberal approaches, and, in consequence, the group has been also branded left-wing populist.

Yet in its [platform for the 2014 European Parliamentary elections](#), the party proposed increasing citizen participation in EU institutions to achieve more transparency and democracy, expressing poor confidence in EU institutions. However, the broad emphasis was on taking sovereignty back, including through the repeal of the Lisbon Treaty. In an [interview](#) during the Election Campaign, Iglesias held that Podemos was not against the euro, as long as the common currency would be made responsible to a "democratic" institution (democratising the political and economic decision-making in the Eurozone).

During subsequent years, the tone of the critics has become more moderate, as can be observed from Podemos's [2016 electoral platform](#). Although the stress still lies on achieving more national sovereignty, restructuring sovereign debts, and eliminating the present budgetary objectives and deficit goals, the party seems to avoid going further. Instead,

Podemos asks for changes in the current EU model such as strengthening the Union's commitment in matters of migration, improving social conditions, and fighting poverty.

The fact is that Podemos has been moderating or indeed shifting—though just a bit—its position over time; before Podemos was created, for instance, [Iglesias used to argue for leaving the Eurozone](#). Podemos's Euro-parliamentarians [tend to vote like the rest of the Eurosceptic parties](#) on issues related to European integration. They are, however, more prone to support the [advancement of further European unification](#), more even than other Spanish parties. Moreover, the party argues for other countries to remain within the EU. Pablo Iglesias—right after the results of Brexit—tweeted: “It's a sad day for Europe. Nobody would want to leave a Europe of fairness and solidarity. We need to change Europe”, summing up, somehow, Podemos's vision for the EU.

*Threatening Podemos in the same way as those right-wing parties would lead to costly mistakes. Two different programmes for Europe lie behind this simple distinction: on the one hand, criticizing the current EU model or pushing for more sovereignty; on the other, advocating a full return to the nation state.*

The ambiguity displayed by Podemos's approach toward the EU might result from both political tactics and regular electoral readjustments. Podemos is still a new party; it was born only three years ago in a very convulsive period, and right after sketching its first platform it won its first election. The party, according to [Carmen González-Enríquez](#), is still defining itself, [balancing between a traditional leftist profile and a more catch-all one](#). It remains to be seen which profile is going to prevail in the upcoming stages of its development.

## The importance of concepts

After everything that has been said, Podemos can hardly be neatly labelled as a Eurosceptic party rather than Eurocritical one. This simple distinction is important in so far as it could entail different outcomes for Europe. Parties such as the UKIP, which has spurred the Brexit vote, and likewise Marine Le Pen's National Front with its so-called “Frexit” platform, suppose

harder forms of Euroscepticism and entail different challenges for Europe to tackle.

Threatening Podemos in the same way as those right-wing parties would lead to costly mistakes. Two different programmes for Europe lie behind this simple distinction: on the one hand, criticizing the current EU model or pushing for more sovereignty; on the other, advocating a full return to the nation state. Emphasising this distinction will give us the chance to rethink or sophisticate our notion of Euroscepticism. The latter is often used too broadly, not only in journalistic formats but sometimes even in academic articles. Today, a new wave of left-wing movements—headed by Jeremy Corbyn in UK and, to a certain extent, Jean-Luc Mélenchon in France—seems to be gaining ground, and its implications for Europe should not be framed within the unclear boundaries of too broad concepts.

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