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# Vienna speeches

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## Presentation

In July 2018, *Transform!* and *European Left* organized a week of debates in Vienna, Austria. The following texts correspond to my three interventions in these debates.

*Transform! europe* is a network of 32 European organisations from 21 countries, active in the field of political education and critical scientific analysis, and is the recognised political foundation corresponding to the Party of the European Left (EL).

*European Left (EL)* is a European party, a flexible, decentralised association of 36 European left-wing parties and political organizations from 24 countries.

From 9th to 11th July, took place Transform!'s Strategy Seminar named '*The Laugh of the Medusa: The Left in Europe*'<sup>1</sup>.

According to the organizers, "the annual strategic seminar of transform! europe and Rosa Luxemburg Foundation focuses on the political actors of the radical left in Europe and their

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<sup>1</sup> You can find the programme of the seminar at <https://www.transform-network.net/en/calendar/event/the-laugh-of-the-medusa-the-left-in-europe/>

ability to provide programmatic and strategic answers to current challenges, to build alternatives and to further develop forms of political organization.

It is a question of the left-wing actors not only in national, but also in European level, their effectiveness and capacity to initiate a political change by creating – among others – left and progressive alliances that will contribute to the long-term project of a left hegemony. Despite the successes achieved by left forces in specific countries, the left as a political subject is still on the defensive. It is therefore, always, essential to organize strategic and programmatic debates not only analyzing the reasons of our victories or our defeats, but also on the fundamental weaknesses of our narrative, our structures and our communication channels.

Thus, we see this seminar as the space where political actors, academics and young scholars, as well as activists and trade unionists come together in order to critically discuss the very thorny topics of modern left politics in Europe.”

On the first day of this seminar, 9th July, I delivered a first speech in the panel *“The role of the Left in a changing global balance of power”*.

On the second day, 10th July, my intervention was made in the panel *“The governmental experience in Greece and Portugal: lessons we can learn”*.

In the same venue, in the evening of 11th July started the Summer University of European Left, under the motto “*A Dialogue for Progress in Europe. 200 years Karl Marx / 100 Years End of WWI*”<sup>2</sup>.

The debates were organized around three main topics:

- Europe’s Role in a Globalized World
- Social Justice: A European Concept of Economic, Ecological and Social Convergence
- Appropriation, Participation and Democracy

My intervention was delivered on the last day, 14th July, in a plenary session on “*Appropriation, Participation and Democracy*”, where we were asked to address the question: “Can we re-appropriate Europe as a Common? – How to re-appropriate Europe as one Dimension of Initiatives to Reclaim Social Justice, Ecological Sustainability and Democracy?”

The three texts presented here are based on the notes prepared as a support for the interventions.

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<sup>2</sup> You can find the programme of the Summer University at <https://www.transform-network.net/en/calendar/event/summer-university-2018-of-the-european-left-party-and-transform-europe/>

I hope readers may be indulgent towards the poor English of the author.

And please take into consideration that these texts were not meant to be read but to be heard, so they present an oral style that may be less appropriate for being published in written form.

It must be also taken into account that their content was aimed at the specific audience present at the seminars and to some specific issues that may concern them in their political activity and debates.

## Speech 1

Transform! Strategy Seminar 'The Laugh of the Medusa: The Left in Europe'

Seminar *"The role of the Left in a changing global balance of power"*

### Some questions on power

Good afternoon.

Thank you for your invitation and congratulations for organising this event, presented in the text as "strategic and programmatic debates, not only analysing the reasons of our victories or our defeats, but also the fundamental weaknesses of our narrative".

I completely agree with the need to analyse the reasons of our victories or our defeats, even though sometimes we don't have neither victories nor defeats, our action being too irrelevant to fit in any of these categories. Anyway, it is important to analyse this question and perhaps we have not been doing it in the deep, detailed and consistent manner it needs to be done.

I am not going to do it now — for lack of time and of personal capacity —, but I would like instead to focus on a *fundamental weakness* — as you say —, not perhaps of our narrative, but certainly of the content of our debates and our publications, a specific point that I think is too often missing or, at least, undervalued in our theoretical and critical work.

So, lets begin by the beginning: the role of the Left, the great issue mentioned in the title.

Basically, the role of the Left is to change society.

And what do we need to change society? (Be it to change our country, our city, to change Europe or the world?)

To make it simple, we just need two things: ideas and power,

- ideas on what to change, how to change, in what direction, etc.

- and power to implement those ideas.

If we have good ideas and a strong power, we'll do it.

Now I ask you, or better, I have asked myself: from these two things that we need to accomplish our role, the two things we need to change society (ideas + power), which one do we have more and which one do we have less? Which one do we lack, do we need more?

I think you may easily agree that what we don't have, what we miss more is power, not ideas.

We have a lot of ideas for changing society, we have books and books filled with excellent proposals, we make seminars, debates, publications...

Of course it is true that our ideas have to be further developed, detailed, fine tuned, constantly adapted to the new challenges of a fast moving situation and to the concrete needs and will of the people of each country. All that is true: the ideas we have are still not enough and are still not good enough. But we have already a rich set of ideas and proposals that is the result of years of studies, of debates and of common preparation.

What we don't have is power. The power to implement our bright and generous ideas.

What is very strange — and I would like to underline this as the focal point of my communication — what is strange is that this thing we lack more and need more (power), far from being the main subject, or one the main subjects of our studies and our debates, as it should be, is quite often ignored, absent of the agendas of most of our meetings and seminars, and of the index of our publications. And that is a big problem.

Why don't we focus on that, don't we concentrate more attention on this fundamental question of power? Of power of the Left, of course.

Some of these questions could be:

-Why we don't have power and other political parties in our countries do? What do they have that we don't?

-How can we gain power?

-What to do when we arrive to power? How to act once in power?

-What can make us loose power, once we have it?

-How to act after loosing power? And how to regain it?

(These are some of the questions we need to answer.)

I have to admit I don't know why we normally don't debate power, such a key issue for the Left. But I know it's worth trying to find out why, because nothing happens without a reason.

Anyway, I will not enter here into the real core of this debate about power, but let's approach one of the many entries of that building and try to have a glimpse of what's inside.

## **A quick listing of some power experiences**

To make things easier, let's limit the scope of our attention. I would suggest introducing three different kinds of limits to make more manoeuvrable this quick approach to the problem.

Geographically: let's reduce the scope to Europe (we skip the difficulties of analysing power in Asia, Latin America, Africa, cases that nevertheless have strongly affected people's perception of our Left in Europe).

Chronologically: let's reduce the scope to our century, these last 18 years (we skip the difficulties of dealing with all the crucial power experiences of real socialism, popular fronts, etc.).

And politically: let's reduce the scope to the Left, to our Left, this political world around European Left party, GUE/NGL, transform! and friends.

So, what happened in Europe, in the few 18 years of this century, with the Left parties, regarding the exercise of power? That would be the question.

It is methodologically useful to introduce here yet another partition: to separate experiences with Left as leading forces and leading persons in government, from other experiences with Left as junior partner in government or in ruling coalitions.

Of course, apart from these two situations, there are also some different kinds of power when we are just in opposition: not only the power of social resistance, of trade unions and industrial actions, influential power of social movements and citizens' initiatives, but also the power of the vote in Parliaments (national, local or European). Mariano Rajoy has just experienced this kind of power exercised from the opposition. And last Socialist Portuguese government, the one that later called the Troika and signed the Memorandum, fell down in 2011 by a vote in Parliament rejecting its Stability and Growth Program, vote where the Bloco, as opposition MPs participated with a decisive influence.

But let's concentrate on the cases where Left parties have been participating directly in power.

As junior partners in government, we have had a lot of situations, in many different countries and regions, from the North of Ireland to Catalonia, from Finland to Italy or Berlin. The cases are abundant in quantity and diverse in quality.

All of them, we should have studied in detail, to learn all possible lessons from these rich experiences.

I know that they have been object of analysis and debates in the countries concerned, sometimes very hot debates, like I have witnessed at the congress of Rifondazione after the defeat that followed the participation in the Prodi government. This Italian case had such an impact (and we know now: a

during impact) that it surely has grabbed general attention in many meetings and debates of the Left in Europe.

But the majority of our power experiences as junior partners in governments have not really had the necessary scrutiny at European level, we had not enough exchange of experiences in this crucial issue, learning the precious lessons that only real situations of exercise of power can bring.

But let's move now to the situations where our Left has been leading governments, because these cases are very few, differently from the above mentioned experiences as secondary forces. [Still only in Europe, only during XXI century.]

### *Moldova*

The century started with a stunning victory of the Communist Party of the Republic of Moldova, winning 71 of the 101 seats of Moldovan Parliament, with 50,1% of the votes, forming a government and electing also the President of Republic.

After some years of right wing domination, this was a surprise for most European observers and analysts.

In 2005 the CPRM won again the elections with absolute majority — 46% and 56 seats out of 101.

In April 2009, the Communist party wins another absolute majority with 49,5% of the votes and 60 seats.

Months later, in July 2009, a new election sees another victory for the Communists, with 44,7% and 48 seats, losing the absolute majority which allowed the opposition to unite and form a government.

In 2010, PCRM wins again, with 39% and 42 seats, but far from the absolute majority.

This is the longest period of consecutive victories and the highest electoral scores of all Left parties in Europe in the period under analysis, our still very young XXI century.

The CPRM is a full and active member of EL and of our Left parliamentary group in PACE<sup>3</sup>. For the first time in XXI century our Left won elections and was ruling a country in Europe.

This experience has been, for sure, very rich in lessons on how to conquer power, how to use power and also how and why we may lose it.

During and after this power experience, has it been the object of debates, of articles, of books, trying to analyse and explain or, at least, to provide interpretations on the Moldovan Left ruling, the very first European Left government in the XXI century? Why and how they won election after election? What their

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<sup>3</sup> Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

government has achieved for the benefit of the people? Why they later lost support?

Perhaps this analytical research has been done in due terms and has been made available to us all, but I must confess I didn't notice it.

### *Cyprus*

In 2008, while we were still keeping our good electoral results in Moldova, we experienced another success with the election of Dimitris Christofias, general secretary of AKEL, as President of the Republic and head of government in Cyprus.

Now it was happening inside the European Union.

Enormous expectations were raised by the presence of an experienced communist leader inside the meetings of the European Council, where the future of EU is supposedly designed and decided.

Namely, taking into consideration that some decisions are to be taken by unanimous vote, giving AKEL<sup>4</sup> a *de facto* right of veto to all key political decisions of the Union that they would consider specially negative for people's interest.

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<sup>4</sup> AKEL - Progressive Party of The Working People, the communist party in Cyprus

Christofias presidency lasted five years.

Adding to this, during this period, Christofias government had, for six months, the rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union, with a reinforced role in agenda setting and conduction of daily work of EU.

Now European citizens were going to be able to appreciate the difference it makes to choose the Left, instead of choosing the Right or the Centre to rule a government in EU.

What has been the extent and profoundness of the debates and analysis promoted by the European Left party, GUE/NGL or Transform! about this period of exercise of power in Cyprus? About the real influence of having this government, both for Cypriots and for EU citizens in general?

Once again, I am afraid the debate has been very scarce, if any at all.

### *Greece*

In 2015, with the victory of Syriza, we start the third experience of a Left led government in Europe during this century.

The Greek situation has been the object of huge debates in Europe, long before Syriza came to power. It was only natural that it would continue to be so after their victory.

The international impact of the Greek case is enormous, much more than the Cypriot case and the Moldovan before it.

It has been presented to the people (both by us and by our enemies) as an example of what a Left party would do when reaching power in a member-state of the European Union and namely in a member-state facing great economic difficulties and all kind of pressures and blackmails.

The actions and decisions of EU and the Troika against Greece have been debated everywhere, including in all mainstream media. And the counter-reactions of the Greek government and the Greek people too.

But, what about our own debate about it? Did it match the importance of what was at stake for us? Because the importance couldn't be higher. The entire world was watching Syriza and Alexis.

For the first time, our Left was at the eye of the hurricane and great expectations awaited every single move in Athens. What was hapening there would affect enormously the future of us all in Europe.

One real risk was that Greece could be swallowed by a cathastrofic turmoil of misery and violence (and with Golden Dawn and infiltrated police involved, this could have looked pretty ugly). If it had happened, I think it would have jeopardized any chances of success of all other Left parties in Eu-

rope for decades, because we would all be facing the argument that voting for us would be voting to bring this same Greek-style chaos, misery and violence to our own countries. It's good that it didn't happen.

But what happened instead has also been quite problematic for us. Because we were so closely linked to Syriza, the Right wing parties downgraded our critique against them saying “why do you criticize us for obeying the Troika and applying the Memorandum, if this is exactly what your good friends of Syriza are doing?”

And the immediate consequence was the strengthening of the “there is no alternative” argument and the reinforcement of the political field using it. This apparent lack of alternative had an huge negative impact on population’s state of mind and willingness to fight back austerity measures.

The importance of this situation demanded a more deep, open, detailed and outspoken political debate among us all.

But, once again, when the question is about power, and power of our own people, we have a rather diplomatic if not timorous approach. Or else, we split. Either we mix up fraternity and solidarity with hypocritical diplomacy and submissive silence, or we handle political differences with sectarian warfare.

## **Conclusion**

Time is almost over, I think it's time for me to stop.

Reaching my conclusion, I think we can detect, in all cases where we have our Left related to power, a certain pattern of difficulty in dealing with it openly, analyzing the phenomenon in a lucid and critical way, and that is somehow preoccupying.

Because, although power is, or must be, a key question for any Left militant or organisation, we strangely avoid debating it, mainly when it happens in reality, which is the moment when it has to be debated more strongly and with more accuracy by all of us.

We are internationalists. However, we do not intend at all to interfere in the sovereign decisions of our parties when they are ruling their countries. Of course not.

But any Left power, any Left government anywhere, has a strong influence in the popular perception of Left parties everywhere.

We are all affected (in a positive or in a negative way) by the concrete measures taken by any Left party when it conquers power.

We know that being in the government is not exactly the same as having full power to govern. Mostly in the cases when we are junior partners in ruling coalitions, it can even weaken us, if we don't have power enough to implement our policies or block others' decisions we disagree with, because, at the end of the day, we will be seen as responsible or co-responsible for all measures taken, even if we are not at all identified with them.

This was probably the case in several European situations that we should have analysed in detail.

Every case of power experience by any of our parties anywhere, must be a case-study addressed by all of our parties everywhere. And it has not been the case.<sup>5</sup>

It could make us wonder, why have we been avoiding the debate about power in general, but specially, about the concrete experiences of power of our own parties of the Left?

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<sup>5</sup> It is interesting to note that, in the very same days these debates were taking place, some political developments in two countries were adding more reasons to this statement: the news from Czech Republic were reporting that a new government would be formed thanks to the support of the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (whose members were present at the seminar) and we took notice that our comrades of Levica, from Slovenia (also present), had just been faced with a similar situation.

Some days before, the PSOE Spanish government had taken charge thanks to the support of the Left and, if we add to all this the case in Portugal and, differently, the Greek one, there are now 5 EU governments (in 27 or 28) depending directly on the votes of Left parties.

I don't have any satisfactory answer to this question, but I have a feeling that the answer may be important for our movement.

Perhaps we still carry upon our shoulders an old poisoned mix of fear and uncritical reverence towards power, mostly when that power is held by our own comrades.

Wasn't it the case in the relation of our parties with the governments of the former socialist countries, even when things started to go terribly wrong? Or today, with China?

Or towards our friends of Left governments in Latin America and the Caribe, when they take attitudes we would never accept in our own countries?

Or towards some African governments, resulting from anti-colonial liberation wars that we all supported with militant determination, but that later slowly became a bunch of corrupt kleptocrats?

Perhaps we still have that feeling that any critique, made during these always difficult moments when we rule a country, could sound like a betrayal in times of war. So, we forgive or we forget everything.

If it is so, that's very problematic. And it means it is time to make a revolution in our minds. And always dare to ask for the concrete results of our use of power, those moments when we are effectively trying to change society.

Because, sometimes, the use of power, instead of changing society, could be having the effect of changing us instead. Changing us for worst, rather than changing society for better. It would not be the first time in history.

So, I finish insisting on my proposal that we start to dedicate 'half' time of our debates and 'half' space in our publications to the question of power: why we don't have it, how to win it, how to use it and how it is being used when we have it, why we have lost it in situations where we had it.

And I close saying that, if you have the ideas - good ideas, of course -, then "all you need is power; power; power is all you need".

Thank you.

## Speech 2

Transform! Strategy Seminar

‘The Laugh of the Medusa: The Left in Europe’

*Seminar “The governmental experience in Greece and Portugal: lessons we can learn”*

### **Situation in Portugal**

We are very happy that there has been a global curiosity for the political situation in Portugal following last elections of 2015 and for the government solution we were able to build, which was not self-evident at the time. Three years after, friends and enemies are forced to recognise that the outcome is so far rather positive for the country.

A great part of this curiosity, and the reason for the initial rejection in Brussels and elsewhere, was due to the (surprising — they say) decisive role of the so-called “radical Left” in all this process.

## **Radical Left?**

Before entering the real subject of our debate, please allow me to start with a lateral commentary on terminology, because I have some doubts if this adjectivation of ourselves, at European level, as 'radical left' is a good option. I may be wrong, but I think it is not: not useful, not accurate, it does more bad than good to our goals.

It may be bad for several reasons and I will try to concentrate on two of them.

First reason: it is bad because, in spite of “radical” having the same literal meaning everywhere (in the positive sense of going to the roots), the semantics are not the same in different countries and in different political cultures, and we must take that in consideration when producing a pan-european speech.

I understand that in Greece it may be positive, our comrades were even able to win elections with a coalition, and then a party, under this name.

But in Portugal it is mainly used by our enemies to insult or to disqualify us, trying to reduce our field of influence to an ultra-minority radical segment of society. I have the idea that in Spain, in France and in many other countries it has probably the same use.

We are the Left Bloc, not the Radical Left Bloc. Our German comrades call themselves Die Linke, not Die radikal Linke. Same in Luxembourg with Déi Lénk. And elsewhere.

At European level, we call ourselves the party of the European Left, not the party of the European radical Left.

If almost everywhere we call ourselves just “Left”, if in most of the countries we would never call ourselves 'radical left', why should we assume in our theoretical texts and speeches this designation that our enemies are trying to stick on us to reduce the popular appeal of our proposals?

And, second reason: it is bad because the need for this self-adjectivation has behind it (conscious or unconscious) a concept that the Left, just Left with no adjective, refers to others, not to us; we are just the radical fringe of this field.

But if we are the radical Left, who would then be the Left, the non-radical Left? The underlying concept is that the Left are the socialists or social-democrats, that would be the main Left. I have often criticised our French comrades when they call themselves “la gauche de la gauche”, the Left of the Left, because it means that the French Socialist Party would be “la gauche” or, at least, “la droite de la gauche”. And this is fundamentally wrong nowadays. This mistake disregards the quality shift that socialists and social-democrats underwent during the last decades. Today, they are not the right of the Left, as they were long time ago; they became instead the left of the Right. This may often seem to be the same place, but it is not.

In the bottom, they changed their family belonging. We may find their new family ties operational everywhere, in many countries, like Germany, at international organisations, like NATO, and, most visibly, in the process of building together the neoliberal European Union. The natural strategic alliance of the socialists and social democrats today is made with the different right wing parties: conservative and liberals, not with the Left. I'm sure you have all experienced that in different ways.

But, even if it is so, it is important to notice that this refiliation process of the socialists in another political field is neither uniform, nor automatic.

It is not uniform among all parties of the European Socialists, because they have different backgrounds and different contexts, and a party is always itself and its circumstance — as Ortega y Gasset would say. And it is not also uniform inside the parties themselves because, being big mass parties, they include many different members with different ideologies, some of them really left wing people with a left culture and a progressive ideology, and we must value that.

Adding to this is the fact that this process of sliding to the right is not automatic and instantaneous, but rather a relatively long and often smooth process of change, presenting different stages along its long way.

That is why we may be able, under certain concrete circumstances, to build alliances with them and make agreements for specific goals. And this was the case in Portugal.

### **The situation preceding the agreement**

To understand the present government agreements in Portugal, we must understand its background and the details (devil is in the details) of the concrete situation that made it possible. I will list some of these details, because each one of them had a role in taking us to the final result we are analysing here.

Portugal has been governed by the Socialists (prime-minister Sócrates) in the years before and during the crisis of 2008. Then, in 2011, with interest rates of public debt reaching 7,7%, the Socialist government presents a tough austerity package and a Stability and Growth Programme agreed with Brussels, which has been rejected by the Parliament.

The left usually voted against these kind of policy, what was new was the right wing parties joining us in the rejection, aiming only to overthrow the government and replace it.

Sócrates' Socialist government resigns, calls the Troika and signs the Memorandum before the elections.

In the 2011 elections that followed the resignation, Socialists are defeated and the right wing coalition wins with an absolute majority. Bloco loses half of its MPs, from 16 down to 8.

In May 2014 we had the European elections and Socialists, under a new leader, António José Seguro, win with 31% against 28% of the right wing coalition that receives here a kind of punishment for three years of austerity policy they were applying.

But, in spite of this victory, the Socialist leader is challenged in his post by António Costa, Mayor of Lisbon, because the victory with a 3% margin has been too narrow, he said, and Socialists need and deserve big victories, something he promises to deliver.

So, in September 2014 António Costa is elected leader of the Socialists, ousting the leader that had just won the European elections.

In November 2014 former Socialist leader and former prime-minister, Sócrates, the one of the Lisbon Treaty, is arrested under heavy charges of corruption. It had never happened before with a Portuguese prime-minister, the country is shocked and, specially interesting for what we are debating here, the Socialists are in total shock.

In October 2015, we had parliamentary elections and the Socialists, under the new leadership of Costa, loose with 32% against 37% of the right wing coalition.

### **The conditions for the agreement**

It has been under these concrete conditions that government agreements were negotiated:

1 - an unexpected electoral victory of the Right that had implemented the hardest Troika austerity, but a victory without absolute majority

2 - the defeat of the Socialists, with a new leader whose reason to have run for leadership has been the criticism on the modest victory of his predecessor, announcing great victories to his party but finally delivering only a shameful defeat; so, times were not very promising for him and Costa's resignation was the expected move for this electoral night, because nobody believed he could save his face in front of the PS militants

3 - the best electoral result ever of the Bloco, 10,2%, passing from 8 to 19 MPs

4 - a good result of CDU (communists+greens), 8,2% and 17 MPs

5 - a public challenge made during an electoral debate, live on TV, by Catarina<sup>6</sup> to Costa, saying that if the Socialists abandon some specific more negative measures of their program, Bloco was willing to allow Socialists to rule the country and get rid of the Right wing policies

6 - an openness of PCP to do the same.

There was a (let's say) Left majority in Parliament. An opportunity, of course. But only with the Left strengthened and the center Left weakened, the opportunity showed its potential to deliver results. Because Left majorities in Portuguese Parliament had existed many times before, but the truth is that they had never been used to create a government. So, there was no tradition at all to do this kind of arrangements, and that was an obvious difficulty.

Although Costa was seen as more open to Left ideas (as a Mayor he had some collaboration with the Left parties in the Municipality of Lisbon), the fact is that he was an important minister in the government whose austeritarian Stability and

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<sup>6</sup> Catarina Martins, leader of Bloco de Esquerda

Growth Program had been rejected, of the government that called the troika and signed the memorandum.

And here lies another substantial difficulty for the agreement: the Socialists had run for this legislative election of 2015 with an electoral program full of right wing style measures and assumptions, largely influenced, in the economic and labour chapters, by the group of experts around Mário Centeno, an economist with a PhD by Harvard University, not engaged in party politics before and completely unknown to the public, with a reputation for economic liberalism, author of works on Labour Economy, among other issues. Not a leftist at all, although he had openly opposed the economic ideas of the Troika and of the former Right wing government.

*Let me make a short parenthesis here: Centeno is now president of Eurogroup and, considering his opinions and his background, he fits well in the job. His election had a huge impact in Portugal. From the symbolic point of view (and politics has always used symbols as important tools), this could say a lot about change in Europe.*

*After the horrible Jeroen Dijsselbloem, anyone would look good, that's a fact, but choosing the minister of a government announcing the end of*

*austerity, in opposition to the previous Troika-backed policies, the minister of a government that only generated mistrust in Brussels for being supported by the so-called radical Left? That, nobody could have expected some months before.*

*But EU rulers, and namely Germans, needed a 'good example' to show the skeptical people of Europe not only that their austerity recipe finally worked well, because Portuguese government strictly obeyed Brussels' diktat, and also that they were ready to be generous and open, in recognition of the sacrifices made to comply with EU obligations.*

*The impact in Portugal of Eurogroup election (apart from a natural primary instinct of national pride) was devastating for the Right wing parties, because their last and strong argument against new policy of social rights recovery was that the Eurogroup would never approve it. On the other side, the government used this election for its propaganda about their original and innovative right track and about the success in the allegedly impossible squaring of the circle of pleasing the Left, pleasing the trade unions and pleasing Brussels altogether.*

*Indeed, Brussels (let me use here a Portuguese popular expression) knows more asleep than we do when we are awake. The experienced europoliticians know that they are not putting a minister of any problematic government in the Eurogroup presidency, on the contrary, they are putting the Eurogroup president inside the Portuguese government, consolidating difficult and not so popular budgetary options already taken there about deficit and spending restrictions.*

*Centeno's hard grip on spending is blocking necessary investments and social spending, sacrificing reasonable political options in the altar of dogmatic budgetary goals. EU old foxes know very well that an Eurogroup president is always an irremovable finance minister, no matter what happens. Centeno is their life insurance to prevent any derailing of Portuguese politics (that was not very likely to happen, anyway).*

## **Main achievements**

It is important to say that people was quite happy with the government during the first years. And the electorate of both the Socialists and the Left (Bloco and PCP) largely supports the solution. Main achievements in this period were the recovery of wages and pensions, successive increase in minimum wage, regaining of cancelled holidays, lowering direct taxes on lower revenues, enlarging the application of social tariff on electricity and the beginning of a wide combat against precarity in labour relations, including for public workers. All new privatisations were blocked and some already in course, in public transport sector, could be reverted. Some social and civil rights were developed and a legislative offensive of the Right wing parties against them was stopped.

Now, things are starting to change a little. Social services are under great stress and seriously affected by lack of investment and by underbudgeted provisions for daily needs.

And because, taking into consideration the improvement of the economy, the reduction of unemployment and the government propaganda of the good economic results, workers of many different sectors have decided to reinforce the struggle for their rights and for the reconstruction of their careers, completely blocked for years by the previous governments. But they meet a cold and resounding “there is no money” answer, delivered

by the prime-minister and largely in line with Centeno's hard approach.

With a great part of the items inscribed in the initial bilateral party agreements already delivered or on its way to be completed, may be Socialist leaders feel it's time to get back to the rightist spirit of their original electoral programme.

### **Problems and limitations**

The stubborn obedience to the Fiscal Treaties, surpassing the goals agreed with Brussels for the deficit, is certainly very good for the profile of Centeno in the Eurogroup and his future career in EU, but is having serious consequences for an under-budgeted National Health Service, for schools, for public transport and public workers careers, and lowered dramatically all other necessary public investment.

In what concerns labour laws, collective bargaining, energy rents or public-private partnerships — namely in health care and roads —, the government has made unnecessary concessions to private business strategic interests. The former great public companies (mail, energy, telecom, airports), privatised during the adjustment period, continue to create problems for the economy, but the government refuses to confront them.

One striking example: preparing the proposal for 2018 State Budget, in our joint preparatory work in the field of energy, together with the Socialists (and this means that the Bloco worked both with Socialist MPs and the Secretary of State in charge of energy, representing the government) we decided to create a modest contribution applied to the excessive profits on renewables that ruinous agreements by former governments had allowed them to charge on consumers. Left parties, including Socialist MPs, voted in favour, on a Friday, in the respective standing Parliamentary Committee and the contribution was approved. The final general vote in Plenary was scheduled for next Monday. During the weekend many things probably have happened, because Monday the government recalls that specific issue to be revoted in plenary and, together with the Right wing parties, reject what it had approved 3 days before. Big energy lobby did what it had to do to preserve scandalous margins of profit.

Another example of the not so easy daily life of ‘geringonça’<sup>7</sup>: Labour laws are the most recent battle field — it’s happening now. Most of the troika labour laws remain untouched. After almost two years of laborious negotiation with the Bloco, in a joint committee Bloco+government created with that purpose, some good compromises have been reached, improving substantially the workers’ legal rights in many aspects, with special focus on precariousness.

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<sup>7</sup> In English ‘contraption’ - the word used in Portugal to name the political agreements that are the base of the present government solution.

Before bringing these conclusions to a vote in Parliament, and without any notice to its political partners, the government presented them for Social Concertation in the Economic and Social Council, agreeing with the business representatives a lot of surgical amendments that largely neutralise the positive effects for the workers of the legislation changes proposals they had agreed with us.

Now the fight goes on in Parliament, because Social Concertation agreements are not legally binding and need to be approved by legislators. The Right wing parties already manifested their willingness to vote for the agreement, but only if Socialists don't allow the Left to withdraw the business oriented amendments added to the text in Social Concertation. Some socialists, including the president of the party, may not be ready to simply stamp the government-business social concertation agreement as it is, even if any change could, to a certain extent, make the government lose its face with the Business partners with whom they signed the agreement. But PS<sup>8</sup> MPs argue, with acid humour, that after 'social concertation' comes 'parliamentary concertation'.

Votes will happen next week. Let's see what happens.

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<sup>8</sup> Socialist Party

## **General political consequences of the agreement**

This new government experience shook many solid prejudices of Portuguese established common sense and this may prove to be of great importance to open new ways for the future.

One of the main topics underlined by commentators was that it had put an end to an old vicious concept called “the arch of governance”, by which only center and right parties could be considered in what regards formation of governments.

This concept is now apparently buried, but some try to replace it by “the European arch”, integrated by the very same parties, another subtle way to exclude the Left from all ruling issues, now claiming anti-European parties are naturally out of question because Treaties are to be respected.

Another aspect: all parties claim to reject the constitution of a central grand coalition, between PS and PSD<sup>9</sup>, for democratic sanity of the system, they say, meaning that if you have both main parties in government, then, either there is no alternative and with no alternative there is no democracy, or the alternatives will be right or left anti-system solutions, and that's also the end of democracy. So, they prefer to continue the alternance between PS and PSD.

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<sup>9</sup> Social Democratic Party, member of EPP.

What has changed with the present experience is that the Left can no more be excluded from the possibility of supporting a government.

Another consequence - they say, be we doubt - is that, from now on, the governments would result either from a Left majority or from a Right majority, mattering mainly which bloc gets more votes e not so much in which party of the bloc the vote is cast, because the ruling party is not necessarily the one that gets more votes, as is the case with the present government, held by the party that came second both in votes and seats.

This relates directly to the problem of the so called “useful vote”, that has been quite detrimental for the small Left parties, as many voters with sympathy for our Left used to vote for the Socialists not to “waste” their vote and not to favour a PSD victory. Now they would have more freedom to choose and we could hope it would have positive consequences.

With the present weak situation of the Right wing parties, due in part to the popularity of the “geringonça” and of the government, but also to their incapacity to present any alternative policy to the one executed by the government, and with polls showing support for the Socialists that have rised up to 45%, the always clever and pragmatic bourgeoisie assumed the goal of giving the Socialists an overall majority so that they could get rid of the Left and govern without undesirable constraints.

But, things are changing, because of social discontent mentioned before, and more recently, polls have been showing, in a consistent manner, that this goal of absolute majority has a quite low probability to be met, in spite of the high degree of popular approval of the government in general.

Last poll shows PS at 38,1%, the right wing parties with 28,6 and 6,5 (together 35,1%) and, on the Left, Bloco with 10,6 and CDU 7,4 (together 18%). In spite of these results being not so different from the ones of 2015, there are two aspects that introduce a big change in the balance of power and in the range of solutions available.

First is that PS wins, becomes the first party, not the second, and consequently enjoys a "natural right" to govern the country, something it had not at all in 2015.

And second, the Socialists would have more seats than the two right wing parties together, meaning that their government or their budget proposals could not be rejected by the Right. Nor by the Left, by the way. It could only be defeated if Left and Right joined forces against them, what would create an unsustainable situation (or, at least, quite uncomfortable politically) both for the Left and for the Right. Not impossible, nothing that had not happened before - remember that last Socialist government was ousted that way - but it is quite unlikely in the present circumstances.

Meanwhile, the prime-minister has stated repeatedly that his intention is to renew the government agreements with the Left for another legislature, after the elections of 2019, and to do it whatever the election results will be, even if he has absolute majority, because, he said this week, he feels very well working with his Left partners, "geringonça is going well and it is in the heart of the Portuguese". He is a very smart politician and knows well that the first party to break geringonça will pay an heavy price for it.

He is moving more to the right in his options, to the traditional policy of PS, and he does it because he can: the polls comfort him. But he feels he has to do it saying the PS is not moving, it is where it has always been, and says this singing love songs to the geringonça and the Left partners, while rejecting their political demands.

There is also a new factor: a more cooperative new leader of the main right wing party, PSD, who, differently from the former prime-minister and leader of that party, instead of using the tactics of fighting Costa hardly by identifying him with the horrible Left he was associated with, is ready to provide the necessary political support to allow him to get rid of the Left influence, 'whose constraints are blocking the reforms the country so urgently needs, something that they could eventually do together'.

This may be today the new tactics of the bourgeoisie, an update to the previous quest for an absolute majority of the PS. They'll do anything that could put Bloco de Esquerda and PCP far from any influence in governmental affairs. That's their main goal for 2019.

Many traps will be put on our way. We will face that with both and ice cold blood patience and a warm attention to the deepest feelings of the people.

It's better I stop here, because it's more effective for clarifying the Portuguese case to answer to your questions.

Thank you for your attention.

## Speech 3

European Left - Summer University 2018

“A Dialogue for Progress in Europe. 200 years Karl Marx / 100 Years End of WWI”.

Plenary session 14th July

“Appropriation, Participation and Democracy”

*“Can we re-appropriate Europe as a Common? – How to re-appropriate Europe as one Dimension of Initiatives to Reclaim Social Justice, Ecological Sustainability and Democracy?”*

### **Some questions on EU and the Left**

Perhaps you noticed this is the only session in the whole program whose title is made of questions. Why? Are we supposed to be delivering answers? It's not fair...

To prepare my contribution, I asked many comrades present here at the Summer University what were for them the most striking and dividing questions on this subject of Left positioning towards EU.

And the questions were four:

1. Is EU reformable?
2. Do our ideas collide with the EU Treaties?
3. How to deal with European democracy?
4. What are the possibilities of national and of European levels of intervention and how to articulate them?

I will have time to address only number one and number two.

### **Is EU reformable?**

First question is if EU is reformable, if we can reform it or not, and I think some strange debates have been made around this issue.

It is obvious for all (at least I think it is) that we can easily reform EU if we win the elections and have government power in Portugal, in Spain, in France, in Germany, in Denmark, in Greece, in Slovenia and so on, conquering a great majority in the European Council and in the European Parliament, nominating the Commission and all EU bodies.

It would take us no more than two weeks (or two months, doesn't matter) to completely invert the sense of European policy and block the neoliberal agenda.

Then more two years to make the necessary legal changes to wipe out the outdated Treaties, regulations and Court rulings.

So, of course it is reformable, all we need is power.

But the fact is that these conditions of a strong Left power, widely spread in Europe, this great wave of change, is something we can't expect to see in the near future.

And, if we don't have power in EU, it means someone else has. If it is not the Left, then it is the Right, or the Centre, or even the far-Right, or any possible combination of the three of them. And they are, and will be, constantly reforming the EU according to their own political agendas, what is only natural.

And when they can't reform enough, or fast enough, they just violate their own rules, they have an elastic and pragmatic approach to the Treaties, as we have seen in recent years. Why? Because they can, they have the power to do so.

It seems that some of us are the only ones looking at the Treaties as stone carved rules. The authors, the defenders, the users of the Treaties, they just don't do it themselves.

And here we come to the core of the problem: the way we present and debate this putative reform of EU.

Because, to nurture the idea of any possibility of a leftist and progressive reform of EU, under the right wing domination, or even the Right and Center shared domination, is an attitude that does not only lack the minimum level of logical consistency and of basic common sense, but also may create false expectations for the popular movement, quite prejudicial for our struggle.

A Left reform under Right and Center power? Who has seen such a thing anywhere, anytime?

And how to do it, if we are not in power? Asking gently to our enemies who rule EU to please start making a progressive reform?

The point is that we can never disconnect this kind of structural political proposals we make, from the imperative need of an effective power change to fulfill them.

Otherwise, it's just an illusion, and a dangerous illusion, that we see often permeating progressive texts, presenting extensive lists of what European Union should do, that is, what EU leaders should do, as if they were just waiting for our advice to become nice and good to the people.

Comrades, let's be clear: no Left power, no Left reform. It is as simple as that. Let's not over-complicate things that are already complicated by nature.

### **Collision with EU Treaties**

Another question raised is if our ideas or proposals collide with the European Treaties or not.

Well, considering what the European Treaties look like, I think colliding with them is a very noble cause and a dignifying objective.

The bad news is that the Treaties don't collide with our ideas. No matter how progressive or even revolutionary our ideas might be, the European Treaties don't collide with them.

Why? Simply because Treaties don't collide with ideas, they collide only with facts, with effective political or economical decisions taken by governments or other ruling authorities. Never with ideas, they are not made to that. Treaties are legal constraints to stop undesirable actions, not to stop undesirable thoughts or ideas.

And this brings me to the hot question of the tactics Left must adopt towards the European Union and its Treaties and our need to make things substantially change in society.

First: if we can not change our countries, we will not change Europe. If we are not strong enough to change our own countries, then the talk about changing Europe is no more than that, just talk.

But changing our countries, being the first step, a *sinne qua non* condition, is far from being enough.

Furthermore, our countries are not equal: changing Portugal, or Greece, or Cyprus has a reduced impact; changing Germany or France is another thing, it may change the whole game.

Anyway, changing several small countries, if they coordinate well their actions, could also have this catalyst role of changing the complete set of EU equilibrium.

So, ok, we start to change our country, then what? What can we do?

Any progressive change goes against the reactionary spirit emanating from Brussels. But not necessarily against the Treaties. There is a margin here, how narrow it may be.

For example, in Portugal we blocked all new privatizations and managed to revert some that were almost completed, in the public transport sector. In EU they didn't like that at all, of course, but they had no legal backing in the Treaties to forbid this move. So, we did it.

We raised every year the minimum wage, the Commission criticized it a lot, but again, could do nothing more than criticizing.

We were inside the narrow limits of the room for maneuver provided by the Treaties.

### **The example of a bank**

I will now give you an example from the financial sector, that alone can illustrate well the three different situations that our concrete relations to EU may present.

You know the biggest bank in Portugal is a public bank, 100% owned by the State. They don't like it in Brussels, but nothing allows them to forbid it. This is the first and the easiest kind of situation we may have in relating to EU.

This bank has needed recapitalization. The rule is that recapitalization of banks must be provided by shareholders and the State must not intervene. The problem in this case is that

shareholder and State are the same entity. Should this be considered State aid and forbidden or considered shareholder normal obligation, and allowed?

And, in this second hypothesis, should this amount of money used for recapitalization be counting for the State deficit or not? Indeed, the money moved from one pocket to another of the same jacket, as the bank is a State company. Did this really affect the deficit?

In all this, there are no clear rules to be followed, so, the final solution was open, was found through negotiations and was the pure result of power balance and circumstantial convenience of the strongest link: the Commission and the Eurogroup. This is a second kind of situation we may have in our relation with EU.

They accepted all this, but made very clear a strict European rule: you may have a public bank, but you can not have public banking. Meaning the bank can be public, but must act in the market exactly like the others, according to the very same principles applying to private banks, in the name of the sacred rule of undistorted competition. Untouchable dogma, period.

We are very happy to have a public bank, this goal has been in our programs of European Left for years.

But we want a public bank to provide a public banking service to families, to small businesses, to industry and to the public

sector, in line with the strategic economic goals of our policy, not to be just another bank like all the other private banks.

But with this we would cross a red line of EU orthodoxy. What to do, then?

Here the difference between Bloco and PS options become completely clear. The Socialist government we have, fully respected these restrictions, all the orders from Brussels, based on the Treaties.

If we were governing, and if good political and economic conditions were met, of course, we would probably give a step forward in the left direction, regardless of the legal European constraints.

And this illustrates the third kind of relation we may have with Brussels.

The Commission would certainly react.

And here would start a collision with the Treaties, the collision we were speaking about in the beginning: but a real collision, not just talks about imaginary collisions.

Absolutely necessary would be that the people could easily understand why the measure we were taking was necessary or beneficial for their own life or for country's economy, and

why Brussels imposition and dogmatic stubbornness was being held based on opposing interests, negative to us.

This is the kind of collision with the Treaties we need to make: implementing our own policies with full popular support, and making repressive EU authorities react and show their face, but in concrete issues that people are able to understand. That any normal citizen can easily understand. Because that's the propitious battlefield we need to fight the Treaties.

In any war, one of the main advantages is to choose the battlefield and also to choose the timing of the battle.

That's what we have to do, if we are to win this struggle for change in EU.

Because all our policies that may touch the fundamental principles of neoliberalism will inevitably collide with the Treaties. All of them.

A permanent state of collision will be the everyday life of any Left government. We must be prepared for it. Things are going to be tough.

However, if these collisions could happen simultaneously in different countries, then the impact would be much higher, as well as the probability of our victory.

Even so, we may very well be defeated, because of a great disproportion of forces.

We must be prepared for it, because who is not prepared to be defeated, is not prepared to fight.

And revolution is not supposed to be just a nice and peaceful walk in the garden.

I think my time is over and I have to stop here.

Thank you.

### **Answering a question on EU democracy**

*During the debate that followed the intervention of the speakers in this plenary, a question was put from the audience relating to a specific point of our use of democracy in EU. These are the guidelines of my answer:*

Addressing only one partial aspect of your question, for lack of time, I would underline that there are usually two approaches to this question of democracy in international institutions (and not only): majorities stress the power of the vote and minorities fight for the power of the veto. That's normal.

That's what we see happening in the United Nations, where the most powerful countries, numerically in minority, defend their interests through their right to veto any decision.

Being a minority in the European Union for the foreseeable future, the Left should be as emphatic as possible in defending unanimity decisions or, in other words, defending its own strength by the veto.

On the other side of the political spectrum, as we are witnessing now, the dominant political forces are more and more unable to reach unanimous consensus in EU, so they keep changing the rules in order to enlarge the scope of simple majoritarian decisions replacing the need for unanimity.

But, let's look at a very recent example: last European Council and its decision on migrations.<sup>10</sup>

As you remember, this meeting was supposed to be mainly about new steps for the completion of the banking union. But, following the events of arrival of migrants to the coast of Italy and the reaction of the right wing Italian government, prime-minister Conte arrived at the EU summit threatening that if there was not an agreement on that question, then the Council would end up with no conclusions at all in any matter whatsoever: the total veto blackmail.

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<sup>10</sup> Refers to European Council meeting of 29th June 2018, which took place just two weeks before this seminar.

Why did he do that? Because he has this right, that's the rule, according to the Treaties. That's why the threat was effective and he got what he wanted: a lousy unacceptable decision on migration, criticized all over Europe and beyond.

But now I ask you a question. If he can do it, that means any other prime-minister can do it too. Why nobody else does?

I would have been very proud if our Portuguese prime-minister Costa had answered these protofascists - with the same loud voice and assertiveness - that the shameful resolution they wanted could never be approved because we also have the same right to veto and we would use it against him. And the same brave statement could be expected from Greek prime-minister Tsipras.

It was a great moment to fight back and it could have been done strictly respecting EU rules. Using what is left of democracy in EU to boost the noble causes we stand for. It seems to me this would be a smart option for a favorable battlefield.

And more important, perhaps, it would have sent a much needed signal to all European peoples that, in order to face the danger of a fast growing xenophobic far-Right, the Left is standing firmly while, unfortunately, the Center and Center Right are more willing to make concessions, trying to calm down the wild beast with gentle strokes, as they often have done in history, always dramatically in vain.

Is there a danger that these vetos could somehow start to paralyse the EU functioning, as some often argue? In a certain way, and to a certain extent, there is; but, if the reverse of the medal is our permanent silence and to be reduced to a role of political irrelevance, forgetting the people we serve, than our choice can not be other than a very clear one.



