

Transversal Politics. Podemos between Populism and Radical Left

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Abstract. The article addresses the potential and limitations of transversality and its relationship to the radical and populist left by analysing the theoretical reflections and political practices of the Spanish party, Podemos. Transversality, as developed by Podemos, seeks to shape a new political space by capturing societal pluralism and overcoming the marginalisation traditionally assigned to the radical left. Although it aspires to broaden the leftist project by including civil society and other actors, it ultimately becomes a tool for legitimising or delegitimising internal positions within the party, thereby reinforcing an incompatible divide between radicals and moderates. The article distinguishes between “core transversality” to refer to the attempt to move beyond left-right political identification and “peripheral transversality” to include other types of identities such as nationalism and feminism.

Keywords: Podemos, Transversality, Radical Left, Populism.

[es] Política transversal. Podemos entre el populismo y la izquierda radical

Resumen. El artículo aborda el potencial y las limitaciones de la transversalidad y su relación con la izquierda radical y populista mediante el análisis de las reflexiones teóricas y las prácticas políticas de Podemos. En el modo en que Podemos plantea la transversalidad, ésta busca formar un nuevo espacio político en el que se refleje el pluralismo social y se supere el papel marginal atribuido a la izquierda radical. Aunque aspira a expandir el proyecto de izquierdas, la transversalidad termina por convertirse en una herramienta para legitimar o deslegitimizar posiciones dentro del partido y reforzar así la separación entre radicales y moderados. El artículo distingue entre una “transversalidad central”, para referirse al intento de ir más allá de la identificación política izquierda-derecha, y una “transversalidad periférica”, para incluir otros tipos de identidades como el nacionalismo y el feminismo.

Palabras clave: Podemos; transversalidad; izquierda radical; populismo

Sumario. Introduction. 1. Transversality in Practice. 2. The Podemos Hypothesis. 3. Left or Transversal? The Internal Split. 4. Peripheral Transversality. Conclusion: The Paradox of Transversality. Bibliography.

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Introduction

With the emergence of Podemos as one of Spain's most relevant political parties in 2014, the term “transversality” gained prominence in public discourse, becoming both a widely discussed concept and a political buzzword. In the general elections of June 26, 2016, Podemos – now in coalition with Izquierda Unida under the name Unidos Podemos – aspired to become the dominant force on the left, overtaking the traditional social democratic party, the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE, Spanish Socialist Workers' Party). Their goal was to lead or support an alternative to the right-wing

government of the conservative Partido Popular (PP, Popular Party).

A few weeks before the election, the conservative newspaper *ABC* published an article titled “This is how Podemos disguises its communist plan”. The piece referenced a speech by Pablo Iglesias delivered prior to the founding of Podemos, in which Iglesias purportedly advocated for implementing communism through strategic means, aiming to “bring to our side what everyone thinks is good”¹. The

¹ R. Pérez, “Así camufla Podemos su plan comunista”, *ABC*, June 5, 2016, https://www.abc.es/espaa/abci-camufla-podemos-plan-comunista-201606050301_noticia.html.

article framed this as an example of “instrumental populism”. In addition to populism, it argued, another tool was at play: transversality. According to the author, Podemos attempt to garner cross-ideological support and present itself as a party “neither left nor right” represented a form of “false transversality”. In this view, transversality served merely as a disguise for a communist agenda, facilitated through populist rhetoric.

Similarly, the editor of the liberal newspaper *El Mundo* reflected on the influence of Gramsci and Machiavelli on Podemos, particularly on Pablo Iglesias, emphasising their role in shaping the party’s conception as a vehicle for seizing power. He concludes: “Under the guise of transversality, a Leninist conception of the party is masked”². As in this case, efforts to portray Podemos as adopting a more radical position often stemmed from the anxieties provoked by its transversal politics³. Transversality effectively broadened support for Podemos as a credible alternative to the dominant traditional parties. Consequently, the media often reinforced the narrative of a hidden communist and anti-democratic agenda behind the party’s transversal discourse.

In mainstream media narratives, the radical left was accused of concealing its ideological objectives – particularly the implementation of communism – through the combined strategies of populism and transversality. While “populism” was associated with negative connotations such as authoritarianism and manipulation, “transversality” evoked appeals to broad, moderate, and even centrist constituencies. This made “transversality” a more acceptable term in public debate, even adopted by other parties such as the liberal Ciudadanos and the PSOE, whereas “populism” was treated with suspicion, adding an anti-democratic dimension to the portrayal of Podemos’ political project.

As a result, Podemos was framed as incapable of being a truly transversal party due to its simultaneous association with both populism and communism. However, the relationship between transversality, populism, and the radical left is far more complex. These terms have not only operated in complementary ways but also in tension: transversal vs. radical, left-populist vs. radical left.

The debate is further complicated by the fact that transversality, like populism, lacks a clear and consistent definition in both academic literature and public discourse. It is therefore important to explore how transversality has been understood from both other political experiences as well as the way in which Podemos has conceptualised and implemented the term. From its inception, Podemos was characterised by innovative political practices – such as new organisational models, media strategies, and leadership approaches – and by a reflexive orientation that resulted in numerous publications on political topics and strategies including the left, hegemony, and the relationship between party

and civil society. Transversality emerged as both a strategic tool and a subject of theoretical reflection, shaped by the broader political conjuncture and the internal evolution of the party.

Initially, transversality was conceived as a creative way of opening up a new political space, redefining the political conflict along the lines of the antagonism between “those at the top” and “those at the bottom”, rather than the traditional left-right dichotomy. It also supported an experimental organisational model, incorporating loosely structured civil society units such as the *círculos* (circles). Over time, however, transversality became entangled in internal debates about institutional politics and ideological identity. Political struggles increasingly revolved around the tension between radical and transversal (understood as more moderate), or between left and populist (framed as pragmatist or non-ideological). As internal splits within Podemos grew, both the debates surrounding transversality and populism diminished, although traces of these concepts remain in the party’s political practices and occasional reflections by its leadership.

The aim of this article is to analyse Podemos’ theoretical reflections and political practices related to *transversality*, demonstrating how it functioned as a strategy for expanding the political and electoral reach of the radical left. Over time, however, it also became an internal mechanism through which different factions within Podemos sought to legitimise their own positions while delegitimising others. In doing so, this analysis highlights both the potential and the limitations of transversality and its relationship to the radical and populist left.

The article proceeds as follows: first, I introduce the concept of transversality, outlining its applications in other political contexts (Argentina and Spain). Next, I examine its use within Podemos, identifying the main definitions, debates, and political practices associated with the term. I distinguish between “core transversality” to refer to the attempt to move beyond left-right political identification and “peripheral transversality” to include other types of identities such as nationalism and feminism. Finally, the conclusion addresses the paradox of transversality: how a political strategy aimed at inclusion and ideological expansion can ultimately lead to internal divisions and a return to traditional ideological identification.

1. Transversality in Practice

Transversal politics gained prominence in the early 2000s through two distinct projects and contexts: Kirchnerism in Argentina, as implemented by Néstor Kirchner, and Basque nationalism, as developed by the right-wing Partido Nacionalista Vasco (Basque Nationalist Party, PNV) in the Basque Country and the left-wing Nafarroa Bai (Navarra Yes) in Navarra. These cases illustrate the concrete application of transversal politics, as well as the specific challenges and consequences that arise from adopting such an approach.

Transversality and Populism: The Case of Argentina

The severe crisis that struck Argentina in 2001 had both economic and political dimensions.

² C. García-Abadillo, “Cursilería y poder”, *El Mundo*, March 17, 2016, <https://www.elmundo.es/espaa/2016/03/17/56e9aaa1ca4741bd338b46b7.html>.

³ J.L. Villacañas, *El lento aprendizaje de Podemos*, Madrid, Los Libros de la Catarata, 2017.

Economically, it was marked by a widespread rejection of the neoliberal model; politically, it was epitomized by the slogan “¡Que se vayan todos!” (“All of them must go!”), which expressed deep disillusionment with the entire political class. When Néstor Kirchner assumed the presidency in 2003, the country was undergoing a profound crisis of representation, characterized by public distrust of both political parties and the political elite.

In this context, Kirchner introduced what he called the ‘strategy of transversality’. As he declared: “I believe in a transversal Argentina; we’ve already seen what happened when we had a uniform Argentina”⁴. In practice, this meant constructing a political project that could cut across different actors, regions, and ideological positions. This transversal construction stood in direct opposition to the “uniformity” of the traditional political system that had led Argentina into crisis.

The aim of this inclusive approach was not limited to representing a broader spectrum of Argentine society; it also involved restructuring the party itself. The creation of a new political identity was intended to incorporate multiple social and political sectors, reflecting a more comprehensive vision for a renewed national project. In this sense, the strategy sought to reinvigorate Peronism through transversality⁵, leading to the emergence of a new political space: Kirchnerism.

Transversality served a dual purpose. Internally, it helped consolidate Kirchner’s leadership within the Peronist movement; externally, it allowed him to build new social and political alliances, thereby expanding and legitimising his political space. This strategy positioned Kirchner against the former president Eduardo Duhalde (2002-2003), whom he successfully challenged and defeated in the 2005 legislative elections. By summoning various social and political forces⁶, Kirchner was able to compensate for his initial lack of internal party support. Transversality thus emerged as a counterweight to the old structures of the Partido Justicialista, forging new alliances with regional actors, political parties, social movements, and trade unions⁷.

Understood as a strategy for constructing a new political identity and space, transversality functioned as a ‘strategic political grouping’ through which Kirchnerism consolidated Kirchner’s leadership and advanced a political project shaped in collaboration with diverse actors. However, the emphasis has largely been on the top-down design of this transversal space, with less attention paid to the role of participating actors in shaping the process.

⁴ L. Colonna, “Kirchner defendió la “transversalidad” en su paso por Rosario”, *La Nación*, September 20, 2003, <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/politica/kirchner-defendio-la-transversalidad-en-su-paso-por-rosario-nid529024>.

⁵ E. Matarazzo, “La transversalidad K”, *La Nueva*, July 12, 2004, <https://www.lanueva.com/nota/2004-7-12-9-0-0-la-transversalidad-k>.

⁶ J.A. Rodríguez, “Qué es el kirchnerismo”, *La Voz*, August 24, 2021, <https://www.lavoz.com.ar/opinion/que-es-el-kirchnerismo>.

⁷ J. Lucca, “Conflictos y realineamientos de los actores sociales y políticos durante el gobierno de Néstor Kirchner”, *Suramérica: Revista de Ciencias Sociales* 3, 2014, pp. 27-50.

Moreover, the scope of transversality extended beyond merely renewing Peronism. It sought to establish a new political cleavage, aiming to reorganise Argentine society through a national-popular discourse⁸. In this regard, transversality is closely linked to the populist rupture⁹. Over time, however, transversality faded as Kirchnerism consolidated as a distinct political identity and space. The strategic focus shifted away from openness to other political and social forces and toward strengthening the core Kirchnerist identity and maintaining the support of existing allies.

Transversality and Nationalism: The Case of Spain

In Spain, the *Lehendakari* (President) of the Basque Country, Juan José Ibarretxe, launched a proposal in 2003 to reform the Basque Statute of Autonomy and transform the Basque Country into a “freely associated state”. Known as the “Ibarretxe Plan”, the proposal faced strong opposition from Spanish state parties, who interpreted it as a veiled attempt at secession. Ibarretxe’s sovereigntist position coexisted within the same party, the Basque Nationalist Party (EAJ-PNV), alongside a more moderate stance represented by Josu Jon Imaz, chairman of the party’s executive committee. The party’s internal strategy thus reflected a tension between Ibarretxe’s sovereigntism and what Imaz defined as transversality.

In the Basque case, transversality had a significant internal dimension, particularly regarding how the PNV could advance toward greater autonomy – or even independence. While sovereigntism moved closer to advocating for full independence and called for redefining Spain as a co-federal state, transversality emphasised the recognition of both nationalist and non-nationalist identities within the Basque Country.

Imaz’s conception of transversality was rooted in his understanding of the Basque Country as a complex society in which multiple identities coexist. From this premise, he argued that the only viable political path was one based on a transversal majority. This approach required building agreements with the Spanish state and collaborating with the Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party (PSOE) within the Basque context. Imaz was explicit about the centrality of transversality when he stated: “What is at stake here is who leads transversality: us or the Socialists”¹⁰. In his view, transversality was associated with pragmatism and political centrism, and it stood in opposition to radicalism. Through this positioning, Imaz not only challenged Ibarretxe’s sovereigntism within the PNV but also contested the positions of Eusko Alkartasuna (EA, Basque Solidarity) – a party

⁸ M. Retamozo and L. Trujillo, “El kirchnerismo y sus estrategias políticas en Argentina: Desde la transversalidad a la Unidad Ciudadana”, *Izquierdas* 45, pp. 185-214.

⁹ F. Cantamutto, “Phases of Kirchnerism: from rupture to particularistic assertion”, *Convergencia* 24, pp. 1405-1435.

¹⁰ I. Martínez, “Imaz apela a buscar el consenso mientras Ibarretxe ve “imprescindible” la consulta”, *El País*, October 1, 2007, https://elpais.com/diario/2007/10/01/esp-pana/1191189603_850215.html.

that had split from the PNV in 1986 and opposed Imaz's vision.

Following the Spanish state's rejection of the "Ibarretxe Plan", the sovereigntist faction intensified its efforts to secure the *right to decide*. Ibarretxe proposed holding a referendum on independence, which was subsequently declared unconstitutional by Spain's Constitutional Court. The lack of political results, coupled with rising tensions – including the outlawing of the pro-independence radical left – gradually eroded support for both sovereigntism and the PNV. This culminated in the victory of the Socialist Party, which formed a coalition government with the conservative Partido Popular (PP).

As a result, Imaz's vision of transversality – as a coalition between nationalist and non-nationalist forces led by the PNV – did not achieve its goal. The PSOE's Secretary of Organisation, Leire Pajín, celebrated the new government as "a transversal government that truly understands the plurality of Basque society, that is capable of dialogue, and that does not constantly pit society against itself"¹¹. Yet this so-called "transversal government", a coalition between left and right, was composed exclusively of Spanish nationalist parties and excluded Basque nationalism altogether. However, the coalition between PSOE and PP was an exception and PNV became the party in government after the next elections.

A parallel attempt at transversal nationalism emerged in Navarra. In 2004, a new political platform, Nafarroa Bai (Yes to Navarra), was created, bringing together a diverse group of nationalist, left-wing, centre-left, conservative parties, and independent figures. Despite its ideological diversity, the coalition identified as progressive – positioning itself against both the pro-independence radical left and the social democrats – and as Basquist, a Navarran version of Basque nationalism.

For Nafarroa Bai, transversality was grounded in the recognition of social and political pluralism. Plurality was understood not as a problem to be solved, but as a complex social reality that shaped both political and national identity¹². From this perspective, the everyday coexistence of nationalist and non-nationalist citizens should be reflected in institutional politics. Nafarroa Bai sought to embody this vision through its plural internal composition and its attempt to form a coalition government with the Socialist Party, thereby ending the region's long-standing conservative government. While the party emphasised its progressive orientation, it also insisted on a nationalist identity aligned with the construction of a transversal space capable of sustaining social coexistence. As Uxue Barkos stated: "When we talk about respect for the plurality of Navarra, we are not speaking only from *abertzale* (nationalist) perspectives; rather, we want to create

¹¹ PSOE, "Pajín: "La elección de Patxi López como lehendakari será la mejor noticia de 2009"" , PSOE, 2009, <https://www.psOE.es/actualidad/noticias-actualidad/pajin-la-eleccion-de-patxi-lopez-como-lehendakari-sera-la-mejor-noticia-de-2009--30546>.

¹² P. Zabaleta, "Transversalidad política sin pasaportes", *El País*, August 31, 2007, https://elpais.com/diario/2007/08/31/pais-vasco/1188589204_850215.html.

a space of transversality, of deep respect for its diversity"¹³.

Nafarroa Bai achieved significant success in both local (Pamplona) and regional elections, opening the possibility of a coalition government with the Socialists and the Navarran branch of Izquierda Unida (United Left, IU). However, the PSOE's national leadership overruled its regional branch and blocked the formation of such a government. Internal disagreements soon emerged within Nafarroa Bai, leading to the departure of several parties and members.

In 2011, the party's leader, Uxue Barkos, reaffirmed the relevance of the transversal project, despite the fact that three of its four founding parties had already left. She argued that political plurality was not represented solely through parties and pointed to the 15M movement as evidence that one could be progressive without belonging to a political organization¹⁴. That same year, Nafarroa Bai was succeeded by a new coalition: Geroa Bai.

Between 2004 and 2011, Nafarroa Bai managed to create a transversal political space rooted in pluralism. Although, it failed to maintain internal cohesion, as the divergent interests and strategies of its constituent parties clashed, Uxue Barkos became president of Navarra in 2015 with the support of the nationalist and non-nationalist left.

2. The Podemos Hypothesis

The general election of 26 June 2016 marked the end of what became known as the "Podemos Hypothesis". In coalition with Izquierda Unida (IU), Podemos secured 71 seats – exactly the same number the two parties had obtained separately in the previous election on 20 December 2015 (69 for Podemos and 2 for IU) – but lost over one million votes.

Since its foundation, Podemos had rooted its identity in the protests of the indignados in 2011. Its aim was to channel the social discontent and democratic aspirations of the 15M movement, and to rapidly transform that momentum into institutional power by establishing a party capable of governing¹⁵.

The "Podemos Hypothesis" initially referred to the idea of seizing the window of opportunity opened by 15M, which had exposed a profound crisis of political representation. The objective was to become the decisive political force capable of leading significant social and political change. The perceived urgency to respond hegemonically to this moment justified the creation of a vertical, media-centric party structure: an "electoral war machine".

The hypothesis rested on a dual assumption: first, a retrospective analysis of the organic crisis of the so-called *Regime of '78*; and second, a prospective

¹³ U. Barkos, "Si es posible, terminaré esta legislatura en el Congreso de Diputados", EAJ-PNV, January 15, 2007, <https://www.eaj-pnv.eus/es/documentos/6322/uxue-barkos-el-dia-rio-vasco>.

¹⁴ I. Fernández, "El proyecto abierto y transversal que ha seducido a tantos navarros va a seguir presente", *Deia*, September 9, 2011, <https://www.deia.eus/politica/2011/09/11/proyecto-abierto-transversal-seducido-navarros-5517575.html>.

¹⁵ E. Cancela and P.M. Rey-Araújo, "Lecciones del experimento Podemos", *New Left Review* 138, 2023, pp. 141-165.

view that framed populism and parliamentarism as fundamentally incompatible¹⁶.

To analyse how transversality was understood and developed within Podemos, it is useful to distinguish between two phases: the “Populist Hypothesis” and the “Government Hypothesis”.

The Populist Hypothesis

The “Populist hypothesis” emerged from the belief among Podemos’ leadership that the political theories of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe – particularly their work on hegemony and populism – as well as the experiences of left-wing populism in Latin America, could be meaningfully adapted to the Spanish context. In this sense, Podemos reflects one of the most explicit applications of left populism¹⁷. Within this framework, the traditional left-right divide was de-emphasised in favour of a vertical antagonism between “the people” and “the elite”. This dichotomy formed the core of left populism, in which the elite was labelled *la casta* and positioned in direct opposition to “the people”. The unsatisfied demands of various social groups – constituting “the people” – were symbolically unified around the figure of the leader, Pablo Iglesias.

Although Podemos identified itself as an inheritor of the 15M movement, the populist hypothesis introduced a strongly antagonistic and dichotomising logic, along with a form of charismatic leadership that contrasted sharply with the consensual and horizontal approach of the *indignados*¹⁸. This tension was, to some extent, mitigated by the concept of transversality, which became part of the new political vocabulary through which Podemos challenged dominant public discourses and ideological categories.

While populism underscored the centrality of “the people” as a broader political subject than that defined by the traditional left, transversality ensured a degree of pluralism through the recognition of diverse identities and interests. At the same time, it preserved a dialogical and inclusive approach. From a transversal perspective, social demands must be framed in such a way that other groups – who may not share the same identity – can relate to and adopt them. In short, transversality enabled a discourse that was more closely aligned with that of 15M, offering an alternative to the rigid dichotomisation of the political spectrum into “us” and “them”.

In its initial usage, transversality referred to the plurality of Podemos’ voter base, whose support could not be reduced to the traditional left or to any single demographic group (such as young or urban

voters). In this sense, Pablo Iglesias described Podemos as a “transversal force” after the party won five seats in the 2014 European elections¹⁹. According to this view, the electoral base pre-dated Podemos; the 15M movement was already transversal. Thus, while the figure of the leader and the use of media were important, they were not sufficient without a transversal discourse. As one analyst put it: “Discontent is transversal, and Podemos has crafted a discourse that resonates with that transversality”²⁰.

15M was not only transversal in terms of its social composition and its potential to forge a broad majority – it also represented an example of transversal politics. Its emphasis on “real democracy” and the eradication of political corruption created a common ground in which plurality could be maintained, despite ideological or social differences²¹. By adopting transversality, Podemos was able to reposition itself from being seen as a radical left force to occupying a broader political space – one that appealed to the radical left, the centre-left, non-ideological voters, and those disillusioned with traditional politics.

The pluralism of 15M was thus used to justify the need to reach out to voters who did not necessarily identify with the left. When Íñigo Errejón described the social majority as “necessarily transversal”, he linked transversality to the populist hypothesis as a strategy that moved beyond traditional left-wing politics: “15M taught us not to confine ourselves to labels, but to unite around common-sense ideas and a new national project. Only in this way can we defeat the oligarchy”²². In this regard, transversality served as the bridge between 15M and populism, and became foundational to a political project aimed at surpassing the PSOE as Spain’s leading progressive force.

The period from May 2014 to the general election of 20 December 2015 is often regarded as the most transversal phase of Podemos. During this time, the party actively questioned established decision-making processes, ideological frameworks, and its relationships with other political actors²³. However, this also marked the beginning of a shift in which the transformative potential of 15M began to be reframed primarily as an electoral strategy. If transversality and centrality were reduced merely to mechanisms for electoral gain, the result could be the drift towards moderation and centrist politics.

Although Podemos’ growing electoral support during this period was not sufficient to lead political

¹⁶ J. Franzé, “La “hipótesis Podemos” va al taller: sobre la crisis orgánica y la relación populismo-instituciones”, *Público*, July 17, 2016, <https://www.publico.es/opinion/tribunas/hipotesis-podemos-taller-sobre-crisis-organica-relacion-populismo-instituciones.html>.

¹⁷ S. Mazzolini and A. Borriello, “The normalization of left populism? The paradigmatic case of Podemos”, *European Politics and Society* 23(3), 2022, pp. 285-300.

¹⁸ A.R. Peña, “Podemos: de hipótesis populista a fuerza parlamentaria”, in C.N. Zubeldia and D.I. Barco (eds.), *Siglo. Actas de V Congreso Internacional de Historia de Nuestro Tiempo*, Universidad de La Rioja, 2016, pp. 575-582; J. Valdivielso, “The outraged people. Laclau, Mouffe and the Podemos hypothesis”, *Constellations* 24, 2017, pp. 296-306.

¹⁹ J. Lobera, “Podemos: un sustrato político transversal”, *El Diario.es*, October 19, 2014, https://www.eldiario.es/agendapublica/nueva_politica/sustrato-politico-transversal_1_4575764.html.

²⁰ Ó.G. Agustín and M. Briziarelli, *Podemos and the New Political Cycle: Left-Wing Populism and Anti-Establishment Politics*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

²¹ I. Errejón, “Podemos ganar”, *20 Minutos*, November 26, 2016, <https://www.20minutos.es/opiniones/firma-invitada-igno-errejon-podemos-ganar-2899261/>.

²² A.R. Troyano, “La fuerza de Podemos”, *Ctxt*, 2016, <https://ctxt.es/es/20160330/Firmas/5063/Podemos-15M-circulos-Podemos.htm>.

change outright, it embedded transversality within “the government hypothesis” – a strategic orientation that would coexist, often in tension, with the populist one.

The Government Hypothesis

The results of the 2015 general election did not lead to a victory for Podemos – neither as the dominant force on the left nor as the vehicle to end the two-party system dominated by the PSOE and PP. However, the election made one thing clear: post-electoral agreements were now necessary, as no single party held a clear majority in the new Parliament. The traditional parties (PSOE and PP) were forced to negotiate with the emerging forces (Podemos and Ciudadanos).

The central issue became identifying which coalition could offer a viable alternative to the PP government. As the second most voted party, the PSOE took the initiative in launching negotiations.

Having previously denounced “la casta” (the political elite), Podemos now found itself contemplating a coalition government with one of its primary targets: the PSOE. As such, transversality was no longer approached through the lens of the *populist hypothesis*, but rather through the *government hypothesis*. The antagonistic stance towards traditional parties, particularly the PSOE, had to be recalibrated in order to reach a governing agreement.

Podemos’ positioning and its interpretation of the political landscape had shifted considerably since its inception. The party’s early claims that the left-right division was a “fraud”²⁴, and that the real alternative lay in a plebeian form of left populism²⁵, now appeared at odds with its willingness to participate in government.

During the negotiations to form a new government, Pablo Iglesias took the initiative by proposing a coalition between the PSOE, Podemos, and IU, with himself as vice-president. This proposed “government of change” would reflect the electoral results proportionally, granting Podemos a substantial number of ministries – already outlined publicly by Iglesias. From Podemos’ perspective, such a coalition would allow for a recomposition of the left, with Podemos as a leading force. The liberal Ciudadanos party was excluded from this equation.

While Podemos had succeeded in expanding the ideological and organisational plurality of the parliamentary left, it simultaneously reaffirmed the significance of the left-right divide. In this context, transversality revealed its limitations in incorporating new political actors and positions within a broader political project. The potential of a “transversal left” was constrained by electoral realities and the difficulties in converting a pluralistic ‘social majority’ into a transversal “electoral majority”.

²⁴ La Sexta, “Pablo Iglesias: “La política entre izquierda y derecha es una estafa””, *La Sexta*, November 6, 2014, https://www.lasexta.com/programas/sexta-columna/avances/pablo-iglesias-politica-izquierda-derecha-estafa_201411065725b-77f6584a81fd883a978.html.

²⁵ C. García-Abadillo, “Cursilería y poder”, *El Mundo*, March 17, 2016, <https://www.elmundo.es/espaa/2016/03/17/56e9aaa-1ca4741bd338b46b7.html>.

Pedro Sánchez, however, was reluctant to accept Iglesias’ proposal and instead pursued an agreement with Ciudadanos. In February 2016, Sánchez and Albert Rivera signed a formal agreement. Both parties invited others to join, but Iglesias strongly rejected the proposal. Sánchez had previously emphasised shared priorities between PSOE and Ciudadanos, such as constitutional reform. To legitimise his pivot away from Podemos, Sánchez framed the move as the creation of a “transversal government”²⁶. In this usage, “transversality” became a strategy for constructing a cross-ideological coalition, where “political centrality” was reinterpreted – and effectively reduced – to “the political centre”.

Although Podemos had successfully introduced transversality into public discourse, its conceptual ambiguity enabled other political leaders – such as Sánchez and Rivera – to appropriate it for their own agendas. This ambiguity had already been intensified by Podemos’ own shift towards the *government hypothesis*.

As Iglesias later explained, internal PSOE support for Sánchez as Secretary-General was, to some extent, a reflection of Podemos’ influence. Although a coalition government was only realised later, Iglesias recognised that Podemos would never be permitted to govern directly. Thus, the only viable path was to support Sánchez as president, even if that meant ceding more power than Podemos’ electoral strength would justify. In Iglesias’ view, participation in government was the most effective way to advance political change²⁷.

As part of the “Populist Hypothesis”, transversality had entailed the construction of an inclusive and plural political space, connecting people’s demands with institutional politics. While antagonism did not disappear, the “Government Hypothesis” involved the representation of plural society within the existing institutional framework. This shift had two major consequences: first, the resurgence of the left-right axis; and second, a narrowing of the scope for political change – from attempting to dismantle the “Regime of ‘78” to enacting reforms from within.

The internal tensions this produced within Podemos surfaced most clearly in the conflict between its two main figures with their respective fractions: Iglesias, the charismatic leader, and Errejón, the mastermind of the “Populist hypothesis”²⁸. At both a strategic and ideological level, the debate about the party’s future was framed through the opposition between left ideology and transversality.

3. Left or Transversal? The Internal Split

The inability to form a government following the 2015 elections led to new elections in 2016. Podemos

²⁶ I. Uriá, “Sánchez inicia el diálogo más cerca de C’s que de Podemos”, *InfoLibre*, February 3, 2016, <https://www.infolibre.es/politica/sanchez-inicia-dialogo-cerca-c-s-11122299.html>.

²⁷ S. Díaz, “Te definen tus enemigos”, *Público*, January 16, 2024, <https://www.publico.es/politica/te-definen-tus-enemigos.html>.

²⁸ R. Rojas-Andrés, S. Mazzolini and J. Custodi, “Does left populism short-circuit itself? Podemos in the labyrinths of cultural elitism and radical leftism”, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 32(4), 2024, pp. 960-977.

refused to support the coalition between the PSOE and Ciudadanos and, in its attempt to surpass the PSOE, chose to form an alliance with Izquierda Unida (IU), under the name Unidos Podemos (United We Can). This decision was met with internal opposition. The party's entry into Parliament had already provoked tensions concerning the adoption of a traditional left-right political framework and raised questions about how to attain power – or even hegemony. Forming a joint candidacy with IU meant aligning with a well-established, territorially structured party, but more importantly, with one clearly positioned to the left of the PSOE.

Until the 2015 elections, transversality remained the official strategic orientation of Podemos, despite ongoing debates over whether the party should be considered part of the radical left. For one faction of Podemos, aligned with Íñigo Errejón's position, the coalition with IU represented an abandonment of the transversal project²⁹. This moment marked the emergence of a dichotomy between "left" and "transversal" politics. It was no longer possible to do "transversal left" politics; rather, one had to choose between transversal or left-wing approaches.

Paradoxically, the debate over transversality became more intense than ever, as did the efforts to define what it actually meant. This internal split does not imply that Pablo Iglesias entirely rejected the idea of transversality – he continued to invoke it occasionally. However, transversality had become more of a mode of internal positioning within Podemos than a common political strategy. The factions portrayed each other using opposing dichotomies: radicalism vs. moderation, and openness vs. identity closure.

Transversality and the Left

The electoral coalition with Izquierda Unida (IU) and the increasing identification of Podemos with the political left as consequence of being a party more firmly anchored in parliamentary activity. At the ideological level, the concept of transversality came under question, with some suggesting it should be replaced by a more explicit alignment with leftist political ideology. Organisationally, transversality became increasingly associated with the faction aligned with Íñigo Errejón.

This association meant that the faction led by Pablo Iglesias rejected transversality as a way to delegitimise Errejón and his allies. The ideological debate within Podemos thus became inseparable from the internal struggle for power and strategic positioning. Broadly speaking, two positions emerged: one advocating for leftist politics through a rejection of both transversality and populism, and another defending leftist politics while also calling for a redefinition of transversality.

Iglesias' faction adopted the leftist approach. They share the idea that leftist identity should be strengthened but they differ in terms of the role attributed to transversality, as it can be seen in the

positions of Juan Carlos Monedero, a founding member of Podemos, and Pablo Iglesias.

Although Juan Carlos Monedero argues that the goal of *Podemos* is to achieve popular unity³⁰, he rejects populism, which he strongly associates with Errejón's position. Interestingly, this does not mean that he opposes transversality – at least not explicitly. Monedero refers to concepts such as "decaffeinated transversality" and "transversality light" to criticise a deideologised political discourse. At the same time, he acknowledges that "the search for transversality is the right thing" as a strategy to build a transformative political force in times of neoliberal hegemony.

The issue, then, lies in the connection between transversality and the "Populist Hypothesis". According to Monedero, this combination merely reinforces dominant political frames rather than challenging them. Instead, Podemos should push people to move beyond these hegemonic frames – as is the case when addressing concepts such as "plurinationality" or even "workerism". In practice, the best way to overcome neoliberal policies and the two-party system is through an alliance between Podemos and IU, which would constitute a new and shared political space.

The confluence with IU highlights the tension between two understandings of political conflict: one framed as "the people vs. the elite", and the other as "left vs. right". The need to adopt a distinctly leftist discourse is presented in contrast to populism, which is understood here as de-ideologised. Although some value is attributed to transversality, it becomes closely associated with populism as a lack of ideological clarity. This perspective signals an emerging rejection of transversality, positioning it in opposition to leftist ideology – and, internally, to the faction led by Errejón. The critique of "light transversality" is not accompanied by the development of a 'strong transversality', but rather by its implicit dismissal.

Pablo Iglesias adopts a different position by not opposing the left and transversality. Since transversality was a defining feature of Podemos from its inception, Iglesias adapts the concept to a new conjuncture: on the one hand, Podemos was now in coalition with IU and had reached political agreements with the PSOE; on the other hand, the personal and political distance between Iglesias and Errejón had widened.

In this context, Iglesias refers to transversality as a means of connecting civil society and political parties – more specifically, as the key to shaping Podemos into a party that reflects society. For Iglesias, transversality is part of Podemos's DNA and should not be confused with a moderate or centrist discourse³¹. While institutional politics can lead to pre-defined, fixed positions, transversality contributes to generating opposition beyond the logics of parliamentary politics. It challenges the

²⁹ L. Chazel and G. Fernández Vázquez, "Podemos, at the origins of the internal conflicts around the "populist hypothesis": a comparison of the theoretical production, public speeches and militant trajectories of Pablo Iglesias and Íñigo Errejón", *European Politics and Society* 21(1), 2020, pp. 1-16.

³⁰ J.C. Monedero, "Las debilidades de la hipótesis populista y la construcción de un pueblo en marcha", *Público*, May 11, 2016, <https://www.publico.es/opinion/columnas/debilidades-hipotesis-populista-construccion-pueblo-marcha.html>.

³¹ P. Iglesias, "Pablo Iglesias clausura la Universidad de Podemos", *YouTube*, September 26, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dV7iOBmfYIE>.

traditional logic of “left vs. right” and instead reveals who is truly on the side of the people and who supports the privileged. Rooted in the experiences of 15M and the housing movement against evictions, Iglesias envisions the combination of parliamentary and grassroots action through transversality. What is needed, he argues, is:

A Podemos that does not need to proclaim itself as transversal, but instead builds transversality through conflicts, converging with all social and political actors who stand on the side of the majority. Convergence must flourish in social struggles, where different forms of activism (from parties and movements) must get to know each other, coexist, respect one another, and ultimately unite. Convergence cannot be just an electoral coalition or the distribution of parliamentary time; it must be built from the ground up³².

In this view, transversality plays a key role in creating a common political space where pluralism can both coexist and converge. Iglesias emphasises that transversality entails appealing to a diversity of social subjects through convergence. The party does not need to target individuals with a pre-existing ideological identification, nor does it need to adapt itself to what it believes “the people” want. Instead, transversality transforms both society – through the convergence of parliamentary and social action – and the party itself, as it seeks to reflect social pluralism internally.

Iglesias dissociates transversality from electoral strategy, as might be the case under the “populist hypothesis”, and instead frames it as the creation of a political space co-constituted by parties and civil society. His insistence that transversality must be “practiced”, rather than merely “proclaimed”, also reflects his internal positioning within Podemos. Up until Podemos’s Second Congress in February 2017, Iglesias consistently argued that the party should mirror society – or movements like the PAH – rather than traditional political parties like the PSOE or PP. His repeated critiques of Errejón centred on this point, presenting his own candidacy as representing the “true” transversality in contrast to those seeking to resemble conventional parties.

As at the beginning, Podemos should reflect society. The difference now is that this principle applies not to the entire party, but to Iglesias’s faction: “I ask you to vote for this team because we need a broad, inclusive Podemos: one that resembles our country and its people, not the old politicians and the old parties of our country”³³. By claiming that Errejón’s goal was to emulate traditional parties, Iglesias also links Errejón’s version of transversality with moderation and centrism.

³² P. Iglesias, “Oposición transversal o el Podemos que necesitamos”, *Público*, November 11, 2016, <https://www.publico.es/opinion/hereroteca/oposicion-transversal-podemos-necesitamos.html>.

³³ Valencia Plaza, “Iglesias: “Transversalidad no es parecerse a Ciudadanos o el PSOE”, *Valencia Plaza*, 2017, <https://valenciaplaza.com/valenciaplaza/iglesias-transversalidad-no-es-parecerse-a-ciudadanos-o-el-psoe>.

After the Second Congress – and following Errejón’s departure from Podemos – transversality ceased to be a defining concept in Iglesias’s political discourse. The increasing emphasis on a clearly leftist project and participation in the coalition government contributed to the gradual disappearance of transversality as a bridge between social and parliamentary dynamics, and as a tool for challenging traditional leftist identifications.

Transversality and the National-Popular

Podemos’ increasing proximity to IU and the lead-up to its Second General Assembly in 2017 – which was key to defining the party’s strategic direction – intensified the calls from Errejón and his faction to maintain transversality as a core element of the party’s identity. They reinforced their defence of transversality, closely linking it to populism and the construction of the *national-popular*. This was framed not only as part of the internal ideological debate, but also as a broader strategic move – both to shape the party’s positioning and to counterbalance the dominance of Iglesias’ faction.

Transversality became strongly associated with Errejón and his group, who frequently referred to the term. Transversal politics implies a recognition of the insufficiency of one’s own position and the need to engage with different perspectives. In the words of those close to Errejón, transversality is “about articulating a discourse and a path of democratic progress capable of reworking those diverse demands and experiences into the framework of a new social majority”³⁴. As expressed by Emilio Delgado, it is “about being able to interpret a social majority that may or may not identify with the left, but that does share the fundamental agreements expressed in the squares of our country around social justice, democracy, and sovereignty”³⁵.

There is an acknowledgement of the importance of left-wing voters – implicitly recognising that Podemos is a party of the left – as well as of the need to reach less ideologically defined voters who nonetheless share the same demands and values. Errejón conveyed this idea through his appeal to “those who are missing” (*los que faltan*). Transversality would thus serve as a means of resisting ideological rigidity, including within the party’s own organisation. It is also a strategy for confronting those in power who view ideological enclosure as a way to control Podemos’s growth and influence.

Errejón insists that the separation between “radical” and “transversal” does not reflect the internal dynamics of the party, but rather are externally imposed labels used by the powerful to sow division. While Iglesias sought to reinterpret and incorporate transversality into his own project, Errejón similarly reclaimed the notion of radicalness, stressing its compatibility with transversality. As he put it: “We got to this point by saying that there was

³⁴ E. Maura, “¿Por qué es importante la transversalidad?”, *Insti-25M*, July, 12, 2016.

³⁵ F. Manetto, “Podemos reabre el debate sobre las alianzas y sus objetivos electorales”, *El País*, April 5, 2016, https://elpais.com/politica/2016/04/04/actualidad/1459784420_936764.html.

nothing more radical than transversality, and nothing more transversal than radicalness; that we needed to combine common sense and an outstretched hand with great firmness when dealing with the powerful..."³⁶.

Despite denouncing these labels as externally imposed, defining transversality as radical also reflects internal positioning within the party. It is an attempt to counter accusations of becoming too moderate or too close to the PSOE on the one hand, and not radical or left-wing enough on the other. Errejón and his allies seek to dismantle dichotomies such as authentic and direct versus moderate and transversal, or essentialism versus transversality, in order to demonstrate that radicalness can be compatible with an inclusive and majoritarian vocation³⁷.

Transversality is integral to the national-popular project. In this sense, Errejón's interpretation of transversality diverges from that of Iglesias. The central disagreement is not, as Iglesias suggests, between moderation and radicalism, but between the left and the national-popular. Transversality involves constructing a new "totality" – the foundation of the national-popular project – rather than merely claiming to represent one "part" (as the left does)³⁸.

Thus, the national-popular project stands in opposition to the leftist project as an internal tension within Podemos. Errejón later acknowledged that this moment marked, in his view, the end of Podemos's majority vocation: "When Podemos began to renounce the national-popular and transversal path and began to orient itself towards the traditional left, it started getting traditional left election results"³⁹.

The divergence between the two projects also applies to the role Podemos should play as an institutional actor within parliamentary dynamics. As mentioned, Iglesias understood transversality as a means of linking social opposition with parliamentary politics. For Errejón, it represents the construction of a "soft us" – open to a heterogeneous composition – and a "hard them", composed of a privileged minority. The key difference here lies in whether civil society's struggles should be channelled directly or mediated through institutional mechanisms.

Although Errejón regards the national-popular project – grounded in transversality and aimed at transcending the traditional left-right axis – as the original project of Podemos, transversality is now largely confined to internal party debates. It has lost its potential to serve as a tool for building a social majority. Rather than fostering a common ground

through dialogue between diverse positions, it now marks a divide between increasingly incompatible stances. Due to its associations with centrism, moderation, and with the figure of Errejón himself – as well as its perceived opposition to radicalness and the left – transversality has also lost prominence as a defining element of Podemos's political practice.

4. Peripheral Transversality

Although transversality, in its various forms, characterised the strategy of Podemos between 2014 and 2017, it did not disappear entirely and continued to re-emerge on several occasions. Thus far, I have referred to transversality as a broad strategic orientation, encompassing the formation of a new political space and the internal organisation of Podemos. However, transversality also gained particular relevance at the regional level, especially in Catalonia and the Basque Country, where the traditional left-right ideological divide intersects with nationalist politics. Furthermore, transversality has been associated with feminism, signalling its resonance beyond party structure and electoral strategy.

The concept of "peripheral transversality" recognises the significance of transversal dynamics in forms of political identification and positioning that differ from the "core" or "central" transversality associated with the reconfiguration of the Spanish political space beyond the traditional ideological divide between left and right.

Podemos achieved excellent electoral results in the 2015 general elections in the Basque Country and Navarra, where it was the most voted-for party in the former and the second most voted-for in the latter. The main parties adversely affected were the nationalist left parties in both regions, including Geroa Bai (formerly Nafarroa Bai). In this context, Podemos' transversality offered a new space for political identification that moved across both the nationalist and the left-right ideological axes. It echoed the founding of Nafarroa Bai, which had also sought to challenge the rigid division between ideological and nationalist blocs. However, Podemos soon began to lose votes in regional elections and faced criticism due to a lack of clarity on territorial issues such as a potential referendum on independence, sovereignty, and the annexation of Navarra.

This dynamic was later echoed in Catalonia, which became highly polarised following the referendum on independence in October 2017. In this context, Iglesias referred to the idea of a "transversal government" as a possible outcome after the December 2017 elections⁴⁰. He advocated for a coalition government between PSOE, Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC), and Catalunya En Comú-Podem (Together We Can in Catalonia), political allies of Podemos. Faced with the risk that the left-right divide might be overshadowed by the growing split between constitutionalists and pro-

³⁶ P. Oliveira and S. Cabeza de Vaca, "Íñigo Errejón: "Nuestra propuesta es la más radical"", *Público*, February 4, 2017, <https://www.publico.es/politica/inygo-errejon-nuestra-propuesta-radical.html>.

³⁷ E. Maura, "O lo uno o lo otro". Radicalidad y moderación en la nueva política", *Ctxt*, October 12, 2016, <https://ctxt.es/es/20161012/Firmas/8873/15M-Podemos-maura-debate-transversalidad-pueblo.htm>.

³⁸ I. Errejón, "Podemos a mitad de camino", *Ctxt*, April 23, 2016, <https://ctxt.es/es/20160420/Firmas/5562/Podemos-transformacion-identidad-poder-cambio.htm>.

³⁹ I. Errejón, "Podemos Missed its Chance to Transform Spanish Politics", *Jacobin*, October 23, 2021, <https://jacobin.com/2021/10/inygo-errejon-spanish-left-podemos-mas-pais-madrid-15-m-vox-populism>.

⁴⁰ EFE, "Pablo Iglesias avisa a ERC y PSC de que serán sus vetos mutuos los culpables de la posible repetición electoral", *La Vanguardia*, December 18, 2017, <https://www.lavanguardia.com/vida/20171218/433739268367/pablo-iglesias-avisa-a-erc-y-psc-de-que-seran-sus-vetos-mutuos-los-culpables-de-la-possible-repeticion-electoral.html>.

independence supporters, Iglesias proposed a transversal left-wing government.

At the regional level, such a government would redefine the political space from the left by prioritising social policies. At the national level, it could offer a path toward resolving the territorial conflict by encouraging dialogue with the Spanish government in search of a negotiated solution. PSOE candidate Miquel Iceta also referred to a “transversal investiture”, though in his case it involved cross-ideological support – from Catalunya En Comú-Podem, but also from right-wing parties such as the PP and Ciudadanos. This debate highlights not only the importance of transversality in the political discourse but also the contrasting strategies of Podemos and PSOE: while Podemos sought to challenge the traditional separation of nationalist blocs, PSOE tended to reinforce it.

In the end, however, the focus on social policy, dialogue, and the defence of a left-wing coalition from a transversal perspective failed to overcome the growing polarisation between constitutionalist and pro-independence parties. There was no room for a third space or for a social majority that could electorally support Podemos’ initiative. As a less traditional party with a distinct approach to nationalism (as part of its plurinational project), Podemos continued to lose support in Catalonia, just as it had in the Basque Country and Navarra.

Despite the connection between transversality and feminism⁴¹, the term “transversality” was rarely used by Podemos in relation to feminist politics – even during the period when the party adopted a clear and determined feminist profile. As Minister for Equality, Irene Montero implemented “gender mainstreaming”, a concept equivalent to a “transversal approach”, to ensure the integration of gender perspectives across government policies and decisions. However, she did not use the term “transversality”, as it had largely been abandoned by Podemos after 2017. This distancing was further reinforced by the fact that Ciudadanos began advocating for what they called “transversal feminism”, framed as “liberal feminism”, in 2018-19.

Montero’s application of gender mainstreaming entailed a transversal approach in the sense of designing public policies through a gender lens. In a similar way to the 15M movement, the feminist movement in Spain has also been considered transversal in its social and political composition. However, the growing influence of *anti-woke* discourse, along with the controversial public reception of laws on sexual consent and transgender rights, led to increasing criticism of Montero’s leadership, as well as internal divisions within feminist movements.

This notion of division was later taken up by Sumar, who launched a proposal for a “feminism for the 99%” – a feminism aimed at the majority – under the label of “gender transversality”. While this approach does not differ substantially from Podemos’s implementation of gender mainstreaming, Sumar framed it as a novelty by explicitly aiming their message at both

women and men. They contrasted their stance with what they labelled “trench feminism” (*feminismo de trincheras*), which they argued was responsible for generating social division and fragmentation. In this way, transversality became a means of political positioning for Sumar in relation to Podemos, reproducing the broader ideological dichotomy between the left and the transversal.

In response, Montero questioned Sumar’s framing of transversality and reinterpreted its meaning as the ability to secure rights through building majority consensus. She stated:

The word “transversal” has been emptied of its meaning. I do not believe that being transversal should simply mean “monkey see, monkey do”. Transversality means having a political proposal that is capable of guaranteeing a right, expanding opportunities for happiness, and turning that into a majority position⁴².

Montero’s intention was not to reintroduce transversality into Podemos’s feminist discourse, but rather to delegitimise Sumar by accusing them of mimicking the majority and prioritising electoral gains over genuine social transformation and the advancement of new rights. However, had it not been for internal political struggles within the left, transversality could have played a more constructive role in developing a renewed vision of feminism.

Conclusion: The Paradox of Transversality

The protests and demands of the 15M movement opened up a new socio-political space, one largely orphaned of institutional and parliamentary representation. Podemos emerged with the aim of occupying this void and redefining the political landscape. The so-called “Podemos Hypothesis” sought to seize this window of opportunity and achieve political power before that window closed.

Transversality was key to transforming social heterogeneity into a coherent political project that did not rely solely on the traditional left-right axis. Initially, the “populist hypothesis” aimed to channel social grievances and political discontent into a new political project, grounded in the binary of “those below” versus “those above”. Subsequently, the “government hypothesis” revealed the need to reintroduce the left-right axis, still from a transversal perspective, as Podemos transitioned from an extra-parliamentary force to an institutional actor.

From that point on, transversality began to lose its weight as a unifying and guiding principle for Podemos’ political action, instead becoming a tool for internal positioning. Pablo Iglesias employed the concept of transversality to reaffirm his commitment to convergence with IU and to strengthen ties with civil society. In contrast, Íñigo Errejón rejected Podemos’ “leftward turn”, advocating instead for an appeal to a broader but less ideologically defined majority, and for a focus on effective and pragmatic institutional engagement.

⁴¹ N. Yuval-Davis, “What is transversal politics?”, *Soundings* 12, 1999, pp. 94-98.

⁴² I. Montero, “Ser transversal no es ver por dónde sopla el viento”, *El País*, December 19, 2023, <https://elpais.com/espagna/2023-12-19/irene-montero-sobre-sumar-ser-transversal-no-es-ver-por-donde-sopla-el-viento.html>.

The tensions between these two factions – and the eventual split – were preceded by a reduction of transversality to a marker of internal division, separating the radical from the pragmatic, or the leftist from the centrist currents within the party. Transversality gradually lost its transformative potential and was, for all practical purposes, abandoned as a strategic concept following Podemos' second congress in 2017. From then onwards, the party shifted more decisively towards achieving a coalition government with the PSOE, which it successfully did in 2019. However, this came at the cost of declining electoral support, dropping from 20.66% and 69 seats in 2015 to 12.8% and 35 seats in the November 2019 elections, as part of Unidas Podemos.

Attempts to develop a “peripheral transversality” also failed to progress. Regarding nationalism, the polarised political landscape around independence movements thwarted the possibility of a left-wing transversal project in which progressive forces could converge around social policy, regardless of their nationalist positions. From a feminist perspective, while gender mainstreaming was pursued, it did not equate to embracing transversality. Instead, liberals and media actors attempted to conflate “transversal feminism” with a form of “liberal feminism”, in opposition to the “queer feminism” often associated with Irene Montero.

The emergence of Sumar marks a reintroduction of transversality into the left-wing political debate⁴³, seeking to reconfigure the political field. However, this is a transversality devoid of reference to left populism, instead rooted in institutional and governmental practice, with the aim of recapturing the broad appeal that characterised the early days of Podemos. Yet, as before, transversality once again became a matter of positioning – this time externally – as Sumar and Podemos competed as electoral rivals, thereby reproducing the dichotomy between radical and moderate.

Comparatively, Podemos shares notable similarities with Kirchnerism in Argentina in terms of reshaping the political space to channel social discontent with the party system into a new political project, incorporating voices from civil society, and broadening the electoral base. In both cases, transversality became entangled in internal struggles and was eventually sidelined as a political strategy during phases of power consolidation. The key difference lies in internal dynamics: Néstor Kirchner succeeded in becoming the dominant force within his party, while in Podemos, the transversal approach was largely relegated to the position of internal opposition to Pablo Iglesias.

Whereas Argentina's case reflects a populist articulation of transversality, the examples of the Basque Country and Navarra relate more closely to nationalism – an approach not adopted by Podemos. In the Basque Country, the PNV's version of transversality was constructed from a nationalist standpoint, aiming to facilitate dialogue across left and right parties. In Catalonia, Podemos adopted

a left-wing position that sought to engage both nationalist and non-nationalist parties. Despite these differences, both contexts share the challenge of developing a transversal approach in a polarised environment, dominated by the sovereigntist vs. constitutionalist divide. There are also parallels with the experience of *Nafarroa Bai*, where a new and transversal political space was formed, but internal divisions ultimately fragmented the original project. In both cases, the appeal to broader society was insufficient to prevent factional splits.

In sum, it can be concluded that transversality played a crucial role in the formation and consolidation of a political space from the left, one that drew on both populist and institutional logics to evolve into a governmental force. Transversality, in this sense, serves several functions that enrich the left's political experience: (a) it reflects the pluralism of society in terms of representation and party organisation; (b) it expands political identification beyond the left-right axis by introducing a bottom-up discourse; (c) it offers a bridge between institutional political work and demands from civil society; (d) it seeks to transcend nationalist/non-nationalist divides through a shared focus on social policy and public consultation; and (e) it incorporates feminist politics across policy areas.

That said, transversality becomes most visible when parties – such as Podemos in the past or Sumar more recently – explicitly define it as part of their political strategy. This does not imply that transversality is absent from other political practices. On the contrary, many parties engage in transversal politics, whether through electoral coalitions or policymaking. What is particularly notable in the case of Podemos is the attempt to pursue transversal politics from a left-wing position, with the dual ambition of expanding its electoral base and attaining governmental power. At the same time, the case highlights the limitations of this strategy; particularly its struggles with institutional politics, engagement with mainstream parties, and fostering internal cohesion and dialogue among divergent positions within the party.

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⁴³ Ó.G. Agustín, “Podemos, Sumar and the return of Eurocommunism: the real, the radical and the populist left”, *Soundings* 86, 2024, pp. 20-38.

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