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RESEARCH ARTICLE

How Do Radical Left Parties Frame the Nation? A Comparison Between Greece, Spain and France

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ABSTRACT: The trajectory of radical left parties during the 2010s presents a complex facet of contemporary European party politics. The decline of traditional social-democratic parties has at times facilitated the rise of political formations positioned to their left, addressing issues increasingly neglected by the mainstream Left. While scholars have extensively explored the radical Left's relation to austerity politics, EU institutions, populism, and political strategies, less attention has been given to how these parties frame the concept of the nation and articulate national belonging. This paper seeks to address this academic gap by comparing the three most prominent radical left parties in Europe during their peak: SYRIZA in Greece, Podemos in Spain, and La France Insoumise in France. Through discourse analysis, this study focuses on how these parties employ a form of left-wing patriotism to integrate national elements into their discourses. Ultimately, this paper aims to shed light on a frequently overlooked aspect of the radical left party family through a comparative analysis.

KEYWORDS: Nationalism; Patriotism; Radical Left Parties; La France insoumise; Syriza ; Podemos

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1. Introduction

Following the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, radical left parties (RLPs) were “squeezed between decline and adaptation” (Chiochetti, 2016: 1), with limited academic research on the subject (e.g., Bell, 1994; Bull and Heywood, 1994). However, in the 2010s, the radical Left began to regain momentum and political influence in Europe as the 2008 financial crisis, subsequent austerity policies, and protests against them opened new political opportunities for contentious and left-wing politics (Della Porta, 2015; March and Keith, 2016). This crisis, rooted in issues the radical Left had long criticized, such as globalization and neoliberalism, created an environment where RLPs could potentially thrive. Some of these parties, frequently rebranded in a populist manner and linked with grassroots anti-austerity movements, did attain considerable popular support, but others remained virtually non-existent in certain European states. Academically, there has been a notable increase in the literature on RLPs, leading to scholarly consensus on the definition of this political grouping — a party family that occupies a composite yet distinct political space to the left of mainstream social democrats (e.g., Chiochetti, 2016; Escalona et al., 2023; March, 2011; March and Keith, 2016). Furthermore, the exponentially growing research on populism has also explored the left side of the populist spectrum, with recent studies on (radical) left populism merging with traditional scholarship on the radical Left, thereby establishing strong connections between the two (e.g., Charalambous and Ioannou, 2019; Damiani, 2020; Katsambekis and Kioupkiolis, 2019).

Despite these advances, certain areas in the literature remain understudied, particularly the relationship between RLPs and national identity. Investigating how the radical Left engages with national identity is a timely and necessary research area, given the growing political significance of national identity in many European countries since the 1990s. This trend has been further amplified by the economic and political crises in Europe following 2008, which triggered disaffection with EU institutions, a rise in nationalism, and the resurgence of nationality as a contentious political identity, often associated with right-wing values. While these sociopolitical processes have received considerable scholarly attention concerning the radical and/or populist Right, very little has been explored about the radical Left in this context (for some exceptions, see Chazel and Dain, 2021; Custodi, 2021, Custodi 2024).

Consequently, this paper provides comprehensive insights into the often-overlooked relationship between radical left politics and national identity, thereby contributing to the expanding body of research on RLPs in Europe. The central focus of our empirical inquiry is to understand how radical left parties in the 2010s engaged with concepts such as national belonging, identity, and pride. To address this question from a comparative perspective, we concentrate on key political instances that gained prominence within radical left politics during the 2010s, primarily due to their electoral success and political influence. Specifically, our analysis examines the experiences of Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, and La France Insoumise (LFI) in France.

The article proceeds as follows: Section 2 presents the data collected and the methodology used for the analysis. Sections 3, 4, and 5 lay out the empirical findings for each of the three parties. Section 6 reviews the findings from a comparative perspective and discusses the relevance of the article, as well as its limitations.

2. Concepts, Data and Methods

To empirically fulfil the objective of this paper, we employ a discourse analysis grounded in the political discourse theory (PDT) of the Essex School, specifically drawing on the works of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985; 2005; 2013). PDT views discourse as a mechanism for interpreting the world through the

articulation of various elements into coherent narratives. Through articulation, discursive elements linked together are mutually influenced in their meanings, resulting in new meaning formations. Accordingly, discourse is thus understood as a “system of meaningful practices that form identities of subjects and objects”, with the capacity to alter social and political realities (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000: 3–4).

In the context of political parties framing the nation, articulation involves strategically linking various signifiers (e.g., freedom, tradition, sovereignty) to construct a narrative of national identity. In this sense, the nation tends towards being an empty signifier, as it can embody multiple meanings and become a site of different ideological articulations. Hegemony, therefore, involves the successful articulation of a particular discourse on national belonging capable of dominating, at least to a certain degree, the political landscape. This study examines how radical left parties strive to achieve hegemony by promoting their vision of the nation. This frequently takes the form of a counter-hegemonic attempt, challenging the dominant, often right-wing discourse and proposing an alternative articulation of national identity along progressive lines.

Identifying instances where opposition parties resist the hegemonic national narrative and offer counter-hegemonic discourses reveals the dynamic interplay between dominant and subordinate discourses in shaping national identity. Through the concepts of articulation, empty signifiers, hegemony, and counter-hegemony, this research elucidates the complex processes through which national identity is constructed and contested. This approach enhances comprehension of how radical left parties understand and articulate the nation, intertwined with notions such as their radical left identity and populist character. Overall, it deepens our understanding of political communication and the broader socio-political struggles underpinning the framing of the nation.

When applying PDT to the study of the discursive articulation of the nation, the Andersonian conception of the nation proves especially fitting and theoretically sound. Anderson conceptualises the nation as an imagined (though not imaginary) political community, which is imagined as limited and sovereign. Importantly, it is “modular” – capable of articulating itself in diverse ways based on contexts, political actors, and ideologies (Anderson, 1983). Thus, it undergoes continuous historical resignification, including through political agency. Therefore, as we examine how radical left political actors frame the nation, our focus is on understanding their “imagination” of the nation. This involves considering the values and boundaries of exclusion that underpin their conception of the nation. Furthermore, our inquiry delves into the interplay between their imagination and the sedimented meanings of the past, and between their imagination and the ones propagated by other political forces during the same temporal context.

Based on the above, we started by identifying the central patterns of the discourse of Syriza, Podemos and La France Insoumise regarding the concept of the nation. We progressively transitioned from descriptive open coding, which closely examines the texts and identifies the presence of national(ist) vocabulary, to more selective and theoretically-inspired coding that focuses on the processes of signification of the nation in their discourse.

To achieve this empirically, our study draws upon a curated collection of 56 speeches, articles and interviews by the leadership and prominent figures of these respective political parties. Two key criteria guided the selection process for our dataset. First, we focused on identifying specific issues that hold specific relevance to our research inquiry, particularly when they discussed national(ist) issues and themes. Second, we identified relevant speeches and documents that underscore the political trajectories of each party, including major party events and the opening or closing rallies of general electoral campaigns. The majority of the selected texts span the years from 2010 to 2022, covering the peak of these parties’ influence and critical turning points in

their evolution. The reason behind choosing the specific timeframe and focusing on electoral campaigns lies within the importance of the national context in the contemporary world as the main unit of political decision-making and deliberation (De Cleen and Stavrakakis, 2020). In this sense, it is expected of parties to talk about the nation during electoral campaigns as they attempt to maximise their gains and win as many voters as possible. More importantly, the timeframe of 2010-2022 allows us to examine all three radical left parties when they were most successful, had the most electoral gains, and therefore could discuss the national issue to appeal to a bigger audience.

Since all the texts under analysis are originally in Spanish, French or Greek, any quoted phrases within inverted commas were translated into English by us. The full list of the selected material can be found in the Appendix.

3. The nation in SYRIZA

In examining the material for SYRIZA, references to national belonging or the nation are relatively scarce, with the exception of the January 2015 national election, where terms such as ‘Greece’ and ‘Greek people’ are frequently used. Indeed, the national element has only a secondary position to the primary articulation of the party’s discourse during the period of 2010-2015 which employed a populist logic pitting ‘the people’ against ‘the elite’ (Katsambekis, 2019; Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, 2014). Within this context, the discursive elements that refer to the nation are incorporated and re-interpreted through SYRIZA’s populist logic and they do not become prevalent in its discourse. This articulation is also part of the discursive strategy that SYRIZA developed in the examined period, which gave the party a sense of flexibility in focusing or not on the national element depending on spatial and temporal circumstances. The latter can be seen in how Tsipras talked about the nation in Athens or peripheral cities, and when it was a marginal or main opposition party on the brink of governmental power. SYRIZA adhered to the prevalent interpretation of the nation in the Greek left that takes the form of ‘left-wing patriotism’, combines the national element with class analysis and internationalism (Balampanidis, 2019; Milios, 2016), draws from the historical experiences of World War II and the Nazi occupation (Lalioti and Bithymitris, 2013) and understands the nation through the class struggle between working people and political and economic interests to offer a counter-hegemonic narrative to the hegemonic right-wing perception of the nation. This narrative saw, the working women and men of Greece (a categorisation that involves workers, farmers, small businessmen and many more) as patriots at the heart of the nation, against the interests above that were deemed as ‘unpatriotic’ (Lambrinou, 2017). This kind of counter-hegemonic narrative became prevalent in the post-war non-communist left and much more evident after the emergence of the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) during the 1970s and 1980s, which combined socialism with populism and patriotism (Pantazopoulos, 2001; Stavrakakis, 2019: 40–41) and which managed to contest the hegemonic right-wing perception of the nation significantly.

From 2010 to 2015, the party articulated a deep understanding of the nation of Greece, by drawing heavily from the history of the left in Greece and highlighted its patriotic character by emphasizing that the left has always been at the forefront of struggling for Greece and the Greek people. Historical events like the Greek resistance during World War II and the Polytechnic uprising in 1973 were often articulated in SYRIZA’s discourse to showcase the party’s commitment to being a patriotic left that fights for the country [GR3, GR5].

Grounding its discourse on those historical references, SYRIZA articulated the nation as a country in need of having its own people reinstated as sovereign and by promoting a renewed ‘popular sovereignty’ that will bring ‘national independence’ and ‘social justice’ at the same time [GR1, GR3]. Indeed, SYRIZA prioritized these concepts in its discourse by articulating the need to restore both social justice and the dignity of the Greek people with an articulation of the nation as a floating signifier (Chazel and Dain, 2021) capable of receiving a

particular meaning within SYRIZA's discourse. This articulation was rhetorically symbolised by the Greek people's struggle against the Memorandum, the Troika, and its representatives in Greece, including the parties of the centre-right New Democracy and the centre-left PASOK [GR2, GR9]. This signification brought forth SYRIZA's counter-hegemonic strategic positioning in the then-existing antagonism between pro- and anti-Memorandum forces in the Greek political context (Katsambekis, 2016; Teperoglou and Tsatsanis, 2014), by adding the national aspect between patriotic and unpatriotic forces respectively and articulating the Greek people, within a primarily populist logic of equivalence. With the promise of fulfilling popular sovereignty, SYRIZA attempted to unite the people under a great patriotic and democratic front [GR6] claiming that the party wanted to 'unite the Greeks, not divide them', unlike ND and PASOK who threatened Greece and articulated a divisive rhetoric [GR8]. In the parliamentary election of January 2015, SYRIZA relied on that unity to claim that:

This is why I call the Greek women and men to form a new national concord, from Plateia Omonoias (i.e., Peace Square), a square with such a symbolic name. To form a new social and patriotic alliance, with determination, courage and prudence to face the tough battles that lie ahead of us. (...) Together with SYRIZA which represents unity, resistance, justice, and democracy, it is time to make the vision of a new emancipation of the Greek people, a reality [GR8]

The perception of Greece as a debt colony, the need to liberate the country and emancipate the Greek people from the restrictions of the Memorandum and the political and economic interests behind are also part of SYRIZA's perception of the Greek nation through an anti-colonial prism (Markou, 2017: 64–65, 2020). It is once again the articulation of the nation as a floating signifier that is strategically employed in SYRIZA's discourse, where the latter constructs it as a nation subjected to colonial powers in the form of the EU and IMF and their collaborators in the country, ND and PASOK. These elements become part and parcel not only of SYRIZA's counter-hegemonic understanding of the nation but, more broadly, of the left-wing populist elements that are prevalent in the party's discourse (Markou, 2017, 2020) and at the same time, are indicative of SYRIZA's soft Eurosceptic approach to the then political context of the EU (Vasilopoulou 2018). In this articulation, Tsipras' references to the 'Greece that resists' [GR9], also work as a way to bring together all social and political forces and articulate their economic, social and political demands against austerity and neoliberalism to create a great patriotic front that will liberate Greece from its debtors that take the form of colonial powers. It is also at this point where the prevailing populist logic in SYRIZA's discourse brings together both the party's left-wing patriotic elements and anti-colonial elements, through the depiction of the Greek people as an underdog that will reclaim its sovereignty against the political and economic interests who act against them.

SYRIZA's counter-hegemonic articulation of the nation does not rely only on a negative understanding of Greece as a victim of economic and political interests but also on a positive understanding, as a country that is defined by certain values and which the party aims to restore. Specifically, the articulation of Greece as a floating signifier is connected to the elements of 'democracy', 'social justice', 'the rule of law', and 'security, stability, and dignity' [GR4], making it the country that SYRIZA wants to bring back. An example of this articulation is when the party talks about the restoration of dignity in Greece to offer a sense of dignity and patriotic pride to Greeks themselves, to restore the image of Greece internationally and to restore the country's role in EU as a member of equal standing to the other member-states [GR4]. It is the reinstatement of that significance of Greece that SYRIZA aims to bring forward, and it is through this counter-hegemonic narrative that the party called all Greeks to form a democratic and patriotic front which can help SYRIZA fulfil these demands, based on an inclusionary understanding of the national belonging, one that includes refugees, ethnic minorities and marginalised social groups (Iliadis 2019). More importantly, this reinstatement is attached to a reinstatement of popular sovereignty, as SYRIZA will represent the Greek people and will offer a new social

and political order for Greece and for the benefit of the Greek people [GR7]. The nation as a floating signifier becomes most evident here: Greece is not only framed as a country subjugated to economic and political interests and bound by debt but also as a macro signifier that is articulated with other discursive elements such as solidarity, justice, democracy etc.

Overall, SYRIZA's discursive articulation of the nation during the period of 2010-2015 is a composition of four distinct yet interconnected elements: 1. references to the historic role of the left in Greek history; 2. the Greek people and Greece as expressions of resistance against Memorandum, national and supranational economic and political interests, 3. anti-colonial perspectives; and 4. a promise of restoring Greece's image as a country where democracy, the rule of law, popular sovereignty and dignity will prevail. Accordingly, SYRIZA presented itself as the continuation of the Greek left's tradition of defending the nation through social policies. This implies developing a counter-hegemonic left-wing patriotic discourse that is substantively different from other counter-hegemonic discourses on the nation that were developed by radical right parties at the same period, such as the Greek party Independent Greeks (ANEL) (Laliouti and Bithymitris, 2013) or by established hegemonic discourses on the nation. SYRIZA did not resort to a nationalist perception of Greece based on xenophobic or anti-immigrant elements, but to an inclusive perception that brought together popular struggles for sovereignty with demands for social justice and democracy, as well as the promise of national independence from the perceived crypto-colonialism of EU and IMF (Markou, 2020).

SYRIZA's subsequent governmental period (2015-2019) saw only a few instances of SYRIZA's left-wing patriotism mostly represented in the party's policies on extending citizenship rights to immigrants, refugees and the LGBTQ community and the party's contribution to the resolution of the Macedonian name dispute with North Macedonia (Iliadis, 2019; Venizelos, 2023). In the first case, SYRIZA showed how its perception of the nation is an inclusive one focused on extending social and political rights to different social groups while implementing a rather open migration policy (Nestoras 2015). In the second case, SYRIZA used a patriotic discourse to support its choice of the name 'North Macedonia' for the then-named FYROM, as a way to counter the nationalist discourse that was developed against that decision in the social and political aspects of the Greek society (Venizelos, 2023: 111–113) and encouraged by the EU's political leadership (Montague 2018). Both instances also show that the party gradually abandoned any soft Eurosceptic element that it had before coming in power and embraced the existing political framework of the EU (Vasilopoulou 2018).

More importantly, this left-wing patriotism was in accordance with the party's populist discourse at the time, and despite the fact that it had a secondary role in SYRIZA, it managed to strengthen the party's appeal to Greek society.

4. The nation in Podemos

According to Pablo Iglesias, who served as Podemos' Secretary-General from 2014 to 2021, the most important adjectives that defined Podemos during the 2016 electoral campaign were "social-democratic, patriotic and plurinational" (only to immediately add that "Marx and Engels too were social democrats") [ES7]. The second term – *patriotic* – may seem odd for labelling a party of the radical Left, albeit in its populist version, and it may seem even odder in Spain, as the Spanish radical Left had been avoiding any reference to Spanish national identity in its discourse since the late-Francoism era onwards (Navarro Ardoy, 2015; Rendueles and Sola, 2019), due to the lingering legacy of Francoism's influence over the perception of Spanishness (Núñez Seixas, 2010; Ruiz Jiménez et al., 2021) and the radical Left's ideological closeness to Spain's peripheral nationalisms (Quiroga, 2010).

However, Iglesias' choice of defining Podemos as patriotic was not merely a one-time rhetorical strategy: it was a consistent feature in the first years of the party. In fact, since the party's foundation in 2014 both Iglesias and other party leaders employed a national-popular vocabulary; declared their pride in, and love for, Spain; praised the *patria* and their being Spaniards; labelled their party's policies as "patriotic" and accused political opponents of "anti-patriotism".

Indeed, during the discussions before launching the party, Iglesias and the other future leaders of Podemos began to form the view that, for a left-wing populist project to be successful, it had to include the aim of refounding a new Spanish national identity. They believed that patriotism would grant legitimacy and strength to their political project while also countering the consensus of the Right. As Íñigo Errejón, number two of Podemos from 2014 to 2018, recalled:

from the outset, a distinctive feature of Podemos was its social and democratic patriotism, synthesized in the slogan "the patria is the people", which held a clear national-popular resonance. This stance was highly innovative in Spain since the last years of the dictatorship, and it faced harsh criticism from the Left, which accused Podemos of aligning with the extreme right – when in reality it was obstructing its path [ES26].

According to Errejón, this redefinition of Spanish identity aimed at denying right-wing actors "the opportunity to put forward, uncontested, their own view of what the country stands for" [ES17]. He emphasized that progressive forces must assert their hegemony in the realm of national identification, or the reactionary forces would do so instead [ES18, ES19]. This would not come easily for them, because, as Iglesias argued,

our political group [*the leftists*] lost a war [*the Spanish Civil War*], and when they lost a war they lost a country, and the country began to be associated with the Right, and when they take this away from you, when they take away from you a flag that can be used to name us all, they have taken much away from you [ES14].

Notwithstanding the difficulties, the main figures of the party leadership became convinced that this was a necessary and important part of the populist strategy they aimed to put forward. If controlling the meaning of popular concepts is central to a populist strategy (Mouffe, 2018), then for a left-wing populist project to be successful in Spain, national identity had to be wrestled from the grasp of the Right and reframed with progressive values [ES8, ES14]. Therefore, patriotism was intentionally employed by the party's goal-oriented leadership to challenge the association of nationhood with right-wing values typical of Spanish politics and to propose another identification with Spain along inclusive and leftist lines. This type of patriotism can be readily defined as counter-hegemonic patriotism, as it aimed to challenge the dominant form on its own grounds by resignifying national belonging on progressive terms (see: Custodi, 2021; Custodi and Padoan, 2023).

At the centre of this type of patriotism, there is a close bond between the idea of *patria* and the idea of *people*. As the former head of Podemos' parliamentary group Pablo Echenique put it, "to love your country is to love your people and to be a patriot is to make sure that people who live in Spain have a decent life. For this reason, we are enormously proud to be Spanish" [ES12]. In the words of Íñigo Errejón, it is not the "elite", but the "humble people" to whom the patria belongs [ES8]. In saying so, Podemos entangled the creation of the political frontiers typical of populism (*us, the people* vs. *them, the elite*) with the in-out relation typical of nationalism (*patriot* vs. *antipatriot*), framing Spain "as a country of the People against the antipatriotic elites" [ES9]. This has been clear since the first party conference in 2014 when Iglesias exemplified this entanglement by saying that "it is not the elite that makes the country work, nor does it make the trains run on time, or the hospitals and the schools work. It is the people. This is our patria: the people" [ES1].

In Podemos' patriotism, national pride is always framed within a progressive political agenda based on left-wing economic claims and cultural pluralism. In this patriotic discourse, working people and the poor are often labelled as "patriots" [ES4, ES13, ES20, ES24] and the contemporary feminist movement is praised as "the real Spain" [ES18], performing a "republican and social patriotism" [ES15]. Along similar lines, people active in grassroots social movements, such as the young people who fight against climate change, are "heroes who build the patria" and "true patriots" [ES3, ES20, ES23]. On the contrary, tax-evading billionaires and corrupt politicians became "an elite that uses the Spanish flag to hide its corruption" [ES10]; "enemies of Spain" [ES3], "traitors of the patria" [ES21] and "unworthy to even pronounce the word Spain or the world patria" [ES4].

The defence and expansion of the welfare state constitute a central pillar of Podemos' patriotism. During the closing speech at the 2015 party demonstration *Marcha del Cambio*, Iglesias defined the patria as a community that ensures top-quality medical treatment and access to the best medicines for its citizens. He further expressed outrage at the "scam" of austerity that has "humiliated" his patria [ES2]. Similarly, in the closing rally of the 2015 electoral campaign upon witnessing someone in the United States facing death due to lack of health insurance, Iglesias stated his aspiration to become the president of a country where any citizen, can feel proud of being Spanish – proud of being from a country where the best healthcare is public and accessible to everyone [ES3].

Moreover, another crucial aspect of Podemos's patriotism lies in its assertion that Spain is plurinational. In stark contrast to the Spanish right-wing's patriotism, which centres around notions of state centralism and monoculturalism (Coller et al., 2018; Herrera and Miley, 2018), Podemos portrayed Spain as a "plurinational country" [ES11, ES18]. According to this perspective, Spain was conceived as "a patria made out of different languages, cultures, and sentiments" [ES6]; and as "a country of countries where citizens have different national attachments" [ES7]. Linguistic and cultural diversities are not only acknowledged as defining characteristics of Spain but are also celebrated as sources of national pride [ES23]. In endorsing this pluralist and inclusive conceptualization of Spanish identity, Podemos has therefore made no concessions to xenophobic discourse or criticism towards migrants. On the contrary, the party has consistently combined patriotic rhetoric with solidarity and hospitality towards migrants. As Iglesias asserted, a "Spaniard" is "everyone who lives and works in Spain, regardless of her/his origin" [ES16] and this is exactly what "really torments fascists": "to see Senegalese and Bangladeshis proudly wrapped in the Spanish flag" [ES16].

Remarkably, Podemos' patriotism was consistently defined in opposition to internal adversaries rather than external ones. It seldom extended to international politics but remained confined to the realm of national affairs. Although the party did express some mild Eurosceptic views, these were rarely framed within a patriotic narrative; instead, they were typically presented through the traditional narrative of the radical Left's alter-Europeanism – as a call for a social Europe and European solidarity, opposing the neoliberal policies of the EU (see also: Viviani and Damiani, 2019). When they talked about European affairs and criticised EU-led austerity policies, their patriotic rhetoric largely faded away and this indicates that the supposed link between left-wing Euroscepticism and nationalism, as argued by Halikiopoulou et al., does not hold true in the case of Podemos (see Halikiopoulou et al., 2012).

Finally, Podemos' patriotism heavily relied on morality and emotions. The emotion of pride played a central role in the expression of Spanish belonging: a recurring pattern was to initially declare pride in Spain/patria/Spanishness and subsequently delve into the definition of what Spain/patria/Spanishness truly entails. In engendering the sentiment of national belonging, the party leadership did not merely embrace "constitutional patriotism" (Müller and Scheppele, 2008); instead, it opted for a concept of moral community founded on an emotionally charged national-popular vocabulary that fostered a collective identity [ES25] (As Iglesias provocatively stated, "being constitutional patriots is not so sexy after all" [ES5]).

Over the years, however, Podemos' patriotism increasingly clashed with the escalating Spanish territorial crisis, particularly in the aftermath of the Catalan independence claims. Following the controversial independence referendum in Catalonia on October 1st, 2017, and the subsequent repressive actions by the Spanish government, Podemos' attempt to envision a plurinational Spain and an inclusive patriotism gradually diminished. The public debate became more focused and polarized around the territorial issue, contributing to the waning of the patriotic discourse. Moreover, as Podemos gradually moved away from its populist strategy, the use of national-popular symbols, language, and references gradually declined, as the party redirected its focus towards the symbolic, linguistic and aesthetic imagery of the radical Left, which it had initially sought to avoid (Rojas-Andrés et al., 2023) (Rojas-Andrés, Mazzolini and Custodi 2023). Patriotism persisted for a certain time even with the fading of the party's populist strategy (it can still be found in Iglesias' speeches up to 2019), but it gradually lost its importance, and today, under the leadership of Ione Belarra, it has largely disappeared. (For an analysis of Podemos' gradual departure from populism, refer to Mazzolini and Borriello, 2022; Rojas-Andrés et al., 2023).

As Errejón polemically argued after leaving the party, Podemos gradually "turned away from the early 'national-popular' hypothesis and its transversal discourse, and (re)located itself in the identitarian space of the traditional Spanish Left," resulting in "a loss in the capacity to resignify the Spanish national identity" [ES26]. That being said, the abandonment of patriotism did not lead to a return of open hostility towards Spanish identity as was common in large sectors of the old radical Left. Instead, it resulted in a certain degree of appeasement towards the country's banal nationalism, with national belonging no longer subjected to bold attempts at resignification, nor frequently brandished as a discursive weapon in political confrontation.

5. The nation in La France insoumise

The existence of a powerful "revolutionary democratic" imaginary in France linked to the French Revolution of 1789 has provided the left with many resources to draw in order to develop a progressive patriotic discourse. It is in France, in the wake of the Revolution, that a "civic" conception of the nation emerged. This "civic" nation, closely linked in France to the idea of citizenship, was based on the sovereignty of the people and the formulation of a general interest transcending particular interests and inherited privileges. It differs markedly from the right-wing conceptions of the nation based on ethnocultural criteria. This "revolutionary democratic" heritage constitutes a foundation for the forces of the left since the homeland can be linked to the revolutionary tradition. For example, it is drawing from the revolutionary imagination, the insurgents of the Paris Commune of 1871, and Jean Jaurès, founder of the *Section française de l'Internationale ouvrière* (French Section of the Workers' International, SFIO), that Mélenchon claims the *République sociale* (Social Republic) [FR6; FR13; FR17].

Jean-Luc Mélenchon willingly claims this historical filiation, with which his trajectory is imbued – for example, he defends the "Social Republic" and he considers the 1789 *sans-culottes* (without breeches) as his "ancestors" [FR1]. In 2012, 2017 and 2022, his meeting speeches were systematically tinged with reference to the 1789 French Revolution whose imagery irrigates his entire political narrative. He mobilizes the memory of past struggles and draws a continuity from the revolutionary people of 1789 to his movements (*Front de gauche*; LFI; *Union populaire*) which are presented as the culmination of republican history.

By putting forward a solidarity-based protectionism and the defence of French strategic industries, Mélenchon opposes national sovereignty to the predation of a deregulated financial globalization. In this logic, he portrays the national elites (e.g. the political *establishment*; the economic powers) and supranational bodies (e.g. the "Troika"; the neoliberal European Union) as the enemies of the nation.

Jean-Luc Mélenchon also mobilizes the idea of a past greatness of France, and the imaginary of a “universalist nation”, repeating that France, present on the five continents, is not a “Western nation” [FR2; FR5; FR12]. He recalls France’s status as a powerful nation, insisting on its central place in Europe, to justify the relevance France’s strategic options regarding the European Union: (1) a plan A with a renegotiation of the Treaty; (2) a plan B with an exit from the European Treaty in case of failure (2012, 2017) or a disobedience to European rules in order to apply the program (2022). In his opinion, France must be firm in its negotiations with Germany, while denouncing its hegemony on the continent and even speaking of the “German poison” in his book *Le Hareng de Bismarck* (The Bismarck Herring, 2015). At the heart of the 2017 and 2022 campaigns, Jean-Luc Mélenchon tried to draw a new destiny for France and to propose a new horizon: France “will offer peace to the world”, and will present itself as the leading edge of the ecological transition, because France must become an “example” for the rest of the world.

Regarding his patriotic rhetoric, Jean-Luc Mélenchon does not engage in a counter-hegemonic operation *per se*, as in the case with *Podemos*, since he draws on a French tradition that allows for a closer relationship between patriotism and socialism. While *Podemos* was inspired by the Latin America’s Left and primarily interested in “reinventing the homeland”, Mélenchon is much more rooted in the French tradition. Nevertheless, he admits to being particularly interested in the “left nationalism” [FR11] of the former Venezuelan president, Hugo Chávez. More than a new inspiration, the Latin American “pink tide” seems to have reinforced Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s belief that the signifiers of “homeland” and “nation” should be mobilized by the forces of the radical left. In recent history, French parties on the “left of the left” – as the *Nouveau parti anticapitaliste* (New Anticapitalist party, NPA) or *Lutte ouvrière* (Workers' Struggle, LO) – had in contrast mainly favoured an internationalist discourse.

Despite the French revolutionary heritage, and especially after the 1980s, the mobilization of national symbols by the left has been complicated by the outbreak of the nationalist discourse of the French radical right represented by the Le Pen family and its party the *Front National* (National Front, FN) – renamed *Rassemblement National* (National Rally, RN) in 2018 – which has appropriated the use of “nation”. In this sense, the mobilization of a patriotic narrative by Jean-Luc Mélenchon constitutes a rhetorical innovation in *recent* history. The nation is a floating signifier: the meaning given to it is “suspended” and it is therefore possible to “re-signify” it by giving it a progressive meaning.

Mélenchon’s innovation of a patriotic left-wing discourse is not the only one in recent history. Jean-Pierre Chevènement, a French senior civil servant and politician, who was a member of the *Parti socialiste* (Socialist Party, PS), represents the first *recent* attempt by the left to remobilize the nation. In 1992, while he was still a member of the PS, Chevènement campaigned against the Maastricht Treaty while Jean-Luc Mélenchon did not follow him at the time. It was then the first major split of the sovereignist republican left of the PS (around Chevènement) with a very anti-European dimension – a trajectory that Jean-Luc Mélenchon followed later, in particular from 2005, when he was also still a member of the PS and campaigned against the 2005 Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe.

As mentioned above, as early as 2012, it was possible to identify a strong impregnation of a patriotic and republican imaginary in Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s discourse. However, from the 2017 presidential election, the patriotic rhetoric became more prevalent in his discourse. The pervasiveness of the patriotic narrative in Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s discourses in 2017 and in 2022 must be understood as a positive re-signification of the term “homeland”, against the nationalism of the radical right represented by Marine Le Pen [FR7; FR9]. In stark contrast to the exclusionary and ethnocultural understanding of France propagated by the radical right, the leader of LFI advocates for a civic and inclusionary conception of the nation. In doing this, Mélenchon builds

the concept of the nation against specific enemies, both national (e.g. the “political establishment”) and supranational (e.g. the German ordoliberalism, NATO, the EU) [FR4; FR10; FR18].

During the 2012 presidential campaign, the left-wing international anthem *The Internationale* was sung along with the French national anthem, *La Marseillaise*, and both red and blue-white-red flags were waved during the *Front de gauche* meetings [FR3]. In 2012 and in 2017, the patriotic rhetoric gained more prominence in Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s discourse. This change was partly due to Mélenchon’s “populist turn” which was accompanied by the removal of the radical left’s aesthetic markers (Alexandre et al., 2021; Chiocchetti et al., 2019). While in 2012 Jean-Luc Mélenchon had adopted a “Front versus Front” strategy (i.e. Front de gauche vs. Front National), contrasting left-wing values and internationalism with FN’s nationalism, in 2017 he decided to further develop his patriotic speech to attract non-voters and Marine Le Pen’s electorate - those who are, in Mélenchon’s word, “fâchés mais pas fachos” (angry but not fascist). For instance, during the “Parade for the Sixth Republic” organized on 18 March 2017 by *La France Insoumise*, French flags were distributed to the crowd by the organisers. More generally, in 2017 and 2022, red and partisan flags disappeared from the meetings and were replaced by tricolour flags, and only *La Marseillaise* was sung at the end of meetings.

The national question has largely divided LFI. On one side, some (ex-)prominent LFI members as Georges Kuzmanovic and François Cocq (who were expelled from the party in 2018), developed a strong nationalist discourse and, following the footsteps of the German left-wing politician Sarah Wagenknecht (*Die Linke*), they criticised the “discourse of open borders” and warned on “the economic consequences of massive immigration for the living conditions of the working classes” (Mathoux, 2020: 188). On the other side, other important LFI members (such as Clémentine Autain) developed much more internationalist positions and refused patriotic frames.

Jean-Luc Mélenchon, and the vast majority of the executives surrounding him, represent a synthesis of these two currents. In 2017, Mélenchon tried to present the problem of immigration or multiculturalism in a positive light, while reaffirming the priority of republican values. His electoral implementation in Marseille — sometimes portrayed as a land of welcome and a city of immigration — through his status as deputy of this city, confirmed this approach. During the 2017 campaign, in one of his most noticed meetings in Marseille, he paid tribute to the 30,000 people who died in the Mediterranean with a minute of silence, declaring that he wanted to be the “president of peace” [FR8]. At the same time, he said it was necessary to solve the problem of immigration at the source, stating that:

Immigration is always a forced exile, a suffering, as the children of Europe know, those hundreds of thousands of people in Spain and Greece who had to go away from their countries because of misery and distress. We must go to the cause of the ills. [FR8]

Since 2017, Mélenchon’s ambition to unite these different factions within a single party, led to a few contradictions in his discourse and the positions he took as he has been oscillating between the two currents, occasionally shifting his position to a more extreme rhetoric. Since September 2020, Mélenchon has been increasingly making use of the concept of ‘creolisation’ to structure his patriotic discourse in the context of the consolidation of Marine Le Pen’s radical right, and the emergence of a new far-right political actor, Éric Zemmour (candidate of *Reconquête* [Reconquest]), whose discourse was even more openly hostile to immigration than that of the RN. When applied to “societal facts”, the concept of “creolization” allows to “break the deadlock of a closed conception of identity” (Ménil, 2009: 9–10). The use of this concept has an ideological and strategic function, since it resolves the contradictions between LFI’s two currents and thus enables it to build a wider chain of equivalence by appealing to different segments of the “people”.

In LFI's case, the concept of "creolization" allows Mélenchon to reconcile the *droit à la différence* (right to difference) and the *droit à l'universel* (right to the universal). In other words, it allows him to (1) recognise the importance and inevitability of "encounters of different cultures" in every national community [FR14] (2) while distancing himself from communitarianism, as the concept of "creolization" defends the "mixing and spontaneous creation of common cultural practices" rather than "assimilation [...] through the standardisation of practices" [FR15]. Mélenchon explained in an interview on 4 September 2021 that "creolisation completes [the] universalism without cancelling it. It is cultural universalism [FR14]. Creolisation is an alternative to the model of the segmented American society and to that of the dominant culture which demands the submission of all others" [FR14].

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The analysis of how SYRIZA, Podemos, and LFI understood and articulated the concept of the nation enables us to draw comparative conclusions regarding the similarities and discrepancies among these cases, and offers insights into how the radical left party family conceptualizes the nation within the European context.

When examining the notion of the nation within SYRIZA, Podemos, and LFI, three key similarities immediately emerge in their discourses: a historical grounding in a left-wing understanding of the nation, a contemporary re-interpretation of how their respective nations should be envisioned, and a clear distinction from right-wing perceptions of the nation in their respective countries. In all three cases, the analysis reveals that each party seeks to draw from their country's left-wing history to present themselves as the modern continuation of forces that have historically struggled for the nation's benefit.

For instance, SYRIZA invoked historical frames of the Greek patriotic Left, referencing the resistance during the Nazi occupation and the social and political struggles during the dictatorship, to position itself as the contemporary embodiment of a left-wing party that interprets the nation in class-based, populist, and counter-hegemonic terms. Similarly, although to a lesser extent, Podemos referenced the struggles of the Spanish left during the Civil War and Francoism, in an effort to situate itself within the broader narrative of antifascist patriotism, while aspiring to re-imagine the nation through a counter-hegemonic patriotism that opposes the dominant right-wing conception of the nation. LFI, in turn, integrated elements from the revolutionary imaginary of the French Revolution and the Paris Commune of 1871, aligning the party with the republican tradition of France as a nation based on civic foundations, in contrast to the ethnic conception of the nation promoted by the French radical right.

Furthermore, each party sought to offer a new interpretation of their respective nations by framing traditional and new left-wing demands as patriotic policies. In the context of the Greek debt crisis, SYRIZA's discourse combined elements of democratic rule, social justice, and the restoration of popular sovereignty as the foundation for a democratic, patriotic, and counter-hegemonic front that could re-signify the nation through a new social and political order centered on 'the Greek people.' Podemos similarly employed these elements to conceptualize the Spanish nation, emphasizing the role of left-wing economic demands and cultural pluralism in constructing a national identity rooted in the patriotism of the poor, the working class, and grassroots social movements. LFI aimed to reinterpret the French nation along the lines of a robust, multicultural welfare state that would exemplify the "greatness" of France.

The examined cases also share a perception of the nation that is fundamentally distinct from the concepts espoused by the political right in each country. SYRIZA's conception of the nation was consistently rooted in a democratic and inclusionary approach, contrasting sharply with the ethnic and exclusionary nationalism of the Right, which was accused of being aligned with foreign economic interests. In the case of Podemos, the

party viewed the disassociation of nationhood from established right-wing connotations as crucial to their counter-hegemonic strategy, which sought to re-articulate the nation in a way that embodied progressive values. Similarly, in articulating a left-wing patriotic conception of the French nation, Jean-Luc Mélenchon endeavored to reclaim national symbols that the Front National had partially hegemonized since the 1980s.

Moreover, a key insight from the comparative analysis is the profound link between populism and the adoption of patriotic rhetoric in the party discourse of the three cases, though with varying degrees of emphasis (for a theoretical discussion on the connection between populist strategy and the nation, see: Anastasiou and Custodi, 2024). SYRIZA embedded its vision of the Greek nation within its populist discourse. Similarly, Podemos articulated the populist dichotomy of ‘people vs. the elite’ alongside a national dichotomy between patriots and anti-patriots, making the two narratives mutually reinforcing. Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s incorporation of populist elements, evident as early as 2012 during his first presidential campaign, was accompanied by the development of a patriotic rhetoric. This rhetoric intensified in 2017 during his second election campaign, the peak of his ‘populist turn,’ leading to the articulation of a strong ‘national-popular’ discourse and the promotion of a vision for a republican and patriotic nation.

A notable area of divergence among these cases is their stance on the European Union. Of the three, LFI articulated the most pronounced Eurosceptic rhetoric, advocating for a France that reclaims its sovereignty and re-negotiates its position within an EU, perceived as dominated by German hegemony. SYRIZA initially also combined patriotism with a critique of the EU, portraying the Greek nation as subject to quasi-colonial powers in the form of the EU and the IMF. This narrative led SYRIZA to frame Greek patriotism as the need of liberating the country from the neoliberal austerity measures imposed by its foreign creditors. However, SYRIZA’s critique fell short of outright Euroscepticism, as the party refrained from rejecting Europeanism and European cooperation. Finally, Podemos expressed its left-wing patriotism while maintaining only mild and secondary Eurosceptic views, framed primarily within a traditional radical left narrative of alter-Europeanism rather than through patriotic rhetoric.

This divergence highlights the complex relationship between (left-)patriotism and Euroscepticism, which cannot be reduced to a simple equation between the two. Moreover, these differences in the degree of Euroscepticism can be partly explained by each country’s historical relationship with the EU. The Greek debt crisis significantly altered perceptions of the EU within Greek society, which subsequently influenced SYRIZA’s understanding of the nation through a new left-wing patriotic lens. This perspective positioned the party against both domestic and foreign actors in soft Eurosceptic terms. However, after 2015, SYRIZA largely abandoned its criticism of the EU and sought to align its governmental strategy within the constraints of EU policy (Nestoras 2015; Vasilopoulou 2018). In Spain, where hard Euroscepticism never gained significant traction among the population (Jiménez and De Haro, 2011), Podemos never fully adopted a Eurosceptic stance and gradually downplayed the mild Euroscepticism it had expressed in its early years. In France, criticism of the EU has been a “privileged tool” for the radical left to distinguish itself from the social-democratic left (Escalona and Vieira, 2015). When Jean-Luc Mélenchon left the Socialist Party (PS) in 2008, he employed this Eurocritical discourse to delineate the boundaries between the “fake left” (PS) and the “real left” he claimed to represent. For Mélenchon, the Lisbon Treaty, signed in 2007 by the EU member states, exemplified the loss of sovereignty of the European people, who had not been listened to.

Table 1. Left-wing patriotism in LFI, Podemos and Syriza

	<i>La France Insoumise</i>	<i>Podemos</i>	<i>Syriza</i>
Historical grounding to a left-wing understanding of the nation	Revolutionary imaginary of the French Revolution of 1789 and the Paris Commune of 1871	Articulation of the struggles of the Spanish Left during the Civil War and Francoism	References to the resistance during the Nazi occupation, and the social and political struggles during the dictatorship
Contemporary left-wing re-interpretation of the nation	Vision of a strong, multicultural welfare state to highlight the “greatness” of France	Emphasis on left-wing economic claims, cultural pluralism, and popular mobilization	Combination of democratic rule, social justice, and the re-establishment of popular sovereignty
Counter-hegemonic attempts against right-wing nationalism	Attempt to re-appropriate national symbols predominantly used by the Le Pen family since the 1980s	Denunciation of the false patriotism of the right, accused of betraying the country’s interests	Assertion that true patriotism lies in the union of social and political forces resisting foreign/economic impositions
Form of the state	Defense of the “one and indivisible” Republic (Jacobin heritage)	Advocacy for a “Plurinational state,” viewing Spain as a “country of countries”	Promotion of an inclusive state that stands with the people against all forms of discrimination
Patriotism and Populism	Patriotic elements integrated into a populist narrative	Overlapping of populist and patriotic narratives, reinforcing each other	Increase in patriotic references with the rise of populist rhetoric
Patriotism and Euroscepticism	Strong nexus between patriotism and Euroscepticism	At the beginning, there is a strong nexus between patriotism and Euroscepticism, but without completely abandoning Europeanism	Opposition to the Troika and existing EU fiscal and economic policies is not so much characterised by patriotic rhetoric, but rather by a traditional left-wing altereuropeanist stance

Another aspect of difference that we have partially omitted from the analysis, given that the existing literature has already extensively examined this issue (e.g., Chazel and Dain, 2021; Gerbaudo and Screti, 2017; Venizelos, 2023), is the form of state. The national context is crucial here: the unique history of nation-building in each case and the presence of independence/autonomy movements in Spain, unlike in France and Greece, account for the varying forms of state advocated by the three radical left-wing parties. These range from the “one and indivisible” Republic proposed by LFI to the “plurinational state” supported by Podemos.

In order to summarize the findings, Table 1 presents the similarities and differences of left-wing patriotism among the three parties:

In conclusion, it is essential to acknowledge the time constraints inherent in our study. Our decision to concentrate on the peak years of the electoral strength of these parties has partially overshadowed their more recent developments. This is particularly notable in the cases of Podemos and Syriza, where recent changes have been both profound and significant. Although we have recognized this evolution, it was relegated to the periphery of our empirical analysis. This choice allowed for a fruitful and in-depth examination of their interactions within the party politics arena and their deployment of political strategies and narratives as prominent actors; however, it paid less attention to the evolution of their positions on the nation in relation to their broader political development. This area represents a promising opportunity for new research. Acknowledging this limitation thus serves as an open invitation for further comparative studies that thoroughly address the diachronic dimension of this topic.

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Appendix

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