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# THE IBERIAN DRIVER FOR EUROPEAN SOCIAL DEMOCRACY

by *Javi López*

| If they both won the European election in their respective countries, the Portuguese Prime Minister António Costa (p22) is currently in a clearer situation than Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, whose PSOE party gained the most seats in April's national election but fell short of a majority.

Today, the Iberian Peninsula is sending out a message of hope to the rest of the European continent. The Socialist parties that lead the Portuguese and the Spanish governments have both secured a remarkable 33 percent of electoral support in the recent European elections and are in a position to become a reference point for European Social Democracy as a whole.

In Spain, the electoral resurgence of the PSOE (Spanish Socialist Worker's Party) at the hands of Pedro Sánchez deserves a thorough analysis, since the country is today the most populated European country governed by Social Democracy and PSOE has won the four elections held in the spring of 2019: local, regional, general and European.

Pedro Sánchez became President of the Spanish Government in June 2018 thanks to a constructive motion of no-confidence against the previous Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy, after a harsh sentence for corruption which confirmed the existence of systemic irregular funding in the centre-right Spanish Popular Party (PP). The

first successful motion of no-confidence in the four decades of Spanish democracy – a genuine black swan – brought the third Socialist, after Felipe González and José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, to the Presidency of the Government.

Over the last year, the PSOE has had the chance to roll out a strong 'red', 'purple' and 'green' agenda with a clear pro-European character and in favour of modernisation of the country which largely explains the election results. Pedro Sánchez formed the first Spanish cabinet with a large majority of women, as well as ministers who were highly regarded in society, several of them having substantial experience in Brussels,

such as the Minister of Foreign Affairs, former President of the European Parliament Josep Borrell, and the Minister of Economy, the former Director General at the European Commission Nadia Calviño.

The policies implemented by Sánchez's cabinet over the last year have been aimed at the rebuilding of the welfare state and the

*Spain and Portugal, two beacons of hope for European Social Democracy - @fjavilopez*



modernisation of the economy through a budget proposal that consolidates productive investments and made the largest increase in the minimum wage in the history of democracy (22.3%), increase in paternity leave or increase in spending against gender violence. Other priorities are the fight against corruption, a territorial agenda of dialogue but strong in the defence of the constitutional order and the development of feminist policies in favour of gender equality as well as policies against climate change that ensure the necessary green transition of the country.

The virtue of the political formula of the current PSOE lies in their ability to assimilate and interact with the profound changes experienced by the Spanish political system and



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reach agreements with their left (Podemos) but remain true to their traditional role of trustworthy State party. At the same time, they have kept the traditional identity traits of European Social Democracy – redistribution and individual freedoms – while adding to their programme items related to environmentalism and the strong Spanish feminist movement that the new generations across the globe are demanding.



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The Portuguese Prime Minister Antonio Costa is following a similar formula: the “Gueringonça government”. The Portuguese government is a minority socialist government that has achieved spectacular results for its country: economic recovery, improvement of salaries and social benefits and reduction of debt and deficit. The solvent government of Antonio Costa has managed to reach agreements in Parliament with the parties on his left with progressive policies while occupying and redrawing the political centre of the country.

Back in Spain, there are two major challenges for Pedro Sánchez and PSOE: the political fragmentation and the establishment of post-election agreements among liberals, conservatives and the far-right, which we have already seen after the 2018 regional elections in Andalusia. Good election results do not guarantee easy governance in a fragmented political system.

At the same time, the post-election agreements at regional and local level have consolidated a block formed by the liberal Ciudadanos, PP and the far-right Vox that maintains a high level of confrontation with Pedro Sánchez’s government and the deterioration of some basic consensuses due to the normalisation of the new far-right party in Spain. This behaviour, especially on the part of Ciudadanos - Macron’s alleged political partners in Madrid - should certainly draw the attention of the whole of Europe.

In a tense and polarised context on account of the conservative forces, the PSOE’s bet for understanding, serenity, and a will to lower the political temperature has strengthened its electoral position. This is not a very common thing nowadays and could set an example for European Social Democracy as a whole.



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