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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

"Each one is with their own electorate": unpacking radical left linkage at the transnational level

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Abstract

It has been widely noted that radical left parties (RLPs) pay particular attention to 'environmental linkage'. At the national level, research has shown that pursuit of linkage is driven by a range of reasons, mainly ideological, but also linked to electoral and party competition strategies. However, despite notable cases of interaction between RLPs and transnational civil society actors, RLP transnational linkage is relatively under-explored and under-theorised. We know little, about what might drive and hinder these parties' linkage with transnational social movements. By drawing upon qualitative content analysis of party documents and semi-structured interviews with relevant party elites, this article analyses how three prominent RLPs in Southern Europe – SYRIZA (Greece), Podemos (Spain) and Left Bloc (Portugal) – engaged with anti-austerity transnational initiatives during the Eurozone crisis. It is argued that, mainly due to the primacy of domestic over European politics, most incentives identified at the national level do not apply transnationally, which helps to explain why RLPs did not generally pursue transnational linkage with non-party anti-austerity forces as they did in their domestic arenas. The article advances a tentative framework of drivers and inhibitors of the RLPs' pursuit of linkage at transnational level.

Keywords Radical left parties · Social movements · Transnational linkage · Anti-austerity

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Introduction

It has been widely noted that radical left parties (RLPs) pay particular attention to cultivating 'environmental linkage' (Schwartz 2005), that is, their links to organised groups in society that mobilise around left-wing issues, such as trade unions or social movements. At the national level, research has shown how this pursuit of linkage takes place largely along ideological lines but is also animated by a range of reasons connected to electoral and party competition strategies (Tsakatika and Lisi 2013; Tsakatika and Keith, 2023). However, despite notable cases of interaction between RLPs and transnational civil society actors (Della Porta 2007; March 2011; Keith 2016), relatively little attempt has been made to theorise RLP transnational linkage (notwithstanding Charalambous 2022). In particular, we know little about what might drive and hinder these parties' linkage with transnational social movements or other types of civil society actors.

The Eurozone crisis that marked the 2010s saw the rise of both anti-austerity social movements and RLPs opposing austerity. That was particularly the case in Southern European countries, including Greece, Spain and Portugal, where the crisis' impact was most dramatic. Given the transnational character of the crisis, there are reasons to expect that when RLPs are ideologically committed to internationalism (March 2011; Hudson 2012; Holmes and Lightfoot 2016), they would also have engaged with grassroots anti-austerity initiatives at the transnational level (Bonfert 2020). Arguably, opposition to austerity at home would be more effective if also directed at its international sources, in collaboration with other actors sharing that goal, such as the AlterSummit and Blockupy initiatives, or by helping the national anti-austerity movements to forge links at transnational level. That could have been further facilitated by the development and growing importance of RLP transnational organisations such as the European Left Party (Dunphy and March 2019).

This article explores whether and why these expectations about RLPs' pursuit of transnational linkage were borne out or not. Through analysing how three prominent RLPs in Southern Europe engaged with anti-austerity transnational initiatives during the crisis, the article advances a tentative framework of drivers and inhibitors of the RLPs' pursuit of linkage at transnational level. The article focuses on SYRIZA (Greece), Podemos (Spain) and Left Bloc [hereafter Bloco] (Portugal), which were arguably well placed (if not the best placed RLPs) to seek ties with anti-austerity movements at the transnational level. The parties experienced broadly similar national contexts in which the crisis and associated austerity measures had a pronounced transnational character, they explicitly emphasised transnational cooperation as a way to counter those measures, and had a strong linkage with domestic social movements (Bortun 2023). After all, there was the precedent of the global justice movement from the late 1990s and early 2000s, with its series of world and European social forums, which all these parties had been shaped by and which they could have arguably built upon to help developing a similar transnational movement against austerity. Indeed, their relatively concomitant electoral rise arguably presented new opportunities for them to develop such linkages beyond their national borders, particularly through their delegations in the European Parliament.

The article draws upon original data collected via qualitative content analysis of party documents and semi-structured interviews with party elites involved in the transnational activities of SYRIZA, Podemos and Bloco. At the same time, the article aims to make a theoretical contribution to the study of party linkage by advancing a framework of drivers and inhibitors of RLP linkage at transnational level, which elaborates on the incentives identified by Tsakatika and Lisi (2013) at the domestic level. The key argument is that, due to the primacy of national over European politics, most of those incentives do not apply at the transnational level, which is why the RLPs did not generally pursue transnational linkage with non-party anti-austerity forces as they did in their domestic arenas. That was further complicated by the anti-austerity movements' own limitations in building bridges at transnational level.

The article is structured in five sections. The first one lays out the theoretical framework of the article with a particular focus on the framework proposed by Tsakatika and Lisi (2013). The following section briefly describes the data and methods used. Sections three and four explore the RLPs' linkage with anti-austerity movements at national and transnational level respectively, with a focus on the perceptions of party representatives. The final section draws out the key findings of the article and suggests avenues for future research.

Theoretical framework

Linkage theory distinguishes between participatory linkage, whereby political parties aim to connect citizens to policymakers via party membership and activism, and environmental linkage, whereby parties seek to create links to civil society actors from the specific demographic they aim to engage with (Lawson 1980). Despite the 'cartel party' thesis claiming that contemporary political parties have detached themselves from their social roots in their quest for office (Katz and Mair 1995), a sizeable body of research over the past two decades has significantly qualified that thesis, showing that in many cases parties have continued to pursue both participatory and environmental linkages (e.g. Aarts 1995; Poguntke 2002; Verge 2012).

Furthermore, the pursuit of linkage can often be a two-way process, as movements also try to link up with political parties, whether by infiltrating existing parties (Bergan Draege et al 2017) or by contributing to the creation of new ones (Kitschelt 2006; Agustín and Jørgensen 2016). More often than not, though, social movements tend to maintain informal links with parties, as their association with a particular party may affect their public image or alienate other parties (Allern and Bale 2012). This approach also allows for parties to pursue ties with a wider range of movements, and vice versa, in what has been described as the "bounded pluralisation of party-SM linkages" (Keith and Tsakatika 2023, 72). Informal ties, however, can often prove enduring and mutually influential (Keith and Tsakatika 2023).

Linkage is arguably important for all party families, as it can provide them with increased legitimacy and pool of resources – but it is particularly important for the radical left, which tends to lack the same level of access to the levies of power as the more mainstream parties (e.g. Charalambous and Christophorou 2014; Dunphy and March 2019; Keith and Tsakatika 2023). The RLPs' pursuit of linkage intensified during the Eurozone crisis, particularly in Southern European member states, where

the electoral rise of RLPs was tightly linked to the emergence of mass anti-austerity movements (Roca et al 2018; March 2018). This was a two-way process, where movements – despite their general anti-party mood (Della Porta et al 2017) – occasionally sought to link up with existing RLPs and, in some cases, even facilitated the rise of new parties (Agustín and Jørgensen 2016; Ramiro 2016).

The most explicit attempt to explain why RLPs pursue environmental linkage at the national level was made by Tsakatika and Lisi (2013), whose explanations were subsequently applied more broadly by Keith and Tsakatika (2023). By analysing RLPs in Southern Europe at the beginning of the Eurozone crisis, Tsakatika and Lisi identified four main reasons. First, their ideology drives RLPs to seek forging ties with civil society actors who share their goals and policies, particularly important given the RLPs' comparatively limited access to and influence over the state apparatus. Moreover, as Tsakatika and Lisi (2013, 9) point out, failing to "be seen to represent the interests, ideas and values of a particular constituency … would damage their legitimacy". Second, the need for programmatic update triggered by major external developments – such as the financial crisis – may embolden RLPs to engage even more with sectors of civil society mobilised around those developments. The third and fourth reasons identified are linked to the RLPs' desire to expand their electoral base and to prevent other (usually left-wing) parties from doing so, respectively.

This framework is worth amending in three respects, though. Firstly, being "seen to represent a particular constituency" is an incentive that is distinct from ideology and relates to parties' need for legitimacy. Indeed, in the case of RLPs, there is a need for these parties to be seen to oppose economic and political elites. Thus, we can identify a positive and a negative dimension to this distinct *legitimacy incentive*. Secondly, analytically speaking, the third and fourth reasons are two sides of the same coin, i.e. the electoral logic of political parties. Hence, they should be grouped together as a two-fold *electoral incentive* – a positive function of the party expanding its electorate and a negative one of preventing political rivals from doing so. Third, RLPs, particularly those (self-)described as "movement parties" (Della Porta et al 2017), may seek linkage for strategic reasons, as they aim to harness the power of mass mobilisation not merely to enhance their odds at the ballot box but to further their policy goals in-between elections.

This article aims to draw upon this amended version of the framework originally proposed by Tsakatika and Lisi (2013) and which identifies five distinct incentives for RLPs seeking linkage: ideology, programmatic update, need for legitimacy (to be seen as representing certain social forces and/or opposing others), electoral incentive (to attract voters and/or stop rivals from doing so), and mobilisation strategy. This framework is applied at the transnational level in the context of Eurozone crisis, when arguably RLPs were faced with all these incentives to seek linkage with transnational movements against austerity.

Data and methods

The article uses a qualitative approach to gain the kind of detailed information on RLP transnational linkage necessary to analyse the complex processes at hand and to explore perceptions of the key actors involved in them (following Börzel 1998; see also Tansey 2007). The data was collected between 2016 and 2019, through three different methods. First, I undertook documentary research of relevant documents touching upon the question of transnational cooperation, including party documents (electoral manifestos, congress/summit resolutions) and mass media materials (press releases, interviews) from SYRIZA, Bloco and Podemos, their transnational organisations (e.g. The Left group), and from the main transnational anti-austerity initiatives, namely AlterSummit and Blockupy. Second, 23 semi-structured elite interviews were conducted – 16 with party officials (international officers, MPs, MEP assistants) who, during the period under study (2009–2019), were involved in the transnational work of the three parties, and 7 interviews with experts, journalists and activists with first-hand understanding of the broader transnational actors on the European radical left (See Appendix for further details). Third, I conducted non-participatory observation research at two international events of the European radical left, attended by representatives of the three parties and activists in the social movements: the AlterSummit conference in Brussels in November 2016, entitled "Rights4All Now!", and the conference organised by the Transform Europe network (the political foundation of the European Left Party) in Lisbon in October 2018, entitled "Is Southern Europe the Weak Link of European Integration? Tracing Possible Areas of Cooperation among Movements and Parties".

Taken together, these three methods allowed for the exploration of the key channels, dynamics, incentives and inhibitors of the transnational linkage between parties and social movements as well as the perceptions of some of the key party actors involved in those processes. As indicated earlier, the three parties were selected due to their significance in the period covered, broadly similar national contexts, shared opposition to transnationally enforced austerity, strong engagement with social movements, and salient transnational orientation. Given these similarities, we have reasons to expect that these parties would have been not only more prone to but also more successful in forging linkage at transnational level. AlterSummit and Blockupy were selected as they were arguably the most visible transnational initiatives against austerity in Europe at the time (Bonfert 2020).

RLPs and national movements against austerity

SYRIZA

SYRIZA was formed in 2004 as an electoral coalition of several left-wing groups, of which *Synaspismos* [Coalition of the Left and Progress] (SYN), coming from the Eurocommunist tradition of the Greek left (Tsakatika and Eleftheriou 2013), was by far the largest. The financial crisis and austerity measures in Greece in the early 2010s led to the rise of large anti-austerity social movements (Tsakatika 2016) and the reshuffling of the party system that had been dominated for decades by the centre-

right and centre-left parties (Moschonas 2013). SYRIZA went from merely 5% in the elections on the eve of the crisis to becoming main party of opposition following the 2012 elections to then entering government in 2015.

One of the key reasons for SYRIZA's electoral breakthrough was its linkage with the anti-austerity movements during the 2010–2012 period, when the first waves of austerity engulfed the country (Tsakatika and Eleftheriou 2013, 11) and the party adopted a strategy of protest and mobilisation (Spourdalakis 2013). SYRIZA was involved in all relevant social movements of those years, most prominently the *Aganaktismeni* [Indignant] movement and the civil disobedience campaign *Den Plirono* [Won't pay] (Tsakatika 2016). That included the provision of political, technical and legal assistance to protesters as well as financial support from the wages of the party's MPs (Karitzis 2017, 13). In sum, SYRIZA became, more or less, the political mouthpiece of the anti-austerity movements and campaigns (Tsakatika and Eleftheriou 2013), even though that was sidelined after 2012 in favour of an office-seeking strategy (Eleftheriou 2023).

Bloco

The Left Bloc (Bloco) in Portugal was founded at the turn of the century through the merger of small radical left organisations (Lisi 2009). From the beginning Bloco orientated towards social movements, partly because – as SYRIZA – it had weak ties to the trade unions (Lisi 2013, 30–32). The party's leading body even created a role responsible for liaising with social movements, even though the latter were not given any formal leverage to shape the party's agenda or strategy (Lisi 2013, 28–29). Some of the campaigns where that linkage was strengthened revolved around 'post-materialist' issues such as abortion or LGBTQ+rights, which allowed the party to build a strong base among the youth (Lisi 2009).

The early stages of the economic crisis saw Bloco prioritise office-seeking over social mobilisation, but its modest performance in the 2011 elections made the party seek a closer relationship with the anti-austerity movements, providing them with logistical support and a political platform (Lisi 2013, 33–34). Following the 2015 elections, as Bloco lent parliamentary support to a centre-left government, Bloco again shifted its strategy towards parliamentary politics, against the background of a wider de-mobilisation of the anti-austerity movements (Bortun 2023, 107–109).

Podemos

Established in 2014, Podemos was the political offspring of the crisis in Spain (Ramiro and Gomez 2017, 4). It came about following the 2011 *Indignados* [The Outraged] mass movement and other significant anti-austerity initiatives, such as the so-called *mareas* [tides] against cuts to public services or the anti-eviction movement PAH (Stobart 2016, 177). As those movements opposed austerity measures and blamed mainstream parties for them (Hughes 2011), a vacuum opened up for the emergence of new parties such as Podemos (Ramiro and Gomez 2017).

Targeting the support of the younger generations, Podemos pursued ties with youth movements such as *Juventud Sin Futuro* [Youth Without a Future], which had

played a prominent role in the Indignados movement. Such an orientation spoke of the party's strategy to "link the most advanced sectors of civil society into a broader project of political change" (Iglesias 2015, 19). That was coupled with an electoralist strategy aimed at bringing the party into power. This ambitious goal – partly achieved between 2019 and 2023, when Podemos participated in a social democratic-led government – prevailed as the main priority for the party even more rapidly than in the cases of SYRIZA and Bloco (Kouki and González 2018).

RLPs and transnational anti-austerity movements

If these RLPs pursued linkage with anti-austerity movements at home, then they might also be expected to have pursued linkage at the transnational level, considering both the transnational character of austerity (Holmes and Lightfoot 2016) and the parties' own awareness of the importance of transnational coordination to defeat it (Iglesias 2015; Tsipras 2015). This expectation is also grounded in the ties that parties like SYN (SYRIZA's forerunner) and Bloco had developed years before the crisis, particularly through their participation in the European Social Forum (March 2011, 178). That proved all the more important for SYN, whose participation in the European Social Forum summits (2002–2010) alongside other groups of the Greek left created the networking and momentum that led to the creation of the Space for Dialogue that in turn resulted in the formation of SYRIZA. More importantly, according to one of the Greek interviewees, working for SYRIZA's political foundation, those summits "made the Italian left, the Spanish left, the Greek left etc. to think European." (Angelina Giannopoulou, 2017, personal communication).

The biggest anti-austerity movements developed over the first half of 2011 in two of the three countries concerned here, most prominently the movements of the Indignants in Spain and Greece (Flesher Fominaya and Hayes 2017). Despite some obvious similarities between them, these movements proved to be, on the whole, of a less transnational character than one might have expected. As noted by Della Porta (2014), "today anti-austerity protests appear to be marked by the defence of what remains of national sovereignty, at least in the weakest economies" and this was particularly relevant in countries such as Greece, Spain and Portugal. The notable exception was arguably represented by the activist-led solidarity networks aimed at tackling specific issues exacerbated by the crisis (Bonfert 2020). The other avenue for the emergence of cross-border anti-austerity movements was directly at the transnational level, and most prominent among these movements were AlterSummit and Blockupy.

Links with AlterSummit

Despite the affinity between the European Social Forum and the anti-austerity movements (Calossi 2016, 94), the former faded away just as the crisis was unravelling. The main initiative that emerged to fill the vacuum was called *AlterSummit*. A network of trade unions, social movements, NGOs, research networks and political foundations, it aimed to build "more convergence between movements opposed to

the current anti-social and anti-ecological policies promoted by European governments and institutions" (AlterSummit 2013d).

According to left-wing intellectual and activist Helena Sheehan (2016, 68), who participated in its first summit in Athens, AlterSummit was primarily "a convergence of forces from the European Social Forum". The Athens summit took place in June 2013 and called for things such as an end to "debt slavery", the cancellation of austerity measures, restoration of wages and social rights, increased regulation of the banking sector (AlterSummit 2013c). More importantly, AlterSummit's manifesto had an explicit transnational dimension, as "the struggle of the Greek social movements is a European struggle" (AlterSummit 2013d). When it came to political parties, though, the organisers stated that parties "may not be members … we ask them to share our struggle, but not to represent us" (AlterSummit 2013a). Even so, representatives of many European RLPs attended the summit in Athens, including SYRIZA together with its political foundation (Nicos Poulantzas Institute) and one closely associated with Bloco (CUL:TRA), both part of the pan-European network Transform (AlterSummit 2013b). Indeed, the finale of that summit saw a speech by SYRIZA's leader at the time, Alexis Tsipras (Sheehan 2016, 70), followed by a march in the centre of Athens, somewhat confirming the social movement credentials of AlterSummit. Sheehan's (2016, 70) assessment of the summit is, however, mixed:

> "Overall, I found the experience of the AlterSummit a bit underwhelming … attendance from abroad was not what was expected, and attendance from Greece, despite posters all over town, was far less than hoped. This was attributed to a sense of downturn on the Greek left. Nevertheless, it did strengthen the bonds between the different sections of the European left and built networks for ongoing practical initiatives."

One concrete example of such practical initiatives came two years later, ahead of the referendum called by the SYRIZA government in July 2015 over the deal offered by the Troika, when AlterSummit launched a petition of solidarity with "the citizens of Greece" and endorsed the *Oxi* vote against the deal (AlterSummit 2015).

The Greek government's U-turn following that referendum might explain why there were no SYRIZA representatives at the AlterSummit event held the following year, in Brussels, entitled "Rights4All Now!" (attended by the author for non-participatory observation). That event saw a very limited RLP presence more generally, as reflected in the list of speakers (AlterSummit 2016) as well as in the banners, posters, or other political materials visible on site. The crowd was mostly made of people from trade unions, social movements, and grassroots groups, while RLP participation was mainly by proxy, via political foundations such as Transform. That was due to the anti-party mood reminiscent of the Social Forum summits but also to the RLPs' relative lack of interest in the event and the initiative as a whole.

According to one of SYRIZA's international officers, AlterSummit's focus on non-institutionalised civil society actors meant that, "because of the general retreat of the movements, it has retreated in importance too" (Christos Kanellopoulos, 2017, personal communication). An interviewee from Bloco, who was working for the party's delegation in the European Parliament at the time, confirmed AlterSummit's relative

lack of relevance: "Haven't heard much of AlterSummit lately … it was more in Greece" (Nuno Pedrosa, 2017, personal communication). This indicates that, despite the ideological convergence with and the relevant expertise of the participants in AlterSummit (see AlterSummit 2016), the ideological and programmatic incentives were not strong enough to make RLPs seek a linkage with this transnational initiative. Furthermore, AlterSummit arguably failed to create bridges between its transnational leadership and the activist bases in the different national arenas (Bonfert 2022), thus lacking the kind of high profile that would have seen RLPs engage with it for electoral or legitimacy reasons.

Links with Blockupy

The other broad transnational initiative centred around social movements that emerged during the crisis and which some of the parties discussed here participated in was *Blockupy*. Self-described as "part of a European wide network of various social movement activists, altermondialists, migrants, jobless, precarious and industry workers, party members and unionists … from many different European countries", Blockupy wanted to "create a common European movement, united in diversity, which can break the rule of austerity and will start to build democracy and solidarity from below" (Blockupy, n.d.). Between 2012 and 2015, it organised several mass demonstrations in Frankfurt in front of the ECB headquarters. While being largely German-based, Blockupy had a salient transnational orientation, mainly due to the relatively smaller impact of the crisis in Germany having prevented there the rise of mass anti-austerity movements (Bonfert 2020, 191–195).

Indeed, one of Blockupy's co-founders was the pan-European network Attac, which represented a point of continuity with the European Social Forum but also reinforced the transnational character of Blockupy (Della Porta 2020). More importantly, leading members of Podemos and SYRIZA, such as the former's MEP Miguel Urbán (BBC, 2015), participated in the Blockupy protest from March 2015. Later that year, members of Blockupy went to Athens and interviewed people from both SYRIZA – who had just entered government – and the social movements. The interviews were uploaded on YouTube channel (Blockupy 2015), but the very low number of views for each of the videos uploaded there give an idea of the limited traction of this initiative, which by all accounts ceased its activity after 2016. Unsurprisingly, only one interviewee mentioned Blockupy as a significant channel for transnational cooperation. Nevertheless, the Blockupy protest from 2015, held during the negotiations between the SYRIZA government and the Troika, was one of the rare instances of transnational mass mobilisation during the crisis, even though the broader initiative failed to 'take off'.

Why RLPs did not pursue transnational linkage

An interviewee from Podemos, and political advisor to The Left group in Brussels, remarked that parties were largely to blame for the underwhelming linkage at transnational level during a period that called for precisely that: "We had austerity measures in Greece and Spain at the same time … conditions for triggering social movements,

but the parties didn't understand that well" (Daniel Albarracín, 2016, personal communication). A Greek political scientist interviewed as country expert also noted how the parties' domestic orientation towards social movements was not replicated at a transnational level: "Especially SYRIZA and Podemos are parties based on social movements, but I can't recall an event of social mobilisation where the two parties joined together – not in Greece, not in Spain, not even at a European level, like a manifestation in Brussels." (Yiannis Balabanidis, 2017, personal communication).

The parties' apparent failure to engage with transnational initiatives such as Alter-Summit or, alternatively, to help their domestic anti-austerity movements build transnational ties also needs to be placed in their wider national contexts: those domestic movements receded as the parties achieved electoral prominence, namely after 2012 in the case of both Greece and Spain. As one SYRIZA interviewee pointed out, the party's rise and the very birth of Podemos were greatly facilitated by the decline of social movements:

> "The *Indignados* movement and the squares movement [in Greece] actually failed to stop austerity, so we passed on to the other level, to the institutional level. It's like they assigned SYRIZA and the other parties to work now at the institutional level, because they failed to stop austerity. … They've had a huge success in reshaping the political scene, but they failed in their main target, which was to stop austerity." (Kanellopoulos, idem)

An interviewee from Bloco, who was a member of parliament at the time, argued that social movements handing the mantle of anti-austerity to political parties was not a positive development:

> "It is one of the dramas in Portugal – the inexistence or the fragility of social movements … this kind of political situation would hopefully be an incentive for the creation of social movements, to press the political decision, but on the contrary, people are calmly waiting for the government, for you – I mean you Bloco, PCP etc. – to solve things as they should be solved; they are more de-mobilised than ever, which is completely dramatic." (José Manuel Pureza, 2017, personal communication)

Some of the Podemos interviewees also noted the decline of social movements: "Podemos was a political instrument for a social movement, when the 15 M [*Indignados*] movement was going down" (Albarracín, idem). Other Podemos interviewees, though, shied aways from this assessment, perhaps because the link to the anti-austerity movements was so central to the party's identity. When speaking of Podemos' presence in the EP, one of their MEP assistants claimed in the interview that "we are a delegation of a social movement" (Jorge Conesa de Lara, 2016, personal communication), although it was not clear whether and how the said social movement had any say in the party's agenda or strategy.

Yet, even at the peak of those anti-austerity movements in Spain and Greece, i.e. 2011–2012, their transnational ties remained strikingly limited. As Bonfert (2020, 282) finds:

> "To a large extent, the relative weakness of the anti-austerity movement's transnational dimension was a result of the predominantly national focus of the movement's most momentous struggles in Spain and Greece, which left most transnational coalitions in the hands of activists without a strong domestic social base underneath them."

Della Porta (2014) also noted, at the time, how the "increasing regional inequalities and the asymmetry of the effects of the global crisis make coordination at the European level more difficult". In that respect, the crisis seemingly had the opposite effect than expected: rather than joining forces at a pan-European level, social movements opposed to austerity were predominantly national in character. Not the least important was the financial factor, as the crisis undermined the movements' material capacity for transnational cooperation, given their reliance on the younger generations particularly hit by the economic crisis (Coppola and O'Higgins, 2015). Thus, as the anti-austerity movements failed to leave their mark at the transnational level, RLPs found little electoral or even legitimacy-enhancing reasons to emphasise transnational linkage with them.

The interviewees were somewhat divided over how parties should have responded to the decline of social movements. On the one hand, an interviewee from Podemos, working as MEP assistant at the time, suggested that parties should "invest resources to support social movements coordinate themselves" (Alejandro Merlo, 2017, personal communication), while a Bloco leading member argued that a crucial component of building a left alternative to the status quo is "the capacity to develop social movements, both at the national and the European level" (Pureza, idem). On the other hand, one of SYRIZA's international officers seemed more reserved towards how pro-active parties should be in that respect:

> "SYRIZA and probably Bloco are not that powerful in civil society structures and there is a certain apprehension, ambivalent feelings towards SYRIZA in the civil society: 'What are these people trying to do? Are they trying to manipulate us?'. Because behind us there is the communist tradition of not participating in anything that you cannot control, so SYN and SYRIZA tried to change that tradition and to respect the independence of social movements." (Kanellopoulos, idem)

Thus, as noted in the case of AlterSummit, given the social movements' own reluctance to engage with parties, the latter may be put off from taking the lead in the development and mobilisation of movements, choosing instead to maintain rather informal ties with them (see Keith and Tsakatika 2023). It is a vicious circle that fundamentally hinders the linkage between parties and movements at both national and international levels.

At the same time, it is worth stressing that, at some point, all three parties discussed here traded their strategy of social mobilisation for one that prioritised electoral and parliamentary politics. That was particularly the case for SYRIZA which after entering government soon implemented the very kind of austerity measures that the concerned social movements had been born against (Eleftheriou 2023). This

office-seeking strategy hampered RLPs' transnational engagement more generally (Bortun 2023), particularly with regards to initiatives lacking a mass character, such as AlterSummit. As one Podemos interviewee summed it up, "when it comes to the real moment … each one is with their own electorate" (Conesa de Lara, idem).

Discussion

The previous section has shown that, despite reasonable expectations to the contrary, RLPs did little in assisting nationally based anti-austerity movements, such as the Indignants from Spain and Greece, to build significant transnational ties and coordination. Equally, the parties displayed limited engagement with the initiatives emerged directly at a transnational level in opposition to austerity, like AlterSummit and Blockupy, which failed to build footholds in the different national arenas. This rather underwhelming transnational linkage between RLPs and anti-austerity movements can be explained by several factors largely outside of the parties' control: the retreat of anti-austerity movements just as the parties were rising electorally, the overwhelmingly national character of those movements, their long-standing wariness of political parties, and the impact of the crisis on the movements' (and RLPs') material capacity for transnational activism.

At the same time, the parties' own strategic shift domestically from linkage and mobilisation towards office-seeking was also reflected at the transnational level, where the relatively underdeveloped anti-austerity initiatives were even less likely to enhance the RLPs' electoral appeal. In other words, if the electoral incentive to pursue linkage with domestic anti-austerity movements weakened as those movements went into decline, that incentive was even weaker at the transnational level, particularly given the second-order importance of the EP elections. Thus, it was not only the electoralist turn of RLPs but also the widely noted primacy of national politics (e.g. Ladrech 2003; Poguntke et al 2007; Bressanelli 2014) that was relevant. Accordingly, parties generally focus on the domestic arena, where they derive most of their power, legitimacy and resources from and RLPs are not an exception. Despite their self-professed internationalism, national politics takes precedence for RLPs, often hindering their cohesion and coordination at transnational level (Bortun 2022; Dunphy and March 2019). This arguably illustrates the discrepancy previously noted by Keith and March (2023) between RLPs' rhetorical commitments to some of their traditional values (anti-capitalism, internationalism etc.) and their actual practice.

This finding also highlights the relevance of structural factors: the kind of active citizenry that domestic social movements draw upon is arguably absent at a transnational level or, at least, not cohesive enough to engender impactful transnational social movements. This aspect of transnational cooperation was reflected in the generally limited transnational mass mobilisation during the crisis (Crouch, 2013, 232). Indeed, as a former leader of the Dutch Socialist Party put it during the crisis, "a major mistake of other left parties in Europe [was] to constantly demand European solidarity … most Frisians don't give a damn about the Greeks" (apud Janssen 2013, 33). This dynamic poses a key, long-standing question for transnational cooperation on the left: if the heterogenous social groups that RLPs appeal to across different

Table 1 Framework of drivers and inhibitors of RLP-social movement transnational linkage

Drivers	Present in the case studies?	Key inhibitors	Present in the case studies?
Ideology	Yes	Prioritisation of national politics	Yes
Programmatic update	No	Limited influence over policy-making at transnational level	Yes
Electoral incentive/positive: Electoral incentive/negative:	No No	Office-seeking prevalence over mobilisation strategy	Yes
Need for legitimacy/positive: Need for legitimacy/negative:	Partially Partially	Limited resources	Yes
Strategy of mobilisation	No	Lack of a cohesive transnational social basis	Yes
		Movements' wariness of parties	Yes

Source: author

countries (Beaudonnet and Gomez 2017) do not identify with each other, then how are parties supposed to build any significant linkage at transnational level? Other national context-related differences, such as the diverging positions on the question of the EU may further hinder transnational cooperation more generally. That has been shown to be the case with the European Left Party, whose relative lack of cohesion and political agency (Dunphy and March 2019) might have also been responsible for the RLPs' meagre attempts at building a transnational movement against austerity.

It appears, therefore, that RLPs' pursuit of linkage at the transnational level lacked most of the incentives identified by Tsakatika and Lisi (2013) at the domestic level and elaborated on in the first section. As summarised in Table 1, only two drivers were present in the case studies at hand: the programmatic convergence over the opposition to austerity and, partially, the need for legitimacy. The latter was best illustrated by Podemos, who first gained seats in the EP before making any domestic electoral gains and, therefore, engaged more with both the AlterSummit and Blockupy, with one of their members describing the party's presence in the EP as "a delegation of a social movement". Thus, Podemos arguably had to uphold that image ahead of national elections where they were hoping to capitalise on their ties to the anti-austerity movements. However, Podemos' own limited attempts at forging transnational linkage suggest that the party did not really see transnational mobilisation as a key element of its strategy.

Thus, the programmatic update, electoral and strategic incentives for the pursuit of linkage were virtually absent in all three cases at the transnational level. Arguably, that largely boils down to the second-order status of EP elections and the radical left's very limited influence over EU policymaking. This also indicates that there is probably a hierarchy of incentives in the pursuit of linkage that escaped initial attempts at theorisation, with the electoral one sitting at the top of it. That means that RLPs are perhaps not that different from other parties in prioritising electoral politics but also that their national constituencies do not care that much about whether RLPs are allied with like-minded transnational forces.

Having said this, arguably RLPs would have been able to do more with regards to some of these structural factors, particularly in terms of employing their own mem-

bers in the process of transnational cooperation with other anti-austerity initiatives and parties. For example, rank-and-file party members also involved in local and national anti-austerity movements could have been mobilised to forge stronger cross-border ties with their counterparts in other, mainly Southern European, countries. By and large, that did not happen, as RLPs maintained an elite-driven and elite-based approach to transnational cooperation throughout the crisis (Bortun 2023). These once-dubbed 'movement parties' steadily turned into leader-centric organisations (Eleftheriou 2023; Plaza-Colodro and Ramiro 2023), where the 'movement' part has become increasingly harder to justify. This was particularly the case with SYRIZA, whose participation in government further curtailed its incentive to foster mass cross-border mobilisation, choosing instead to focus on top-level political negotiations to further its policy goals. All three parties, though, centred their transnational engagement around institutional politics in Brussels, largely cut off from any forms of transnational mass campaigning or mobilisation.

Future research could, for starters, explore the transnational nexus between RLPs and social movements also from the bottom-up perspective of rank-and-file party members – including activists in the diaspora, for whom the ideological commitment to internationalism might be more important than for the party activists at home – and of social movements participants themselves. At the same time, to reflect a wider range of national contexts, other relevant case studies could be explored, such as Die Linke (Germany) or La France Insoumise (France), which have also been noted for their salient transnational orientation, at least at a rhetorical level. Finally, there is also scope for more theoretical and normative reflection on how RLPs can transcend the dichotomy between the pursuit of linkage and office-seeking by treating them as complementary elements of their strategy for radical social change.

Appendix 1 List of interviewees and their relevant roles at the time of the interviews (2016-2017)

SYRIZA

Angelina Giannopoulou – Researcher at SYRIZA's Nicos Poulantzas Institute and facilitator of the "European Integration and the strategic perspectives of the radical Left" project of Transform.

Christos Kanellopoulos – Member on SYRIZA's Secretariat of the Department of International Relations and Foreign Policy.

Giorgos Karatsioubanis – Former member of the Central Committee of SYN and, since 2015, of SYRIZA; also a member of the party's departments for international and European affairs.

Vasileios Katsardis – Former member of SYN Youth and press officer for SYRIZA MEPs.

Dimitris Rapidis – Member of the party's Secretariat of Foreign Affairs, working for the SYRIZA delegation to the EP.

Bloco

Luís Fazenda – Founding member and former parliamentary leader of Bloco, long-standing member of its Political Committee and head of the party's department of international affairs.

José Gusmão – Former MP between (2009-2011), assistant of Bloco's MEP Marisa Matias, member of the Political Bureau, and second on the list for the 2019 European elections.

Tatiana Moutinho – President of CUL:TRA and facilitator of the "Strategies for the European South" project of Transform.

Nuno Pedrosa – Assistant of Bloco's MEP Marisa Matias.

José Manuel Pureza – Current MP, member of the party's National Board and academic.

Podemos

Daniel Albarracín – Leading member of Anticapitalistas, political advisor for GUE/NGL and for the EP's Committee on Budget and the Committee on Panama Papers, economist.

Jorge Conesa de Lara – Assistant to Podemos MEP Lola Sánchez Caldentey.

Enrique Maestu – Assistant to Podemos MEP Tania Gonzáles Peñas and one of the party's initial members.

Amelia Martinez Lobo – Assistant to Podemos MEP Lola Sánchez Caldentey and member of *Anticapitalistas*.

Alejandro Merlo – Member of the International Secretariat of *Anticapitalistas* and assistant to Podemos MEP Miguel Urbán.

Lilith Verstrynge – Assistant to Podemos MEP Estefanía Torres Martínez.

Others

Hibai Arbide Aza – Spanish journalist with left-wing leanings, close to people in Podemos, and working in Athens for the television network *teleSUR*.

Walter Baier – Former National Chairman of the Communist Party of Austria (1994-2006) and Coordinator of the Transform network.

Yiannis Balabanidis – Greek political scientist with left-wing leanings, working at the Minister of Economy.

Pablo Garcia – Spanish journalist with left-wing leanings, covering EU affairs in Brussels for *El Diario*.

Jim O'Donnell – Irish left-wing activist and long-standing staff member of GUE/NGL.

Nikos Sverkos – Greek journalist with left-wing leanings, covering SYRIZA since 2006.

Hilary Wainwright – Left-wing academic and activist from the UK, research fellow of the Transnational Institute, and contributor to Transform's website and yearbook.

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