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A contribution to [THE PROFESSION] series

## Editing *South European Society and Politics*: A Labour of Love

An interview with Anna Bosco and Susannah Verney

### Introduction

**Anna Bosco** is Associate Professor of Comparative Politics and Politics of the European Union at the University of Florence. She has carried out research on parties and party systems change in Italy, Spain, Portugal, Greece and East-Central Europe.

**Susannah Verney** is Associate Professor of European Integration and European Politics at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. She has carried out research on Greek and South European politics, Euro-scepticism and EU Enlargement.

They are the Editors of the journal *South European Society and Politics* and the related Routledge book series. They have co-edited several comparative books, all published by Routledge: *Crisis Elections, New Contenders and Government Formation: Breaking the Mould in Southern Europe* (2018); *Protest Elections and Challenger Parties: Italy and Greece in the Economic Crisis* (2015); *Southern Europe and the Financial Earthquake: Coping with the First Phase of the International Crisis* (with Marina Costa Lobo, 2014); *Elections in Hard Times: Southern Europe, 2010–11* (2013); and a volume on Turkey, *The AKP Since Gezi Park: Moving to Regime Change in Turkey* (with Senem Aydın-Düzgit).

The following interview was conducted by the editor of *Italian Political Science*, **Nicolò Conti**, and edited by the two interviewees.

### Nicolò Conti [NC]

Can you summarise the history of *South European Society and Politics*?

**Anna Bosco and  
Susannah Verney**  
[AB & SV]

SESP is now in its 26<sup>th</sup> year of publication. The journal's history reflects a quarter century of change, both in Southern Europe itself and in the way in which it is studied. The mid-1970s transitions to democracy in Portugal, Greece and Spain, followed by these countries' rapid requests to join the European Community, were crucial to the initial development of scholarly interest in Southern Europe as a region. These three new democracies, together with Italy, were perceived as a group with shared characteristics such as democratic fragility and difficulties in economic development. Twenty years after the regime changes, there were academic periodicals dedicated to the study of individual South European countries, but no social science journal covering the region as a whole. SESP was founded to fill this gap. The timing was important as in the mid-1990s, the region was changing shape. The Turkish, Cypriot and Maltese applications for European Union membership were seen as triggering the emergence of a 'New Southern Europe', alongside the



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existing 'Old-4'. SESP's mission was thus to deepen our understanding of a part of Europe which had become a significant focus of interest.

When the journal was launched in 1996, the study of Southern Europe was still somewhat in the shadow of transitology, a field which had been recently boosted by developments in Eastern Europe. This emphasis on its dictatorial past shaped a tendency to view Southern Europe as a region apart, in a different category from the rest of Western Europe and somewhat marginal to mainstream concerns. Over the subsequent years, the journal has tried to change this by choosing to publish on topics of broader interest in the social sciences and highlighting the relevance of South European experience. Characteristic were the special issues published in the journal's first years addressing welfare states, immigrants and the informal economy, gender inequalities, and unemployment and its consequences. All were 'hot topics' at the time and indeed, remain so today.

Thus, a central goal of SESP has been to put Southern Europe on the map of important academic debates. For example, SESP's contribution to Europeanisation studies – from the late 1990s, arguably the next big theme of research on Southern Europe – has included three special issues, examining both Europeanisation (published in 2000 and 2013) and de-Europeanisation (2016). A key issue of the last 15 years, through which SESP has contributed to the growing literature on democratic backsliding, has been Turkey's democratic decline, leading to regime change in 2018. Besides analyses of all the Turkish elections and referendums during this period, articles in SESP have addressed key dimensions of this process such as the Gezi Park mobilisation and the 'national will' backlash, grassroots clientelism, the Islamisation of Turkish society, public attitudes towards regime change, and the impact of social assistance and welfare regimes on regime support.

Meanwhile, the decade of economic and political crisis after 2008-09 was crucial in placing Southern Europe centre-stage. The danger of sovereign debt defaults with the potential to destabilise the eurozone attracted the spotlight of global attention. After extreme austerity triggered intense public discontent, the region became a vanguard of European political change. Phenomena identified in SESP as electoral and governmental 'epidemics', entailing party system mutation and difficulties in cabinet formation, soon spread to other European countries. SESP's crisis coverage dealt extensively with the consequences for political representation and the rise of challenger parties including the far right. But it also went well beyond this to address the crisis years' impact in multiple fields including the welfare state, administrative reform, environmental policy, emigration, centre-periphery relations, social capital, trust in the tax system, trade unions and even farms, as well as societal responses like the Spanish housing movement. In the last few years, the EU's Southern members have moved beyond the eurozone crisis to a new phase and once again this is reflected in SESP. The reversal of crisis-era policy measures, the particular experience of post-bailout Portugal and the politics of polarization are all topics of SESP special issues. And to bring the story right up to date, we also have a forthcoming special issue on the response to the covid pandemic in Southern Europe.

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**NC: Which theoretical approaches/methods are represented in the articles published by the journal**

**AB & SV:** All are welcome! SESP has a clearly delimited geographical scope but huge boundaries in terms of disciplines as well as theoretical and methodological approaches covered. The journal only publishes articles focusing on Portugal, Spain, Italy, Greece, Cyprus, Malta and Turkey, either as case studies or in comparative perspective. At the same time, however, it accepts contributions by scholars of political science, sociology, political economy, social policy, social anthropology, contemporary history and socio-legal studies. As a consequence, there are no preferred theories or methods: any approach which serves our understanding of domestic politics and society in Southern Europe has a potential place in the journal.

**NC: *South European Society and Politics* is ranked in the first quartile of the Journal Citation Reports (Impact Factor Best Quartile), an amazing achievement for a journal in area studies. How do you think this kind of ranking affects the authorship and readership of the journal?**

**AB & SV:** We are also amazed by how well the journal has done. The latest Impact Factor, published in early July 2021, was 3.771, ranking SESP in the top 25% of both Political Science and Social Affairs journals for the fifth year running. Of course, we are thrilled with this result!

With regard to authors, success breeds success and it's clear a good IF encourages increased submissions. This isn't a surprise as it's well known that in many countries, including Italy, colleagues are under pressure to publish in high-ranked journals. But as far as readership is concerned, we tend to think the relationship works the other way round. We ourselves choose articles to read based on how they relate to our research and teaching interests rather than which journal they appear in. So, we think SESP articles are being read, not because of where they are published but because colleagues find the topics interesting and relevant to the profession. In this sense, rather than a good IF bringing more readers, it's the fact our articles are being read and cited that has made SESP a top quartile journal.

One final word about the journal's success so far: we don't take it for granted. Getting into the top quartile took a lot of hard work over many years. Staying there means we have to be careful not to become complacent and relax our efforts. In that sense, every year presents a new challenge.

**NC: From your viewpoint, what are the main ingredients to a success story such as the one of *South European Society and Politics*?**

**AB & SV:** Perhaps first and foremost – and this follows on from what we said before – it's important to publish material that colleagues will actually want to read. We want our articles to be relevant to current debates and to address themes that people are concerned about. Central to SESP's mission is to deepen our understanding of our own region. But as a regional studies journal, it's important not to become

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insular or parochial. So, while the journal publishes South European case studies, the goal is for these to resonate beyond the specific national or regional experience and speak to scholars without a particular interest in Southern Europe, but with an interest in the broader issues raised. This need to cover important subjects and debates isn't always met by the regular submissions to the journal. One of the ways we try to ensure good thematic coverage is by promoting special issues on important topics. A themed collection of articles allows a broader and deeper investigation of a particular subject. Download figures suggest readers recognise this, as special issues often attract special attention.

Second, we think one of the key ingredients of SESP's success has been that we have a clear idea what kind of articles we are looking for. Each week when we assess the latest group of submissions, we are on the lookout for cutting edge topics. Timeliness is also an important aspect. Scholars are still writing about the early years of the eurozone crisis. But this is now more than a decade in the past, the debate has moved on and it's important that the content of the journal reflects this. We are also looking for articles with a strong empirical basis and presenting fresh data. South European societies have undergone significant changes in the last decade, so if we want to understand the region today, we need data which is as up-to-date as possible.

Implementing these criteria requires careful selection at the initial phase of editorial review. We think this is fundamental. We know that a desk rejection can be very hard to take and writing the letters informing authors about these decisions is the hardest part of our job. But in the long run it's better for everyone to do things this way. In the journal's early years, we were less selective - with the result that editors, authors and referees often lost time in review processes that didn't end with a decision to publish. A desk rejection frees an author to resubmit elsewhere immediately and, as should be clear from what we've said, doesn't necessarily mean there is a problem with the quality of an article - it may not suit SESP, but be a perfect fit for another journal.

Third, a good peer reviewed journal needs good peer review. Editors need constructive and unbiased guidance from colleagues with solid expertise in the topic. It's also necessary to find a balance, choosing referees with complementary expertise who can comment on different aspects of an article. It often takes a lot of research, looking through Google Scholar profiles and reading other articles on the topic, to find the best people for the job. We wouldn't say we always get it 100% right, but we try hard. And here we'd like to say a big thank you to all our referees - you are the unsung heroes of journal publishing and none of it would work without you.

The fourth magic ingredient is editorial tender loving care. Some people think editors essentially act as mailboxes, receiving referee reports and forwarding them to authors. This isn't the case. Between the first submission and the final published version, articles always change significantly. Sometimes that change can amount to a transformation. Building on the input of the referees, editorial direction is crucial. Revising a journal article is a crafting process. The editor's role is to guide the author on how to do this in a way which will lead to the

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work achieving its full potential. Sometimes authors think we are pushing them too hard, but our goal is to help each article become the very best it can be.

Summing up what we have said so far, we could say that SESP's successful recipe is based on two main elements. The first is editorial experience. Unlike many society-based journals, there is no institutionalised turnover of the journal's leadership. Both of us have been involved in SESP's editorial work from the late 1990s. This means we have a historical memory of how SESP has evolved and a constant view of what the journal stands for and where it should be going. Over the past twenty years, we have also developed a deep understanding of what our readers want and whether and how an article can work for the journal.

The second essential element is intensive editorial input at every stage of the publication process. Our editorial style is very 'hands-on'. We are fortunate to have the support of a truly excellent editorial team. Many thanks are due to Associate Editors Senem Aydın-Düzgit, Sandra Bermudez-Torres, Lorenzo Mosca and Leire Salazar and to Assistant Editors Fabio Bordignon and Elisabetta De Giorgi for their irreplaceable role. On our part, editing SESP involves a huge time investment. Our work is largely not visible and it has to be said that editing the journal has not been good for our careers. But for us, it is a true labour of love and we are deeply proud of SESP and everything it has achieved.

**NC: How does Italian scholarship figure in the authorship of the journal (in terms of coverage, diversity, competitiveness, etc.).**

**In your opinion, how does the logic of career progression in Italian academia affect the decision of what to publish and where?**

**AB & SV:** These are interesting twin questions about the role of Italy in the journal and the role of SESP in Italian political science. There's no doubt Italy is a key country for SESP. If we look at the record of the last decade (2011-2020), articles with 'Italy' in the title are 21% of total published articles (which means at least twice as many submissions). And this without taking account of comparative articles focused on three or more South European countries. Italy is also one of the top citing countries - together with the UK, Turkey, Spain and the USA - where scholars refer to SESP articles most. Last, but certainly not least, Italian contributors have been among the most widely read (and cited) by the national and international community. This is easy to see on the journal website: among the 10 most downloaded articles since 2011, five have Italian subjects and Italian authors.

As this is an interview for *'Italian Political Science'*, it's worth stressing that despite SESP's multidisciplinary nature, in 2011-2020 around 90% of the Italian articles published in SESP were submitted by political scientists (with the remaining 10% submitted by members of different sociological schools). This is a tribute to the strength and vivacity of Italian political science, which has been able to 'populate' SESP with articles on different and timely topics.

The role of SESP for the career progression of Italian political scientists is difficult to overestimate. Besides being a first quartile journal, SESP has been ranked as an 'A' journal by the Italian Agency for Evaluation of the University and Research System. Because publishing in 'A' journals is essential to receive

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the national scientific qualification and thus for career advancement, SESP has become a target outlet for many colleagues. It's well known that Italian political scientists can count on fewer 'close-to-home' journals than those available to other disciplines. Compared to scholars working in the various branches of Sociology, who have Italian as well as international 'A' journals as outlets for their submissions, Italian political scientists have a very limited number of journals 'made in Italy'. As a consequence, SESP, an international journal which hosts a group of Italian political scientists in the editorial team, has often been considered as a 'close-to-home' journal and a good place to submit.

This has led many junior colleagues to approach the journal. Seniority is not an issue and SESP devotes special attention to the articles of junior submitters. If we find an article by a junior scholar convincing and the referees give it a 'green light', we are ready to 'tutor' the author through the publication process with help and suggestions of different kinds. We are proud to say that SESP does a great job in offering junior scholars the possibility to publish, be noticed and become well-known in the scientific community. We have several success stories of this kind in our archive, not only for Italy, but also for the other South European countries covered by the journal. This is an important part of SESP's service to the profession.

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