

THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF SYRIZA PARTY IN GREECE

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SINCE THE 2008 FINANCIAL CRISIS, the European Union has been confronted with an important existential crisis. This crisis has led to major financial bailouts in various Member States, forcing them to give up large portions of their financial sovereignty to the EU. The EU's harsh doctrine of endless spending cuts caused a severe economic and social turmoil and a surge in anti-EU sentiment throughout Europe.

In addition, many new parties arose in the European political scene in recent years, such as the Five Star Movement in Italy, the Ciudadanos and Podemos in Spain, the Alternative for Germany, the Greek parties of Syriza, Golden Dawn, To Potami, ANEL as well as La République en Marche in France. These parties differ significantly regarding their ideology, their creation and their financing. The rise of some of these parties is related to an intensification of populism and extremism all around Europe.

Under this prism, the present article focuses on Greece's characteristic example of Syriza's birth and rise. In order to evaluate the institutionalization of Syriza and draw some specific conclusions over its political impact, one needs to respond to the following questions:

What is the political, social and economic background inside which this party was formed? What is the relation between the old Greek political system and Syriza's birth? What are Syriza's composition and electorate?

The Greek reality

Since the restoration of democracy in 1974, a bipolar party system dominated the political scene in Greece. The two key parties were the centre-right New Democracy and the centre-left Pasok (Panellenic Socialist Movement). Unlike in other European countries, the late 70s and early 80s were a positive time for Greece. There were advances in fields like labour law and education that were considered the most progressive in Europe.

However, the burst of the 2008 financial crisis and the subsequent harsh neoliberal austerity process, led to a dramatic deterioration of the Greek economy and society. Pasok was the first Eurozone government to apply for a loan, based on the argument that accepting the Memorandum was the only way for Greece to remain in the Eurozone. However, the austerity measures led to a dramatic outcome. The Greek public debt as a percentage of GDP rose from 129% in 2009 to 175% in 2013¹. The new policies resulted in high unemployment that reached 28% in 2013 as well as in snowballed suicide rates. Moreover, one third of the population lost access to social security and free health care, including vaccinations.

This crisis unavoidably led to a revelation of the mismanagement, corruption and clientelist practices of Greece's political system, and especially of Pasok's long years in government. The cap created in Pasok's political space gave Syriza a unique opportunity to act.

In the 2012 elections, the first election that took place after the economic crisis, the far-left Syriza marked a significant breakthrough, gaining 26.89% of the votes, only 3% behind New Democracy. At the same time, the far-right Anel received a 7.5% of the votes. And the neo-nazi party Golden Dawn received 7% of the votes, guarantying 18 seats in the Greek Parliament (see Table 1). After the 2012 election, the coalition of New Democracy, Pasok and Democratic Left took on the burden of responsibility to re-negotiate the bailout agreement and the difficult task of exiting Greece from the crisis. However, given the level of deterioration of the Greek economy, the margins for success were extremely limited.

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Three years later, the parliamentary elections of January 2015 resulted in the formation of a left-far right coalition between Syriza and Anel. Syriza gained 36.34% of the votes gaining 149 seats, just two seats short of forming a majority government. Anel received 4.8% of the votes and Golden Dawn received 6.28% of the votes (see Table 2). The elections of September 2015, that followed the 5th of July referendum, resulted in a slight decrease in Syriza's and Anel representation in the Parliament. Still, the two parties guaranteed a clear majority that governs Greece till today.

A reinvented coalition

The Syriza coalition was formed in 2004, as the power that would represent the coalition of the radical left parties. Actually, the party Synaspismos (Coalition of the Left of Movements and Ecology) has been the key component to the creation of Syriza's umbrella group. Mr Tsipras, himself, originated from the youth wing of the orthodox Greek Communist Party, the KKE (*Κομμουνιστικό Κόμμα Ελλάδας*). In reality, the majority of Synaspismos members came from the KKE. For instance, this was the case of Mr.

Yannis Dragasakis, Synaspismos's first leader and Ms Maria Damanaki, the secretary until recently. The Syriza coalition included many other intellectual groups, such as Trotskyist, Maoists, and Eurocommunists, the dominant intellectual culture. Since the riots in Greece in 2008, young people started to identify with Syriza and his anti-establishment rhetoric. In the same way, voters from the public sector and small business owners started to be more and more attracted by Syriza's propaganda. Indeed, Tsipras promise to voters was based on a somehow unrealistic though very desirable outcome of an end to the painful austerity measures and a boost in public spending. Syriza blamed predominantly Troika and its decisions for Greece's devastating problems. As a result, the party proposed very popular policies, including free electricity for people whose supplies have been cut off and food stamps to be handed out at schools².

As far as the organisation of the party is concerned, before 2012 the party was formed around a dissimilar group of people with a strong involvement in social movements and mobilizations. After the 2012 elections, Tsipras needed to turn a coalition of a heterogeneous organization into a unified party and to transform the culture of the party at a very deep level. The first step was to integrate people cherishing power. In fact, the clientelist mentalities and habits are very deeply rooted in Greek society, including in the popular classes. This process also involved bringing in figures associated with the political establishment. These would be people previously been in Pasok and lost authority as well as people simply disappointed by Pasok's failed policies and corruption scandals. These were people who had served in the governments of Simitis and/or Papandreou. Two characteristics examples are the case of Panagiotis Kouroumbis, who is now the Minister of the Interior and Administrative Reconstruction and Alexis Mitropoulos, Vice President of Parliament in the previous mandate. Although there were strong reactions from the local branches and the regional executives against Syriza intentions, Tsipras tried hard and succeeded to include some of these people on the electoral lists in 2015.

A rightward drift in the party's ideology accompanied the inner-party restructuring. Unlike Podemos in Spain, before 2012, Syriza didn't talk much about the corruption scandals and the long-running collapse of the country, the need for honesty and political integrity. Syriza was fixated on the external capitalistic powers denying the debt and working on an international campaign against its legitimacy. However, there was a clear shift in Syriza's leadership in the summer of 2012, when it started reversing its stance. The formu-



Party	Party Leader	Seats	Percentage (%)	Votes
ND (New Democracy)	Samaras Antonios	129	29,66	1 825 514
SYRIZA Unitary Social Front	Tsipras Alexis	71	26,89	1 655 042
PASOK (Panhellenic Socialist Movement)	Venizelos Evangelos	33	12,28	756 045
ANEKSARTITOI ELLINES (Independent Greeks)	Kammenos Panagiotis (Panos)	20	7,51	462 410
LAIKOS SYNDESMOS – CHRYSI AVGI (People's Association – Golden Dawn)	Michaloliakos Nikolaos	18	6,92	426 027
DH.M.A.R. (Democratic Left)	Kouvelis Fotios – Fanourios	17	6,25	384 971
... (Communist Party of Greece)	Papariga Alexandra	12	4,50	277 214

Table 1 – Election Jun. 17, 2012 (15th Parliamentary Term: Jun. 17, 2012 through Dec. 31, 2014)
(Final Composition of 15th Parliamentary Term). Source: The Hellenic Parliament: Official site, available at <https://www.hellenicparliament.gr/en/Vouli-ton-Ellinon/To-Politivma/Ekloges/Eklogika-apotelesmata-New/> last access: 09.07.2018

Party	Party Leader	Seats	Percentage (%)	Votes
SYRIZA	Tsipras Alexis	149	36,34	2 246 064
ND (New Democracy)	Samaras Antonios	76	27,81	1 718 815
LAIKOS SYNDESMOS – CHRYSI AVGI (People's Association – Golden Dawn)	Michaloliakos Nikolaos	17	6,28	388 447
TO POTAMI	Theodorakis Stavros	17	6,05	373 868
... (Communist Party of Greece)	Koutsoumpas Dimitris	15	5,47	338 138
ANEKSARTITOI ELLINES (Independent Greeks)	Kammenos Panagiotis (Panos)	13	4,75	293 371
PASOK	Venizelos Evangelos	13	4,68	289 482

TABLE 2 – Election Jan. 25, 2015 (16th Parliamentary Term: Jan. 25, 2015 through Aug. 28, 2015)
(Final Composition of 15th Parliamentary Term). Source: The Hellenic Parliament: Official site, available at <https://www.hellenicparliament.gr/en/Vouli-ton-Ellinon/To-Politivma/Ekloges/Eklogika-apotelesmata-New/> last access: 09.07.2018

lations in the party's documents didn't change, but there was a double discourse. In the party's programme there are statements about socialism and no sacrifice for the euro, yet these statements are no longer expressed publicly, especially not by Tsipras and the circle round him.

In addition, from 2012 onwards, the type of political practice favoured by the Tsipras leadership didn't move beyond parliamentarism. It was clear that Syriza wanted to bring down Samaras coalition, but only through parliamentary tactics, focusing on the presidential elections in late 2014. The Greek Parliament elects the President of the Republic with a qualified majority, which Samaras did not achieve.

As far as the big waves of mobilizations in 2010, 2011, early 2012 are concerned; they slowly vanished. Nevertheless, several times between 2013 and 2015 mobilisations were re-launched, as it happened when Samaras shut down the public broadcasting company, ERT, in June 2013, or after the murder of Pavlos Fyssas by Golden Dawn in September of that year, or during the transport workers' strike in early 2013.

By the early autumn of 2014, when elections were looming, Syriza had no manifesto. The "Thessaloniki Programme" of September 2014³ comes about to reveal once again the contradiction in Syriza's rhetoric. On the one hand, the programme advocated a set of commitments that clearly broke with austerity politics, as were the nationalization of banks and the renegotiation of the debt with a large write-off, but on the other hand the document supported a honourable compromise with the EU. Some of the Greek demands, like public-sector employment, were supposed to be financed with EU subsidies. There was the readiness to collide with the Ger-

man interests as well as a conviction that Greece needs to stay in the European Union and in the Eurozone.

At the European level, between 2010 and 2015, the power structures of the EU had expanded and hardened, imposing compulsory fiscal targets and structural adjustment for all, not just the Troika countries. Syriza's anti-neoliberalism discourse was fading away but the illusions about what they could get from Europe remained. The party's leadership was advocating a 'win-win deal', but this proved to be just an illusion. They lacked the political realism and the Brussels *modus operandi* experience needed to survive negotiations.

Immediately after his election, Tsipras's position moved from an extreme right approach, and readiness to collide with the creditors, to a more reserved stance that wanted Greece to stay in the Eurozone. Hence, Tsipras called for a possible debt write-off and started the renegotiation process over Greece's bailout agreement with the EU and the International Monetary Fund.

It is important to notice also that during the same period, Tsipras leadership started building bridges to people in the state system, military and diplomatic circles. He also approached the more centrist wing of New Democracy. One outcome was the election of the conservative veteran Prokopis Pavlopoulos as President of the Republic in February 2015. Prokopis Pavlopoulos won 233 votes i.e. 33 more than the 2/3 majority required during the first round of voting. Members of Parliament of Syriza, of Anel and of New Democracy voted for him.

Between January and July 2015, the new government implemented very few aspects of the Thessaloniki Programme. There was an unprece-

dentedly low level of legislative activity, including a minimal package to deal with the humanitarian crisis, about one-sixth of the package announced in the Thessaloniki Programme and tax debts could be paid in a hundred monthly payments: but this measure was partly revoked by the Third Memorandum. The referendum of the 5th of July 2015 came to do things worst⁴.

The question posed was unclear: "Should the proposal that was submitted by the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund at the Eurogroup of 25 June, 2015, and is comprised of two parts, which make up their joint proposal, be accepted? The first document is titled "Reforms for the Completion of the Current Program and Beyond" and the second "Preliminary Debt Sustainability Analysis." In other words the question posed was No or Yes to the Junker package.

It was the first time European citizens defiantly said "No" (61%) to an ultimatum from Europe's ruling powers. After this extraordinary result, Tsipras thought that it would be easier to convince its creditors over the disastrous austerity package and the need for a new payment plan to be agreed. Unfortunately that did not happen.

Final remarks

Today, after eight years and three bailout programs, Greece is keen to regain its financial sovereignty and its creditors are already planning post-bailout commitments. Nevertheless, Greece's post-bailout future cannot be much different from its present. It will certainly have to include binding targets and compliance reviews for many years to come.

Syriza's history is still in the making. However, one thing is certain so far, new parties following old practices have limited margins of success. ■

Notes

¹ Yiannis Katsourides, *Radical Left Parties in Government: The Cases of SYRIZA and AREL*, Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016, ISBN 978-1-137-58841-8.

² Stathis Kouvelakis, "Syriza Rise and Fall", *New Left Review* 97, January-February.

³ The Syriza Thessaloniki Programme, available at the official site of Syriza: <https://www.syriza.gr/article/SYRIZA--THE-THESALONIKI-PROGRAMME.html> last access: 12.07.2018.

⁴ Sofia Vasilopoulou, Daphne Halikiopoulou, "Greek Politics: Economic Crisis or Crisis of Democracy?", *World Affairs* 178(3), October 2015.

