

THE POLITICS OF SYRIZA IN EUROPE: FROM LEFT-WING RADICALISM TO POST-LEFT MANAGERIALISM

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During the last six years, Greece has experienced a crisis that has progressively become embedded as a permanent structure in the political, economic and social fabric of the country. This article considers Syriza's transformation during 2015 by describing the process of its political mutation in terms of rhetoric and coalition-building strategy.

It attempts to understand how and why this political mutation has occurred since its election, which has further aggravated the erosion of Greece's society and governance system.

The first part of the article focuses on the anti-EU establishment rhetoric underpinning Syriza's radical political discourse. It further describes how the party succeeded in developing another type of Europeanised political discourse. The second part of the article examines how the left-wing Syriza party has dealt with the coalitional, ideological and strategic challenges and risks it has faced. It sheds light on its two-fold strategy for building coalitions with the radical left as well as with the centre-left and the centre of the European political spectrum. The third part of the article explains how Syriza joined mainstream politics and considers its political mutation as an emblematic case of post-left managerialism in the European regime of austerity.

Syriza as a European political force of an adversarial and anti-establishment radicalism

Syriza erupted onto the Greek political scene with the promise that first it would mitigate, delay or even get rid of the effects of the neoliberal agenda imposed brutally and relatively late in Greece compared to other European states, and second it would restore the gains of the post-war social compromise by rectifying their inequitable distribution.

This eruption took place in a political vacuum where the dominant figures of recent Greek politics had already left active political life. Before the outbreak of the crisis, the centre-left and centre-right governments never enacted a straightforward embrace of neoliberalism. Despite their role in "restructuring" and shutting down large sections of medium-sized

Greek industry, they continued to indulge in particular forms of state intervention, mainly in providing liquidity for the oligopolistic internal capital market, in maintaining the political system through forms of paternalistic syndicalism and in mitigating the effects of an inherently unequal economic and social system through the public pension system.

The far-left led government that emerged from the legislative elections of January 2015, under the premiership of Alexis Tsipras, expressed a willingness to pursue policies explicitly based on a policy agenda that was different not only from the EU's proclaimed economic reform agenda, but also from the domestic agenda of the long-established nepotistic political parties. Almost paradoxically, Syriza's pre-electoral claims to offer real policy alternatives to the dominant neoliberal consensus seemed credible. Until then, the classic rhetoric of traditional mainstream governing parties on Greece's European policy was mainly based on the idea of "Greek exceptionalism". Syriza succeeded in developing another type of Europeanised political discourse, accusing the EU of exporting crisis. The attempt consisted of blaming the EU's reactionary forces for producing the crisis. This discourse defied the dominant neoclassical interpretation that the 2008 economic crisis was caused by the dysfunctions of the national economy, and more precisely that it was caused by governments adopting an interventionist approach to developing their economies (Overbeek and Van Apeldoorn, 2012). Instead of talking about the exit from the crisis, the radical leftist discourse of Syriza, refusing to assign any intrinsic naturalness to the phenomenon of the crisis, placed the emphasis on the crisis of the EU integration model.

From this perspective, the crisis is not a starting point but the key to understanding the long process of European integration (Mégie and Vauchez, 2014). The non-outbreak of the crisis is shown as a sign of temporary and weakly legitimised EU supranational power. In this sense, the early Syriza¹ embraced the top-down approach of politics and society proposed by critical analysts working within a post-Marxist paradigm to understand neoliberalism as something imposed from above on an unwilling or impotent citizenry, thus emphasising the historical arbitrariness of the EU's cultural and institutional legitimacy; in this view, EU arbitrariness consists of the fact that its foundations lie in the misrecognition of a power relationship between states, social groups and classes (Lahire, 1999). Syriza developed this argument on the foundation of a Manichean vision within which the unchallengeable hegemony of neoliberal ideas and the complicity of the media in that hegemony prevail (Onfray, 2002). The intrusion of its anti-EU establishment rhetoric into the European public space was, in the first place, extremely successful in providing critical accounts of neoliberalism, i.e. its rise to dominance, its mode of operation and the best ways to combat it.

Early Syriza's "rhetorical triangle" consisted of three elements. First, it brought to the fore the promotion of new policy tools for radical reform of the rules of economic governance and coordination at European level, i.e. breaking the spiral of austerity by changing the economic methodology, loosening the budget rules, activating an investment clause and Europeanising sovereign debt management.

Second, Syriza's leadership made vehement criticism of the EU elite dominance model by undertaking high-risk political activism against the

1. The "early Syriza" phase includes the pre-election period and the first half of 2015.

reactionary nature of established elites seeking to protect and expand their existing privileges and the political role of supranational technocracy. In the first half of 2015, the governing Syriza party tried to distance itself from the domestic technocratic elite and the operations of supranational bodies such as the EU and the IMF.

Third, it initiated a new vision of the European project and Europeanised the Greek question. Syriza's claim consisted of saying that the Greek crisis is a European crisis and should be resolved within the European framework by a reformed and socially sensitive EU. It supported the promotion of a citizen-centric strategy by focusing on policy issues of social and societal relevance, recalling the party's tradition of developing and supporting grassroots social movements; bear in mind that Syriza became a unitary political party in the summer of 2013 (Chatzistavrou and Michalaki, 2014a).²

But to what extent has this adversarial and anti-establishment rhetorical radicalism been deeply rooted in the reality of the party? Although part of Syriza's partisan base has a left-wing and activist political background, Syriza came from the reformist branch of the Greek left (KKE-Interior, Synaspismos) in which the dominant view abandoned the revolution and communism and over time accepted the EU, NATO and the "bourgeois" compromise with the institutions of contemporary capitalism.

The rhetorical devices mentioned above have mostly been addressed to the European elites that promote German monetarism without expressing hostile attitudes towards people of other nations. The rejection of the EU model has been founded on social and economic arguments and has not been based on issues of national identity and sovereignty. Actually, Syriza's early political discourse combined an economic patriotism mixed with an alternative Europeanism. Initially, the party's quite favourable attitude toward monetary sovereignty was a defensive response to the EU's "austeritarian" proposal for resolving the Greek crisis, considering the national currency to be an economic tool for weak states to manage globalisation.

The ideology, rhetoric and targeting of the early Syriza party, particularly in its programmatic writings, maintained a Marxian terminology. Some traces of its historical origins on the communist left have been preserved in the oratory. At Syriza's founding congress in 2013, socialism was defined as a strategic objective.³ At the same time, Syriza was, and still is, also involved in populist tactics – in the neoliberal sense currently used of flattery and demagoguery of people and their needs, and in the way that populism generally governs all systemic parties given the political representation crisis that currently plagues them.

Although it has progressively abandoned the term of socialism, it has maintained some rudimentary political features of workers' ideology. In fact, the pre-electoral Syriza party and the early Syriza-led government displayed greater sensitivity than the mainstream parties in their concern for popular interests and workers' welfare. At the same time, their discourse also conveyed elements of left-populist communication that addressed the question of the impoverishment and pauperisation of the "people" – as a concept going beyond classes – more than the interests and the role of classes and their social hierarchy.⁴

2. "(...) Syriza's goal is the creation of a new model of the Left developed through dialogue, joint action and a propulsive synthesis of ideas. This is the founding contract of Syriza and only strict compliance by all sides will enable the left to meet its historical responsibility. The left that resolves disputes with factionalism and divisions has no future (...)", G. Dragasakis, vice-president of the Hellenic Parliament and Syriza MP, *VIMA*, Sunday edition, 20.07.2014.
3. Syriza's founding declaration stipulated that "Our Europe is the complete opposite of the Europe of today, the Europe of the Enlightenment and its radical critique, the Europe of revolutions, of the welfare state and of democracy of mass movements".
4. In his public speech *a year after Syriza's rise to power*, given on January 24, 2016, Tsipras referred to "the people of the low and middle classes whose enemy is the austerity and not the government" without making any reference to class struggle, Speech by Prime Minister A. Tsipras on the first year of Syriza governance, Faliro, Athens, 24/01/2016.

The Syriza-led government's transnational networking in Europe: trapped by contradictory ambitions

In order to explain Syriza's coalitional tactic with other European political forces, it seems necessary to take into account where the party stood ideologically in the pre-electoral phase and relate this to the strategic factors of its political viability in the oppressive post-election environment that in the first half of 2015 involved continuous negotiations with the EU and the IMF. Originally, Syriza developed ideological biases against all the basic principles of neoliberalism, i.e. structural adjustment, fiscal austerity and free trade. But the party leadership knew very well from the very beginning of its rise to power that staying in the arena of radical left politics in Europe couldn't provide substantial gains for renegotiating the Greek problem within the European political and institutional framework.

At the European level, Syriza embraced a two-fold strategy. First, the alliance with left-wing movements in Europe addressed the big challenge of shaping the conditions for creating a broad and solid "European opposition front". Different initiatives were launched on the basis of this common political commitment: Tsipras's candidacy for the European Commission presidency in 2014 supported by the political group European Left; the later alliance with Podemos following the election of P. Iglesias to the head of the movement; or even, later, Syriza's rapprochement with Sinn Féin after Tsipras's first electoral victory in the beginning of 2015. Second, once the Syriza-led government entered into harsh negotiations with the EU institutions and the IMF, the rapprochement with European centre-left governments (the Parti socialiste français and the Italian Partito Democratico) opened up the possibility of using them as bridges/facilitators in order to mitigate lenders' very demanding expectations and to further politicise the Greek question.

Early Syriza's strategy involved an inherent contradiction between different purposes. During the pre-electoral period, it adopted a protest and Euro-critical attitude with a radical leftist stance. Here, the idea of a new, broad sociopolitical cluster coalition fighting neoliberalism, austerity and the EU-IMF memoranda policy in Greece and Europe prevailed (Chatzistavrou and Michalaki, 2014b). Two rival plans for the future of Europe were opposed, from the one side, "the plan for a Europe of banks and multinational companies, of neoliberal and austerity policies, the Europe of Merkel and Schulz" and, from the other, "the plan of the European Left for the peoples of Europe".⁵ This frontal positioning put to the fore the idea that the EU openly promotes an ordo-liberal world of economic society that seems to be perfectly self-regulating in an apolitical manner. It rejected the reactionary political evolution of eurozone governance towards a de facto majoritarian and, as a result, asymmetrical intergovernmentalism (Chatzistavrou, 2016b), i.e. a not rule-based intergovernmentalism operating within weak European and national parliamentarisms, delegating growing discretionary powers to the EU executive institutions without being subject to any political control at European level. In this regard, Syriza also criticized the centre-left parties, arguing that their alignment with neoliberalism proved to be an astute strategy to secure their political viability. In fact, according to the party the dividing line between the radical and the moderate left lay in the

5. Syriza manifesto, Declaration on the 2014 EU Elections For the reversal in Greece and the foundation of the other Europe, http://www.opinionpost.gr/news/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/diakirixi_syriza-euroekloges_25.04.pdf

intolerance of austerity policies: a number of times Syriza blamed the centre-left both in Greece and in Europe for accepting or even supporting them.

During the first half of 2015, a gradual but continual shift took place. Tsipras' first visit as prime minister was to Paris in February 2015. His intention was to send a message that France was considered the guarantor of a new European deal for employment and social cohesion. In fact, from that time on, the Syriza-led government embraced a pro-European line counting on France and Italy to balance the political discourses that favoured rigorous economic policies in Europe.⁶ While both countries' centre-left governments were showing willingness to proceed on some structural reforms, simultaneously they were putting pressure in favour of a certain loosening of budgetary stability rules. More precisely, the Syriza-led government was counting on France to insert social indicators into the evaluation of member states who are forced to adopt harsh austerity policies in the fiscal compact.

By adopting a more flexible alliance strategy, Tsipras had the opportunity to oscillate to quite a large degree across the political and ideological spectrum and to seek different alliances in order to satisfy the strategic needs of the moment. This strategic move resulted, progressively, from early 2015 to the end of that year, in the adoption of a significantly more moderate political position, shrinking the field of battle above all on fiscal austerity. Actually, the role of François Hollande was decisive in pushing Tsipras towards the path of "normalisation" and economic realpolitik during the EU bailout talks in July 2015 (Chatzistavrou and Passet, 2016).

After the Greek referendum took place, Tsipras adopted the "in between" method of Hollande, stressed the importance of a national growth strategy and counted on France's eurozone reform agenda. In September 2015, Tsipras' pre-electoral promise consisted of simply moderating the negative effects of the austerity measures to come, thus accepting in a certain way the maintenance and extension of austerity politics as well as the intensification of hierarchical orderings of social and economic relations in a country that is structurally inequitable. Since his second political mandate, Tsipras' flirting with the European centre-left and the centre has been intensified.⁷

Syriza moved abruptly from political idealism to economic facticity. It seems important to understand why Tsipras integrated the objectives for eurozone governance so easily, thereby agreeing to embrace the economic culture embedded in EU structures, even though the economic and social fragmentation resulting from the crisis continued to increase steadily in Greece.

The political mutation of Syriza: towards a kind of post-left managerialism

Undoubtedly, the July 12th 2015 agreement to the EU's terms clearly showed that the Greek experience of economic adaptation continues to be a cross-party elite phenomenon, mainly driven by supranational technobureaucrats (Chatzistavrou, 2016a). Syriza explained the application of

6. The question of the French deficit will undermine the credibility of France and gradually push the country to slowly and partially adopt the "Third Way", i.e. to do some structural reforms and to adopt a more contractionary fiscal policy.
7. In autumn 2015, Tsipras didn't hesitate to ask for Hollande's help to find a political way out of the deadlock in the negotiations with the "quartet" of creditors in the framework of the first review of the third adjustment programme. In November 2015, the delegation of the Parti socialiste français visited the Syriza offices. French socialists expressed their full support for Syriza and the Greek government. They also extensively discussed the possibilities of setting up a Europe-wide opposition front against austerity with the participation of parties, movements and unions. At the same time, without putting into question Syriza's membership of the GUE/NGL group in the EP, Tsipras asked for participation as an observer in the meeting of the European political group of Socialists and Democrats ahead of European Councils. This proposal had very positive echoes among the French and Italian Socialists and some of the German social democrats; since then the proposal has been approved. Finally, the proposal of the Syriza-led government to set up a new EP informal working group to monitor the implementation of the third adjustment programme – approved at the beginning of 2016 – has become possible thanks to the support of the liberal Guy Verhofstadt and the social democrat and EP President Martin Schultz.

8. Syriza embraced the post-Marxist analysis of how neoliberalism came to enjoy its current ascendancy over the political field. In this perspective, the neoliberal doxa is understood as having been “imposed” on society through a form of “symbolic violence” (Bourdieu, 2000).
9. The most disappointed people in the EU continue to be the Greeks. Specifically, 60% of Greeks surveyed feel dissatisfied with their lives, compared with the 19% average in the EU-28. In addition, 83% of Greeks have no confidence in the future. In the EU-28 the figure is 32% and in the eurozone it is 34%. 99% of Greeks feel that the labour situation in the country is “bad” compared with an average of 67% in the EU-28 and 71% in the eurozone. However, 70% of the Greeks are in favor of the Economic and Monetary Union and the euro (EE28: 56%). Eurobarometer, autumn 2015, published 24/12/2015.
10. This is a kind of new “authoritarian populism”. This term was first used to describe the phenomenon of Thatcherism (Hall, 1988).
11. The third memorandum currently in force clearly stipulates that the creditors can replace the adopted policy measures with others at any time if they consider that the initial objectives are not met. This means that the Greek government is under daily budgetary surveillance and financial control. The fact that the macroeconomic objectives upon which the third memorandum rests cannot be readily achieved leaves the space open to legislative inflation through the adoption of new measures, whenever appropriate.
12. A key concept in Bourdieu’s sociology of domination is that of “symbolic violence”, or in other terms the imposition of a cultural code (Kauppi, 2003). In this sense, being authorised to speak in the name of a debt duty gives real existence to the national duty of repaying its debts. The re-election of Tsipras is proof of this symbolic violence exerted on the Greek population and approved through electoral consent.

neoclassical economics to public policy decisions as a fundamentally elite and foreign phenomenon, in response to pressures on the structures of monetary policy imposed by EU membership and to the demands of globalisation. This rhetorical strategy was useful even after the capitulation of July 12th 2015. Syriza used the same rhetoric, reaffirming that the neoliberal agenda had been imposed on the government from above, neutralising the party’s capacity to mobilise post-referendum popular support.⁸ Through a process of victimisation, the late Syriza-led government initiated its professionalisation as a ruling party. Syriza’s political mutation from a protest party to a party of government enabled it to maintain the Brussels policy agenda, which involves containing state expenditure, increasing taxation, negotiating inflationist policies, among others, as well as the “Brussels-dependent pyramid of clientelism” (Streeck, 2015).

Syriza’s political mutation has been facilitated to a great extent by the significant popularity of euro-monetarism in Greece (Chatzistavrou and Michalaki, 2015).⁹ This feeling of irreversible belonging to the euro has been reinforced thanks to the growing populist manipulation of mainstream parties by supporting unconditionally euro-monetarist views.¹⁰ The coercive form of structural adjustment programmes led Syriza to embrace political pragmatism without being able to deny the ideological ascendancy of neoliberal ideas. In fact, the main logic of the structural adjustment programmes imposed by the EU in highly indebted countries led to the proliferation of violent and excessive legalities – a colonial practice reminiscent of a bygone era (Esmeir, 2012) – disrupting the EU’s common *acquis* and constitutional basis. The basic idea behind this pressure is that there are immutable economic imperatives in the face of which every government remains powerless. Social and economic interests are transformed into social and economic imperatives imposing specific policy instruments and catch-up targets.¹¹ In this shrinking policy space available to governments, the politicisation of social and economic policies as well as the prioritisation of national needs became more and more difficult, reducing far-left parties’ influence and confining them to an anti-systemic and anti-European role.

During the pre-electoral period in September 2015, Greece yet again faced the same dilemma. From the one side, there was no space for political choices between governing parties and voters; the discrepancy between voters’ aspirations and political parties’ interests was quite evident, reminding that the latter were incapable of channelling and representing the former (Gramme, 2013). From the other side, there was a complete dominance of the pro-austerity doxa over the mainstream media fields, in the circles of the Greek state managerial, political and corporate elites, but also of institutional experts and economists serving in academia. In this context, it has proven very difficult for minor anti-austerity political forces to challenge the discourse of debt culture.¹² Tsipras managed to exploit the power vacuum in Greek politics to the full. Syriza joined the arena of mainstream politics, engaging a new kind of relationship with citizens and its domestic political competitors and promoting itself as the “best equipped ruling force” to execute the implementation of the third adjustment programme as smoothly as possible.

The reduction of politics to governmentality means that the national policy must therefore adapt to an economic rationality that dissociates

economic policy from the political and social process (Wilson J. and Swyngedouw, 2014). This is a post-political context in which Greece has had to deal once again with the harshest version of the economic governance system which put intense pressure on national institutions and coordination mechanisms, forcing them to adapt themselves in order to deal with supranational scrutiny from the EU institutions.¹³ Moreover, the severe, punitive logic that permeates the economic governance framework – and especially the economic adjustment programmes – had significantly disrupted the unanimity rule and therefore the equality of member states in taking decisions within the eurozone.

In a context of systemic failure, after the election of September 2015 Alexis Tsipras represented a new kind of leftist Bonapartism,¹⁴ projecting himself as an unrepentant fighter who believes in state capacity and regular popular consultation and support (Chatzistavrou and Michalaki, 2015). He managed to expel – bloodlessly – all known or suspected opponents and dissidents from Syriza and keep under his control a party whose political base remains highly left-affiliated. Currently, Tsipras runs the country with the backing of a loyal core of influential political staff.

The readiness of Syriza to embrace managerialism may to a considerable extent be attributed to the fact that no other mode of governance appeared possible. Post-left managerialism is a political stage referring to a mode of governance where left-wing political parties are entrusted with the managerial and mediating tasks of running the economy and the state in the context of austerity. Post-left managerialism emphasises continuity in economic policies regardless of the governing party's political and ideological affiliation. Syriza has left in place all measures introduced during the previous years of adjustment and has fully incorporated the “Brussels consensus” about adopting restrictive fiscal policies. In this framework, it has been called upon to conduct similar, and even harsher, structural reforms legitimating the crisis policies and accepting *ex post* responsibility for decisions initiated by the EU supranational technobureaucracy. Abandoning any active attempt to reshape redistributive politics in this context of economic downturn, Syriza's remote and insulated politicians have become the managers of the economics of public debt by enforcing governmental techniques based on globally adopted market-oriented criteria.

With emphasis on “steering” rather than “rowing” (Osborne and Gaebler, 1993), this change in governance is based on a partial, technocratic approach to policy, focusing on the operation of one policy at a time (Bevir, 2010). The style of governance and the policy agenda according to which fiscal prudence and consolidation are the norms of policymaking reflect a “post-neoliberal rationality”, referring to the limited capacity of the state to enforce political solutions (Bevir, 2010), thus eradicating the social role of ideology.

The institutionalisation of competitive pressures on the state's fiscal policy deprives it of the capacity to exercise discretionary policies imposing the exemplarity and routinisation of austerity policies as a state of exception (Agamben, 1998). In 1988, Paul Ricoeur analysed the concept of crisis as a “global concept” arguing that the desocialisation of the economy will transform it in a permanent structure of the *conditio Humana*. The election of Syriza in January 2015 constituted a turning point as far

13. Post-politics refers to the analysis of the foundations of society since the 1990s based on the Schumpeterian critique of market individualist forms of governance-beyond-the-state that combines the politics of consensus, public managerialism and supranational technocracy (Chatzistavrou and Michalaki, 2015).

14. The term “Bonapartism” is used in its broadest sense to mean a centralised and rather authoritarian executive relying on the regular consultation of the people through plebiscites, and thus based on the fusion of elites and popular support.

as concerns the process of “crisis acculturation”,¹⁵ mirroring not its potential reversibility, but, on the contrary, its systemic ineluctability.

Conclusion: The Syriza experiment or how to give up breaking with the EU’s austeritarian status quo

From the left revisionism of KKE Interior, the “bourgeois” socialism of Synaspismos and the grassroots activism of Syriza, the path to where Syriza stands today is not too long. No doubt, between its two tendencies, the left-radical and the reformist, the second one featuring the credo of political modernisation of social democratic parties, has until now prevailed over the first during its governance. Its political credo now relies on a mixture of Keynesianism (mixed economy, welfare state, role of the public sector) and neoliberalism (balanced budgets, sound entrepreneurship, “continuity” of the state, privatisations).

Syriza’s political mutation has had significant implications for the European left. Europe’s left-wing parties aspiring to power face historically unprecedented challenges. They aspire to govern with the willingness to oppose the “grand coalition” of centre-left and centre-right parties, to contain the rise of the extreme right in Europe and to favour agreements with “progressive forces” on the left of the political spectrum while assuring their electorates that they will not repeat the mistakes of Syriza in Greece. The failure of Syriza to impose changes on the EU’s responses to the Greek crisis encourages left-wing parties to become more moderate, opting for coalitions with systemic political parties and/or renouncing government in order to clean up the system, marginalise the traditional clientelist parties and support radical programmes that break with austerity.

Syriza’s experiment negatively affects the efforts of European Left to recompose itself, giving the opportunity to other parties to recover the social democratic discourse or allowing the stunning political revival of decaying traditional parties. Furthermore, Syriza’s political capitulation and even, more generally, European Left’s overall weakness in crisis response feeds the phenomenon of the “extreme moderates” political parties located at the centre of the political spectrum. In fact, this phenomenon indirectly proves the hidden connivance between the centre-right and the centre-left in European politics. These “extreme moderates” political parties are positioned as “pragmatic”, “un-dogmatic”, and “free of ideology”, while they accept the basic values of capitalism, push for the elimination of welfare policies and think that social problems should be rectified by piecemeal reforms and regulatory policies (Parenti, 2007).

The current trend toward the proletarianisation of European societies shows that the current tools of political struggle and governance are inadequate for meeting global economic and social challenges. The political psychodrama of Syriza may at least facilitate our understanding of why and how neoliberal politics entail the erosion of political consciousness and resistance. Obviously, political experiments are not designed to verify the hypothesis on the basis of which they operate and that’s why they have the potential to cause harm and, even more, to defeat the idea they were supposed to confirm.

15. This is a process of adopting the crisis as a pattern of thinking and behaviour.

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