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Can Europe make it?

Fragmented we fight: what's Left in Greece in 2015?

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The openings produced by the Syriza phenomenon have been closed by Syriza itself. What, then, is the current state of the Greek political left with yet another national vote pending?



SYRIZA President Alexis Tsipras addresses supporters in Patras. Menelaos Mich/Demotix. All rights reserved.

In the study of society and politics in contemporary Europe, Greece lends itself as a case of dynamism, growth, realignment, recomposition, fissure and fragmentation in the political arena. Over the last few years social contention has increased, producing an overhaul of the political system. This comes in the context of the deep economic crisis and its brutal neoliberal management through a variety of austerity measures that have devastated the overwhelming majority of the Greek society.

In this article we focus on the developments of parties in Greece the left of the political spectrum and attempt an analysis of the conditions and dynamics in the current conjuncture. The Left constitutes an important parameter not only for the political system but also for the social movements and for the shaping of the dominant ideological frame – perhaps more so today due to the inherently fluid state of affairs.

Syriza's experiment

Syriza's communication strategy under Tsipras' leadership since 2008, and especially after 2010, was one premised on the potential of left governmentality and the shift from an oppositional imaginary into a ruling one. This was an experiment immersed in uncertainty from the very beginning. Everything was at stake –Syriza's cohesion, its leadership's popularity, the coercive capacity of the clientelistic Greek state, and the Troika's and the EU's true flexibility.

The latter was a key expectation in Syriza's strategising and one on which its programmatic positions were crafted. The slogan 'No sacrifice for the Euro, no delusion for the drachma' was quite popular back then but gradually it disappeared from the vocabulary of both members and officials.

Challenging the dominant political paradigm, which has its origins in Synaspismos affirming that the solution had to be sought within the confines of the single currency, remained marginal within the party. Yet, the nucleus of the Eurozone - Germany, France and the European Commission - stayed firmly attached to the agenda they were warning Tsipras about months before he won the election of January 2015.

Potential allies, namely Italy, proved unstable, unable and unwilling to push for less strictness in dealing with Greece. The balance of power within the Eurozone and between the EU side and the IMF side of the Troika could not be shifted simply based on Syriza's growing domestic and pan-European appeal. On none of the three main axes of the negotiations - the debt, structural reforms and budget balances – did the lenders balk. Both their ideological dogmas and their interests remained deeply entrenched and inelastic.

Syriza had of course travelled a long distance from early 2012 to early 2015: diluting its political positioning on a variety of issues, flattening out the edges of its slogans, downplaying the more radical elements of its policy proposals and shelving some of them altogether in the context of a general drift to the right, while preparing to take over executive power.

This continued after its electoral victory in January 2015 when its inability or reluctance to implement its programme was covered by symbolic moves and by fully prioritising the negotiations with the international lenders. In a sense, the seeds of the eventual capitulation in July were sown in the previous years and watered in the previous months.

Syriza gradually shifted towards the model of a 'normal' party, a broker party, which acted as a mediator between diverse interests. Within Syriza a core nucleus of leading officials designed and implemented government strategy, without systematic consultation with the party organs. Decision-making became increasingly centralised.

Local self-organisation gave way to hierarchical institutions of power and the pedagogical possibilities that characterised the party's relations with the movements since the late 1990s were subsumed into careful balancing acts between the radical segments of the party, public opinion and the exigencies of power. Thereby, the drift of Syriza to the right between 2012 and 2015 was also escorted by demobilisation and the shift of contentious politics from the social to the political field – from the streets to the ballot box.

Various commentators and activists had warned about this since approximately 2012, but attention remained focused not on the problem of Syriza but on that of Syriza taking power and exercising it in a radical way. Yet, the latter concern is largely dependent on the former's appropriate resolution. For all its momentum Syriza was in 2015 still a new party, within which neither significant cohesion that could run the test of incumbency nor programmatic clarity that would suffice for full confrontation existed.

Stathis Gourgouris [described Syriza as](#) 'a loose, self-contradictory, and internally antagonistic coalition of leftist thought and practice, very much dependent on the capacity of social movements of all kinds, thoroughly decentralized and driven by the activism of solidarity networks ...'.

Even if this description held in its entirety at some point in time, the problem with Syriza is that, once in government and even before, it gradually stopped being all of the above. Its looseness disappeared as key issues in government policy was limited to a core circle of cabinet ministers.

The internally antagonistic coalitions of leftist thought and practice turned into a distinction between the majority led by Tsipras and a minority expressed partially by the Left Platform. Whilst Tsipras insisted on keeping Greece within the Eurozone the Left Platform hesitantly posed the Eurozone issue as an open question rather than as a finalised position but nevertheless chose not to argue in support of Grexit.

Any sort of dialectical interaction between the positions and assessments of the various tendencies inside Syriza, even if these ceased to be institutionalised in 2013, was put on hold. All organisational and ideological processes that would lead to further development paused along with it.

The party was no longer the main issue; running the state was. For a new party without highly developed structures and the lack of internal cohesion masqueraded by abolishing the system of tendencies, running the state is a tricky business. The practice of having those working for the party not participating in government may have worked in achieving the continuance of Syriza on the ground but it also resulted to the ground's detachment from the party in public office.

Many features portrayed by Syriza since February 2015 had previously been exhibited by AKEL, the first case of a left-wing party heading the government in the EU and the Eurozone. In both cases, executive responsibility was accompanied by ideological moderation, consecutive compromises and populist rhetoric that was disproportional to the party's traditional constituencies.

The leadership of both parties premised their potential to govern on the basis of their more egalitarian programme based on the possibility of negotiating effectively within the ambit of Eurozone mechanisms, institutions, political dynamics and geopolitical surroundings. In both cases they failed.

If AKEL's case did not affect the rest of the European radical left, the mainstream drift of Syriza has done damage already. It hurt the European anti-austerity movements and parties like Podemos, whose claims – that the Eurozone's confines are adjustable – and tactics – to remain focused on a consensual mood and pursue institutional negotiations at the EU level – are inspired by assumptions previously defended by Syriza.

Cyprus may be viewed as too small to matter, the crisis hadn't arrived when AKEL assumed power and the Cypriot communists never symbolised the movement-like dynamism of the anti-austerity march that Syriza contributed towards creating.

As for Greece, the question of concern should not be if Syriza will be radically left-wing but, rather, if it will attract individuals and collectivities that are. Although, in theory, it is simply impossible for Syriza to truly represent at the same time those who stand to benefit from the third memorandum and austerity and those who stand to lose from them, Pasok was able to do so in the period 2009-2012.

Syriza's new identity may not be at stake at this point – its Pasokification seems inevitable – so if the party retains radical left activists, trade unionists, members and voters within its ranks, then it is stealing away from even the softest resistance to more austerity.

The referendum and its aftermath

The referendum was of critical significance and its impact on Greek society and politics has not yet been exhausted. In societal terms, it awoke parts of the movement and it has also allowed large segments of society to return to politics, to develop positions and express them in public.

In political terms, it affected various components of the party system: change in the leadership of New Democracy, with an opening up of the question of that party's orientation, the establishment of bridges between Syriza and Antarsya - as the No campaign was largely conducted by rank and file left-wing activists across the board and the revelation of To Potami as an ultra-neoliberal force having to shed any remaining centrist pretenses.

Above all, it allowed for the crystallisation of the position of Eurozone exit within the ranks of Syriza and now Popular Unity. For the first time, a significant portion of former Syriza cadres and activists are explicitly calling for withdrawal from the Eurozone and have formulated a political programme based on this fundamental goal. It seems that it had previously been difficult for them to

project this position based on speculation. Having to face the lenders' ruthlessness proved to be detrimental for the next step in left-wing Euroscepticism.

Indeed, since the referendum the underlying cleavage of divisions within the left concerns above all the issue of European integration. Syriza is arguing against the viability of a Eurozone exit and is willing to succumb to austerity at least for the moment; the position of Popular Unity projects Eurozone exit as the only progressive solution and, whilst willing to discuss EU membership, insists on practices that are as consensual as possible; Antarsya is calling for a rupture with both the Eurozone and the EU without concern for consensus and on the basis of a radical transition towards socialism; and the KKE insists on the immediate and complete socialisation of the means of production outside of the EU.

Although the position of Antarsya, along with some other fringe left-wing groups, is closer to that of the KKE rather than Popular Unity, their expectations, discussions and aborted attempts for common action have so far been orientated towards Popular Unity rather than KKE.

There is an ideological reason as well as a practical one for this. The ideological reason is the Trotskyist emphasis on a 'transitional' programme of action whereby advanced reformist demands are articulated by revolutionaries who expect radicalisation as these demands cannot be accommodated in the current conjuncture by the bourgeois state.

The practical reason concerns the historic isolationism of the KKE, a legacy of both its Stalinist tradition and its own mode of operation, which precludes any alliance with other political formations. These two factors have been relevant for some time now and the stance of KKE in the referendum has strengthened them further.

The KKE's decision to call for a blank vote bordered on narcissistic sectarianism, whereby the party, its structures, its ideology and its programme are not open to any kind of questioning, amendment or postponement. The issue was misidentified as an ideological rather than as a political one.

That is why in real political terms, the KKE failed 'to be there', ready and capable of mobilising and leading the left after the capitulation of the Syriza leadership. It was such a huge opportunity that was missed, that one cannot but wonder if the KKE ever aimed at leading individuals and organisations that do not yet have a fully developed class-consciousness and are hesitant as to the potential for direct confrontation.

Both within and outside parliament, the KKE has spent enormous resources vilifying the whole of Syriza, and more so its radical-left elements. In this light, it is as if the Communist Party as a shared experience rests on the refutation of any other kind of left-wing experiment, even ones that could be potentially won over to the party's perspective on many issues. Above all, KKE views itself diachronically as the only truly revolutionary force. This is not based on an empirical assessment of the other left wing forces but more importantly constitutes a monist ontological premise that there can only be one vanguard of the working class.

Inasmuch as electoral potential is concerned, Popular Unity is currently the front-runner in the attempt to revive Syriza's popular radicalism. Nevertheless, its current appeal, weaknesses and opportunities have been delimited by mistakes made while its leaders were still members of Syriza.

The decision to form a party may not have been an erratic one in the sense that a maturation process preceded the establishment of Popular Unity, time-wise, however, this maturation period was short. Many of those now leading or active inside Popular Unity had no idea they would soon form a new party before the referendum and had to face the confusion of a collective existential crisis.

In any case, trusting the government too much, not preparing for this option and, in essence, for capitulation, Syriza's left delayed significantly a left turn and this now carries significant costs for the anti-austerity forces; it limits its credibility, organisational cohesion and programmatic articulation.

It is a medium-term matter whether Popular Unity can operate a different and radical signifying framework of political action. This is primarily, but not exclusively, an issue of party organisation. As points of command are

established within the party structure so ideological tendencies crystallise into political trends.

The formation process of Popular Unity is indicative of the clay feet that the party will soon be standing on without a 25 strong parliamentary group. This is not an entity that is actively supported by the movements of which it is a part, as the movements themselves are still at awe, in total disarray and with the sense of defeat.

Its economic programme, one based on the research and argumentation of a handful of economists, is full of contradictions, simplifications and 'constructive ambiguities'. Clearly, there is still an amorphous space inside Popular Unity and in electoral terms this translates into an inclination not to push public opinion too far by suggesting two steps forward instead of one.

This is still a project in the making. It must not therefore be viewed as a 'final product' that will remain unchanged for the foreseeable future or that will not be subject to internal dynamics and antagonisms or the developments in relation to the other forces of the left.

This is both the end of an era and the closing of a window of opportunity for the left. On the one hand it experientially revealed the limitations of a systemic fight, at least in what concerns the Eurozone, and it also exposed neoliberal fundamentalism in all its nakedness.

In the process of doing so, the referendum has repoliticised Greek society, opened up questions of EU membership and currency type. On the other hand, the third memorandum signed by Tsipras signifies political surrender and, more importantly, ideological defeat for the left.

Whether this setback proves temporary or long lasting remains, of course, an open question that depends on a series of factors both in relation to the social reception of the new austerity package in Greece, as well as regarding the developments in the economies and societies of other European countries.

The social and political openings produced by the Syriza phenomenon have been closed by Syriza itself. Yet political processes such as the rise of an anti-austerity force from obscurity to power and political events such as the defiance by a bankrupt state's citizens for the Troika's final offer, are now historical precedents. They are present and ready to be taken on by new forces in search of signifiers for rupture.

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