

# Anti-Populism in Argentina and Greece: Exploring Shared Patterns, Trajectories, and The Impact on Minorities

El antipopulismo en Argentina y Grecia: Explorando patrones compartidos, trayectorias y el impacto en las minorías

Antipopulismo na Argentina e na Grécia: explorando o comum quanto a padrões, trajetórias e impacto nas minorias

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## ABSTRACT

Our era is characterized by a significant conflict between populism and anti-populism, both politically and culturally. Populist groups and leaders often portray themselves as the true voices of the common people, gaining electoral support or even taking power by framing society as a battle between the ordinary people and the elite, challenging the political and economic establishment. Conversely, parties within the liberal political spectrum counteract the rise of populism by articulating a strong anti-populist discourse, sometimes successfully dominating the political arena. However, despite the increase in studies on populism, there are not many publications regarding anti-populism. This article seeks to examine the anti-populist discourse in Argentina and Greece, two countries with many similarities in political, economic, and cultural aspects. By analyzing the key ideas of anti-populist discourse, we aim to highlight the common anti-populist logic marked by typical paths of modernization, which not only opposes populism but also frequently disregards or opposes specific social groups, such as minorities.

Keywords: anti-populism, civilization and barbarism, cultural dualism, minorities.

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## RESUMEN

Nuestra época se ha caracterizado por un conflicto importante entre populismo y antipopulismo, tanto desde una perspectiva política como cultural. A menudo, grupos y líderes populistas se autoproclaman la voz de la gente común, obteniendo apoyo electoral o llegando al poder presentando la sociedad como una batalla entre el pueblo y la élite, desafiando a la clase dirigente política y económica. En cambio, en el espectro político liberal, los partidos contrarrestan el auge del populismo articulando un sólido discurso antipopulista, muchas veces dominando con éxito la escena política. A pesar del creciente número de estudios sobre populismo, no existen muchas publicaciones sobre antipopulismo. Este artículo pretende examinar el discurso antipopulista en Argentina y Grecia, dos países con muchas similitudes en aspectos políticos, económicos y culturales. Al analizar las ideas clave del discurso antipopulista, pretendemos destacar la lógica antipopulista común caracterizada por las vías típicas de la modernización, que no sólo se opone al populismo, sino que con frecuencia desprecia o se opone a grupos sociales específicos, como las minorías.

Palabras clave: antipopulismo, civilización y barbarie, dualismo cultural, minorías.

## RESUMO

Nossa era se caracteriza por um conflito significativo entre o populismo e o antipopulismo, tanto política quanto culturalmente. Frequentemente, os grupos e líderes populistas se retratam como as verdadeiras vozes do povo, ganhando apoio eleitoral ou inclusive tomando o poder, enquadrando a sociedade em uma batalha entre o povo e a elite, desafiando o sistema político e econômico. Por outro lado, os partidos dentro do espectro político liberal neutralizam a ascensão do populismo articulando um forte discurso antipopulista, às vezes dominando com êxito a arena política. Apesar de os estudos sobre o populismo terem aumentado, não existem, porém, muitas publicações a respeito do antipopulismo. Este artigo procura examinar o discurso antipopulista na Argentina e na Grécia, dois países com muitas semelhanças nos aspectos políticos, econômicos e culturais. Ao analisar as ideias principais do discurso antipopulista, pretende-se destacar a lógica antipopulista comum marcada por caminhos típicos de modernização, que não só se opõe ao populismo, mas também frequentemente desconsidera ou se opõe a grupos sociais específicos, como as minorias.

Palavras-chave: antipopulismo, civilização e barbarismo, dualismo cultural, minorias.

## Introduction

The new president of Argentina, 'shock therapy' right-wing libertarian Javier Milei, stated in the presidential debate of the 2023 elections that the Argentinean people must choose between "populism that sinks us or the Republic" (Página 12, November 12, 2023). This statement fails to elicit surprise, given Argentina's deep-rooted anti-populist and anti-Peronist tradition. The country has gone through a long-standing and intense battle between populism and anti-populism, with some politicians understanding populism as a threat to democracy and a retrograde and decadent culture that hinders progress. The same narrative has also been developed in other cases as well, in Latin America, Southern Europe and beyond, where many political forces view populism as a threat to democracy and an obstacle to modernization. In Greece, for example, a robust tradition of anti-populism exists, evident across both the left and the right of the political spectrum. Recently, there have been numerous occasions where the current prime minister and president of the New Democracy party has attacked populism, considering it antithetical to rationalism and/or democracy (tvxs, December 9, 2021). Indeed, the anti-populist logic seems to have great power in public discourse, affecting directly political developments; nonetheless, very few researchers place emphasis on it. As Biglieri (2020) argues, "compared to the amount of academic production regarding populism, the reflections about anti-populism are few" (p. 6).

Most of the time, anti-populists emphasize the concept of liberal democracy, arguing that populists do not pay the necessary respect to it. However, while presenting themselves as defenders of democracy, they do not consistently demonstrate the same democratic sensibilities towards all social groups and socio-political issues, often concurrently embracing authoritarian political trajectories. Despite some scholars equating populism with a negative stance towards minorities (Mounk, 2020; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 84; Weyland & Madrid, 2019, p. 16), in actual political life, populists do not consistently undermine liberal features such as minority protections (as there are populists that actively promote the rights of minority groups), while anti-populists often evince either indifference towards or direct opposition to specific minority groups. Naturally, this raises questions about the type of democracy anti-populists envision.

In this article, we first attempt to conceptualize the anti-populist phenomenon, which has not yet been thoroughly examined in the literature, and then we turn our focus on Argentina and Greece, two cases exhibiting numerous similarities, through the lens of a semi-periphery schema that serves as a linkage between Europe and Latin America. By examining the central tenets of anti-populist discourse, we aim to explore the anti-populist elements impacting both politics and society. Our aim is to underscore the existence of a shared anti-populist rationale, characterized by distinct (and rather stereotypical) modernizing trajectories, which not only counters populism but often opposes and/or remains indifferent towards particular social groups (e.g. ethnic minorities).

It is well-established that conducting comparative analysis poses distinct challenges for researchers, necessitating meticulousness in both case selection and comparison methodology. Comparison is a very important analytical tool, as it aids in strengthening the power of description, while also playing an essential role in the formation of concepts through the study of similarities and differences among cases (Collier, 1993, p. 105). After all, even if the geographical distance between the two countries is substantial, this does not seem to matter that much within our globalized environment. We are not, of course, pioneering in the parallel examination of cases from Europe and Latin America, as prior scholarship has already opened the road. For instance, Weyland (1999) scrutinized neoliberal populism in Latin America and Eastern Europe, while Mudde and Kaltwasser (2013) analyzed various cases from both regions, endeavoring to identify rigorous populist typologies. The research project POPULISMUS conducted at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki an extensive study on populism in Europe and America, while it organized workshops and conferences on the phenomenon, focusing on cases such as left-wing populism in Latin America, right-wing populism in Europe, and the populist/anti-populist divide during times of crisis.<sup>1</sup> Adopting a similar perspective, we direct our attention towards comparing two countries situated in distinct geographic areas, breaking away from Eurocentrism in the examination of populism and anti-populism, thereby facilitating the comparison of diverse cases on a global scale.

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1 POPULISMUS: Populist Discourse and Democracy, [www.populismus.gr](http://www.populismus.gr).

## Anti-populism: Historical and Conceptual Clarifications

We live in an epoch marked by a profound political and cultural conflict between populism and anti-populism. On the one hand, populist parties and leaders, frequently positioning themselves as the authentic representatives of the popular classes, bolster their electoral influence or even ascend to governance by espousing a discourse that dichotomizes society between the people and the elite, challenging the former.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, parties of the self-proclaimed liberal political space move against “the invasion” of populism by articulating a strong anti-populist discourse, managing occasionally to dominate the political field. While a significant portion of the literature delves into populism and its internal core, often attempting to identify its causes and the strategies needed to deal with it (Pappas, 2020), there is a relative lack of studies that illuminate the other side of the coin, namely anti-populism. Most of the time, scholars attempt to trace the opposite of populism in concepts such as pluralism, elitism, liberalism, or technocracy, ignoring anti-populism and its impact on politics and society. However, in recent years the efforts to highlight this phenomenon have been intensified, especially by scholars who embrace the Laclau-inspired discursive tradition as well as performative and socio-cultural approaches (Galanopoulos & Stavrakakis, 2019; Markou, 2021; Moffitt, 2018; Ostiguy, 2009a; Stavrakakis, 2014, 2017).

Yet, what exactly is anti-populism? Anti-populism constitutes a strong criticism against populist parties through a consistent attack on populism often encompassing the popular classes themselves (Markou, 2021, p. 203), presenting populism as an irrational and regressive phenomenon that threatens democracy (Markou, 2021, p. 204). Together with populism they seem to form a polarity—even a cleavage (Barbieri, 2021)—that shapes political meaning within certain conjunctures (Stavrakakis, 2014).<sup>3</sup> This is why it becomes virtually impos-

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2 For populism, see Laclau (1977), Stavrakakis (2024).

3 Interestingly, according to Jonathan Dean (2022), “anti-populism can function even in the absence of ‘actually existing’ populism. In certain circumstances, populism—and especially the figure of ‘the populist’—should be seen as itself a product of anti-populist discourse, rather than the latter being simply a post-hoc response to a pre-existing array of populist actors. Put differently: anti-populism is not simply reactive. To some extent, anti-populist discourse constructs and constitutes the very idea of ‘the populist’ to which it is ostensibly a reaction” (p. 5).

sible to study the one without the other – something consistent with an ontology of signification going back to Saussure’s emphasis on the identity/difference nexus (Stavrakakis, 2019, p. 200).

Clearly, ‘populism’ operates as a central element of anti-populist discourses, most often positioned as an enemy of “democracy”, “modernization”, “healthy political forces” and “the citizens” themselves (especially when the latter are understood as individual monads outside the play of collective political identifications). It does not adhere to a specific form, nor is it exclusively aligned with the left or the right, with a progressive or a liberal/conservative outlook but could rather be associated with a multitude of discursive typologies, ideologies, or economic ideas. Furthermore, it does not contain a predetermined value, having the ability to follow both an inclusive and/or exclusive trajectory. As Stavrakakis argues, “both (pro) populist and anti-populist discourses can acquire ‘progressive’ or ‘reactionary’, democratic or anti-democratic forms” (Stavrakakis, 2017, p. 3). Nonetheless, anti-populism is usually expressed by liberal leaders and parties. The anti-populist logic rejects the populist phenomenon based on a suspicion towards populist politicians and popular/populist politics in general. Biglieri (2020) defines “anti-populism” as “the negation of the people and its leader and their antagonism with the elites” arguing that “...if we accept that populism is a constitutive dimension of politics, we could also say it the other way round that anti-populism is the negation of a constitutive dimension of politics: in particular, the *mise-enscène* of the way in which the ‘underdog, the dispossessed, the oppressed’ deal with the antagonism that transverse any social order” (p. 8).

The pejorative use of the term “populism” and the strong criticism against it is, of course, far from a novel phenomenon; it rather has its roots back in the 20th century, with intellectuals who viewed populism as a dangerous phenomenon threatening democracy and the only path towards modernization (Stavrakakis & Jäger, 2018). Most analyses within the preceding century developed a pathological approach to the phenomenon of populism. A significant contribution to the “stigmatization” of populism as a negative phenomenon was made by the work of Richard Hofstadter and the writings of his “pluralist” cohort, which altered the progressive tone it had previously assumed. Indeed, in his book entitled *The Age of Reform*, Hofstadter launched an attack

on American populism, contending that it is closely associated with provincialism, nativism, nationalism, and anti-Semitism (Hofstadter, 1955). Hofstadter's work had a direct impact on academic discourse and contributed significantly to the development of anti-populist reasoning (Stavrakakis, 2017, 2024).

Therefore, we have reached the present-day situation, where populism has been recognized in public discourse as a dangerous and irrational phenomenon. Demata, Conoscenti and Stavrakakis (2020) note that "if a leader or a party is accused of being populist, this is usually done pejoratively and is produced discursively mainly by those political actors who claim to oppose populism" (p. 12). Most often, anti-populist discourse registers populism as a phenomenon associated with irresponsibility, demagoguery, immorality, corruption, destruction, and irrationalism (Stavrakakis, 2014, p. 509). Moreover, populist politicians are considered demagogues who deceive and misinform the people of lower-class origins and deficient education through emotional rhetoric, political contrivances, and lies, while the latter are presented as uneducated, irresponsible, and patently unable to distinguish truth from a lie and as persons who are incapable to take right decisions (Markou, 2021, p. 203). The anti-populist discourse often employs medical and psychiatric metaphors to portray populism as a pathology, a "disease," or a social "mental illness." Additionally, it is frequently depicted as a destructive natural phenomenon or a mythological monster (Nikisianis, et al., 2018, p. 278). Beyond that, Furedi (2024) emphasizes that populism is presented as a moral disease, while sometimes being medicalized as a virus (e.g., infection, epidemic, etc.). According to him:

The use of a medicalised narrative that diagnosed populism as a form of moral pathology is reminiscent of the use of crowd psychology in the 19th century to de-legitimize the democratic aspiration of the people. The demonisation of the masses in the 19th century anticipates the contemporary pathologisation of populism. Crowd psychologists such as Gustave Le Bon wrote off the people as a mass of irrationality and delusion. Then and now the medicalisation of public life expressed an elite's hatred of those members of their 'social inferiors' who dared to challenge their power. (Furedi, 2024)

According to Moffitt (2020), anti-populism can connect politicians from across the ideological spectrum who share a common vision of

how to do politics. As he states, anti-populists consider the division between people and elites to be a false one, tend to defend a world of free markets and free movement of citizens, while recognizing an important role for supranational economic and political actors, understand politics as a relatively rational activity without heated disputes and passions, react against the way populists behave in the political arena and emphasize the importance of returning to the age of “consensus” (Moffitt, 2020). Historian Thomas Frank, for his part, argues that anti-populists accuse populism of 1) being nostalgic or anachronistic in a way that ends up being futile and unhealthy, 2) feeling antagonism toward government agencies, 3) tending to be authoritarian, 4) being “anti-pluralistic”, and 5) does not recognize the hierarchy of meritocratic achievements (experts and excellence). Frank explains through many historical facts and documents that this indictment is not always true, tracing the case of late 19th-century American populism (Frank, 2020, pp. 56-77).

Pierre Ostiguy, who follows a socio-cultural approach, places populism and anti-populism in two opposing camps, in two different political fields, the “low” and the “high” respectively, based on socio-political and socio-cultural characteristics. This insightful approach helps us in understanding complex political scenes, where populism and anti-populism are part of the politico-social culture. According to him, two different ways of performing politics come into conflict: 1) the popular language (slang) with the most intense expressions in their body movements (populism) with the good ways of behaving with rational and moral discourse (anti-populism), 2) the person-centered and strong (usually male) leadership (populism) with the formal, impersonal, juridical and institutional models of power (anti-populism), as well as 3) localism (populism) with cosmopolitanism (anti-populism) (Ostiguy, 2009a, 2017).

In this vein, anti-populism is strongly criticized by a part of the academic community. For Moffitt (2020), anti-populism presents some problems: 1) consensus politics is quite similar to the Third Way (of “beyond left and right”) of former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair and sociologist Anthony Giddens, which is not sure that it is really desirable in a democracy, 2) the negative use of the concept of populism delegitimizes politicians from other places, even if they are worthy, while



equating left and right populists, who do not have the same characteristics, 3) anti-populism tends to reinforce the false opposition between liberalism and democracy, while opposing populism even if it means leading to not-so-democratic solutions. In addition, there are other problems of anti-populist discourse, such as the arbitrary equation of populism with demagoguery, clientelism, authoritarianism, and irrationality, the frequent underestimation of popular classes and popular culture (demophobia: Marlière, 2013), as well as its stereotypical perspective (Markou, 2021). As Galanopoulos and Stavrakakis (2019) argue that:

(...) antipopulism creates an image of cynical populist politicians, of shameless demagogues, who, by using fraudulent means and utilizing fake news, deceive the people of lower social strata and the uneducated. Thus, voters are presented as prone to deception, victims of their addiction to the sweet venom of populism. Arguably, this depiction of voters as an ignorant mass, guided by emotions, passions, stereotypes and superstitions, ultimately serves the purpose of delegitimizing popular sovereignty in favor of market and technocratic sovereignty. (p. 6)

Finally, it is crucial to note that anti-populism often “is characterized by a political demophobia and a strong trust in the political, economic and media establishment” (Hamdaoui, 2022, p. 437). This anti-populist fear is also associated with the elitism they often exhibit, which is connected to a belief in “excellence” as the solution to political problems and as a response to the alleged “rashness” and “imprudence” of the populist phenomenon. According to Furedi (2022), anti-populists “do not simply blame people for voting the wrong way or voting against their interests, but also accuse sections of the electorate of lacking the moral and intellectual resources necessary for acting as responsible citizens”, a fact that leading “to the questioning of the value of democracy itself”. As he states, “some anti-populists are far more interested in de-legitimizing the moral status of their opponents than in attempting to understand their own responsibility for the setbacks suffered by liberalism” (Furedi, 2022). It is true that anti-populists (and others as well) often neglect the challenges of the contemporary post-democratic framework and the fulfillment of popular demands, while directing their criticism towards political forces that challenge the current dete-

riorated system, attempting to delegitimize them through a distorted utilization of concepts such as populism and conspiracy theories.<sup>4</sup>

## Parallel paths: Exploring anti-populism in Argentina and Greece, Past and Present

In Argentina and Greece, populism often clashes with anti-populism, leading to strong socio-political polarization that directly affects the political and social context. How do these two cases compare with one another? Will they assist us in the pursuit of a common anti-populist paradigm? It is evident that the two countries are divided by significant geographical distance, belonging to different continents and featuring different economic power, industrial production, as well as positions of influence in the global market and international forums. They present a completely different operating framework, as Argentina's economy functions as a national economy, while Greece's economy is a member of an economic and monetary union (European Union) as well as member of the Eurozone (Melas, 2015, p. 9). However, a meticulous exploration of the historical trajectories of both cases, encompassing moments of rupture, intersections, pivotal events, and the attributes of influential leaders, reveals numerous commonalities that justify the comparison making it a rewarding exercise.

In this line of thinking, sociologist Nicos Mouzelis asserts that Greece and northern Balkan countries exhibit noteworthy parallels with the developed countries of Latin America. As he points out, Latin American and Balkan countries share common historical experiences, including integration into the global market, gradual industrialization, early political independence, and a prolonged tradition of parliamentary governance (Mouzelis 1986, p. 219). Academic Eleni Kefala (2007) states "that apart from parallel cultural trajectories Greece and Argentina share common sociopolitical and economic features in modernity" (p. 4), underlining their common cultural reactions, such as the notion of duality in terms of national identity and elucidating their concomitant trajectory through a concise historical overview. The assertions of the two scholars are substantiated by re-

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4 For the utilization of conspiracy theories as a concept to delegitimize political opponents, see Markou (2022).

cent findings illustrating the shared political, economic, and cultural facets between the two countries. The economic downturns of 2001 and 2009 (in Argentina and Greece, respectively) exhibited parallel characteristics, accompanied by pronounced social unrest. Furthermore, the response to these crises witnessed a temporal prevalence of left-wing populism and the adoption of particular social solutions aimed at challenging neoliberal capitalism (e.g. Argentina saw the emergence of recuperated enterprises and factories, while Greece witnessed the VIOME case, evidently influenced by the Argentine model [Oikonomakis, 2013]).

In addition, it could be suggested, the two countries present, among others, an important common feature at the socio-political level, the diachronic conflict between populism and anti-populism. The rise of the populist phenomenon and populist leaders, such as Juan Domingo Peron and Nestor Kirchner, on the one hand, and Andreas Papandreou and Alexis Tsipras, on the other, have exerted a direct influence on the political scene and political culture of the countries, while together with anti-populism has led to the formation of an antagonistic political scene. Recently, the governments of Mauricio Macri and Kyriakos Mitsotakis in Argentina (2015) and Greece (2019) respectively, presented common anti-populist characteristics.

## The case of Argentina

In Argentina, a longstanding politico-social battle between populism and anti-populism has shaped the political discourse and policy agendas in the country. Rooted in historical, political and socio-economic contexts, this conflict has profound implications. Peronism, a political movement that emerged in mid-20th century Argentina with a focus on populism, lies at the core of this dichotomy and continues to exert significant influence on the country's politics (Karush & Chamosa, 2010; Turner & Miguens, 1983). Adversaries of Peronism vehemently critique the Peronist party, alleging its propagation of clientelism and autocratic tendencies. They perceived its populism as a menace to democratic institutions, economic stability, and social welfare. Their critique was heavily anchored in the dichotomy of "civilization and barbarism", a stereotypical construct delineating contrasting logic, which continues to shape the public discourse of the country (Markou, 2021).

Fernando Gabriel Pagnoni Berns (2019) discusses the concept of “civilization and barbarism” and the new ideological social divide in the country between pro-Kirchnerists and anti-Kirchnerists, arguing that many divisions in Argentina relate to “one of the most defining ideological division in Argentina’s history: the wide gap separating savages from civilized people” and Sarmiento’s *Facundo*. Specifically, the notion of “civilization and barbarism” is not a recent conceptualization but rather finds its roots in the early 19th century, where certain political figures, such as the “Unitarian” modernizer Bernardino Rivadavia, viewed it as essential for the nation to embark on a path of modernization and liberate itself from tyrants, typified by caudillos (e.g., Juan Manuel de Rosas), as well as the rough way of life prevalent in the country, embodied by gauchos and caudillos (Ostiguy, 2007, pp. 88-90; Ostiguy, 2009a, p. 10). One of the founding fathers of Argentina, Sarmiento, who also served as the country’s president between 1868 and 1874, espoused modernizing ideas and penned a book (*Facundo: Civilization and Barbarism*) in which he proposed the idea to eradicate the gaucho and his “retrograde” culture by replacing him with European migrants (Huberman, 2011, p. 17), while he depicted the “monstrosities” of the powerful local caudillo of the isolated hinterland, Juan Facundo Quiroga (Ostiguy 2007, p. 90), portraying the hinterland as primitive and indomitable.<sup>5</sup> Sarmiento believed that the way of life of hinterland should be replaced by a “civilized society” resembling that of Northern Europe (Ostiguy 2009b, pp. 10-11). For Sarmiento, the “isolation” of local societies, their purism, and “cultural inferiority” posed significant challenges to the nation and its cultural identity. Therefore, he envisaged countering this barbarism through communication with Europe (Balderston & González, 2004, pp. 143-44). Following Rosas’s defeat, the modernizing agenda evolved into the hegemonic project in Argentina (Ostiguy, 2007, p. 90).

In the years following 1940, Sarmiento’s antinomy of “civilization and barbarism” came back in public political debate by anti-Peronist forces (Ostiguy, 2007, p. 100). Specifically, this dichotomy disconnected from rural/urban and cultural elements, instead becoming associated

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5 Nevertheless, Sarmiento presents many contradictions in his work, as “he sees the gaucho as the embodiment of barbarism” but at the same time he “admires his courage and skills” (Huberman, 2011, p. 17).

with class differences in anti-Peronist discourse, where the gaucho was supplanted by the urban worker, while Perón was depicted by his political opponents as the new caudillo (the new Rosas). Consequently, anti-Peronists casted workers, the lumpenproletariat, and the populist Perón as embodiments of barbarism and primitivism (Ostiguy, 2009a). It is widely acknowledged that anti-Peronists employed pejorative terms, such as “descamisados” (“shirtless”), to illustrate Perón’s supporters, attributing this to their perceived “folk” behavior during the significant demonstration for Perón’s release in 1945 (Horowitz, 1999, pp. 32-34). However, Perón and Eva Perón thought to reclaim this expression with a renewed sense of pride (Spektorowski, 2018, p. 159), turning it into a motto that reflects their love towards the working class. The attempt to culturally stigmatize Perón and his supporters marked the onset of profound polarization. Hence, the Argentine political landscape has been defined by the split between Peronist and anti-Peronist factions, essentially representing the contrast between populism and anti-populism (Biglieri, 2020, p. 9).<sup>6</sup>

The intense confrontation between populists and anti-populists persists to this day, as the Peronist movement continues to exert significant political influence, while anti-populist forces periodically shape various political alliances to counter it. Following the outbreak of the country’s crisis in 2001, the anti-populist camp reverted to the framework of “civilization and barbarism”, opposing the left-wing platform of Kirchnerism (which came to power in 2003), with figures like Elisa Carrió and Gerardo Morales, characterizing their political adversary as authoritarian and perilous for the country (Markou, 2021). The anti-populist rationale has been evident across diverse political entities over time. In 2007, a new political entity emerged following Mauricio Macri’s victory in the elections for “Jefe de Gobierno” (chief of government) of Buenos Aires, with its central aim being to represent a broader majority through the de-ideologization of politics, while populism continued to stand as its primary adversary (Schuttenberg, 2017, p. 287). This new formation, the “Republican Proposal” (PRO), heavily relied on signifiers of “insecurity” and “populist policies” (Schuttenberg, 2017, p. 287), a strategy reminiscent of the Greek case where the

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6 See more in: Markou (2021).

concept of “security” prominently featured in the rhetoric of New Democracy in Greece after 2019, with populism remaining its enemy. Following years of harsh opposition against Kirchnerism by anti-populist forces (2015), Mauricio Macri (PRO), Ernesto Sanz (UCR), and Elisa Carrió (Coalición Cívica ARI) allied to form the new political coalition “Cambiamos” (“Let’s change”). This new political alliance infused new momentum into the anti-populist camp and targeted the left-wing Peronist government, accusing it as corrupt and authoritarian (Schuttenberg, 2014, p. 75).

Capitalizing on widespread social discontent among a significant portion of the society regarding the governance style of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner after two terms in government, marked by political scandals and a profound economic recession (Manzetti, 2014; Stefanoni, 2019), businessman Mauricio Macri managed to ascend to power in 2015. “Cambiamos” (“Let’s Change”) secured victory in the national elections, signaling a shift in the country’s economic logic from a neo-developmental context towards a neoliberal orientation (Abiuso, 2023, p. 59). According to Biglieri, Kirchnerism reintroduced populist traces into Argentine politics, which in turn revived the anti-populist camp. In this logic, Cambiamos, expressing an anti-populist rationale, rejected the people and their leaders (Biglieri, 2020, p. 10). Therefore, Biglieri posits that anti-populism harbors the peril of authoritarianism, as it seeks to “get rid” of the people, while, paradoxically, anti-populists are frequently presented as defenders of democracy (Biglieri, 2020, pp. 15-16). As emphasized by Biglieri and Perelló (2018), Macrismo has aimed to “eliminate the people” through a dual approach: firstly, by targeting leaders or representatives associated with the populist era, and secondly, by seeking to inhibit any form of expression or reconstitution of a collective identity through the criminalization and suppression of opposition protests. For instance, the government of Macri has targeted anti-government demonstrations and protesters, exemplified by the focus on activists like Milagro Sala, an indigenous social activist (Biglieri & Perelló, 2018).

Indeed, it seems that Macrismo revitalized the dichotomy of “civilization and barbarism”. Civilization was aligned with principles of transparency, institutional checks and balances, capitalist progress, and economic liberalization, whereas barbarism was linked to the

regressive cultural traits associated with populism, hindering the nation's reform agenda. Additionally, it encompassed segments of the populace, including indigenous communities, migrants, demonstrators, and marginalized social groups. More precisely, Macri's anti-populism manifested as a vehement rejection of populist phenomenon, depicting it as retrograde, negative, and dangerous, alongside authoritarian tendencies. Nevertheless, Macrism exhibited authoritarian inclinations towards specific segments of the populace (Markou, 2021).

For instance, Macrism targeted the poor migrants of the country. It established new immigration legislation that prohibited the entry of foreign nationals with criminal convictions into Argentina, expediting the deportation process for foreigners accused of legal infractions, regardless of whether they had been convicted in some instances (Goñi, 2017). Specifically, as Basok (2019) argues, Mauricio Macri enacted Necessity and Urgency Decree (DNU) 70/2017, which prohibits the entry or residency of certain migrants, particularly those with any criminal history, irrespective of the severity of their offenses, and initiates a rapid deportation process for migrants considered deportable. The President justified this decree by referencing a perceived "crisis" in public safety, suggesting that the measures outlined in the decree would address this issue. Basok (2019) notes that this law attempts to restrict admission and deny permanent residency to poor immigrants and those of non-European ancestry. According to Pannell and Galvis-Delgado (2017), Macri employed an anti-immigrant rhetoric, equating immigrants with crime, particularly those from Peru, Paraguay, and Bolivia. Through the decree promoted by Macri, he utilized immigrants as scapegoats for his own political gain (Pannell & Galvis-Delgado, 2017). In his analysis of Macri's discourse on minorities, Flax (2020) contends that xenophobic elements are evident in Macrism, as Macri employs dissimulation tactics to differentiate Argentinians from other groups of people, ignoring the problems of the latter. Flax suggests that "the others" are perceived as a threat to Argentinians because they are associated with drug trafficking or job scarcity. Moreover, Flax observes that Macri's references to immigrants, whether historical European migrations or those intertwined with investments, delineate specific nationalities as favorable, implicitly excluding others (Flax, 2020).

In addition to migrants, Macri appears to have underestimated indigenous populations as well. For instance, during a press conference at the World Economic Forum in Davos Mauricio Macri voiced his endorsement for a trade agreement between Mercosur and the European Union, claiming “it’s a natural association because in South America, we are all descendants from Europe”, denying the existence of roughly one million Indigenous people in Argentina alone, something that he had reiterated in the past (teleSur, January 25, 2018). Amnesty International (2018) noted that in Argentina in 2017-18, “indigenous peoples continued to be criminalized and discriminated against, while “migrants” rights suffered significant setbacks” (p. 76). The fact that indigenous communities face discrimination has led to conflicts (e.g. land conflicts) during the Macri administration. An article of Lucia He (2018) mentions research from Amnesty International, which reported that there were at least 264 unresolved conflicts involving indigenous communities at that time. Moreover, according to her, in 2017 a conflict between Argentine authorities and a group of Mapuches escalated into violence and culminated with the death of 28-year-old indigenous rights activist Santiago Maldonado (He, 2018). Hence, it is evident that Macrism exhibited a hostile stance towards particular social groups both in discourse and politics through an anti-populist performance.

## The case of Greece

In Greece, a country with a notable populist history, the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) occupies a central position within the political landscape. PASOK of Andreas Papandreou successfully mobilized the masses back in time, dividing the socio-political landscape into two opposing camps: the “underprivileged” and the “privileged”, targeting authoritarian right-wing forces, foreign intervention, US imperialism, and conservative privileged factions (Lyrintzis, 1997, pp. 671-672). PASOK was founded by Papandreou following the fall of the military dictatorship in 1974, with its fundamental principles being national independence, popular sovereignty, and social liberation, while it succeeded in 1981 in ascending to power with 48% of the vote (Clogg, 1983, p. 436). Naturally, a significant number of the studies, in Greece and worldwide, focused on examining the populism of PASOK (Clogg, 1983; Karayannis, 2021; Lyrintzis, 1997; Pantazopoulos 2001). For ins-



tance, one of the academics who extensively delved into the populism of Andreas Papandreu is Andreas Pantazopoulos, who approached PASOK through the concept of “national populism” (Pantazopoulos, 2001). Furthermore, the existence of populist motifs in Greek politics before the rise of PASOK to power is rather feasible. Recently, there have been scholars who have delved further into the past, seeking traces of populism in the period of the movement in Goudi (Potamianos, 2016) and in the political discourse of Eleftherios Venizelos (Aslanidis, 2024). In the words of Potamianos (2016), “the radicalism of 1908-1910 exhibits the fundamental characteristics of the Jacobin version of populism according to Laclau: the significance of the petit bourgeois layers, the formation of the people as a subject that antagonizes the elite, and especially the focus of demands and the identification of the adversary in the political field” (p. 126).

In response to populism, the anti-populist camp emerged in Greece, which harshly criticized the phenomenon, accusing it of demagoguery. Populism is construed by anti-populists as a demagogic practice, as an attempt to manipulate citizens, as a threat to democratic norms and as an obsolete culture that prevents country's trajectory towards its modernization (Stavrakakis, 2017). Greek anti-populism relies nowadays greatly on the idea of “cultural dualism”, developed by academic Nikiforos Diamantouros (1994, pp. 15-17) in the 1990s, a theory —with a similar understanding of modernization with Hofstadter's approach (Stavrakakis 2017, p. 16)—, that recognize a crucial Greek division between an “Eastern/Balkan immaturity” and a “rational Europe”, which takes the form of a battle between an obsolete (pre-democratic and nationalist) and a modern political (rational and democratic) culture. This idea perceives populism as pivotal characteristic within the first underdog culture (Diamantouros, 2013, p. 213). Diamantouros' idea has significantly impacted the formation of a socio-political narrative widely employed by politicians, journalists, and intellectuals both before and after the economic crisis (Markou, 2021; Stavrakakis, 2017). At the political level, anti-populism has been expressed by personalities from different political parties and ideologies. One of the first politicians who was linked to the concept of “cultural dualism” was the reformist Prime Minister Costas Simitis (from social-democratic PASOK) who centered his discourse on defeating populism and solidifying European and liberal

values within the country (Stavrakakis, 2017, p. 15). However, before the emergence of the “cultural dualism” scheme, there were other anti-populist narratives, such as the concept of “kitsch,” which was developed by a segment of the left around the 1980s in response to the electoral rise of the populist PASOK (Markou, 2017).

Following the onset of the economic crisis, the rise of left-wing populism with SYRIZA and Alexis Tsipras (Markou, 2017) precipitated the establishment of a strong anti-populist coalition which raised criticism against them, encompassing centrist and center-right parties.<sup>7</sup> ND (New Democracy) stands as the foremost proponent of anti-populism within the country, embodying multifaceted ideological orientations, encompassing (neo) liberal, conservative, and nationalist ideas. For some researchers, conservative ND under the leadership of Kyriakos Mitsotakis seems to be moving in a neoliberal and authoritarian direction (Mylonas, 2020; Tsimitakis and Panayiotakis, 2021). According to Mylonas (2020), while Mitsotakis’ ND constructed a liberal and progressive discourse with signifiers such as “future,” “Europe,” “development” and “freedom,” at the same time it called upon conservatives and far-rights, arguing that it is a patriotic force fighting for “national issues,” the end of “illegal immigration” and ensuring “security” for Greeks (p. 191). In the first governmental period (2019-2023), “security” has been one of the central features of its political discourse throughout this period, having an authoritarian connotation as it received the concept of a security of “law and order” (Tsakiroglou, 2022).

Besides that, the main goal of the party was to lead the country away from polarizing populist ideas and, eventually, back to “normality” and “national unity” (Mylonas, 2020, p. 191). ND considers populism as one of the greatest threats to (liberal) democracy. Its anti-populism stems mainly from its leadership’s rhetoric and many important party officials (concurrently, however, there are individuals within the organization who exhibit a strong affinity for right-wing populism). On numerous occasions its president has launched strong attacks against SYRIZA and its populism, which is considered to be creating problems for democracy, prosperity, and rights (Liberal, April 8, 2022).

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7 For the case of SYRIZA in power, see Venizelos (2023) and Venizelos & Markou (2024).

What are the central features of its anti-populist discourse? First, its anti-populism adheres closely to the tenets of “cultural dualism”, which perceives the populist phenomenon as part of an obsolete and regressive culture that creates obstacles to progress, prosperity, and modernization (Markou, 2021). Secondly, its president shows his clear opposition to the frequent use of “the people” (except in cases where it is accompanied by the term “Greek”). According to him, liberal politicians choose to use the term “citizen” and turn their interest to the well-being of the “person”, instead of the amorphous “mass” and the vague concept of “the people” (New Democracy, 2019a). Third, its anti-populism is further articulated through the party’s political performance and the demeanor of its leader, and, specifically, through the use of an official language and style that contradicts the popular way that populists exercising politics, devoid of fervent emotions and sentimentality and abstaining from popular expressions (slang). However, even though populists are those who often present a person-centered power (Ostiguy, 2009a, 2017), Mitsotakis from the first moment showed its willingness to set up a person-centered mechanism of power, placing ERT (Hellenic Broadcasting Corporation), the EYP (National Intelligence Service) and the General Secretariat of Information and Communication under the control of the prime minister (The Press Project, July 9, 2019). This was also the reason why he was criticized for exercising a model of centralized power, especially after the surveillance scandal (Capital, August 8, 2022). Finally, a central element of its anti-populist performance was the attempt to highlight “excellence” as a key constituent element of the party, an element which emerges to differentiate it from its populist opponents. ND endeavors to present itself as an exemplary political entity equipped with the expertise to facilitate the modernization and advancement of the nation. From the first moment, after all, while in opposition, it sought to portray itself as a “decent” political force, as a party that would form a “government of the excellent” in the future (New Democracy, 2016). It is no coincidence that the ND government had included in its new cabinet in 2019 twenty-one non-parliamentary officials, of which 18 were technocrats in the position of deputy ministers (Kathimerini, July 8, 2019).

A noteworthy aspect that warrants attention is the association between ND’s anti-populism and its intrinsic elitism, as well as its inclination towards an anti-populist approach when interacting with

popular classes and vulnerable social groups. Anti-populism as a phenomenon is often associated with a stereotypical and negative attitude towards the popular classes. For instance, there were politicians, during the Greek crisis, who blamed the Greek people for the economic crisis that broke out in the country, thus justifying the implementation of stringent austerity measures (Markou, 2021). In contemporary times, although New Democracy may not speak disparagingly of the Greek people or accuse them (after all, it is the people who empower them to govern), it still fails to approach all social groups equally and appears indifferent to the rights of certain minorities. Specifically, while it aims to portray itself as a progressive and liberal party of Europe that advocates diversity and respects minority groups, its rhetoric embodies an anti-populist stance, which coincides with an ambivalent attitude towards some minorities. In particular, its president presents himself as a liberal politician who accepts social diversity and believes in democracy based on the will of the many and the protection of the few, emphasizing the importance of providing equal opportunities to everyone (Toumasis, 2020). In practice, however, his party does not follow the same tactics towards all minorities.

For example, New Democracy prioritized the rights of sexual minorities by advocating for a bill legalizing same-sex marriage, which was passed with majority support (Lifo, February 15, 2024). Nevertheless, ethnic minorities' issues and rights, such as Roma, do not take a central place in the political discourse of ND. Its references to vulnerable social groups and minorities in party's public pre-election gatherings are minimal, while its president refers mainly to their rights within specific contexts or on international days. In his keynote speech in Athens before the 2019 elections, the ND president refers to all Greek citizens, including workers, farmers, professionals, pensioners, civil servants, the unemployed, new mothers and students without making special mention of minorities and vulnerable social groups (New Democracy, 2019b). Moreover, the ND administration implemented policies that undermined the position of vulnerable social groups by canceling AMKA grants temporarily for "immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, unaccompanied refugee children and third-country nationals" (Pannia, 2021, p. 57). The approach of the right-wing party towards all minorities was not uniform; it showed indifference and/or created

obstacles for certain vulnerable social groups such as Romani people (Roma).

Despite the implementation of various initiatives aimed at fostering the social integration of the Romani community, including inclusive educational programs and the development of strategies to alleviate poverty and social exclusion among Romani people (Egroma, March 9, 2022), systemic challenges persist. Specifically: 1) Representatives of the Romani community cite a bad communication between governmental authorities and Roma (Konstantopoulos, 2022). 2) Several policy measures and decisions have undermined the rights of Roma, such as the dissolution of the “Special Secretariat for the Social Inclusion of Roma” an entity dedicated to institutionalizing Roma social integration as a distinct public policy, which was subsequently subsumed under the jurisdiction of the “General Secretariat for Social Solidarity” (renamed the “General Secretariat for Social Solidarity and Fight Against Poverty”) (E-nomothesia, July 17, 2019). 3) The pandemic exacerbated disparities, with numerous Roma children excluded from remote learning initiatives (Konstantopoulos, 2020). 4) The governmental response during the pandemic failed to adequately protect Roma communities living in precarious conditions (Andrianopoulos, 2021). 5) Reports of police brutality against Roma persist, exemplified by incidents such as the fatal shooting of an unarmed Roma youth involved in a car theft (Varvantakis, 2021), and the killing of a 16-year-old Roma boy for allegedly evading payment at a gas station (tvxs, December 22, 2022). Despite rhetorical commitments and purported strategies for Roma social inclusion, the approach of the right-wing government tends to perpetuate stigma and deepen the marginalization of this vulnerable social group.

## Conclusion

In this article, after conceptualizing the phenomenon of anti-populism, we traced anti-populist discourse in Argentina and Greece, two countries that share many similarities in political, economic, and cultural aspects. We referred to central anti-populist narratives, simultaneously examining how each country approaches the popular classes and some minority groups. As observed, anti-populism in both countries, relying on a modernizing and stereotypical logic, directly

influenced the political scene and society, often opposing or showing indifference towards specific social groups. In Argentina, Macrism appeared hostile towards poor immigrants and indigenous people, while in Greece, despite ND's inclusivity in other instances (e.g. the LGBTQI+ community), it did not embrace all minorities in the same manner, showing disregard for the issues faced by ethnic groups such as the Roma.

The above findings demonstrate that anti-populism is not merely an attack on populism, but often (especially in cases of liberal anti-populism)<sup>8</sup> also a hostile stance towards segments of the popular classes. The two cases presented in the study are of exceptional interest regarding this issue. Macrism opposed both poor immigrants and indigenous people through specific policies and tactics. In the case of Greece, ND has made significant efforts to demonstrate itself as a liberal party that respects the rights of minorities. After all, it largely defended the rights of the LGBTQI+ community. Nonetheless, in some instances, such as the case of Roma minority and migrants and refugees, efforts to improve their living conditions were minimal, leaving them exposed to greater risks. Not only did they fail to protect these people, but the government's approach to Romani issues was often quite offensive.

In conclusion, it is crucial to note that the anti-populist discourse is not necessarily always associated with such political logics, while other discourses can be presented in a similar manner. It would be incorrect to equate anti-populist logic with an inherent opposition or indifference towards the people, especially when there are anti-populists who place significant emphasis and value on the popular subject, such as many left-wing parties do (Markou, 2021). However, it is important to emphasize that, in recent years, liberal anti-populists, while typically self-portrayed as representatives of liberalism and democracy, can pursue dangerous paths for democracy and human rights.

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8 There is also a left-wing anti-populism. Many of these parties, like communist parties, analyse populism as a kind of demagoguery that wants to deceive the working class and as a political movement of the petty bourgeois class that is not interested in a socialist society without inequalities. However, "the people" of left-wing parties is not connected with barbarism or absurdity, but instead it presents some positive characteristics (Markou, 2021, p. 218).

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