

Understanding the Greek Communist Party

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During the months preceding the last two Greek parliamentary elections of 6 May and 17 June 2012, for many on the left hopes ran high for a substantive challenge to neoliberal discourse and practice that could potentially revert EU economic policy itself. Except from the strictly partisan, most of these wished good results for both of the main parts of the Greek radical left – the Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA) and the Greek Communist Party (KKE). At the end, only the former triumphed, while the latter experienced initially a less than modest rise of 0.94% (in the first election) and then (in the second election) a decrease of 3.98% and the lowest result in its history (4.50%). While SYRIZA's ascent has already attracted much analysis, the KKE's descent has been either dismissed as unimportant, or hastily explained with references to rhetorical boxes – dogmatism, left extremism, irrationality, sectarianism – devoid of theoretical reflection. Yet, a closer look suggests otherwise, as well as invites questions over communist and radical left party strategy in periods of economic crisis.

All those who have preoccupied themselves with the KKE in the past two or so decades, or have had even a passing glimpse at its physiognomy seem to agree upon at least one thing: that the KKE has not changed in terms of ideology and policy. Consequently, if it has not changed in a period of twenty years (not to mention the whole of the period before its 1988-1991 coalition with SYN – SYRIZA's main component – and its simultaneous participation in two consecutive governments) but only just now, in the last Greek election of 17 June 2012 its share of the vote was halved, then voters must have expected it to change amid changing circumstances. So far, all are still in agreement. Let us remember the facts. The economy was (and still is) on the brink of collapse, living standards decreased sharply, social insecurity erupted into unrest; an anti-German and partly anti-imperialist sentiment, albeit largely underpinned by nationalism and not simply class consciousness flourished in Greek society; the mainstream parties, PASOK and New Democracy lost credibility and votes, and experienced serious internal fragmentation; the extreme right, Golden Dawn, showed clear signs that it could enter parliament for the first time; and SYRIZA proposed cooperation with the KKE under the prospects of what it envisaged as an alternative, radical left government, and started climbing high in the polls. So circumstances did change but why didn't the KKE?

At first sight, it may seem that the KKE's conduct cannot be grasped by almost any theory of party politics. Most commentary trying to explain the KKE's ideological and policy continuity has thus far focused on the 'usual suspects' that haunt even the most prominent academic analyses of the party's trajectory: its miscalculation during the campaign about vote losses, which is part of a broader ill-informed approach that views continuity, irrespective of context, as the only way to maintain and increase electoral appeal; an ideological dogmatism that embodies a narrow-minded, almost obsessive vilification of SYRIZA; and the fear of its core leadership that government participation, or even just a halt to intense antagonism with the other radical left would loosen their stronghold over the organization.

Here, I would like to disagree and put forward an alternative explanation. The KKE is not an irrational actor, with a *sui generis* dogmatism, a complete inability to predict its electoral fate and a leadership blinded by its own power. Being dogmatic means little in party politics and is by definition a characteristic of parties that – unlike the KKE's tradition of saying a lot on everything – produce scarce and superficial ideological analyses. The real questions suggested by the plenty that we know about how political parties function are what a party's goal(s) are, how and when they can be achieved in a given situation and why a specific strategy to achieve them is judged to be better than others.

Secondly, the KKE could certainly foretell its bad result (if not the actual numbers, then their gist), chiefly because of its strong organizational power and its tendency to hold frequent internal polls. Speaking in Chalkida approximately

a week before the second election of 17 June, KKE General Secretary, Aleka Papariga said: “Ten days before the election of 6 May, polls showed that we had double digit percentages and we lost votes when we revealed what a government of the left would mean, we expected the loss, think, however, of the cost if we had said ‘yes’ ... a temporary cost can be reverted when the justice of its position is proven, a durable political mistake, however, cannot be corrected easily and you pay for it for years” (To Vima, 11 June 2012). There seems to have been wide acknowledgement of the above described argument inside the KKE. With one exemption, in the form of a recently constructed blog publishing purportedly internal criticism of the party and its leadership, the KKE seems to have been cohesive and united in its last two electoral campaigns.

The whispers about dissenting voices, the rumors about a possible split and the speculation about the leadership being undermined are not vindicated by facts so far. Nor do they reflect the true nature of the ongoing discussion within the circles of the party about whether it diverged from the programmatic goals of its 15th Congress. Not that internal upset is impossible, or can easily reach the public eye. But a Central Committee assessment of the result that “calls on those people who this time preferred to vote for other parties instead of the KKE and especially for SYRIZA to think hard on this even if it is in retrospect”, is, to say the least, unlikely to reflect, or be the product of marked differences in opinion about stratagem.

Resistance to change by the KKE is part of a broader approach of relying less on the electoral arena and more on the societal one and ideology. A number of otherwise unexplained choices by the Greek communists attest to this: the fact that Papariga has consistently ranked very low in Greek political leaders popularity polls throughout her time as KKE General Secretary but no move to substitute her has been made; the more than ten years old strategy of giving primacy to KKE-controlled trade union, All Workers Militant Front (PAME) over the parliamentary group; the resources and time spent on cooperation with minuscule but orthodox formations across Europe and beyond, at the expense of any kind of attempt to reach over to the more ‘mainstream’ radical left that has more potential to contribute to domestic legitimization.

The Greek communists realize that they can achieve very little in parliament and in government and at the same time that, in order to achieve the little that they can, they will have to undergo the risk of losing any kind of trustworthiness and potentially seeing their vote share drop even more drastically than it already has. If the KKE had decided to declare its willingness to form a government with SYRIZA and whoever else might have been interested to chip in for a radical left majority to be sustained, or even simply support it without official participation, then such a government would have been more likely than not to be formed. But the KKE already had a similar experience in 1989-1990 and still suffers from it. A protest party the KKE may be, but it is also one whose mobilization in work places, universities, trade unions, local committees and other forms of its own, patiently crafted civil society can yield results in terms of social capital; results that are more tangible and imperative for its future than any kind of maneuvering within state institutions.

With very few exceptions, the results of radical left party participation in, or support of government have always had a common denominator across time and space: the radical left compromises and loses votes, only to return back to opposition weakened, confused and divided (see Olsen, J., Koß, M. and Hough, D. (eds) (2010) *Left parties in national governments*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan).

In hindsight, the KKE’s choice in the last Greek election was not one between disaster and success but one between different forms of disaster. It chose electoral disaster over a potentially more enduring, multi-faceted and uncertain one. If I was a party, I might have done the same.

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