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The Left-wing Populist Revolt in Europe: SYRIZA in Power¹

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Introduction

In recent years, the “specter” of populism threatens the political establishment in Europe and the neoliberal edifice of the EU. Specifically, the outbreak of the economic crisis, the implementation of harsh austerity policies in many European countries and the emergence of liberal democracy’s pathologies led to the rise of the populist phenomenon. In Northern Europe, popular

discontent and anger have been expressed mainly by right-wing nationalist and xenophobic parties, while in Southern Europe people have turned to left-wing populist movements. SYRIZA (Coalition of the Radical Left) in Greece is the first radical left party in Europe which managed to seize power through a strong inclusionary populist and anti-austerity discourse. Nevertheless, after almost three years in power, it did not fulfil the popular expectations.

In this paper, we examine the political discourse articulated by SYRIZA in power (2015-17) through Laclau’s theory and the approach of Populism, and we utilize the lexicometric tool of the Populism Observatory to search the frequently used words in Alexis Tsipras’s discourse. Populism is a research project and an open access web-based Observatory at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (School of Political Science) that analyzes populism through a discursive methodological framework. The simple lexicometric analysis can help us sketch a statistical outline of the discourse, followed by theoretical scrutiny. Our aim is to find out if SYRIZA transformed its rhetoric after the conquest of power (January 2015) and which *central signifiers* it tends to use and avoid. Furthermore, we argue that the concept of “crypto-colonialism” can explain the dominance of egalitarian populism in the Greek politics but we question the use of the term for any inclusionary populist case. Moreover, we underline the failure of SYRIZA to fulfill the popular demands and we seek out the reasons for this fiasco. Finally, we try to answer to the following question: Does the case of SYRIZA prove that populism fails wherever it comes from (right or left)?

¹ This paper is based on my presentation in Ohrid’s School for Politics and Critique 2017. Some ideas of my presentation are analyzed also in my paper “The Rise of Inclusionary Populism in Europe: The Case of SYRIZA”, *Contemporary Southeastern Europe*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2017), 54-71. The analysis that we present here has been enriched by new primary sources (more speeches), combination of methods (bibliographical and lexicometric), and new assumptions and goals.

Movements and Populism in Post-democratic Times

In recent years, the eruption of economic crisis and the domination of neoliberal hegemony have revealed the serious weaknesses of Western democracy. The majority of citizens have been marginalized from the political process and the economic capital shapes the political game and promotes its own interests. As Colin Crouch argues, “politics and government are increasingly slipping back into the control of privileged elites in the manner characteristic of predemocratic times.”²

This undemocratic political landscape has been characterized as “*post-democratic*” by many intellectuals. According to Jacques Rancière: “Post-democracy is [...] a democracy that has eliminated the appearance, miscount, and dispute of the people, and is thereby reducible to the sole interplay of state mechanisms and combinations of social energies and interests.”³ The post-democratic context in conjunction with the tremendous shock of the financial crisis has created the conditions for the emergence of populist parties, which claim to represent the marginalized people. In Greece, the people’s anger and frustration against the neoliberal political forces and post-democratic politics led to the resurgence of left-wing populism. The rise of left-wing populism came after the emergence of the movements of the squares, such as the *Indignados* in Spain and the Indignant Citizens in Greece. It is true that the great mass mobilizations of the last decade are an important factor for the electoral success of populist parties around the world.⁴

2 Colin Crouch, *Post-democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), 6.

3 Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement*, trans. by Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 101-2.

4 Paolo Gerbaudo, *The Mask and the Flag: Populism, Citizenism*

But can we define the term “populism”? There are plenty of different interpretations about this complex phenomenon. In this paper, we analyze populism by utilizing the theory of Ernesto Laclau and the approach of Populismus (Aristotle University). According to Laclau, populism is a political logic that can be found in any political movement and divides society into two opposing groups, *the people* and *the elites*, through the connection of different popular demands and the construction of a collective identity.⁵ As Laclau mentions, “populism starts at the point where popular democratic elements are presented as an antagonistic option against the ideology of the dominant bloc.”⁶ The concept of “the people” works as a *nodal point* (a central reference) in the context of populist discourse. According to Populismus’ approach there are two minimal criteria of a populist discourse: (1) the prominent reference to “the people” and (2) an antagonistic perception of the socio-political terrain as divided between “the people”/the underdog and “the elites”/the establishment.⁷

Does populism threaten democratic politics? Populism can be both dangerous and corrective for democracy, depending on the ideological overtones it carries. In order to give a fair answer, we must take first into

and Global Protest (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 223.

5 Ernesto Laclau, “Populism: What’s in a Name?,” in *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, ed. by Francisco Panizza (London: Verso, 2005), 32-8.

6 Ernesto Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory: Capitalism, Fascism, Populism* (London: New Left Books, 1977), 173.

7 Background Paper from the International Conference “Populismus: Populist Discourse and Democracy,” Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, *Populismus*, www.populismus.gr/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/POPULISMUS-background-paper.pdf.

consideration the political and social context of each case and the type of populist who dominates the political scene. For example, one can easily blame the xenophobic rhetoric of Front National in France as a real danger for democracy, but he/she cannot express the same opinion about the populist style of Morales in Bolivia. It is clear that populism “*can be both a corrective and a threat to democracy*,”⁸ as it can be combined with different kinds of ideologies and economic models. Left-wing populist movements have most of the times an inclusionary and democratic character, while right-wing populist parties have often an exclusionary and undemocratic character (of course there are always exceptions).⁹

Greek Radical Left: From Streets to Government

SYRIZA was founded in 2004 by Synaspismos and several small leftist (ecologist, socialist and euro-communist) groups. For more than six years it was unable to destroy the strong bipartisanship.¹⁰ However, the outbreak of economic crisis and the implementation of harsh austerity policies by traditional parties led to massive changes in the Greek political system. SYRIZA took advantage of this conjuncture to launch an enormous populist attack against neoliberalism, while it received considerable dynamic from massive anti-austerity popular movements, such as the Indignant Citizens. As Paolo Gerbaudo argues, the activists shifted their focus

from protest politics to electoral politics, a fact that is responsible for the electoral success of SYRIZA.¹¹

Within a few years, SYRIZA managed to rise to power through the formation of a wide social alliance (January 2015). The principal aim of SYRIZA’s governmental alternative platform was the annulling of austerity policies (Memorandums).¹² Nevertheless, the harsh negotiations with the “institutions” did not yield positive results for Greece and SYRIZA decided to hold a referendum. The crucial referendum took place on July 5, 2015, to decide whether Greece was to accept the bailout proposals by the “institutions.” Against the predictions of many opinion polls and mainstream media, the majority of the Greek voters overwhelmingly rejected austerity proposals from the country’s creditors and voted in favour of the No (61%).¹³

The unpredictable outcome of the referendum did not bring any drastic change in the negotiations between Greece and the “institutions.” Hence, the EU put a critical dilemma for Greece: accept harsh austerity measures or Europe would let Greece collapse and expel it from the Eurozone.¹⁴ The leadership of SYRIZA decided to reject the referendum’s result and to sign a new agreement with Europe (third Memorandum). The refusal of the Government’s 43 MPs to support the new bailout agreement led to early elections (September 2015). Finally, just a few months after its large victory, SYRIZA won the elections again and retained power with

8 Cas Mudde and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser (eds.), *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 16.

9 Dani Filc, “Latin American Inclusive and European Exclusionary Populism: Colonialism as an Explanation,” *Journal of Political Ideologies*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (2015), 263-83.

10 Yiannos Katsourides, *Radical Left Parties in Government: The Cases of SYRIZA and AKEL* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 53-67.

11 Paolo Gerbaudo, *The Mask and the Flag*, 223.

12 Memorandums are the loan agreements between Greece and its emergency lenders.

13 Greek Referendum Results 2015, Ministry of Interior, www.ekloges-prev.singularlogic.eu/r2015/e/public/index.html?lang=en#{“cls”:“main”,“params”:{}}.

14 Michael Schiavone, *Austerity and the Labor Movement* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2016), 160.

ANEL (Independent Greeks). The coalition government with the radical right party demonstrates that the attempt to put an end to austerity is SYRIZA's primary goal, as the only thing in common with the nationalist and xenophobic party of ANEL is that both are against austerity.¹⁵

SYRIZA's Discourse in Power: Theoretical and Lexicometric Analysis

Can we accept SYRIZA's populist characterization using the criteria and the theory mentioned above?¹⁶ It is well known that SYRIZA's political discourse in opposition was clearly a strong populist discourse.¹⁷ This does not change after its rise to power. Alexis Tsipras continues to call the subject of the "people" against the internal and external "enemies" of the country, namely "the old establishment and the EU of austerity."

Specifically, SYRIZA's leader calls upon the Greek people, the working class, the unemployed citizens, the communists, the minorities and the people who believe in a better future for their country in order to fight against neoliberalism and the corrupt parties.¹⁸ He calls the people to support him in order to win the severe battles against the "old" establishment, economic oligarchy and neoliberal obsessions of the EU. However,

he does not reject the initial vision of a peaceful and equal European community but the current neoliberal form of it. Tsipras argues that his government signed an agreement with Europe to prevent the transfer of property abroad, financial asphyxiation and the collapse of the financial system.¹⁹

The leader of SYRIZA continues to use in his rhetoric the central signifier "the people." Thus, "the people" appears as a privileged reference, a *nodal point*. The heterogeneous subject of his people includes different social groups, such as the minorities, the workers and the people who are suffering from the harsh austerity policies. The anti-austerity and democratic struggle against the corrupt political system and neoliberalism holds the heterogeneous subjects together. The "enemy" of SYRIZA's people are "the old establishment" (the corrupt political parties), the economic oligarchy, the neoliberal institutions and the fascist/neo-Nazi forces. Thus, SYRIZA's political discourse is organized according to an antagonistic scheme, between "us" (the people) and "them" (the corrupt political parties, neoliberalism, the EU of austerity, etc.).

With the aim of providing more useful information about the political discourse of SYRIZA we utilized the online discourse analysis tool of Populismus to conduct a simple lexicometric analysis.²⁰ According to this research tool, the most frequent words in the rhetoric of Alexis Tsipras are the following: *the people, Europe, we, Greece, austerity, they*. As we can observe, the references "we," "the people" and "they" prove the

15 Ibid.

16 The analysis draws on a random sample of 30 statements, interviews and speeches of SYRIZA's leader Alexis Tsipras, before and after the election of September 2015 (until January 2017).

17 Yannis Stavrakakis and Giorgos Katsambekis, "Left-wing Populism in the European Periphery: The Case of SYRIZA," *Journal of Political Ideologies*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (2014), 119-42.

18 "Tsipras' Speech in Athens," *SYRIZA*, September 18, 2015, www.syriza.gr/article/Alekshs-Tsipras:-O-pothos-toy-laoy-gia-zwh-de-tha-ginei-parenthesh-photos--vid-.html#.V2sRcfl94dU.

19 "Tsipras' statement following the conclusion of the Eurozone Summit," *Prime Minister*, July 13, 2015, www.primeminister.gr/english/2015/07/13/prime-minister-alexis-tsipras-statement-following-the-conclusion-of-the-eurozone-summit.

20 Online Discourse Analysis Tool, *Populismus*, www.observatory.populismus.gr/index.php/home.

antagonistic scheme that is used by populist parties and leaders (*people vs elites/we vs they*). There are many other words in Tsipras' discourse which appear quite frequently, such as *SYRIZA*, *ND*, *Left*, *country*, etc. It is important to note that some words, such as *Europe* or *Greece*, at this period of time can be found frequently in the discourse of any political party.

The results of lexicometric analysis show also that statistically there is no trend in SYRIZA's discourse to refer preferentially to the *nation* or to any nationalist or racial signifier. Moreover, any references to *migrants* or *refugees* carry positive connotations. These findings confirm the fact that SYRIZA should not be equated with the populist radical right parties, as its "people" is a plural and inclusionary subject, without racial or racist demarcations. The radical left party is one of the most consistent defenders of the immigrants' and minorities' equal rights. It is also opposed to the "Europe of repression" and the fascist forces that support it.²¹ Tsipras' patriotic references do not carry xenophobic, racist or nationalist elements but follow an anti-imperialist orientation. Therefore, the idea that all types of populism share similar characteristics is problematic enough. As Stavrakakis contends, the linkage between populism and nationalism is a relation of articulation and not a relation of a necessary fusion.²²

Greece as the West's "Crypto-colony": The Inclusionary Populist Response²³

The Greek political landscape is dominated by inclusionary populism for almost four decades. Are there any reasons that explain this? As Dani Filc argues, "colonialism is an important key to understanding the development of either form of populism."²⁴ Filc underlines the fact that inclusionary populism appears mainly in colonized countries and the people are constituted by the inclusion of different ethnic or social groups. For example, the political discourse of Latin America's populist parties has patriotic and inclusionary elements and differs from the xenophobic rhetoric used by radical right parties in Northern and Eastern Europe. This happens because Latin American populism emphasizes the past of indigenous people and the identity of *mestizo*. At the same time, exclusionary populism appears mostly in former colonialist countries, because nativism is an innate characteristic of their culture (the people as an ethnocultural entity).²⁵

Greece was not a colony of a Western superpower country in the period of colonialism but since its declaration of independence (1821) it has always been highly dependent both economically and politically on the West.²⁶ As Herzfeld contends, some countries (such as Greece) are nominally independent, but that independence

21 "Tsipras' Speech in Athens."

22 Yannis Stavrakakis, "Religion and Populism in Contemporary Greece," in *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, ed. by Francisco Panizza (London and New York: Verso, 2005), 244-47.

23 More about crypto-colonialism and populism: Yannis Stavrakakis and Thomas Siomos, "SYRIZA's Populism: Testing and Extending an Essex School Perspective," paper presented at the ECPR General Conference, Charles University, Prague, September 7-10, 2016.

24 Filc, "Latin American."

25 Ibid.

26 Michael Herzfeld, "Crisis Attack: Impromptu Ethnography in the Greek Maelstrom," *Anthropology Today*, Vol. 27, No. 5 (2011), 25.

comes at the price of a humiliating form of effective dependence (crypto-colonialism).²⁷ Nowadays, a type of “crypto-colonialism” is retained through the imposition of neoliberal recipes by the EU and IMF. Greece encounters the stereotypical attitude of the German government which wants to build a strong dominance within Europe through tough policies that exacerbate the economies of weaker states. Greece has lost its national sovereignty through a kind of “disciplining process” and the government cannot implement its own political program without the approval of Germany. It is well known that Greece’s public debt is unbearable, but Berlin refuses to budge. In this way, Greece is hostage to Germany’s politics.²⁸

Following the ideas of Filc and Herzfeld, we can support the idea that the “shadowy” dependence of Greece on the West could give some interpretations about the dominance of inclusionary populism in Greek politics. However, we question the use of the term in any egalitarian populist case. For example, in the case of Spain this term cannot be used appropriately, as Spain, despite the fact that it presents a strong inclusionary populism (through Podemos), is a former colonial power. Why this happens? What if the weak position of Spain in the EU has changed the character of its populism? The questions remain and need more investigation.

27 Michael Herzfeld. “The Absent Presence: Discourses of Crypto-colonialism,” *The South-Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol. 101, No. 4 (2002), 900-1.

28 Matthew Karnitschnig, “Why Greece Is Germany’s ‘de facto Colony,’” *Politico*, June 16, 2017, www.politico.eu/article/why-greece-is-germanys-de-facto-colony.

Conclusion

In this paper, we tried to prove, through cross-fertilization of different methods, that SYRIZA continues to express an inclusionary populist discourse after its victory in the elections. Moreover, we highlighted the importance of the movements of the squares in the electoral success of SYRIZA. Finally, we combined the ideas of Filc and Herzfeld to reveal the reasons of the long-term domination of inclusionary populism in Greece. Nevertheless, new assumptions came to the fore about the use of the term “crypto-colonialism” in other cases.

The issue that concerns us here is: Did SYRIZA manage to fulfil the popular demands? Populist SYRIZA in opposition became the voice of “the silent majority.” However, it failed to accomplish its popular platform after it formed a government. The leadership of SYRIZA rejected the popular mandate and continued the implementation of austerity policies, which violate the human rights and increase poverty and social inequality. But why SYRIZA failed? The Greek government did not have an organized plan to exit the Eurozone and the EU and it did not create any strategic alliance. According to Costas Lapavitsas, “SYRIZA failed not because austerity is invincible, nor because radical change is impossible, but because, disastrously, it was unwilling and unprepared to put up a direct challenge to the Euro.”²⁹ As a result, SYRIZA fell into the trap of economic and political liberalism, losing its strong radicalism. We do not know yet what will be the future of the radical left in Greece. Is it going to be transformed into a social-democratic party?

29 Costas Lapavitsas, “One Year On, Syriza Has Sold Its Soul for Power,” *The Guardian*, January 25, 2016, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jan/25/one-year-on-syriza-radicalism-power-euro-alexis-tsipras.

As we mentioned above, SYRIZA expresses an inclusionary and democratic populism in its rhetoric. Nonetheless, its decision to ignore the popular mandate disputes its democratic character. Does the case of SYRIZA prove that populism fails and threatens democracy wherever it comes from? The answer can only be negative as the failure of the Greek radical left cannot be generalized to all left-wing populist governments. There are many examples of left-wing populist parties or leaders that managed to accomplish many of their goals. For example, Nestor Kirchner in Argentina managed to achieve great economic growth with unconventional negotiations and state interventions.³⁰ Nevertheless, a big problem of Latin America's left-wing populism is that it does not want to break with the capitalist system, while it supports the idea of a moral or state capitalism.

Future research on this topic should consider the following: Is left-wing populism the solution to today's neoliberal dogma, or not? Is the exit of the neoliberal EU a real alternative for the radical left today?

30 Benjamin Dangl, *Dancing with Dynamite: Social Movements and States in Latin America* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2010), 69.