

SYRIZA: From 'Subversion' to Centre-Left Pragmatism

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SYRIZA was formed in 2004 as a fairly loose coalition, involving more than ten different left currents and political groups. Its formation grew out of a process that started in 2000, when most political groups that later composed SYRIZA coexisted in the Greek and European alter-globalization movement. In 2001, several thousand Greek leftists participated in the Genoa G8-Summit protest in 2001, possibly the largest European anti-globalization demonstration ever; many of those participants belonged to political organizations that later formed SYRIZA, a coalition that emerged as an assertive left pole in the central political scene and the Greek parliament.

Historically, SYRIZA derived from four major traditions: a communist tradition (marked by tensions between former pro-Soviet and Euro-communist groups); an extra-parliamentarian left tradition (marked by its own tensions, mainly between Trotskyist, Maoist and radical Euro-communist sub-traditions); the 'alter-globalization movement' of the early 2000s; and Greece's reformist social-democratic tradition, especially after the crucial 2012 elections, when the Greek social democratic party (Panhellenic Socialist Movement - PASOK), disintegrated. From 4.6% in the 2009 national elections, SYRIZA rose to almost 27% in 2012. Meanwhile, PASOK plummeted, falling from almost 44% in 2009 to 13.8% in 2012. Since military rule ended in 1974, PASOK had alternated in power with the right-wing Nea Demokratia, but in January 2015, PASOK collapsed to a mere 4.6%, as SYRIZA became the ruling party with more than 36% of the vote.

During this period, SYRIZA continued to evolve. From 2012, when SYRIZA became the country's major opposition party, it gradually adopted a reformist stance, shifting towards 'pragmatism' and distinguishing between the 'old SYRIZA of 4%' and the 'new SYRIZA of 27%'; in this period, also, many former PASOK members joined SYRIZA. In the 2014 European Parliament elections, SYRIZA led with 26.52%, and seemed poised to form a government as the leading partner in the coming national elections. Calling on party members to consider 'effectiveness' and 'safeguarding our electoral victory', many SYRIZA leaders started flirting with centre-left politicians and small centre-left political formations.

The official language of the party in mass media, the slogans, and its former

targets started changing: its slogan, 'For a Government of the Left', was gradually replaced by a self-description as a 'Government of National Salvation'; 'Redistribution of Power, Wealth and Income to the benefit of Labour' was replaced by the 'Productive Reconstruction of the Country'. Programmatic positions — including democratic control of the society and an economy by the people, the development of self-directed, co-operative productive schemes and a non-market social economy — were put aside.

SYRIZA's pre-electoral program promised an end to austerity policies and a deal with the country's creditors to fund the Greek public sector; a few weeks after SYRIZA's rise to power, those promises gave way to negotiations for a milder Memorandum, and a preliminary agreement signed by Minister of Finance Y. Varoufakis in February 2015. Varoufakis had never been a SYRIZA member or supporter of any left-wing current; soon after his appointment as a Minister, he publicly distanced himself from SYRIZA's programmatic positions. He described the crisis as victimizing all social classes equally, calling for an export-orientated model and rejecting wage increases as undermining competitiveness. Thus, his oft-repeated public claim that 70% of the Memoranda's measures would be beneficial for Greece, was no coincidence.

However, SYRIZA did not come to power with the promise of promoting 70% of the Memoranda's measures. If it had, SYRIZA would probably not be included in the Greek parliamentary map today, let alone playing a key role. The vision reflected in Varoufakis' statements redefined SYRIZA's mandate, practically amounting to an attempt to reshape the social alliance which until then had supported the historical experiment of a left-wing government in Greece.

The February 2015 agreement made clear that the Greek government was negotiating within the European neoliberal austerity framework, merely seeking a fig leaf to conceal its compromises. This fig leaf involved, on the one hand, a moderate program to 'end the humanitarian crisis' (by providing energy subsidies, food stamps for the extremely poor etc.) and, on the other, a rejection of direct nominal reduction of wages and pensions, while maintaining preexisting directives regarding mass lay-offs and low VAT coefficients for certain mass products. The government surrendered its pre-electoral program, instead seeking an agreement that would simply leave intact Greece's neoliberal institutional and economic framework, hoping to avoid further austerity measures regarding low and medium incomes.

However, creditors never accepted these proposals, instead offering a plan to further finance Greece through deeper neoliberal policies, including new wage and pension cuts (the 'Juncker plan'). Through five more months of negotiations, the government never received any of the promised tranches from its creditors, although Greece continued paying its debt obligations to the ECB and the IMF until the final depletion of all public funds, and the delay, by necessity, of an IMP payment in late June, 2015, when the government practically ran out of cash. That week, Prime Minister A. Tsipras called for a referendum on the 'Juncker plan'. In anticipation of the vote, Greece had to limit withdrawals from Greek banks ('bank holiday' and 'capital controls'), as the ECB refused to lend the banks additional cash as anxious depositors withdrew their savings.

The referendum campaign highlighted class and social divisions unseen for decades. Two 'Greeces' fought each other: poor, wage-earners, the unemployed and many small entrepreneurs demanded a "No" vote, while the upper classes agitated for "Yes". With the banks closed, mass media propaganda warned that a "No" vote would lead to disaster, while employers pressured workers to vote "Yes"; nevertheless, almost two-thirds of Greeks (61.3%) voted "No". But in Parliament, the government transformed the "No" into a "Yes" vote, working together with the conservative opposition. In July 2015, when SYRIZA signed a new Memorandum, practically duplicating the 'Juncker plan', this Memorandum was described as the result of blackmail, a defeat in the struggle between Greece, its creditors, and the dogmatic European elite.

This interpretation echoes voices within SYRIZA that see the Memoranda either as an economic mistake which will not boost growth, or as an attack on Greece by 'foreign interests'. Thus, SYRIZA's final capitulation is presented as what some of the party members term a 'heroic fall in an uneven battle', which can be reversed in the future by equivalent government measures, such as efforts to combat corruption and modernize state structures. However, austerity is not just a 'false policy' but a class strategy promoting the interests of capital over those of workers, the unemployed, pensioners and the economically vulnerable; it offers fewer rights for labor, weak social protection, and low flexible wages, and offers no meaningful bargaining power.

Beyond certain limits, the subjection of all parts of social life to unfettered markets may create a political risk for the neoliberal establishment, since it can trigger

uncontrolled social outbreaks. This political risk was a strong weapon as the Greek working class and SYRIZA sought to stop austerity. But that weapon rested on a precondition: that SYRIZA would stick to its program, and retain its priorities, putting people before profits.

However, this strategy was abandoned since the victorious European Parliament elections in 2014, as SYRIZA turned toward a reformist-neoliberal path as a prerequisite for “growth and stabilization”. The roots of this shift lay not only in the new challenges as SYRIZA became a ruling party, but also in the political tradition of Greece’s post-Stalinist Left. Its patriotic reformism was characterized by governmentalism — that is, the idea that forming a left-wing government is an adequate and sufficient condition for political change — and economism (which views social evolution as the result of the development of the productive forces, believed to make inevitable the transformation of relations of production).

In signing a new Memorandum, SYRIZA agreed to clear the Greek institutional and labour market framework of ‘rigidities’ — which in fact reflected workers’ previous victories. SYRIZA remains dominant on the Greek political scene, but today the party is better understood as a mainstream social democratic party, than as a movement of the radical Left.

Global Dialogue, volume 6, issue 4, December 2016.