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The Decline of Populism and the Prevalence of the (Neo)Liberal Modernization Paradigm in Greece¹

Emmanouil Mavrozacharakis²

Abstract

The prevalence of the right-wing party of Nea Dimokratia (ND) in the Greek political landscape reflects an enormous change in the political behavior. Citizens have not chosen a simple switch on the power but contributed with their votes to a strategic defeat of populism and at the same time, they paved the way for the search for a new type of leadership, which is close to realism in handling with the social problems that cannot be implemented merely with calculated financial costs. The dominance of conservative ND is not an ideological choice. It is a choice that runs counter to the logic of falsely or hypocritical negotiating austerity measures opposed to Greece by his lenders (due to memoranda) and the consequent tax-tornado as a result of negotiating failure with the partners in the EEC and the IMF. The positive choice for ND also reflects the contradiction with the misguided manipulations of public opinion regarding the strategy of micro-concessions and micro-alliances as a means of concluding a “political-social alliance”.

Keywords: Left Populism; SYRIZA; Nea Dimokratia; power shift; pragmatism; realism; ideological dominance; government and state power; power shift

Introduction

It is clear that strategic electoral defeats do not refer to percentages, but to structural transformations and shifts in the electorate. In this sense, the last elections in Greece reflect an enormous change in the political stance of the electorate. The citizens have not chosen a simple switch on the power but contributed with their votes to a strategic defeat of populism and at the same time, they paved the way for a new type of leadership, which is close to pragmatism and rationalism in handling with social problems. In a specific way, the Greek public was disgusted against the over-promising rhetoric and the under-delivery politics experienced under SYRIZA’s rule. In these terms “Greece already has a first-hand experience of economic populism and rejected it after a long time of hope, making a turn towards pragmatism”, as Pagoulatos states (Lana-Guggenheim, 2019). The vote in 2015 was one of hope, of desperation. Then, idealism collapsed. According to Kazamias (2019), “the painful truth about SYRIZA is that it has ruled Greece for four years as a party suffering from identity loss and diminishing credibility. Its record in government has been so full of compromises and retreats that it

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now hovers across the political spectrum like an amorphous haze—a phantom of its old self, without much shape or substance. Tsipras’s cabinet included ministers who have defected from almost every other party in parliament, even several hard-right populists from the Independent Greeks”. This view is not without truth, but it does not take into account that the populism of the Greek SYRIZA, in a political and symbolic way, is typically participatory and inclusive by attempting to promote political programs that improve the quality of life of some weak and poor social groups and migrants (Font, Graziano, Tsakatika, 2019). In a sense, the left-wing populism of SYRIZA follows the Latin American model of populism that deals with societies that do not have the level of equality and prosperity of Western Europe (Mavrozacharakis, 2018). This does not mean that there are no acute socio-economic differences in Western Europe as well. However, the weakest social groups still rely on more or less extensive social services and aids and enjoy full political rights. Like the populists in Latin America, who are struggling for better living conditions for the population (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013: 159), the left-wing populism of SYRIZA also focuses more explicitly on the excluded, the marginalized and the underprivileged (Mavrozacharakis, 2018: 30). However, the political and economic reality in Greece left no room for the realization of populism as it was anticipated by the ruling left. The voting for conservative ND was not an ideological choice. It was a choice that runs counter to the logic of falsely or hypocritical negotiating austerity measures as opposed to Greece buy his lenders (due to memoranda) and the consequent tax-tornado as a result of negotiating failure with the partners in the EEC and the IMF. Unable to beat the creditors of Greece, the SYRIZA-Government joined them by implementing all the cuts, privatizations and VAT increases it had been elected to oppose (Younge, 2019). Alexis Tsipras agreed with the Eurozone partners and lenders to implement one of the harshest austerity programs. At the same time though, and with a strong populist manner, Tsipras government attempted to distance itself from the verbal content of the austerity measures it has negotiated and voted (Mavrozacharakis, Kotroyannos, Tzagkarakis, 2017: 41).

Main Considerations

The SYRIZA government relieved communicatively that it has the ability to move flexibly within a tight framework. In reality though, SYRIZA not only failed to fulfill its campaign promises but also to implement even a part of its core ideological principles (Mavrozacharakis, Kotroyannos, Tzagkarakis, 2017: 41). Moreover, the left unwittingly turned to realism as its anti-memorandum negotiating strategies were totally failed. However, electorally, the leading group of SYRIZA was still able to extract the majority of social acceptance, despite the implementation of the new

memorandum. This fact just proves the effectiveness of populism that Tsipras government used. The road that led to the final compromise of SYRIZA government with lenders was marked by the symbolic production of politics in the sense that a continuous hard negotiation scenario with the partners was raised, as a “race-till-you-drop” to avoid the memorandum. Similarly, the left government after signing the memorandum tried to cultivate the impression that it will do everything to normalize its social effects.

The radical fury with which SYRIZA demonized the memorandum and everyone who was involved in its management in Greece and abroad, while the party was in opposition (Petras, 2015), was followed during its first governmental period by a managerial modesty of subordination to the partners. It turns out that since 2016 the income taxes were especially harsh on people earning more than 35,000 Euros per year, as they pay an average of 40% more than they did before. This is likely to lead to even more people being unable to pay taxes and social security contributions. In addition to the income tax, the amount that people will have to pay for the ENFIA property ownership tax was about 3.4 billion Euros yearly.

As a result of all these, in the meantime, the evaluation of the causes of the crisis has shifted the voters' opinion. People no longer believe in the hostile image of Europe as the left projected it before the 2015 elections. Brussels — and Berlin — are no longer so much blamed for the crisis, but the fight for the best economic model for Greece in the coming years has come more into focus (Löhe, 2019). Some want higher pensions and higher social spending. Others, lower taxes and lower free market limits. These are quite domestic reasons, and they have led to Tsipras' defeat.

Nevertheless, the election victory of the Conservatives gives a hint for the whole of Europe. The large-scale narrative of the populists that they are the traditional parties that had destroyed the prosperity of the country no longer works. With the example of Greece, arrogance becomes clear: In negotiations with the EU, not everything can be achieved -except a compromise (Löhe, 2019). The power shift in Greece also reflects the contradiction with the misguided manipulations of public opinion and finally the strategy of micro-concessions and micro-alliances as a means of concluding to a “political-social alliance”.

The overall strategy chosen by SYRIZA for the governance of the country was therefore defeated. At the same time, the power shift acted as an outlet or emotional release for people's political anger, underlining, in a sense, the demand for a shift towards more social policies and less taxation (Stewis-Gridneff, 2019). As a result, in the political map of Greece, there have been strategic changes. First, citizens did not give a vote of confidence to the SYRIZA government and the “financial relief

measures” it received (Karitsis, 2016). These measures constituted a strategic choice of SYRIZA that was defeated. In particular, SYRIZA preferred political extortion of the economically weaker voters, arguing, that in the event of ND victory the crumbs preemptively distributed by SYRIZA would be in jeopardised. Also, the mobilization of the anti-right-wing syndrome of the left and centrist voters, failed. Above all, however, the catch-all ability of Syriza to penetrate into different social strata, numerous civil-society organizations and especially the middle strata, has been diminished (Adler, 2019). The strategic political tool of populism based on enemy-friend shapes (Mavrozacharakis, Tzagkarakis, Kamekis, 2015: 2) was canceled and his position got a more realistic approach of a center-right modernization strategy expressed by the Nea Dimokratia of Mitsotakis. For that reason, some commentators pointed out that the election of ND to power was the end of left-wing populism in the sense that it was a vote of protest against a government that promised too much while it did very little (Labropoulou, 2019).

Despite the fact that the new government of ND appears to have plans for reforms, Mitsotakis comes from the same political establishment that plunged Greece into the crisis and which the voters rejected in 2015. The positive vote for the market-friendly old guard is a vote of protest against a government that has given many promises, which it has failed to implement, a message to the populists worldwide that things can change and then change again. At the same time, voters turned their back on SYRIZA after adopting tough fiscal measures (BBC, 2019). While in 2015 Tsipras was the personification of change, he has given many promises, and under the pressure of the EU, he was forced to make a turning of 180 degrees. Alexis Tsipras tried to entice the voters with clumsy last-minute pre-election prizes, benefits and promised increases in pensions. However, the outcome of the elections in Greece is above all a clear rejection of populism. This is their essential importance not only for Greece but also for the whole of Europe. The clear prevalence of Nea Demokratia shows that many people would like to leave behind the years of the crisis and that they want again a sense of regularity (Schlötzer, 2019).

It turns out that all SYRIZA's strategic political choices have been defeated, which is overshadowed by many electoral polls that deliberately cultivated the impression that the difference between Nea Dimokratia and SYRIZA will exceed 12%. This gave the SYRIZA leadership the opportunity to mitigate the big defeat it suffered after just 4 years in government.

Conclusions

With a government of Nea Dimokratia of 40% of the total votes and an 8% distance from SYRIZA, the latter suffered a strategic defeat. Surely, based on the low expectation logic that remains embedded

in the left, the percentage of 32% is impressive. However, since all the state power and its corresponding resources have been used to achieve this percentage, its future preservation is not relevant. In this sense, this logic is beyond the limits of power, and this is indeed a long-term strategic defeat of the left. This development is possible due to the constant shifting of the right to the center, especially to the modernization faction of the old PASOK of Konstantinos Simitis, without encountering resistance from the hard right core of the Nea Dimokratia.

Government and state power may be Mitsotakis' advantage in attracting centrist, moderate politicians and statesmen, but the impression that is formed in the public is that he governs on the basis of their abilities and pragmatism. With Mitsotakis and his Nea Dimokratia, Greece is going to a phase of a revitalization of the perception of modernization as expressed by a group of intellectuals and Individuals who pursued the market and economic neoliberalism with a dogmatic persistence akin to former apologists for state socialism (Iordanidis, 2003). This bet, however, can only succeed if the new power of the right manages to correct and restore the consequences of the distorted modernization introduced in Greece by the Simitis government legacy.

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