

Greece: Five Years After the Syriza Government and the Referendum



Alexis Tsipras

In 2015, the electoral victory of Syriza (the Coalition of the Radical Left) in Greece, following dozens of one and two-day general strikes and a vibrant set of social movements, raised the prospects of a “rupture” with the Eurozone and the opening of a continent-wide confrontation with austerity in the wake of the Great Recession. But it was not to be. Syriza Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras pulled back from a clash and set the party on a path to accommodation with the bankers and a set of brutal attacks on Greek workers.

In this article, Antonis Davanellos analyzes both the development of Syriza—including the internal power plays by party leader Alexis Tsipras and his inner circle in the run up to the party’s 2015 electoral victor— and Tsipras’ decision to override the July 2015 people’s referendum in favor of signing an austerity Memorandum with European creditors and the subsequent right-ward drift and split in Syriza, as well as lessons for how revolutionary forces can operate within broader left political parties and formations to prepare for inevitable conflicts with reformist forces.

After the 2019 elections, when conservative Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis succeeded Alexis Tsipras as head of the Greek government, a “new normal” appeared as a smooth continuation from the previous government’s mandate.

After four and a half years under the Syriza ruling party that insisted on calling itself “the Radical Left,” the capitalists of Greece felt safer than during the 2015 panic when they rushed to transfer tens of billions of euros abroad. The Third Memorandum (an economic austerity pact with the so-called Troika: the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund) was implemented, relative *social peace* was imposed, and neoliberal reforms were reinforced. Now privatizations enjoy the support of a vast majority of parliament, precarious labor relations have shot up to record levels among the member states of the European Union (EU), and Georgios Katrougalos’s pension reform (most recently the former Syriza Minister of Foreign Affairs) established the bases for a complete transformation of the social security system along the path of the famous three pillars system.

The last agreement that Tsipras made with creditors, which was shamelessly described as “an exit from the Memoranda,” predetermined the future path: all the laws and regulations that were voted under the dictates of the Memoranda were declared sacrosanct, requiring that creditors agree to any future modifications as a precondition. Budgets with ruthless surpluses to be set aside for debt payments became mandatory for a long period of time. Economic and social policy was placed under “reinforced supervision” by the Troika until the year 2060. Even moderate social democrats, such as Nikos Christodoulakis from the social democratic PASOK party, are frustrated with this “straitjacket” and publicly declare that this course is an unrealistic dead end in the context of a serious international economic recession.

These actions taken by the Tsipras government help

us understand the 2019 election results. Popular disappointment and the decline of social movements formed the basis for Mitsotakis' political-electoral victory at the head of the conservative New Democracy party. The same factors also explain how SYRIZA maintained its electoral support at 31 percent in the absence of a massive alternative pole of attraction to its left.

These actions also help us understand the political direction of Syriza's deep transformation, recognized by Alexis Tsipras himself. Many commentators speak of "Pasokification," the transformation of Syriza into something akin to the traditional PASOK social-democratic party. This is not exactly correct. Syriza's social-democratic mutation is almost complete, but it is happening at a time when social democracy is no longer a political current that manages the aspirations and illusions of the working class in a reformist way. It has become a current that converges with traditional conservative parties, mutating towards social-liberalism both in Europe and in the rest of the world. So, the current model for Tsipras is not Andreas Papandreu, founder and historical leader of PASOK until his death in 1996, but Emmanuel Macron.

Syriza's Rise

The enormous political power amassed by Syriza's core leadership around Alexis Tsipras – a fortified party within the party – was not the product of his own skills, political views, and tactics (at least not primarily). These facts cannot be understood if we do not take into account the explosion of social resistance during the years 2010 to 2013.

The storm of working-class and popular mass opposition to ruthless austerity prior to Syriza's 2015 electoral victory demolished PASOK and dealt a serious blow to New Democracy, a far-right mainstream party, creating a political vacuum in the regime. These gaps often form the basis for new Bonapartist phenomena in history.

The first serious defeat of Syriza's left – not only that of the Left Platform, but that of a broader environment that ended up leaving the party in 2015 – was its inability to guarantee collective democratic control over Syriza's decisions and actions as a party. This outcome was the result of a long period of struggle, it accelerated after the 2012 elections and reached its climax in the 2013 Party Congress. The emblematic points marking this defeat were: the *autonomy* of the *presidential guard* within the party, the *autonomy* of the parliamentary group from party, and the establishment of "inaccessible" intra-party mechanisms (such as the *Program Committee*, etc.) just before 2015.

In the current debates on the radical Left, it is important to remember that complete autonomy for the circle around Tsipras was achieved under the banner of a party belonging to its members, this slogan was used to attack the organization and mechanisms of internal party tendencies and the structured functioning of the party. As has happened before in the history of the workers' movement, an assault on structured, democratic functioning was not aimed at achieving direct-democracy but at creating an unchecked power with the party.

The political project of this nucleus of power around Tsipras, during the period in which it established its autonomy, was the complete reversal of the Syriza program, including decisions on which the party based itself from the 2013 Congress. As Nikos Filis, a famous Syriza comrade who stayed in the party after 2015, used to argue before 2015, the cornerstone of Syriza's policies would be to tackle the issue of debt.

The competing positions stemming from the political confrontation – within Syriza and within the entire left – over how best to challenge Greece's debt are well known. All the points of view that were then discussed maintain their importance in the field of theory. But the crucial point that linked Syriza (except for a small right-wing current) was the

cessation of debt payments and a moratorium on the return of the principal and interest. This option would preserve remaining available public funds and provide a left-wing government with the ability to unilaterally organize class politics in support of the working class. This policy might lead a left-wing government into a de facto war of position against creditors and the Troika (IMF, ECB and the EC). This alternative clearly assumed that the European working-class movement and left would be tasked with supporting a rupture in Greece. The importance of this last factor has normally been underestimated in subsequent balance sheets, and I think that this is a major mistake. It was proven that German Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble and Eurogroup President Jeroen Dijsselbloem understood the threat of “contagion” from the Greek crisis better than the left itself, and that is why they adopted a completely rigid strategy during the negotiations, aimed at killing any alternative to austerity from the start.

In his memoir, Yanis Varoufakis reveals – and now everyone knows – something that was then only discussed by a tiny fraction of Syriza: that the small leadership group (Varoufakis mentions Tsipras, Deputy Prime Minister Yannis Dragasakis, and State Minister Nikos Pappas) had elected well before 2015 to act as a battering ram to eliminate intra-party politics. No collective body of Syriza ever approved the government’s turn committing it to pay all debt installments “complete and on time” (per the agreement of February 2015) or the de facto recognition that a left government must limit its political activity to negotiations with creditors. This change was objectively accompanied by other major reversals.

Disputes over the immediate program of actions that Syriza promised during the election campaign in 2014-2015 are well known. In the so-called Thessaloniki Program, commitments that would improve the situation of the working and popular classes (raising the minimum wage and pensions, restoring the Collective Contracts, abolishing taxes on small properties)

coexisted side-by-side with new ideas that supposedly would ensure a kind of easy and peaceful exit from the crisis, a return to growth, and a “productive reconstruction.” Examining this program in detail, one could see that it was full of holes. What gave this program a certain political dynamic was the promise of unilateral actions to be taken by a left government aimed at reversing austerity. Indeed, if a left-wing government chose – or was forced, under pressure from party members and social movements – to raise wages and pensions immediately, then all the little wishful *soap bubbles* in the program (such as the Development Investment Bank or the famous production complexes that were supposed to transform Greek capitalism) would be shown to be out of place and out of time.

Unilateral actions, such as the cessation of payments, would have direct political consequences: they would have made the viability of a left-wing government an issue of immediate interest to the working and the popular classes and would define the relationship between the government and the ruling class as a confrontation. This is why the ruling circle around Tsipras avoided acting on this internal party agreement at all costs. It was not easy. I still remember what took place in a joint session of the Syriza parliamentary group with the party’s Political Secretariat: it was here that Dragasakis suggested for the first time that the promise to raise the minimum wage should not be understood as an immediate agreement, but something that should be undertaken “in the course of the four years of the mandate” the party won in the January 2015 election. The room froze. Many members who would not think of defining themselves as the extreme left expressed their opposition. Dragasakis left the session without defending his point of view. And yet, this was the policy that was imposed under a series of political blackmails inside the party. But it also took place in the context of a retreating working-class movement, a movement that took less interest in playing an active role, while more and more desiring to

“delegate” responsibility for solving the crisis to candidates in the elections, and later to the Syriza government.

Syriza’s Right Turn

A crucial component that articulated the right turns in coherent party policy was Syriza’s position on the Eurozone. The dispute within the party over this is well known. A minority in the party claimed that support for an even reformist political program in favor of the working class was inevitably combined with defending and preparing for a break with the Eurozone and the EU. The majority stated that such a program could be supported while leaving the question of the existing borders of the Eurozone and the EU open to be tested in practice. The problem was only half resolved with the algebraic formula “not a single sacrifice for the good of the Eurozone.” It is important to remember the concrete political *translation* that allowed this formula to become the majority position. We could mention dozens of documents, articles, or speeches from Alexis Tsipras’s electoral campaigns, where it was clearly stated that if Syriza was forced to choose between, for example, the defense of public schools and hospitals and the stability of the Eurozone, he would not hesitate to support the interests of the people. In this sense, the later change to the policy of “staying in the Eurozone at all costs” must be located in another profound political reversal in the internal balance of forces within Syriza dating to before 2015, a reversal that was prepared in the shadows long before January 2015.

The composition of the economic team that prepared the negotiations with the creditors, chosen by the leading group around Tsipras, is indicative: people who had worked in the IMF, in the international banking sector, in the U.S. establishment, and in European social democracy. They were delegated to negotiate with only one clear red line: avoiding a break with the Eurozone and the EU. The results of this negotiation are well known: The Third Memorandum.

As usual, the truth about any political leadership can be clearly seen on the terrain of the political allies it chooses. The decisions of the founding congress of Syriza, in 2013, were clear at the time: from the extreme left to the left of social democratic currents. The *left social democratic current* with Syriza was composed of those who would refuse to share the responsibilities derived from the Memorandum and who quickly reacted against the attendant ruthless austerity plans. Sometime later, someone representative of Syriza's right-wing trend, Yiannis Balafas, for instance – who I will grant was an honest proponent of this position – spoke publicly about a range of completely different allies, excluding only “the pro-Samara faction on the right and Dawn Golden” (an openly fascist party). Samaras was then the prime minister and the leader of the right-wing New Democracy faction. No one else publicly defended this view which, at that time, constituted such an immense reversal of Syriza congress's decisions. This reversal led to addressing as a potential allies a large part of the established politicians, including the pro-Kostas Karamanlis faction of New Democracy that formed a more sector moderate around the former prime minister.

This orientation was adopted by the leading group around Tsipras. As 2015 approached, he began to speak first of a government of social salvation and then of a government of national salvation. It was not simply a matter of pure terminology, nor was it the product of ignorance about the difference between these terms and the goal of a left-wing government. The move that led to the government coalition between Syriza and the right-wing Independent Greeks party (ANEL), a spin-off of New Democracy, and the election of the former minister and member of the pro-Karamanlis New Democracy section, Prokopis Pavlopoulos, as be President of the Republic (a largely ceremonial, but not unimportant position) with Tsipras's backing was not organized overnight.

We shouldn't see this course as a conspiracy with a predetermined result. Quite the opposite, it was a political adventure, during which there were many other open possibilities with completely different political outcomes.

The last phase of Syriza's reversal was the Referendum in July 2015. The fact that Tsipras chose, or was forced to resort to it, was proof of the confrontations taking place between the different political dynamics of the time. Leaving aside the evaluations that emerged after the facts, the reason the leadership of Syriza acted as it acted was that it believed the referendum would lose and, therefore, provide it with the perfect alibi to go back on all its promises on not sacrificing pro-working-class policies to the dictates of the Troika. It is a huge political error to consider the Referendum as nothing more than a great fraud.

Ruling class panic, the massive capital flight, the banking crisis and capital controls, the hasty creation of the "front for a YES vote" and the call for the repressive apparatus of the state to intervene if things get out of control were all completely live questions.

After many months of inaction on the streets and a tendency to delegate political action to others, popular sentiment was expressed by an impressive majority force and with a clear mandate in the referendum: almost 62 percent voted NO on the question of whether or not to submit the government's policies to the dictates of the creditors. This represented a forthright NO to the continuation of austerity.

The referendum results were the last great opportunity for the radical left, both inside and outside Syriza. The weakness in the left's ability to coordinate politically and its failure to build an organizational network that could defend the results the day after the referendum were crucial. Especially for the radical left forces within Syriza, self-criticism must include the delay in concluding that Syriza leadership's was

now tasked with doing the dirty work for the stability of the regime. This decision would have required much more drastic interventions, both inside and outside the party, beyond its political and organizational margins and beyond partisan discipline. There are many and widely-divergent justifications for the radical left's delay in taking these measures. But the results are what they are: an enormous opportunity was lost.

The Failure of the Left Reinforced Tsipras's Audacity

In fact, the 180-degree turn (the so-called *kolotoumpa*) the day after the Referendum was imposed as an intra-party coup, where the party leadership moved independently, ignoring even the majority of the party's Central Committee, making sure to legitimize its decisions a posteriori.

Aristidis Balt, a well-known Syriza intellectual, in his book on Syriza, describes the September 2015 elections (when Syriza refreshed its governing majority after the departure of much of its left wing, including 25 Members of Parliament, that went on to found the new Popular Unity party) as purifying. In a sense, they were. Tsipras now enjoyed the the support of the establishment (PASOK, the conservative Potami, and New Democracy) all voted with Tsipras in accepting Third Memorandum with the Troika that imposed harsh new austerity measures. Furthermore, Tsipras could now count on support for German Chancellor Angela Merkel who stated that the "new elections in Greece are no longer part of the problem, but part of the solution. " Alexis Tsipras was able to dedicate himself to purging his party and relegating the working masses to the position of passive witnesses. His warm embrace with ANEL leader Panos Kamenos on election night was a warning of the nature of the government that had emerged.

All of us who actively participate in this whole process have important responsibilities. These can be measured in each one of us, taking into account what each one said in public as events continued to unfold.

On May 13, 2015, we wrote in our newspaper, *Workers Left*:

“There are many of us who disagree with the “easy” nature of [Syriza’s] pre-election discourse, which made the road to government easier but left a crucial question unanswered: Is it possible to establish a radical anti-austerity program within the Eurozone and carry out negotiations with its institutions? Today we know the answer: NO...

For anyone who still wants to see, it is clear that we are caught in a downward spiral, in a negotiation where at every stage we were forced to defend our people from a lower level. Where this decline leads us is obvious: To force through the signing of the Third Memorandum... [instead of] the cessation of payments to the creditors, an offensive against the “freedom” of capital flight, implementation of the decisions of Congress about nationalizing the banks, imposing taxes on capital and the wealthy to finance the measures against austerity, supporting this policy with all necessary means, including confrontation with the EU and the Eurozone.

Such a “rupture” would have been completely normal and expected just after the January 25, 2015 Syriza electoral victory. But now [May 2015] the possibility of resorting to a popular mandate through a new national election remains open, on the condition that these options will be clearly presented by the government and openly supported by Syriza.

In any case, the crucial decisions before us cannot be made by a closed circle... The Party, from the Central Committee to its local branches, must decide. The party must resist the dark wind that is arising as a threat.”

Based on this reasoning, we participated in the political confrontations within Syriza, a confrontation of crucial importance. Knowing before – and no longer having any doubts after February 2015 – that the end result would be a split.

Given the political difficulties inherent in the unprecedented

political situation, and knowing today the unfortunate end result, we do not believe that it is productive for those who reacted to this challenge in different ways should now compete with each other with respect to who reacted when and in what way. A large part of Syriza's members and comrades did respond [to Tsipras' reversals] and refused to share in the responsibilities of implementing a new austerity Memorandum. But they were defeated and a very high price had to be paid. a rare opportunity for a major rupture was missed. Syriza's experience was transformed from a reference point for the international radical left to an argument in the hands of the establishment, with former conservative Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy and French President Emmanuel Macron using it to persuade the social majority that there is no alternative, that the radical left neither wants to nor can it change the world.

Lessons of the Defeat

The wave of hope that had emerged during those years was defeated mainly by the combination of two factors: on the one hand, the retreat of workers' struggle after the incredible climax of 2010-15. And, on the other hand, the defeat of the left within the Syriza party by the coalition of forces that united under the banner of staying in the Eurozone at any cost and who signed and implemented subsequent neoliberal austerity policies.

A large part of the left interpreted this defeat by accepting a generalization that, in my opinion, is wrong, namely, that the slogan for a left government was a mistake.

The question of governmental power was raised by the popular and workers' struggle during a period of intense struggle. It had to be answered in real terms, which are defined by the strengths and weaknesses of the existing working-class movement. The question of real workers power, a revolution like that of October 1917, was not on the agenda; not because

someone decided to exclude it, but because – despite the climax of the crisis and rising social confrontations – Greece never reached the situation of dual power, there were no forms of independent organization of the workers and their allies similar to the soviets.

The Third International in Lenin's time, during the Third and Fourth Congresses, warned us of the possibility of this paradox. They also gave us elements with which we could construct appropriate responses, including: Transition Policies, the Transitional Program, United Fronts, and a Government of the workers or Government of the Left.

Daniel Bensaïd, elaborating on the contemporary context in which the international left found itself after the collapse of the USSR in 1989, defined three criteria that “in various combinations allow or impose as a necessity the support for, or participation in, a left-wing government based on a transitional perspective.” These are:

1. A context of crisis, or at least an important growth of social mobilization.
2. A political alliance that can support a government that is committed to the project of a dynamic break with the status quo.
3. A correlation of forces that allows revolutionaries to guarantee that either the reformers keep their commitments or they will pay a great price for their backtracking.

In my opinion, it was clear that the first two criteria described by Bensaïd were absolutely present in the Greek crisis of 2010-2015. The complexities, the reasons for the defeat, and the main self-criticism of the radical left are mainly related to the third.

The problem does not lie in whether we should participate in a radical change in government, but rather how we should

participate. And, it is especially important to recognize that not only does it matter how many of us are ready to confront those forces only willing “to go half-way,” it also matters when we do so and that we learn to do so more dynamically.

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