

The defeat of left-wing populism and the dangers for democracy in Greece

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Eurocrisis in the
Press

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The negotiations between the Greek government and its creditors have dominated European politics in these last months to such an extent that politicians and press alike seem to have largely forgotten about the populist radical right, and certainly the Greek Golden Dawn. All eyes were focused on the unequal struggle between Greece's creditors and the left-wing populists of Syriza (Syriza's right-wing, conservative and nationalist coalition partner ANEL, i.e. Independent Greeks, received very little attention). Resistance to neoliberal economic policy has been beaten for now, or so it seems, even with Syriza still in power as I write this. This crisis can go in many directions. But what is clear is that the defeat of the democratic, inclusive and pro-European left-wing populist Syriza and the imposition of even harsher austerity measures on a country suffering a profound economic crisis might strengthen the radical right and perhaps also other forces that constitute a danger to democracy and stability in Greece.

After the 2014 European elections, as on numerous occasions before, [populism was identified as a big threat](#) to democracy all over Europe. The label populism was applied to parties Right and Left, from UKIP to the Front National and from Podemos to Syriza. All of them were castigated by mainstream politicians and commentators for making unreasonable and unrealistic promises to the people, for playing on the people's emotions in times of economic crisis rather than trying to get out of the crisis, for being irrational, and, ultimately, for threatening democracy. Radical Right and radical Left were amalgamated under the label 'populist' and presented as part of one and the same threat to liberal democratic politics.

Populists left and right in Europe today do indeed both claim to speak for 'the people', and present themselves as the representatives of 'the people' against an illegitimate 'elite', but the substance of their politics is very different indeed, and so is their relation to democracy. In this piece I want to raise two points. One: the relation between populism and democracy in the Greek crisis. Two: the risk that defeating a democratic and inclusive leftist populist party and ignoring its demands might strengthen the radical right in Greece (and perhaps also elsewhere).



Syriza is a populist party. Not because its demands are irrational or unreasonable, but because it claims to represent 'the people' against an illegitimate 'elite'. I am using a neutral definition of populism here, one that is close to the growing academic consensus about the concept of populism and far removed from the derogatory and overly broad use of the term in much political rhetoric and journalism alike.

Syriza opposes 'the people' to two illegitimate elites in fact: the corrupt Greek political-economic elite and the international and European political and financial elite, part of which are its creditors. It was elected to resist European austerity measures and to be an alternative for the corrupt Greek political class that ruled the country for many years (and executed European austerity measures).

Syriza seems to have lost the battle with its creditors (I am writing this on the day before the Wednesday 15th deadline for getting the deal through the Greek parliament imposed by the Eurogroup). Moreover, those creditors

have 'punished' Tsipras (and Greece in its entirety) for letting the Greek people voice its opinion about the proposals of the creditors in a referendum. It is rather shocking, from a democratic perspective, to read that Tsipras was warned that a 'no' vote would get him even worse conditions than those that were rejected by the referendum. Populism as a threat to democracy? Not in this case, it seems. After months of negotiating and certainly after the agreement reached on July 12th, it is hard to maintain that it was the Greek populists that threatened democracy. If anything, Syriza's populism constituted a corrective to the hollowing out of Greek democratic institutions by the country's creditors. A corrective that has largely failed so far.

Tsipras is now stressing that his government will divide the costs for the third aid package evenly and make the rich in Greece pay as well. He is thus trying to keep at least some of his election promises and keep some of his appeal as a representative of 'the people' against 'the elite' (as well as left-wing appeal of course). It remains to be seen whether this will be enough for him to remain in power, and how. He already needs the support of the old political parties that Syriza was the alternative for, thus losing even more of his populist appeal as an alternative to the elite.

How things will evolve, no one knows. It seems very likely, however, that democracy will not be the winner here. Much has already been said about how the agreement reached on July 12th constitutes the end of democracy in Greece (and in the European Union). What I want to focus on in the remainder of this piece is on how this crisis and the potential disintegration, defeat or surrender of Syriza might create conditions that are favourable to forces *within* Greece that constitute a threat to democracy.

In an [interview with ABC](#) on July the 14th, Yanis Varoufakis stated that:

"If our party, Syriza, that has cultivated so much hope in Greece ... if we betray this hope and bow our heads to this new form of postmodern occupation, then I cannot see any other possible outcome than the further strengthening of Golden Dawn. They will inherit the mantle of the anti-austerity drive, tragically."



Whether Varoufakis' remark is inspired by Ernesto Laclau's thinking on populism I do not know (some attention has been devoted to [Laclau as an inspiration for Syriza](#)), but [Laclau's perspective on populism](#) does help to understand this statement. The late Argentinean political theorist stressed that the resistance to an elite is constitutive to populism. It is through the opposition to an illegitimate 'elite' that populists can construct 'the people' and bring together a range of demands and different societal groups. What brings those demands together, and what plays a central role in making all kinds of groups of people feel part of 'the people' and vote for a populist party is their shared opposition to 'the elite'.

This also means that populists such as Syriza have no definitive claim over the demands they have brought together nor over the groups of citizens they have interpellated as part of 'the people' (by opposing them to the same 'elite'). Demands such as 'the end of austerity', as Varoufakis mentions, but also 'national sovereignty', 'Greek dignity', 'democracy', and 'solidarity' were mobilised by Syriza. Syriza built an alliance of a range of leftist groups behind these demands. Syriza's successful claim on those demands and values is also what explains their broad support in the January elections and in the referendum. Not all 36% of the Greek electorate that voted for Syriza were on the radical Left, let alone all 61% of the people that voted 'No' in the June bailout referendum. But 'end of austerity', 'Greek dignity', 'democracy' etc. are not inherently linked to Syriza. If Syriza gives in to the agreement and renounces its election promises, or falls apart, or a combination of both, those demands are up for grabs again by other political forces.



European leaders have pushed for a return to the pre-Syriza era with parties that complied more easily, a Syriza that is forced to behave like those earlier governing parties, or a technocratic government that merely executes European orders. Syriza was left little to no space to arrive at a honourable agreement. There are several reasons for this, but an important one seems to be the aim to defeat a radical Left party that contested the dominant economic ideology and, for some members of the Eurozone, the parties in charge of austerity that are being threatened by leftist contenders. But it is not sure that the outcome of all this will be one of the government options above. Nor can we foresee what the impact of the on-going crisis will be on the political field in Greece in general. One aspect of this is that Eurozone leaders have been so occupied with defeating a democratic and inclusive left-wing populist party in Greece that they seem to have all but forgotten the radical right, a rather more disconcerting force, and most certainly so in Greece, where the radical right is of the neo-Nazi kind.

One of the forces that might benefit from what is happening in Greece today is indeed the Golden Dawn, be it under that name or in some kind of alliance with another name.

Syriza has often presented itself as the alternative to Golden Dawn: Syriza as a democratic alternative to austerity politics versus the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn as an outlet for resistance to austerity. Things are a bit more complicated than that however. After the January 2015 elections, Syriza formed a coalition with the conservative right-wing nationalist party ANEL, a member of the European Conservatives and Reformists, and a party that has been labelled radical right by some. The two parties have widely diverging views on ethical issues, immigration, and other issues, but were united in their resistance against austerity measures. Syriza's coalition with ANEL was a pragmatic one, as no other anti-austerity party was willing to make a coalition (Syriza approached the communist KKE before the elections but they declined). Still, this coalition also seems to indicate that for Syriza the pro austerity versus anti-austerity dimension was more crucial than the progressive-conservative dimension.



Still, it remains so that the defeat of the left-wing populist Syriza creates the space for the rise of the Golden Dawn, a party that is much further to the right than ANEL and that follows much more extreme and violent political strategies. A situation with Syriza gone, weakened, unable to fulfil its promises, and/or forming a government with the traditional political parties (which would constitute its joining 'the elite' it criticised so heavily), could strengthen the Golden Dawn's claim to be the true representative of 'the Greek people', the only defender of 'Greek dignity' and of 'democracy', and the only alternative to 'the elite'. (It also remains to be seen what ANEL itself will do in the next

days and weeks and beyond – their support for the agreement with the Eurozone will also determine their appeal as an alternative to austerity).

Beyond the fact that they are both populist and resist austerity, Syriza and Golden Dawn have very different political projects that give very different meanings to the central terms in their rhetoric. Syriza articulates national sovereignty and resistance to austerity in a democratic and progressive project that defines ‘the Greek people’ in an inclusive way (one of Syriza’s first measures was a more just treatment of immigrants, on which [a recently passed bill was not supported by ANEL](#)).

Golden Dawn is a very different story. Its definition of ‘the Greek people’ is not open and inclusive but closed and racist. Its defense of ‘national sovereignty’ and ‘dignity’ equal the rejection of immigration, multiculturalism, and the European Union. Like Syriza, it criticizes the financial elite, but it does so in a deeply anti-Semitic way. It doesn’t merely oppose the Greek people to European leaders, but speaks of a clash between peoples as ethnically defined national groups. And its solidarity is not one between the poor and needy, but one limited to ethnic Greeks and hostile of foreigners (as [its food handouts shows](#)).



Populism can be a [corrective to democracy](#) or a [threat](#). It all depends on who uses the populist strategy of claiming to represent ‘the people’ and to what ends. Defeating and ignoring the demands of a democratic and inclusive populism can threaten democracy in at least two ways. Greece is already losing much of its democratic decision-making power (despite Syriza’s attempts). With radical right populists on the rise, democratic values and human rights would also get a serious blow. Given the extreme nature of Golden Dawn, very broad support for the party does seem unlikely, but who knows what kind of political formation on the far right will come out of this crisis? But even if Golden Dawn does not manage to become a broad populist party, radical right activists might constitute a threat (and so might radical left activists). The situation in Greece is becoming ever more dire with soaring unemployment rates, enormous problems in health care, and more austerity to come. With Syriza at the very least weakened as a democratic outlet for resistance against austerity and as a vessel of hope for the future of Greece, where will that resistance go, and what will happen if all hope has failed?

World War II has often been invoked in this crisis. What we are seeing today has nothing to do with Nazi Germany occupying Greece (let me leave the [war debt issue aside here](#)). For one, despite the dominance of Germany in European politics, this was not a case of Germany versus Greece, but the entire Eurozone versus the Greek government. A rather more interesting parallel, as Varoufakis has mentioned, is the one with the Versailles Treaty after WWI and the opportunities that created for the radical right in Germany.

I am not arguing here that anything of the kind is going to happen in Greece. It is exactly the instability and unpredictability of the current situation that is reason for concern. Let us hope the radical right in Greece does not benefit from this (and let us be grateful that Golden Dawn was not stronger during the talks with the Eurozone – partly because of legal measures –to begin with). But if politics in Greece do take a turn for the worse, it seems clear that the European leaders and institutions will have played an important role in creating the conditions for this to happen.

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the Euro Crisis in the Press blog nor of the London School of Economics.

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