

SYRIZA is not the same party that rose to power in 2015 as it is imploding - is this the end of its populist adventure?



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The career of Greece's, SYRIZA (The Coalition of the Radical Left - Progressive Alliance) - its transformation from a small radical party into one that claimed and seized power in a European country, to its current implosion - has aroused interest around its politics, strategy and, ultimately, character.

SYRIZA as an opposition party (2004-2015) had a strong radical character: standing against imperialism, the decline of democracy, racism and xenophobia, as well as neoliberal capitalism.



In the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2008, SYRIZA (along with other left-wing populist parties) gave hope to the peoples of Europe that it was able to strike a new anti-neoliberal path and tear down the liberal and social democratic politics that led to economic collapse, poverty, and social exclusion. Thirteen years after the outbreak of the economic crisis in Greece, ten years after the remarkable [Greek movement of squares](#) and six years after the huge victory of SYRIZA leader Alexis Tsipras in the elections, many citizens turned their backs on the party.



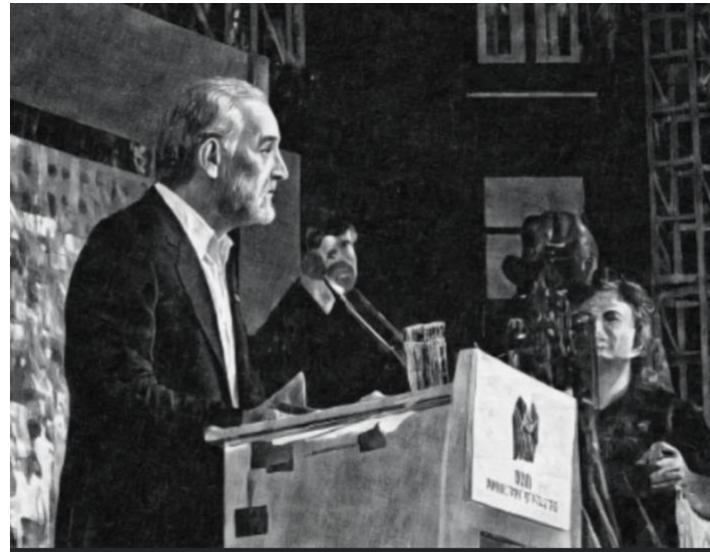
But SYRIZA's rapid adaptation to the existing political-economic structure after its rise to power transformed its logic. The party maintained its left-wing populist characteristics, which (mainly in the first phase of its rule between January and September 2015) retained both a kind of radicalism and a close relationship with the popular classes.

During its second term in office (September 2015-2019), SYRIZA gradually abandoned its radical elements and the radical politico-economic solutions it had been advocating.



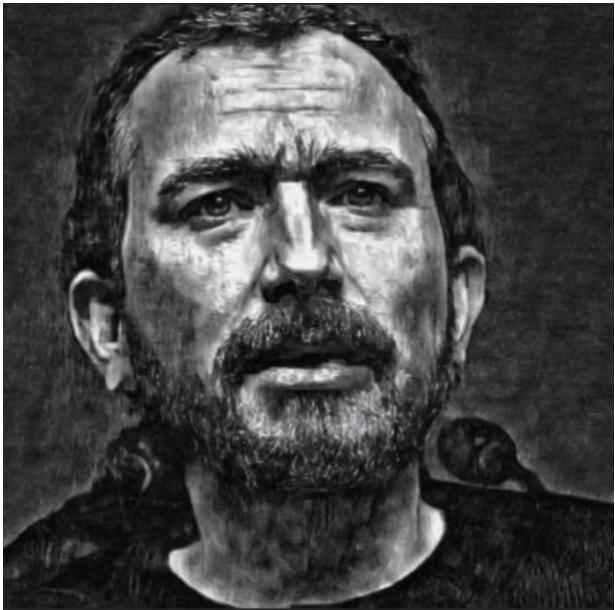
The party did not find it difficult to accept liberal democracy with all its problems, or to form a coalition government with the [Independent Greeks](#), a radical-Right party. It forgot its recent anti-imperialist past and recognized fiscal discipline and liberal reforms as an important tool of governance. Shortly before the end of his term in 2019, Tsipras favoured moving the party towards a so-called 'progressive alliance' (but in cooperation with both progressive and conservative politicians), flirting with the center-Left, and adopting consensual politics and 'political realism'. Although Tsipras [described the new party's program as radical and realistic](#), it was hard to discern any radicalism anymore.

So what has happened to the populism of SYRIZA, the central characteristic of the party in the years before its 'pragmatic' turn? Let's start from the beginning. SYRIZA has not always been a populist party. In the period before the election of Tsipras to the party's leadership, its former leader Alekos Alavanos had not adopted a clear populist logic, placing great emphasis on the role of youth and movements.



Tsipras' ascendance changed the orientation of the party from 2008 onwards, during a period of strong social movement activism marked by popular mobilizations. A new populist logic through the articulation and representation of popular demands for democracy, equality, justice and solidarity, as well as uncompromising opposition to the political and economic establishment that led the country and Europe to the destructive fiscal, sovereign debt and political crises were central elements of this transformation.

After its electoral defeat in 2019, it gradually became clear that SYRIZA's populism had nothing to do with the populist intensity and passion of the past. In opposition, as it has been since 2019, SYRIZA continued to maintain elements of its populist rhetoric and less pronounced aspects of its anti-elitism, such as the persistence of its self-identification with 'the many' against 'the elites/the establishment'. According to populism researcher [Antonis Galanopoulos](#), while SYRIZA is still accurately recognized as a left-wing populist party, its populist discourse has admittedly been toned down during the pandemic.



Pablo Iglesias

At the same time, it is very difficult for a populist party to retain its populism in power, without moderating its intensity. It is characteristic that most of the populist parties, after their rise, attempt to find political solutions through consensus, while accepting aspects of the political establishment. As a result, they are unable to maintain the antagonistic logic of 'the people versus the elites' and their close relationship with the people. After the successive defeats suffered by left-wing parties in Europe and their compliance to the system, it seems that the radical left cycle and populist vision of the post-crisis period is now closing. Recently, Pablo Iglesias from Podemos [decided to leave Spanish politics](#) after the Madrid regional election, proving that 'the show' has come to an end.

Despite SYRIZA's [current political woes](#) it is likely that Left-wing populism will not disappear especially where polarization and pervasive inequality seems to dominate politics.

Based on [The systemic metamorphosis of Greece's once radical left-wing SYRIZA party](#)
By Grigoris Markou

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