

Syriza's Failure Has Hurt Us All - First notes on the European elections in Greece

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Setbacks for Syriza have prompted Alexis Tsipras to call an early general election. Yet as a onetime left-wing government reaches the end of the road, the bases for rebuilding the fight against austerity look weaker than ever.

Contents

- [The Big Picture](#)
- [The Fragmented Left](#)
- [Popular Unity Humiliated](#)

Let's be clear: the disaster was even worse than even the most pessimistic could have expected.

The European elections saw Syriza heavily punished by the voters, as its 23.8 percent result put it almost ten points behind the right-wing New Democracy. Alexis Tsipras has now called a snap general election for July 7 — a kind of damage-control exercise, given the trouble he and his party are in.

The spin deployed by the government and pro-Syriza media did not change anything much —nor did recently announced “social measures,” which had more than a whiff of preelection “gifts.” The electorate went ahead and punished a government which has for almost four years relentlessly applied a third austerity Memorandum.

The explanation by Nikos Filis, a prominent figure in the current Syriza leadership and a former education minister, have much to tell us about the reasons for his party's collapse:

“The first reason [for Syriza's defeat] was the application of the memorandums. Perhaps they were less painful than the previous ones, and Syriza tried to find ways forward that would help out our most vulnerable fellow citizens, but ultimately it applied memorandums of a neoliberal thrust. The painful compromise [of swallowing the EU-imposed memorandum] also involved other compromises. No party has been able to escape the fate to which [implementing] the memorandums condemns them. [The conservative] New Democracy lost out in so doing, and then rebuilt itself, whereas [the center-left] Pasok has collapsed.”

He was doubtless onto something, here. But there are also other conclusions to draw from the disaster.

The Big Picture

The July 7 general election will be a walk in the park for the New Democracy (ND) party: all the signs are it is heading toward an absolute majority in parliament. ND's ten-point lead over Syriza in

the European elections was bigger than what most opinion polls and government officials expected (and indeed, it is a record in recent decades). It was moreover amplified by Syriza's setbacks in local and regional contests, as it lost two regions (including greater Athens) and half of the local councils it controlled in the Athens and Piraeus area. There has been a clear rejection of Tsipras and his government.

Added to this, a closer analysis shows that the Syriza electorate in 2019 in fact bears little relation with the voters who first put it in government in 2015. Admittedly, given the lack of any credible alternative on the Left (in the broadest sense) of the political spectrum, it has not collapsed entirely. That's the big difference with what happened to Pasok in 2012, after its own implementation of austerity measures.

Syriza continues to rack up considerable votes both nationally and in popular neighborhoods, even if here it is sometimes challenged or — most of the time — overtaken by the Right. In terms of class profile, according to the data provided by exit polls it is suffering its heaviest losses among private-sector workers, students, and farmers (down 16 percent compared to 2015) and the most limited ones among professionals and pensioners (6-7 percent).

In generational terms, it has lost nearly half its support among younger voters (17 to 24 year-olds) but has shed only 4 percent backing among the over 65s. From an electorate polarized around wage-earners and the youth, it is now a party with a nearly uniform average score among most social strata and age classes (around 20 percent) and is ahead of New Democracy only among the unemployed. The "qualitative" profile of its electorate has undergone an even more dramatic change. A look at the choice Syriza voters made among its candidates for the European Parliament is instructive in this regard.

The seats are distributed in line with a preferential voting system: each voter can choose up to four names among the candidates of a given list. Among the six MEPs Syriza did manage to elect, the one who came second, Elena Kountoura, comes from Panos Kammenos's national-sovereigntist Anel party (Syriza's partner in government, up until the agreement with Macedonia over its name change) and promoted a clearly nationalist and xenophobic discourse. The fifth-placed one, Alexis Georgoulis, is a comedian known for his roles as the young male lead in various TV series, who initially planned to be a New Democracy candidate. The sixth, Petros Kokkalis, is the grandson of a man with a real leftist record: "Doctor Kokkalis," a doctor and minister in the rebel Democratic Army government during the civil war that followed World War II (before then taking refuge in East Germany). But he is, most importantly, the son and heir of the oligarch Sokratis Kokkalis, who made his fortunes in telecoms in the 1980s, profiting from his ties with Pasok prime minister Andreas Papandreou.

Syriza's electorate today looks less like the popular base of a left-wing party than the "de-ideologized" clientelist support of a party of government. It is moreover obvious that it is in part the heir to the "social-liberal" Pasok of the 2000s. Syriza came first in just four constituencies nationally, and of these, three were among Pasok's historic symbolic bastions: two in Crete and one in the northwestern Peloponnese, around the city of Patras, cradle of that party's long-dominant Papandreou family.

At the same time, there were also developments further to the right of the political spectrum. A new far-right party emerged — Greek Solution — driven by both the nationalist mobilizations around the Macedonian question and the exhaustion of the neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn. It racked up excellent results in northern Greece (where these nationalist rallies were strongest) and received almost as many votes nationally as Golden Dawn (they took 4.1 and 4.8 percent respectively). It is possible that with the rise of this party, the Greek far right has found a more "acceptable: face than the criminals

of Golden Dawn and that it will be able to make fresh breakthroughs in the future. Another worrying indicator of the far right's potential came from the exit polling among first-time voters: one poll found that around 13 percent of them voted for Golden Dawn.

The Fragmented Left

As for the rest of the Left, the Communist Party (KKE) stood still relative to its result in the 2015 general election (5.5 percent) though this was itself down on its result in the previous European elections in 2014 (where it took 6.1 percent). Its results in regional elections also indicate a notable loss as compared to the 2014 contests, of the order of a fifth of its vote. In Greater Athens, its score went down from 10.6 to 8.3 percent, in Central Macedonia from 8 to 5.7 percent, and in the Thessalia area (Central Greece) it fell from 10.4 to 7 percent.

Most importantly, the KKE lost three of the four local councils it had hitherto controlled, keeping only Patras, where its very popular candidate, the outgoing mayor, was resoundingly reelected with 71 percent in the second round. Overall, however, the KKE's influence is slowly but surely eroding. The party pays the cost of its extreme sectarianism and neo-Stalinism, which have made it unable to intervene in any effective way in the highly volatile conjuncture of the last decade.

The surprise of the elections was the unexpected success of Yanis Varoufakis's MeRA25 list, with exactly 2.99 percent of the vote, falling narrowly short of electing a MEP (the threshold is 3 percent). Former Syriza parliamentary speaker Zoe Kostantopoulou also salvaged a somewhat respectable score (1.6 percent), though this was only half what she would have needed to win a seat in the European Parliament.

Analyzing the results for these two formations, we see a widely spread and relatively homogenous electorate: the outcomes were a little better than average in the bigger towns and cities, but there were neither particular high points nor deserts. In short, they received a widespread vote of affinity, based on the visibility and media presence of their leaders, but which also reflected their lack of organizational implantation on the ground.

The candidate who came closest to election on Yanis Varoufakis's MeRA25 list — Sofia Sakorafa, an outgoing MEP who was initially elected for Syriza in 2014 — remains linked in the collective memory to the mobilizations against the Memoranda in 2010–12. This was doubtless a good catch for Varoufakis, the only one thus far, but probably from this point onward he will be able to attract a significant part of those disillusioned by Syriza, especially at the level of cadres and prominent personalities. It also seems his list did well among youth (and very definitely among young middle-class Greeks with degrees): according to an exit poll among first-time voters, MeRA25's result was around 4.5 percent, more for instance than the KKE, which was rated at 3.7 percent among this age bracket despite having its own youth organization.

Varoufakis's success and the relatively honorable score for Kostantopoulou only make the defeats for Popular Unity (a political front created in the summer of 2015 by Syriza's Left Platform after it left the party) and Antarsya (the far-left coalition founded in 2009) more painful, especially for the former, not least in a contest in which the pressure to vote tactically for bigger parties is much lesser than in a national-level general election. Their defeat will weigh heavily, for these are the only two forces with a denser base of activists, unlike Varoufakis and Kostantopoulou's lists, which only exist on TV panels.

Antarsya's result was very weak (0.66 percent) but ultimately comparable to what it achieved in previous Greek and European contests (in 2014–15 it ranged between 0.64 and 0.85 percent). Its

main setback was in the municipal elections in Athens, where two separate lists stood, as the SEK (Greek section of the International Socialist Tendency led by the British Socialist Workers' Party) ran alone. Both elected some councilors, but the 2014 electorate (around 2 percent) was split in two and the capital built up over years of activist labor was badly undermined.

Popular Unity Humiliated

As for Popular Unity, its result was humiliating (at 0.58 percent), especially if compared with its only previous point of reference, its 2.9 percent result in the September 2015 parliamentary elections (the second national contest that year, after Syriza accepted the EU institutions' memorandum and then its left wing split away). There was an element, here, of personal rejection of Panagiotis Lafazanis, the former leader of Syriza's Left Platform and energy minister in the first Syriza government. But it is also a rejection of the policy led by his current, and a collective failure of the Popular Unity project as such.

Many factors were at play here — I will just briefly list them.

Firstly, even if it is always reductionist and in part unfair to limit the whole problem to this, there was doubtless a problem of leadership. It should be said that Lafazanis is perceived as especially exhausted and discredited, not only given his evident failure to effectively oppose Syriza's capitulation in summer 2015, but also the wayward drift of the more recent period, illustrated by a considerable flirtation with nationalism (over the Macedonian question in particular) and his appearance on a far-right TV channel (unleashing a storm of protest within Popular Unity).

We ought to note that Zoe Kostantopoulou went even further in this direction (calling for people to participate in the nationalist rallies over Macedonia, which Popular Unity stopped short of doing) but she was not addressing the same section of the electorate as that party.

Nonetheless, adopting such stances doubtless considerably weakened Popular Unity, and further damaged its internal cohesion and moral standing among wider layers of the anticapitalist and activist left. The monopolization of Popular Unity's media and public presence by Lafazanis individually drew an increasingly negative public response, but his tendency refused any attempt to promote fresh faces.

This current, a majority in Popular Unity's leadership policies (following a conference marked by some rather dubious maneuvers) showed little concern to build the party as a "common home" for all its component parts. This was all the more damaging given that this tendency is made up of aging cadres who emerged from the 1991 split in the KKE, bearing a culture marked by a bureaucratic spirit and lack of openness to the sensibilities or practices of the social movements. The result has been a continual hemorrhaging of activists, especially after its founding congress in June 2016, at which it mobilized around 5,000 activists — no small number in post-2015 conditions.

There is no doubting that Popular Unity and its activists were present in all the mobilizations of the recent period (as were Antarsya's activists) but it ought to be said that these were very fragmented and far from broad mobilizations. Moreover, Popular Unity activists have tended to overlook work on the ground and replace it with symbolic actions or agit-prop micro-actions carried out under a party banner, notably in the movement against home foreclosures.

Last but not least, both Popular Unity and Antarsya have seriously underestimated the need to present credible, developed alternative proposals, instead thinking that denouncing the Syriza government and calling for exit from the eurozone and European Union could alone suffice. In a

situation of demoralization in which the idea that “There Is No Alternative” reigns supreme, this discourse appears as a merely rhetorical exercise, able to convince no one. Their lack of a real project has allowed Varoufakis in particular to appear as the bearer of an “innovative” and “sexy” message, skillfully playing the card of a moderate, “euro-compatible” opposition to Tsipras and Syriza.

A final consideration that confirms the failure of the anticapitalist left parties: while results for their lists in regional elections were doubtless also weak (in general achieving between 1.5 and 2 percent, though with peaks of 3 percent for Popular Unity or lists it backed), they were considerably higher than their results in the European contest, and they often did manage to elect representatives to regional councils. The same could be said of their municipal lists, in those areas where their campaigns corresponded to real activist work and implantation at the local level. This gap well illustrates the (in my view irreversible) inability of both Antarsya and (even more so) Popular Unity — the only new force on the radical left since summer 2015 — to construct viable political forces at the national level.

The future seems all the more compromised because, in electoral terms, Varoufakis seems able to assert his own predominance in an “intermediate” space which is to the left of Tsipras’s party and yet also “moderate” and doubtless open to closer relations with Syriza once that party goes into opposition. At the same time, on the radical left only the KKE continues to maintain a militant base and electoral credibility. Yet it does this while also locking itself down in a pathological sectarianism that condemns it to a slow (and in my view, also irreversible) process of decline.

Clearly, the work of rebuilding will be a long-term task. Yet the call for the invention of new ways forward is an urgent one.

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P.S.

- Jacobin, 06.11.2019:
<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/06/syriza-greece-elections-tsipras-varoufakis>
- Abridged version of a text originally published on Contretemps and available on ESSF (article 49232), [Premières notes sur les élections européennes en Grèce](#).
- TRANSLATION BY DAVID BRODER.