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Event Analysis

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The 3rd Congress of SYRIZA in 2020: party change put into perspective

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Introduction

SYRIZA will organize its third Congress at the beginning of 2020. The outcome of the Congress is going to influence the future of SYRIZA as the party has to adjust to the new realities caused by recent developments such as its meteoric electoral rise since 2012 and the governmental experience between 2015 and 2019. SYRIZA is henceforth the second-biggest party in terms of electoral influence and parliamentary representation in Greece. Therefore, SYRIZA's internal developments will affect more broadly the political competition and the Greek party system.

This Congress will be a turning point in SYRIZA's internal transformation after its loss of power in the July 2019 national elections. An electoral loss is generally considered as a catalyst for internal transformation.¹ However, SYRIZA has been constantly evolving since the 2010 Greek crisis. Until 2013, SYRIZA was a coalition of different leftist parties and organizations. During this time, the first Congress of SYRIZA proceeded to unify the different organizations under a single party. The acquisition of power in 2015, the internal split in September 2015 (when the left wing quit the party), and the loss of power in July 2019 suggest a series of great internal modifications. This instability constantly affected the types of resources mobilized by SYRIZA into the political field, the profile of party elites, and the program and ideological identity of the party. Overall, SYRIZA remains a small party—in terms of organization and membership—whose social and local anchors are weak, despite its term in office between 2015 and 2019. From this point of view, the Congress is considered as an initiative to make the party more attractive to broader audiences and to extend SYRIZA's social roots.

The Congress in context

SYRIZA lost four consecutive elections in a two-month period and failed to maintain its power. On 26 May 2019, SYRIZA lost the European elections to the New Democracy political party by a large margin, 23.75% to 32.12% of the votes cast. Even though European elections tend to be perceived as second-order elections, these were

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¹ Mair, Peter / Müller, Wolfgang and Fritz Plasser. (eds.). 2004. *Political parties and electoral change: party responses to electoral markets*. London: SAGE; Harmel R and K. Janda. 1994. An Integrated Theory of Party Goals and Party Change. *Journal of Theoretical Politics* volume 6(3), 259-287.

the first to be organized since 2015 and have been widely polarized by the two major parties. The entire electoral campaign was conducted as a prelude to the legislative campaigns, and the stakes were high for both sides. The defeat, but mostly the large margin of votes, provoked a shock within SYRIZA. In response, A. Tsipras, the party leader, announced national elections on 7 July 2019. Along with European elections, municipal and regional elections were also held. SYRIZA was defeated in all contexts. In a total of thirteen regions, Tsipras succeeded to elect only one candidate supported by the party, while New Democracy controlled the rest of the regions. At the municipal level, SYRIZA failed to deliver a significant performance as the overwhelming majority of its candidates failed to win municipal offices. Finally, the outcome of the national elections confirmed the initial trends as New Democracy gained 39.85% of the casted votes compared to 31.53% in favor of SYRIZA. Thus New Democracy elected 158 out of 300 deputies and formed the new government.

However, these defeats did not indicate an electoral disaster for SYRIZA since the party was far from collapsing. SYRIZA managed to maintain 31% of the votes cast and maintained the role of the second pillar within the emerging two-party system. From this point of view, the 2019 national elections ended an electoral cycle that began with the double national elections in May and June 2012.² This electoral cycle signified the collapse of both the PASOK and the traditional bipartisan system. During this period, the main indicators of political competition were the very high rates of electoral volatility, the entry of new players into the political field, a polarized multi-party system with six or more parties in Parliament, and the impossibility to form single-party majorities or governments. Therefore, the consolidation of the two key players in the 2019 elections, namely New Democracy and SYRIZA, the eclipse of various flash parties, and the poor electoral performance of contenders like PASOK or Greek Communist Party indicated a centripetal dynamic within the emerging political configuration.³ It is through this lens that SYRIZA tries to further consolidate its position within the party system and focuses on its internal organization with aspirations to return to office in the future.

On the road to the Congress: intraparty struggles and challenges

The Congress can be perceived as a moment and space of internal struggles and redistribution of power. Thus, the composition of the Congress' agenda is a particularly important step as it can decide the orientation of the Congress' activity. Internal players—with sometimes competing interests—try to consolidate or reinforce their position within the party by setting the agenda and trying to influence its outcome. Thus, the issues discussed or excluded from the dialogue illuminate the internal struggles and power dynamics.

From this perspective, we can assess a series of main findings. The first concerns the process of creating the agenda and its implications. The leader of the party, A. Tsipras, determines the agenda of the Congress. As previously indicated, the party transformation has arisen from his encouragement. The party leader

² Voulgaris, Giannis and Ilias Nikolakopoulos. (eds.). 2014. *2012: O diplos eklogikos seismos*. Athens: Themelio.

³ Tsirbas, Yiannis. 2016. The January 2015 Parliamentary Election in Greece: Government Change, Partial Punishment and Hesitant Stabilisation. *South European Society and Politics* volume 21(4), 407-426.

declared that the electoral result was "(...) a contract, but also a command, to transform (the party) in quick steps, to transform into a significant party, into a modern and mass, left, progressive movement with deep roots and strong links to the working people and society".⁴ This initiative suggests clearly that the Congress is not going to address the designation of a new leader, which is the norm after an electoral defeat. In contrast, A. Tsipras sets the agenda as an uncontested leader. Hence even discussions regarding the ways to elect leaders in the future have mainly been proposed by A. Tsipras. Without opting for an official change until now, he seems to be interested in introducing participatory models, like the open primaries, to further enhance his popularity and his legitimacy.

Furthermore, the fact that established party elites decide the agenda of the congress leaves little space for discussion of controversial topics. As we can assess from official declarations, three issues are highly promoted within pre-congress dialogue, namely the members' enrollment, the organizational structure of the party, and the ideological identity of SYRIZA. The three issues express the party elite's concern regarding how to regain power. In this context, criticism about the party's term and strategic choices, like the coalition with a far-right party, seem to be minimalized. According to the party officials, belaboring on these topics could undermine the unity of SYRIZA and its capacity to efficiently confront the New Democracy government.

A second observation is about the potential struggles between competing groups. Several party officials have prioritized the reactivation of party organs and better articulation between the different party components (namely the parliamentary group, the central and the local organs). These proposals are steadily promoted by an internal group, called the group of 53 which was formed in 2014. This group is composed of party officials who were elected into parliament and/or integrated into government. Since the defection of the left wing in 2015, the group constitutes the main cluster of internal opposition. During the term in office, the group's deputies criticized the concentration of power in A. Tsipras and the council of ministers, with party organs marginalized from the decision-making processes.

This situation begs the question as to why this internal group seeks to enhance the power of internal collective organs. The pressures over the active role of the party bureaucracy aims to consolidate these officials within the new architecture of the party. It also expresses a struggle between the historic cadres of SYRIZA with the former socialists and other politicians who joined the party since 2015. Dissidents from PASOK have approached SYRIZA since 2012. However, this was without modification of the party's internal composition. Their presence within the parliamentary group remained small and they could not access central party organs due to internal resistance. However, the entry of dissident political elites, experts, and intellectuals progressively upset the established patterns of promotion within the party. This entire period of SYRIZA's expansion between

⁴ Speech of the President of SYRIZA in front of the Central Committee of the party, 13 July 2019. Available at: <https://www.syriza.gr/article/id/82168/Al.-Tsipras:-Entolh-na-metaschmatistoyme-se-mia-megalh-parataksh-se-ena-sygchrono-kai-maziko-Aristero-proodeytiko-kinhma.html> (accessed: 31 October 2019).

2012 and 2015 was characterized by internal struggles over what kind of symbolic resources should be utilized within the party. The composition of internal organs, party candidates' lists, and party leader counselors demonstrated the evolving image of SYRIZA into a more professionally-oriented party that promotes patterns of political career based on the expertise and the experience in public office. These trends have been enhanced since SYRIZA gained power in January 2015. Prior to these elections, the candidates coming from other political parties multiplied thanks to A. Tsipras, despite pressure from local branches who promote party candidates. Since 2015, former politicians have registered membership in SYRIZA, became part of the parliamentary group, and even gained access into governmental positions.

A. Tsipras' call for the "enlargement" of the party is also accompanied by the enrollment of various external players who seem keen to gain broader visibility and influence within party affairs. The composition of the committee in charge of the Congress is particularly interesting from this perspective. The committee was announced at the end of November 2019, and its composition was decided by the party's authorities. It includes more than 600 members and is composed by some prominent former socialists as well as trade-union leaders, academics, artists, and persons from various civil society institutions.⁵ Even if the efficiency of such a massive organ is in dispute, it reflects the leader's aim to open internal affairs beyond party members and illustrates the upheaval that occurs within intraparty composition. The group of 53 usually receive a political promotion through party organs. In contrast, the new officials without any organic links to the party gained influential positions as a direct choice of the party leader due to their personal political capital. Thus, the struggles over the role of the party organization refer to the different patterns of political careers coexisting within the party since 2012.

The Congress and the position of SYRIZA within the political field.

A big concern regarding party organization is that SYRIZA's membership is small. There is a disconnect between electoral influence and the number of members, a fact that is frequently identified by the party's elites. SYRIZA's electoral boost these recent years was not accompanied by an increase of its members. Furthermore, SYRIZA maintains a loose internal structure and the rules that govern members' enrollment at the local level are not strictly codified. In other words, supporters may participate in party activities without maintaining an organic link. Since 2010, the party expanded its audience and formed broader coalitions under the anti-austerity program and enhanced its electoral influence through investment in protest movements like the "Indignant Citizens."⁶ The links between SYRIZA and social movements contributed to the rise of SYRIZA but also allowed to activists to seek political promotion through the party. However, during SYRIZA's term in office, we observe a broader separation between the party and the social movements which were linked with SYRIZA's anti-austerity strategy. Furthermore, the left-wing members of

⁵ Έντονο άρωμα ΠΑΣΟΚ στην Κεντρική Επιτροπή Ανασυγκρότησης του ΣΥΡΙΖΑ. *Efsyn.gr*, 28 November 2019. Available at: https://www.efsyn.gr/politiki/antipoliteysi/220881_entono-aroma-pasok-stin-kentriki-epitropi-anasygkrotisis-toy-syriza, (accessed: 08 December 2019).

⁶ Rori, Lamprini. 2015. De la contestation au pouvoir. Les ressorts de l'ascension électorale de SYRIZA. *Savoir/Agir* volume 32(2), 61-71.

SYRIZA left the party when SYRIZA adopted a new austerity program in September 2015. This split deprived SYRIZA from a critical mass of members as not only the Left Platform (namely the left wing of the party) defected, but also members of youth organizations and activists from anti-austerity or solidarity movements broke from SYRIZA.⁷ These developments affected both the size and quality of SYRIZA's membership as the grassroots activity has decreased and SYRIZA has failed to maintain active local branches.

More importantly, the discussion about the party organization refers to the function of organizational linkage, namely the capacity of a party to create links to society and voters through civil society organizations and institutions.⁸ Currently, the issue is gaining momentum since SYRIZA lost its main resources, namely the resources provided by state capture and parliamentary activity. Since 2015, SYRIZA is almost exclusively reliant on these kind of resources to maintain its position and expand its voter base.

Parliament-linked resources seemed to play an important role into the overall activity of the party. SYRIZA benefited from the increase in subsidies granted to political parties by the public budget. According to the laws regulating political party financing, the subsidies are distributed according to the party's position in the elections (Law 3023/2002). For example, according to the Committee for the Control of assets, an independent authority controlling the assets and revenue of political parties and political staff, SYRIZA received a benefit of 972,624 EUR in 2011, while in 2017, the amount granted to the party was about 6.4 million euros.⁹ In parallel, the number of MPs increased from thirteen MPs in 2009 to seventy-one in June 2012 and one hundred forty-nine in January 2015. MPs provide extra financial sources for the party since the party receives part of their parliamentary allowances and they participate in supporting the expenditures of party organs at the local level.

SYRIZA used the governmental coalition to implement targeted public policies with the aim to consolidate and expand its political clientele. SYRIZA aims to maintain and expand its electoral clientele. SYRIZA aimed to maintain and expand its electoral audience by implementing better access to healthcare for vulnerable groups, distributing social benefits to the outsiders of the economic crisis, and promoting civic rights and identity politics.

Furthermore, SYRIZA sought to consolidate its position by appropriating the state apparatus. SYRIZA provided the nomination for public administration roles, giving preference to party affiliates. These were senior positions in public administration, public organisms, and ministries. Controlling these key positions allowed SYRIZA not only to better implement its agenda, but also the opportunity to undertake patronage practices. Control over key public institutions is traditionally seen as a way to expand the party's voters through nominations or different kinds of services. At the same time, SYRIZA controlled

⁷ Papanikolopoulos, Dimitris. 2019. *SYRIZA kai koinwnika kinimata: h sxesi, o gamos, h diastase*, in *SYRIZA ena komma en kinisei*, edited by Mpalampanidis, Giannis. Athens: Themelio, 121-141.

⁸ Poguntke, Thomas. 2002. *Party Organizational Linkage: Parties without firm social roots?*, in *Parties in the new Europe. Political and analytical challenges*, edited by Luther, Kurt Richard and Ferdinand Müller-Rommel. Oxford / New York: Oxford University Press, 43-62.

⁹ Control Committee, <https://epitropielegxou.parliament.gr/> (accessed: 30 October.2019).

the nominations to gain the loyalty of the remaining members and to enroll new ones. The strategy of politicization of the state apparatus is far from being a particularity of SYRIZA. Historically, parties in power use their access into the state machine in order to maintain and expand their political influence.¹⁰

However, the overall social roots of the party remain weak as SYRIZA never succeeded to create organic links with institutions of interest representation or with local government authorities to establish itself locally. SYRIZA never created any strong links within the trade union movements or professional associations, unlike PASOK, New Democracy, and the Greek Communist Party, which maintained massive affiliated organizations. Despite PASOK's loss of influence due to the austerity measures and the movement of several trade union leaders from PASOK to SYRIZA, SYRIZA still occupies a marginal position in that sector. A similar assessment is observed at the local level. Despite the victories at the national level, SYRIZA could not capitalize on these dynamics within the municipalities. The most notable victory for SYRIZA was the gain of the Attica region (which includes Athens) in 2014. Otherwise, the party has not won a significant number of municipalities or changed the electoral map since 2010. The weak performances suggest a broader inability for SYRIZA to sustain its influence in competition at the local level. As a result, the loss of power (and consequently the loss of institutional and state-related resources) obliged SYRIZA to establish itself within social spheres which could provide the party with broader visibility and legitimacy, as well as with experienced political staff.

Finally, the ideological and political identity of the party appears to be one of the most important issues. SYRIZA aims to strategically reposition itself within the ideological and political oppositions of the party system. The declared goal is to present SYRIZA as the representative of the broader progressive political camp by uniting the center-left, namely, an electorate that has been traditionally represented by PASOK. During this era, SYRIZA has redefined its ideological identity. The anti-memorandum rhetoric and practices allowed the party to undermine the traditional two-party system. However, once SYRIZA faced constraints while in power, the government has voted and implemented a third program of structural and economic adjustment since 2015.¹¹ SYRIZA's term in office and the ANEL coalition (a far-right party), made it impossible to invoke both the opposition to the memorandum and to the radical left legacy. Insofar, SYRIZA seeks a new narrative to maintain and increase its political influence, a narrative which would be more coherent with the catch-all strategy promoted by the party direction. Thus, SYRIZA's goal seems to be the redefinition of, and the hegemony over, the center-left space. In that way, SYRIZA attempts to reactivate the traditional cleavage between left and right and dominate on the Greek left since PASOK has collapsed. This strategy is in line with the profile of its electoral base, which includes mainly former socialist voters. Therefore, SYRIZA's strategic priority is to capture the political space that has been historically monopolized, both ideologically and electorally, by PASOK.

¹⁰ Sotiropoulos, Dimitris. 2001. *I koryfi tou pelateiakou kratous*. Athens: Potamos.

¹¹ Mpalampanidis, Giannis. (ed.). 2019. *SYRIZA ena komma en kinisei*. Athens: Themelio.

Conclusions

The Congress and its outcome will decide, to a large extent, both the identity of SYRIZA and the features of the party system after a decade of constant transformation. As SYRIZA loses power and sees its parliamentary representation shrink, it automatically loses vital resources needed to compete for power. The party's strategic goal is to enhance SYRIZA's entry into social spaces and arenas of competition that would allow a broader social clout while simultaneously leading the party into hegemony over the center-left political space. SYRIZA is thus trying to balance between two different kinds of resources that will decide the outcome of the strategy and the identity of the party.

Even though SYRIZA got separated from social movements during its term in office, the party steadily seeks to recreate and maintain connections with them. Linkage with social movements provides SYRIZA with potential members and internal legitimacy, as well as opportunities for dynamic opposition. Furthermore, associations with social movements allow SYRIZA to promote post-materialist issues that strikingly distinguish SYRIZA from both the traditionally conservative New Democracy and PASOK. However, it seems that the movement-related resources, both symbolic and material, have a minor role to play into the new orientation of SYRIZA.

SYRIZA opts to instead transform into a more professional-oriented party. The state machine, the interest groups, and the local government are perceived as privileged spaces for party activity and as the main channels of political promotion. This evolution shows a clear tendency towards the imitation and reproduction of the traditional modes of political domination in Greece. This evolution is in accordance with SYRIZA's transformation of its broader identity as the party casts aside its radical left heritage and seeks to represent a broader audience. The transformation of SYRIZA will significantly shape the Greek left, which has been constantly shifting since 2012. SYRIZA is confronted with the challenge to reinvent the center-left in a period when this political identity is under scrutiny across Europe.

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