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## Greece: Trying to understand SYRIZA

*This is less of a blog more of a series of notes to try and enhance understanding of who SYRIZA and its leader Alexis Tsipras actually are, and how they might behave if, as polls suggest, they become the winning party in a second Greek general election. I've been troubled by the lack of historical depth in most of the profiles published in newspapers; and of course my own knowledge is limited to English sources. I've checked this with two authoritative Greek sources. It should go up on my BBC blog soon. Get ready to hear about parties and political currents that most commentators believed were insignificant just a few years ago:*

SYRIZA is an acronym signifying "Coalition of the Radical Left". It's key component is a party called Synaspismos, itself an umbrella group of the far left in Greece.

Alexis Tsipras is the 38 year old leader of the Synaspismos party, and rose to prominence as its candidate for the mayor of Athens in 2006. Tsipras originated from the youth wing of the Communist Party, the KKE.

Greek communism, like most of western communism after the 1970s, was split into two hostile parties: the KKE of the "interior" and that of the "exterior" – the latter denoting a Moscow-oriented party, the former denoting a Euro-communist, more parliamentary and socially liberal agenda.

Initially Synaspismos was the electoral alliance between the two KKEs. But in the early 1990s the main Moscow-oriented KKE quit the alliance, purging about 45% of its members, who then stayed inside Synaspismos with the Eurocommunists. These included Tsipras.

Synaspismos then evolved in an interesting direction. Reacting to the rise of the anti-globalisation movement, first of all the party itself became a

highly diverse left umbrella group: of Eurocommunists, left-social Democrats, far leftists, and ecologists. It played a significant role in mobilizations against summits, beginning in Genoa 2001 and beyond. Meanwhile the main KKE remained a traditional Communist party, rooted in public sector and manual trade unions.

Then, in the 2004 election, Synaspismos came together with other small parties to form SYRIZA. These included a split-off from the British SWP, a split off from the main Communist Party and another group of eco-leftists.

Under Tsipras' leadership, and invigorated by now including the entire left except the traditionalist KKE, SYRIZA grew the far left's vote from 3.3% to 5.6% in the 2007 election – giving it 14 MPs.

The crisis which broke out in December 2008, after the police shooting of a 15 year old schoolboy led to two weeks of rioting by the youth and poor of Athens, further strengthened SYRIZA as a left pole of attraction. Though the parties inside SYRIZA remained in the low thousands of members, many young people began to identify with them – above all in a country where Marxism has massive prestige due to its role in both the anti-fascist resistance and in the 1946-49 Civil War. In addition, those migrants with the right to vote, hearing a rising chorus of anti-migrant rhetoric from the centre as well as the right, have flocked to vote SYRIZA.

Once George Papandreou's PASOK party committed itself to supporting EU-designed austerity programmes, after January 2010, a huge political gap opened up on the left of Greek politics – which arguably forms a natural majority. Only the KKE and SYRIZA were opposed to austerity and of the two SYRIZA had a political leadership of youth, resilience and global vision.

(It is worth noting here the character of PASOK. It emerged in the inter-war years as a split from republican liberalism, and while it became a traditional social democratic party after the fall of the Colonels regime in 1974, its forms of organization, and mass base among civil servants and small business people, lead some to compare it to Argentine "Peronism" – that is left nationalism with a working class base. This affects the political dynamics the moment the PASOK leadership loses its claim to represent "the nation" in conflict with the EU.

As events pulled SYRIZA leftward, and swelled its support, one final split took place that may prove highly significant. Veteran leaders of the old KKE-interior – that is, the Eurocommunists – split from Synaspismos and formed the Democratic Left, led by Fotis Kouvelis – in March 2010. They formed a separate parliamentary group of 4 until the recent election massively swelled their numbers to 19. At the first congress of the Democratic Left, in March 2011, in an extraordinary move, the then serving PASOK prime minister, George Papandreou, attended, sat in the front row of the audience, and applauded.

Now, how to make sense of this, and why does it matter?

The mainstream PASOK party split before the May 2012 election. Six sitting MPs joined the Democratic Left, while others tried to form an anti-austerity left social democratic party, led by charismatic female MP Louka Katseli. The latter disappeared without trace. But the PASOK left and its voters now co-exist with the former Eurocommunists in a fairly moderate, anti-austerity but essentially left social democratic, pro-Euro party – the Dem Left - which now has 19 seats.

SYRIZA massively scooped up the votes of leftist, progressive, socially liberal young people, as well as the trade union voters not specifically aligned with the Communist Party, to gain 52 seats.

The Communist Party itself, while growing its vote, did not break out of its traditional demographic base – manual workers, older lifelong Communists with family loyalty traced back to the pre-war workers' movement. The KKE gained 26 seats.

In the negotiations to form a government this week the PASOK leader, Venizelos, got the Democratic Left as far as agreeing to a programme to “progressively disengage” from the Troika-imposed austerity. But they could not persuade SYRIZA to join, and without SYRIZA, the Dem Left knew it would be the captive of a PASOK/ND coalition.

As new elections loom, obviously one possible outcome is the return of voters to ND and PASOK. But the latest polls do not signal this. They signal a growth in support for SYRIZA, which is seen as a consistent opponent of austerity on the left, and which has narrative and momentum among the traditional base of all other leftist parties.

If we look at the demographics of the left, there are the following:

- anarchist minded youth, living alternative lifestyles among the poor, who will only vote for SYRIZA or not at all. (Anecdotally, even some members of the “black bloc” were reported to have joined SYRIZA, after accepting the futility of constant rioting/counterculture.
- Middle-class and professional workers, including many public servants who’ve been hit by tax rises, wage cuts, arbitrary deductions, loss of entitlements and job losses
- Private sector trade unionists
- Migrants and the urban poor
- Small businesspeople who formerly were the base of PASOK but who have been radicalized by the tax rises, tax clampdowns and repeated heavy policing of demonstrations, and who are the most likely to be ruined by any longterm structural reform in Greece.

The success of SYRIZA then seems down to its ability to attract voters and activists from all these groups, eating into almost every part of the left including the old Moscow-style KKE.

In the process of negotiations over the past seven days, Tsipras and his close advisers have further upped their own credibility by being seen to play the game of constitutional negotiations; sticking to their economic rejection of austerity stance, but in general not going out of their way to alienate, rhetorically, natural PASOK, Dem Left or KKE voters.

In the NET poll, taken while Tsipras was making his doomed attempt to form an anti-austerity government of the left, SYRIZA scored 27% - compared to its election showing of 17% - clearly demonstrating that it had created momentum as the pole of attraction for left voters wanting a showdown with the EU. PASOK was losing ground to both SYRIZA and the Dem Left. Some KKE voters were saying they would switch votes to SYRIZA in a second election.

When I spoke to leading members of SYRIZA in summer 2011 they were privately very pessimistic about the possibility of forming a government – even an alliance of all the left including splits from PASOK. At that time they said the most obvious solution would be an above-politics left-nationalist figure, a “Greek Kirchner” or “Greek Morales”, and that the absence of such a figure would make it impossible to form what Marxists refer to as a “workers government” – ie a radical reforming government

with the participation of the far left, but limited to parliamentary means.

Now however, the charisma of Mr Tsipras, the fear of a far-right backlash, the depth of the crisis and the seeming inability of PASOK to recover may thrust Tsipras himself into the Morales role. Of all the left party leaders he is the least encumbered by a rigid ideology, because SYRIZA remains highly diverse and internally democratic as a party. And he is tangibly a generation younger than the other leaders. (PASOK's further problem is that its younger politicians tend to be on the technocratic right of social democracy).

When I interviewed a SYRIZA spokesman earlier this year I explored the problem of a far-left party, which is anti-NATO etc, taking power in a country whose riot police have been regularly clashing with that party's youth since 2008. The message was that they would be purposefully limited in aim, and that the core of any programme would be a debtor-led partial default – that is, the suspension of interest payments on the remaining debt and a repudiation of the terms of both Troika-brokered bailouts. What SYRIZA shares with the Dem Left and PASOK is its commitment to the EU social model: they are left globalists. Hence they could make any attempt to force Greece out of the Euro look, to the Greek population, like a Brussels/Berlin initiative, no matter how it looks to the rest of the world.

So, for example, speaking on condition of anonymity a one of SYRIZA's MPs told me today: "The austerity programs don't work and we have to persuade our European partners about it. SYRIZA is a responsible political force, it's in favour of a new paradigm without rejecting the Euro. What SYRIZA is rejecting is the actual monetary policy of the Eurozone; we want to reform the ECB. We have to seize the opportunity: in Europe now there are more voices in favour of the need for growth, less austerity; the Hollande election in France may change things, creating a new framework. Greece could benefit from this, but only if there is a government in Athens with the political will to radically change things."

If, in the next election, SYRIZA scores 26% it would get about the same number of seats, under the vote redistribution rule, as ND got this time – say just over 100. If, on top of that the Dem Left vote holds up, with about 20 seats, and the Communists retain their 26 seats, that is very close to the 150 they would need for a majority.

It is being rumoured that SYRIZA may soon transform itself into a single party and extend membership to a far left group called Antarsia (which gained 1%) and the Louka Katseli group from PASOK which failed to gain seats, and the Eco-Greens, who polled below 3%. That would extend its reach even further both to its right and left.

Even without a majority, a SYRIZA-DL minority could attempt a legislative programme that relied on the abstention of some of PASOK's remaining MPs, tacit "non-opposition" from the KKE, and, paradoxically, the non-opposition of the right wing anti-austerity party Independent Greeks (conservative nationalist). One current obstacle to this is the KKE's historic enmity to SYRIZA and indeed the entire rest of the Greek left.

Whatever the outcome, the above explains how a combination of historical factors, the position of the EU and a demographic radicalization of young people propelled one of the furthest left parties in any European parliament to within a few steps of forming a government; and provoking a showdown with the EU that would doubtless see Greece's suspension or exit from the Euro.

At the same time it explains that the resulting government may, in effect, be little more than a left-social democratic government, despite its symbology and the radicalism of some of its voters. By forcing the mainstream parties into positions where they could not express the will of the majority of centrist voters, the EU may end up destroying the Greek party system as it has been shaped since 1974.