

Introduction: A Note on Populism in Crisis-ridden Greece

Kostas IFANTIS

*Associate Professor of International Relations, Department of International Relations,
Kadir Has University, Istanbul, Turkey and Panteion University, Athens, Greece.
E-mail: konstantinos.ifantis@khas.edu.tr*

Dimitrios TRIANTAPHYLLOU

*Associate Professor of International Relations, Department of International Relations,
Kadir Has University, Istanbul, Turkey. E-mail: dimitriost@khas.edu.tr*

I

This is a collection of essays on Greece during a crisis that has already lasted more than eight years. A group of scholars discusses several aspects of the grand failure that is Greece since 2009. It is by no means a comprehensive treatise of what went so wrong and why a country that is still among the most developed and wealthy in the world cannot bounce back, reform itself, and deliver the public goods to its citizens. Although it is not explicit, a careful reading of the papers reveals an underlying theme. A populist wave finally swept Greece in early 2015 and nearly destroyed the old political guard. The post-Junta political, social and economic consensus that served as a bulwark for rapid democratization and modernization came under enormous pressure from extreme right and extreme left bullies. Civil War discourse and oratory was used to target political opponents and pseudo-revolutionary voluntarism was offered as the anti-European and anti-elite solution to the country's misery. The justified rage became violent outbursts with the agents of populism barely hiding their satisfaction.

Populism has long been a contested concept. Although the academic literature is abundant it remains ambiguous in so far as it is hard to get a consensus on whether 'it is a creed, a style, a political strategy, a marketing ploy, or some combination of the above.'¹ Whether it is Donald Trump with his 'America First', or Nigel Farage with his Brexit zealotry, Marie Le Pen, Pepe Grillo, Victor Orban or Alexis Tsipras, populists emerge as defenders of the underprivileged, the avengers and the vigilantes who shall punish the corrupt systemic elites. In reality they are all demagogues who prey on the hardship and the despair of those most hit by the crisis. Although it would be wrong to dismiss the anxieties and anger of those who have flocked to Trump or overwhelmingly voted No in a mockery-of-democracy referendum in the Summer of 2015 in Greece, populist demagogues in the West brought to the fore the parochial and undemocratic, authoritarian conviction that politics should be an expression of the "general will" of the people as they alone can represent it against the 'corrupt elite.'

¹ Michael Kazin, "Trump and American Populism, Old Whine, New Bottles", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol.95, No.6, 2016, p.18.

In Autumn 2016, Niall Ferguson explained the populist surge in the Western World as a backlash against globalization.² He described a recipe for populism with just five ingredients, based on historical experience. The first of these ingredients is a rise in immigration. Actual or perceived, it matters not. What does matter is the stimulant in the ever-present xenophobic attitudes in sizeable parts of the society. The second ingredient is an increase in inequality. It is well documented that although globalization has lifted hundreds of millions out of extreme poverty, the global economy has recently regained the heights of inequality that were last seen in the pre-World War I period. The third ingredient is the perception of corruption. For a populist backlash, people have to start believing that the political elites are corrupted. As a fourth ingredient the recipe requires a major upheaval in the form of a major financial crisis that would further marginalize the poor and gravely threaten the wellbeing of the middle class. A financial crisis followed by a prolonged period of depression with skyrocketing unemployment provides the most fertile ground for a populist drive. For Ferguson the fifth is the flammable ingredient. It is that demagogue who would react vituperatively and explosively against all the others.³ Ferguson in his historical assessment of populism cautions that it;

is not just a form of political entertainment. History suggests otherwise (...). It suggests that men who threaten to restrict immigration—as well as to impose tariffs and to discourage capital export, as populists generally do—mean what they say. Indeed, populists are under a special compulsion to enact what they pledge (...). Of course, populists are bound eventually to disappoint their supporters. For populism is a toxic brew as well as an intoxicating one. Populists nearly always make life miserable for whichever minorities they chose to scapegoat, but they seldom make life much better for the people whose ire they whip up. Whatever the demagogues may promise—and they always promise “jam today”—populism tends to have significantly more economic costs than benefits.⁴

There has been without a doubt a broad populist upsurge in the West. Indeed, populism is making a comeback in Europe, if not in other parts of the world such as the United States or the Philippines, to name a few countries around the globe. It has taken roots in countries of widely varying circumstances. From the beacon of tolerance and social solidarity Scandinavia, to Hungary and Poland where it is now the dominant political discourse. In Europe, it has long been associated with crisis, in particular the financial, economic, and social crisis that made its mark on the continent beginning the third quarter of 2008 and has not really left us yet as the economic crisis was followed by the migration crisis of the last few years. In the case of Greece, these twin crises have not only left their mark but are very much part of the social and political landscape to this day.

Before we launch into an attempt to understand populism in Greece, it should be noted that populism has not been an alien phenomenon in Europe. In fact, as Mark Mazower has aptly titled his book outlining the history of Europe's 20th century, Europe is very much a “Dark Continent” where democracy found itself in constant conflict with the competing ideologies of fascism and communism.⁵ In fact, the rise of Hitler and Mussolini in Germany and Italy, in the interwar interwar years and the rise of populism and nationalism could be explained as a reaction to the growing the

2 Niall Ferguson, “Populism as a Backlash against Globalization – Historical Perspective”, *Horizons*, No 8, Autumn 2016, p.12-21, <https://www.cirsd.org/files/000/000/002/50/7f2bf2a15387ae129bf97c676597b9e0822e4a39.pdf>, (Accessed on 25 March 2018).

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century*, New York, Vintage Books, 2000.

economic crisis of the 1930s that swept the continent and the United States. Today's populism, at least in Europe, is related to a sense of collapse or disintegration of Europe. In his brilliant book, *After Europe*, Ivan Krastev suggests that the new populism taking hold in Europe is one that lacks vision; it is reactionary to the economic and refugee crises and Europe's seeming decline.⁶

II

Where does populism in Greece fit in in this context? Can it be reflective of the general trends in European populism or is it more than the conventional wisdom which suggests that populism is primarily a right-wing phenomenon? In fact, one could posit that Greek populism is both a right-wing as well as a left-wing development, in particular in its radical forms. The Greek case can best be summarized as comprising a sense of marginalization from Europe, a reassurance in the continuity of Greek civilization and Orthodoxy, a reaction to the elite-based model of governance that has shaped the country's political history since the return of democracy in 1974; i.e. a reaction to the establishment, and an attempt to redefine ideologically the country's political and social cleavages. Let us explain.

Although a relatively old member of the European Union since it became its tenth member state in 1981, the geographic distance with core Europe persists to this day. In fact, Greece acquired its first land border with another country only in 2007 when Bulgaria joined the Union. The same applies to Greece's membership to NATO which took place in 1952 together with neighbouring Turkey, a country from which Greece has historically felt threatened given the inability of both countries to resolve their differences. This feeling of marginalization from where its political elites promulgated where the country belonged has had a tremendous impact on how Greeks define themselves. In fact, the feeling of belonging to the West which has grown consistently with the return to democracy in 1974 faces a steady dose of competition from another defining paradigm which states that 'the Greeks are a nation without brethren'. In other words, this 'misunderstood' underdog nation which claims to have antecedents to ancient times has acquired over time an inferiority complex in that it is all alone to deal with the powers that be of this world, be it the Turks and their perceived demands, or American imperialism, or German hegemony in the era of economic crisis. This narrative has exemplified Greek society for decades and has shaped the populism both of elites and radical and marginalized forces of society. In fact, populism, although a primary component of the discourse of the military dictatorship that ruled the country between 1967 and 1974, was instrumentalized, to a large extent, by Andreas Papandreou in his quest to become prime minister in the 1980s and, fundamentally, throughout his tenure in office. For Papandreou, the discourse against American imperialism and Greece having no place in the European Community, were major components of the electoral victory of the centre-left PASOK in 1981. Hence, the underdog narrative was imbibed with a anti 'other' rhetoric to justify political ends that coincided with how society perceived itself.

Although over time PASOK become a mainstream party and part of the elite that today's populists on either the right or the left decry and blame for the country's economic woes, its populism defined to a large extent the social setting in democratic Greece. To a large extent, many citizens accepted the notion that anything goes in a democracy and that the people have the upper hand whether their views on certain issues were acceptable to society as a whole, especially one belonging to an EU country that professed to share the highest standards in terms of values and norms. Society's enduring support

⁶ Ivan Krastev, *After Europe*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017.

for home grown terrorism, represented by the November 17 group which operated between 1975 and 2002 and assassinated 23 persons that were either political and economic elites or representatives of the American, British, and Turkish missions in Greece, is a case in point. It was only after one of its victims, Athanasios Axarlian, was an innocent student passer-by, that public opinion began to debate this sort of terrorism. Yet home grown ideological terrorism persists to this day with various new groups having emerged over time in 'protest' against the powerful of this world. Another case in point regarding populism is the 'protection' granted by various left-wing and anarchist groups to the neighbourhood of Exarchia in Athens where most of the protests against government policies begin and end while the police and, by extension, the state seem unable or unwilling to impose public order.

In other words, the ground for today's populism in Greece has long been established and in a way sanctioned by a very permissive political environment and a cultivated underdog culture which allowed, during the evolution of the economic crisis that has put a significant dent on the country's development and society's fabric since it first emerged in 2008, the emergence both of right-wing and left-wing populism. Right-wing populism is primarily expressed by the neo Nazi Golden Dawn party which was founded in 1980 but was finally able to enter Parliament in 2012 on the premise that it represented a change from the corrupt elitist political parties that have interchangeably governed Greece since 1974. Although its ideology and murderous practices have been exposed, it manages to poll around 7 to 8 percent thereby implying that its discourse has acquired the support of a significant segment of the downtrodden. Its support has also benefitted with the appearance of the migration crisis which it perceives to be an attempt by the establishment to dilute the homogeneity of the Greek nation. On the left, populism is primarily expressed by the radical left party, SYRIZA which has been in power since January 2015. A party primarily made up of Eurosceptic intellectuals in a coalition of left-wing and radical left parties with a voting strength of about 4 percent saw its votes quadruple in the 2012 elections and increase significantly to 36 percent in 2015 as it managed to become the largest party in Greece. The basis for its power has been the involvement of many of its leading members that are currently ministers in the street protests (sometimes violent) against the policies of previous policies and its permissive attitude towards protests to this day. In fact, its coalition with the Independent Greeks party, a populist right-wing fringe group stemming from the current centre-right main opposition party, New Democracy, exemplifies the malleability and opportunism of today's Greek populists, in particular when holding on to power is at stake.

Given the data from the 2015 elections, populist parties represent over 175 seats (some 46% of the vote) in the 300-member strong parliamentary chamber as the left-wing SYRIZA and right-wing Independent Greeks coalition attempts to stay in power while continuing to blame the country's economic and other woes on the parties that governed the country before them or on the demands of the country's creditors as Greece tries to overcome the shackles of its economic crises. Irrespective of whether the current governing elite survive the next electoral cycle, populism unfortunately will continue to having staying power.

III

The papers in this special issue deal with the failures of policy and the inability to manage the crisis and overcome the structural malaises of the Greek economy, society and body politik. In his contribution, Dimitris Tsarouhas' paper focuses on the discursive frames used by policy entrepreneurs

in Greece as they attempted to deal with the 2009 crisis. He analyses the role played by discourse in handling the crisis' consequences. Adopting a historical institutionalist framework, he argues that ineffective policy outcomes can be attributed to a path-dependent logic enshrined in the country's political economy structures following the transition to democracy post-1974. Moreover, the reaction of policy entrepreneurs to the crisis was reinforced by their discursive logic of action, itself embedded in the state's institutional matrix. Procrastination, a refusal to face an uncomfortable reality and *politics as usual* coloured the response of Greek actors to the country's biggest crisis in recent memory.

Constantine Papadopoulos in turn argues that, in order to understand the reasons behind the Greek economy's inability to recover sooner from its 8-year recession, analysis must focus on the institutional, political and cultural traits of the country rather than take a primarily 'economistic' approach and simply blame 'excessive austerity' and/or the euro. In fact, it is argued that Greece's positive performance under the euro (until government actions derailed the economy) is generally underappreciated, suggesting that if the country's institutional weaknesses are addressed, the economy will grow. If they are not, the country's long-term economic potential will almost certainly remain unfulfilled.

Kostas Lavdas' paper focuses on what he terms stalled Europeanization as a field of practices, institutions and discourse connected with a process of ambivalent reform. The absence of a consensual national strategy of adaptation to a particularly challenging environment, i.e., participation in the eurozone, produced dramatic consequences when confronted with the financial crisis after 2009. Lavdas argues that the country's sluggish Europeanization reached a critical turning point in 2009 when the urgency of the crisis brought to the fore a number of structural impediments and vulnerabilities. Asymmetric policy adjustment – limited in some areas, extensive in others – has been the combined result of perceived necessity, insufficiently designed and implemented reform packages, party-political repositioning, and plain politicking. Europeanization in Greece became a stalled process in 2015; restarting the stalled process since 2016 would most probably lead to ongoing but sluggish Europeanizing interactions, involving shifts in the roles of domestic politics, institutional traditions and interest groups while reshaping the patterns of political contestation.

Nicholas Papanastopoulos makes an effort to put the tragically failed effort of the SYRIZA-ANEL government to renegotiate the bailout agreements before 2015 in the context of crisis management imperatives. By utilizing an interdisciplinary approach, he briefly discusses the public policy failures and the government's (in)capacity to cope with a turbulent and suspicious European landscape and he points to the gross inability of the government to manage the crisis it itself reignited in 2015.

Marilena Koppa, by taking a macro-historical view, explores the role of Greece in the Balkans since the end of the Communist regimes and the impact of the sovereign debt crisis that followed. Since the beginning of the 1990s, while Greece failed to accomplish its vocation at the political level, at the level of the economy the country acted as an important regional actor. Koppa in her paper examines the dynamics of the Greek crisis on the Balkan economies and analyzes the major challenges for Greece in this new reality. At the same times, it tries to identify the triple crisis faced currently by Greece: at the level of credibility and status, at the level of mediation between the region and the EU and, finally, at the level of what she calls a gradual peripherization of the country and its Balkan policy.

The following two papers deal with the grave challenge that came to top the economic and financial collapse of Greece. Dimitris Keridis discusses how the migration and refugee crisis that erupted in 2015 landed recession-riven Greece with a series of humanitarian, political, social, and financial as well as foreign policy and security challenges. Following a near disastrous open-borders policy steeped in leftist ideological parochialism, Athens aligned itself closely with Germany in support of the EU-Turkey deal that drastically reduced the human flows from Turkey into the EU and invited NATO naval forces to help monitor the implementation of the agreement. Keridis structures his paper around two parts: the first part describes the immigration and refugee crisis itself, from a global, European and national-Greek perspective; the second part analyses the risks to and policy responses of Greece and how they relate to the country's overall geostrategic position, at a time when Europe is being redefined as it struggles to respond to a multitude of challenges.

In turn, Christos Baxevanis critically discusses the legal and political aspects of the highly ineffective Greek Asylum System while he focuses on the EU-Turkey agreement and how its implementation has impacted on Greek-Turkish-EU relations. He observes that since the signing of the EU-Turkey Statement, there has been a significant reduction in the number of people unlawfully crossing European borders or losing their lives in the Aegean. Turkey's role is indispensable in addressing the refugee crisis. At the same time, Greece is invited to carry out an unprecedented administrative, legislative and operational project with very little success. A series of urgent needs (accommodation, nutrition, asylum procedures, health) or social integration processes (education, training, access to labour) have not been met. Baxevanis notes that this discussion cannot take place without taking into account the European institutional and political framework as well as the grave economic crisis that has plagued both the EU and Greece.

Kostas Ifantis focuses on the impact of the crisis on the Greek strategy towards Turkey. He places his analysis in the context of a strategic consensus that was ruptured during the crisis and the lack of bipartisanship on the country's security preferences. Although Athens and Ankara have enjoyed an unusually long period of calm waters in the Aegean from 1999 to 2016, the last two years have produced the familiar aggressive rhetoric and mutual mistrust. With the bilateral issues intact, the traditional inertia on both sides can easily turn into heightened tensions with the risk of miscalculation given the proximity of military hardware being hardly insignificant. The paper also discusses the findings of a research conducted by the two guest editors on the Greek elites' perceptions of Turkey in the midst of the crisis.

Finally, Dimitrios Triantaphyllou attempts to explain how crisis-ridden Greece defines and defends its national interest. The constellation of the twin economic and migration crises coupled with the increasingly transactional nature of the global order have forced Greece's hand in sticking to its guns with regard to its membership in both NATO and the European Union. While deterrence *vis-à-vis* Turkey remains a high priority, Greece has had to labour to regain its status and credibility within both aforementioned organizations by evolving away from its traditional policy of balancing between its membership obligations in NATO and the EU and its more nuanced approach to relations with Russia in contrast to many other countries. Its flank state status and the danger of further marginalization at a time of a changing Turkey have forced its hand while also presenting opportunities for the adoption of a renewed positive agenda with its neighbours.