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Greek right-wing populist parties and Euroscepticism

In Greece, as is generally well known, there are two right-wing populist parties, Independent Greeks and Golden Dawn. I will start by briefly presenting these two parties and their views regarding the European Union and the European idea in general.

Greek right-wing populist parties

Independent Greeks is a small right-wing party founded in 2012 when it split from New Democracy. It is mostly characterised as a right-wing populist, conservative, nationalist or patriotic anti-austerity party. In the early election in May 2012 they got 10,6% of the votes (670,957) and in the June 2012 election they got 7,5%. Since then they have constantly been losing voter support (4,5% in the January 2015 election and 3,7% in the latest election in September 2015). Despite that, Independent Greeks is currently the junior partner of the Syriza coalition government with ten seats in the Greek Parliament. During the 2014 European election they had won just one mandate for the European Parliament but later their MEP resigned from the party so that they are without representation in the EP.

The party of Independent Greeks argues in favour of a united Europe with all Member States being equal, while maintaining their national status and dignity. In its founding declaration the party complains that the Union has been turned into a vehicle to promote the interests of the most powerful countries and the global banking system. As mentioned in the same document they announce that the purpose of the party is to stop the «national humiliation and violent economic attack» on Greece coming from the European Commission, European Central Bank, and International Monetary Fund. Finally, they also reject any restriction on national sovereignty and are against the abolition of the nation state (Independent Greeks, 2012). Despite all that, the party does not support a Greek withdrawal from the common currency and the European Union.

The party's chairman argued in one of his 2014 speeches that the battle for the European elections is a battle against federalism in Europe. 'They want a Europe of federation, where there will be no nation states. The Independent Greeks believe in a Europe of nation-states, a Europe of national sovereign states. If this is considered as Euroscepticism, yes, we are Eurosceptics.' (ThePressProject, 2014)

Let me finish my discourse about Independent Greeks with another comment of their chairperson which is taken from an interview from May 2015. He stated: 'Germany wants to dominate Europe. Schäuble wants the abolition of nation-states. We support the Europe of nation-states, but not the surrender of our country and our national sovereignty and property to the German domination.' This is a very significant message because much of the current Euroscepticism is in fact rooted in an anti-German sentiment, expressing the underlying fear that this nation again aims at subjecting the entire Europe to its power (O'Neil, 2015).

Then there is Golden Dawn, a far right, neo-Nazi and racist party. Its political agenda is dominated by xenophobic, anti-immigrant rhetoric. But still some commentators across Europe continue to characterise Golden Dawn as an extreme right-wing populist party. I will say a few more things about that at the end of my presentation. Golden Dawn was founded in 1985 but it didn't draw much attention until recently. Even at the 2009 elections the party won only 0,3% of the votes. But on May 2012 the party made its breakthrough in the Greek political life when it gained 7% of the

votes. Since then the party has held on to its level of support. Both in the January and September elections in 2015 Golden Dawn held third position and obtained 18 seats in the Greek Parliament. At the 2014 European election the party gained 9,4% and has currently three seats in the European Parliament. These MEPs are not members of any European Parliament group.

Golden Dawn is also Eurosceptical and it is opposing Greece's participation in the European Union and the eurozone. In fact, we do not find remarks on Europe itself very frequently in their rhetoric, but their position on Europe can be deduced indirectly. Golden Dawn's Euroscepticism is closely associated with their anti-globalisation, both aspects are expressed in the anti-immigration discourse of the party.

In one of its official political statements Golden Dawn explicitly stated that: 'Golden Dawn was perhaps the only voice with national orientation which reacted strongly to the country's entrance to the single, common currency. Eventually, the euro has proved to be our disaster. The national currency is equivalent to national independence and this must be the fundamental purpose of a national leadership.' (Golden Dawn, web). Within the programmatic discourse of the party we find expressions such as 'We say "yes" to Europe of Nations, and "no" to the Europe of capital and loan sharks.' A recent announcement of the party regarding the migration issue was entitled: 'Grotesque decision from the Euro Summit: The Europe of loan sharks leaves Greece as prey to illegal immigrants.'

In general, they create a counterpoint between the Europe of lenders and loan sharks – which is the present European Union – and the Europe of Nations, which supposedly represents their own idea of a united Europe. The current Europe of Brussels, according to Golden Dawn, is the Europe of international lenders and economic interests. Of course this rhetoric has been influenced or even absolutely determined by the current economic crisis in Greece and the austerity policy of the memoranda.

Causes of Euroscepticism

The main cause of Euroscepticism as it can easily be understood from the above definitions is the very process of integration and its relationship with the nation states. Eurosceptics want to limit the power of the European Union institutions and to stop the transfer of power and responsibilities from the national agencies to European ones. Another source of criticism is the belief that the European Union was too bureaucratic or even undemocratic. The so-called democratic deficit of the European Union is a main cause of Euroscepticism. Mark Leonard and José Ignacio Torreblanca from the European Council on Foreign Relations noticed in an article dating back to 2013 that various critics believe that the decisions are taken by unaccountable institutions rather than elected national governments (Leonard & Torreblanca, 2013).

Many perceive the European Union as something distant, something alien where there is no possibility to participate. They do not feel that their voice can be heard in Brussels. The European Union is presented as a union that follows objective laws and rules which in fact de-politicises each topic avoiding to start a serious public debate or to define alternatives. They especially criticise that this policy of 'there is no alternative', a concept of politics without rivals, without conflict leads to the rise of right-wing populist parties who exploit the anger of citizens. The main depiction of Europe by Eurosceptics is hence that of a foreign regulatory authority which interferes in the internal affairs of countries.

The current crisis has reinforced Euroscepticism, increasing reservations against the European Union. Many citizens in southern European countries face the EU the same way Latin Americans face the IMF. The European Union intervenes in highly sensitive policy areas such as pensions, taxes, salaries, the labour market; sectors which are the centre piece especially for the national identity of a Member State (Leonard & Torreblanca, 2013). In Greece we can easily notice a major increase in Euroscepticism since 2009. According to the latest Eurobarometer survey only 25% (EU average is 41%) of the Greek people have a positive image of the European Union (whereas 38% have a neutral view and 37% a negative one). Only 20% (EU average is 42%) believe that their voice is heard and that their opinion matters in the EU. 57% of the Greeks are pessimistic about the future of the EU. Trying to find the reasons for this image, we can take a look in the most important problems that – according to Greek people – the EU is facing at the moment: 40% of the Greeks consider the economic crisis as a fundamental question, 32% unemployment, 33% public finance and 27% immigration. It is obvious that they transfer their national concerns to the European level. The survey results clearly show the role that the current crisis and the strategies against play when it comes to the rise of Euroscepticism in Greece.

Let me just mention some of the consequences of these strategies. The Gross domestic product (GDP) of the country declined between 2010 and 2014 by 25% (Eurostat, 2015). Unemployment has reached 25,8% for the general population and 50,6% for the young people under 25 years. Greece ranks top among the 28 European Union countries in terms of poverty risk (*Ekathimerini*, 2014). The austerity measures according to the memorandum, which are conceived as policies imposed by the EU on the Greek people and the reactions of European leaders to the current refugee crisis are feeding the Euroscepticism in Greece. Regarding the refugee crisis, I will only note that more than 800,000 refugees arrived in Greece during 2015 whereas the European Union still cannot take a clear stance on how to respond appropriately. A relocation programme was agreed but not yet implemented; some countries like Germany adopted some kind of an 'open door policy' mainly towards Syrian refugees while some other countries, such as Hungary, are building up walls and fences.

Comments and conclusions

In 2014, the Economist published an article entitled 'The Eurosceptic Union'. Nowadays Euroscepticism is growing even stronger, partly because of the current economic crisis. It is more evident than ever that we must change Europe and its institutional structures in order to save it.

Concluding, I want to make three general comments regarding the issues of populism, Euroscepticism and the far right parties as well as on their interactions.

1. We must avoid the equation of Euroscepticism with far right-wing parties. There could be a productive criticism towards the European Union that does not call into question the European project and European ideals. An equation, on the other hand, would be extremely delicate. In this sense the historian Mark Mazower wrote in the *Financial Times* that 'What far right stands for could be more lethal to the EU than anything leftwing populists can unleash. Though critical of the direction the EU has taken, parties such as Syriza and Spain's Podemos remain Europeanist. Not so the forces of the right. Golden Dawn, a frankly Nazi party, politically is Eurosceptic; economically, its vision is of fascism in one country.' (Mazower, 2015) We must not demonise any criticism towards the European Union. Criticism of the existing European Union and the operation of the European institutions should be taken into account in order to improve Europe.
2. We must not equate populism in general with something a priori negative. According to Ernesto Laclau, philosopher and well-known scholar of populism, populism is a neutral concept. Populism can be derived from any place in the socio-institutional structure and from any location within the left-right spectrum. It does not describe any political practice by different organisations but it is rather a way of articulating demands (Laclau, 2010: 76). In line with this interpretation, populism is not by itself an element of extreme political behaviour. Whether it is reactionary or progressive depends on its demands.
3. Golden Dawn is not a populist party. It is a neo-Nazi, extreme right-wing party. It is not correct to characterise unambiguously neo-Nazi parties like Golden Dawn merely as populist. Cas Mudde, one of the most distinguished scholars in the fields of the extreme right and populism, distinguishes between extreme right and radical right. The decisive question is whether or not they support the democratic idea. Thus, he does not consider Golden Dawn as a populist party. Instead he argues that Golden Dawn is an anti-democratic party and the most powerful extreme right party in Europe (Mudde, 2015). At the same time Aurelien Mondon, lecturer of French politics at the University of Bath with a specialization on populism and the extreme right, has argued that 'Part of the extreme right can be defined as populist. However, it becomes an issue when the term populism becomes the central definitional element of parties like the Front National and Golden Dawn. These parties have made the use of populist rhetoric central to their strategy but their ideological core is not to be found there. Therefore, they are not simply populist parties.' He also states that calling parties like Front National and Golden Dawn merely populist parties is not only misleading, but it is also deeply damaging on a political level, as the same term removes the stigma attached to other more precise definitional terms like racist, extreme right, and also gives a semblance of democratic legitimacy. (Mondon, 2014)

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