

The 'Reluctant Europeans': What Syriza's Victory Means for Europe

Written by George Kyris

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GEORGE KYRIS, JAN 28 2015

For years, conventional wisdom has said that the role of the EU in national elections is rather insignificant. Even European Parliament elections are often regarded as 'second order', where voters use the ballot box in order to express their grievances towards governing parties and the way they manage national issues. This lack of a proper debate on EU issues is not too surprising if we take into account how detached European citizens often feel from what goes on in 'Brussels'. It is for that reason that last Sunday's elections in Greece, marked by the major role of the EU and the remarkable victory of Syriza, become rather historic.

Indeed, Greece is no exception to the rule and historically the EU has not played a massively important role in elections. For example, the last European Parliament elections before the outbreak of the Eurozone crisis (2009) were fought in strictly national terms: parties of the opposition, like the Coalition of the Radical Left *Syriza* (which back then enjoyed very little support), used their campaign to attack the centre-right government of *New Democracy*. Similarly, the campaign of the governing party focused on national policies, in an effort to promote achievements of its term.

However, since the beginning of the Eurozone crisis in the Mediterranean country, things have changed a lot. Progressively, more and more Greeks have viewed the EU under a negative light: when the country joined the Eurozone in 2001, 51 per cent of its people had a positive image of the EU, considerably more than the rest of the member states (42 per cent). In 2009, few months before the outbreak of the crisis, a still significantly high number of Greeks (48 per cent, the same with the EU average) viewed the EU positively while a low 16 per cent had a negative image. Since then, the percentage of people who have a positive image of the EU has dramatically dropped: before the 2014 European Parliament elections it reached an all-time low of 16 per cent, which was also the lowest across the EU. In late 2014, the positive image of the EU had gone up to 23 per cent but the majority continued to view the EU negatively, the highest percentage out of the only three member states (the others being Cyprus and Austria) where negative feelings prevailed.

But for all the bleak feelings, the support of EU membership has not seen an equally impressive decrease and few days before last Sunday's (25th January) elections more than 80 per cent of Greeks wanted the country to remain part of the Eurozone. Indeed, this is an interesting feature of euroscepticism in Greece, unlike other countries such as, for example, the UK: Greeks remain somehow 'reluctant Europeans', firmly in support of their place in the EU but at the same time questioning what the EU looks like at the moment.

Those changes in society have also been reflected in the party scene. Over the crisis years, elections have been fought between two main camps: on the one hand, those parties that promoted themselves as strongly pro-EU and they supported measures that satisfy the conditions of the EU bailout agreements and, on the other side, those who opposed these deals and austerity. As such, the EU took centre stage in the parties' campaign. In last Sunday's elections for example, the leader of the coalition government *New Democracy* often used a combination of the Greek and the European flag in its visual campaign, while party broadcasts of the centre-left *PASOK*, the junior coalition partner, sought to uphold Greece's status in the world and Europe. *The River* was established a year earlier with a clear pro-EU agenda, while the communist party *KKE* continued to fight a strongly anti-EU campaign – in fact, this is

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the party whose campaigns have historically paid more attention to the EU in comparison to others. Lastly, both the right *Independent Greeks* and the extreme right *Golden Dawn* fought campaigns strongly opposed to measures related to the EU bailout agreements.

But this 'Europeanisation' of political parties and their debate can be seen most clearly in the case of *Syriza* and its journey until claiming victory in last Sunday's elections. As the positive impact of the EU went down, *Syriza*'s share of votes went the opposite direction: from 5 per cent in the elections just before the crisis, *Syriza* jumped to 16.79 per cent in 2012, 22.9 in 2014 and finally to 36.34 per cent in last Sunday's elections. The party's success based on an anti-austerity/ anti-establishment agenda should indeed be seen as a result of great public frustration with the way Brussels have dealt with the Eurozone crisis. At the earlier stages of the crisis, *Syriza* advanced a radical rhetoric, with some of its members openly advocating policies that did not conform to a 'European' future of the country, such as exit from the Eurozone or return to the national currency of drachma. But on their way to government, *Syriza* had to take into account those 'reluctant Europeans' described above. Gradually and especially after its victory in the 2014 European Parliament election, *Syriza* has tried to promote itself as a more moderate and pro-EU party- albeit with an alternative vision for Europe and with many, different voices on what the future should look like- and does not negotiate the place of the country in the Eurozone. At the same time, *Syriza* has made an effort to move out of its isolation and has reportedly developed links to many European elites towards building own alliances abroad.

So, while in many cases –including Greece in the past- policies that are decided at EU level do not impact the elections debate because people grow indifferent about them, the Eurozone crisis is a slightly different story. In this case, people see policies that are decided at the EU level to be of such importance for national politics of many countries, such as Greece, that become the single most salient issue in the national debate. Indeed, what we have seen in the Eurozone crisis and in the latest elections in Greece is not the EU gaining importance as an issue *per se*. Rather, in a sense, national politics continue to dominate the discussion but this time people view them intrinsically linked to what goes on in Brussels and the bailout agreements.

But for all the obvious impact of the EU on the terms and outcome of the elections debate, the big question now is what sort of party *Syriza* will be the day after. And, since Greece has often been seen as the country that could set the tone of an alternative solution to the Eurozone crisis, this is a question crucial for the rest of Europe too. Initially, the Greek crisis led to a polarisation of views between those, like the centre-left *PASOK* or the centre-right *New Democracy*, who firmly supported measures and 'sacrifices' in the name of Europe and those, like *Syriza*, who suggested Greece should try for alternatives, even if this brings a cost to the country's relationship to the EU. Progressively, however, and as euroscepticism seems to have gone down a bit, *Syriza* has moved to support Greece's place in the Eurozone. Indeed, this convergence of the agendas of big parties on the issue of the EU has often been the case throughout Europe. But despite all its transformation that has brought it closer to the EU, *Syriza* remains a party that evangelises a different, more radical, anti-austerity agenda for Greece and for Europe. The words of *Syriza*'s leader Alexis Tsipras following the election results do not leave room for misunderstandings: 'the verdict of the Greek people ...annuls... in an indisputable fashion the bailout agreements of austerity and disaster'. The following months will test whether this different Europe can actually exist.

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