

# Syriza, Podemos, Venceremos? Syriza and the Future of the European Left

Written by Nikolaos Nikolakakis

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NIKOLAOS NIKOLAKAKIS, MAY 6 2015

The electoral victory of the Greek Coalition of the Radical Left (Syriza) in the recent legislative elections undoubtedly constitutes a historical event in Modern Greek history. Concurrently, Syriza's victory constitutes a milestone for the European left. For the parties on the left of social democracy [1], Syriza's victory could arguably be seen as a unique opportunity to rise electorally in their own national political arenas. It could be proven to be, thus, a highly influencing event for the future of the left in Europe. Inside the European left, the idea of the domino effect that a government of the left could provoke has been ever present in recent times. According to said notion, a government of the left in one of the EU member states, would bring about a series of chain reactions leading to the drastic change of the balance of powers inside the Union. The present short article seeks to illustrate how Syriza's victory puts the domino effect theory to the test.

### The Domino Effect Theory

For the last three years, Syriza and the Party of the European Left (EL) have been using the domino effect theory as one of their main political arguments. When faced with the question of the feasibility of an alternative vision of the Europe in a Union characterised by *quasi*-antithetical ideals, the aforementioned notion constituted their response. Said theory implies that the victory of one of the party members in one of the EU's 28 countries would function as a political earthquake inside the European edifice; an earthquake that would bring about more left governments in Europe. This, arguably, constitutes a *conditio sine qua non* for the successful implementation of the left's policies both at a national as well as at the European level. The aforementioned idea is indeed part of the wider constructivist approach that the European left has had vis-à-vis the EU for over two decades now. This form of left Europeanism views the liberal/neoliberal foundations of the EU as something that can be deconstructed in case of a significant change in the balance of politico-ideological powers inside the Union. This idea is, indeed, evident in both Syriza's as well as the EL's political manifestos. In fact, they both clearly read that there is a need to create a Greece that advances inside a Europe that changes. This changing nature of Europe constitutes the core of Syriza's message and represents the hope that the party's victory could bring to its European counterparts.

### Syriza's Government of the Left and the Rise of *Podemos*

Currently, the Syriza-led government is facing significant pressures both from its European partners and from a multiplicity of national and international centres of financial interests. Said pressures aim to shift Syriza's proposed policies towards a more moderate political orientation. Indeed, the balance of political and ideological powers inside the EU and the Eurozone is unfavourable to Syriza's proposed policies. Austerity is currently viewed as the only way out of the severe crisis that has affected the majority of European countries for the last five years. Thus, any change to the current Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Greece the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the EU, and the European Central Bank (ECB) appears to be highly unlikely. This hostile stance currently held by the country's lenders has posed a number of dilemmas to Syriza's government[2]. Syriza has so far chosen neither moderation nor radicalisation. The party's response is constituted partly by the so-called constructive ambiguity in regards to the proposals towards the EU. Said response can be seen as a means to gain time in light of the Spanish elections this coming fall; elections that will play, according to Syriza, an ever-important role. A possible victory of

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*Podemos* in Spain, as well as the electoral rise of *Izquierda Unida* (IU) could undoubtedly serve as an important factor towards the implementation of the left's agenda [3]. Recent polls verify the possibility of this scenario. The hostile stance currently held by the Spanish government verifies that mainstream political forces inside the EU are being threatened by the possible implementation of anti-austerity measures in any member state. Nonetheless, whilst anti-austerity unites them, Syriza and Podemos are far from being homogenous political formations. In fact, Podemos is neither a full member of the EL nor it seems to desire to become one in the immediate future. On the other hand, according to recent polls Podemos would not have an absolute majority but would be able to form a coalition government with the IU; a founding member party of the EL and a long time ally of Syriza ever since the Eurocommunist era of the 1970s.

## The Importance of Syriza's Victory for the European Left

The majority of the European RLPs warmly welcomed Syriza's victory. The only exception was constituted by a number of orthodox communist parties, such as the Greek Communist Party (KKE). The importance of Syriza's victory can be seen in many instances both during and after the Greek legislative elections. Just days before the elections representatives from all major parties of the European left were arriving in the capital city of Athens. The German *Die Linke*, the Spanish IU, the Portuguese *Bloco de Esquerda*, the Italian *Partito della Rifondazione Comunista*, and the French coalition *Fronte de Gauche* were amongst the parties that opted to send representatives in the Greek capital. The President of the EL, Pierre Laurent, as well as the party's Vice Presidents Maite Mola and Marisa Matias led the group of representatives. The message that they were conveying was one of support and solidarity towards their Greek counterpart. This could arguably serve as a clear indication of the importance that the Greek elections had for the wider European left. In addition to this, one particular moment of Syriza's campaign arguably holds high explanatory importance. This was constituted by the brief message that the President of Podemos, Pablo Iglesias, conveyed to Syriza's supporters during the party's last rally in Athens. Iglesias was asked to join the stage by Syriza's president Alexis Tsipras, and close his brief salutation to the crowd with the slogan, "Syriza, Podemos *Venceremos*". Syriza's victory was thus portrayed as a victory of the European left, which witnessed for the first time one of its member parties holding office. The fact that Syriza chose to close its central political rally with a salutation from the leader of another European RLP on the verge of an electoral victory could be seen as a visual reconstruction of the aforementioned domino effect theory.

Following Syriza's electoral victory, Podemos presented Syriza's victory as an image from Spain's future. Indeed, during an impressive rally held in Madrid just a week from the Greek elections, Podemos' leader used Syriza's example on several occasions. During his speech, he argued that the Greek elections signified the end of austerity in Europe. Furthermore, he called the people of Spain to show the audacity demonstrated by the Greek electorate and vote for Podemos in order to close the vicious circle of the austerity measures imposed to their country. In addition to Podemos' support, parties of the European left in support of the Syriza-led government held a number of rallies in all major European cities. Those rallies were held during the initiation of the negotiations between the Greek government and the so-called '*trojka*' made out of the IMF, the EU, and the ECB. This unprecedented campaign of support by citizens of other European countries towards the Syriza-led government could be seen as the verification of two arguments. *In primis*, it shows how important Syriza's victory is for the wider European left. *In secundis*, it signifies that the Syriza-led government in conjunction with its European counterparts succeeded, at least to an extent, to Europeanise the Greek question. They managed, thus, to use their distinct left-Europeanist discourse in an attempt to provoke the professed political earthquake inside the European edifice.

## Conclusion

This short article aimed and hopefully shed some light on the importance of Syriza's victory for the wider European left. In fact, the Greek party's victory can be seen as a milestone for the wider European left, and most importantly for the EL. Being the first full party-member to gain office, Syriza inspired and continues to inspire the totality of the European RLPs. Parties that have been struggling to achieve even the most minimal electoral gain against their mainstream political opponents. The financial crisis that has been affecting the EU has provided with a unique opportunity for the radical left. Syriza was the first party to seize said opportunity and rise electorally in an unprecedented manner in Greek and European history. Its victory could, indeed, provoke a series of chain reactions

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inside the EU. Nonetheless, it is the party's success that could really provoke a European-wide political earthquake. It could be argued, thus, that the forces of the radical left in Europe depend as much on the Syriza-led government's success in implementing their proposed policies, as does Syriza on another RLP gaining momentum in another European country. Syriza's proposed policies are characterised by a sharp antithesis to the European politico-ideological *status quo*. It is precisely for this reason that Syriza is in great need of an ally inside both the Eurogroup and the Council of the European Union. A Podemos-led government could constitute this ally at the maximum European level. We could therefore conclude that the future of the European left will be, to a significant extent, decided in the coming months.

## Notes

[1] For a concise classification of radical left parties (RLPs), see March (2011)

[2] The series of dilemmas posed to Syriza's government can be better envisaged by Charalambous' (2013) notion of the 'Communist Dilemma'

[3] Poll data relevant to the Spanish elections can be found here.

## Bibliography

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**Nikolaos (Nikos) Nikolakakis** is a PhD Candidate at the University of Dundee under the supervision of Dr Richard Dunphy and Professor Christian Kaunert. His research relates to the Party of the European Left. He received his Masters in International Politics and Security from the University of Dundee, and has studied Political Science & History as well as Law at the Panteion University of Athens and University of Bologna respectively. His recent works include Syriza's stance vis-à-vis Europe following the financial crisis, the persistence of left Europeanism and the role of the European Left Party presented at the ECPR General Conference in 2014, and *Historic Victory of Syriza's Left Europeanism* (2015) published in the PSA Greek Specialist Group Electoral Pamphlet no. 4.