Populism or National-Populism? A Critical Approach to Cas Mudde's Perspective on SYRIZA's Populism

By Andreas Pantazopoulos  
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Cas Mudde’s book on SYRIZA’s “failure of populist promises,” which recently appeared in Greek, lends itself to multiple, successive readings of the current Greek populist experience in a comparative setting. One of the leading political scientists currently researching the populist phenomenon in both its radical-right and radical-left varieties, Mudde combines thorough knowledge of his subject matter’s ideological premises with a thorough analysis of his factual material, namely, the empirical cases he sets out to investigate. Indeed, it is to Mudde that we owe the term “pathological normalcy,” denoting the current form of radical-right populism in Europe. Mudde has used this term to explain the phenomenon of “mainstream thought” radicalization employed by the “populist radical right” with a view to exploiting a social and identitarian malaise that is widespread in several European countries. It is also to Mudde that we owe a number of thought-provoking and, in many respects, pioneering comparative studies (many of them co-authored or co-edited with his fellow political scientist Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser) about the differences between European and Latin-American populisms, in which Mudde demonstrates the latter’s rather inclusionary practices as opposed to the former’s rather exclusionary ones. Moreover, we owe him a very insightful discussion of the different outcomes produced when populist political parties come to power.

Mudde’s book SYRIZA: The Failure of Populist Promises, prefaced and valuably edited by Petros Papasarantopoulos, was recently published in Greek by Epikentro Press. It comprises articles mainly written last year (2015)—during SYRIZA’s time in office—for English websites (Open Democracy, Huffington Post, The Conversation, The Guardian), as well as interviews originally published in Greek newspapers (To Vima, Kathimerini, The Books’ Journal, etc.) and a conversation between Mudde and Petros Papasarantopoulos (his Greek publisher and fellow researcher of the populist phenomenon), which is published here for the first time.

Mudde’s perspective on populism is familiar enough. As restated in the book, he sees populism as “an illiberal democratic response to undemocratic liberalism.” Populists raise issues the traditional political elites do not usually address (e.g., European integration) and lend them a deeply moralizing dimension. Populist ideology, insofar as populism can be seen as an “ideology” (a “thin-centered ideology,” according to Mudde), divides society into “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite,” between whom there must be no compromise whatsoever. When populists come to power, there may naturally be either positive or negative consequences. Their risk level depends, inter alia, on the prevailing circumstances and the actual power of the democratic regime. Populist reforms impinge upon liberal democracy and weaken the rights of minorities. Both right-wing and left-wing populisms invariably perform an exclusionary function; in fact, the main difference between them is “whom they exclude,” which is largely determined by their accompanying ideology (i.e., socialism or nationalism).[1]

Mudde sees in SYRIZA a substitute for the establishment populist PASOK[2] SYRIZA offered Greeks a “faux option”: the possibility of staying in the Eurozone without having to fulfill the accompanying conditions. The July 2015 referendum was essentially a process for internal consumption, intended to prevent the breakup of the government rather than boost democracy. For Mudde, SYRIZA’s time in office has unveiled the “illusions” spread by populist promises; it has also made clear how “ill-prepared” this political formation was to cope with the crisis’s extraordinary, indeed critical, conditions. He has described the SYRIZA government elite as “willful amateurs” blinded by their own ideology, and Yanis Varoufakis, as an “example of righteous amateurism.”[4] In another article (not included in the book discussed here, since it was published in January 2016), Mudde refers to the SYRIZA governments’ “incompetence” and “opportunism”; he also establishes the international “isolation” of both SYRIZA and Greece, and describes the party’s current fatal hovering between two options: returning to its radical left roots or becoming a center-left party.[5] Ultimately, for Mudde, the record of SYRIZA’s time in office has proved poor; moreover, it is due to its populism, the fallacious “third way” it proposed between the pro-Memorandum policies and Grexit, but also to its sheer amateurism, hypocrisy, unrealistic choices, and failure to understand the rules of the game as played on the international and European scenes. Despite the expectations it fostered in Greece and in a part of the European radical left, SYRIZA is nothing but a Greek exception, in a country, Greece, that is itself an exception to the European rule.

In the context of the problematics developed by Mudde through his stimulating interventions, I would also like to add some more specific critical remarks, which, I believe, can complement his arguments or even function as counter-arguments. My own remarks are concerned with certain aspects of the kind of populism Mudde attributes to SYRIZA. For instance, in Mudde’s opinion, SYRIZA’s choice to govern in coalition with the Greek “radical right,” the Independent Greeks (ANEL), after the January 2015 parliamentary elections was inevitable and therefore “reasonable,” since both were anti-Memorandum parties; however, what he finds unjustifiable is the alliance these two formed after the September 2015 elections, since SYRIZA had already signed its own Memorandum and, quite naturally, it had de facto joined the pro-Memorandum political forces. SYRIZA, Mudde tells us, could have formalized the transition to the post-Memorandum period by opting instead for the socialist PASOK or even the centrist Potami, which were closer to its own positions. The fact that SYRIZA did not make such a choice but continued to govern in coalition with ANEL is probably “a disturbing ideological choice”—indicating that the ‘patriotic left’ is more patriotic than left.[6] The possibility of such an ideological choice seems to be turning into a certainty, as Mudde suggests in another commentary: “In fact, the choice to continue the coalition with ANEL, rather than PASOK-DIMAR or Potami, seems to indicate
that Tsipras is looking for another PASOK, the patriotic left populist party of Andreas Papandreou: fiery in rhetoric, pragmatic in policy. [7]

Elsewhere in his interventions Mudde highlights the toxicity of the political environment created by SYRIZA’s populism. He points out that SYRIZA opponents are attacked as “a fifth column of Germany” or “terrorists,” [8] and also stresses both SYRIZA’s hypocritical defense of “national sovereignty” and its “deceiving Euroskepticism.” [9]

National-populism

What is the common thread to Mudde’s (correct, in my view) criticisms of SYRIZA’s populism? Clearly, they all result from or in nationalism. This idea supports the view that SYRIZA is not “merely” an “anti-austerity” political formation of the radical left, not “merely” a party of left populist protest and denunciation of “the corrupt elites,” but, indeed, a national-populist movement formation. As I have argued elsewhere, one cannot understand the tectonic shifts in the Greek political and party system and the ensuing ideological changes of the past five years, unless one assesses the “pro-Memorandum”/“anti-Memorandum” political dichotomy, as expressed in the mass social mobilization of the “Indignants” in 2011. SYRIZA and ANEL (and, to a large extent, the pro-Nazi Golden Dawn party) are offshoots of that mobilization, which had both social and national characteristics. Indeed, it was a national-popular mobilization of all those who felt, or imagined themselves to be, threatened by the Memorandum and sought defense of their “vested rights” in a summary denunciation of national and “foreign” elites, Germany, the EU, the IMF, the banks, the markets—thereby constructing their existential enemy. SYRIZA couched this form of national-popular mobilization in a denunciatory discourse that called for national and popular resistance, and represented Greece as a country “under foreign occupation” and its political elites as traitors of the national and popular interests. In SYRIZA’s rhetoric, this resistance acquired the characteristics of the National Liberation Front (EAM), an anti-Nazi left-wing organization, active during the German Occupation of Greece (1940–44). Importantly, this was not a secondary version, but the very core, of SYRIZA’s message [10].

During the period prior to the January 2015 parliamentary elections, SYRIZA (but also ANEL, who, in their inaugural ideological declaration, defined themselves as a movement originating in the “movement of the squares,” i.e., the 2011 “Indignants” [11]) would use a unified, fundamental discourse to articulate the national-popular dismissal of the elites and the defense of popular sovereignty, which was regarded as synonymous to national sovereignty. At that time, Alexis Tsipras himself referred to his political opponents as “Merkelists.” Besides, he had openly condemned the Cypriot government’s adoption of its own Memorandum (in March 2013) by directly alluding to the matrix of contemporary Greek nationalism—namely, the familial-maternal relations between Greece and Cyprus—in the following words: “Once more, I should make clear that our own ‘we’ means ‘we Greeks and Cypriots’ who do not surrender without a fight! ... It is this very ‘we’ that differentiates us from the policy and overall attitude of Messrs. Samaras and Stournaras [today, Governor of the Bank of Greece]. Indeed, it differentiates us from Mr. Stournaras, who usually employs ‘we’ to mean the Eurogroup, the creditors, himself and Mr. Schäuble—the Greek and German governments taken together. Once more it would be unthinkable to see Cyprus getting sacrificed on the altar of foreign interests, and ‘motherland’ proving to be a ‘stepmotherland’.” [12]

This ideatopian populism, which substitutes memory for history and identifies the elites with “the foreigners,” also emerged during SYRIZA’s time in office, especially from its early days to the parliamentary elections of September 2015. Indeed, the negotiation with the creditors will be carried out in a climate of “national dignity” restoration, a key phrase in SYRIZA’s ethnocentric discourse. Yet, even today, one year after SYRIZA’s first electoral victory, whenever Alexis Tsipras has to take unpopular measures as part of the third Memorandum he himself negotiated and signed, he invariably asks his political opponents: “Whose side are you on?”—Greece or the IMF?—thus suggesting that the so-called bourgeois political staff, the pro-Memorandum political parties, are essentially in the service of “the foreigners.” Thus, the classical anti-plutocratic populist pattern “those above versus us below” gains its full meaning when “they,” i.e., the elites, are stigmatized and demonized as antinational agents, as the “party from abroad,” indeed as underlings of foreign, secret forces that covet and undermine “our” national sovereignty.

A last but not least remark in the same direction: participants in the Greek farmers’ mass mobilizations currently taking place (February 2016) throughout the country often point to the “antinational” character of the tax measures to be taken by the present left-wing government; protesters remove the Greek flag from local SYRIZA offices; they remind SYRIZA MPs that not long ago they had joined them in cursing the pro-Memorandum parties (namely, the socialist PASOK and the conservative New Democracy) by referring to them as “germanotoloiades” (the Greek collaborators of the Nazis during the German Occupation), and ask Alexis Tsipras not to betray “his people.” Once more, the social protest of “deep Greece” uses the farmers to reproduce an ethnocentric cultural habitus—one that was reinvigorated and systematized over the past years with the decisive contribution of SYRIZA and ANEL, this time, however, pointing to the present left-wing prime minister and his government as apostates of the national-popular contract, the very contract that enabled such a small party to come to power so rapidly.

A telling example is offered by Manolis Glezos, a legendary figure of the resistance against the Nazis during the German Occupation, former Euro MP, and leading SYRIZA official, who left the party in September 2015 because of its pro-Memorandum transformation. Glezos recently stated on the occasion of the farmers’ mobilization: “What foreigners see in Greece is a beautiful sunny resort. Indeed, they want us to be some sort of ‘hotel.’ Unless we realize this, we won’t be able to do anything at all, for it’s as if we ignored who our rival was.” [13] This statement, likening the farmers to “Spartans” resisting those who demand “earth and water” from Greece, embodies the spirit of a radical populist imaginary (both left-wing and right-wing) and essentially comes to nationalize the “social issue” itself, namely, the agricultural reform. It further supports Tsipras’s well-known statement that “we don’t have the ownership” of the Memorandum (he himself signed), which is, therefore, considered to be the product of external coercion.

It is in this sense that SYRIZA’s populism, as well as that of ANEL, can be regarded as national-populism. For, in fact, both of these political formations have drawn on the same social, political, and cultural protest movement of the past few years, to whose claims they can no longer respond. Indeed, the interpretive category of national-populism, proposed by Pierre-André Taguieff [14] can shed light on the contents and polemical forms of a complex national-popular reaction that is not exclusively reducible to its economic or social populist dimensions—to a denunciation of “the corrupt elites.” At any rate, the Greek experience shows that nationalism is not an exclusive privilege of right-wing populism: it might as well be articulated through what has been termed “progressive populism.” Yet the reverse is also true: social claims are not an exclusive privilege of left-wing radicalism; as clearly shown in ANEL’s case (with their pronounced state protectionism, in conjunction with the “anti-plutocratic” dimension of their self-proclaimed “popular center-right” character), right-wing radicalism may also appropriate social claims.

Against this backdrop, SYRIZA and ANEL can be regarded not as two different parties but as one and the same movement party, with ANEL’s “radical
right” (as Mudde calls it) being the informal right wing of one and the same national-populist movement, one and the same “ideological party.” “Right wing” because, at the level of values, ANEL is differentiated from SYRIZA only by virtue of their treatment of minorities in general, and immigrants in particular—even though, in actual practice, the two government allies have found a common way of dealing with this issue. They represent, however, the same ideological party, since they both draw on the same source, that of defending “national sovereignty,” whose loss they present as the sole cause of all evil. In this sense, it can be argued that what has been happening in Greece over the past five years is indicative of the particular way in which the Greek exception forms part of the more or less “soft” Euroskepticism currently growing in Europe, where it mainly (yet not exclusively) finds channels of crystallizing into the radical right. In other words, in Memorandum-era Greece, what Mudde calls “soft Euroskepticism” (a typical feature of SYRIZA and ANEL), namely, a moderate anti-EU nationalismism sometimes morphing into anti-Westernism is the actual starting point of social protest. The social subject of protesting, “we,” as structured and articulated in the denunciatory populist discourse of SYRIZA and ANEL, is neither a class-based “we,” a class identity, nor merely “the people,” but an intersocial collectivity, a “patriotically minded” “people”: it is Greece and the Greeks versus the foreigners conspiring to subjugate them.

This conspiratorial view of political developments, pointed out by Mudde himself when referring to the way Tsipras and SYRIZA understood the agreement they cosigned with the creditors (#ThisIsACoup), further enhances the nationalist anchorage of the populist identity, “we,” and shows once more that conspiracy theory forms part of the national-populist imaginary as an “automatic schematization.” On July 15, 2015, the French communist newspaper L’Humanité informed its readership that, according to government officials in Athens, the new bailout agreement/Memorandum signed by the SYRIZA government was “a well-planned coup” of the “usurers.” Tipras’s view on the matter is particularly telling, since merely a few months later (early September 2015) he actually discerned a “plan” intended to destabilize and overthrow his government—at first, a failed “Grexit plan by W. Schäuble” in February 2015 (i.e., the first month of SYRIZA’s term in office) and, then, a plan organized by some of his party colleagues, the left-wing officials and MPs who distanced themselves from SYRIZA in September 2015 because of Tsipras’s signing of the third Memorandum. More specifically, Tsipras stated: “What they failed to achieve through all this [i.e., Schäuble’s Grexit plan] they now attempt to achieve with the help of the 30 MPs that have overthrown the government.” Amidst the Greek farmers’ mobilizations in February 2016, a key columnist in Avgi newspaper, SYRIZA’s official mouthpiece, pointed out: “There is a coordinated operation intended to destabilize the government—and the country with it.” It is exactly this deep-rooted, enemy-oriented national-popular resistance attitude and culture that has allowed extremist cycles—most probably, right-wing ones—to demonstrate in the streets during the aforementioned farmer mobilizations and use such anti-Semitic slogans as “Rothchilds, get out of Greece.”

Therefore, if we regard SYRIZA and ANEL only as populist parties, namely, only as “liberal democratic responses to undemocratic liberalism,” we risk depriving our perspective of their discourse’s constitutive nationalist nature, without which their very real and powerful social populism (the people versus the elites) might be non operational. Mudde rightly discerns a real possibility of SYRIZA developing into a “patricic PASOK,” a “patricic left”—into the PASOK founded by Andreas Papandreou, not a contemporary European social-democratic party. This further political estimation—confirmation, which is based on the way an important researcher of the populist phenomenon reflects on the “nature” of SYRIZA, clearly shows that this movement formation was and remains national-populist. The aforementioned interpretive category is further enhanced by a recent programmatic about-face of SYRIZA that is insightfully pointed out by Mudde in his last article. There, Mudde crucially underlines SYRIZA’s alliance with the Greek Orthodox Church: an alliance that seems to formalize, even to the most incredulous minds, the view that the populist phenomenon in contemporary Greece can be adequately understood in the context of identitarian populism, where nationalism and Orthodoxy complement one another.

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Notes
8. Mudde, “The Key Lesson from Syriza’s Defeat?”


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