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From protest to paradox: a decade of SYRIZA's ascent, governance and decline

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Introduction

Since the onset of the eurozone crisis in 2010, Greece has experienced profound economic and social upheaval. Public debt soared above 146 per cent of GDP, while GDP contracted by roughly 23 per cent between 2008 and 2013. Unemployment peaked at 27.5 per cent in 2013, and youth joblessness reached nearly 60 per cent in some regions (Lapavistas, 2019; Eurostat, 2020). The Troika—comprising the European Central Bank (ECB), European Commission (EC), and International Monetary Fund (IMF)—imposed three bailout programmes between May 2010 and July 2015, each requiring stringent austerity measures: deep public spending cuts, substantial tax hikes and wholesale structural reforms that reshaped labor markets, pension systems and public administration (Douzinas, 2017).

This environment of fiscal conditionality, combined with decades of clientelist politics and entrenched corruption (Trantidis, 2016), discredited Greece's mainstream parties—New Democracy (ND) and the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK). It was in this void that left-wing SYRIZA—originally a loose coalition of leftist factions—rebranded under Alexis Tsipras to channel a radical, anti-austerity agenda (Tsipras, 2012).

SYRIZA's course demonstrates how radical parties grapple with the wrenching shift from outsider protest to insider governance within constraints that are both external and endogenous. SYRIZA assumed power at the nadir of a sovereign debt crisis and under the iron-clad oversight of eurozone institutions, forcing its factions to navigate an unforgiving institutional architecture while ostensibly upholding an anti-austerity mandate. This proving ground reveals how party adaptation is shaped by voter expectation, leadership strategy, and also by asymmetric power relations with supranational creditors, which can compel ideological retrenchment or capitulation.

This article asks the following question: *How did SYRIZA's transformation from a radical, anti-austerity insurgent into Greece's governing party force it to forsake its founding ideals under the pressures of eurozone creditors and internal strife, ultimately precipitating its electoral collapse?* It offers an analytical narrative of SYRIZA's turbulent decade, divided into five phases—emergence (2010–2014); breakthrough (2015 elections); governance (2015–2019); opposition (2019–2023); and leadership crisis (2023–2025)—before concluding with parallels to comparable left-wing parties across Europe. Moreover, what does SYRIZA's experience teach us about the journey of similar movements—such as Podemos in Spain—that have also moved from street protest into government?

Act I: Emergence and intellectual foundations (2010–2014)

Between 2010 and 2012, successive austerity packages undermined living standards: real wages fell by 20 per cent; social expenditure shrank by 22–24 per cent; and poverty rates climbed to 35 per cent (Koutsogeorgopoulou et al., 2014; Matsaganis and Leventi, 2014). These policies catalyzed mass protests, strikes and the Aganaktismenoi (“Indignant Citizens”) encampments in public squares, notably Syntagma Square in Athens (Kavada and Dimitriou, 2017). Initially leaderless and horizontally organized, these movements galvanized civic participation and nurtured a critique of neoliberal governance (Markou, 2020).

Amid this backdrop, SYRIZA transformed from a fringe party into a cohesive electoral force. Under Tsipras’ leadership from 2008, the party had begun integrating smaller Marxist, eco-socialist and Trotskyist groups (Vradis, 2020). This consolidation was both strategic—aiming to capture leftist discontent—and intellectual, driven by a cadre of academics and activists willing to articulate an alternative vision to austerity.

Socialist economist Yanis Varoufakis played a key role in this (Chapman, 2015), as his writings provided SYRIZA with a coherent narrative on the political economy of the crisis. Drawing on game theory, he characterized negotiations with creditors as zero-sum confrontations in which Greece faced punitive terms designed to preserve European financial stability at the expense of social welfare (Varoufakis, 2014). For Varoufakis, debt restructuring and greater democratic oversight of the European Monetary Union (EMU) were essential to rebalance power within the eurozone.

In September 2014, SYRIZA unveiled its Thessaloniki Programme, a comprehensive policy blueprint that combined fiscal reform, social investment and measures for democratic renewal (Kouvelakis, 2016). Central to the plan was an immediate suspension of debt repayments to bondholders, accompanied by a sovereign debt audit intended to identify illegitimate claims and negotiate haircuts for the remainder.

Act II: Breakthrough and the clash with creditors (January–September 2015)

On 25 January 2015, SYRIZA captured 36.3 per cent of votes, dethroning the ND-PASOK coalition and securing 149 seats in the 300-member Hellenic Parliament (Anderson, 2015). Capitalizing on widespread anger, SYRIZA’s campaign framed the election as a choice between servitude and sovereignty. Tsipras’ slogans—“Enough with memoranda” and “We are not slaves”—resonated deeply after five years of perceived external domination. Partnering with the far-right ANEL (Independent Greeks), which gained 4.7 per cent of votes, SYRIZA cobbled together a narrow majority. The choice was pragmatic: ANEL shared anti-memoranda positions (Fielitz, 2018), though its ultranationalist overtones introduced tensions with SYRIZA’s internationalist ethos. This coalition underscored a central dilemma: to govern, SYRIZA needed allies, even at the cost of ideological coherence.

Debt negotiations commenced swiftly. On 3 February, freshly appointed finance minister Yanis Varoufakis met Eurogroup

president Jeroen Dijsselbloem, demanding a comprehensive debt review. Varoufakis rejected incremental extension of bailout programmes, proposing instead an inclusive “Greek plan” encompassing debt restructuring and targeted growth measures (Brandon, 2015). However, divisions emerged within the creditor camp. Germany’s Bundesbank and Federal Ministry of Finance insisted on strict compliance, while the EC considered conditional relief. Lacking allies, SYRIZA encountered collective resistance, forcing concessions. By April, Varoufakis’ combative approach lost favor; Tsipras delegated negotiating responsibilities to then alternate minister for international economic relations, Euclid Tsakalotos, whose more conciliatory style aimed to salvage talks (Smith, 2015).

With creditor deadlines looming and bank reserves dwindling, Tsipras announced a referendum on the EC-ECB-IMF proposal. Held on 5 July 2015, the referendum yielded a 61.3 per cent “No” vote (The, 2015a). Public sentiment was clear: Greeks rejected deeper austerity. Yet the victory proved pyrrhic. International pressure intensified, capital controls choked the economy, and European banking authorities deliberately reduced emergency liquidity assistance (ELA). Facing the Specter of Grexit and social collapse, Tsipras accepted a third bailout on 13th July with even harsher terms—raising VAT rates and further pension cuts (Sotiris, 2018). Varoufakis resigned in protest, likening the deal to a “new Versailles” (Brown, 2015).

The bailout deal split SYRIZA: left-wing MPs led by Panagiotis Lafazanis formed Popular Unity, refusing to support the agreement (Shawki, 2016). To secure parliamentary approval, Tsipras relied on center-right opposition support—ironically enlisting ND and PASOK votes to pass measures (The, 2015b). In the September 2015 snap election, SYRIZA managed to retain power with 35.5 per cent of the vote and 145 seats, despite Popular Unity’s failure to cross the 3 per cent threshold. Voter turnout plummeted to 56.6 per cent, the lowest since 1974, indicating eroded legitimacy (Al Jazeera, 2015).

At each critical juncture the eurozone’s institutional architecture imposed concrete limits: Maastricht-era deficit ceilings, ECB liquidity thresholds and Troika’s memoranda framed Greece’s permissible policy space. Yet it was SYRIZA’s own internal dynamics—between moderates seeking compromise and hard-liners demanding rupture—as well as leadership calculations about public opinion and alliance-building that ultimately determined how aggressively the party tested those boundaries. In this light, European conditionality set the red lines, but it was the party’s organizational cohesion and domestic electoral imperatives that dictated the pace and extent of its challenge.

Act III: Governing under austerity and institutional constraints (2015–2019)

Under the third bailout, Greece was committed to primary budget surpluses of 3.5 per cent of GDP until 2022 and 2 per cent until 2060—targets that required sustained austerity (Selin, 2018). By 2018, debt had risen to 180 per cent of GDP, reflecting the impact of contractionary policies on the economy’s denominator (Eurostat, 2021). Real GDP growth only returned modestly in 2017–2018, hindered by weak domestic demand and limited access to credit.

These trends challenged SYRIZA's pledge to protect vulnerable groups and revitalize the economy.

The 2016 “flexicurity” reforms aimed to liberalize hiring and firing to boost competitiveness while introducing training incentives to support workers (Bulfone and Tassinari, 2021). In practice, the erosion of collective bargaining and shortened notice periods increased precarity, particularly in tourism and service sectors. Unemployment remained above 15 per cent throughout SYRIZA's term; youth unemployment still exceeded 30 per cent by 2019 (Markou, 2020). Some argue that these measures reflected politics of compromise (Katsambekis, 2019): SYRIZA sought to balance labor protections with creditor demands for market flexibility.

Despite initial resistance, SYRIZA ultimately conceded to creditor demands for privatization as a condition of bailout support. The most significant transactions included the long-term lease of fourteen regional airports to Fraport Greece, which provided €1.2 billion in revenue but transferred operational control of critical infrastructure; the sale of a 67 per cent stake in the Thessaloniki Port Authority for €232 million; and the partial privatization of the Independent Power Transmission Operator (ADMIE), which granted 24 per cent ownership to China's State Grid. To manage these disposals, SYRIZA established the Hellenic Corporation of Assets and Participations (HCAP), institutionalizing asset sales far beyond the bailout timeline. Critics argue that HCAP acted as a superfund, binding Greece's economic sovereignty to protracted privatization commitments for decades, and undermining the party's original promise of democratic control over strategic sectors (Lapavistas and Kouvelakis, 2018).

SYRIZA's early commitments to humane refugee reception gave way to the EU–Turkey Statement of March 2016, under which Turkey agreed to curb irregular crossings in exchange for €6 billion in aid and visa liberalization talks (Demirbaş and Miliou, 2024). Greece assumed the role of Europe's external border, implementing “geographical restriction” policies that confined asylum seekers to islands. Camps like Moria on Lesbos became notorious for inhumane conditions: overcrowding, disease outbreaks and violence (Amnesty, 2015). Human rights organizations criticized SYRIZA for complicity in these policies, questioning the party's moral authority on humanitarian issues (Souvlis, 2020).

As SYRIZA governed under austerity, far-right extremist Golden Dawn exploited social grievances, securing 7 per cent of Parliamentary seats in 2015 and advancing its hateful agenda (Petrou and Kandyliis, 2016). SYRIZA's fragmented left—divided among KKE, ANTARSYA and various independent factions—struggled to form a united front. Legal action against Golden Dawn's leadership in 2019 curtailed some activities, but the broader challenge remained: reconstructing a progressive alliance capable of countering authoritarian nationalism.

Act IV: Opposition, strategic drift and electoral decline (2019–2023)

On 7 July 2019, ND won 39.85 per cent of the vote, defeating SYRIZA's 31.53 per cent (Papadimitriou, 2019). The result reflected public fatigue and a perception that SYRIZA had failed to deliver promised relief. Tsipras conceded defeat, initiating internal

reviews to redefine the party's direction. ND's first term was marred by allegations of wiretapping of journalists and political opponents (Lavelle, 2022), mishandling of pandemic relief funds (Chatzistavrou and Papanikolaou, 2024) and controversies over judicial independence. Despite such scandals, SYRIZA struggled to sustain narratives that resonated beyond protest rallies, lacking a cohesive policy platform to challenge government authority.

Between 2019 and 2023 SYRIZA abandoned any notion of a one-off wealth levy in favor of a supplemental real-estate tax on properties valued above €400 000 and steeper income-tax rates for earnings beyond €200 000, while introducing a two-tier corporate-tax regime (17 per cent on profits up to €220 000; 24 per cent above that threshold). Its social-housing programme centered on the creation of a national Social Housing Registry, targeted rent subsidies, transitional accommodation for evicted tenants and tighter regulations on short-lets, rather than a sweeping scheme to convert vacant private buildings. Under its Green Deal, SYRIZA pledged major investment in renewable-energy infrastructure, public control of the transmission grid, energy-efficiency retrofits for homes and public buildings, and the establishment of decentralized energy communities in place of explicit worker-owned co-operatives. Critics noted that financing details remained sketchy and media coverage tended to focus on headline costs—estimated at around €3.5 billion—thereby framing the proposals as aspirational rather than fully costed strategies.

In the May 2023 legislative election, SYRIZA polled at 20 per cent, trailing well behind ND's 41 per cent projection (Mylonas, 2024). In the June runoff, its share fell further to 17.84 per cent as far-right party Greek Solution gained traction (Hellenic Ministry of Interior, 2023). Voter turnout dropped to 49 per cent, evidencing disaffection across the spectrum. Younger voters gravitated toward small progressive and single-issue parties, indicating fragmentation of the left electorate.

Act V: Leadership crisis, fragmentation and realignment (2023–2025)

Following the June 2023 defeat, Tsipras stepped down and SYRIZA held a leadership election featuring three main contenders: Euclid Tsakalotos, veteran of austerity negotiations; Effie Achtsioglou, former labor minister and trade-union advocate; and Stefanos Kasselakis, a US-trained banker turned political newcomer. Kasselakis' outsider narrative and adept use of social media propelled him to victory with 56 per cent in the second round (Kostarella and Palla, 2024).

Kasselakis' tenure witnessed intensifying factionalism. Reports emerged of orchestrated online harassment targeting critics and dissidents (Zafeiropoulos, 2023). Financial audits raised questions about opaque campaign funding and alleged misallocation of party resources toward personal initiatives (Kathimerini, 2024a).

By December 2023, 11 MPs and two MEPs resigned to form New Left (Nea Aristera), decrying SYRIZA's abandonment of core principles (Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, 2023). The split weakened SYRIZA's parliamentary group and undermined its credibility as the primary leftist force. In September 2024, SYRIZA's central committee voted to expel Kasselakis, triggering yet another schism as he founded the Movement for Democracy, attracting

further defections (Kathimerini, 2024b). PASOK, under leadership focused on social-liberal reform, capitalized on SYRIZA's disarray, overtaking it in polls at around 20 per cent by early 2025 (Vasilopoulos, 2024).

By mid-2025, SYRIZA's support hovered between 5 and 7 per cent, its parliamentary representation reduced to a marginal grouping of 26 MPs (To Vima, 2024). The center-left space is now contested between PASOK and new coalitions. The wider fragmentation of the Greek left raises serious questions about the viability of unified opposition to ND and the EU's prevailing policy framework.

Parallels

SYRIZA's rise from 2010 to 2015 paralleled the growth of other European left-wing parties, such as Podemos in Spain and Jean-Luc Mélenchon's France Insoumise (LFI) (Marlière, 2019). Like SYRIZA, these parties emerged from anti-austerity activism, employed populist rhetoric against elites and combined electoral and grassroots tactics (Rodríguez-Teruel et al., 2016). By contrast, Podemos never commanded a parliamentary majority but leveraged its support into a coalition agreement with the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) in January 2020 (Orriols and León, 2022). From that position as junior partner it helped secure early implementation of manifesto promises, all while steering clear of the kind of dramatic policy U-turn that cost SYRIZA much of its credibility. Despite the usual concessions demanded by coalition politics, Podemos maintained its standing in Spanish politics without enduring a comparable collapse.

LFI has deliberately avoided taking ministerial portfolios, freeing it from the discipline of collective cabinet responsibility and the need to reconcile its manifesto with France's deficit-ceiling regulations (Chazel, 2023). Instead, its deputies have leveraged their backbench positions to push for high-profile amendments over the years. Leveraging committee seats, forging *ad hoc* alliances with green and regional left MPs, and coordinating grassroots campaigns, LFI has established itself as a disruptive force in French politics rather than just another left-wing party that abandons its principles.

Lastly, Germany's Die Linke never attained the same momentum as the parties discussed above but, like SYRIZA, endured a steep electoral downturn in 2021 driven by leadership turmoil and strategic fragmentation rather than financial coercion (Olsen and Hansen, 2022). By February 2025, it had rebounded to 64 Bundestag seats (Connolly, 2025) thanks in part to an innovative door-to-door campaign that effectively communicated its radical platform and re-engaged left-wing voters. This revival reflects comprehensive organizational reform, targeted policy messaging on housing and social services, and modest yet concrete successes at the state level—areas in which SYRIZA has not managed comparable gains since its 2019 defeat and subsequent decline.

In short, SYRIZA's undoing was rooted in its transition from opposition firebrand to governing party under the full glare of eurozone creditors: having vowed to terminate Greece's memoranda, it found itself compelled into a third bailout, shattering the trust of its base, prompting high-profile defections and leaving a legacy of factional bitterness.

Conclusion

SYRIZA's decade-long journey shows how radical movements can harness public discontent to disrupt entrenched party systems and seize the levers of power. Its rapid ascent from protest movement to governing party reveals the appeal of uncompromising anti-austerity platforms in times of crisis. Yet the party's subsequent concessions to eurozone creditors highlight the institutional guardrails that constrain even the most insurgent actors—and expose the internal vulnerabilities that emerge when rhetoric collides with the bureaucratic realities of government.

At the same time, the fallout from Alexis Tsipras's departure without a clear succession plan illustrates how personalized leadership can become a double-edged sword. Once his messianic appeal dimmed, factional rivalries took hold and paved the way for the unexpected ascent of Stefanos Kasselakis. A comparable dynamic has played out in Podemos under Ione Belarra: when Pablo Iglesias left the stage in 2021, a more collective leadership model helped avert the kind of disarray SYRIZA experienced, showing that devotion to a single figure can fracture a movement if not balanced by shared decision-making.

To guard against such pitfalls, durable success depends on developing internal structures that reconcile grassroots activism with the procedural demands of office. Maintaining open channels of accountability to core supporters helps preserve legitimacy when difficult policy reversals become unavoidable. Embedding clear mechanisms—succession protocols, collegiate bodies and transparent debate processes—ensures that strategic coherence survives the inevitable ebb and flow of leadership.

These internal challenges intersect with the broader dynamics of European integration. Radical parties pursuing systemic change must devise strategies that both confront and engage supranational frameworks—whether by leveraging parliamentary procedures in Brussels or forging alliances within EU institutions to shape policy. By contrast, La France Insoumise demonstrates that, by maintaining an antagonistic stance toward full alignment with EU frameworks, a left-wing movement can sustain its disruptive edge without entering government, honor manifesto pledges and continue to energize its base.

Underpinning all of this is the nature of political leadership itself. Charismatic figures like Tsipras or Iglesias can unite disparate currents and unlock mass enthusiasm, but over-personalized command structures risk stifling collective agency. The real test of leadership lies not only in a leader's tenure but in the structures left behind. Alexis Tsipras's impending return under a new banner will therefore serve as a crucial barometer of whether SYRIZA has corrected its past mistakes (Ellis, 2025): a decade ago it galvanized a disruptive force in European politics; today it teeters on the brink of parliamentary extinction, making its next chapter a decisive indicator of lasting renewal.

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