**The Dog that Barked but Did Not Bite: Greek Foreign Policy under the Populist Coalition of SYRIZA-Independent Greeks, 2015-19**

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***Abstract****: The election in Greece in 2015 of a governing coalition of populist parties – the radical left SYRIZA and the right-wing Independent Greeks (ANEL) – created questions about Greece’s foreign policy orientation, particularly its alignment with Euro-Atlantic institutions and a potential rapprochement with non-Western powers. Yet these fears proved unfounded after Greece accepted a new bailout from the Eurozone in the summer of 2015. The trajectory of Greek foreign policy in this period points to an increase in the influence of populism on rhetoric and symbolic actions in the first six months of the government’s tenure, followed by a gradual decline of populism’s visibility. On the whole, populism had a marginal influence on the content of Greek foreign policy during the years of the economic crisis, although it was more important in terms of rhetoric, style and domestic political strategies.*

**Keywords**: populism; foreign policy; EU crisis; Greece; SYRIZA

**Introduction**

The link between populism and foreign policy was until recently under-explored. This started to change with the emergence of populist governments and the realization that populists have distinct ideas on international affairs (Chryssogelos 2017a; Verbeek and Zaslove 2017). Exploring the impact of populism on foreign policy is a relevant exercise for Greece, where foreign policy has historically been salient among public opinion (Tsakonas 2010), and populism has been prominent due to the country’s uneven democratization history, political polarization over long periods of time, and frequent diplomatic, economic and constitutional crises (Pappas 2013). Most recently, a coalition of two populist parties, the radical left SYRIZA and the right-nationalist ANEL, held power between 2015-19.

This article enquires whether populism had an effect on Greek foreign policy during the economic crisis of 2010-19 with an emphasis on the years of the SYRIZA-ANEL coalition. It will do so by adopting a strategic-discursive approach to the phenomenon of populism and apply it to the more specific question of its effect on foreign policy change. Analytically, this approach is more appropriate not simply to assess the impact of populism, but to delineate the distinct character of populist foreign policy. The empirical argument is that populism has had a relatively small effect on new foreign policy outputs. Where changes did occur, the effect of populism was not always easy to disentangle from that of other ideologies or of pre-existing trends. The distinctiveness of populism for foreign policy must be seen less in terms of concrete policies – the ‘what’ – and more in terms of the way foreign policy is used – the ‘how’ – to articulate, reflect and strengthen domestically the antagonistic divide between the ‘people’ and the ‘elites’, and the link between populist leaders and followers.

The article first presents a theoretical overview of the relationship between populism and foreign policy and outlines the strategic-discursive approach. Second, it presents a background of Greek party politics and foreign policy for the period under study. The main part examines whether populism brought about any change in Greek foreign policy along specific theoretical dimensions: foreign policymaking processes, multilateralism, diversification of foreign relations, and politicization. These are commonly seen as areas where populism influences foreign policy (see introduction to special issue), examining them through the lens of foreign policy change however allows us to establish populism’s distinctive impact relative to other factors of foreign policy. As the goal is to think of populism and Greek foreign policy through analytical lenses pertaining to foreign policy change, the analysis will be based on secondary accounts of Greek politics and foreign policy complemented by primary news sources and politicians’ statements organized in a structured way so as to highlight the relevant theoretical connections. The analysis also has the character of within-case comparison, with developments in 2015-19 compared to other periods when populism was present in Greek foreign policy, especially the 1980s. The final part concludes.

**Populism, Foreign Policy and Foreign Policy Change**

Populism is a multifaceted concept (Taggart 2000). It can be understood invariably as a ‘thin-centred’ ideology (Freeden 1998; Mudde 2004), discourse (Laclau 2005; Panizza 2005), style (Moffitt 2017) or mobilization tactic (Weyland 2018). Despite their differences, all these approaches agree on certain core definitional aspects of populism. First, populism carries a binary perspective of politics and society, considering them divided between the ‘people’ and the ‘elites’. Second, between the two, populism is supportive of the ‘people’, understood as virtuous and downtrodden, against the ‘elites’, seen as corrupt and incompetent. Third, beyond its anti-elitism, populism is anti-pluralist (Müller 2016), as it sees the opposition between ‘people’ and ‘elites’ as overriding any other social divide, and considers that the goal of politics is to turn into practice the ‘will of the people’ regardless of any institutional, administrative etc. constraints. Finally, populism acquires different content depending on the definition of the ‘people’ in different national, regional or historical contexts.

The ideational perspective is the one most often used in analyses of populism and foreign policy (see indicatively Boucher and Thies 2019; Plagemann and Destradi 2018; Verbeek and Zaslove 2015), inquiring whether populist ideas are present in the foreign policy positions adopted or foreign policy decisions made by parties and governments. It is important however to separate the independent effect of populism from that of any thicker ideology (Chryssogelos 2017a). For instance, when a left-wing populist criticizes international economic institutions, it should be clarified whether this is on the basis of their populism – opposition to the establishment – or their socialism – opposition to neoliberalism.

The discursive approach on the other hand sees the divide between ‘people’ and ‘elites’ as articulated by actors who aim to re-politicize the relationship between political community and official power (Mouffe 2020). In this perspective, foreign policy can be a field where a popular identity opposed to the system is constructed and this antagonistic relationship reproduced. Relatedly, populism is considered prone to using foreign policy for domestic purposes. Populist leaders’ offensive or inappropriate style on the international stage will foster links with his followers (Drezner 2017), especially during foreign policy crises, actual or constructed.

While this literature has produced many interesting insights in populism’s influence over foreign policy, it still has not delineated the distinctiveness of populism, in the sense that many of the foreign policy effects linked to populism – e.g. centralization of policymaking or antagonism to international institutions – are not exclusive to it but can conceivably be brought about by other factors as well. One way to discern effects specific to populism is to enquire about its influence on foreign policy *change*, making use of a literature which has been surprisingly under-utilized in analyses of populism and, more generally, parties and ideologies in foreign policy.

Thinking in terms of foreign policy change calls attention to the international dimension, which is often overlooked in arguments about the impact of parties on foreign policy. Changes in a state’s external environment may lead to reassessments of foreign policy (Gustavson 1999), or differently, firm international constraints may stifle domestic pressures to change a foreign policy. Second, different degrees of foreign policy change, such as Hermann’s (1990) differentiation between changes of methods, tactics, goals or strategic orientation, call for different theorizations about the role of domestic politics. An even more fundamental change is captured by the concept of foreign policy reorientation or restructuring, a complete reversal of a state’s strategic orientation that reflects a wholesale change of its legitimacy basis and relationship with its society (Holsti 1982).

To answer the question of foreign policy change, an eclectic conceptualization of populism is necessary. First, foreign policy restructuring necessitates the kind of rupture and total antagonistic opposition between the ‘people’ and the political system as understood by the discursive approach. The ‘people’ is a political identity constructed to express a fundamental opposition between a chain of unmet social demands and the political power that ignored them. As such, populism can bring about a deep reassessment about whether foreign policy reorientation is necessary to realign the actions of the state with the interests of the ‘people’(Chryssogelos 2017b).

But while in its purest form populism is indeed a deep rupture between ‘people’ and ‘system’, the discursive approach does not see this as something coming about naturally due to objective representational gaps or material grievances. Rather, this antagonistic relationship must be articulated by political actors. This sees in populism a dual nature, as a challenge to power from below, but which also necessitates an articulation of its identity, goals and strategy by some kind of leadership from ‘above’ (Aslanidis 2017). Weyland’s (2018) strategic and Moffitt’s (2017) stylistic approaches, despite differences in their ontological understanding of populism, share a perception of populism as emanating from above, embodied in strong personalistic and often charismatic leadership. And together with the discursive approach, they share a view of populism as political action aimed at constructing specific relationships – between ‘people’ and ‘system’, and between ‘people’ and leader – in the political field.

The implication is that foreign policy change by populists should aim at articulating, embodying and reproducing the antagonistic relationship between ‘people’ and ‘elites’ as well as the identity between ‘people’ and leader. The gradation of foreign policy change – whether of style, tactics or goals – would then mirror the gradation of the populist phenomenon itself, from a stylistic choice aimed at showcasing in his ‘bad manners’ the leader’s distinction from elites, to a fundamental people-elite rupture. Thus, foreign policy change can articulate and bring into existence these binary and antagonistic relations, or, differently, foreign policy driven by populism will be distinguished by how it reproduces a popular identity mobilized against the ‘system’.

The strategic-discursive perspective implies that the shape and degree of foreign policy change will be determined ultimately by the balance between these two complementary, but also countervailing, relationships articulated by populist discourse: the opposition of the ‘people below’ to the ‘system above’; and the identity between leader and followers. To the extent that a popular identity is brought into existence ‘from below’, by actors outside conventional processes of representation, demands for foreign policy change can be as radical as calls for a wholesale overthrow of the ‘system’. But as this relationship is progressively being articulated by leaders operating in the realm of party politics and, if they win elections, the state, foreign policy will increasingly be used to legitimize the rule of populists (Wajner and Roniger 2019), with foreign policy change contained to the stylistic or declaratory field. Even then however, the distinctiveness of foreign policy influenced by populism remains: regardless of policy outcomes, the purpose of foreign policy will be the articulation of the people-elite relationship in antagonistic terms.

**Party Politics and Foreign Policy in Greece**

Foreign policy has historically been closely intertwined with party politics in Greece. Since World War II the main conflict over the formulation of foreign policy has been the balance between the pursuit of security and geopolitical standing – conflicts with Turkey over the Aegean, the Cyprus problem, disagreements with Balkan neighbours – and the relationship with Greece’s Western partners in NATO and, later, the EU. Successive governments had to strike uneasy compromises when the priorities of Greece’s allies clashed with its immediate national interests. The highest politicization of foreign policy occurred on such occasions, like the Cyprus issue in the 1950s, 60s and 70s and the Macedonia name-issue in the 1990s (Chryssogelos 2021: 110-111).

After 1981 Greece had a two-party system, with the leftist PASOK and the conservative New Democracy rotating in power. New Democracy supported Greece’s Western anchoring and membership of the EEC (later EU). PASOK on the other hand, under the leadership of populist Andreas Papandreou, represented working class and agrarian strata disenchanted with the post-War establishment that had excluded them politically and economically. In foreign policy, this was expressed in Papandreou’s nationalist posture, especially towards Turkey, and flirtations with the Soviet bloc and the non-aligned as a way to demonstrate Greece’s newfound assertiveness towards the US (Loulis 1984).

After the end of the Cold War, PASOK executed a social-democratic turn, becoming pro-European and shedding its populist character. Both parties supported entry in the Eurozone and more moderate relations with neighbours. In 1999 Greece dropped its veto to Turkey becoming a candidate EU member, seeking to embedding relations with its neighbours in the framework of EU enlargement policy. Nationalist ideology remained widely popular in Greek public opinion, where Turkey’s EU candidacy were opposed (Tsakonas 2010: 216). But economic prosperity and popularity of the EU (Clements et al 2014) allowed both parties to present foreign policy moderation as a sophisticated way to pursue the national interest (Chryssogelos 2015).

This pro-European consensus was shuttered in 2010 with the Eurozone crisis, which saw Greece effectively bankrupt and request a bailout by the EU and the IMF in exchange for harsh austerity measures. The crisis caused the Greek party system to realign around the question of austerity and relations with the EU that cut across traditional left-right lines (Verney 2014). ND and PASOK became coalition partners in 2011 to implement austerity and ensure Greece’s place in the euro. The anti-austerity camp ranged from the far left of the Greek Communist Party (KKE) and the emergent radical-left SYRIZA, to the far right of the nationalist Independent Greeks (ANEL) and the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn. Apart from austerity, the bailout cleavage structured attitudes towards the political system, with anti-austerity forces seeing the ‘old parties’ as responsible for Greece’s bankruptcy (Katsanidou and Otjes 2016). Even highly ideological parties like KKE and Golden Dawn exhibited an anti-system discourse in this sense, but populism was a much stronger element of ideologically looser parties like SYRIZA and ANEL.

In the elections of January 2015 SYRIZA under Alexis Tsipras won. Surprisingly, Tsipras turned to ANEL to form an ideologically varied coalition. The new government entered into a confrontational negotiation with the EU, led by flamboyant minister of finance Yanis Varoufakis, over Greece’s bailout program during which the country came close to being kicked out of the Eurozone. After a referendum where Greeks overwhelmingly rejected austerity in June 2015, Tsipras agreed a new bailout anyway. This move caused an internal rift in SYRIZA, with its far-left anti-austerity wing leaving the party. New elections in September 2015 returned the SYRIZA-ANEL coalition, which lasted until 2019 implementing the austerity policies it had once rejected.

During the crisis, traditional foreign policy issues has receded in salience, but in the summer of 2018, Greece signed a deal recognizing its northern neighbour with the name ‘North Macedonia’, a controversial move for Greek public opinion but strongly supported by the US, NATO and the EU. ANEL left the government and Tsipras ratified the deal with the help of MPs of the centre-left. ND opposed the agreement in order to forestall any losses to its right (Chryssogelos and Stavrevska 2019). Tsipras’ move hardened the core of his leftist support despite the four years of austerity but it did not save SYRIZA from defeat in the elections of summer 2019, which saw New Democracy return to power and form the first single-party government since 2011.

**Populism and Change in Greek Foreign Policy**

Our analysis enquires about the effect of populism on Greek foreign policy in four important dimensions: diversification of foreign relationships, politicization, centralization of foreign policy making, and relations with international institutions (particularly the EU). This is a significant departure from most existing analyses of populism in foreign policy, which rely primarily on general overviews of applied policies. Instead, building on the framework of this special issue (intro), this article tests the influence of populism over foreign policy in areas where such an influence in theoretically expected, although seldom yet systematically tested. Doing this through the framework of foreign policy change further helps to isolate the distinct role of populism.

*Diversification of Foreign Relationships*

As Greece’s geopolitical orientation was often intertwined with domestic cleavages, contesting the dominant patterns of foreign policy also signalled a challenge to the establishment. Andreas Papandreou, the archetypical populist leader from the 1960s to the 1990s, contested Greece’s Western anchoring during the Cold War. Papandreou embodied his agenda of giving back dignity to the ‘non-privileged people’ in a foreign policy of anti-Americanism, Euroscepticism, and nationalist posturing against Turkey. But, in a sign of the limits of populism under international constraints, Papandreou never acted upon his threats to take Greece out of NATO or the EEC (Loulis 1984: 378-80). In this sense, the populism in Papandreou’s foreign policy was evident less as a policy-geared ideology and more as a style and posture on the international stage.

A desire to redirect Greek foreign policy was similarly evident in the popular effervescence created by the economic crisis and the delegitimation of the old two-party system after 2010 (Aslanidis and Marantzidis 2016). Among emerging populist parties, the desire to renew a corrupt and failed political system found expression also in debates of changing Greece’s strategic orientation. Opposing the EU in the economy was seen as necessitating the loosening of political and strategic bonds with it and the West as a whole. Between 2010-15 it was common for anti-austerity parties to speculate about and call for the exploration of new financing opportunities from non-Western powers like China and Russia.[[1]](#endnote-1) However, thick ideology was at play as well, for example the left’s anti-Americanism and anti-globalization stance.[[2]](#endnote-2)

While pursuing new connections in foreign policy appeared driven by populist parties’ opposition to EU-imposed austerity, it was not unrelated to external changes. Governments of mainstream parties were already forging new partnerships in response to a new geopolitical environment and opportunities in the region. The last pre-crisis government of New Democracy had signed energy cooperation agreements with Russia in 2008.[[3]](#endnote-3) PASOK fostered a strong relationship with Israel following a rift in Israel-Turkey relations in 2010.[[4]](#endnote-4) Governments of both PASOK and ND welcomed Chinese investment in the port of Piraeus.[[5]](#endnote-5) During the privatization of its natural gas utility and network in 2012-13, Greece strongly considered bids from Russia and Azerbaijan.[[6]](#endnote-6) Greece was already encountering the rise of new, non-Western regional and world powers by the time populists started thinking about new sources of financing of Greek debt.

In the first six months of the SYRIZA-ANEL government in 2015, diversified foreign policy relations were presented as a necessary complement, indeed a precondition for the success, of the debt renegotiation with the EU. Russia, China and other non-European actors were seen, rather unrealistically, as potential sources of financing.[[7]](#endnote-7) Concerns at the time heightened in Western media that a rupture with the EU could bring about Greece’s wholesale reorientation from the West.[[8]](#endnote-8) The threat to disengage seemed to align with the long-standing thinking of important people in the government like foreign minister Kotzias, who had long called on Greece to adapt its foreign policy for a post-Western multipolar world (Kotzias 2010). Rumours also abounded that SYRIZA was looking for support from Venezuela, contacting the Maduro regime in search for financial assistance or free oil deliveries.[[9]](#endnote-9)

After the conclusion of a new agreement with the EU in July 2015, Tsipras attempted to prop up his anti-establishment credentials with symbolic moves like his visit to Cuba for the funeral of Fidel Castro in 2016.[[10]](#endnote-10) He continued with the courting with China of previous governments seeking out economic gains from Beijing.[[11]](#endnote-11) Tellingly for the degree to which geopolitical pressures mitigate ideological considerations, he also continued with the policy of alliance with Israel, despite the strongly pro-Palestinian tradition of the Greek left.[[12]](#endnote-12) Relations with Russia started warmly, but deteriorated by the end of his term due to Moscow’s opposition to the Macedonia name-deal that paved the way for North Macedonia to join NATO; the disagreement led to Greece accusing Russia of internal meddling and the expulsion of two diplomats charged with spying.[[13]](#endnote-13)

The question of whether populists cause diversification of partnerships requires then some qualifications. Like Papandreou during the Cold War, the SYRIZA-ANEL government faced hard international constraints, especially economic demands by the EU and the financial markets. Rather, populists seeking leverage against the EU’s economic tutelage saw promise in closer relations with new regional (Israel) and non-Western (China) partners. The difference was that, while non-populist governments had presented these as pragmatic adaptations to new opportunities within a framework of alignment with the EU and NATO, the SYRIZA-ANEL government presented them as examples of a more assertive international presence.[[14]](#endnote-14) For a coalition that had to convince its electorate that it was still different from ‘old parties’ after accepting a new bailout, articulating in more emancipatory fashion policies that were not too different from those of previous governments was important. But even this effect progressively weakened, so that by the end of its term, and especially after the Macedonia deal, SYRIZA had adopted fully a mainstream perspective of Greek goals through the European and Western framework. [[15]](#endnote-15)

*Politicization, Amenability to Compromise and Conflict*

Populism is often associated with increased politicization of foreign policy, i.e. its removal from the realm of expert opinion and its subjection to public contestation along party, ideological etc. lines. However, as in most countries, foreign policy in Greece has always been subject to politicization in the party system, as it has traditionally interplayed with other cleavages (political, economic, ideological) in Greek society (Chryssogelos 2021: 109). Thus, it is important to identify what is distinctive about populist politicization relative to politicization taking place through conventional political channels.

Conventional politicization in Greece has taken two forms: a government-opposition dynamic and a mainstream-extreme dynamic. Competition in a two-party system often incites the opposition to accuse the government for failing to defend the national interest. Although the rhetoric might be heightened, these are also opportunities for mainstream parties to reassert established and jointly agreed foreign policy goals, the main point of contention being which party has the capability to fulfil them better. On the other hand, fringe parties (populist and non-populist alike) have tried to distinguish themselves by positing an alternative foreign policy course on the basis of strongly ideological readings of international politics. Thus, KKE steadily calls for exit from NATO and the EU, while small, extremist parties of the right in the 1990s and 2000s had a sceptical attitude towards the EU (Ellinas 2012).

Foreign policy politicization can also reflect deeper ruptures between people and the political system however. This vertical politicization will more often reach into foundational questions of strategic orientation, since these usually reflect long-standing elite arrangements. Thus, in terms of Hermann’s foreign policy change scale, politicization by populism will be more probable to pose the question of change in a state’s orientation or goals than politicization within the framework of the established party system, which should focus primarily on methods, tactics or rhetoric. Indeed, distrust against a state’s legitimacy is often expressed in demands for a new foreign policy orientation. In such cases, mainstream parties will often seek to channel the anti-system effervescence into conventional politicization between them (Chryssogelos 2021), a pattern seen historically in Greece as well (Chryssogelos 2015; 2017b).

Andreas Papandreou in the 1970s and 1980s again emerges as the most consistent populist in this respect. As the most radical opposition voice in the 1970s to New Democracy’s government that tried to reconcile Greece’s Western orientation with the need to stand up to Turkish aggression, Papandreou was notable for calling out the ‘establishment’ for giving in to the provocations of Turkey, a NATO ally. His call on the government to sink Turkish vessels conducting geological research in disputed waters remains iconic to this day. When PASOK entered government in 1981, Papandreou was prone to high-profile and maverick foreign policy initiatives that reinforced his domestic anti-establishment image (Loulis 1984: 378–379).

When he returned to opposition in 1990, Papandreou outbid the ND government dealing with the Macedonia issue and his pressure contributed to Athens hardening its position towards Skopje. The Macedonia question, exploding in massive popular mobilizations expressing identitarian and nationalist feelings at odds with Greece’s Western anchoring, signalled that the party system was losing control over the loyalties of the Greek people after the end of the Cold War. Seen this way, Papandreou’s criticism of New Democracy on Macedonia was less an example of populism as of an established party helping absorb popular excitement in the confines of two-party competition.

With the economic crisis in 2010, populist parties aimed to politicize Greece’s relationship with the EU as it was seen as the main reason for the imposition of austerity. Although the EU is not a foreign policy issue per se, the contestation of austerity was explicitly connected to questions of sovereignty and strategic orientation (Chryssogelos 2020: 30-31). In this sense, the confrontational attitude of populists in SYRIZA and ANEL towards the EU in opposition in 2010-15 and in government in the first half of 2015 can be seen as an example of foreign policy politicization along the people-elite polarity.

It is interesting that traditional foreign policy issues like relations with Turkey, the Balkans and the US were not excessively politicized with the entry into power of the SYRIZA-ANEL coalition, at least not beyond the typical government-opposition dynamic. This changed with the decision of Tsipras to reach an agreement on the Macedonia name-issue in 2018, settling on the jointly agreed name ‘North Macedonia’ with Skopje. This would certainly rupture the coalition with ANEL, a nationalist party whose platform included opposition to any resolution of the name-issue using the name ‘Macedonia’.

Most observers in Greece agreed that Tsipras used the Macedonia issue to achieve domestic goals. Lagging in polls against New Democracy, SYRIZA hoped two things: First, by agreeing on a resolution of the issue in a way that agreed with EU and US priorities in the Balkans, it would embarrass ND whose voters were overwhelmingly opposed to the deal but whose leadership had a strong pro-European profile. Indeed, ND opposed the agreement and this caused frictions in its relationship with Brussels and Washington. Second, by using a foreign policy issue that was contested along left-right lines (with the left supporting and the right opposing the agreement) as a wedge, Tsipras hoped to shake off association with ANEL, who were seen by that point as burdensome. Sure enough, after a series of convoluted moves in parliament during ratification of the deal in January 2019, the coalition dissolved, although some ANEL defectors continued to support a new SYRIZA-only government (Chryssogelos and Stavrevska 2019: 438-39).

Tsipras’ decision on Macedonia further qualifies expectations about the impact of populism on foreign policy. First, the thick ideology – radical leftism, which posited a non-nationalistic perspective on foreign policy – superseded SYRIZA’s extant populism. Second, Tsipras’ decision can be seen as calculated foreign policy politicization aimed at neutralizing anti-establishment attitudes – a kind of *anti-populist politicization* as it were. It is telling that the agreement was overwhelmingly opposed by Greek public opinion.[[16]](#endnote-16) Mass demonstrations against it in 2018-19 resembled anti-austerity mobilization in 2010-15, complete with clashes with the police in front of the parliament. SYRIZA passed the agreement with a meager parliamentary majority in a process that stretched constitutional norms, as its government with ANEL simultaneously collapsed. ND opposed the deal but made it clear that it would not abrogate it if it came to power. In essence, heightened politicization along left-right lines between two parties in fundamental agreement about Greece’s domestic governance and international orientation crowded out any populist politicization against the political system remaining from the years of crisis, expressed in a last gasp of street protests against the Prespa agreement.

*Bilateralism, Multilateralism and Support for the EU and other International Institutions*

Populism’s rise after 2010 in Greece was associated with an increase in Euroscepticism, directed against Brussels and Germany, the perceived dominant power inside the EU (Clements et al 2014). Despite a very different context, one can notice continuities with left-wing populism in the 1980s under Andreas Papandreou, who was also initially hostile towards the EEC, seen as a capitalist organization of the ‘centre’ bent on exploiting a ‘peripheral’ country like Greece.

An anti-institutional bent in the SYRIZA-ANEL coalition’s renegotiation with the EU in the first half of 2015 was observable. Tsipras and his finance minister Yanis Varoufakis insisted that a negotiated solution could be found through direct political contacts with European leaders, chiefly Angela Merkel, despite the EU repeatedly directing the Greek side to technical negotiations at the expert level. Varoufakis’ posture, with his insistence on moving beyond the formal rules of the Eurozone and demanding public accountability of Eurogroup debates, is characteristic of a peculiarly populist approach to foreign policy prioritizing direct and unmediated relationship between official power and the people (Varoufakis 2017; see also De Cleen et al 2020).

But even at the height of the economic crisis in the 2010s, Greek populists were not outright rejecting the EU. As already discussed, the only party in Greece that is explicitly calling for Greece’s exit from the EU is the strongly ideological KKE. SYRIZA on the other hand developed a more nuanced rhetoric, rejecting austerity while also calling for a ‘different Europe’ organized more equitably. In 2014 Tsipras was a candidate of the Party of the European Left for president of the EU Commission in the European Parliament elections. In his rhetoric, Tsipras oscillated between a sovereigntist discourse of ‘resistance’ against ‘foreign occupiers’ and a transnational appeal to the ‘people’, especially in the EU’s South, against ‘Brussels’ (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014; Stavrakakis 2015). Thus, SYRIZA avoided a total break with the EU, keeping the hope alive that it could be reformed from within. One can see here also the effect of thick ideologies relative to populism. As a leftist leader, Tsipras could articulate the opposition between ‘people’ and ‘elites’ in transnational terms (De Cleen 2017), different from the populist radical right which understands opposition to international institutions in national-sovereigntist terms.

Conversely, while helping ostensibly radical and ideological parties broaden their appeal by articulating their positions in terms of a more inclusive political identity of the ‘people’, populism also dilutes their ideological coherence, allowing leaders to rearticulate the people-elite divide in novel and ‘thin’ ways over time. The contrast here is with the much more ideological leftist wing of SYRIZA, which stood for exit from the Eurozone as the only solution to austerity. While that wing also adopted populist rhetoric, arguably they were informed more by their thick ideology of radical socialism (much like the KKE). That wing ultimately opted to leave SYRIZA after Tsipras accepted another bailout. They contested the September 2015 election as a separate party on a platform of rejection of austerity and exit from the Eurozone but failed to enter parliament.

*Foreign Policy-Making: Centralization, Personalization, and Communication*

Historically, due to the high salience of foreign policy in Greece, the post of foreign minister was often occupied by high-profile party politicians with prime-ministerial ambitions. This is in turn reflected the degree and kind of politicization that foreign policy was subject to in Greece: something salient and present in debates between major parties and high-profile politicians, but within a framework of steady geopolitical orientation and a consensus on the country’s goals.

These patterns were upset with the financial crisis. The first effect was the creation of coalition governments, a novel experience for the Greek party system. Under the pro-European coalition of ND and PASOK, the foreign ministry was led, atypically for Greece, by a party different from the one of the PM. Between 2013-15, PASOK leader Evangelos Venizelos was foreign minister while ND’s Antonis Samaras was Prime Minister. As Venizelos was consumed with managing factional politics inside his party, Samaras centralized foreign policy making around himself in high-profile issues. All this contributed to the diminishing clout of foreign policy as a standalone domain, and the post of foreign minister in particular, in relation to the past (Kouskouvelis 2012). These trends continued under the populist SYRIZA-ANEL coalition. Tsipras had acquired an international profile during his time in opposition as an emblematic figure challenging EU austerity. His central role in the renegotiation of Greece’s bailouts was evidenced in his interactions with EU leaders and diplomatic forays like his visit to Moscow for talks with Vladimir Putin in April 2015.[[17]](#endnote-17)

Tsipras appointed as foreign minister Nikos Kotzias, an academic and advisor to previous governments who was neither a member of SYRIZA or ANEL nor an elected member of parliament. This quasi-technocratic appointment pointed both to the willingness of Tsipras to maintain control over the broad framework of foreign policy and to the further loss of clout of the foreign ministry as a high-profile political appointment. Within his area of competence, Kotzias assumed leadership in key foreign policy issues like relations with the Balkans (Maksimovic 2016) and multilateral negotiations on the Cyprus issue in 2017. Kotzias’ style was widely considered excessively personalistic and often antagonistic to the foreign service, while he often framed diplomatic issues in explicitly politicized terms articulating populist tropes such as ‘democracy’, ‘dignity’ and ‘resistance’, something very uncharacteristic for a Greek foreign minister.[[18]](#endnote-18)

Procedurally the effect of the new government was felt primarily in the first six months of the renegotiation with the EU over the financing of Greek debt, when in a range of policy areas, from energy to immigration to sports, it posed the demand for more sovereignty from international commitments (Chryssogelos 2020: 31). At its height, the confrontation with the EU seemed to portend a full-scale ‘de-Europeanization’ of the state, i.e. a scaling back of procedures designed to bring Greek administration in line with EU practices and recommendations (Chryssogelos 2019: 614-16). In an analysis of policymaking in the Greek foreign ministry for example, Tsardanidis saw palpable signs of this process of de-Europeanization in how the new Greek government delayed adaptation to European instructions (Tsardanidis 2015).

In sum, the rise of a populist government in 2015 did seem to bring about changes in line with the expected effect of populism on policymaking procedures: an increasing personalistic role of the leader (Tsipras) over experts and bureaucrats, an upending of long-standing administrative procedures operating within and via the EU policymaking system, and a rhetoric of bringing the state back under the control of the ‘people’. These effects however must be qualified in two ways. First, the most radical ones, such as the detachment of the functioning of the state from the EU framework, did not materialize after Tsipras accepted another bailout and Greece remained in the Eurozone. Second, the more tentative ones were in essence an accentuation of prior trends in the Greek political system, most notably the centralization of foreign policymaking in the office of the Prime Minister to the detriment of the foreign ministry. Within this overall framework, an additional sign of populism can be considered Kotzias’ personalistic conduct and politicized discourse, a departure from the actions and rhetoric of Greek foreign ministers before and since.

**Conclusion**

The article has explored the effect of populism on foreign policy using Greece as a case-study, with an element of cross-time comparison between the populist SYRIZA-ANEL coalition in 2015-19 and Andreas Papandreou in the 1980s, the other time in recent history when Greece had a government with so strong populist elements. The article has put forward a strategic-discursive perspective of populism, which highlights its role in articulating specific political relationships, namely that between ‘people’ and ‘system’ on the one hand and between the ‘people’ and leader on the other. As such, populism carries an essentially dual character, with a popular bottom-up dimension in intricate, and often contradictory, interaction with a top-down strategic dimension. Together, they help explain how populism operates as source of foreign policy change.

As we saw, populism indeed generates contestation of a state’s fundamental strategic orientation. If the regime is perceived as intertwined with the state’s international commitments, then these can also be challenged as underpinnings of the ‘elites’ that must be removed. Both the popular mobilization against the post-War right-wing state in the 1960s that eventually led Papandreou to power in 1981, and the anti-austerity mobilization in 2010-15 that resulted in the Tsipras victory, had questioned Greece’s dependency on foreign patrons – the US and the EU respectively. Yet as populism transferred gradually from mass anti-system mobilization to the party system, its challenge to foreign policy ended up serving more as legitimation and mobilization strategy of populist leaders. Arguably, Papandreou’s maverick foreign policy in the 1980s and Tsipras’ near-rupture with the EU in 2015 served as much to domesticate popular effervescence against Greece’s anchoring to the West/Europe as to create openings for new foreign relationships. Both leaders eventually approached the Western mainstream from which they had initially intended to break.

An important constraint for the effect of populism to play out is the international environment, a parameter often downplayed in domestic-based accounts of foreign policy but which the foreign policy change perspective helps bring back into focus. International constraints are particularly relevant for a country in a delicate geopolitical position, pressured by powerful ‘others’ like Turkey and under constant presence of strong patrons like the US and the EU. Both Papandreou in the 1980s and Tsipras in 2015 were constrained by external factors, namely Cold War bipolarity and the demands of foreign creditors and financial markets respectively. On the other hand, in both periods, populist actors exploited geopolitical openings to strike new partnerships in order to leverage against Western and European dependency, although this was seldom a policy reversal as such, as mainstream governments had already engaged in some foreign policy diversification.

The combination of external constraints and top-down populism’s character as a mobilization strategy, rather than a genuinely emancipatory movement, combine to dampen the effect of populism on concrete foreign policy outcomes or, in Hermann’s terms, tangible departure from established goals and actions of a state. Yet, even if in practical terms the impact of populism appears small, the article’s main argument is that the effect of populism remains distinct in how foreign policy is articulated to underpin the ‘people’s’ opposition to the ‘system’. In this sense, even policies that are in practice not dissimilar from those of non-populist governments have a different character as parts of populist discourses (Cadier and Szulecki 2020).

It is in this sense that the question of foreign policy politicization must be viewed. Foreign policy politicization is not exclusive to populism, since all party systems provide a certain degree of debate on foreign policy (Chryssogelos 2021). Using foreign policy for domestic goals is also not exclusive to populists. Populist politicization of foreign policy rather concerns the contestation of important dimensions of a state’s international orientation that is inter-articulated with demands to reinstate sovereignty to the people, a feature primarily of the anti-systemic, bottom-up variant of populism. But at the same time, top-down populism used by entrenched leaders such as Papandreou in the early 1990s and Tsipras in the late 2010s can be well-placed to generate a kind of foreign policy politicization that helped absorb popular agitation into the confines of the established party system (as happened over Macedonia in both periods). Thus, populists occupying an ambivalent insider-outsider status (Chryssogelos and Martill 2021) help the most to neutralize the effects of populist foreign policy politicization.

Finally, in terms of process, populism’s strongest effect is on accentuating previous trends rather than generating completely new ones (see more generally Destradi and Plagemann 2019). This is not completely incompatible with the notion of change in foreign policy, which is often taken to mean a reversal of an existing policy but may also simply mean a new policy in a certain area (see Goldmann 1988). The intensification of such trends as personalization and concentration of foreign policy making to the office of prime minister, or the downplaying of the clout of foreign policy bureaucracies through the appointment of politically weak nonpartisan figures as foreign ministers (as in Italy and Austria during populist participation in government as well), is indeed important. When coupled with a discourse of ‘giving power back to the people’ and a performativity of independence on the international stage (conducted primarily by Tsipras but also foreign minister Kotzias in his areas of responsibility), the effect of populism can again be seen not so much in terms of new policy outputs, as in fostering domestically a substantially new understanding of the relationship between political community and official power.

1. **Footnotes**

   ANEL leader Kammenos was enamored by this idea. See e.g. P. Kammenos: Convergence only with SYRIZA, tvxs.gr 2 April 2012, <https://tvxs.gr/news/egrapsan-eipan/p-kammenos-sygklisi-mono-me-ton-syriza> (in Greek). See also indicatively pro-Russia, anti-NATO and anti-EU statements on the Ukraine crisis of Dimitris Kazakis, leader of the small anti-euro party EPAM that called for a directly elected popular assembly to replace the existing political system: Dimitris Kazakis: A military provocation is coming, EPAM 11 March 2014, <https://www.epamhellas.gr/dhmhtrhs-kazakhs-erxetai-polemikh-probokatsia/> (in Greek). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See the SYRIZA Electoral Program for the elections of 6 May 2012, where the party still called for Greece’s exit from NATO, condemned Greek participation in military operations related to the ‘war on terror’ and condemned US foreign policy. Available at <http://www.syn.gr/gr/keimeno.php?id=26945> (in Greek). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Antonis Karagiannakis, The Agreement between Greece and Russia over the South Stream Pipeline Has Been Ratified, Ta Nea, 28 August 2008, <https://www.tanea.gr/2008/08/28/greece/kyrwthike-i-symfwnia-elladas-rwsias-gia-ton-agwgo-south-stream/> (in Greek). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Papandreou Forges New Bonds in Israel, E-Kathimerini, 23 July 2010, <https://www.ekathimerini.com/69431/article/ekathimerini/news/papandreou-forges-new-bonds-in-israel>. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Liz Alderman, Under Chinese, A Greek Port Thrives, New York Times, 10 October 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/11/business/global/chinese-company-sets-new-rhythm-in-port-of-piraeus.html>. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Helena Smith, Greece Becomes Trade Battleground as Foreign Investors Swoop, The Guardian, 27 May 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/may/27/greece-trade-battleground-foreign-investors-swoop>. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Kammenos: Deals with USA, Russia, China or India in Case of Rupture, To Vima, 7 April 2015, <https://www.tovima.gr/2015/04/07/politics/kammenos-symfwnies-me-ipa-rwsia-kina-i-india-se-periptwsi-riksis/> (in Greek). Greece’s national debt at the time was above 320 billion euro, or almost 180% of national GDP. Originally held by private financial institutions and banks, its bigger share was eventually transferred to the balance sheets of Eurozone governments through the European Stability Mechanism (ESM). It would have been exorbitant for any foreign sovereign, let alone middle-income countries like China and Russia, to cover even part of this debt. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Robbie Gramer and Rachel Rizzo, 5 Reasons NATO Fears a Grexit, Politico, 10 July 2015, <https://www.politico.eu/article/five-reasons-nato-fears-a-grexit-eurozone-putin-ukraine-economics/>, [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Venezuela: Message by Nicholas Maduro in support of Alexis Tsipras and SYRIZA, Ta Nea, 2 July 2015 (in Greek), https://www.tanea.gr/2015/07/02/world/benezoyela-minyma-nikolas-madoyro-yper-aleksi-tsipra-kai-syriza. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Tsipras to Visit Cuba to Pay Respects to Fidel Castro, E-Kathimerini, 28 November 2016, <https://www.ekathimerini.com/214096/article/ekathimerini/news/tsipras-to-visit-cuba-to-pay-respects-to-fidel-castro>. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Energy Tops the Agenda of Greek Prime Minister's Visit to Beijing, E-Kathimerini, 12 May 2017, <https://www.ekathimerini.com/218403/article/ekathimerini/news/energy-tops-the-agenda-of-greek-prime-ministers-visit-to-beijing>. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. SYRIZA’s platform for the May 2012 election called for the dissolution of Greece’s then recent security cooperation agreements with ‘expansionist’ Israel and called for a recognition of Palestinian independence, see SYRIZA Electoral Program 2012. Tsipras of course did neither during his time as prime minister. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Helena Smith, Greece Accuses Russia of Bribery and Meddling in its Affairs, The Guardian, 11 August 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/11/greece-accuses-russia-bribery-meddling-macedonia-deal>. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Jason Horowitz and Liz Alderman, Chastised by E.U., a Resentful Greece Embraces China’s Cash and Interests, New York Times, 26 August 2017. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. See e.g. the different rhetoric Tsipras used in his two visits to China. While in 2016 he called Greece’s relationship with China ‘strategic’ and remarked how he had not managed to ‘change Europe’ whereas China was more receptive to Greece’s needs, by 2017 he presented Greek-China relations through a European framework, calling Greece ‘a bridge between China and Europe’, an expression not at all different from what a mainstream pro-EU leader would have used. Tsipras from Beijing: Greece and China are strategic partners, To Vima, 4 July 2016, <https://www.tovima.gr/2016/07/04/politics/tsipras-apo-pekino-stratigikoi-etairoi-ellada-kina/> (in Greek); Tsipras: Greece a bridge between China and Europe, To Vima, 13 May 2017, <https://www.tovima.gr/2017/05/13/politics/tsipras-i-ellada-gefyra-anamesa-stin-kina-kai-tin-eyrwpi/> (in Greek). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. In January 2019, as parliament was ratifying the agreement, 66% of Greeks declared themselves opposed to it. This percentage increased to 74% in the northern provinces of Macedonia and Thrace. See: Marc Opinion Poll: Overwhelming ‘no’ to the Prespa Agreement. Ta Nea 19/1/2019, <https://www.tanea.gr/2019/01/19/politics/dimoskopisi-marc-syntriptiko-oxi-sti-symfonia-ton-prespon/> (in Greek). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Shaun Walker, Alexis Tsipras in Moscow Asks Europe to End Sanctions against Russia, The Guardian, 8 April 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/08/alexis-tsipras-in-moscow-asks-europe-to-end-sanctions-against-russia>. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Speech of Nikos Kotzias to the Federation of Cypriot Organizations of America, New York, 21/9/2017, <https://www.mfa.gr/epikairotita/proto-thema/omilia-upourgou-exoterikon-kotzia-sten-ekdelose-brabeuses-tou-apo-ten-omospondia-kupriakon-organoseon-amerikes-nea-uorke-21092017.html> (in Greek).

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