

Rise and Fall

Voter support for SYRIZA before and after the Referendum of 5 July 2015*

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1. January 2015: Historic political reversal

The parliamentary election of 25 January 2015 turned out to be an *event of historic importance* for the domestic political scene, while its international resonance was no less profound. SYRIZA's victory was a condemnation of the neoliberal policy of austerity, after five-years of its catastrophic implementation in Greece, and put an end to a long, 40-year period of the country's governance by the parties of the traditional two-party system. The election result prompted an unprecedented – by Greek standards – political and social rallying of support for the new government. The change in climate that followed the election surpassed all historical precedents, at least during the past 20 years, for which systematic empirical data are available from public opinion surveys (Figures 1 & 2). In the post-dictatorship period, only the elections of 1974 and 1981 had analogous impacts.²

The electoral success in January, and the subsequent negotiations attempted by the Greek government with the country's European partners, had a catalytic effect on the balance of power between political parties. Following SYRIZA's victory at the polls, the sharp increase in support for the party constitutes, after 1974, a unique combination of "*post-electoral euphoria*" and the "*rally 'round the flag*" effect³. The duration of this rally effect was determined by the disastrous course of the negotiations. It lasted six months and ended suddenly, following the government's about-turn in the referendum of 5/7/15 and the signing of the 3rd Memorandum on 14/8/15 (Figures 1 & 2).

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² For greater detail, see: **1)** Mavris, Yiannis. 2015a. "Anatomy of a historic political reversal. How the post-election political scene was shaped by the impact of the election result and negotiation of the debt", 24 February 2015. <http://www.mavris.gr/4623/anatomy-of-a-historic-political-reversal/> **2)** Mavris, Yiannis. 2015b. "From January, to September 2015. Reversal of the reversal". Address to the conference organized by the Hellenic Political Science Association titled: "The 2015 election. Recordings, detections, interpretations". University of Athens, Tuesday 24 November 2015. **3)** Mavris, Yiannis. 2015c. "Party and electoral system, 2012-2015. Between the Clashing Rocks of a double bankruptcy". Address to the conference organized by the Centre for European Constitutional Law titled "Electoral system, political system and Constitution". Athens, 7/12/2015.

³ For more on these terms, see: Mavris, Yiannis and Symeonidis, Yiorgos. 2016. Opinion Polls and Election Forecasting in Greece. Athens: Public Issue.

* Published in the journal *Tetradia*, issue 66-67, Autumn-Winter 2016-2017.

Figure 1

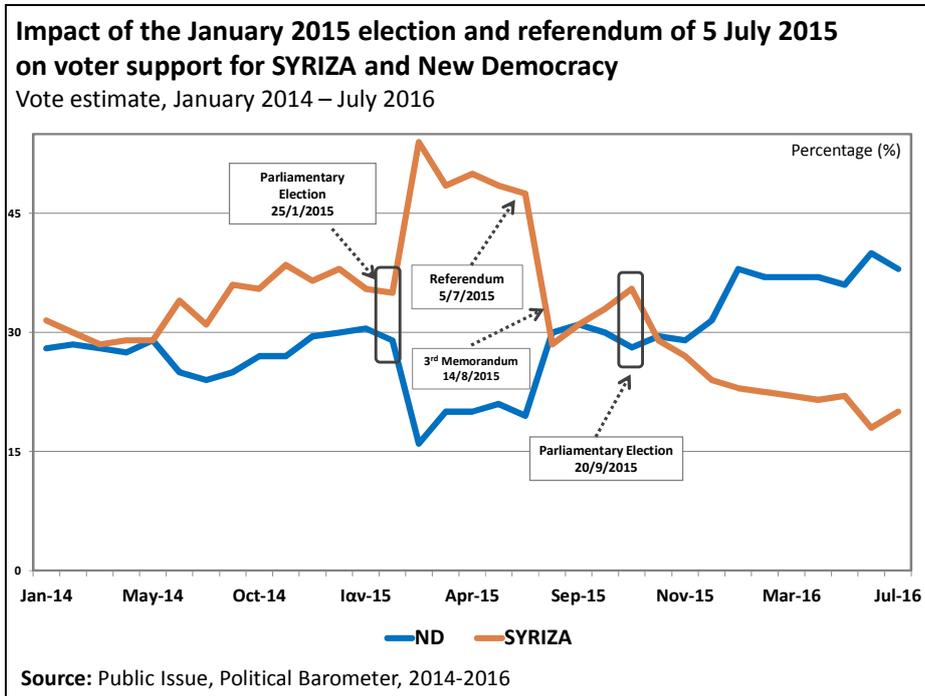
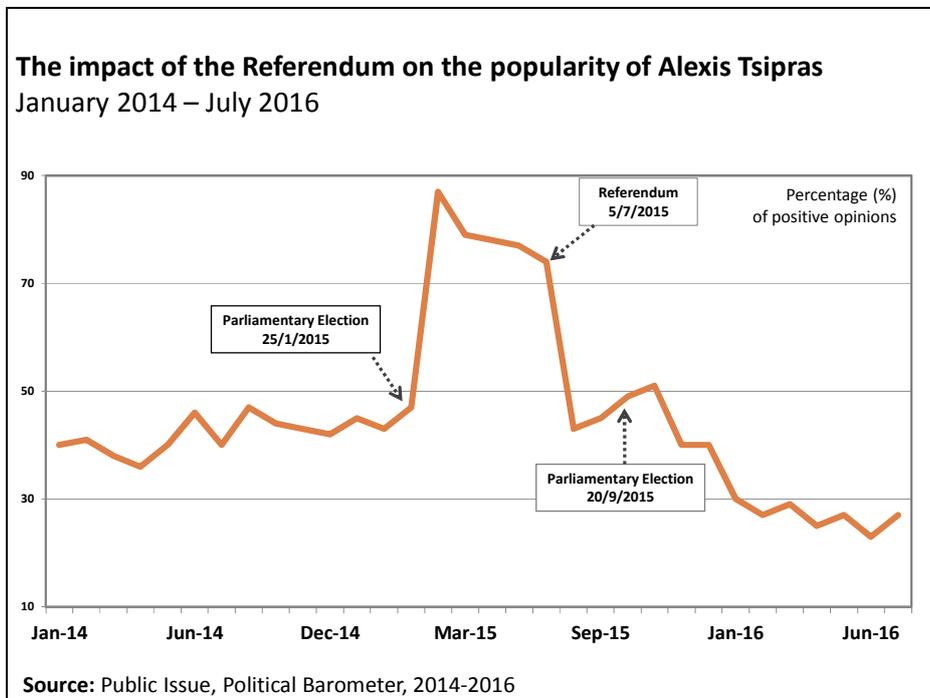


Figure 2



2. The significance of the referendum of 5/7/2015 for SYRIZA's voter support

The Greek referendum, which recorded the overwhelming rejection (61.3%, against 38.7%) of the Memorandum agreement for Greece put forward by the Eurogroup, along with the UK's Brexit referendum that followed this year (23/6/2016), are not isolated "mishaps". They are part of a sequence of referendums in which the political initiatives and institutions of the European Union were censured by the popular vote. The rejection, through referendums, of the policies of the ruling elite is the new form of expressing social discontent in the EU. Moreover, in the case of Greece, the percentage of rejection was the highest ever recorded among nine rejection referendums on European issues in the period 1972-2008.⁴

The parties' positions on the referendum had a decisive influence on voters, with the exception of the Communist Party of Greece, the majority of whose supporters did not heed the party's call to cast an invalid, write-in vote. Party preferences constituted the most important explanatory variable of voting in the referendum. This conclusion is also clear from data recording the rallying of party support, which emerged from the pre-electoral surveys. The fact is thus evidenced that there was indeed a high degree of party alignment (Mavris 2015b, 2016). In different terms, it is empirically substantiated that the exertion of pressure and the scaremongering campaign of international and domestic news media had not succeeded – up to the time of the referendum – in weakening SYRIZA's complete electoral dominance, which had come about after the first election in January (above, point 1), nor in shattering Alexis Tsipras' image as a leader (Figure 2). Furthermore, it is worth noting that the prime minister's popularity among SYRIZA voters had reached 98% in June 2015.⁵

The formal pre-referendum period may have been very short (one week), but voters had been familiar with the contrapositions for quite some time and they were also well aware of what was at stake. For it was none other than the Memorandum program and the austerity policies which had been endured by Greek society uninterruptedly since 2010, i.e. for six long years. It was exactly the same debate that had deepened the socio-political divide which had repeatedly been manifested in successive elections in 2012, 2014 and of course in 2015. It was exactly the same confrontation that had been reproduced, in a climate of increasing polarization, throughout the entire first half of 2015. As a consequence, the

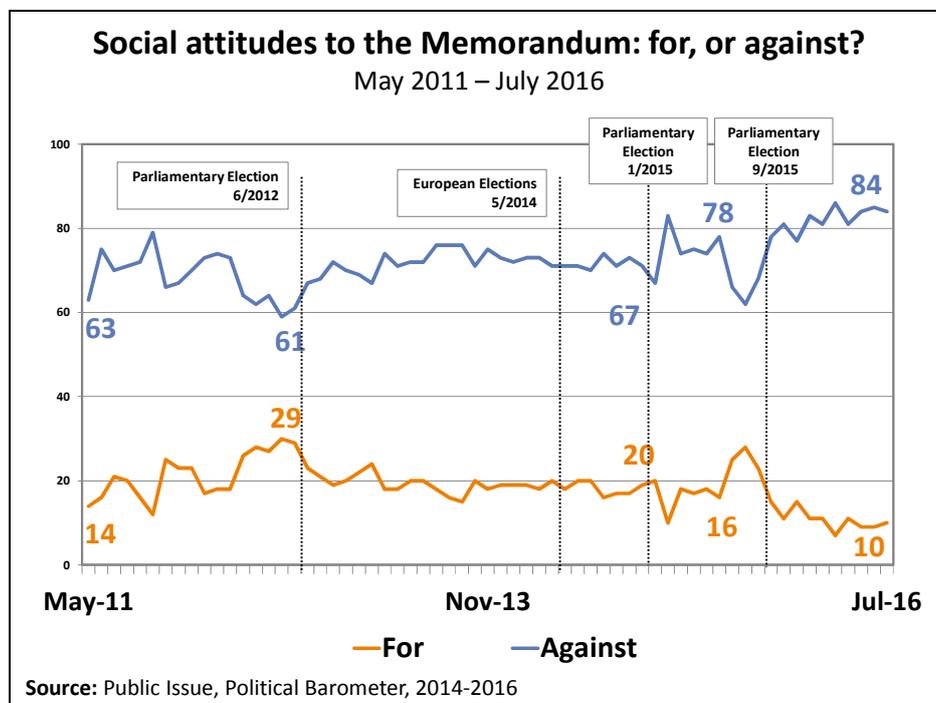
⁴ Along with the corresponding percentage rejecting the Constitution Treaty in the 2005 Dutch referendum (61.5%). Regarding the significance of the Greek referendum and for an analysis of the electoral geography and sociology of the vote, see: Mavris, Yiannis. 2016. "The Greek referendum of 2015: 'democratic moment' (and) (or) swan song of the post-dictatorship democracy?" Date of publication: 7/7/2016. Posted: <http://www.mavris.gr/4846/greek-referendum-2015/>

⁵ Public Issue, Political Barometer 157, June 2016.

electorate took clearly opposing positions on an issue with which they had been extremely familiar for some time.

It can be easily shown, on the basis of available data from opinion polls, that the referendum result was the product of: a) the new divisive split of the Memorandum, which was shaped within Greek society during the period 2010-2015 as a result of the neoliberal assault and b) the dual impact of the January 2015 election on the balance of power between the political parties: post-electoral euphoria on account of the left’s victory, which delivered revenge for the 2012 election, but also a widespread social rallying around the new government (“rally-around-the-tray-effect”) in the negotiations it had been holding up to that time (Mavris 2016).

Figure 3



In reality, the policy of austerity which had been implemented since 2010, just like anywhere else in the world that such programs had been imposed, never succeeded in gaining social consensus, despite the fact that the parties actually implementing the policy, had been voted for by a significant segment of the electorate. From the outset, the attitude of Greek public opinion to Memorandum policies had remained negative among the majority, with average figures for the seven-year period of 71% against and just 29% for (Figure 3). Consequently, the preference expressed by the electorate in the referendum was not conjunctural in nature. To a large extent it had been crystallizing for many years, long

before the January 2015 election, and was not waiting for that highly charged pre-referendum week to express itself, nor would it have been radically different if the run-up to the referendum had been one or two weeks longer. Indeed, it is more likely that it would have been further strengthened as the electorate continued to “digest” the impact of the capital controls, which is eventually what happened.

3. Social polarization deepens: electoral and social geography of the referendum

The decision to hold the referendum sparked a widespread mobilization and forged an extremely broad social alliance, on a nationwide scale; something rarely seen in recent Greek history since the Axis occupation. More than 6 million people (6,161,140) voted in the referendum, to some degree curtailing the growing trend towards abstention.⁶

More than at any other time, the result of the vote clearly demonstrated the very deep political, age and class polarization that has been a conspicuous characteristic of electoral contests in the Memorandum era. It is indicative, moreover, that the biggest employer organizations backed the committee in favor of a “Yes” vote, which was formed on 1 July (Mavris 2016). In addition to the political and party dimension of the polarization, very deep polarization was also evident between age groups, which had also existed previously but not to such an extent. Indeed, the anti-Memorandum stance of young people had already been recorded in the 2012 election and was maintained in the elections of the period 2014-2015. The generation gap in voting behavior reached new heights in the referendum, due to the clear-cut “yes” or “no” choice for voters. In the 18-24 age group, 85% voted “No”, and in the immediately higher age group (25-34), 72%. The vast majority of young people, whose lives are being destroyed by austerity, overwhelmingly opposed the continuation of this policy. The “No” vote also dominated in the next three age groups and only among the elderly (over 65) was “Yes” given a majority, garnering 55%-45% of the vote. Such a degree of age polarization was not seen with regard to gender. This pattern of social polarization of voting, as recorded, confirms the Euroscepticism social divide, as well as the clearly visible class nature of the vote of rejection, which has been observed historically, in similar referendums on EU issues (Accession, Treaties, European Constitution, Mavris 2016).

⁶ On the basis of Public Issue’s demographic assessment of the size of the electorate, actual participation in the referendum is estimated to have been 72.76%, and actual abstention 27.24%.

4. “Democratic moment”

From the viewpoint of social participation, the referendum proved to be a great democratic “moment”.⁷ Irrespective of the – post factum – cancellation of its unprecedented dynamic, the referendum caused a “momentary democratic crack” in the political edifice of “post-democratic” Greece, and the demolition of representative democracy, which is being advanced by the Memorandum program, at the level of politics and institutions. It acted as a counter-movement to the repeated abolition of the Constitution and the blatant circumvention of parliamentarianism in the period since the restoration of democracy, the simultaneous and multiform contraction of the right to vote, as well as the unconcealed manipulation of elections which has been taking place, systematically, since 2012.⁸ And more importantly, it prompted the uninvited and unexpected entry (incursion) of the populist factor into the political arena which, whenever this happens, overturns the political situation with its autonomous political action and produces “appropriate political results” (Poulantzas).

5. Reversal of the reversal. SYRIZA after the referendum

The Greek referendum, however, can also lay claim to a paradoxical originality. For it was unique in that the people’s verdict, as recorded by the result, was annulled almost the same day. With the agreement of 12 July and the signing of the 3rd Memorandum, the popular mandate of “No” was rescinded and the dynamic that had developed within the grassroots social bloc was unceremoniously halted. The anti-Memorandum camp suffered a major political and ideological defeat, the consequences of which have proven to be long-term. Along with the circumvention of the referendum result, a sudden end was also put to the six-month experiment “governance by the left within the EU”, which had been attempted by the first SYRIZA government. The ignominious destiny of the referendum undermined and totally neutralized the political dynamic ushered in by parliamentary elections in January 2015. The policy of reversal had been... reversed.

As for the magnitude of SYRIZA’s capitulation, it is characteristic that prominent British Marxist historian Perry Anderson finds its historical precedent in the support of European social democracy for war credits, in 1914!⁹

⁷ In the sense of the term as described by Colin Crouch in his book *Post-Democracy*. See Colin Crouch, 2006, *Post-Democracy* [Greek title *Metadimokratia*], Athens: Ekkremes, pp. 61-2.

⁸ In this regard, see: Yiannis Mavris. 2014. “Unseen aspects of the election war. Elections in two stages: The Greek electoral experiment”. 5 May 2014. http://www.mavris.gr/3981/elliniko_eklogiko_peirama/

⁹ Perry Anderson. “The Greek Debacle. On the crisis in Greece and Syriza’s failure to resist the eurozone.” *Jacobin* magazine. 23.7.2015. <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/07/tspiras-syriza-euro-perry-anderson/>

The political and ideological transformation of SYRIZA's leading ranks caused severe shocks, the result of which has proven to be *irreversible*. July 2015 was a *turning point* in the periodization of the political scene of the past seven years. As already noted, the great rallying around the government, which appeared after January and was maintained during the six months of negotiation, up until the referendum, ceased and evaporated (Figure 1). The government turnabout also had a similar impact on Alexis Tsipras' popularity as prime minister, which sank too (Figure 2). Thus, the referendum turned out to be both the point at which popular support for the government of the left reached its peak and the point at which it began to plummet.

In the coercive election that followed quite suddenly, in September 2015, SYRIZA prevailed for a second time. The processes that preceded in a condensed time frame, in the two-month period July-August, due to the lack of an alternative solution, did not result in condemnation of the government, but to a second-chance vote, though without social tolerance or grace period. SYRIZA's second victory was evidently a Pyrrhic one.

SYRIZA's mutation and accession (along with the Independent Greeks party) to the Memorandum strategy marked the most abrupt and chronologically condensed "upward convergence of parties" ever seen in the Greek party system. The void created by this shift was not filled by the party forces that departed. The splitting of SYRIZA's leadership team and parliamentary group found no resonance among the party's social and electoral base.¹⁰ It also caused the complete disintegration of SYRIZA'S remaining party machine, deleting all trace of a mass party and limiting the existence of the specific party formation to the leader and his leadership group (party of cadres). And it is well documented, historically, that without the existence of a form of organization, any relationship of representation becomes extremely fragile.

The direct and catalytic effect of this political development, which was certainly of even greater importance, was the sudden degradation of the electoral process, despondency among the electorate and a decline in interest in elections; trends that would be clearly recorded in the result of the September election with the unprecedented rise in abstention.¹¹ After the referendum, the trend of exiting the electorate assumed avalanche-like proportions. In the September election, **595,000 fewer people voted**, relative to the referendum just two months earlier. This means a sharp increase in abstention, in the region of 7%. Furthermore, this figure represents 9.4% of voters in January. In other words, nearly 1 in 10 of those who had voted just nine months previously. In the main, these were voters of the anti-Memorandum camp (Mavris 2015a).

¹⁰ For more detail, see Christos Laskos and Dimosthenis Papadatos-Anagnostopoulos, ed. 2016. *The No that became YES*. Athens: Kapsimi Publications, pp. 17-9 and Part 3.

¹¹ For a more comprehensive discussion of the September 2015 election result and the protracted crisis of the party system, see Mavris 2015b and 2015c.

6. The September election: continuity and discontinuity in SYRIZA's electoral base

Despite impressions, when measured in terms of vote numbers, SYRIZA's losses in the September election were substantial. Relative to January and in absolute figures, its support fell by 320,000 votes, (-14.25%, compared to the party's vote tally in January). The corresponding losses for ND totaled 192,500 votes (-11.2%, relative to January – Mavris 2015c). The enormous qualitative difference, however, related to abstention. **Abstention chiefly harmed SYRIZA, whilst ND hardly at all.**¹² **It has been calculated that 1 in 6 of those who had voted for SYRIZA in January**, representing 17% of its electoral base, i.e. approximately **383,000** voters, had chosen **abstention**. Less than 3%, some 57,000 voters, cast blank or invalid votes. Nevertheless, disapproval of SYRIZA from the left was limited. Only **1 in 15** of those who had voted in January, 7% in total, around **158,000** voters, chose to vote for one of the formations of **leftist protest** (Popular Unity, ANTARSYA, EPAM) and the Communist Party of Greece (Table 1 – Mavris 2015b).

As a counterbalance to these “outflows” of leftist and anti-Memorandum voters who turned their backs on the ruling party, *there were new “inflows” of center-left voters*, who in January had voted primarily for PASOK, Democratic Left or KIDISO (approximately 157,000 voters, Table 1), but also of right and center-right voters, who in January had voted for ND (110,500 voters).

¹² The opinion polls (pre-election or exit) do not provide a reliable estimate of the party affiliation of abstainers. To analyze the abstention, it is preferable to use the actual election data. The table of voting shifts and higher abstention between January and September 2015 were estimated on the basis of election results at (Kapodistrian) municipality level (n=1035). The calculation was based on a quadratic programming model that is used by the Dutch Central Bureau of Statistics. See in this regard: 1) Carin van der Ploeg. 2008. A Comparison of Different Estimation Methods of Voting Transitions with an Application in the Dutch National Elections. Heerlen: Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek Divisie Methodologie en Kwaliteit. 2) Carin van der Ploeg, Frank van de Pol and Jarl Kampen. 2009. A Comparison of Different Estimation Methods of Voting Transitions with an Application in the Dutch National Elections of 2003 and 2006. Discussion paper 09030. The Hague/Heerlen: Statistics Netherlands. For the findings of the analysis, see the announcement at the meeting organized by the Hellenic Political Science Association, on the subject of the elections in 2015, which was held on Tuesday, 24 November 2015 (Mavris 2015b).

Table 1

How January 2015 SYRIZA voters voted in September 2015
Transition distribution and projected votes
ESTIMATE – I

SYRIZA	0.7101	1577607
ND	0.0071	15774
GOLDEN DAWN	0.0011	2444
DIM. SYM.	0	0
KKE	0.0102	22661
THE RIVER	0.0095	21106
ANEL	0.0029	6443
UNION OF CENTRISTS	0	0
Other (Popular Unity, ANTARSYA, EPAM, etc.)	0.0609	135300
Invalid	0.0117	25994
Blank	0.0139	30881
Abstention*	0.1726	383460

Table 2

Source of SYRIZA voters in September 2015
Composition (%) of the party's current electoral base, on the basis of voting in January 2015 election
ESTIMATE – II

		Projected votes		
Voting in January 2015 election	SYRIZA	0.7101	1577607	83.4%
	ND	0.0651	110517	5.8%
	GOLDEN DAWN	0	0	0.0%
	DIM. SYM.	0.2129	67069	3.5%
	KKE	0	0	0.0%
	THE RIVER	0	0	0.0%
	ANEL	0.1228	35599	1.9%
	UNION OF CENTRISTS	0	0	0.0%
	Other (KIDISO, etc.)	0.2309	89636	4.7%
	Invalid	0.0941	10685	0.6%
	Blank	0	0	0.0%
	Abstention*	0.4176	1294	0.1%

Source: Public Issue, estimate based on election results, at (Kapodistrian) municipality level (n=1035)

In aggregate, the voters from other parties who opted for SYRIZA in the September election represented 17% of its new electoral base, also 1 in 6 (Table 2 – Mavris 2015b). In terms of social composition, between the January and September 2015 elections, the (reduced) electoral support for SYRIZA was strengthened by women (+4%) and especially housewives (+8.6%), which resulted – for the first time – in the recording of a significant gender gap. In contrast, support was considerably lower among farmers (-14%), self-employed professionals/small manufacturers (-13.4%) and employers (-9.6%), while holding fairly steady among salaried employees of the private and public sectors (-3.1% and -4.9%, respectively) and the unemployed (-4.5%).¹³

7. After the September 2015 election

SYRIZA's second victory at the polls, in September 2015, marked the beginning of a downward trend in the party's electoral and political support. The transformations that had taken place earlier in the summer that year resulted in its relationship with the social bloc of the ruled classes being irreparably damaged. This relationship, which had been in a process of formation since 2012 (during the three-year period 2012-2015), was broken beyond repair. The party identification of its voters reverted, gradually, to pre-2012 levels. The political mutation of the ruling party thus sparked the **rekindling of the crisis of representation**; a crisis which – from the outset – has characterized the Memorandum era.

One fundamental reason was that the political paralysis of the anti-Memorandum bloc, following the disenchantment of the referendum and the rapid abatement of social mobilization in its wake, did not signal the ideological integration of the social masses or the long-term securing of social consensus on the policy of austerity. On the contrary, social rejection of the Memorandum policy remained – even after the September election – overwhelming. Indeed, today it has reached much higher levels than those recorded in July 2015 (Figure 3).

13 See also: Public Issue, Election of 9/2015: The social characteristics of the vote for SYRIZA. Changes (%) by social category, January-September 2015. <http://www.publicissue.gr/11909/koinwniko-profil-syr-9-2015/>

8. From “party-politicization” to “de-politicization”. SYRIZA and the party system in the post-democratic age. Is there a future?

“The Greek authorities must (...) implement a program, under the auspices of the European Commission, to strengthen the capacity and depoliticize the public administration” (“3rd Memorandum”, Law 4334/16 July 2015, Government Gazette A’80).

In conclusion, the social support secured by SYRIZA in 2012 and 2015 has been severely eroded and to a large extent destabilized. SYRIZA won the second election, without any grace period whatsoever, precisely as had been the case in 2000 with the re-election of PASOK under Costas Simitis. After the September 2015 election, the social climate was extremely gloomy, something which the government was unable to curb, with the result that the balance of party forces reversed dramatically in favor of ND immediately following the election. Indeed, the political turnabout preceded the change in leadership of the main opposition party and the election of Kyriakos Mitsotakis as its new president, and cannot be attributed primarily to this. On the contrary, it is the traditional way to express disapproval of the ruling party, in the context of the firmly established – historically in Greece – parliamentary ideology.

Today, SYRIZA’s position in the constantly changing party system is clearly very precarious. The left missed the historic opportunity to establish itself as the predominant political force in the country. The deepening disappointment within society and estrangement from the political and electoral process, for which SYRIZA bears the greatest responsibility, are working directly against it and paving the way for the return of the right. The historical paradox consists in the fact that a party which invokes the left is now tasked with the final imposition of post-democracy in Greece.

In the framework of the Memorandums, the direct undermining of the role of parties, as agencies of representation, and the disassembly of the very foundation of bourgeois parliamentary democracy, constitute expressly stated declaratory objectives. In the neoliberal model of “post-democracy” (Crouch 2003) which has now become established in Greece, the role of political parties is becoming increasingly decorative. The trend towards the marginalization of their role does not appear to be reversible. Their increasing institutional devaluation and universal discrediting within society constitute very strong trends and long-term changes. The present government, with the 3rd Memorandum co-signed by Alexis Tsipras, is advancing the process of “de-party politicization” and “de-politicization”. But it has been historically demonstrated that the retreat of politics and the weakening of parties always works against the left and in favor of the right. SYRIZA has already sawn deep into the branch on which it sat.