

# Greece: Nine + one remarks on Syriza after its founding congress

Friday 2 August 2013, by [KOUVELAKIS Stathis](#) (Date first published: 18 July 2013).

**This article reflects on the founding congress of Syriza as a political party, rather than a coalition of fourteen organisations, which took place on 10-15<sup>th</sup> July 2013.**

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1. The congress of Syriza took place in a context of growing political instability following the closure of the public radio and television broadcaster (ERT) by the government of Antonis Samaras and the departure from the government of one of its three components (the party of the Democratic Left - DIMAR). The new bipartisan government of New Democracy and PASOK can now only count on a very narrow parliamentary majority (153 votes out of 300), as shown by the vote in Parliament on July 17 on the new package of budget cuts directed at the public sector. Furthermore, the scale of the public reaction to the closure of ERT has sounded the end of the relative apathy that had prevailed on the social front since the vote on the previous Memorandum last November. The ruling bloc has incontestably emerged weakened from this confrontation. The fall of the government under popular pressure appears to be a more realistic goal than it was a few months ago. But what is sorely lacking is a strategy and tactics that would address the question head on.

The position of Syriza is in this respect at an incantatory level, marked by the gap between a rhetoric that is conflictual, but vague, and the line concretely followed at key moments of social confrontation over the recent period (strikes in the underground, the docks and secondary education aborted or broken, because of the measures of requisition taken by the government). In each case, the leadership of Syriza has shown great caution, avoiding any objective of a powerful rise of protest. This culminated in the withdrawal of support to the teachers' strike, which was, however, approved by a majority of more than 90 per cent in exceptionally massive general assemblies.

2. By announcing the party congress in May, the leadership had only one goal in mind: to make the constitution of Syriza as a unified party the occasion to "take things in hand", aiming to both marginalize the internal opposition and stabilize a party political form that would mark a break with decisive aspects of the political and organizational culture of the radical Left. In other words, the goal was to move quickly to a "party form" specially designed to anchor in organizational realities the line of "readjustment" that the leadership has been pursuing relentlessly since autumn 2012 - a line whose expression is the increasing blurring of the positions of Syriza (and their perception by the social sectors that have confidence in them) on key issues (cancellation of the Memoranda, debt, exit from the euro, refusal of privatizations). [1]

To do this, the party leadership imposed a forced march to the congress (with a delay of less than one month between the publication of the preparatory texts and the vote in local branches) and an agenda centred entirely on internal issues, far from strategic and programmatic preoccupations and from the imperative need to develop a programme corresponding to the demands of such a volatile

conjuncture.

This introverted "agenda" was structured around three key points:

- the question of what are called the "components" with an ultimatum of two or at the maximum three months for their dissolution in the framework of the process of "unification" of Syriza [2].
- a right of tendency gutted of its substance, with the suppression of the so-called "separate lists", a roundabout way of designating the proportional representation of minorities in leading bodies.
- the method of electing the president of the party, i.e. by congress and not by the leading bodies (the central committee).

**3.** This internal agenda makes sense only if it is located in the wider perception of Syriza by representatives of the majority bloc and of the internal evolution that the party has undergone over the last year.

For the media and the political forces that are part of the system, the "components" and "tendencies" of Syriza, its famous "cacophony" are code words for the radicalism of Syriza, which these "tendencies" embody, faced with a leadership (embodied by Tsipras) which represents the "realism" and the line of re-centring. The leadership, especially Tsipras, is under constant pressure from the system to "clean up" the party and to assert his authority ("Tsipras, cut off some heads" is a one of the favourite injunctions of authorized media commentators...) by getting rid of dissenting voices. Those who are particularly targeted are those who criticize the leadership from the left and are presented as obstacles to the "image" of Syriza as a "responsible party of government."

Even within Syriza, the spectacular electoral success of spring 2012 has produced a contradictory dynamic. On the one hand, there has been a significant wave of recruits (the number of members has approximately doubled in a few months and has now reached 35,000), as well as success in some areas, particularly in the workers' movement, a traditional weak point of Syriza - relative success, however, since its presence in the unions remains significantly less than that of the Greek Communist Party (KKE), which won only less than 5 per cent of the vote - about one sixth of the vote for Syriza.

But this wave also has another aspect, much more ambiguous. In a society traumatized by the economic depression and formed by decades of "partyocracy" (the "system" forged by New Democracy and PASOK, which have alternated in power since the fall of the colonels in 1974), joining a party that appears to be at the gates of power can also mean the reconstruction of a clientelist relationship, coupled with a relationship of obedience to the charismatic leader. If this phenomenon is still far from representing a majority, it nonetheless alters in what is now a significant fashion the composition of the party and essentially encourages the proliferation of "passive members", who appear only on the day of the vote for the congress and whose link to the organization is based primarily on the personal relationships they have with one or more local cadres.

**4.** This phenomenon, partly spontaneous and perfectly predictable for anyone who is familiar with Greek realities, was nevertheless clearly encouraged in the name of necessary "enlargement" by the party leadership from the autumn of 2012. The choices made at that time - the absence of any real activist intervention and of a party-building strategy, the choice of congresses and national conferences organized in haste, with a bloated number of delegates, similar to that of national or federal leading bodies, the building of strong networks of a personal kind around some leading cadres (usually also parliamentarians) - inevitably lead to a "catch-all" party, as political scientists say, following Kirchheimer. In other words, an electoral party, with its internal life atrophied, mainly welded around its leader and a discourse from above, mainly addressed - through the media - to a

“national audience”, but always modulated in order to please the various “publics” (more “radical” and “lyrical” when speaking to the activists, more “sober” and “pragmatic” when it comes to meeting Schäuble and the IMF).

5. The most problematic aspects of the founding congress of this “new Syriza”, a now unified party, arising from these profound tendencies, leading to its transformation into a “party of government” ready to run the country, are the following: a disproportionate number of voters compared to the participants in internal discussions, an unmanageable body of 3,500 delegates, no structured discussion during the first two days (the time when delegates could speak), no report on the activity of the outgoing leading bodies, an opening speech by Tsipras adapted to the demands of an electoral meeting, not an address to a deliberative body of the party.

To this was added the particularly aggressive climate towards the internal opposition (grouped in the Left Platform [3]), which culminated, on the evening of the last session of Congress, during the votes concerning the representation on the three points relating to the internal functioning on which the discussion was focused (dissolution of the components, representation of tendencies and method of election of the president of the party). There took place shocking scenes for a conference of the radical Left (representatives of the Left Platform booed, rude gestures and insults, Tsipras applauded every time he went up to the podium, before he had even begun to speak), which led to the departure from the hall of the delegates of the Left Platform and of a significant number of delegates from the majority.

6. What is the balance sheet of this conference? From the point of view of programmatic content and strategic development, very thin or nonexistent. The documents adopted merely repeat, often word for word, the formulations adopted (again rather perfunctorily) at the national conference last November. These compromise texts, replete with convoluted and ambiguous formulations, have in any case never really been distributed or publicly supported by the majority faction of the leadership, which is always eager to provide “interpretations” in accordance with the line of “re-centring” and “realism.” Thus, last December, a few days after the national conference which confirmed the position of Syriza on the immediate cancellation of the memoranda by parliamentary vote in the event of electoral victory, those responsible for economic issues, and key figures in the leadership after Tsipras, made a whole series of statements to the media to clarify that Syriza “would not act unilaterally,” avoiding systematically to use the terms “cancellation” or “abrogation”, replaced by references to “negotiation” with “our European partners.” Tsipras himself has increasingly made “conciliatory” statements of this type, especially during his trips abroad, above all in Germany, where he met Schäuble, and in the United States, where he met with representatives of the State Department and the IMF.

7. The Left platform tried to give a political content to a virtually non-existent programmatic debate and tabled four amendments which touched on the most sensitive strategic points: the debt (questioning the legitimacy of the debt itself, denouncing existing conventions and having recourse if necessary to cessation of payments in order to obtain its cancellation); the possibility of leaving the euro zone (a viable option that should be seriously prepared for, if, or rather when, a Syriza government finds itself, like Cyprus, facing the blackmail of the EU and the ECB); the nationalization of the banking sector as a whole, a clear commitment to cancel all ongoing privatization and nationalization under popular control of strategic sectors of the economy (telecommunications, energy, road and airport infrastructure); a strategy of alliances that reaffirms the line of a left anti-austerity government, with no opening to the “centre” or the forces of the sovereignist Right. All of these amendments were rejected, but received between one third and 40 per cent of the vote, the amendments on the debt and the euro receiving the broadest support. In this sense, we can say that on the question of the political line, the leadership was able to impose its point of view.

**8.** However, given the objectives that it had set, this conference represents a serious setback. The agenda in three points mentioned above and focused on the “restoration of order” within the party had a rough passage at this founding moment of the “new Syriza”.

On the question of the dissolution of the components, and the ultimatum which was addressed to them, the leadership had to resort to a compromise (the wording adopted speaks of “dissolution in a reasonable time and after consultation”) following on the extremely firm attitude of Manolis Glezos. Emblematic figure of the Resistance, enjoying immense prestige and stature, as befits the national hero that he is, Glezos did not merely defend the right of the components to preserve their autonomy. He attacked Tsipras in a direct and personal way and strongly rejected the model of a “presidentialist” party, thus undermining the moral and symbolic authority of the leadership and of its leader.

On the issue of minority representation, the leadership threw its weight into the balance, carrying out what can be called a coup de force led by Tsipras in person: after proposing a system that granted by a “technical” subterfuge an automatic advantage to the majority list, the majority bloc imposed on the (minority) tendencies who wished to present themselves as such an obligation to constitute separate lists, figuring on different voting ballot papers.

The possibility that has existed up to now to choose, on a single ballot paper, a list and then to vote, within certain limits, for candidates appearing on the various lists, has been removed. As for the majority list, it is not presented as a tendency list, or an agreement between tendencies (although it is), but as the “unified list”, simply an addition of individual candidates representing the “diversity of the party” as such. It was clearly intended that the minorities should appear as a “foreign body”, merely tolerated, and that the majority list would be accorded a symbolic status of sole expression of the party’s legitimacy.

The operation nevertheless turned against its instigators. Instead of weakening, the Left Platform has been significantly strengthened (see below), and, aided by the presence of small “independent” lists, it brought the majority list down to 67.5 per cent, seven points lower than at the national conference last November.

Finally, on the question of the election of the president by congress, the leadership was successful, but at the cost of the adoption in the party constitution of a “flexible” provision allowing each congress to freely decide how to elect the president. Unsurprisingly, this congress subsequently decided in favour of the direct election of the president. But in the vote by secret ballot, Tsipras had what can be considered a counter-performance, totaling 72 per cent of the vote (74 per cent of valid ballot papers, virtually all the blank or spoiled ballot papers expressing various forms of rejection of the procedure and/or Tsipras personally).

**9.** We can however consider that the main setback for the leadership was the strengthening the Left Platform, which crossed the symbolic threshold of 30 per cent, an increase of nearly 5 percentage points compared to the national conference last November (30.16 per cent, as compared to 25.6 per cent), and this in a highly confrontational environment, entirely conceived with the aim of obtaining its marginalization. There is no doubt that the climate of intimidation faced strong resistance from some of the delegates, beyond the ranks of those who had from the start supported the positions of the platform.

The result caused a shock in the leadership, which avoided any official comment (its representatives became invisible after the announcement of the first results). The press and media reported the obvious embarrassment in the ranks of the majority, although in general, they try to go easy on Tsipras. The questioning is becoming more pressing as to the line that will be followed in the coming

period, the search for compromise or further internal confrontation, this time at the risk of causing a prolonged internal crisis.

For its part, the Left Platform for the first time released a separate communiqué stating that its efforts to obtain “the radicalization and the anchoring on the left of Syriza and the unity of the whole of the radical Left were being pursued in better conditions.” This is a sign that its success is seen as an encouragement to deploy its intervention in an even more visible way within the party and even beyond.

**9 +1.** In conclusion, we can say that the founding congress has probably created more problems than it solved, or attempted to solve. Now established as a unified party, with statutes, programmatic documents and an elected leadership, Syriza nonetheless appears as a party deeply divided over key strategic points, which are at the centre of a national and European debate. It is obvious that the confrontation between supporters of a “realistic” approach, anxious to gain power in a “cold” fashion, not to break with the European framework and to avoid confrontation with strategic sectors of the dominant forces, and those who advocate open confrontation and a break with the present framework of the EU, goes to the heart of the questions that are posed to the radical Left in Europe today.

The essential contribution of Syriza and of the dynamic that it was able to create last spring, is to have been capable of posing in concrete terms, within the radical Left, the question of an alternative state power. It remains to be seen whether such an undertaking will be at the expense of radicality or whether it will join the long list of experiences of left governments which quickly became bogged down in the running of the system. The congress of Syriza was no doubt useful in that it has at least made it possible to formulate the terms of the problem in a way that is clearer and more easily understood by the social and political forces engaged in an emancipatory project.

**Stathis Kouvelakis**, July 18, 2013

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## **P.S.**

\* Source: the French journal Contretemps 9+1 remarques sur Syriza après son congrès fondateur [French version available on ESSF). Translated by International Viewpoint.  
<http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/>

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## **Footnotes**

[1] In the evolution of Syriza, see the article by Baptiste Derickebourg, “Prendre le pouvoir sans perdre son âme” in the June issue of Le Monde Diplomatique and the article by Philippe Marlière “Grèce : Alexis Tsipras entre radicalisme et « réalisme »”, available on ESSF (article 28241):  
<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article28241>

[2] From 2004, the date of its creation, to the national conference last November, Syriza existed as an alliance between a dozen distinct components, covering almost the entire spectrum of the radical Left. The most important of these components was Synaspismos, the party of Alexis Tsipras, which was itself made up of distinct currents, ranging from moderate social democracy (the present Democratic Left comes from there, but a significant part of this current remained in

Synaspismos) to the neo-communism of the Left Current (see note 3).

[3] The Left Platform was established in its current form at the national conference in November 2012 by the convergence of two major components, with over a decade of existence, in various configurations: 1) the Left Current of Synaspismos, consisting essentially of militants who left the Greek Communist Party (KKE) in the split of 1991. It controls most of the workplace branches, the trade-union sector, and maintains a strong presence in some branches and regional federations, mainly in the north of Greece; 2) the three components of Trotskyist origin in Syriza (Kokkino, DEA and APO), now grouped under the umbrella Rproject /Red Network. At the congress, DIKKI, a component coming from PASOK, joined the platform, as did an organization of trade-union cadres (KEDA) who left the KKE in 1995. About a dozen Syriza parliamentarians out of a total of 70 support the platform, including one of the three spokespersons of the parliamentary group, Panayiotis Lafazanis, a former leader of the KKE and long-time member of parliament for the iconic Second District of Piraeus, the most working-class in the country, who is also the platform's best-known public figure.