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CASE STUDY

EUPopLink Country report - Greece

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Abstract

This report examines the overlap of Populism and Euroscepticism at the party level in Greece from the 1980s to today. It provides a longitudinal description of populist parties and their political platforms. While early populism was primarily represented by PASOK, it later became a more widespread feature of the political system, with the emergence and electoral success of populist parties across the political spectrum, including ANEL, SYRIZA, and Golden Dawn, among others, whose political rise was greatly facilitated by the Economic Crisis of the early 2010s, and the political disaffection it gave rise to. Similarly, Euroscepticism began as a left-wing critique of European Integration, focusing on its neoliberal economic policy, but became more popular during the debt crisis years and its immediate aftermath.

The Greek case demonstrates the overlap of the two concepts in party politics, with most populist parties being also Eurosceptic, and vice versa. Moreover, the overlap is not deterministic, with prevalent cases going against this pattern of co-occurrence. Although populist mobilization has waned in recent years, many parties, especially new, smaller parties, continue to take up populist and Eurosceptic positions that combine anti-immigration sentiment with nationalist rhetoric and criticism of EU policies.

Keywords

euroscepticism, populism, Greece

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1. Introduction

Greece serves as a compelling case study for examining how populism and Euroscepticism overlap and co-occur in party discourse. While these two phenomena are conceptually distinct, in the Greek case they have often been closely intertwined, particularly during periods of crisis and political instability. Populist dynamics have been present in Greek politics since the post-authoritarian period, gaining prominence after the restoration of democracy in 1974. The Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK), led by Andreas Papandreou, was the first major party to develop a sustained populist narrative. It framed politics as a struggle between the "non-privileged people" and a corrupt elite aligned with foreign interests, promising national sovereignty, social justice, and economic redistribution (Katsambekis & Stavrakakis, 2017; Mudde, 2017). This left-wing, nationalist populism, sometimes called "ethno-populism" (Pantazopoulos, 2001), gained traction in a post-junta Greece marked by distrust of elites and external powers.

In subsequent decades, particularly following the collapse of the Soviet regimes in Eastern Europe and the massive influx of migrants, a new wave of populism, often mobilised around issues of ethnic identity, arrived and led to the rise of the populist radical party of LAOS (Popular Orthodox Rally) (Tsatsanis et al., 2018). The 2009 economic crisis marked a turning point, intensifying both populist mobilisation and Eurosceptic sentiment. During this period, both inclusionary and exclusionary forms of populism gained prominence. The electoral success of parties such as the Coalition of Radical Left (SYRIZA) and the radical-right Independent Greeks (ANEL) and the formation of a coalition government between these two anti-bailout parties underscored the interplay between economic challenges and shifting political sentiments in Greece (see Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, 2014; Vasilopoulou, Halikiopoulou & Exadaktylos, 2014). Despite widespread scepticism for joining the European Community in the 1980s, a broad pro-European consensus, especially among center-right and center-left parties and citizens, was established. In the aftermath of the financial shock, the disaffection with austerity measures spilled over into a renewed current of Euroscepticism, with European Union (EU) institutions being blamed for imposing austerity and coincided with elements of populist mobilisation.

In the current political arena, after the parliamentary elections of 2023, debates concerning the EU often revolve around issues such as the management of migration, foreign policy (particularly in the context of tensions with Turkey), and the use of the EU's Recovery and Resilience Fund. Although a significant portion of the population is critical of EU policies, the majority of Greeks do not support a potential exit from the EU (Dianeosis, 2024). The present country report was prepared as part of the EUPopLink COST Action (Andreadis & Vasilopoulou, 2026) following the EUPopLink Theoretical Framework and guidelines (Lorimer et al., 2026).

2. Populism and populist political actors in Greece

Populism has been a significant feature of Greek politics, evolving in both form and intensity over time. Over the past two decades, it has shaped party strategies, voter alignments, and institutional dynamics, particularly in response to the financial crisis.

The 2009 financial crisis exposed the unsustainability of Greece's economic model and highlighted the deep failings of the long-dominant two-party system (Aslanidis & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2016). This sparked a widespread demand for political renewal, especially after the 2011 "Indignant Citizens" grassroots populist movement (Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, 2018, see also for an overview Tsatsanis et al. 2018). This social movement was a populist uprising driven by frustration with the political establishment, particularly targeting PASOK for the bailout agreements and the centre-right party of New Democracy (ND). This created space for new parties with anti-establishment platforms. **Coalition of Radical Left (SYRIZA),** a left-wing populist party, capitalised on this by presenting itself as a voice for "the people" against domestic elites and the "Troika" (Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, 2014). On the right, **Independent Greeks (ANEL),** led by Panos Kammenos, emerged with a radical right populist message rooted in these protests and social media activism (Pappas & Aslanidis, 2015).

SYRIZA and ANEL, two parties from opposite ends of the political left-right spectrum, formed coalition governments, demonstrating that despite ideological differences, their shared populism and common opposition to the bailout agreements and austerity policies allowed them to bridge the left–right divide—though their cooperation was not always smooth (Katsambekis & Stavrakakis, 2017, Andreadis & Stavrakakis, 2018).

Among the populist parties that emerged during the economic crisis is **Golden Dawn**, a neo-fascist party that gained prominence by promoting an extreme form of exclusionary populism characterised by racist, anti-immigrant, and anti-elite rhetoric (Ellinas, 2013). While some scholars classify it as a right-wing populist party due to its view of society as a struggle between the "good people" and a corrupt "elite" (Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Doxiadis & Matsaganis, 2013), others argue it transcends populism, labeling it neo-Nazi and explicitly anti-democratic (Georgiadou, 2013). Unlike many

far-right parties, Golden Dawn's anti-immigration stance was central and based on ethno-racial ideology (Papathanassopoulos et al., 2016).

However, as the economic crisis began to fade, the intensity of populist mobilisation declined, and support for some major populist parties, such as SYRIZA and ANEL, gradually weakened. Nevertheless, populism did not disappear from the Greek political landscape. Instead, in the post-memorandum political landscape, new—primarily right-wing—populist parties emerged, capitalising on public discontent, national identity concerns, and anti-elite sentiment. Key examples include Greek Solution, Course of Freedom, MeRA25, Victory, the Spartans, and Voice of Reason.

Greek Solution (Elliniki Lysi), a populist radical right party and a member of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group, was established in 2016 by Kyriakos Velopoulos. It gained parliamentary representation in 2019 by promoting a platform centred on nationalism, opposition to the EU, and restrictive immigration policies. Its electoral success was partly due to widespread resistance to the Prespa Agreement, as well as the decline of other far-right parties—Golden Dawn, which faced criminal investigations of its leadership (Vasilopoulou & Halikiopoulou, 2015), and ANEL which lost voter support after partnering with the left-wing SYRIZA (Vasilopoulou, 2024). The party's messaging merges populist themes with ultranationalism and Orthodox Christian values, which it uses to justify its stances against immigration, LGBTQ+ rights, and multiculturalism (Karakatsouli, 2021).

Course of Freedom, established in 2016 by former SYRIZA MP Zoe Konstantopoulou, is a left-wing populist party with a strong anti-establishment profile (Kyriazi, 2024). While its positions on cultural issues, such as support for minority and LGBTQ+ rights, align it with progressive agendas, it also adopts sovereignist rhetoric. The party criticises EU institutions and austerity measures, calling for German reparations and the reversal of the Prespa Agreement (Vasilopoulou, 2024).

MeRA25, established in 2018 by former SYRIZA MP and Finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis as the Greek affiliate of DiEM25, emerged from the broader anti-austerity movement. The party promotes itself as a progressive and pragmatic response to economic crisis, advocating for public debt restructuring, the abolition of austerity, lower taxation, and support for entrepreneurship (Taggart & Pirro, 2021). MeRA25 can be characterised as a valence populist actor, prioritising non-positional issues such as transparency, democratic reform, and resistance to transnational oligarchic control. In its founding manifesto, it opposes what it describes as an 'Oligarchy without Borders' that operates through mechanisms of manipulation, division, and violence (MeRA25, 2021: 1).

In the June 2023 elections, two more parties with populist elements—**Victory (Niki)** and the **Spartans (Spartiátes)**—secured parliamentary representation. **Victory**, a populist radical right party, was established in 2019 by Dimitris Natsios, in the aftermath of the Prespa Agreement, which it characterises as a national betrayal, arguing that there is only one Macedonia and that it is exclusively Greek. It is considered the first clear far-right, nationalist, and theocratic political party in Greece, maintaining close ties with Mount Athos. The party promotes an ultra-conservative religious ideological platform grounded in ethnic nationalism and the primacy of the Orthodox Church, articulating a populist narrative that contrasts the virtuous and homogeneous 'Greek people' with corrupt political elites perceived to undermine national and religious values (Vasilopoulou, 2024; Samaras, 2025).

The Spartans, a newly formed ultra-nationalist radical right populist party, gained momentum partly due to support from Ilias Kasidiaris, a convicted former member of Golden Dawn (Mylonas, 2024), and adopted anti-systemic, populist rhetoric without a clearly defined program.

Voice of Reason, a populist radical right party founded in 2023 by former New Democracy candidate Afroditi Latinopoulou and member of the Patriots for Europe group, presents itself as a modern patriotic force grounded in the traditional values of "homeland, religion, and family". Echoing the rhetoric of parties like Greek Solution and Victory, it portrays Greece as culturally threatened and appeals to the "ordinary Greek" against political elites. The party's discourse incorporates elements of the "Great Replacement" theory, warning against globalisation, atheism, and Muslim immigration as threats to national identity and Orthodox values, while also condemning the EU for promoting international financial interests (Vasilopoulou, 2024).

These developments indicate that, although populism has declined in overall influence, populist discourse and new actors remain present, especially on the right. While no major party is currently campaigning actively for Grexit, anti-EU and anti-immigration views continue to fuel right-wing populist appeals, particularly in the context of the ongoing refugee crisis.

3. Varieties of euroscepticism in Greece

In the early 1980s, with Greece's accession to the European Economic Community (EEC), a left-wing Euroscepticism emerged, primarily expressed by the Communist Party of Greece (KKE) and PASOK. In particular, PASOK's Euroscepticism was closely tied to a broader critique of the West and American imperialism. These two parties constituted a strong anti-European bloc within the country's party system, while at the same time, the majority of Greek citizens had adopted a quite critical attitude toward the country's accession (Clements, Nanou & Verney, 2014, Teperoglou & Gkotinakos, 2025). Moreover, PASOK gradually adopted pro-European stances, leaving KKE as the main proponent of EU-scepticism, until the emergence of LAOS in the 1990s (Teperoglou & Gkotinakos, 2025). Before the onset of the economic crisis, the membership in the EC/EU was perceived as a positive thing for most Greeks, who used to associate the EC/EU with economic growth, rising standards of living and a desirable institutional framework for modernising the state and economy. This changed in the aftermath of the Eurocrisis, with a sharp increase in anti-EU sentiment. According to the study by Teperoglou & Belchior (2024), Euroscepticism during the peak of the crisis among Greek citizens was multidimensional, driven by material self-interest as well as perceptions of identity loss from supranational governance.

The same period saw the rise of new Eurosceptic parties within the Greek political landscape. While early Euroscepticism in Greece was driven primarily by left-wing populist forces, more recent developments indicate a diversification of the Eurosceptic landscape, with increasing influence from the populist (and radical) right.

One of them is **Greek Solution.** The main rhetoric of the party is to change the EU to prioritise national interests. They emphasise a loose alliance of sovereign nation-states. They strongly oppose EU policies on issues like immigration or foreign policy. They do not support the EU's common foreign and security policy towards Russia. Eurosceptic stances are linked to a populist narrative. This narrative constructs a dichotomy between the virtuous, culturally grounded Greek population and a technocratic, distant EU elite, reinforcing a populist critique of European integration as undermining national sovereignty and democratic legitimacy (Greek Solution, 2024). According to the party of **Niki,** the EU poses a threat to Greece's Orthodox Christian identity and traditional family structures by promoting liberal social values. In their view, national and religious interests should take precedence over commitments to a unified European agenda. This narrative frames the faithful, tradition-minded Greek people in opposition to a secular European elite perceived as hostile to heritage and faith (Niki, 2024).

Left-wing Euroscepticism is currently represented by three key actors: **SYRIZA**, **MeRA25**, and **Course of Freedom.** Each expresses a distinct critique of the European Union, rooted primarily in progressive, anti-austerity, and sovereignist agendas.

SYRIZA, particularly during the pre-2015 period, articulated a form of **soft Euroscepticism**, sharply criticising the EU's handling of the debt crisis and its neoliberal policy orientation, while remaining committed to Greece's continued membership in both the EU and the eurozone (Teperoglou & Gkotinakos, 2025). **MeRA25** is deeply sceptical of the current EU, viewing it as a profoundly undemocratic and economically irrational construction. "The European Union will be democratised. Or it will disintegrate!" is a main slogan of the party. The party of **Course of Freedom** adopts a radical Eurosceptic stance, portraying the European Union as a totalitarian structure that imposes a neoliberal agenda responsible for the erosion of Greece's sovereignty and economic wellbeing. Party leader Zoe Konstantopoulou has described the euro as a "tool of enslavement and oppression". The party advocates for the unilateral cancellation of Greece's national debt and the rejection of the euro and the EU itself as necessary steps toward restoring popular sovereignty.

Finally, there are some significant expressions of Euroscepticism in Greece that lack the classic populist character. The most prominent example is the **Communist Party of Greece** (KKE), which promotes nationalist and anti-globalist ideas. In their view, the EU is an "imperialist union of monopolies", a political and economic bloc designed to serve the interests of European capital, not the people. Consequently, the central conflict is between the working class of all European countries and the capitalist class that controls the EU, and its Euroscepticism is tied to a broader anti-capitalist rupture, not a concrete demand for Grexit. As a result, its strict ideological structure contrasts with populism's anti-elitist and people-centred nature (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017).

4. The populism–euroscepticism Nexus in Greece

Applying Taggart and Szczerbiak's typology (2004), we observe both hard Euroscepticism (wholesale rejection of EU membership, as in the cases of KKE and the now-defunct Golden Dawn) and soft Euroscepticism (criticism of EU policies without rejecting membership, as in SYRIZA and early PASOK) in the Greek political scene. What unites these varied ideological expressions is a populist logic that pits the "pure people" against corrupt elites (both domestic political

actors and supranational institutions). This logic was particularly evident during the 2015 Greek bailout referendum, where the EU was symbolically portrayed as a technocratic force suppressing the democratic will of the people.

As a result, Euroscepticism assumed an important role in the process of party competition, paired with anti-elite rhetoric. Reflecting this close correspondence, a new study by Szczerbiak and Taggart (2024) investigating the overlap of Eurosceptic and Anti-Establishment party positions, identifies a large cluster of parties combining those two elements in their discourse. In the case of Greece, specifically, this overlap is considerable with both SYRIZA and KKE exhibiting Eurosceptic and Anti-Establishment positions simultaneously. These two dimensions appear to be closely associated in Greece, with limited evidence of Eurosceptic parties adopting clearly pro-establishment positions. Interestingly, however, Greek Solution appears as a partial pattern-breaker in the Euroscepticism Anti-Establishment association, being strongly Anti-Establishment, while scoring comparatively lower on Euroscepticism.

5. Responses to euroscepticism and consequences

The responses of Greece's mainstream pro-EU parties (primarily ND and PASOK) have been mostly adversarial. They engage directly in competition by taking a clear, antithetical, pro-EU stance. They argue that Greece's membership in the EU and the Eurozone is the only path to modernity, stability, and economic prosperity, and construe Euroscepticism as an extremist position that will veer Greece away from its Western orientation.

Before the debt crisis, questioning Greece's place in Europe was a fringe position (mostly held by the KKE). The populist explosion during the crisis, and the continued presence of these parties, has made Euroscepticism a permanent and "normal" feature of political debate. The 2015 Greek bailout referendum is, arguably, the ultimate real-world consequence of the nexus between populism and Euroscepticism in modern European history. SYRIZA and ANEL claimed to be the authentic voice of a virtuous and suffering Greek people against a corrupt and morally bankrupt domestic (ND and PASOK) and foreign (the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the IMF, collectively known as the "Troika") elite that were framed as the enforcers of a destructive neoliberal agenda. During the bailout, the issue of Greece's membership in the EU became a central axis of political debate, pitting the mainstream, earlier two-party system consensus of PASOK and ND against SYRIZA and ANEL. Both blocs polarised on the issue and raised the stakes to present the issue as the most central decision for the economic and political trajectory of Greece.

Today, the formal alignment of Greek parties with pan-European populist movements (Greek Solution's membership in the ECR and Voice of Reason's membership in the Patriots for Europe) continues to signal the importance of the populism-EUscepticism connection. Through their membership, parties get integrated into larger networks, providing them with platforms, resources, and shared strategies that transcend national borders and political arenas.

For most (populist-Eurosceptic) parties, Euroscepticism is a secondary ideological consideration. For instance, the primary focus of Greek Solution rests on nationalism, immigration, and religion, and the "Brussels bureaucracy" can be blamed for failures in these core areas. This way they can criticise EU policies on migration and agriculture to attract protest votes, while avoiding the unpopular position of advocating for a "Grexit." For some parties, however, like Course of Freedom, Euroscepticism continues to be of foremost importance. Its entire political identity was forged in its leader's rebellion against the EU institutions and the bailout agreement in 2015, and the issue of Europe continues to define its position in the party system.

6. Conclusions

The Greek case shows that populism and Euroscepticism share a common criticism of the political elites, which gets especially pronounced under periods of economic crisis and widespread democratic disillusionment. In such cases, "Europe" becomes a shorthand for political elites writ large and gets pitted against the "People". The financial crisis of 2009 created fertile ground for both anti-elite populist movements and Eurosceptic stances, leading to a marked increase in the co-occurrence of Euroscepticism and populism in party discourse. However, this is driven primarily by over-time variation in Euroscepticism, which is multifaceted in scope, and volatile in prevalence. During the crisis years Euroscepticism was predominantly focused on political economy issues, emanating from the left-wing parties. Today, it is assuming more identitarian characteristics, mobilized by new, smaller, right-wing parties. On the other hand, populism transcends simple ideological boundaries, spanning the entire political spectrum from left to right, united primarily by its anti-establishment rhetoric and appeal to "the people" as a homogenous and virtuous collective opposed to corrupt elites, and has been a more permanent element of Greek politics.

Yet, even under crisis conditions, convergence to a common populism-Euroscepticism nexus is not deterministic. This is demonstrated by key pattern-breaker cases, like KKE, whose Euroscepticism is time-invariant, but its criticism of the

political establishment does not conform to the populist logic, or Greek Solution, whose core populist identity rarely collides with the issue of Europe.

Although the intensity of populist mobilisation has declined since the height of the crisis, populism remains an influential force, evolving from left-wing anti-austerity parties to a new wave of right-wing populist actors. These parties continue to capitalise on public discontent by merging nationalism, religious conservatism, and anti-elitism into their narratives. Likewise, Euroscepticism remains a powerful political tool, especially on the right, where opposition to the EU is framed as a defense of national identity and traditional values.

Overall, Greece illustrates how populism and Euroscepticism can become closely intertwined without collapsing into a single force. Their relationship is strongest when EU institutions are represented as distant, technocratic, and unaccountable elites, and when national political actors present themselves as the authentic voice of the people against both domestic and supranational power structures. This makes Greece a particularly important case for understanding how economic crisis, national identity, and democratic dissatisfaction can reshape party competition in contemporary Europe.

Ethics and consent

Ethical approval and consent were not required.

Data availability

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