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1 May 2017

Online at <https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/78971/>

MPRA Paper No. 78971, posted 09 May 2017 15:44 UTC

Utopian Left-Wing Expectations and the Social Consequences of the 3rd Memorandum in Greece (1)

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Abstract

In January 2015 the radical left SYRIZA has won the Greek national elections and formed a coalition government with Independent Greeks (ANEL), a right-wing populist party. After a seven-month negotiation with Greece's creditors and the agreement for the implementation of a third memorandum of fiscal adjustment, SYRIZA announced the conduction of a second round of national elections in September 2015. After a second electoral victory, SYRIZA formed again a coalition government with ANEL. The main characteristic of SYRIZA's pre-electoral campaign was that it has primarily focused on the commitment for austerity measures termination and on the implementation of tax alleviation. Even during the second electoral campaign in September 2015, after the agreement for the implementation of the third memorandum of fiscal adjustment, SYRIZA was promising that its implementation will be socially endured in order to reduce negative social consequences, such as those created by the previous memoranda. Practically though, after the first months of the new memorandum implementation, it is obvious that the government has introduced an unprecedented tax policy. Interestingly, this policy is not different from a traditional left logic of tax enforcement but actually leads to the implementation of horizontal austerity policies which firstly affect the socially vulnerable groups. From this point of view, while SYRIZA emphatically declare that it aims at resolving the crisis, its policies seem to deepen the depression. For instance, its inability to find alternative options to finance the social security system, leads to the implementation of restrictive policies which dismantle the welfare state. This paper aims at analyzing the policies of the first left government in Greece by focusing

on the tentative social consequences of the third memorandum and at the same time, studying some of the basic factors for its electoral victory, such as populism.

Keywords: populism, crisis, social impact, memorandum

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(1) The initial version of this paper had been presented to the 4th Edition of the ECPAM'2015 Conference, University of Bucharest, Romania, with the title “Utopian Left-Wing Expectations and the Social Consequences of the 3rd Memorandum in Greece” and was co-authored by Dimitrios Kotroyannos, Stylianos Ioannis Tzagkarakis, Emmanouil Mavrozacharakis, Apostolos Kamekis and Kostas A. Lavdas

1. Introduction

During the previous five years, Greece has faced economic recession which resulted in the direct increase of social and economic problems. The implementation of the previous two memoranda of fiscal adjustment was a field for a tough confrontation between the parties participating in the governments and those of the opposition. The result of this confrontation led to a peculiar distinction between pro-memorandum parties, with key exponents the social democratic PASOK and the right-wing ND (New Democracy) and antimemorandum ones, with key exponents the radical left SYRIZA, the populist right-wing ANEL (Independent Greeks), the Communist Party (KKE) and the Neo-Nazi Golden Dawn. The severe criticism of the opposition to governments that implemented the previous two memoranda and the promise of reversing such policies, led to the electoral rise of SYRIZA and finally to the achievement of gaining the first place in the national elections of January 2015. Straightforwardly, it turned out that SYRIZA had to make a great shift from utopia and the exorbitant promises to realism. Certainly, this shift, coated with populist manifestations and with an extensive delay, led to the signing of another, rather tough memorandum and to the implementation of policies which actually lead to a cyclical continuation of the crisis. During the crisis, the “traditional” parties (PASOK and ND) which shared the power throughout the period after the restoration of democracy suffered a huge shock and for the first time, in 2015 they do not participate in governance. While these two parties used to totally receive over 70% of the votes, since 2012 and especially in the elections of 2015, they both barely exceeded 35%. Therefore, this is a clear evident of the dramatic change in the political landscape in Greece due to the crisis. The enforcement of the Troika (European Central Bank, European Commission, and International Monetary Fund) in 2010, for the implementation of the first memorandum of fiscal adjustment, mutated the agenda of political debate in Greece. From the beginning, the first memorandum was demonized by the opposition as it was seen as a tool for the limitation of national sovereignty. This was the beginning of the creation of the peculiar distinction between pro-memorandum and anti-memorandum political sides. The opposition condemned the memorandum and advocated the protesting citizens in the streets or in the social media. But the fact that the vast majority of anti-memorandum side, with SYRIZA having a prominent role after the transition of ND to the pro-memorandum side, did

not express any viable solution except from the desire for a complete abolition of the memorandum and of the austerity measures. This strategy had focused the debate on the responsibilities of the Greek government which was succumbing to German interests and on those of European partners in general, rather than making a reference to the development of a problematic economic model during the pre-crisis period and propose effective reforms. The transfer of the responsibility to others, to outsiders, affecting in this way the Greek people, is one of the main populist strategies (Smith, 2012; Doxiadis and Matsaganis, 2012; Mouffe, 2015). Thus, an exogenous enemy of “the people” is been created to whom everyone should demonstrate strong resistance. According to this logic, even those who reach an agreement with them should be considered as their agents and traitors of the people². As Alexis Tsipras had stated during the pre-electoral campaign, SYRIZA will abolish the memorandum and implement a program of tax relief and social solidarity increase while encounter the interests of the oligarchy³. But when he became the prime minister of the country he finally signed the implementation of the third memorandum with lenders, imposing severe impact on the Greek society and economy by extending the negotiating period and leading the European Central Bank (ECB) to impose capital controls in banking transactions. It is true though that the social impact of the crisis, the frustration of the people by the implementation of the austerity measures and the populist rhetoric of anti-memorandum parties, such as SYRIZA, which promised a total reversal of the negative socio-economic situation, led to their electoral rise, since the elections of 2012. They formed the so-called anti-memorandum side, with SYRIZA becoming their leader. However, it is true that SYRIZA has not managed to escape from one of the permanent tactics of the Left. This is the increase of public funding through taxation. Unlike pre-electoral commitments which promised to abolish taxes and create a fairer tax framework, it turns out that SYRIZA, as a government, actually increases horizontal taxation affecting thereby the lower socioeconomic groups. Certainly, it should be clarified that while a traditional left policy increases taxation in order to redistribute and thus to benefit the lower socio-economic groups, SYRIZA uses this strategy in a “one-dimensional” character, which practically affects negatively the whole society, as long as it facilitates the vicious recessionary cycle. As it is visible from the available data, the tax increases that have taken place over the last five years have led to a decline in real tax revenue. While tax rates have increased in most categories, the absolute figures reveal a decline in real income. Therefore, a

further increase in the rate of taxation will inevitably lead to a decline in actual revenue, create further pressure on household finances and consequently, to deeper recession.

2. The Utopian Pre-Electoral Agenda

If one studies the pre-electoral agenda of SYRIZA he will find that its proposals-commitments were focused on reversing the economically restrictive situation by implementing a completely differentiated agenda, which was based on the abolishment of the austerity policies, imposed by the memorandum, and on the restoration of the socio-economic situation almost to the pre-memorandum (pre-crisis) period. SYRIZA followed the tactic of demonization of the policies implemented in previous memoranda by adopting a grueling rhetoric against them. Under this strategy, it promised the increase of social and economic benefits and the denial to implement commitments, such as privatizations, agreed by previous governments 4 . Specifically, SYRIZA promised the implementation of measures that included the renegotiation of terms with European partners regarding the economic policy. This strategy, in addition to the “removal” of the Troika and the memorandum, included the promise to renegotiate the national debt. The clear objective was the achievement of a significant “hair-cut”, and the implementation of expansionary economic policies with social content in order to reduce the high rates of social inequality and injustice in Greece (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2015) 5.

2 See Alexis Tsipras pre-electoral speech in 14 June 2012, available at <http://goo.gl/v2Pce> 3

3 See an extract of Alexis Tsipras pre-electoral speech in 20 January 2015, available at <http://news.in.gr/greece/article/?aid=1231378989>

4 An example is the privatization of regional airports. As the main opposition party, SYRIZA promised not to relinquish the regional airports and has accused the previous governments for inciting the Greek public interests. For instance, see a relevant statement of G. Stathakis, subsequent minister of SYRIZA, in November 2014: <http://www.tovima.gr/politics/article/?aid=653906>. However, it was SYRIZA-ANEL government which signed the agreement of concession of regional airports to the consortium Fraport AG – Slentel Ltd for a period of 40 years. For further details see: <http://www.hradf.com/en/news/20151212-regionalairports>

5 According to Bertelsmann Stiftung Social Justice Index for 2015, Greece has the lowest social justice rate among the EU member states.

The anti-systemic and radical rhetoric of SYRIZA also aimed at creating an unrealistic image of a possible electoral victory; that it would reinforce a significant change of the main economic and social policies, not only in Greece but also throughout Europe (Gerodimos, 2015). In any case, SYRIZA deliberately cultivated a contradiction in its agenda. Although often some of its members were adopting a harsh criticism and repulsion on the European Union (EU), all targets were surrounded by the mantle of staying in European Monetary Union (EMU) and the EU. Importantly, they tried to convince people that they will achieve a more advantageous agreement with the EU and at the same time, they will manage to implement their pre-electoral commitments, while remaining within the single currency⁶. However, the abovementioned process was implemented through a nearly seven-month negotiation which caused a dramatic impact on the economy, as a result of the capital controls on banking transactions. The second direction of the pre-electoral strategy of SYRIZA included promises, which focused on assuring citizens that even if the negotiations would be converted into a conflict with the European partners, SYRIZA had the plan to implement its pre-electoral program, which included reduction of the austerity and tax reliefs of the lower socio-economic groups. In any case, this assertion was accompanied by the certainty that their negotiating capacity and strategy, different from the previous governments, will be able to combine the retention in the EU and the EMU and the implementation of a new policy mix. Specifically, SYRIZA used the concept of “dignity” in order to emphasize the promise of maintaining decent pensions and subsidies for the agricultural sector, as well as the abolition of property auctions (of the primary house property). Simultaneously, one of the key pre-electoral commitments was the creation of a socially just taxation system which will entail a tax-free threshold on 12000€ income and the repealing of ENFIA (Single Estate Property Tax) ⁷.

⁶ See an extract of Alexis Tsipras pre-electoral speech in 20 January 2015, available online at: <http://news.in.gr/greece/article/?aid=1231378989>; See also the Thessaloniki program, available online at: <http://www.syriza.gr/article/SYRIZA---THE-THESSALONIKI-PROGRAMME.html#.VuUjmvkjiW>

⁷ See an extract of A. Tsipras’s pre-electoral speech in January 2015, available online at: <http://www.avgi.gr/article/5221266/kanena-spiti-se-xeria-trapeziti>

Regarding the social security system and the issues on employment relations and rights, except from vague pronouncements on dignity, social justice and confrontation of the humanitarian crisis, SYRIZA promised to restore the 13th pension for pensions below 700€ while it also announced the increase of the minimum wage to 751€ as well as the restoration of collective agreements ⁸. These pronouncements essentially promised the restoration of both the labor and pension policies-benefits to pre-crisis levels, as long as SYRIZA believed that it could reach an agreement with partners both for the debt relief and for the termination of the austerity policies, essentially by not implementing the commitments of the previous signed memorandum. All the aforementioned commitments of SYRIZA were embellished with guarantees for the struggle against corruption and tax evasion, which have plagued the country the previous years. Especially after the agreement on the implementation of the third memorandum, the electoral strategy of SYRIZA, for September 2015 national elections, aimed not only to indicate that the projected measures will not harm the lower and the middle social groups but also to express the differentiation of SYRIZA with the old parties which ruled the country the past four decades. The introduction of SYRIZA as a new political entity which was not involved in the power after the restoration of democracy in 1974, aimed at appearing as the single representative of “the people”, which is going to collide with corruption and the interests of the elites in order to succeed the promotion of the general social interest ⁹.

⁸ For instance, see the announcements of P. Skourletis, Minister of Labor and Social Solidarity, that finally were not implemented, available online at: <http://news.in.gr/greece/article/?aid=1231380937>

⁹. The main pre-electoral message of SYRIZA in the September 2015 elections was “We disentangle with the past. We gain the future”. This is a clear indication of the concentration of the campaign in differentiating SYRIZA with the traditional parties and main opponents (ND, PASOK) by identifying SYRIZA as the “new” and the other parties as the “old”, which do not comprise anything new and innovative to offer to the country. For more details see: <http://www.imerisia.gr/article.asp?catid=39335&subid=2&pubid=113703139>

As Tsipras stated, “nobody has anything to fear from a fair tax system. The only ones who have to fear is the smugglers and fraudsters. These people are included in list such as the Lagarde’s list and by now they still remain undisturbed”¹⁰.

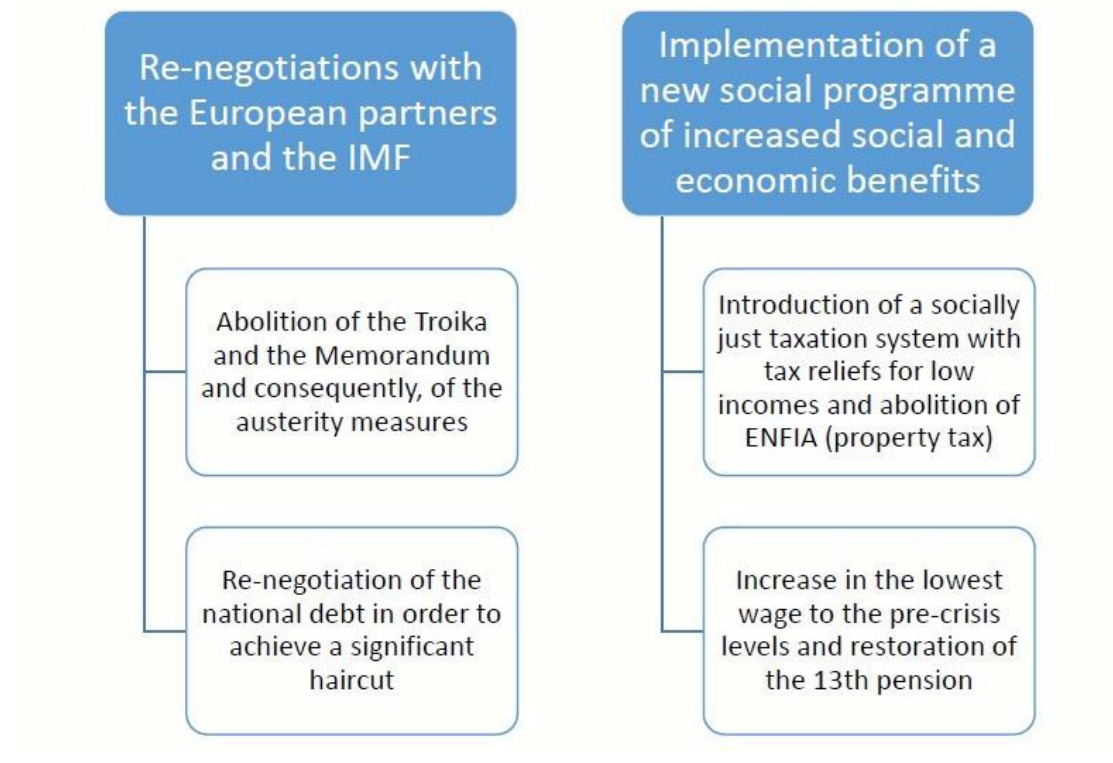


Figure 1. Basic Pre-electoral Commitments of SYRIZA (Greek National Elections of January 2015)

This strategy, together with the creation of the enemy-friend distinction (European partners versus national supporters of austerity termination) is evidence of the use of populism on the road to power (Mouffe, 2015). Populism aims at disorienting voters from the true potential of the Greek side regarding its claims from the European partners.

¹⁰ See an extract of Alexis Tsipras pre-electoral speech in 20 January 2015, available online at <http://news.in.gr/greece/article/?aid=1231378989>

In this context, by addressing the emotional appeal of the people, SYRIZA tried to show the strains of a new political scene, accusing both members of other parties for corruption and deception of the people. In this way and due to the young age of its leader, it won a large part of the voters. Adopting a populist strategy and accusing external factors (EU) and other parties that applied the austerity measures without even stress any resistance, it attracted voters who finally believed that SYRIZA may implement a different policy-mix and at the same time, resist to lenders who try to take advantage of the crisis by buying at low prices the Greek public property. The sense of subversion of the austerity and the return to an imaginary situation of the prosperous past decade has especially attracted young people to vote for SYRIZA.

3. The Disinclination towards Europe and the Illusions of Resistance

A crucial issue about the strategy that SYRIZA has followed in that it managed to win the elections in Greece with a highly critical stance towards Eurozone policies. For this reason it has often been categorized as a Eurosceptic party (Rohrschneider and Whitefield, 2015; Verney, 2015). While before the elections its oppositional rhetoric had a relatively anti-European character, after the electoral triumph and especially after the unsuccessful negotiations, it finally changed political direction and identified itself as a pro-European party in order to pass the third bailout program (Tsebelis, 2015). According to Walzer (2015), “SYRIZA came to power promising to address the pressure from bankers and EU officials, to end the austerity policies and to transform Greece. It was an exciting time, but the party had not already prepared plans to put into practice any of these objectives. Moreover, there was no plan for “Grexit” - for withdrawal from the Eurozone - for drachma reconstitution and the recovery of economic sovereignty”. This mixture of illusions along with the inability to present a well prepared program of reforms for the public administration and a plan of combating the uncontrolled corruption and tax evasion explicitly increased the already extended social and economic problems. According to Anderson (2015), the fiery rhetoric to end the domination of the Troika and to renegotiate the terms for the Greek debt payment, comprise factors that significantly contributed to the emersion of SYRIZA to power. Furthermore, SYRIZA often used a peculiar combination of

radical expressions and supplications with reference to the fundamental European values. Thus, Anderson believes that this combination was actually incompatible with any genuine threat of Grexit and is based on a problematic perception of the leadership of SYRIZA, which was not able to distinguish between the Eurozone exit and the EU exit. It is true that they have realized that the Greek public is largely against a Grexit, as long as most people concede that the Greek standards of living have significantly increased due to the Euro accession, the Structural Funds and the low interest rates resulting from the convergence of spread throughout Europe. Therefore, SYRIZA profusely reassured that there was no question of abandoning the Eurozone. The criticism of Anderson (2015) is contradicted by the argument claiming that SYRIZA went through a long period of incredible illusions of a dynamic negotiation amid Eurozone dissolution threat and amid inarticulate and radical opinions of memorandum abolition through “a law with one article”¹¹, until it became clear that the fiscal tightening is inevitable in order to avoid the bankruptcy and the Grexit. In this sense, the demagogic rhetoric of SYRIZA for “popular sovereignty” does not seem to correspond to the harsh reality as long as “fiscal policy in Greece is totally dependent on the whims of the European institutions and this was finally accepted by Tsipras” (Fischer, 2015). If we look at what is being implementing, “the achievement of the campaign of SYRIZA was a tour de force of lies and demagoguery that causes nausea” (Fischer, 2015). Secretly though, the Greek people have always had the intuition that the probability of memoranda abolition is low, unless the country chooses a path other than the Euro. In any case, the anti-European attitude was a common reference point of the radical left SYRIZA and the rightwing ANEL. As Nicoli clarifies (2015: 12), the attitude towards Europe is currently the main factor that determines the creation of governmental coalitions.

11 As the leader of the main opposition party, A. Tsipras declared that SYRIZA will restore pensions and wages to the prememorandum levels. See the detailed declaration of A. Tsipras online at: <http://www.tovima.gr/politics/article/?aid=484094>

4. The Turn to Realism and Its Consequences

Almost seven months after the rise to power, SYRIZA finally was turned to realism. In order to be forced to adopt realism Tsipras and his coalition government had led the country to a six-month fruitless negotiations with partners, which nearly brought it closer than ever before to a Grexit, by failing to pay a loan repayment to the IMF (Khan and Holehouse, 2015) and by the announcement of the conduction of a referendum about the proposed fiscal agreement by the European partners (Ekathimerini, 2015a). This referendum instead of comprising a concrete democratic tool, it turned out to be a tool of its violation. The three main reasons which lead to this conclusion are the following: a) the question was about a financial issue, a fact that is prohibited by the constitution, b) the period between the announcement of the referendum and its conduction was short (only one week) and c) the question was unclear. Finally, SYRIZA although it managed to win the referendum, the vote for “NO” to the implementation of fiscal measures proposed by European partners, ultimately was led to the agreement for a tougher austerity program than that, by signing a third Memorandum of fiscal adjustment. SYRIZA tried to set off the great battle given against “lenders” (European partners) and though they signed the new fiscal agreement, it managed to win the mandate for its implementation in the national elections of September 2015. The referendum was part of the populist strategy of SYRIZA which attempted to demonstrate that it predicates political-social consensus and the democratic participation of the people in the decisions taken. However, in the end, the decision seemed to be in sharp contrast with the public “will”. Under these circumstances, Tsipras’s main aim was to show that his government had strongly negotiated with “exogenous enemies” and earned an agreement that at least saves Greece from bankruptcy and the return to drachma (Klapisis, 2015). What actually Tsipras wanted to achieve was the wide public acceptance of the fact that he had negotiated as no one in the past and reached an agreement that is tough but it will be implemented in order to avoid bankruptcy and total economic and social destruction. The government of SYRIZA was already aware that the public opinion, although voted for “NO” in the referendum for the implementation of the agreement proposed by the European Commission, would never accept a Grexit (Eurobarometer, 2015). Exactly for this reason Tsipras, by announcing the referendum, aimed at gaining time in order to cultivate the vision that his government had set a strong opposition towards

the measures proposed by the European partners. This vision was a significant tool for the preelectoral campaign of the next elections that he had stimulated, in September 2015. Furthermore, the snap character of these elections during the summer was one more tool for SYRIZA, in order to achieve the parliamentary majority before voters realize the real upcoming effects of the implementation of the memorandum (Rori, 2016). As the tentative data indicate, the implementation of the third memorandum by the specified laws that SYRIZA passed through the parliament, leads to the conclusion that the negative social consequences will be further increased. Firstly, increased taxation is used as the main strategy of collecting the necessary financial resources in order to meet the debt and deficit obligations. But by extensively increasing taxation, investments are even more discouraged and a peculiar redistribution in a lower level, that destroys the middle socio-economic groups, is being implemented. For instance, while before the elections SYRIZA was sharply against the property tax (ENFIA), currently, as a government, it has decided that it will remain almost unchanged as long as it generates enough revenue to the state budget and it is not easy to find equivalent measures (Ekathimerini, 2015b). At the same time, in an attempt to gain more funding, the government of SYRIZA increased the VAT tax on food products from 13% to 23% and finally to 24% in June 2016. The significant increase of this kind of indirect tax comprises a clear horizontal measure but indirectly, it primarily affects the lowest income groups, leading to a decrease of the real wages (Bloomberg, 2015). At the same time, the increase of a tax which is directly related to the consumption amid crisis, inevitably leads to a reduction of the spending capabilities and therefore, cause reduction in sales, mainly of SMEs, which is a sector that potentially and with the relevant reforms and measures – which do not include tax increases - can boost national exports (Nassr, Robano and Wehinger, 2016). All these measures will clearly lead to a continuation of the recession and reduce the purchasing capacity of the Greek citizens, leading to further increases on poverty and social exclusion. A clear indication of this fact is that although taxes were increased during 2015, the tax revenues were dropped by 1.38% in comparison with 2014, without adding the tax rebates that are in abeyance (General Secretary of Public Revenues, 2016). Thus, while totally there is a proportional increase in taxes, the total real revenue had been reduced. It is interesting that the only category of tax that had led to increase in real revenues was the deductions from wages and pensions (General

Secretary of Public Revenues, 2016). This is a clear indication that tax increases severely affect the middle socio-economic groups.

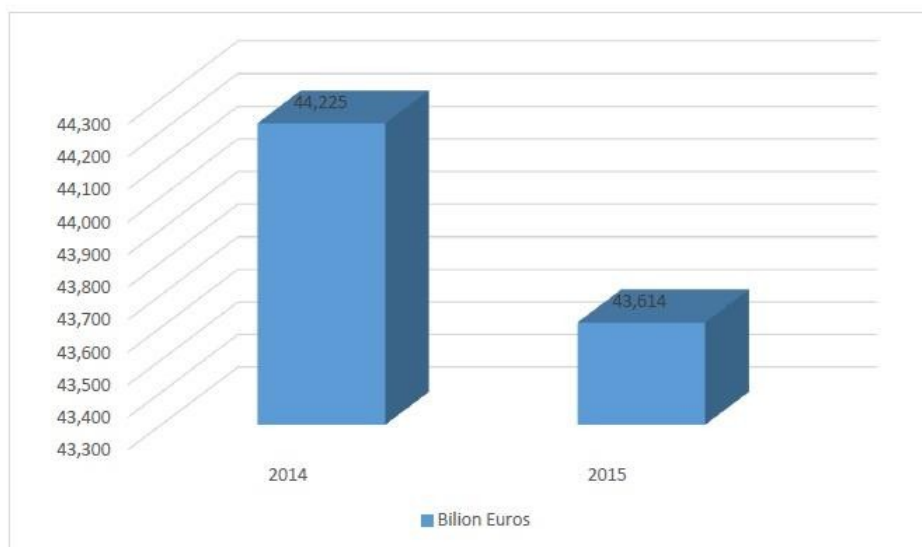


Figure 2. Total Tax Revenues

Source: General secretary of Public Revenues, 2016

A similar strategy is followed in the social insurance sector, in which, after the agreement on the implementation of the third memorandum, structural and restrictive reforms are implemented that largely affect pensioners on different socio-economic categories as long as they introduce significant cuts in supplementary pensions, increases in social security contributions as well as in tax deductions on pensions 12.

12 For further details on the reductions in supplementary pensions and in the tax increases in pensions, see the new social security law of SYRIZA-ANEL government, available in: http://content-mcdn.imerisia.gr/pegasus/Multimedia/pdf/fekasfalistiko_id3415752.pdf

5. Concluding Remarks

It turns out that SYRIZA, instead of implementing a policy which will attract investments by reducing taxation on enterprises with a simultaneous commitment on investing the profits to the creation of new job vacancies, actually it maintains the already large public sector and try through taxation and pension cuts to find the required resources. This government perceives Greek people more as national taxpayers than as citizens as long as the tax increases, mainly on the middle socio-economic groups and on private professionals, comprise a central policy tool for ensuring budgetary adjustment. The logic of the one-dimensional taxation against the total population is embellished by Mr. Tsipras with a supposed intention to a top-down redistribution. But this intention seems hypocritical, once the middle socio-economic groups and especially the private sector, since the beginning of fiscal adjustment, have mostly been suffered, without concrete economic results on public revenues. Moreover, the negotiating strategy that SYRIZA has used put the country in front of a great danger of financial and social collapse. The government underestimated the negotiating capacity of the country by extending the negotiation period and conducting the referendum and instead of gaining a better future for the economy and society it signed a tougher set of austerity measures. It seems that the main purpose was not to ensure the general interest of the country but the political future of the party for the forthcoming period, after the September 2015 elections. The endless negotiations and the use of tools such as the referendum targeted only on maintaining the vision of SYRIZA as the party of “the people” that had negotiated until the end but due to external parameters, several of the - illusionary – pre-electoral commitments are not going to be implemented. However, the situation has become even worst, considering the management of tough issues such as the current reforms in the social security system as well as the management of the refugee problem, which clearly indicate the amateur confrontational strategy of the government. All these problems accumulate further the social and economic difficulties and often put in danger the national interests of the country. It turns out that, the transition of the pre-electoral expectations into real policy, ended in their total reversal. Thus, despite the populist hegemony (Pappas, 2015), in the case of the SYRIZA, leftist self-determination was reversed into a peculiar mixture of “right, capitulated or even

neoliberal left”, which reveals a huge gap between promises and implementation (Munchau, 2015; Kotroyannos, 2016). The abovementioned policies of this government lead to the redistribution of poverty (Rori, 2016), which increases the new social group of permanent precarity (the precariat) (Standing, 2011) as a result of the transformation of citizens into national taxpayers with limited economic capacity

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