

Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences, and Education

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Anti-populism in times of recurring crises

An analysis of 'New Democracy's political discourse

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HAS IT COME TO THIS!
This insane course of the free-silver and anarchist fanatics will not be allowed to prevail.

Table of Contents

1	Introduction	1
1.1	Problem Diagnosis.....	2
1.2	Analytical Focus and Limitations.....	3
1.3	Political and Scholarly Relevance of the Study.....	5
1.4	Thesis Structure	7
2	Populism and Anti-Populism in Greece	7
3	Laclau and Mouffe’s Post-Marxist Discourse Theory	14
3.1	Philosophical Premises and Core Concepts.....	14
3.1.1	Discourse, Articulation, Moments, and Elements.....	16
3.1.2	Nodal Points, Floating Signifiers, and the Field of Discursivity	18
3.1.3	Agency, Subjectivity and Dislocation.....	19
3.1.4	Social Antagonisms.....	21
3.1.5	Logics of Equivalence and Difference	22
3.1.6	Hegemony and Empty Signifiers	23
3.2	Discourse Theory, Populism and Anti-Populism	25
3.2.1	Approaching Populism Discursively.....	25
3.2.2	Populism and Hegemony	27
3.2.3	Approaching Anti-Populism	28
3.2.4	Post-Politics.....	29
3.2.5	Conceptualizing Anti-Populism	31
3.2.6	The Role of the Crisis.....	33
4	Data Gathering and Methods.....	35
4.1	Texts and Documents as Data and Discourse Analysis.....	35
4.2	Data Collection	36
4.3	Discourse Theory and Discourse Analysis	38
5	Analysis: The Refugee/Migration Crisis.....	40

5.1	Background: Greece, ND and the Refugee/Migration “Crisis”	43
5.2	Populism as Extremism	47
6	Analysis: The Covid-19 Pandemic.....	57
6.1	Populism as Irresponsible Opposition	60
6.2	Populism Against Science	68
6.2.1	The Dichotomy between Populism and Science	70
7	Analysis: The Russo-Ukrainian Conflict and the EU Economic Crisis.....	79
7.1	Background.....	79
7.2	Framing the Conflict.....	81
7.3	Populism as an Anti-Democratic Threat	87
7.4	Populists and the National Stability.....	92
8	Discussion and Implications.....	98
9	Summary and Conclusion	104
	Works cited	110
	List of Speeches	124

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1 Introduction

On the 7th of July 2019 ‘New Democracy’ and the party’s leader Kyriakos Mitsotakis won the Greek national elections (39.85%)¹ and were ‘ordered’ by the Greek people to form a one-party government. Despite the party’s clear electoral victory, the new Greek government would quickly experience fierce political tensions and unexpected crises. More specifically, alongside the general unrest that the legislative initiatives for “bold economic reforms”² and the “return of law and order”³ created in the ranks of labor unions and student associations, Greece would experience a major crisis in late February 2020 when Turkey ‘opened’ its borders in the Evros region, triggering the gathering of thousands of people, the militarization of the Greek borders and the initiation of a prolonged period of insecurity, tensions and distrust in the Greek-Turkish relations regarding territorial sovereignty and migration.⁴ The state of emergency that was declared in the region would ease after the closing of the Turkish borders due to the measures attempting to halt the unfolding of the Covid-19 pandemic, signaling the second consecutive crisis that Greece would face in multiple and overlapping levels, challenging the country’s NHS, economy, democratic liberties and social cohesion. Finally, after almost two years of the pandemic’s development monopolizing the daily news and the public discourse, the Russian large-scale invasion of Ukraine and the pan-EU inflation/economic/energy crisis that was caused by it would signal the third consecutive crisis to affect Greece by challenging the country’s fragile economic stability, political party system and position in the international establishment.

In that regard, it seems rather unnecessary to state that these crises that shook the sociopolitical order also produced fierce political debates and confrontations regarding their management, radicalizing the political discourse of the oppositional parties, organizations,

¹ The official results of 7th July 2019 national elections as documented by the Ministry of Interior <https://ekloges.ypes.gr/current/v/home/en/>

² Interview of the President of New Democracy, Mr. Kyriakos Mitsotakis, on New Television of Crete and the journalist Elpida Katsarakis available at <https://nd.gr/synteneyxi-toy-proedroy-tis-neas-dimokratias-k-kyriakoy-mitsotaki-sti-nea-tileorasi-kritis-kai-ti> (last accessed 10/02/2023)

³ Newsroom, “Mitsotakis: Law and order will return when we come to government” (13/07/2016) *CNN Greece* at <https://www.cnn.gr/politiki/story/39212/mitsotakis-o-nomos-kai-i-taxi-tha-epistrepsoun-otan-erthoyme-stin-kyvernisi> (accessed 10/02/2023).

⁴ Lacin Idil Oztig, “The Turkish–Greek Border Crisis and COVID-19” (2020) *Borders in Globalization Review* 2 (1), 78-81. <https://doi.org/10.18357/bigr21202019843>.

and social forces. In this context, “populism” would emerge as a central notion in the political discourse of ‘New Democracy’ to characterize and be correlated to numerous policy suggestions, criticisms towards the governmental management, sociopolitical actions and mobilizations that developed in the context of these crises. The present work is an attempt to map the multiple occasions during these three crises in which “populism” was used in the Greek government’s political discourse, identifying the meanings attached to the notion, the actors and ideas identified as “populist” and the implications that derive from this discursive practice for Greek democratic politics. In that sense, the over-arching research question that is going to be explored is, **“How was the signifier “populism” used in the political discourse of the Greek Government”**, focusing on the period starting from the electoral victory of the party on the 7th of July 2019 until the 31st of December 2022 and the beginning of the pre-election period.

1.1 Problem Diagnosis

The use of “populism” both as a notion and characterization to pejoratively describe multiple, often antithetical, sociopolitical phenomena is by no means a peculiarity of the Greek government. During the last two decades, the term has been used in the Western mainstream academic, political and journalistic discourse to describe phenomena that have destabilized or questioned the global, seemingly unshakeable, neoliberal order by invoking and referring to “the people” as their primary political subject, ranging from the rise of Donald Trump to the agenda of Bernie Sanders and from the mass European protests against austerity, SYRIZA and Podemos to Brexit and Le Pen.⁵

In this context, it seems safe to note that populism has been predominantly underlined as a pathological cause or a lurking threat but also, much less often, as a phenomenon that is potentially corrective to modern democracy.⁶ These differential or even contradictory

⁵ Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo and Pierre Ostiguy, “POPULISM: An Overview of the Concept and the State of the Art” in Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser et al. (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 16-17 <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198803560.001.0001>.

⁶ Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, “The Ambivalence of Populism: Threat and Corrective for Democracy” (2012) *Democratization* 19, no. 2, 184–208 <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2011.572619>.

meanings that have been attributed to populism, whether they come from the dominant and admittedly anti-populist liberal political, academic and journalistic discourse or from critical intellectuals and popular movements, have created certain levels of confusion over the “real” meaning of populism and the concept’s relation to notions such as rationality, truth, representation, and popular sovereignty.

Additionally, the complex antagonistic language games developed around “the people” and “populism” can and must also be explored in relation to the broader ideological/political goals that they aspire to serve in each context. In other words, and returning to the context of the present research, the Greek government’s practice that, in the context of each respective crisis, attempts to pejoratively characterize differing phenomena as populist must be examined in relation to the broader political antagonisms that take place in the context of each crisis. Finally, it is worth asking whether the anti-populist repertoire and its implications are actually beneficial for a democratic system that aspires to constantly deepen and incorporate more voices, suggestions, and diversity in the political debate.

1.2 Analytical Focus and Limitations

Before proceeding to the exploration of the study’s background, it seems important to provide certain justifications for the delimitation of the analytical period and its division in three sub-periods that are perceived as “crises,” a notion that does not necessarily reflect an objective state of events. To begin with, the selection of the period starting from the election of ND and Kyriakos Mitsotakis on the 7th of July and ending on the 31st of December 2022 derives from the analytical will to focus on the “main period” of ND’s governance, meaning the period that involved the programmed legislative initiatives of the party and the management of the three crises. More specifically, 2023 has marked the beginning of a protracted pre-election period⁷

⁷ George Evgenidis, “ND: Start of pre-election period with Mitsotakis press conference today” (23/01/2023) *Proto Thema* at <https://www.protothema.gr/politics/article/1331547/nd-me-oplo-to-kuvernitiko-ergo-kai-kedriko-prosopo-ton-mitsotaki-os-tis-kalpes/> (accessed 07/03/2023); Stavros Papantoniou, “Greece entering pre-election period” (29/11/2022) *Kathimerini* at <https://www.ekathimerini.com/news/1198966/greece-entering-pre-election-period/> (accessed 07/03/2023) ; Evangelia Tsikrikas, “Kyriakos Mitsotakis: It smells like elections? The movements of the Prime Minister that “witness” readiness for elections” (28/11/2022) *NEWSITi* at <https://www.newsit.gr/politikh/kyriakos-mitsotakis-myriase-ekloges-oi-kiniseis-tou-prothypourgou-pou-martyroun-etoimotita-gia-kalpes/3649905/> (accessed 07/03/2023).

that has gradually incorporated broader political issues revolving around the parties' governmental programs and the leaders' personal abilities and merits, therefore allowing for a nearly complete overview of the crises-focused debates since they are no longer on the center of the public debates and mainstream journalistic discourse.⁸ In other words, the 31st of December 2022 seems, based on the author's systematic observation of the public discourse and the objective need for a master thesis to have a demarcated period for the gathering of empirical material, as an adequate date to end the latter's collection.

Furthermore, the division of this 42-month period in three sub-periods that are characterized as crises is inspired by the periodization that PM Mitsotakis himself has adopted during the addressment and evaluation of ND's governmental period:

“You know much better than I do how many crises we have had to manage, starting with the migration invasion in Evros, migration pressures which, unfortunately...are at least being maintained at very high levels.

In the midst of a pandemic, an unprecedented global health crisis which led the government to completely readjust its program and support society with almost 50 billion euros.... And of course, now we are called to manage something that seemed unimaginable a year ago: a war in the heart of Europe, with unprecedented consequences in terms of the explosion of global inflation. And of course, a great steepness crisis that we have to face.”⁹

Finally, it is evident that the detailed analyses of these crises could potentially comprise individual thesis topics on their own, since they represent profound phenomena with a global and multileveled impact. In that sense, the present work does not aim at focusing on a deep and multifaceted analysis of the nature, causes or impact of these three crises on the Greek society, economy or political system. On the contrary, the aim of this research is to focus specifically on the roles and meanings that “populism” acquired in the discourse of the Greek

⁸ T. Gaitanis: "Mitsotakis or Tsipras" the dilemma of the next elections" (11/02/2023) *Capital* at <https://www.capital.gr/politiki/3698179/t-gaitanis-mitsotakis-i-tsipras-to-dilimma-ton-epomenon-eklogon>; (accessed 07/03/2023); “Tsipras: The dilemma of the elections will be Democracy or Mitsotakis” (01/02/2023) *IEIDISEIS* at <https://www.ieidiseis.gr/politiki/183206/tsipras-to-dilimma-ton-eklogon-tha-einai-dimokratia-i-mitsotakis> (accessed 07/03/2023).

⁹ Speech by the Prime Minister and President of the ND Kyriakos Mitsotakis at the opening of the work of the Summit of the Presidents of the New Democracy Party and DIMTO (15/10/2022).

government in the context of and in relation to these consecutive critical periods and connect the findings to broader ideological goals and political implications.

1.3 Political and Scholarly Relevance of the Study

When researchers discuss the relevance of their study, the question that they seek to answer essentially revolves around the contemporary importance and potential impact of their work. Furthermore, researchers should reflect on the gaps that their study could fill in the scientific literature of their research area by providing information that is either missing or is going to contribute to the evolution of the particular academic field. Finally, in social sciences and especially in studies of discourses, the role of the analysts must also be scrutinized since they do not perform the analysis/research in an ahistorical or asocial vacuum but they themselves belong in a particular culture and society and they participate in the forming of discourses while also being influenced by them.¹⁰ Although this discussion will be completed during the final chapters of the present work, when the evaluation of the empirical findings and analysis is going to be conducted, it seems important to also form some introductory observations and statements regarding the aforementioned issues and the reasons that led to this particular research area.

In that regard, the present research perceives itself as being part of the broad field of political discourse analysis, a field that during the last two decades has experienced a significant increase in terms of academic popularity towards the phenomenon of populism, since, as discussed earlier, a series of major political events and phenomena, like the rise of Donald Trump or Brexit, have been correlated in the context of political and journalistic discourse to the concept, thus providing new research material and momentum to populism research.¹¹ However, the present research aims at focusing on anti-populism, an admittedly underresearched phenomenon, through the examination of populism not as a concept but as a signifier in the political discourse, meaning that the primary focus will be on the discourse

¹⁰ Marianne Jørgensen and Louise Phillips, *Discourse Analysis As Theory and Method* (Sage Publications, 2002), 21.

¹¹ Yannis Stavrakakis, "Discourse theory in populism research: Three challenges and a dilemma" (2017) *Journal of Language and Politics*, 16(4), 523–534.

about populism and not on the discourse that is, at least perceived as, populist. The importance of studying anti-populism alongside populism lies firstly on their mutual constitution and reproduction and, secondly, on their frontier in the context of political antagonism that has been empowered during the last decade in the Greek context and seems to get particularly intensified during crises.¹²

Finally, although the literature covering populism in the context of the Greek debt crisis has been affluent,¹³ the period that the present analysis intends to focus on hasn't been academically scrutinized yet on a sufficient degree in terms of research on the phenomenon of (anti-)populism. With most of the literature focusing on the role and function of populism during the COVID-19 pandemic,¹⁴ it seems that the discursive strategy of the government to characterize and perceive certain political demands and proposals in the field of migration crisis-management and the Russo-Ukrainian war context as populist can and must be researched further.

Concluding, the research on populism and anti-populism is especially important in the current juncture since Greece seems to face certain challenges regarding the country's democratic quality, with certain distinguished NGOs and research institutes publishing

¹² Yannis Stavrakakis and Giorgos Katsambekis, "Left-wing Populism in the European Periphery: The Case of SYRIZA" (2014) *Journal of Political Ideologies* 19, no. 2, 119-42; Yannis Stavrakakis, Giorgos Katsambekis, Alexandros Kioupiolis, Nikos Nikisianis, and Thomas Siomos. "Populism, Anti-populism and Crisis" (2018) *Contemporary Political Theory* 17 no. 1, 4-27.

¹³ Some notable works, among other equally important ones, are: Γιάννης Σταυρακάκης, Λαϊκισμός: Μύθοι, Στερεότυπα και Αναπροσανατολισμοί (ΕΑΠ, 2019) (Yannis Stavrakakis, *Populism: Myths, Stereotypes and Reorientations*) (Hellenic Open University, 2019); Σεβαστάκης Νικόλας και Γιάννης Σταυρακάκης, *Λαϊκισμός Αντιλαϊκισμός Και Κρίση*. (Εκδόσεις Νεφέλη, 2012) (Sevastakis Nikolas and Yannis Stavrakakis. 2012. *Populism Anti-Populism And Crisis*. (Nefeli Publications, 2012); Takis Pappas, *Populism and crisis politics in Greece*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Yannis Stavrakakis and Giorgos Katsambekis. "Left-wing Populism in the European Periphery: The Case of SYRIZA." (2014) *Journal of Political Ideologies* 19, no. 2, 119-42.

¹⁴ Daphne Halikiopoulou, Marina Zoe Saoulidou, Konstantinos Vlamis and Evelyn Karakatsani, "Far-Right Populism and Anti-Vax Movements in Southern Europe: A Comparison of Spain, Greece, Portugal and Cyprus.", (2022) *89initiative*; Antonis Galanopoulos & Giorgos Venizelos, "Anti-populism and Populist Hype During the COVID-19 Pandemic," (2022) *Representation*, 58:2, 251-268, DOI:10.1080/00344893.2021.2017334; Kostas Papaioannou, Myrto Pantazi and Jan-Willem van Prooijen, "Unravelling the relationship between populism and belief in conspiracy theories: The role of cynicism, powerlessness and zero-sum thinking" (2023) *Br J Psychol* 114(1):159-175. doi:10.1111/bjop.12602; Lia Figgou and Eleni Andreouli, "Appeals to Consensus and Partisan Politics in Parliamentary Discourse on the Pandemic", (2022) *Political Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12874>; George Kordas, "COVID-19 in Greece: From the Government's Clash with the Greek Church to the Diffusion of Anti-Mask Supporters", (2021) *PARTECIPAZIONE E CONFLITTO*; Yannis Stavrakakis and Giorgos Katsambekis, "Populism and the pandemic: A collaborative report", (2020) *Loughborough University. Report*. <https://hdl.handle.net/2134/12546284.v1> ; Charalambos Tsekeris and George Efthymiou, "Greek Government's Communication Approach During the Covid-19 First Wave", (2020) *HAPSc Policy Briefs Series*, 1(2), 79–87. <https://doi.org/10.12681/hapscpbs.26452>

alarming reports regarding foundational democratic values and freedoms.¹⁵ After all, as discussed in further detail during the theoretical chapter of the present work, the discussion around populism and anti-populism is essentially connected to fundamental elements of liberal democracy, such as popular participation and democratic liberties.

1.4 Thesis Structure

Having established these introductory notes, it seems appropriate to conclude the introductory chapter by outlining the structure of the thesis. In that regard, the following (second) chapter of the present work is going to briefly present the background of the struggle between populism and anti-populism in the Greek context since the country's democratic transition in 1974, identifying the main actors of the Greek political system and presenting the events and discourses on which the contemporary parties and leaders have built on. Moving to the third chapter, the focus is going to be on the theoretical framework of the research, focusing on Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory (DT), the theory's approach to the (anti-)populist phenomenon and its previous applications on research regarding the interplay between populism, anti-populism, crisis and hegemony. Following, the fourth chapter will touch on the methodological principles and the selection of methods and data, respectively. Furthermore, the thesis is going to proceed to the analysis of the Greek government's political discourse in three chapters, with each chapter referring to one of the three crises selected to be analyzed. Finally, the findings of the empirical analysis are going to be discussed in order to draw conclusions on their importance and impact on Greece's democratic politics.

2 Populism and Anti-Populism in Greece

¹⁵ Evie Papada, David Altman, Fabio Angiolillo, Lisa Gastaldi, Tamara Köhler, Martin Lundstedt, Natalia Natsika, Marina Nord, Yuko Sato, Felix Wiebrecht, and Staffan I. Lindberg, "Defiance in the Face of Autocratization. Democracy Report 2023," (2023) University of Gothenburg: Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem Institute) https://www.v-dem.net/documents/29/V-dem_democracyreport2023_lowres.pdf ; RSF's 2022 World Press Freedom Index : a new era of polarisation (2022) <https://rsf.org/en/rsf-s-2022-world-press-freedom-index-new-era-polarisation>

Populism is by no means a notion that entered the Greek sociopolitical reality only recently since the nearly fifty years (the so-called *Metapolitefsi*) that have followed the country's democratic transition in 1974 (after the end of the 1967-1974 military dictatorship) have incorporated various ideologically and politically diverse populist mobilizations and movements.¹⁶ The first significant movement belonging to this category that has been scrutinized by the relevant academic literature developed during the late 1970s and was a product of PASOK's (Panhellenic Socialist Movement) political project that attempted to represent the demands, empower and 'give a voice' to the 'non-privileged' and rural social strata.¹⁷ The representation of these demands was articulated against an establishment that was accused of monopolizing, often through the assistance of foreign powers, the economic and political privileges and access to power since the end of the Greek Civil War (1946-49) while also promoting the need for national independence and popular sovereignty, a stance that fueled the, at least rhetorical, suspicion towards Greece's European political integration and NATO responsibilities.¹⁸

PASOK would eventually dominate the Greek political stage in the late 1970s and early 1980s influencing the Greek political culture in a profound manner, while also triggering anti-populist political and academic reactions, mainly perceiving PASOK's populism as an antagonist to Greece's modernization.¹⁹ The most influential and emblematic anti-populist work exploring this relation has been Diamandouros' 'cultural dualism' thesis that understands contemporary Greek history as a constant struggle between the 'underdog', 'unprivileged' or 'obsolete' cultural camp which adopts a traditionalist and 'Eastern/Balkan immature' stance, and its 'modernizing' counterpart that pursues the 'rational' construction of a modern European/ Western state that, naturally, destabilizes the traditional social

¹⁶ Yannis Stavrakakis and Giorgos Katsambekis, "Left-wing Populism in the European Periphery: The Case of SYRIZA," (2014) *Journal of Political Ideologies* 19, no. 2, 119-42.

¹⁷ Dimtris Tziouvas, *Greece from Junta to Crisis: Modernization, Transition and Diversity* (I.B Tauris, 2021), 106.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 47; Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, note 16, 124.

¹⁹ Yannis Stavrakakis, "How did 'populism' become a pejorative concept? And why is this important today? A genealogy of double hermeneutics", (2017) *POPULISMUS Working Papers No. 6*.
<http://www.populismus.gr/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/stavrakakis-populismus-wp-6-upload.pdf>, 2;

structures.²⁰ In this thesis, PASOK has been perceived as clearly representing the ‘underdog’ culture and demands, with populism constituting a central component of it.

Obviously, Diamandouros’ thesis was not developed in an ahistorical vacuum but was influenced by the modernization theories of the Cold War that from a ‘liberal’ and ‘pluralist’ starting point attempted to negatively revise the historical reading of the North American populism and ascribe certain problematic characteristics to populist movements.²¹ Stavrakakis states that the first and most emblematic work of this kind has been Richard Hofstadter’s *The Age of Reform* that attacked the American populism and the ‘People’s Party’, which was previously conceived by the contemporary historiography as a rather progressive democratic and inclusionary mass movement, with accusations underlining its nativism, nationalism, antisemitism, conspiratorialism, backwardness and provincialism.²² Additionally, Hofstadter was also the first to perceive populism as an inherent feature or impulse affecting the national political culture as a whole within a dualist context that involves the aggressive capitalist development/modernization of the era against the irrational, extremist and nostalgic traditionalism opposing it.²³ Hofstadter’s influence is stressed by Stavrakakis in order to highlight the continuity of the anti-populist rhetoric and arguments from the early days of the Cold War to Diamandouros and the present, while also pointing out the elitist, reductionist, deterministic, ideologically subordinated and one-dimensional aspects of the modernization theory, and its various expressions, that have been identified in the literature.²⁴

Entering the 1990s, the literature has underlined the transition of Greek populism to a new stage that is characterized by the transformation of PASOK’s strategy and political discourse towards a “modernizing,” consensual, anti-extremist, economically pragmatist and, most importantly, anti-populist direction.²⁵ The denunciation of references to “the people” as “populist” and backward and their replacement by politically “neutral” terms like “civil society” or the “middle ground” has been noted as a common feature of both major parties (PASOK and the liberal center-right ‘New Democracy’), alongside the convergence of their

²⁰ Ibid. Grigoris Markou, “Anti-populist discourse in Greece and Argentina in the 21st century”, (2021) *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 26:2, 201-219, DOI:10.1080/13569317.2020.1852669

²¹ Ibid.

²² Stavrakakis, note 19, 4.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid, 5-7

²⁵ Giorgos Katsambekis, “The Place Of The People In Post-Democracy Researching Antipopulism' And Post-Democracy In Crisis-Ridden Greece”, (2014) *Postdata*, 19(2), 562-563
http://www.scielo.org.ar/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1851-96012014000200009&lng=es&tlng=es,

political programs, which, as discussed more extensively during the theoretical chapter, is perceived by Katsambekis as being part of the Greek “post-democratic” turn/era (mid-90s-00s) that was characterized by the visual absence of any alternative policy paradigms or proposals other than the advancement of Greece’s European integration and “modernization.”²⁶ In that sense, the common anti-populist elements of both parties’ political discourse were based on the common advancement of the “objective” need for “expert technocratic economic governance/management” that moved the political debate to the realm of spectacle and ethics, incorporating accusations around issues such as corruption and political arrogance.²⁷ This ideological mutation of PASOK that marked the party’s passage from social democracy to the gradual embracement of neoliberal values and policies has been underlined as transferring the “populist flag” from the left (1980s PASOK) to the right side of the Greek political spectrum.²⁸ The literature highlights the two-year political clash between the government of PASOK on the one hand, and the Church of Greece and the political party LAOS (Popular Orthodox Rally) on the other, as the most notable expression of Greece’s post-2000 right-wing populism that developed around the “modernizing” removal of religious references from the Greek identity cards. This “modernizing” decision appears to have triggered the fierce reaction by the Church of Greece and the articulation of a clearly populist discourse by the Archbishop Christodoulos, which was followed by the organization of certain right wing forces around the newly formed LAOS party that employed an extreme-right discourse that also incorporated references to “the people” based on an antagonistic view of society.²⁹

Populism would return to the left of the Greek political spectrum after the 2008 global economic crisis in the context of which the Greek debt and deficit were declared unsustainable by the so-called *troika* (IMF, EU, ECB) that demanded fierce austerity measures in order to develop a bailout program.³⁰ The surge of unemployment and the inability of small and medium scale businesses to cope with the crisis produced a profound wave of popular indignation and despair that dislocated and reshaped the political identities and political party system, dividing the latter between the pro- and anti-memorandum forces,

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid; Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, note 16, 124.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid, 125.

³⁰ Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, note 16, 124

with the former consisting of the parties that agreed on implementing troika-directed austerity policies (PASOK, ND and LAOS), later unified under the coalition government of PM Loukas Papademos, and the latter opposing the austerity measures and the troika monitoring.³¹ In this context, SYRIZA (Coalition of the Radical Left) would triple its electoral power and become the main “anti-memorandum” pole, a dynamic process fueled by the multiple anti-austerity popular mobilizations, strikes and demonstrations like the square movement of *Aganaktismenoi*, through the articulation of a discourse that privileged “the people” as its central political subject on the basis of a dichotomous and antagonistic conception of the Greek society between “the people” and “the establishment.”³²

In this context, the pro-memorandum forces would articulate an anti-populist discourse identifying the “irresponsible populism of the past”³³ as the determining factor that led to the crisis.³⁴ This interpretation of the crisis gradually formed a strategic rhetoric denouncing every form of opposition to the bailout programs/memorandums as being part of the same destructive ‘populist’³⁵ logic in order to reinforce the TINA³⁶ governmental narrative, legitimize and facilitate the implementation of the austerity measures. In that sense, the strategic plan of the mainstream parties and media was focused on portraying the crisis as a struggle between the noble and rational “pro-memorandum” moderates against the “populist”, “extremist” and “irrational”³⁷ antagonistic anti-austerity forms of political organization that emerged, mainly SYRIZA but also the neo-Nazi “Golden Dawn” that was surprisingly empowered in the 2012 elections.

Certain central narratives have been identified in the literature as being part of the pro-memorandum anti-populist discourse. Firstly, the so-called “theory of the two extremes” is a

³¹ Yannis Stavrakakis and Giorgos Katsambekis, “The Populism/Anti-Populism Frontier and Its Mediation in Crisis-Ridden Greece: From Discursive Divide to Emerging Cleavage?” (2019) *European Political Science* 37–52. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41304-017-0138-3>, 8

³² Ibid; Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, note 16, 137

³³ Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, note 31, 38

³⁴ Yannis Stavrakakis, Giorgos Katsambekis, Alexandros Kioupiolis, Nikos Nikisianis and Thomas Siomos “Populism, anti-populism and crisis” (2018) *Contemporary Political Theory* 17 (1):4-27.

³⁵ Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, note 31, 43.

³⁶ The acronym TINA stands for “There is no alternative.” It rose during the 1990s when neoliberal advocates produced what became the dominant interpretation of the demise of the USSR state socialism, asserting that socialism had to fail since a state-run economy cannot work and was bound to lead to economic collapse. See David Kotz, *The Rise and Fall of Neoliberal Capitalism : With a New Preface* (Harvard University Press, 2018) <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674982215>

³⁷ Ourania Hatzidaki, “The ‘Theory of the Two Extremes’. A Rhetorical Topography for Self- and Other-Identification across the Greek Political Spectrum” in Ourania Hatzidaki and Dionysis Goutsos (eds), *Greece in Crisis. Combining Critical Discourse and Corpus Linguistics Perspectives* (John Benjamins, 2017), 151-189.

phrase used to underline the accusations against mainly, but not limited to, SYRIZA and Golden Dawn of committing or supporting parallel acts of extremism in order to sabotage the governmental efforts for economic recovery and stabilization, while also implying certain ideological similarities.³⁸ Secondly, the “condemnation of violence from all sides” had been used to describe the discursive strategy of certain mainstream media and anti-populist politicians of correlating the violent physical attacks of Golden Dawn against immigrants and political adversaries to the fierce anti-austerity popular demonstrations of the 2012-2015 that in certain occasions involved violent clashes with the police. This correlation was facilitated through the use of the concept “anomy,” designating the logic or political culture that the anti-populist forces identified as common between “far-leftists and far-rightists” that legitimizes the (unacceptable) disobedience to certain laws that are judged as unfair thus fueling, through this culture of defiance and sense of lawlessness, criminal acts like the ones of Golden Dawn.³⁹

This fierce confrontation would eventually result in “populism” (SYRIZA) winning the elections in January 2015 by linking the grievances of numerous crisis-affected social groups under the (‘empty’ in Laclau’s terms) signifier “Hope,” forming a coalition government with ‘Independent Greeks’, a smaller right-wing populist party.⁴⁰ After five months of tense negotiations with Greece’s international creditors aiming at repealing the austerity measures, the government coalition would call for a referendum regarding the latest IMF/EU ultimatum/proposal with the options “YES” and “NO” representing its acceptance or rejection, with the government openly supporting the “NO” decision. In this context, the populism/anti-populism divide would become central, with the anti-populist camp that rooted for “YES” stigmatizing the entire process of the referendum as “populist,” underlining its divisive nature and interpreting it as a question regarding Greece’s EU/Euro membership thus giving the name “We stay in Europe” to the anti-populist “YES”-supporting movement.⁴¹

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Κύρκος Δοξιάδης, *Προπαγάνδα* (Εκδόσεις Νήσος / Στο Κόκκινο 105.5, 2016) (Kyrkos Doxiadis, *Propaganda* (Athens: Nisos/Sto Kokkino 105.5, 2016) (in Greek).

⁴⁰The official results of the January 2015 national elections as registered by the Ministry of Interior [https://eklogesprev.singularlogic.eu/v2015a/v/public/index.html?lang=en#%22cls%22:%22main%22,%22params%22:{}".](https://eklogesprev.singularlogic.eu/v2015a/v/public/index.html?lang=en#%22cls%22:%22main%22,%22params%22:{}); Antonis Galanopoulos, “Exploring the populism/anti-populism cleavage during the Greek referendum” (2018) Conference: Media, Polis, Agora: Journalism & Communication in the Digital Era.

⁴¹ Ibid.

Despite the anti-populist attempts to portray the referendum as a ‘parody’, ‘coup’, ‘democratic perversion’ or ‘scam’ against SYRIZA’s view of it as one of the greatest popular struggles of modern Greek history, “NO” would win with 61,3% of the votes without, however, leading to a “GREXIT” but to a new (third) MoU/austerity oriented bailout agreement and to the gradual “systemic metamorphosis” of SYRIZA which gradually abandoned its radical anti-neoliberal positions and adopted more ‘realist’ and compromising ones.⁴² Furthermore, this ‘realist’ shift included the reformulation of the party’s previously anti-imperialist, or at least critical towards NATO, past and the acceptance of troika’s directions towards fiscal limitations and structural reforms.⁴³ In that sense, the previously radical left SYRIZA has been underlined in the literature as gradually moving towards the center-Left, having focused on constructing an identity of ‘progressive’ and ‘democratic’ for itself on the basis of the adaptation of ‘political realism’ and the recognition of past ‘self-delusions.’⁴⁴

During SYRIZA’s governance, ND would elect the strongly anti-populist Kyriakos Mitsotakis as its leader⁴⁵ and gradually construct an “anti-SYRIZA” hegemonic block that incorporated ideas, demands and grievances from centrist liberals to far-rightists against the “governing populism”⁴⁶ of SYRIZA that was portrayed as a threat to the country’s democratic institutions, economic prosperity and national defense.⁴⁷ More specifically, SYRIZA’s ‘capitulation’ to the troika and its continuation of austerity policies, like intense taxation, would produce popular dissatisfaction that enabled ND to portray leftist politics as ideologically bankrupt, unrealistic and sabotaging of the ‘objectively’ necessary reforms for, eventually, no reason since the beginning of the crisis.⁴⁸ Additionally, ND capitalized on the

⁴² Grigoris Markou, “The systemic metamorphosis of Greece’s once radical left-wing SYRIZA party”, (2021) *OpenDemocracy* at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/rethinking-populism/the-systemic-metamorphosis-of-greeces-once-radical-left-wing-syriza-party/> (accessed 14/03/2023)

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid; “Tsipras: In 2015 we were delusional” (September 15, 2019) *Ta Nea* at <https://www.tanea.gr/2019/09/15/politics/antipoliteysi/kamia-aytokritiki-tsipra-gia-ti-diakyvernisi-syriza/> (last accessed 12/04/2023).

⁴⁵ Oxford Analytica, “New Nd Leader Will Toughen Up Greece's Opposition.” (2016) *Emerald Expert Briefings* (20160127). <https://doi.org/10.1108/OXAN-DB208078>.

⁴⁶ Kyriakos Mitsotakis: “My goal is for the ND to express all its strength against the populism of an incompetent government” (11/01/2016) EURACTIV at <https://www.euractiv.gr/section/esoterikes-ipothesis/news/mitsotakisskopos-mou-ekfrasi-oles-tis-dinamis-apananti-ston-laikismo-mias-anikanis-kivernisis/> (accessed 05/03/2023).

⁴⁷ Yannis Mylonas, "Crisis, Authoritarian Neoliberalism, and the Return of “New Democracy” to Power in Greece." *Stasis (Saint Petersburg, Russia)* 10, no. 2, 181-208.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

national issues regarding the name dispute between Greece and North Macedonia and migration, by rejecting the diplomatic solution of SYRIZA to the former as a ‘national defeat’ and by accusing SYRIZA of supporting an ‘open borders’ policy that does not stop ‘illegal immigrants’ from entering the country, to the latter.⁴⁹ Finally, ND’s ideological combination of liberal (e.g. lower taxation) and hard-right (e.g. strict immigration rules) demands and grievances was pervaded by strongly anti-populist elements that focused on the restoration of ‘normality’ against the polarizing/divisive ‘populist’ governance of SYRIZA, associating the latter with nationally catastrophic policies, false promises, demagoguery and lies. This representation of SYRIZA was equated to “incapability” to effectively run the country in contrast to ND’s technocratic and expert management.⁵⁰

Eventually, the Greek people would elect ND on the 7th of July 2019⁵¹ (39.85%), allowing Kyriakos Mitsotakis to form a one-party government, applauding ND’s pre-election self-identification as an “embankment to populism” that was determined to lead the country safely to the “post-populism era.”⁵² This is the temporal point from which the analysis will begin in chapter four.

3 Laclau and Mouffe’s Post-Marxist Discourse Theory

3.1 Philosophical Premises and Core Concepts

Laclau and Mouffe’s Discourse Theory adheres to the anti-essentialist and anti-foundationalist ontological and epistemological premises of social constructionism and the poststructuralist ‘tradition’ forming, firstly, the idea that discourse constructs the social world

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Yannis Stavrakakis, “Populism, Anti-Populism and Democracy,” (2018) *Political insight* 9.3, 33–35.

⁵¹ The official results of 7th July 2019 national elections as documented by the Ministry of Interior <https://ekloges.ypes.gr/current/v/home/en/>

⁵² “Mitsotakis: It is ND’s duty to lead the country to the post-populist era”, (22 June 2016) *Ta Nea* at <https://www.tanea.gr/2016/06/22/economy/mitsotakis-xreos-tis-nd-na-odigisei-ti-xwra-sti-meta-laikismo-epoxi/> (accessed 14/02/2023) (in Greek: Μητσοτάκης: Χρέος της ΝΔ να οδηγήσει τη χώρα στη μετα-λαϊκισμό εποχή”); “Mitsotakis: New Democracy is an embankment to populism and extremes”, *Ta Nea* (5 May 2016) at <https://www.tanea.gr/2019/05/05/politics/mitsotakis-anaxoma-sto-laikismo-kai-ta-akra-i-nea-dimokratia/> (accessed 14/02/2023) (in Greek: “Μητσοτάκης: Ανάχωμα στο λαϊκισμό και τα άκρα η Νέα Δημοκρατία”).

in meaning, and that, owing to the fundamental instability of language, social phenomena are never finished or total since meaning can never be ultimately fixed, paving the way for continuous social struggles for the fixation of meaning and the definition of society and identity by different social actors.⁵³ On the same note, DT rejects the existence of a pre-given self-determining essence that succeeds in determining and ultimately fixing all other identities within a stable and totalizing structure and perceives truth as not determined by reality but as discursively constructed and conditioned by the appropriate “truth regime” that specifies the criteria that render something true or false.⁵⁴

Having established these philosophical starting points, it also seems necessary to situate DT in relation to other discourse analytical approaches since DT focuses on understanding the social as a discursive construction/web of processes where meaning is created and whereby, in principle, all social phenomena can be analyzed using discourse analytical tools.⁵⁵ However, this claim must not be misunderstood as refusing to acknowledge the ‘real existence’ of the material world outside discourse. DT’s refusal is limited to the extra-discursive meaning of objects, signifying that the latter only acquire meaning when they become objects of discourse.⁵⁶ Secondly, Laclau and Mouffe also deny the distinction between materiality and language, insisting that discourses are not merely a representation/expression of the objective world but constitute ‘publicly available and essentially incomplete frameworks of meaning that enable the social life to be conducted’.⁵⁷

By using linguistic terminology, DT perceives the different signs present in the social as carrying different meanings given to them by different social actors, while simultaneously being placed in certain contexts with different meanings.⁵⁸ The meaning that is assigned to a particular sign is possible but it is not the only possible one since different discourses attempt to create and impose order amongst the different signs and meanings but their contingent character renders this process impossible to be fully completed.⁵⁹ In this theoretical approach, of major importance is the structuralist linguistic theory of Ferdinand de Saussure

⁵³ Jørgensen and Phillips, note 10, 6.

⁵⁴ David Howarth and Jacob Torfing (eds), *Discourse Theory in European Politics: identity, Policy and Governance* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230523364>. 14

⁵⁵ Jørgensen and Phillips, note 10, 24

⁵⁶ David Howarth, *Discourse* (Open University Press, 2000), 104

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 105

⁵⁸ *Ibid*.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*.

emphasizing the distinction inherent in all signs, the basic elements of any language, consisting of two sides, a signifier (sound/image) and a signified (content) whose relation is arbitrary. This arbitrariness signals that the meaning that humans attach to words/sounds/written images is a result of social conventions and not a product of nature and, therefore, each sign acquires its meaning through its relation and difference to other signs.⁶⁰ Saussure identified two levels present in language, with the first being the fixed underlying network of signs that give meaning to one another or, basically, the stable/closed structure of the language (*langue*), and the second being the situated language use or the actual way people use signs in specific situations (*parole*).⁶¹ Saussure believed that the latter must always draw on the former and that only *langue* can constitute an object of scientific research for linguistics since *parole* falls victim to people's mistakes and individualities.⁶²

The poststructuralist tradition, in which DT belongs to,⁶³ has developed a two-fold critique of the Saussurean structuralist model, adopting the structuralist idea that signs acquire their meaning by being different from other signs but challenge the fixed/locked position of each sign in relation to others, meaning that in different contexts a particular sign can differ from different signs.⁶⁴ Secondly, the role of situated/concrete language use (*parole*) is of crucial importance for poststructuralism and for discourse analysis since it perceives this procedure as the one where the structure of the language is created, reproduced but also challenged and changed through the introduction of alternative fixations of the meaning of signs.⁶⁵

After outlining these general starting points, it is possible to now proceed to a more detailed presentation of certain discourse-theoretical core concepts and tools.

3.1.1 Discourse, Articulation, Moments, and Elements

⁶⁰ Jørgensen and Phillips, note 10, 10

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 11

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Howarth, note 56, 28; Jørgensen and Phillips, note 10, 11

⁶⁴ Ernesto Laclau, "Discourse", in R. Goodin and P. Pettit (eds), *The Blackwell Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy 2nd Edition*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 541-547

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

In theorizing about discourse, Laclau and Mouffe begin by claiming that all objects and actions are meaningful, with their meaning being given to them by certain systems of significant differences/different discourses that constitute their identity. These systems/discursive structures constitute sociopolitical constructions establishing relations between different objects and practices while providing ‘subject positions’ with which social agents can identify.⁶⁶ On a broader scale, sociopolitical forces will attempt to construct ‘hegemonic projects’ in order to dominate certain fields of meaning thus fixing the identities of objects and practices in their desired way.⁶⁷

Having established these initial notes, in order to approach the concept of discourse, the first central concept of DT is articulation (or articulatory practice), initially defined (and supplemented further later) as ‘any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice.’⁶⁸ The concept of articulation comes first since it provides the necessary information for the conceptualization of “discourse” to be focused on which is initially framed as ‘the structured totality resulting from the articulatory practice.’⁶⁹ On the same note, Laclau and Mouffe define the differential positions/signs within a discourse as moments, while also defining any difference/sign that is not discursively articulated as an element. The signs are referred to as ‘differential positions’ because, as discussed during Saussure’s work, their meanings are being fixed through their differences from one another.⁷⁰

However, these initial conceptualizations are not enough to give a full picture of DT’s perception of discourse. In that sense, Laclau and Mouffe continue by stating that discursive formations consist of related elements ‘which in certain contexts of exteriority can be signified as a totality.’⁷¹ Laclau and Mouffe thus draw on linguistic models and construct an analogy between linguistic and social systems on the basis of the relational character of all identities and the necessary character of all relations.⁷² However, the crucial differences between DT and the linguistic systems is that, firstly, for DT social relations are not limited to

⁶⁶ Howarth, note 56, 102

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 2001), 105.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Jørgensen and Phillips, note 10, 26

⁷¹ Laclau and Mouffe, note 68, 106; Howarth, note 56, 102

⁷² Ibid.

linguistic phenomena but also encompass practices/actions and, secondly, the ‘closure’ of the linguistic model is challenged on the basis that every social action does not merely repeat an already existing system of eternally fixed meanings and practices but can generate new fixations of meanings. The second difference between DT and linguistic models is closely connected to the function of articulation since ‘closed’ linguistic models reduce all elements to the internal moments of a system,⁷³ in which case the main characteristic of an articulatory practice, that is now introduced to the analysis as ‘the construction of (new) nodal points that partially fix meaning’,⁷⁴ would be impossible.

3.1.2 Nodal Points, Floating Signifiers, and the Field of Discursivity

The question that naturally arises from the previous section’s last statement is, what is a nodal point? Starting from Laclau and Mouffe’s claim that ‘a discourse is formed by the partial fixation of meaning around certain nodal points,’⁷⁵ a nodal point is understood as a privileged sign around which the other signs are ordered and acquire their meaning through their relationship to it (the ‘body’ in medical discourses, ‘democracy’ in political discourses etc.).⁷⁶

Having clarified the function of a nodal point and proceeding to recap, a discourse is understood to be established as a totality in which each sign is fixed as a moment through its relations to other signs.⁷⁷ However, discourse is not fully understood solely through that explanation in DT. More specifically, discourse also has to be understood as a reduction of possibilities since the way that signs relate to one another is just one of the various possible others that were excluded. In other words, a discourse must be understood as an attempt to create a unified system of meaning by excluding certain possibilities that are grouped under the name ‘field of discursivity.’⁷⁸ In other words, the meaning that each sign has, or has had,

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Laclau and Mouffe, note 68, 113

⁷⁵ Ibid, 112

⁷⁶ Jørgensen and Phillips, note 10, 26

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Laclau and Mouffe, note 68, 113

in other discourses that is excluded by a specific discourse is viewed as the ‘surplus of meaning’ that the field of discursivity consists of.⁷⁹

In that sense, Laclau and Mouffe state that all discourses are constituted as attempts to dominate the field of discursivity and ‘arrest’ the flow of differences.⁸⁰ The reason underlying the need to dominate the field of discursivity is the necessary constitution of any discourse in relation to an outside that threatens to undermine and disrupt the fixation/unity of its meaning through possible alternative fixations of the meanings its signs. By focusing on the concept of elements as polysemic or non-articulated/fixed signs, discourse can be also understood as an attempt to transform elements into moments by fixing their meaning through a temporary closure (a stop) to the fluctuation of their meanings that, however, is never immune to new undermining attempts since the transition from elements to moments can never be completely realized.⁸¹

Finally, in DT, certain signs can be polysemic since they are articulated in different discourses unambiguously by relating them to different elements, thus producing competing ways of understanding them. These signs that are particularly open to different ascriptions of meaning are called floating signifiers.⁸² More specifically, this term describes signs that can be identified both as nodal points, if they possess the role of a privileged sign around which a discourse is organized, and as elements at the same time, if they are also used in another discourse with different meanings. Floating signifiers are thus the signs that different discourses struggle to invest with meaning in their own specific manner, such as ‘democracy’ in political discourse that liberal and socialist discourses use in different ways. In that sense, the difference between nodal points and floating signifiers is the former refers to a point of crystallization within a particular discourse while the latter refers to a continuous struggle.⁸³

3.1.3 Agency, Subjectivity and Dislocation

⁷⁹ Jørgensen and Phillips, note 10, 27

⁸⁰ Laclau and Mouffe, note 68, 112

⁸¹ Jørgensen and Phillips, note 10, 28; Laclau and Mouffe, note 68, 110-112

⁸² Ibid; Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (Verso, 1990), 28

⁸³ Ernesto Laclau, “Power and representation,” in M. Poster (ed.), *Politics, Theory and Contemporary Culture*. (Columbia University Press, 1993), 287 as cited in Ibid, 28.

Briefly, Laclau and Mouffe are critical of both the traditional Marxist and Althusser's structuralist conception of the subject's agency in forming its own consciousness and the related influence that ideology and, therefore, structures have on it. As discussed, DT views all social practices, and therefore ideologies as well, as discursive and although they adhere to the idea that ideologies sustain and reproduce the identities that are discursively created, they reject the deterministic and reductionist characteristics of the Althusserian theory that views ideological practices as a distinct and relatively autonomous domain of social formations.⁸⁴

Laclau & Mouffe do not perceive social agents as homogenous subjects possessing a single identity but the plurality of subject positions that discourses provide can create room for several, sometimes even competing, subject positions and therefore identities, depending on the availability of different subject positions on each instance.⁸⁵ The identification of, and the very concept of, different subject positions is used to explain the different, and often contradictory, forms that an agent can acquire while produced as a social actor.⁸⁶

On the other hand, the concept of political subjectivity is developed in DT to explain how social actors act, focusing on the relation between action and the contingency of the discourses that grant them identities. More specifically, through the use of the important concept of dislocation, denoting the revealing of the contingency of the discursive structure, Laclau explains how major events can create identity crises for the subjects, forcing them to act, identify with certain political projects/their discourses and confront these crises that are seen as the situations that provide the ground for this form of identification to take place and generate political subjectivities that eventually become subject positions and ascribe characteristics to social actors.⁸⁷ The concept of dislocation is further explored in conjunction with hegemony to account for the disruption of symbolic orders, denoting events that cannot be symbolized by the established discursive order and thus disrupt it, introducing an 'extra-discursive' dynamism to DT's conception of society.⁸⁸

The subject in DT can thus be understood as structured discursively. In that sense, the concept of identity in DT, heavily influenced by Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, is equivalent

⁸⁴ Ibid, 108.

⁸⁵ Laclau and Mouffe, note 68, 113

⁸⁶ Ibid; Howarth, note 56, 109

⁸⁷ Ibid; Laclau, note 83, 40.

⁸⁸ Howarth, note 56, 111

to the identification with certain subject positions that discourses offer to the individual.⁸⁹ In that regard, the nodal points of identity (like ‘man’) are signifiers that are subjected to offers of different meanings by different discourses.⁹⁰ The process of filling these signifiers with meaning happens through the linking together of the signifiers through chains of equivalence that establish the identity relationally, forming a discursive construction that designates what the signifier equals to and what it differs from. (e.g. men with strength, women with beauty etc.). In that sense, it becomes obvious that this construction also assigns guidelines and instructions for action to those that identify with this particular signifier in order to acquire the identity (of a ‘real’ woman, man etc.). The negotiation of all identities in and through discursive processes renders identities social in character.⁹¹

3.1.4 Social Antagonisms

In DT the concept of antagonism is used to denote the mutual hostility of an agent against another on the ground of blocking the attainment and securing of a particular identity, or, in other words, the situation when two identities mutually exclude each other.⁹² More specifically, this process denotes the contrasting demands made by two identities in relation to the same actions within a mutual field, resulting in the inevitable blockade of each other.⁹³ The discourses involved, that constitute each of the two identities, are part of each other’s field of discursivity and naturally, as discussed earlier, during the antagonistic phase they threaten the fixation of meaning and existence of each other.⁹⁴ As discussed in the section of political subjectivity, in relation to dislocation, the moment that identities collide is also a moment when the contingency, this time of the identities, becomes visible.

⁸⁹ Jørgensen and Phillips, note 10, 43

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Jørgensen and Phillips, note 10, 48

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid; Laclau, note 83, 17

3.1.5 Logics of Equivalence and Difference

Building on the concept of social antagonism, agents are seen as occupying different positions within discourses constituting the social space, becoming ‘particularities’ that are situated in a greater or smaller distance from one another. When a social antagonism emerges and creates a frontier thus challenging certain identities (agents) that are positioned close to each other, a certain logic is possible to emerge that renders a series of moments equivalent to others in terms of their common differentiation from an opposing moment, called ‘the logic of equivalence.’⁹⁵ More specifically, the logic of equivalence denotes the process through which different particularities achieve a common ground, or form a chain of equivalence, by finding a common negation and thus simplifying the political space that they inhabit. In other words, this process renders the identity of the Other purely negative in relation to the chain of equivalence.⁹⁶ These different co-operating particularities are collectively represented by a process called hegemonic relation, through which a certain agent, without ceasing to be its own particularity, assumes the representation of a universality entirely incommensurable with it.⁹⁷ As a result, Laclau and Mouffe note that the agent’s universality is a ‘contaminated’, meaning that it experiences an unresolvable tension between universality and particularity and its function of hegemonic universality is not consolidated but is always reversible.⁹⁸

In contrast to the logic of equivalence which has the effect of simplifying the political space in which it emerges, the logic of difference focuses on dissolving these equivalential chains by weakening the discursive dichotomization of the social field and representing social relations as complex. The logic of difference is based on the aforementioned idea that agents occupy different positions in the discourses comprising the social field. Laclau and Mouffe use a comparative example from linguistics to explain the difference of the two logics, portraying the logic of difference as expanding ‘the syntagmatic pole of language, the number of positions that can enter into a relation of combination and hence of continuity with one another; while the logic of equivalence expands the paradigmatic pole, or the elements that

⁹⁵ Laclau and Mouffe, note 68, 127

⁹⁶ Howarth, note 56, 120

⁹⁷ Laclau and Mouffe, note 68, XIII

⁹⁸ Ibid.

can be substituted for one another, thereby reducing the number of positions which can possibly be combined.’⁹⁹

3.1.6 Hegemony and Empty Signifiers

A solution to social antagonisms can be given through hegemonic interventions, with the latter being articulations which forcefully reconstitute unambiguity.¹⁰⁰ On a more general note, the concept of hegemony in DT is of major importance because it links different identities and political forces to common projects, obviously influenced by the conception of Gramsci but also with a critical attitude towards it.¹⁰¹ More specifically, Gramsci’s call for a transcendence of the working class’s narrow corporate interests by articulating different social forces in a new ‘historical block’ that will transform the class’s interests into a ‘collective will’ representing universal values and interests in the name of ‘the people’ or ‘the nation’ etc. is of major importance for DT’s theorization of hegemony.¹⁰²

Taking and evolving Gramsci’s conception of hegemony as the ‘formation and organization of consent’ beyond the remnants of class reductionism, Laclau and Mouffe conceptualize hegemony as the ever-recurring procedure of the articulation of new political representations and the obstacles they encounter both from within, since they can never be able to fully capture the real, and from other antagonistic representations.¹⁰³ Secondly, hegemony is understood as the temporary stabilization/crystallization of such representations, whether in the short or long term. This procedure that involves the symbiotic relationship of these antithetical forces takes place on the principle of DT that a fully constituted society is an impossible object that contingent contents only try to impersonate.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁹ Ibid, 130.

¹⁰⁰ Ernesto Laclau, “Power and representation,” in M. Poster (ed.), *Politics, Theory and Contemporary Culture* (Columbia University Press, 1993), 287 as cited in Jørgensen and Phillips, note 10, 48

¹⁰¹ Howarth, note 56, 110

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Yannis Stavrakakis, "Populism and Hegemony" in Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 535-553

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

Moving on, it can be theorized that DT's conception of hegemony resembles the function of discourse in that both aim at the transformation of elements into moments, with the former, however, succeeding in this fixation across discourses that collide antagonistically.¹⁰⁵ More specifically, in the context of the antagonism a particular discourse is seen as threatened from the discursive field from which another discourse manages to rearticulate its elements and therefore disintegrate it.¹⁰⁶ A successive hegemonic intervention is denoted when a single discourse emerges dominant from a conflict, ending the antagonism while being itself, as a new fixation of meaning, the result of the antagonism.¹⁰⁷ In that regard, hegemony is seen as the contingent articulation of elements in an undecidable terrain in an attempt to naturalize a particular articulation (hegemonic intervention). Finally, in line with the aforementioned differentiation from the Marxist thought, Laclau and Mouffe note that hegemonic transitions are made possible through political articulations that are not dependent on extra-discursive interests like class interest but they themselves retroactively create the interests they claim to represent.¹⁰⁸

A concept that combines elements from this process and from the logics of equivalence/difference and is occasionally used interchangeably with floating signifiers by certain scholars, is the 'empty signifier'. Initially understood as a signifier without a fixed or limited signified, empty signifiers are structurally different from floating signifiers since they are perceived as hegemonically representing a group of multiple demands that constitute a chain of equivalence whose members are distinguished through a differential logic but combined through an equivalential one.¹⁰⁹ These unfulfilled demands form a totality that a signifier (the empty signifier) manages to represent through a hegemonic process. In that sense, the difference between the categories empty and floating signifiers lies in that empty signifiers correlate to the construction of a collective identity once a frontier is consolidated while the floating signifiers attempt to map and explain the logic of the displacements of that frontier.¹¹⁰ Although this difference between the terms is stressed by Laclau, both concepts are seen as hegemonic operations and situated close to one another since the only, unlikely but nevertheless, imaginable situations where only one of the two categories is present while

¹⁰⁵ Jørgensen and Phillips, note 10, 48

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Laclau and Mouffe, note 68, XI

¹⁰⁹ Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)* (Verso, 2007), 35

¹¹⁰ Ernesto Laclau *On Populist Reason* (Verso, 2005), 123

the other is excluded are, firstly, a completely immobile frontier (only empty signifiers are relevant) and, secondly, a ‘purely psychotic universe’ where there would be only pure floating without any partial fixation of meaning.¹¹¹

Building on the example of Solidarność in Poland, Laclau explains how the movement was initially connected to a set of precise demands coming from the workers of the industry but gradually started to be articulated in contexts with various other demands, resulting in Solidarność being the signifier of a considerably greater project than the demands of the ship industry workers.¹¹² In that sense, the universalizing process that the movement followed separated the signifier from the particular signified rendering it empty but not floating, since a floating signifier would be able to connect to different contexts and projects with its meaning in each context being fully realized, despite being ambiguous overall.

3.2 Discourse Theory, Populism and Anti-Populism

3.2.1 Approaching Populism Discursively

The question that needs to be addressed after examining the key components of DT regards the theory’s approach to populism and, most importantly, anti-populism. To begin with, in contrast to the ideational and political-strategic approaches to populism that have attempted to study and analyze the phenomenon as a set of identifiable ideas (‘thin centered ideology’) and as a political strategy/mode of political organization, respectively, Laclau, Mouffe and the Essex School¹¹³ approach populism discursively. More specifically, the discursive approach to populism prioritizes the formal properties of populism (in contrast to substantive

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹²The example of Solidarnosc has been commonly used by Laclau to refer to, among other concepts, empty signifiers. The example utilized here comes from an interview in 2013 cited in the discussion on floating signifier in Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Floating_signifier#cite_note-FOOTNOTEMoraes2014-8; Laclau, Ernesto. “Why Constructing a People Is the Main Task of Radical Politics.” *Critical Inquiry* 32, no. 4 (2006): 646–80. <https://doi.org/10.1086/508086>.

¹¹³ The Essex School of discourse analysis refers to a type of scholarship founded on the works of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe originally centered around the university of Essex. It focuses predominantly on the political discourses of late modernity utilizing discourse analysis, as well as post-structuralist and psychoanalytic theory,

characteristics of the ideational approach). In the discursive approach, populism does not mobilize the people nor constitutes a particular set of beliefs held by them but constructs ‘the people’ and their adversaries.¹¹⁴ In that sense, populism is not perceived as an ideology that views society as split in two parts, but as a series of articulatory practices that construct and reify this dichotomy.¹¹⁵

Focusing on Laclau’s work specifically, he insisted that analysts should not perceive observable properties of populist movements as essential characteristics of populism, but they should approach a movement as populist if it presents a particular logic of articulation of its contents, no matter what their nature is.¹¹⁶ Elaborating further and building on certain core elements of DT discussed above, Laclau formulated two criteria through which a phenomenon/movement can be considered as populist, with the first being its articulation around the nodal point designated as ‘the people,’ and the second being the representation of society as antagonistically divided between the people and the opposing power bloc of ‘the elite,’ referring to the elite’s established structure and ideology.¹¹⁷ This antagonistic representation of society is achieved by the function of the logics of equivalence and difference that struggle to maintain and dissolve the links between different social actors, by simplifying or complexifying the political space that they inhabit and so on.¹¹⁸ The reason that the discursive approach refuses to acknowledge predetermined ideological-political characteristics to populist movements is based, to a certain degree, on the existence of historical examples and studies on populist movements that have presented democratic and inclusionary characteristics, resulting in a strongly backed distinction between ‘exclusionary’ (with mostly European far-right examples) and ‘inclusionary’ (with mostly socialist South American examples) types of populism.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁴ Ryan Flitcroft, *Populism in the UK: A Critical Analysis of the Discursive Logics of the UK Independence Party*. PhD thesis (University of Essex, 2021), 25.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ernesto Laclau, “Populism: What’s in a Name?” in Francisco Panizza (ed), *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy* (London: Verso, 2005), 32–49; Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ernesto Laclau, “Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory,” in *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory: Capitalism, Fascism, Populism*, 2nd ed. (Verso, 1990), 143-160; Yannis Stavrakakis, “The Return of the People: Populism and Anti-Populism in the Shadow of the European Crisis,” (2014) *Constellations* 21: 505-517. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.12127>, 25.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Cas Mudde and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser, “Exclusionary vs. Inclusionary Populism: Comparing Contemporary Europe and Latin America”, (2013) *Government and Opposition*, 48(2), 147-174. doi:10.1017/gov.2012.11; Grigoris Markou, “Is Conspiracism Endogenous to Populism? A Discursive-

Combining the aforementioned elements, this minimal conception of populism by Laclau is thus ultimately focused on the construction of ‘the people’ and their adversaries by discursive practices in the context of the representation of the social around a fundamental antagonism. This situation indicates that the dominant logic of equivalence has produced a chain of equivalence that is represented by an agent which has assumed the representation of the totality of the chain through a hegemonic relation but is prevented from fulfilling the assumed identity and function by the elite in the context of the antagonism.

3.2.2 Populism and Hegemony

In conjunction with the concept of hegemony and dislocation, populism can be understood to emerge as the type of hegemonic politics par excellence, given that hegemony, as discussed earlier, is precisely what designates the negative dialectic between dislocation and articulation and, in Laclau’s view, constitutes the permanent expression of society’s inability to ultimately constitute itself as an objective order.¹²⁰ Laclau views hegemony as the only way for social fullness to be achieved. In other words, hegemony denotes the procedure and mechanism that constantly (re)negotiate this failure for social fullness and is eventually revealed as the investment of a mythical, and therefore always evading, fullness to a partial object.¹²¹ Laclau views this mythical hegemonic procedure as performed by populism in democratic societies, taking the form of the construction of a popular identity out of a plurality of democratic demands (through an articulatory practice). In simpler terms, populism is connected to articulatory practices that claim to express certain popular interests and identities.¹²² That is the justification for the selection of the first characteristic that Laclau attributes to populism, meaning the privileging of the nodal point or empty signifier of “the people.”¹²³

theoretical Analysis,” (2022) *Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory* 25 (2): 154–70. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.33134/rds.376>; Akritas Kaidatzis, “Progressive Populism and Democratic Constitutionalism”, (2022) *Revus* 47. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/revus.8068>

¹²⁰ Stavrakakis, note 103, 535; Laclau, note 82.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Laclau, note 110, 96; Stavrakakis, note 103, 539.

¹²³ Ibid.

However, these articulations/claims are always informed by the sociocultural and historical context that are performed in and are historically seen as accompanied by complex language games that can involve various forms of both a recognizing/idealizing attitude and a rejecting/demonizing one.¹²⁴ Both of these altitudes can appear as conservative or progressive, democratic or anti-democratic with their identities being constituted based on their difference, since it has already been discussed that in DT all social identities are relational.¹²⁵

3.2.3 Approaching Anti-Populism

In contrast to the concept of populism that has multiple schools of thought, typologies and approaches attempting to study it, anti-populism is, comparatively speaking, an under-researched phenomenon. The reason for analyzing the function of populism and the concept's relation to certain discourse-theoretical concepts before advancing to the discussion on anti-populism is their mutual constitution, intertwinement, interdependence and the necessity to be studied together,¹²⁶ meaning that It would be seriously problematic, if not impossible, to conduct an effective theoretical discussion on anti-populism without having conceptualized, at least to a certain degree, how populism is perceived and understood in the context of the study.

Having clarified this connection, the present section will attempt to reach an understanding of anti-populism as an analytic concept by making use of DT's discussed ideas in connection to certain aspects of Laclau's theory of the political¹²⁷ and Mouffe's critique¹²⁸ of "post-politics."

¹²⁴ Stavrakakis, note 103, 542.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Stavrakakis et al, note 34, 1.

¹²⁷ Laclau, note 110, 97

¹²⁸ Chantal Mouffe, "The "end of politics" and the challenge of right-wing populism" In F. Panizza (ed.), *Populism and the mirror of democracy* (London: Verso, 2005); Chantal Mouffe, *On the political* (Routledge, 2005).

3.2.4 Post-Politics

As already discussed, DT understands hegemony as the only way to represent the social as fully constituted, rendering what we call ‘society’ a naturalized hegemonic effect of a previous antagonistic demarcation and stresses that any hegemonic order that attempts to fix the meaning of society around any universality will eventually experience dislocations/interruptions where the hegemonic representation is questioned. In that sense, politics has been understood as the never-ending struggle for hegemony between contingent representations of society through the production of empty signifiers that, through the reduction of their own differential particularities, function as representatives of the missing fullness of a whole whose constitution is blocked by an antagonist. In the case of populism, ‘the people’ acquire this function of representing the chains of equivalence of certain unsatisfied demands as an absent fullness against an establishment/power center that will not/cannot satisfy them.

This inability of the popular demands to be satisfied has been interpreted as a “democratic paradox”¹²⁹ since it reflects a constitutive gap between the people as the subject of democracy and the “power” that is promised to it.¹³⁰ In this context, Laclau theorizes that politics and populism become synonymous since the construction of “the people” is the political act par excellence and the absolutely essential requirements of the political (the “sine qua non”) are “the constitution of antagonistic frontiers within the social and the appeal to new subjects of social change” (through the creation of empty signifiers, unifying demands in chains of equivalence etc.).¹³¹ It is in this context that, as discussed earlier, populism is understood as an articulatory logic that pervades the discourses that oppose the nodal point “the people” to the elite/establishment/power etc. but according to this theorizing can also be found, although not always in an equal degree, to any other political discourse since “some

¹²⁹ Margaret Canovan, “Taking Politics to the People: Populism as the Ideology of Democracy” In: Mény, Y., Surel, Y. (eds) *Democracies and the Populist Challenge* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022)

https://doi.org/10.1057/9781403920072_2

¹³⁰ Seongcheol Kim, “Populism and anti-populism in the 2017 Dutch, French, and German elections: A discourse and hegemony analytic approach”, (2018) *POPULISMUS Working Papers, No. 7* at <http://www.populismus.gr/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Kim-WP-7-upload.pdf>

¹³¹ Ibid; Laclau, note 110, 154

kind of equivalence (some production of a ‘people’) is necessary for a discourse to be considered political.”¹³²

This idea that politics cannot exist without antagonism (or outside the political) and the creation of antagonistic frontiers is the starting point of Mouffe’s critique of “post-politics” that is also connected to Rancière’s and Crouch’s conceptualizations of “post-democracy.”¹³³ More specifically, Mouffe perceives ‘post-politics’ as the false belief that the foundation of politics consists of a conflict-free rational consensus and deliberation, signifying a refusal to acknowledge the antagonistic dimension as constitutive to ‘the political.’¹³⁴ This promise for ‘partisan-free/dialogic democracy’, ‘good governance’, alongside other similar notions perceived by Mouffe as anti-political, comprises the foundation of the “neo-liberal hegemony” that has posited a rational consensus on the ‘proper’ economic policy that has incorporated traditionally adversarial political forces (conservative/Christian democratic – ‘Third Way’ social democratic – centrist- even leftist) thus transcending or hegemonically displacing the traditional left-right division of the democratic political space and replacing it with the rational/right-wrong.¹³⁵ In its more contemporary form, meaning after the 2008 crisis, “post-democracy” and “post-politics” also capture the tendencies of modern to democracies to pre-democratic rule, moving the ‘temple of democratic decision making’ from the ‘sovereign people’ to various non-democratically controlled formal or informal institutions, ‘experts’, evaluators, ‘markets’ and so on.¹³⁶ The tendency to dismiss challenges as irrational or outright wrong by the hegemonic order is going to be particularly relevant during the analysis of the crises that are intended to be studied.

For Mouffe, during the early 2000s, this belief in the end of adversarial politics and the attempt to leave the left/right divide in the past was analyzed as paving the way for (far) right-wing populist movements to rise by “pretending to offer an alternative” to the people that felt their voice as confiscated by the establishment elites.¹³⁷ In this context, the neo-liberal establishment responded by constituting itself equivalentially as a hegemonic bloc, through

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Colin Crouch, *Post-democracy* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2004); Jacques Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics* (Verso, 1995).

¹³⁴ Kim, note 130, 3; Mouffe, note 128, 2

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Katsambekis, note 25, 557

¹³⁷ Mouffe, note 128, 106; Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (Verso, 2018), 10.

the moral distinction of “good” against “evil” to designate democrats and far-rightists respectively, revealing the limitations of the post-political promise for conflict-free politics.¹³⁸ However, it should be stated at this point that although antagonism is perceived as ontologically necessary for politics by Laclau and Mouffe’s post-foundationalist “agonistic pluralist” perspective, right-wing populism’s reductionist tendency to accompany the equivalential articulation of the ‘the people’ with attempts to fix its identity around a certain “transcendental signified” or an a priori essentialized community (the nation, race etc.) while constructing existential threats to it (e.g. immigration) can produce severely anti-political results.¹³⁹

3.2.5 Conceptualizing Anti-Populism

In the post-democratic context described above and building on the experiences of the re-adjustment attempts of the EU after the 2008 crisis, anti-populism has been perceived firstly as a discourse that marginalizes ‘the people’ in order to constantly enforce the shift from the political and democracy (antagonism) to the post-political and post-democracy (‘neutral’ management, ‘expert’ technocratic administration, consensus).¹⁴⁰ Practically, this marginalization can take the form of equating and stigmatizing any invocation of ‘the people’ in political struggles as an attempt for ‘ideological manipulation’ or ‘demagogy’.¹⁴¹ Furthermore, especially in the context during and after the 2008 EU crisis when the people ‘returned’ through the rise of mobilizations and movements characterized as populist, anti-populism can also be translated as a discursive reaction by the hegemonic bloc which constitutes itself as the only alternative to the ant-democratic threat of “populism,” with the latter being constructed as an empty signifier and as ‘omnipresent,’ meaning that it is not limited to certain ideological-political forces but pervades the political space, thus equivalentially linking discourses that do not link themselves equivalentially (far-right with far-left, Le Pen and Mélenchon, SYRIZA and Golden Dawn and so on).¹⁴² This lumping of

¹³⁸ Kim, note 130, 4

¹³⁹ Ibid; Stavrakakis et al, note 34.

¹⁴⁰ Katsambekis, note 25, 558

¹⁴¹ Georgi Medarov, “The transformations of liberal anti-populism in post-1989 Bulgaria”, *POPULISMUS Working Paper No.2* at <http://www.populismus.gr/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/WPs2-medarov1.pdf>

¹⁴² Kim, note 130, 3

profoundly different ideological-political forces under the ‘umbrella’/empty signifier “populism” by the EU elites/officials has been criticized as an expression of their increased willingness to tolerate “populist” forces on the (far-)right of the political spectrum, like Victor Orban, in comparison to their stance and treatment of left populist expressions and demands like SYRIZA’s government.¹⁴³

Additionally, anti-populist discourses tend to also construct, directly or indirectly, the popular subject (‘the people’) as a (potential) victim of populism due to its irresponsibility, lack of rationality or education, inability to understand complex phenomena, ‘harsh’ solutions and distinguish truth from lies.¹⁴⁴ The last characteristic can be particularly interesting since it can be linked to the relevant topic of ‘post-truth’/‘fake news’ and anti-populism’s tendency to equate the terms to populism and present them as ‘mutually reinforcing pathologies’ of a perceived political ‘normality’.¹⁴⁵ In that sense, the analysis returns to Mouffe’s observed post-political distinction of rational/right-wrong with the anti-populists (in most cases expressing the status quo) following a radicalization of their discourse in the sight of the emergence of the populist Other, claiming an allegedly nonpolitical/neutral, epistemic superiority based on the possession of a single truth and a supreme rationality.¹⁴⁶ In other words, the source of the anti-populist forces’ power becomes their exclusive access to truth rendering their opponents objectively wrong and transforming their own political claims/projects to objective epistemic authorities, or ‘common sense’, that ‘naturally’ demand a total extra-political acceptance.¹⁴⁷

Finally, building on the connection of populism to certain discourse-theoretical concepts, we can conceptualize anti-populism firstly as directly connected to the dominance of the logic of difference, meaning that it aims at preventing the formation of chains of equivalence by populism. Additionally, utilizing the concept of political logic,¹⁴⁸ during a

¹⁴³ Giorgos Katsambekis, “The Populist Surge in Post-Democratic Times: Theoretical and Political Challenges”, (2017) *The Political Quarterly*, 88: 202-210. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.12317>

¹⁴⁴ Ibid; Stavrakakis, note 117, 510.

¹⁴⁵ Antonis Galanopoulos, and Yannis Stavrakakis, “Populism, Anti- Populism and Post-Truth in Crisis-Ridden Greece”, (2019) *Populismus Working Papers 10* at <http://ikee.lib.auth.gr/record/313950/files/Galanopoulos.pdf>

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 2.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Political logic is a term used Laclau and Mouffe (Laclau and Mouffe in order to emphasize its difference from what they call social logics, meaning the naturalized/uncontested/stable patterns, rules, or norms manifest in practices or regimes of practice. The operation of political logics becomes clear during times of dislocation/revealing of the contingency as processes that

dislocatory moment when discursive shifts occur, anti-populism can be perceived as the political logic whose effect is to preempt the contestation of the settled norms by populism through articulations of demands and restore the previous (hegemonic) order.¹⁴⁹ As already discussed, this procedure is facilitated by the radical disavowal of the legitimacy of the worldviews of the counterhegemonic/populist actors as objectively wrong, anti-democratic and so on. Elaborating on the importance of the dislocatory moment a little more, Miró utilizes De Cleen's definition of the conservative political logic¹⁵⁰ and applies it to his anti-populist theorization concluding that the key component of anti-populist politics, during but not limited to a dislocatory moment, is 'a discourse of fear that interpellates¹⁵¹ citizens as members of a threatened social order', a defensive reaction that aims at re-constituting the social order and the elimination of any possibility for collective agency.¹⁵²

3.2.6 The Role of the Crisis

The relation between crisis and populism is a relatively common theme in populism research, although crisis as a notion is and can be connected to the function of all hegemonic interventions.¹⁵³ In that regard, the linkage between populism and crisis has been identified as a historical fact by Laclau, deriving from the crisis of the dominant ideological discourse that, in turn, is a product of a more general social crisis.¹⁵⁴

Laclau's approach to the link between crisis and populism combines certain elements coming both from Roberts' and Moffit's approaches that perceive crisis as a triggering

seek to maintain or disrupt settled norms. See: Jason Glynos & Aurelien Mondon, "The political logic of populist hype: The case of right-wing populism's 'meteoric rise' and its relation to the status quo", (2016) *POPULISMUS* Working Papers No. 4

¹⁴⁹ Joan Miró, "Beyond populism and institutionalism: Anti-populism and the management of austerity in Spain", (2019) *Constellations* 26: 116– 131. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.12386>

¹⁵⁰ Benjamin De Cleen, "The conservative political logic: A discourse-theoretical perspective", (2017) *Journal of Political Ideologies* volume 23.

¹⁵¹ This verb refers to the Althusserian category of "interpellation," meaning the ideological production of subject positions. See: Louis Althusser, "Ideology and ideological state apparatuses" In L. Althusser (Ed.), *Lenin and philosophy and other essays*. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 37.

¹⁵² Miró, note 149, 8

¹⁵³ Stavrakakis, note 103, 545

¹⁵⁴ Ibid; Ernesto. Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory: Capitalism, Fascism, Populism* (New Left Books, 1977).

mechanism of populist mobilizations¹⁵⁵ and as constructed by populist discourse performatively while also being a precondition for populism to exist, respectively.¹⁵⁶ More specifically, the notion of dislocation is of major importance here, standing for the moment that the contingency of the discursive structure becomes visible that, in this discussion, denotes the moment of failure of the established reality and the emergence of antagonistic discursive articulations struggling for the imposition of a new hegemony.¹⁵⁷ It is the dual character of dislocation as both disruptive and performatively constructive, objective and subjective that links the two orientations and forges the understanding of the crisis as a dislocation/failure of a sedimented system of representation acting as a triggering mechanism for new unique (not only populist) discursive articulations narrating the dislocation's nature/characteristics while also offering alternative political solutions.¹⁵⁸ These articulations are not determined by the "objectivity" of the dislocation/failure but involve radical constructions, meaning that, in the case of populism, 'the people' are constructed without expressing any pre-existing unity of the group.¹⁵⁹ In that sense, 'the people' as an empty signifier creates what is supposed to be expressing, which is a collective common identity.

What is to be concluded from these theoretical notes on the three approaches is that socioeconomic and political dislocations are crucial in triggering crises of representation, failures of social reproduction and, subsequently, in producing populist actors and mobilizations.¹⁶⁰ These actors are perceived as constructing and performing the crisis in a certain confrontational manner that aims at representing excluded popular demands while also producing anti-populist reactions coming from the ruling elites that, especially in situations when a crisis seems unable to be dealt with, seem to denounce all radical political calls/alternatives, no matter their formal connection to the phenomenon, as "populist."¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁵ Stavrakakis et al, note 34, 5; Kenneth Roberts, "Populism, political mobilizations, and crises of political representation. In: Carlos de la Torre (ed.) *The Promise and Perils of Populism*. (The University Press of Kentucky, 2015), 140–158

¹⁵⁶ Benjamin Moffitt, "How to perform crisis: A model for understanding the key role of crisis in contemporary populism", (2015) *Government and Opposition* 50(2): 189–217. as cited in Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Stavrakakis, note 103, 548; Laclau, note 145, 65

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid; Laclau, note 110, 118

¹⁶⁰ Stavrakakis et al, note 34, 20

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

4 Data Gathering and Methods

4.1 Texts and Documents as Data and Discourse Analysis

Having established the core theoretical points and analytical concepts of DT while also reviewing certain aspects of the discourse-theoretical approach to the understanding of the interplay and coexistence of populism, anti-populism and crisis, it seems appropriate to make some notes on how the empirical data/material of the analysis are going to be generated.

Discourse-theoretical research can focus on multiple forms of linguistic and non-linguistic, reactive and non-reactive empirical data such as primary documents, interviews, newspaper reports, social practices, images or monuments that all belong and are perceived as components of the concept of discourse.¹⁶² In DT, treating all data as text is a possible way of conducting research without, however, perceiving social practices merely as effects of texts or texts as purely being the effects of more objective logics.¹⁶³ Building on this need to treat texts at the appropriate levels of abstraction, Howarth underlines the distinction between discourse analysis and discourse theory, with the former representing a variety of techniques utilized in order to analyze ‘talk and text in context’ and the latter referring to the underlying assumptions that inform their appropriate employment, thus creating an ontological-ontical contrast.¹⁶⁴ In that sense, discourse in DT is an ontological category that specifies the primacy of politics, the contingent character of all identities and every other concept examined during the theoretical chapter of the present work, while in discourse analysis discourse is perceived as a “set of symbolic representations and practices embodied in a range of texts, speeches and signifying sequences of all sorts.”¹⁶⁵

Having clarified this distinction, certain questions emerge regarding the collection of material for discourse analysis, that in the present thesis refers to the political discourse of the Greek government, regarding the size of the sample, the criteria for selection and the process of analysis. In that sense, as explained during the following two sections, the present work has

¹⁶² Howarth and Torfing, note 54, 335-336

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, 336

focused on collecting and analyzing all possible documents produced by the Greek government that include the signifier “populism” (and its derivatives- populis*), whether published as transcripts of linguistic practices, such as a speech or interview, or as written forms of communication, such as a public statement or party announcement. In that sense, document analysis is the chosen method for identifying and retrieving the necessary material for analysis. As a method, document analysis perceives written texts produced by the agents involved in the practice under study as the primary sources for the analysis which, in this case, refers to the Greek government and ND.¹⁶⁶

The selection of forming such a sample over a smaller-representative one is justified by the need to first identify all possible uses of “populis*” by governmental members and then, based on the assumption that members of the same political party and government will adopt a relatively homogenous political/ideological stance towards such a phenomenon, attempt to identify certain general trends in their approach to “populis*” and then proceed to discursively analyze them.

4.2 Data Collection

Moving to the more practical aspects of the present work, it has already been established that the focus of the analysis is going to be on the discourse produced by the Greek government during a period that begins with the government’s inauguration and ends at the beginning of the pre-election period. In order to fully capture the discursive use of the signifier “populism” and all its derivatives, the present work has focused on four internet data bases that are operated either by state institutions or the ‘New Democracy’ party organization. More specifically, the first data base that has been searched is the Greek Prime Minister’s official website (<https://primeminister.gr/>) within which an archive of every public appearance, speech, article or interview by PM Kyriakos Mitsotakis operates and publishes the aforementioned forms of communication as texts. Secondly, the official website of the Greek government (<https://government.gov.gr/>) was also selected as a source of empirical material

¹⁶⁶ David Altheide and Christopher Schneider, *Qualitative media analysis* (Vol. 38). (Sage Publications, 2012).

since it includes an archive of speeches and official briefings conducted by governmental officials, referring to ministers, deputy ministers and the governmental representative. Thirdly, the official data base of the plenary session transcripts on the website of the Hellenic Parliament (<https://www.hellenicparliament.gr/Praktika/Synedriaseis-Olomeleias>) was searched in order to identify occurrences when Members of the Parliament elected with ND (initially 158 but until May 2023 156 out of 300) used the signifier “populis*” in their parliamentary speeches. Finally, the official website of ND was searched through its press office data base (<https://nd.gr/grafeio-tupou>) in order to identify usages of “populis*” in public party documents, announcements, events and forms of communication produced by non-parliamentary party officials.

The aforementioned data bases were firstly searched through their own search bar/mechanism and secondly through Google’s site-specific search (e.g. site:www.nd.gr) using a Google Boolean Search.¹⁶⁷ More specifically, all data bases were searched for variations of the Greek word populis* (λαϊκισ*), in order to include all variations of the Greek linguistic equivalents of populism, populist and (the not used in English adjective) “populistic” (λαϊκιστικός/ή/ό in Greek). The pieces of text that emerged from the search were firstly coded according to the date of their publication, since the analysis focuses on documents published during the period 07/07/2019-31/12/2022, and then qualitatively analyzed in relation to their political context/theme in order to examine and identify their (potential) relevance to one of the three identified crises, since the date of publication alone was indicative but could not guarantee a conceptual connection to the crisis by itself.

The results of the search indicated 85 independent pieces of text referring to usages of “populis*” by PM Kyriakos Mitsotakis, 51 pieces of text produced by governmental officials, 111 plenary sessions where Members of the Parliament associated with ND made similar references and 46 pieces of text produced by the press office of ND including the aforementioned signifiers. Regarding the temporal and thematic division of the analysis into three crises, out of the 293 total pieces of text that were identified, 47 of them referred to issues regarding the refugee/migration crisis, 143 referred to issues regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and 103 referred to issues regarding the Russo-Ukrainian conflict and its economic

¹⁶⁷ For more information on Google Boolean Search see <https://resources.workable.com/tutorial/source-google-boolean#:~:text=The%20definition%20of%20Boolean%20search,to%20produce%20more%20relevant%20results>.

consequences. The results of the search can be interpreted, on an initial stage, as verifying the observation that “populism” is a regularly emerging topic of discussion for the Greek government. Unfortunately, not all documents have been officially translated and published in English by a state or party service, a limitation that must be noted before proceeding to the analysis since the translation of the quotations has been conducted by the author of the present work. In that regard, certain Greek-specific metaphors or euphemistic usages of the Greek language that might not carry the same meaning when translated in English word-by-word are going to be underlined in order to avoid any unintentional change of their meaning.

4.3 Discourse Theory and Discourse Analysis

The present section is an attempt to produce an overview of how DT is going to be applied in the identification and analysis of the anti-populist discourses in the empirical material. On an initial note, DT’s operationalization does not follow an algorithmic method or procedure but requires a certain degree of ‘imagination’¹⁶⁸ or modulation of certain concepts in order to fit the historical circumstances of the empirical research and analysis.¹⁶⁹ This procedure is necessary in order to proceed to the analysis of the logics and mechanisms by which meaning is produced, fixed and contested, such as the already discussed logics of equivalence/difference, the production of empty signifiers and so on.¹⁷⁰

Building on the discussion on the core concepts of DT, it seems possible to understand discursive practices as attempts to turn elements into moments by establishing a temporary closure without, however, ever being able to eradicate the polysemy of moments and, therefore, the ‘threats’ coming from the field of discursivity. In that sense, the process of articulation can constitute an act of reproducing or challenging existing discourses through the always, although in different degrees, innovative fixation of meaning that, however, is also informed to a certain degree by previous discourses that incorporated the same signs as moments.¹⁷¹ What derives from this description is that a discourse can never totally and

¹⁶⁸ Jørgensen and Phillips, note 10, 29

¹⁶⁹ Howarth, note 56, 134

¹⁷⁰ Howarth and Torfing, note 54, 341

¹⁷¹ Jørgensen and Phillips, note 10, 30

eternally fix the meaning of signs since new articulations can constantly intervene and challenge the existing structures of meaning in the context of struggles over the domination of certain discourses over others, the ascription of meaning to certain signs etc. It is precisely these struggles and expressions that are manifested through articulatory practices that DT suggests the analysts approach, focusing on the meanings that are established through the positioning of elements in particular relationships, the exclusion of certain alternative meanings and so on.¹⁷² In other words, DT is interested in analyzing how existing structures, viewed in the form of discourses, are constituted and changed by looking at the way articulations continuously reproduce or transform the existing discourses.¹⁷³

In that sense, the analysis of the selected texts is going to focus on the discourses of the Greek government in order to identify possible (flexible) uses of “populism” as a signifier, that, firstly, construct populism in certain positions in relation to specific concepts (e.g. as a threat to the economic/democratic order) and fill “populism’s” meaning by articulating it in discourses with certain elements. At this point, the concept of “contrariety,” developed by Martin Nonhoff to analyze discursive hegemonic struggles, that refers to relations of negatory exclusion among individual elements between two opposing-antagonistic equivalential chains, can also be of great value.¹⁷⁴ In a relation of contrariety, the empty signifier of each chain acquires a representative function by being constructed in opposition (relation of contrariety) to the greatest number of elements on the opposing chain.¹⁷⁵ A typical example of this procedure is the debates over economic models where, for example, the “liberal-free market economy” is discursively constructed in contrariety to “centrally planned economies” that are represented by a chain of equivalence incorporating “economic stagnation,” “lack of creativity,” and other elements which are articulated in contrariety to “liberal-free market economy.” In that regard, the analysis is also going to examine the discourses of the Greek government in order to examine whether their use of “populism” as a signifier allows for the creation of equivalential links between various actors, demands, concepts and meanings that

¹⁷² Jørgensen and Phillips, note 10, 30

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Martin Nonhoff, “Hegemony Analysis: Theory, Methodology and Research Practice”, In Tomas Marttala (ed.), *Discourse, Culture and Organization: Inquiries Into Relational Structures of Power* (Springer Verlag, 2019), 63-104; see also: Kim, note 130, 5

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

might or might not link themselves equivalentially (e.g. SYRIZA and Golden Dawn) in the context of the three identified crises while also examining the rationale behind this use.

Thirdly, focusing a little more on the rationales behind the use of “populism,” the analysis is also going to examine how the Greek government constructs its own identity in relation to “populism,” by linking itself equivalentially with nodal points that relate (positively or negatively) to “populism” (e.g. constructing “populism” as opposed to “economic rationality” and then proceed to structure its own identity through a discourse articulated around the nodal point “economically rational” by articulating it with other moments in a chain of equivalence that also ascribe a certain meaning to it). Finally, although the focus of the analysis is not on the identification of populist discourses but on the use of “populism” as a signifier, it seems necessary to pay some attention to the discourses that are characterized as “populist” by ND to examine whether they align with the discourse-theoretical formal approach to populism.

By following this analytical procedure, the aim is to identify and comprehend certain aspects of the antagonistic language games and hegemonic interventions that have developed during this crises-involving and conflictual 42-month period and map their consequences.

5 Analysis: The Refugee/Migration Crisis

ND’s election on the 7th of July 2019 was accompanied by exultating statements regarding the victory over populism that the elections had signified:

“Three weeks ago, Greece also chose the path of strong development. The recent elections closed the door on populism, demagoguery, and regression. And they gave a strong mandate for a self-reliant way out of the crisis.”¹⁷⁶

During this period, it became clear that the government of Kyriakos Mitsotakis attempted from the very beginning to articulate a discourse that linked the signifier “populism” through

¹⁷⁶ Speech by Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis at the dinner hosted by the President of the Republic of Cyprus Nikos Anastasiadis (29/07/2019)

a chain of equivalence to the outgoing government of SYRIZA, “demagogy” and “economic regression,” while constructing this chain of meaning in contrariety to the chain of equivalence positively linking the signifiers ‘strong development’ and ‘self-reliance’ to the government of ND. Additionally, during the same period, “populism” was also articulated into a chain of equivalence with political extremism that, apart from SYRIZA, also encompassed the victory over Golden Dawn, since the neo-Nazi organization did not manage to achieve parliamentary representation during the July 2019 elections¹⁷⁷:

“I would like to emphasize that Greece is perhaps the first European country to emerge from this dangerous phase of European populism. The Motherland of Democracy proved again that the state of Freedom and Dialogue ultimately prevails, no matter how much it is threatened by extreme forces. And it is, I think, a message of hope for all of us who want a more democratic, stronger, better Europe!”¹⁷⁸

“And I believe that our victory sent multiple messages: It proved that our country can reject economic stagnation, choosing growth and progress. But also to condemn populism, eliminating from the political map political formations, such as Golden Dawn. It is proof of the maturity and free spirit of the Greek people. And I believe it is a ray of light for Democracy throughout Europe.”¹⁷⁹

And,

Journalist: Do you consider yourself an anti-populist, pro-Western, pro-NATO Prime Minister?

PM Kyriakos Mitsotakis: That is a reasonable enough description. I have fought very hard against populism during my political career. I am very happy that Greece now has a moderate, results-oriented, non-populist government.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁷ The official results of 7th July 2019 national elections as documented by the Ministry of Interior <https://ekloges.ypes.gr/current/v/home/en/>

¹⁷⁸ Statements by Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis after his meeting with the Prime Minister of the Netherlands, Mark Rutte (03/09/2019)

¹⁷⁹ Statements by Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis after his meeting with German Chancellor Angela Merkel (29/08/2019)

¹⁸⁰ Interview by Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis in the online edition of The Washington Post (26/09/2019)

As indicated by the quotations, signifiers such as ‘freedom’, ‘dialogue’, ‘democracy’, ‘growth’, ‘progress’, ‘maturity’, ‘moderation’ ‘free spirit’ are equivalentially chained together with the new government in contrariety to the chain of equivalence linking “populism” to “danger,” “economic stagnation” and “extremism,” signifiers that are connected both to the outgoing government of SYRIZA and to the imprisoned and electorally “defeated” Golden Dawn. Additionally, it is important to also note the anthropological and cultural elements that are present in this post-election narrative since the “Greek people,” an empty signifier that in this case represents both the majority of those who voted but also acquires more “mythical” and universal characteristics, are portrayed as “mature” and “free spirited.” Both signifiers are used to signify a passage from the “era of populism” and the “extremes” to a new period where “maturity” has prevailed and the “free spirit” of the Greek people, which in this chain of equivalence is associated to (the European-and thus obviously liberal) “democracy,” has rejected those who undermine “moderation,” “democracy” and so on. There is, thus, the creation of two antagonistic political identities during this short post-election period where the victorious anti-populists, having PM Mitsotakis as their leader, are marching towards the future that encompasses the promise of the positive chain of equivalence discussed above (economic progress, results, moderation etc.) having the “Greek people” on their side, while the “populists” are constructed as representing a problematic and extreme past that the popular subject has consciously left behind. In that sense, ND interpellated the popular subject during this short period as the subject of a positive anti-populist transition that acquired almost “revolutionary” characteristics in the party’s discourse.

Focusing a little more on the equivalential link constructed between SYRIZA and Golden Dawn, a re-emergence of the ‘theory of extremes’ can be identified in this narrative since the condemnation of “populism” is seen as linking together SYRIZA’s four-year governance and, the already under trial for multiple felonies, Golden Dawn, two discourses and actors that do not link themselves equivalentially in any form. The equivalential link between the two actors was formed, as already noted, through their connection to the ten-year long economic crisis, since they were both portrayed as “populist” pathologies or symptoms of the latter, but also as representing broader political logics that are constructed as omnipresent authoritarian threats to Europe’s stability:

“The Europe of development, dialogue and care for the weakest, unfortunately, is being undermined today by left-wing or right-wing nationalism and populism. And we live a contradiction. This new generation, which has experienced more

freedom than all the previous ones, sometimes seems to be fascinated by crude authoritarianism.”¹⁸¹

This brief analysis of ND’s post-election discourse expressed by statements articulated before 2020 has taken place in order to provide certain information on the new hegemonic order that emerged after the 2019 elections and the position and meanings that “populism” acquired in it. This information is used at this point to facilitate the transition to the first crisis that the present work has identified as indicative of ND’s perception and discursive usage of “populism,” namely the refugee/migration crisis. After briefly providing some necessary background information on Greece’s migration/refugee “issues” and examining ND’s political stance and legislative initiatives, the analysis is going to examine the correlation of “populism” to the notion of “extremism.” as expressed by members of the governing party to describe and stigmatize certain ideological positions towards migration.

5.1 Background: Greece, ND and the Refugee/Migration “Crisis”

The government of Kyriakos Mitsotakis’ ND is by no means the first Greek government to be called to manage migration-related challenges. Greece’s geographic position at the borderline of two continents, Europe and Asia, has always rendered issues involving the movement of populations particularly important for the country’s national politics and international relations. Focusing on the post-2008 economic crisis period, Greece experienced a noticeable rise in the numbers of irregular immigrants, a phenomenon that resulted in the securitization of the issue of ‘illegal’/irregular immigration by the 2012 government of ND that portrayed it as a security threat to the country’s economy, culture, social cohesion and peace.¹⁸² This perception of irregular migration by ND resulted in profoundly restrictive and preemptive measures against migrants/refugees, triggering fierce responses by humanitarian NGOs and left-wing political parties and organizations:

¹⁸¹ Speech by Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis at the official dinner of the "Thessaloniki Symposium" on the theme "Governing in times of lack of governance" (22/10/2019)

¹⁸² Dionysios Stivas, “Greece’s Response to the European Refugee Crisis: A Tale of Two Securitizations”, (2023) *Mediterranean Politics* 28, no. 1, 49–72, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2021.1902198>.

*(I am calling you to teach a lesson...) “to those who miss the times when insecurity and hooded men raged on the streets. For those who want the country to be filled with illegal immigrants... and they are very frustrated that this Government, this faction, is coming and will not allow Greece to become a country of illegal immigrants.”*¹⁸³

SYRIZA’s post-2015 government would adopt a different approach to migration, annulling certain laws, restrictions and practices established by the government of ND and discursively constructing the crisis firstly as a threat to the refugees/migrants’ human rights and, secondly, as a threat to the European integration project.¹⁸⁴ More specifically, during the first year of SYRIZA’s governance (between January 2015 and February 2016) almost one million people would cross the Greek–Turkish borders, profoundly challenging the exhausted (by the austerity measures) Greek state mechanism and creating serious issues for the implementation of Greece’s European obligations regarding migration, under, for example, the Common European Asylum System or the Dublin Regulation.¹⁸⁵ The profound humanitarian crisis that was triggered by this unregulated movement of people resulted in the “EU-Turkey deal,” signed in March 2016, stating that Turkey should take all measures necessary to stop irregular movements towards the Greek islands, accept the return of any irregular arrivals and, for every return, send one Syrian refugee waiting in Turkey to an EU member state.¹⁸⁶ In exchange, Turkey would receive six billion Euros in order to improve the infrastructure that would provide humane conditions to the waiting refugees, with Turkish nationals also being granted visa-free travel to Europe.¹⁸⁷

Although much can be written on the refugee crisis, what is of particular importance for the present analysis is ND’s discursive stance towards SYRIZA’s governmental management since it can be argued that the Kyriakos Mitsotakis’ government draws heavily on the arguments developed during this period. More specifically, ND’s main criticism as opposition during the crisis was focused on SYRIZA’s “incompetence” and (ideological)

¹⁸³ Speech by Prime Minister Antonis Samaras at Syntagma Square (23/05/2014)

¹⁸⁴ Stivas, note 182, 55.

¹⁸⁵ Dimitris Skleparis, “Europe without Walls, without Fences, without Borders”: A Desecuritisation of Migration Doomed to Fail”, (2018) *Political Studies* 66, no. 4, 985–1001
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321717729631>.

¹⁸⁶ <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/theme-towards-a-new-policy-on-migration/file-eu-turkey-statement-action-plan>

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

“obsessions,” claiming that the crisis could end if the country adopted a different political stance towards Turkey and migration in general:

“I attribute incompetence, obsession, and cynicism to the government in the refugee issue. Go to Moria, Samos and you will see miserable conditions. This is about cynicism and incompetence. The hypocrisy has to do with statements that “there are no borders at sea” and various other platitudes that have been heard.”¹⁸⁸

And,

“...unsuccessful, adventurist and (ideologically) obsessive policy followed by the previous government. It was a policy of zero protection of our borders. Also, it was a policy of mockery of any anxiety about the situation prevailing in Evros and the islands of the Eastern Aegean. It was a policy of inaction both in Greece and in Europe, it was a policy of hypocrisy towards human suffering for party benefits. It was also a policy of unprecedented inadequacy, which led to scenes such as that of Idomeni, Moria, which exposed us internationally.”¹⁸⁹

These statements by Kyriakos Mitsotakis shortly before and shortly after the start of his term as Prime Minister are particularly important because, firstly, they signify the counter-hegemonic claim of ND as opposition that was articulated in contrariety to the “leftist open-borders” migration management of SYRIZA and, secondly, indicate how the new hegemonic order that emerged after the elections constructed the phenomenon of irregular migration. As the quotations indicate, ND’s criticism is informed by certain ‘post-political’ beliefs that produce a successful/unsuccessful or competent/incompetent binary regarding migration management, implying certain ‘objective’ goals that the government of SYRIZA failed to achieve. The ‘objective’ incompetence of SYRIZA is thus meaningfully linked to (ideological) “obsessions” (“ιδεοληψίες” in Greek), a term signifying (historically bankrupt, according to ND) leftist approaches to border protection that, although appearing as “humanist” and “sensitive,” end up ignoring or even producing the suffering of

¹⁸⁸ Interview of the President of New Democracy Kyriakos Mitsotakis on the TV station ‘Action 24’ (23/05/2019)

¹⁸⁹ Answer of Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis to a topical question on immigration on "Prime Minister's Hour" in the Plenary Session of the Hellenic Parliament (04/10/2019)

refugees/migrants. Furthermore, as discussed immediately after, these “obsessions” were discursively constructed in contrariety to “the protection of our borders”, a notion that is closely connected to the “national interest” in the discourse of ND’s government regarding migration.

Having provided these introductory notes on ND’s stance in relation to previous challenges regarding migration, it seems appropriate for the analysis to illustrate what is meant by “refugee/migration crisis” in the context of ND’s governance, since the refugee/migration flows from Turkey towards Greece have been continuous, although varying in intensity, since 2015.

In that sense, the analysis perceives the “refugee/migration crisis” as represented by the ‘Evros incident’ that developed from February 28th, 2020 until the last days of March 2020, alongside the riots and violent incidents in two islands of the Eastern Aegean, Lesbos and Chios, triggered by the governmental plans to build two new refugee reception facilities, that also took place in late February 2020. Both events and the respective debates that they triggered ended due to the implementation of restrictive measures by the government aiming at halting the unfolding of the profound COVID-19 pandemic.

Regarding the Evros incident, the crisis began when the Turkish government announced that it would no longer stop migrants trying to reach Europe through the Greek borders, triggering the gathering of thousands of displaced people in the Greek-Turkish border in the Evros region.¹⁹⁰ This decision made by the Turkish government resulted in an almost two-month border crisis between Greece and Turkey, the militarization of the Greek borders and the characterization of the incident as a “hybrid attack” by the Greek officials, framing the attempts of the migrants/refugees to cross the border as an “invasion” or “warfare”:

“And already from the end of February, from that night of the 28th to the 29th of February, this place... had essentially turned into a battlefield, with invasion

¹⁹⁰ Matina Stevis-Gridneff and Carlotta Gall, “Erdogan says ‘we opened the doors’ and clashes erupt as migrants head for Europe”, *New York Times* (February 29, 2020) at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/29/world/europe/turkey-migrants-eu.html?action=click&module=RelatedLinks&pgtype=Article> (accessed 14/03/2023)

*attempts What we experienced here, three years ago, was the first but not the last phase of a new form of **hybrid warfare** breaking out in Europe.*"¹⁹¹

The analysis, as mentioned during the introductory chapter, also follows the periodization of PM Kyriakos Mitsotakis that identifies the 'Evros incident' and the tense incidents of those months as the first crisis that the government of ND had to manage.

5.2 Populism as Extremism

In this context and building on the discourse that ND developed during SYRIZA's governance, "populism" was firstly correlated to "extreme" political positions regarding migration that questioned ND's policies. More specifically, ND attempted from the early days of its governance to balance between its pre-election conservative critique of leftist migration policies that was expressed by a chain of equivalence represented by the empty signifier "open borders" that linked, as discussed earlier, the government of SYRIZA with the signifiers "hypocrisy," "incapability" and "ideological obsessions," and certain far-right proposals calling for stricter rules, at best, or military action against people crossing the borders irregularly, at worst. The far-right discourse calling for violent or legally controversial solutions to the migration issues of Greece has been articulated by more than one right wing parties since 2012, as observed by PM Samaras' statements earlier as well, while in the 2019 elections it was 'Greek Solution'¹⁹² that represented the main far-right challenger to SYRIZA's migration management. What should be noted from this trajectory is that the center-right ND attempted to differentially incorporate certain far right demands during the 2019 elections in order to electorally weaken the (populist) 'Greek Solution' and the other anti-immigration (far) right parties.

This attempt of ND to balance between the two approaches became particularly evident during the riots in Lesbos and Chios when the local communities demonstrated and refused to cooperate with the government's instructions and plans to build new hosting

¹⁹¹ Speech by Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis at the event for the signing of the contract for the construction - extension of the fence along the Greek-Turkish border at Evros (31/03/2023)

¹⁹² For more general info on Greek Solution see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greek_Solution

facilities or take similar ‘decongestive’ measures. Interestingly, the riots were discursively constructed by ND as a merge between “populist” far right and leftist political forces, both opposing the governmental plans:

“The strategy of New Democracy is the one that has decongested and shielded our islands and not the populists who are unable to find solutions and stir up the people.”¹⁹³

And,

“ I totally understand what's going on in the islands. We are here to address, above all, the difficulties of the islanders. But they are also called to guard the peace in their own place. To isolate all extreme elements, far-right, far-left, suspicious NGOs, local lobbyists.”¹⁹⁴

In ND’s discourse, the ideological approaches to migration and the policies that they advocate for were presented as situated on an imaginary axis signifying varying degrees of “moderation,” with ND’s approach being situated on the center of the axis while being articulated through a chain of equivalence represented by the empty signifiers “strict and fair,” positively linking elements such as “reason,” “moderation” and “results”:

“This path, therefore, of moderation, of reason, of strict democracy is followed by this Government and this is the only path, and you know it well, which can lead to a result, in a very difficult, very complex and very demanding phenomenon, such as migration”¹⁹⁵

On the other hand, “populism” is the empty signifier that represents a chain of equivalence linking both “extreme” approaches to migration, meaning the “open borders” and the “concentration camps” approach, that are situated on the two ends of the imaginary axis

¹⁹³ Speech by Notis Mitarachi, Minister of Migration and Asylum, during the 14th Conference of New Democracy (12/05/2022)

¹⁹⁴ Introductory statement by Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis at the start of the meeting of the Council of Ministers (27/02/2020)

¹⁹⁵ Speech by Georgios Koumoutsakos, Deputy Minister of Migration and Asylum during the Continuous Committee of Public Administration, Public Order and Justice (07/05/2020)

meaningfully linking elements such as “obsessions,” constructed in contrariety to “reason,” “easy solutions,” in contrariety to “results” or “relaxation,” in contrariety to “rigor.”

“The truth is... that throughout the world this specific issue (referring to migration) is dominated by obsessions, “easy” solutions, populisms. Greece could not be an exception. What makes us different is that in this country... there is an exception from the far-right populism that dominates abroad, which perhaps one could call “humanitarian populism”... that considers the phenomenon as natural, as coming from above and that we as Greek politicians have no role to play. Migration is not a natural phenomenon. Of course it is a European problem...but as the Greek political system and as a Government have a critical role to play too.”¹⁹⁶

And,

“Of course, the immigration debate is also characterized by the two populisms that have characterized it since it occupied Greece from 2015 and onwards. The populism of irresponsible relaxation, “everything open” and the other, the populism of the concentration camps....

This middle path of democracy and rigor is followed by our own policy, and we have a clear consciousness, we know that we are doing our job well, despite the adverse conditions that we face.”¹⁹⁷

As indicated by the statements, “populism” in this case acquires and refers to broader ideological characteristics, being connected to ‘far-right’ ideas, (hypocritic) ‘humanism’ and philosophical positions towards the global phenomenon of migration alongside political theorizations on the role of the government in its management. The opposition of “democracy,” a typical floating signifier that various political discourses constantly struggle to invest with meaning in an antagonistic political system, to these approaches and its equivalential link to “rigor,” signifying the center-right migration policies of ND that aim at

¹⁹⁶ Speech by Dimitris Keridis Member of the Hellenic Parliament elected with New Democracy during the Plenary Session (31/10/2019)

¹⁹⁷ Speech by Georgios Koumoutsakos, Deputy Minister of Migration and Asylum during the Continuous Committee of Public Administration, Public Order and Justice (07/05/2020)

the “drastic decrease of the migration flows,”¹⁹⁸ further supports the identification of ideational characteristics in the approach of ND to “populism” in this juncture.

Additionally, as discussed earlier, ND’s discourse attempts to once again create equivalential links between the two “populist” approaches to migration, but also between the main actors that allegedly represent them, namely SYRIZA and the (far-right) ‘Greek Solution.’ The meaningful connection between the two approaches is constructed on their, alleged, mutual constitution, expressed through expressions like “they feed each other”, designating the procedure through which the two approaches, despite being different, reproduce each other. Both approaches are situated in sharp contrast to ND’s identity that is organized around the signifiers ‘moderation’, ‘reason’ and ‘results’ that supplement the self-characterized “strict and fair” migration policies. Furthermore, and building on the previously deployed narrative regarding the ‘cooperation’ of “the extremes”, migration is also seen as a privileged field on which “the populists” can unite in order to oppose the government:

“Populism will come again. Now the populists will unite on different issues, like immigration, where they offer easy solutions while some write on the internet as if the rest of us are not worried about our homeland”¹⁹⁹

And,

...Did this statement offset the irresponsible left populism, which belongs to you (referring to SYRIZA) - not personally but factionally and, on the other hand, the extreme populism of the far right? I said they are two different things. The truth is that they feed each other. This is true. You feed them and they feed you. This is true. But from different starting points.²⁰⁰

The main argument supporting the, alleged, mutual constitution of the “populist” leftist ‘irresponsible relaxation’ or ‘openness’ and the far-right ‘concentration camps’ is based on the problematic results that the policy of “open borders” brings for the local communities that

¹⁹⁸ “N. Mitarakis: The goal is zero refugees staying on the islands.” VouliWatch (13/10/2020) available at <https://vouliwatch.gr/news/article/n-mitarakis-stohos-i-mideniki-paramoni-prosfygon-sta-nisia> (last accessed 02/05/2023)

¹⁹⁹ Speech by Adonis Georgiadis, Vice President of New Democracy, during the Party’s 13th Conference (30/11/2019)

²⁰⁰ Speech by Georgios Koumoutsakos, Deputy Minister of Migration and Asylum during the Continuous Committee of Public Administration, Public Order and Justice (07/05/2020)

the far-right “populists” take advantage of in order to legitimately advocate for extreme solutions such as ‘concentration camps.’ In other words, the discourse of ND is built on the argument that the ‘migration fatigue’ that the “open borders” approach creates is a fertile ground for extreme right voices. As indicated by the statement, this circle that involves the two “populist” approaches feeding off each other is perceived as ‘poisonous’ for the national political debate and will break if either of the two camps ‘come to their senses’, indicating, once again, a supreme rationality allegedly possessed by the anti-populist camp that is based on, seemingly, non-political but objective values:

“...you say that everyone (referring to immigrants/refugees) should come... that there should be no hosting centers and so on. It is what I said, the populism of the irresponsible relaxation and the other, the far-right, is also coming, precisely because you are the preachers of this irresponsibility of openness... and stepping on the results of this very logic and politics, they come and display the logic - essentially that's what they say - of the concentration camps. You listen to them and accuse them of being "extreme right-wing"... Well, we are experiencing in that sense the feedback of the two populisms. If either of them comes to their senses, we will stop what fuels and poisons the political debate in the country.”²⁰¹

Finally, on the same note, what is of particular interest is the anti-populist construction of “the people” affected by the migration flows during periods of unrest against the installation of new hosting facilities, and therefore refugees/migrants, in their communities. As previously noted, certain anti-populist discourses have been approached as constructing “the people” as the ‘victim’ of the “populists” by ascribing certain characteristics to the popular subject, such as being uneducated, easily convinced, emotional, irrational and so on. In ND’s discourse a similar phenomenon can be observed with the demonstrating local populations being constructed as initially ‘welcoming’ and ‘solidary’ towards refugees/migrants, a stance that after the ‘irresponsible’ “open border” handling of SYRIZA between 2015 and 2019 was transformed into rightful exhaustion. This ‘real’, ‘authentic’ and/or ‘spontaneous’ fatigue of the local populations is being portrayed both as a source for improvement for the government

²⁰¹ Speech by Georgios Koumoutsakos, Deputy Minister of Migration and Asylum during the Continuous Committee of Public Administration, Public Order and Justice (07/05/2020)

policies but also as a source of legitimation exploited by “populist” far-right marginal activist groups:

However, I want to conclude with a phenomenon, which was mentioned by two wings of the Parliament, the left and the deeply populist right, namely the reactions of the people. Obviously, there are reactions from local communities. Why; Did they suddenly become racist? They are the same people - I am now addressing the left, the left populism- ... who in 2015 opened their homes and arms to receive refugees and immigrants. The exact same people.... are reacting today. Why; Because you managed the situation the way you managed it, because there is indeed migration fatigue in the local populations and we need to listen to them and stand by them.

But this - and now I turn to the other populism, the hard and dark populism of the populist right - the real and authentic and spontaneous fatigue felt by the local population, cannot legitimize (“be a pool of Siloam” in the original) fascist acts of marginal minorities, who insult our country’s culture and our logic.”²⁰²

The signifiers ‘real’, ‘authentic’ and ‘spontaneous’ to describe the popular migration fatigue should also be examined in relation to what they are not, meaning that they are constructed in opposition to the ‘not real’, ‘fabricated’ or ‘politically motivated’ disagreements and demonstrations against the governmental initiatives. These disagreements can be attributed to actors that do not belong to the seemingly ‘non-political’ “local communities” that express their ‘genuine’ and ‘rightful’ feelings by demonstrating but represent groups with broader political goals that oppose the governmental initiatives.

In the discourse of ND, these groups have taken the form of journalists, leftist groups that strategically push an EU strategy of “open borders” or ‘suspicious’ NGOs that focus on monitoring human rights, publishing state wrongdoings and offering legal assistance. These accusations have been particularly tense during disputes that followed the ‘Evros incident’ that attracted international attention and were subjected to fierce debates questioning their validity and ‘fake news’ status:

²⁰² Speech by Georgios Koumoutsakos, Deputy Minister of Migration and Asylum during the Continuous Committee of Public Administration, Public Order and Justice (07/05/2020)

(while discussing the “Incident of the Evros-38²⁰³”) I must say that there are shadows in many issues. The entanglement of non-governmental organizations of unknown financing source with MEPs, lobbies and journalists who systematically publish images that burden our country abroad, images which are consistent with those that other countries produce against Greece, such as Turkey... ”²⁰⁴

And (discussing the same incident on a later Plenary Session),

“We experienced a sustained attack against Greece by SYRIZA in the European Parliament, alongside the parties of the European Left, advocating for an open border policy, the policy we experienced ...in the period 2015-2019. We were attacked by certain NGOs, staffed by SYRIZA officials...The Opposition, however, continues to distort reality while there is a link between the two NGOs, which managed the case and accused Greece, and prominent SYRIZA executives. These NGOs need to clarify their role in this case ”²⁰⁵

To summarize and conclude this first analytical chapter, although the correlation of SYRIZA, NGOs, journalists, Turkey and many other actors in the discourse of ND can be analyzed further in relation to different politically important signifiers that relate to migration, such as “patriotism” or the “national interest”, the focus of the analysis has intentionally remained on the signifier “populism” and its function in the hegemonic struggles. To summarize using certain previously discussed discourse-theoretical tools, the hegemonic claim of ND during the multiple tensions that emerged in the field of migration has been the promise that only the governmental hegemonic bloc’s “strict and fair” approach to the management of these events can safely produce results that benefit all involving actors, while preventing the “extreme” “populist” approaches, whether coming from the Left or the far-right, from returning or rising to power. Naturally, this hegemonic claim is constructed on the positioning of the empty signifier “populism,” representing both “extreme” “populisms,” as a threat to the well-being of local communities and the “smooth” management of migration conducted by ND.

²⁰³ The incident in the Evros region with 38 refugees of Syrian origin including the, at least alleged, death of a seven-year-old girl: <https://www.dw.com/en/is-greece-failing-to-deploy-eu-funded-surveillance-system-at-turkish-border-as-intended/a-63055306>

²⁰⁴ Speech by Notis Mitarachi, Minister of Asylum and Migration during the Plenary Session of the Hellenic Parliament (14/12/2022)

²⁰⁵ Speech by Notis Mitarachi, Minister of Asylum and Migration during the Plenary Session of the Hellenic Parliament (26/01/2023)

Returning to Miró's theorization of anti-populism, ND at this juncture clearly interpellates the citizens as being part of a threatened social order that is constructed on a balance between strict migration rules and the protection of human rights that only the governmental management can safeguard from "populists" that either advocate for uncontrolled "hordes" of displaced people "storming" the cities or for the transformation of the Greek borders into war zones.

Additionally, ND has attempted to create a distinction between the different disagreements towards its policies, distinguishing between those originating from local communities/people and those coming from actors that are equivalentially linked to broader political or strategic goals. While the former are perceived as 'authentic' and as a source for governmental improvement, the latter are treated with suspicion and are meaningfully linked to signifiers that acquire solely negative meanings in the governmental discourse regarding migration, such as "Turkey," "open borders" and so on.

The conclusions that can be drawn from this discursive practice relating to the use of "populism" as a signifier is that, in the particular crisis and policy field, "populism" signifies certain policies, demands and ideological approaches that deviate from an established "rational," "realistic" or "moderate" way of conducting politics in the field of migration. Obviously, this way is by no means objective, but it is constantly constructed in the discourse of ND, whether linguistically or practically, thus renegotiating the boundaries between "rationality" ("strict and fair") and "populism" ("open borders" or "concentration camps"). Additionally, it is obvious that "populism" in this case is not a privilege solely of the Left or Right but a tendency that pervades the political space, although linked to different signifiers in each camp, such as "irresponsibility" for the Left or "fascist acts" for the Right.

In relation to the discourse-theoretical formal approach to populism developed by Laclau and the alignment of the parliamentary representation of the "populist" far-right discourse to it, namely the party 'Greek Solution', it is possible to draw some conclusions on the party's allegedly "populist" discourse:

".. the only thing we didn't do is open champagnes to celebrate your perfect management of illegal immigration. I heard a colleague, Member of Parliament of New Democracy talking about "innocent souls." SYRIZA and the Left... are more interested in illegal immigrants... Was this, in other words, PASOK's

*primary interest today? Whether or not pushbacks occurred? **I wish they did.** Will anyone in this room talk about the Greeks? Its outrageous...*”

.. The people are crying and suffering over these issues and you appear as celebrating the "innocent souls" (referring ironically to the illegal immigrants) ...You accused SYRIZA of filling Greece with hosting centers. You, Minister, have filled Greece with illegal immigrants.”²⁰⁶

As indicated by the quotation, the ‘Greek Solution’ does align with certain characteristics attributed to the “populist” far-right discourse by ND, such as the hyper-hostile attitude towards people that cross the Greek borders irregularly, to the point of openly advocating for “pushbacks,” a practice that has been criticized as violating international law, the prohibition of refoulement and the human rights of refugees.²⁰⁷ Additionally, it is evident that in the discourse of the ‘Greek Solution’ there are mentions to “the people” that are ‘suffering’ and whose needs are neglected by a state that cares more about ‘illegal immigrants’. Although people-centrism is a characteristic that Laclau attributes to populist discourse, in the case of ‘Greek Solution’ “the people” are, on the one hand, constructed in opposition the governmental establishment/elites, but also to the illegal immigrants and their, alleged, privileged access to state attention and resources. Additionally, “the people” in this discourse are not a nodal point but a peripheral one since it is constantly substituted by the “Greeks” and references to nationality thus dividing the social space not only horizontally, between “the people” and an “elite”, but also vertically, between “Greeks” and “illegal immigrants.” As stated in the literature as well,²⁰⁸ this type of far-right populism, although opposed to some kind of power bloc, attempts to fix the identity of the people around some kind of a priori privileged differential particularity, such as an ethnic or nativist essence.²⁰⁹ In the case of ‘Greek Solution,’ the party’s discourse clearly belongs to these reductionist discourses that attempt to delimit the boundaries of “the people” around their nationality (“the Greeks”).

²⁰⁶ Speech by Konstantinos Hitas, Member of the Hellenic Parliament elected with ‘Greek Solution’, during the Continuous Committee of Public Administration, Public Order and Justice (21/09/2020)

²⁰⁷ Various reports and papers have been composed discussing the phenomenon of “pushbacks” debating their existence and compliance to European/international law. However, it is rather rare to see mainstream political parties advocating openly for such controversial practices.

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/689368/EPRS_BRI\(2021\)689368_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/689368/EPRS_BRI(2021)689368_EN.pdf)

²⁰⁸ Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, note 16.

²⁰⁹ Kim, note 130, 3; Stavrakakis et.al, note 16.

Moving to the second major actor characterized as “populist”, namely SYRIZA, the party does not form any clearly, according to Laclau’s formal criteria, populist demands during the unfolding of these challenging incidents. Regarding the ‘Evros Incident’, SYRIZA’S stance can be characterized as rather consensual and supportive of the governmental decisions to close the borders in the Evros region:

*"There is no doubt. As soon as such a massive influx attempt towards country emerged, any government would do what the current one did - I want to be completely honest."*²¹⁰

On the other hand, regarding the demonstrations in the islands of the Eastern Aegean that followed the ‘Evros incident’, SYRIZA articulated a discourse aiming at the formulation of a “serious” and “realistic” “national plan” based on “humanitarian principles” and the “need to protect the country,” involving the consensus of all parliamentary parties, in opposition to ND’s stance of, allegedly, dealing with a national and European issue without consulting any force. SYRIZA’s claim towards the governmental management was based, firstly, on “a serious and responsible stance towards homeland security against the instrumentalization of the events for party benefits” and “the underlining of the collective responsibility that the EU member states share on migration challenges.” Additionally, SYRIZA pointed out “the patriotic need to treat refugees and migrants in accordance to the principles of international law and humanism” while “uniting the Greek society on the basis of solidarity in order to isolate far-right and racist groups and their divisive actions.”²¹¹ As indicated by these official positions and regarding the formal populist criteria, SYRIZA did not seem to articulate a populist discourse to address the migration issues of the period in the sense that the popular subject was not a nodal point in the party’s discourse nor was it constructed in opposition to an “elite” or establishment but in opposition to extreme-right elements and in solidarity to the displaced.

On the 27th of March, as a response to the rapid multiplication of COVID-19 cases in the Turkish mainland, the Turkish authorities moved thousands of migrants and refugees from the makeshift camp at the border to quarantine facilities, at first, and then to hosting

²¹⁰ Interview by Alexis Tsipras, President of SYRIZA, at the TV station MEGA, 03/03/2020

²¹¹ These principles come from the official statement of the Political Committee of SYRIZA regarding the crisis events in March 2020 (04/03/2020) available at <https://www.cnn.gr/politiki/story/209977/prosfygiko-h-stasi-oi-theseis-kai-oi-protaseis-toy-syriza> (last accessed 22/04/2023).

facilities in nine different Turkish provinces.²¹² This event triggered the gradual closing of the Turkish borders in the Evros region and the easing of the tensions along the Greek-Turkish border.²¹³

6 Analysis: The Covid-19 Pandemic

The Greek government and PM Mitsotakis interpreted the de-escalation of border tensions as a victory of the Greek border protection authorities over the provocation of Turkey:

“I want, on this occasion, to once again congratulate the Hellenic Police, the Armed Forces and those who contributed to this very long, painstaking effort to guard our borders during the past month..

It may be the end of a chapter, but this battle - have no doubt - continues. We succeeded and secured a very important acquis on behalf of the country and on behalf of Europe. The ability and effectiveness to guard our land and maritime borders.”²¹⁴

At the same time, the Greek government also began taking preemptive restrictive measures in order prepare for a possible surge in COVID-19 cases on a national level. The intensity of these measures peaked during the last days of March 2020 when a strict national lockdown was implemented, incorporating the ban of any ‘unnecessary’ movements, the obligatory use of a surgical mask in all indoor public spaces and the suspension of all public events.²¹⁵ Additionally, the state mechanism supplemented the lockdown and the national restrictive measures with a daily COVID-broadcast where the Deputy Minister of Civil Protection Nikos Hardalias and the infectiologist Sotiris Tsiodras, the chairman of the government advisory

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Oztig, note 4, 80

²¹⁴ Meeting under Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis on the Evros incident (27/03/2020)

²¹⁵ Mitch Prothero, “In Greece, the government prepares for a crisis that is beyond its capacity to handle” Business Insider (March 23, 2020) available at <https://www.businessinsider.com/coronavirus-greece-prepares-for-crisis-2020-3> (last accessed 22/04/2023)

committee for the management of the pandemic, informed the public on the development of the pandemic (new cases, deaths, measures and so on).²¹⁶

The admittedly fast reaction and effective strategy of the Greek government to the development of the pandemic led to a notably low number of COVID-19 cases and deaths until the gradual lift of the restrictive measures on the 4th of May, a period that has been commonly referred to as “the first wave” of the pandemic in Greece.²¹⁷ During this period, SYRIZA, the main opposition to the government and the, according to the political discourse of ND up to that point, major “populist” political force, was characterized by a rather consensual and supportive stance towards the governmental management instead of a confrontational and ‘extreme’ one that, according to ND, had adopted during certain tense crisis-ridden periods of the past.

As expressed by the statements of Alexis Tsipras and SYRIZA’s former Minister of Health Andreas Xanthos during the same period²¹⁸:

*"If we were in government, we would also choose Mr. Tsiodras to manage the situation."*²¹⁹

And,

*".. what is important at this time is that we all fight together, united on a front of life, so that there are as few human losses as possible. This means, calmly, and without panic, to reverently follow the instructions of the scientists."*²²⁰

What can be safely observed from these initial responses of the “populist,” as previously accused by ND, SYRIZA to the governmental handling of the pandemic is that the party’s stance does not follow the stereotypical readings of “populism” that ND had formulated in the

²¹⁶ “The “generals” of the battle, S. Tsiodras and N. Hardalias talk to “NEWS” about the coronavirus” at Ta Nea (March 22, 2020) available at <https://www.tanea.gr/2020/03/22/greece/oi-stratigoi-tis-maxis-s-tsiodras-kai-n-xardalias-miloun-sta-nea-gia-ton-koronaio/> (last accessed 22/04/2023).

²¹⁷ Dimitrios Moris and Dimitrios Schizas, “Lockdown During COVID-19: The Greek Success”, (2020) *In Vivo* 34, no. 3, 1695 <https://doi.org/10.21873/invivo.11963>.

²¹⁸ Statements retrieved from: Antonis Galanopoulos, “Greece” in Stavrakakis, Yannis, and Giorgos Katsambekis. *Populism and the Pandemic: A Collaborative Report*. Loughborough University, June 15, 2020. <https://hdl.handle.net/2134/12546284.v1.>, 26-28

²¹⁹ Interview by Andreas Xanthos, Member of the Hellenic Parliament elected with SYRIZA, at the TV station SKAI (22/03/2020)

²²⁰ Article by Alexis Tsipras, President of SYRIZA, at the newspaper ETHNOS (22/03/2020)

past, correlating “populist” forces to extremism, constant confrontation, and the rejection of any cooperation. Accordingly, ND’s discourse during the ‘first wave’ of the pandemic was structured around the nodal point “unity,” articulated through a chain of equivalence including signifiers such as “the collective will,” “homeland” or “united effort” pointing towards the emergent patriotic need for collective action and discipline. During this period, no antagonistic frontiers were made visible between the “populist” and the anti-populist forces regarding the governmental management of the crisis and the governmental discourse did not articulate any accusations constructing “populism” or the “populist” opposition in contrariety to the chain of equivalence of “unity”:

“..As individual desire yields to the collective will, the homeland is in our hands. We are all Greece. Let's protect Greece, then! So that we meet tomorrow healthier, stronger and more optimistic...”²²¹

However, “populism” would gradually return as a pejorative signifier in the discourse of the Greek government firstly as a response to SYRIZA’s counter-hegemonic claims expressed through the formulation of an alternative plan for a socially sustainable post-pandemic economic recovery and, secondly, as a response to SYRIZA’s criticism towards the management of the ‘second wave’²²² of the pandemic which started at the end of October 2020.

In these two cases, the discourse of the Greek government appears to meaningfully correlate the signifier “populism” predominantly to two concepts and their relevant signifiers: “responsibility” and “science.” Although these two discursive tendencies or patterns do not develop in strictly separate periods but overlap, the analysis will attempt to present each discursive practice in separate sections focusing on the particular characteristics of each one in relation to the meanings and positions that they attach to “populism” and the equivalential links that the latter creates as an empty signifier in relation to the antagonistic context that it is used into.

²²¹ Message of Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis to the citizens (22/03/2020)

²²² “Tsiodras: It is impossible to control the pandemic, the situation is worse in the second wave” at *Ta Nea* (27/10/2020) available at <https://www.tanea.gr/2020/10/27/greece/tsiodras-adynto-na-elegxthei-i-pandimia-xeiroteri-i-katastasi-sto-deytero-kyma/> (last accessed 23/04/2023); Nikos Krinis, “Greece to Enter Lockdown to Fight Second Covid-19 Wave” at *Greek Travel Pages* (05/11/2020) available at <https://news.gtp.gr/2020/11/05/greece-enter-lockdown-fight-second-covid-19-wave/> (last accessed 23/04/2023).

6.1 Populism as Irresponsible Opposition

Proceeding to examine the relation that ND's discourse established between "populism" and the concept of "responsibility" or "responsible opposition," the first step of the analysis must be at SYRIZA's "We Stay Standing" plan focusing on the economic and social recovery of the country after the pandemic, published during the last days of March 2020 and updated on the 25th of May.²²³ As noted in the literature,²²⁴ SYRIZA's plan included certain typical leftist and neo-Keynesian economic demands and policies, focusing on the strengthening of the NHS through funding and permanent personnel, state support of the private sector workers' salaries and the prohibition of foreclosures. In that regard, SYRIZA's post-first wave discourse articulated a central contrariety between the nodal points "justice" and "hope" and the "reactionary reforms" that ND attempted to advance which were informed by "neoliberal obsessions" and aimed at the transformation of the economy and the deregulation the welfare state and labor market. At this point,²²⁵ the response of the government introduced the polarity between "populism" and "responsibility":

*"The government will use every opportunity to support both workers and businesses. It is the time for responsibility, not for cheap populism."*²²⁶

And,

"...(referring to Tsipras)he is happy because Greece will have a recession this year, alongside the entirety of Europe. Recession due to an unforeseen and unprecedented event, the coronavirus pandemic. Divisive and populist, Mr.

²²³ "SYRIZA: The updated "We Stay Standing" program - The entire presentation at Zappeio" *NEWSIT* (25/05/2020) available at <https://www.newsit.gr/politikh/syriza-to-epikairopoiimeno-programma-menoume-orthioi-oli-i-parousiasi-sto-zappeio/3037372/> (last accessed 23/04/2023)

²²⁴ Galanopoulos, note 218, 28

²²⁵ Statements retrieved from Ibid.

²²⁶ Response by the Deputy Minister to the Prime Minister and Government Spokesman Stelios Petsas to SYRIZA'S press office announcement (26/03/2020)

*Tsipras "remains the same". Regarding the governmental plan, it is crystal clear. We have no delusions; we tell the truth and we proceed with seriousness."*²²⁷

As the quotations indicate, "populism" was articulated in a chain of equivalence with "division," a notion that collided with the privileged and positively charged concept of "unity" against COVID that the governmental discourse incorporated as a nodal point during the first wave of the pandemic, but also in opposition to certain positively charged signifiers such as "truth", "seriousness" and, most notably, "responsibility", which functions as a nodal point for the anti-populist discourse of ND at this juncture. This view is also indicated by the official response of the government to SYRIZA's plan that included the ironic re-phrasing of the plan's name from "We Stay Standing" to "We Remain Irresponsible".²²⁸

"The relationship of the Official Opposition to responsibility and correct costing of measures is proved to be non-existent."

This pattern of articulating and meaningfully linking "populism" to signifiers that indicate an "irresponsible" stance during this state of emergency, whether "irresponsibility" signifies "uncosted" or "non-studied" economic suggestions, political "immaturity" or "irrationality", can be identified in the crushing majority of ND's discursive responses to the opposition's economic critique and counter-suggestions:

*"During the discussion of this bill you still have the opportunity to show that you have come to your senses, that you have matured politically, that you are willing to escape from the era of inexpensive populism."*²²⁹

And,

"It is now clear that crises, whether economic or health related, are not dealt with populism, pointless actions and wishful thinking. They require a government that is constantly ready to take immediate decisions with courage and

²²⁷ Statement by the Deputy Minister to the Prime Minister and Government Representative Stelios Petsas regarding the post of the Leader of the Official Opposition Alexis Tsipras via social networks (06/05/2020)

²²⁸ Response to the "We Stay Standing II" program formulated by SYRIZA: Ministry of Economics of the Hellenic Republic (26/05/2020) <https://www.minfin.gr/-/apantese-gia-to-programma-menoume-orthioi-ii-tou-syriza>

²²⁹ Speech by Lazaros Tsavdaridis, Member of the Hellenic Parliament elected with New Democracy, during the Plenary Session (14/09/2020)

responsibility, always having in mind the well-being of its citizens and the prosperity of the country.”²³⁰

What is indicated by these statements, made just a few weeks before the negative record of 1259 cases²³¹ that signaled the beginning of the second ‘wave’, is that ND’s hegemonic claim focused on capitalizing on the admittedly successful management of the first “wave” by linking it with its developing recovery plan in a discourse forming a chain of equivalence around the nodal point “responsibility”, including signifiers such as “courage” and “determination”. This chain of equivalence is constructed antagonistically to “populism” that, in this case, comes to signify the “irrationality” (“come to your senses”), political “immaturity” and “incapability” of the primary opposition, accusations that draw heavily from the pre-election period and the immigration crisis that preceded the pandemic.

Thus, during this first stage of the confrontation regarding “populism” and the pandemic, it is possible to observe the constitution of two identities in the discourse of ND, with the government being self-constituted as ‘objectively’ successful, responsible and capable in the management of crises and the “populist” opposition being constituted as refusing to politically “mature,” “face reality” and understand the exceptionally challenging conditions of the present. It is precisely these characteristics that were attributed to the opposition through the signifier “populist” that create the binary between “populism” and the concept of “responsible opposition” that, as demonstrated by the quotation, is perceived as forming “realistic” and “serious” demands regarding the resources designated to support the businesses/workers:

“...we invite you, even now, to abandon the path of populism and proceed to that of responsibility and of realism, just as your institutional role dictates and the times demand... That's why I insist that we shouldn't be populists... as SYRIZA did during the previous weeks by saying - 'give it all during the first week' (referring to resources) You can't just come out and talk like this with such ease, “give it all,” “do everything immediately,” ...I think that you are insulting yourselves.

²³⁰ Dionisios Aktipis, Member of the Hellenic Parliament elected with New Democracy, during the Plenary Session (14/09/2020)

²³¹ “Covid 19- Greece: Negative record with 1259 new cases and 12 deaths” *EuroNews* (27/10/2020) available at <https://gr.euronews.com/2020/10/27/covid-19-ell-ada-1259-nea-kroy-smata-12-thanatoi> (last accessed 23/04/2023)

That's why I said that it is good to be serious and not populists during these times.”²³²

As the second ‘wave’ of the pandemic deepened, the Greek government was called to compose the Annual Budget for 2021 that would also incorporate the financial support from EU’s ‘NextGenerationEU’ recovery fund that was agreed in July 2020. During the parliamentary debate, which is going to be the second milestone of the analysis, the most frequently emerging characteristic that seems to have followed “populism” is the concept of “bidding” (“πλειοδοσία” in Greek), referring to the “irresponsible,” “understudied” and “irrational” claims, demands and promises of the opposition regarding the larger amount of resources that should or could be given to support the economic recovery if the opposition was in government:

“And what has the Official Opposition been saying all this time? What is its policy proposal and its plan? It changes forms from day-to-day or from month-to-month... And of course ...populism is disguised as social sensitivity. The politics of ‘bidding’, without limit and without reason....Whatever the Government proposes, the Opposition comes and asks to add one more. The “x+1” policy.”²³³

The anti-populist articulation that meaningfully linked “bidding” and “populism” was by no means new to the Greek political scene but drew from ND’s discourse that was consolidated between 2012 and 2014 during the surprising rise of SYRIZA to the government through an anti-austerity programmatic discourse:

(referring to SYRIZA's commitment to restore the minimum wage to 751 euros)
*“...But let me ask, why 751 and not 1,000 euros? Do you really want to enter such bidding? Can Greece's competitiveness really withstand a higher basic wage? Or will this lead to more unemployment?”*²³⁴

Like 2014, “bidding” was connected to “populism” to signify the lack of technocratic expertise, knowledge and administrative capability on the one hand, and the inability or

²³² Ioannis Kallianos, Member of the Hellenic Parliament elected with New Democracy, during the Plenary Session (12/12/2020)

²³³ Thodoris Roussopoulos, Member of the Hellenic Parliament elected with New Democracy, during the Plenary Session (12/12/2020)

²³⁴ Interview by Prime Minister Antonis Samaras to the newspaper “Real News” (13/10/2014)

unwillingness of the “populists” to understand and confront socioeconomic “reality.” In that regard, the liberal technocratic anti-populist discourse of ND in this juncture articulated a hegemonic claim that assumed a single way of managing the upcoming economic crisis which could only be effectively followed by the government that possessed a supreme rationality and objective capability in managing the economy. On the other hand, “populism” was articulated as lacking “reason” and “limits,” two signifiers that are typically articulated in liberal technocratic discourses and carry an obvious extra-political charge.

“The government plans and acts prudently and responsibly. It operates in the real world. It seeks with prudence to shield the country and make the living conditions of all citizens constantly better.

On the other hand, the Official Opposition...engages in a sterile and barren confrontation, without substantiated arguments, without studied counterproposals. They point the finger without offering any substance to the political debate. They invite the citizens to new “flights” in the “pink bubbles” of populist promises.”²³⁵

In the same context, as already indicated by the statements, ND’s discourse also constructs “populism” in contrariety to the notion of “responsible opposition” through its correlation to “confrontation” or “division.” More specifically, ND discursively approaches the “populist” strategy of SYRIZA as being based on “division,” signifying its tense critique towards certain governmental decisions or mishandlings, during times that, allegedly, required a “united national front” against the pandemic. This accusation of “populism” being connected or even founded on a Manichean perception of society, meaning as split between two camps that represent good and evil and therefore as dangerously antagonistic and in constant conflict between each other, has been a rather common argument of the anti-populist Greek forces since the beginning of the economic crisis.²³⁶

“.. The Opposition, and especially the Official Opposition, acts like they don’t want the pandemic to end. They cultivate a toxic and hostile climate and

²³⁵ Speech by Christos Staikouras, Minister of Finance, during the Plenary Session (18/12/2021)

²³⁶ Giorgos Katsambekis, ‘The People’ and Political Opposition in Post-Democracy: Reflections on the Hollowing Out of Democracy in Greece and Europe”, in J. Cook, N.J. Long and H.L. Moore (eds.), *The State We’re In: Reflecting on Democracy’s Troubles* (Berghahn Books, 2016), 144-166

undermine the one and only goal we have at the moment: to finish as soon as possible with the pandemic...I insist that with lies and populism you are undermining the national effort."²³⁷

And,

"On the one hand there is rationality and logic, solving society's problems, changing the economic paradigm, strengthening the middle class, programmatic discourse and planning. This is the politics of Kyriakos Mitsotakis. On the other there is populism, bidding, irresponsibility, divisive rhetoric. The Opposition of "anti-", without policies, without a program, without proposals."²³⁸

In this case, the analysis necessarily returns to the 'post-political' or 'post-democratic' and technocratic understanding of democracy on which the 'neoliberal hegemony' has been built on and to which ND subscribes to ideologically. More specifically, New Democracy's discourse attempted to construct the post-pandemic recovery as a field where political antagonisms are perceived as damaging and unnecessary, promoting its own "responsible" economic plan as the only alternative (TINA) towards a recovery that combines "courageous" state support of the businesses and the workers, with fiscal discipline based on precisely and carefully planned costings and calculations:

"Despite the great difficulties, the Government advances bold reforms, while at the same time giving practical support to the weakest of our fellow citizens. Because science has finally found the vaccine for the COVID-19 pandemic, but it seems that the vaccine for populism will never be found, dear SYRIZA colleagues. So, I call you to stop needlessly aggravating the political confrontation. I urge you to stop projecting your own inner crisis on society."²³⁹

On the same note, Mouffe's critique of 'post-politics' is also useful to explain why ND's discourse has focused on debating the recovery plan using elements that don't directly relate to traditional ideological positions, such as "Left" or "Right", "liberal" or "socialist," but refer

²³⁷ Speech by Vasileios Kontozamanis, Deputy Minister of Health, during the Plenary Session (31/03/2021)

²³⁸ Speech by Spiros Livanos, Member of the Hellenic Parliament elected with New Democracy, during the Plenary Session (15/12/2020)

²³⁹ Themistoklis (Themis) Chimaras, Member of the Hellenic Parliament elected with New Democracy, during the Plenary Session (12/12/2020)

to seemingly objective notions and binaries such as right or wrong, rational or irrational, truth or false. In that regard, this discursive practice can be understood as the effect of ND's attempts to preserve its neoliberal hegemonic consensus that does not recognize the social frontiers as conflicts between politically constructed discourses reflecting different economic policies and rationales that compete in order to hegemonize and tackle the pandemic's consequences based on different ideological perceptions, but as 'objectively' right or wrong, rational or irrational and, thus, non-contingent and non-political.

To illustrate the full picture using discourse-theoretical analytical tools, both "waves" of the pandemic undoubtedly dislocated the already unstable Greek political field, exposing the contingent nature of the socioeconomic reality and forcing the government of New Democracy to re-negotiate and re-articulate its economic policies and responses in order to re-establish the hegemonic order that the dislocation disrupted while being threatened, mainly, by SYRIZA's hegemonic claim for more state intervention, public spending and so on. In order to safeguard its attempt to restore the hegemonic order by re-adjusting its economic policies, New Democracy's hegemonic claim focused on capitalizing on the admittedly successful management of the first "wave" in order to constitute itself as following an 'objectively' correct, rational, realist and economically 'responsible' plan committed to technocratic rationality, in sharp contrast to the non-costed, reckless and irrational demands of the opposition that were grouped under the empty signifier "populism."

The meaningful linking of all these different notions to the empty signifier "populism" and their construction is properly illustrated by the statement of the Minister of Finance during the discussion of the second annual budget that ND composed in times of pandemic during the last days of 2021:

"...Mr. Tsipras, you remain trapped in a world of delusion, illusions, suspicion, populism, irresponsibility, bidding and lost opportunities. You remain captive ...in an endless umbilical examination, in a world that does not want or cannot read the data and messages of the times. at the beginning of this challenge, you urged us to give everything head-on. Then you kept coming with proposals to increase the measures we had announced by several billion euros. Fortunately for

the country, New Democracy has in its DNA the rejection of populism and the insistence on responsibility, consistency and progress.”²⁴⁰

Finally, a question that must be addressed at this point is, how are the people constructed in this discourse that perceives the “populist” opposition as adopting an “irresponsible” stance towards the “national effort”? Briefly, at this juncture, ND attempted to create a continuity between the “victory over populism” narrative that was constructed immediately after its election, where the Greek people “rejected populism,” and the “responsible” and “mature” stance that the Greek people adopted during the first ‘wave’ of the pandemic:

After all, the Greek society has now been shielded after an unprecedented ten-year economic crisis and has developed and attained an extremely high level of maturity. With its attitude during the pandemic, it has rejected every nugget of populism... while at the same time it shows great personal responsibility and great levels of social solidarity. In the most difficult juncture, the Greek citizens with their conscious behavior, discipline and cooperation proved the consistency and their prudence.”²⁴¹

In ND’s discourse, the Greek people are perceived as having politically “matured” after going through both periods, with the signifier “maturity” being the nodal point around which their identity is constructed in ND’s anti-populist discourse. The articulation that constructs the idea and notion of collective “maturity” is thus positioned in contrariety to the “bidding” and “divisive” “populism,” with the former acquiring the meaning of “immunity” that the popular subject has acquired through its experiences against “populism”:

“.. the Government during the most difficult situation supported the economy, the businesses and the workers. These efforts are recognized by the international community and the Greek society. The overwhelming majority of the citizens trust the Prime Minister and the Government. They turn their backs on the images of misery that are constructed by the Opposition, with an extreme, populist, sometimes cheery discourse that, however, remains indifferent to the citizens.”²⁴²

²⁴⁰ Speech by Christos Staikouras, Minister of Finance, during the Plenary Session (18/12/2021)

²⁴¹ Zeta Makri, Member of the Hellenic Parliament elected with New Democracy, during the Plenary Session (14/09/2020)

²⁴² Speech by Theodoros Skilakakis, Deputy Minister of Finance, during the Plenary Session (12/12/2020)

In that sense, it is evident that the empty signifier “populism” is meaningfully linked to political attempts to present a “distorted reality” or “deceive” the Greek people in order to mobilize them against the government that uses every possible mean to support and protect them. The citizens were thus interpellated as the subject of a mature sociopolitical order that “populism” attempted to destabilize by creating objectively false images of “misery” and by attempting to demagogically deceive them.

The analysis will now proceed to the second polarity that can be identified in the Greek government’s discourse regarding the pandemic that involves the signifier “populism,” the one with “science.”

6.2 Populism Against Science

The apparent contrast between “populism” and “science” or “expert knowledge” during the pandemic was by no means a Greek peculiarity but a tense international debate that primarily focused on the countries with, allegedly, populist leaders and governments, such as the US, UK etc. In these debates, “populism” was correlated to the success or failure of a respective government at managing the pandemic, with “populism” being, most of the times, portrayed as a source of failure.²⁴³ The recurring arguments that can be identified in cases along different geographies and ideological contexts is that “populism,” in contrast to liberalism most of the times, opposes excellence, meritocracy and questions science in times that the uncritical obedience to the ‘objectively correct’ expert scientific knowledge seems necessary.²⁴⁴

As noted already, these debates touch upon certain broader political issues, such as the coexistence of democracy and technocracy or the alleged ‘objectivity’ of scientific knowledge in situations such as the 2008 economic crisis, where neoliberal economists were portrayed as the sources of the absolute and ‘objective’ truth that could lead to economic recovery. In this context, Stavrakakis has referred to Roland Barthes’ “myth,” in order to conceptualize the

²⁴³Yannis Stavrakakis, “Ideological aspects of the health crisis (COVID19)” (Nikos Poulantzas Institute, 2020) (Σταυρακάκης, Γ. (2020). Ιδεολογικές όψεις της υγειονομικής κρίσης(COVID19). Αθήνα: Ινστιτούτο Νίκος Πουλαντζάς). <https://poulantzas.gr/yliko/giannis-stavrakakis-ideologikes-opsis-tis-ygionomikis-krisis-covid19/>

²⁴⁴Ibid.

process through which the relation between politics and science gets naturalized and appears as an unquestionable natural law. More specifically, “myth” is used to refer to a special type of discourse that becomes naturalized, thus repressing its contingent and historical articulation and presenting itself as commonsensical and certain, as truth.²⁴⁵ However, at the same point, it is underlined that science is necessary for any power as a source of legitimation and it is not evaluatively neutral since it reflects the values of the respective society, a statement that might seem as discrediting science but, actually, points towards the necessity of a radical democratic, pluralist framework to exist, where different viewpoints and values discuss and occasionally collide while forging science’s credibility.²⁴⁶

Returning to the pandemic, the literature notes that the argument of “populism” being an anti-scientific force dates back to Hofstadter that identified anti-intellectualism as a core characteristic of populism, alongside nativism, antisemitism and provincialism, among others.²⁴⁷ This argument was reinforced on a global level when prominent “populist,” according to the mainstream academic, political and journalistic discourse, figures, such as Trump and Bolsonaro, proceeded to approach the pandemic with profoundly controversial statements, creating confusion and provoking the formation of conspiratorial movements and groups.²⁴⁸ However, as pointed out in the literature, “populism” by itself is a very ambiguous criterion to explain the stance of certain political forces towards the pandemic or science. Regarding the Greek case, the second ‘wave’ of the pandemic and the inability of the state mechanism to control the number of cases and deaths alongside the profound restrictive/preventive measures that followed in an attempt to halt the development of the pandemic, such as the mandatory vaccination of certain social groups and the strict national lockdowns, led to the emergence of tense debates questioning the effectiveness of the preventive measures, vaccination and the role of the scientists.

²⁴⁵ Ibid; Galanopoulos and Stavrakakis, note 145, 9.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ Antonis Galanopoulos and Giorgos Venizelos, “Anti-populism and Populist Hype During the COVID-19 Pandemic”, (2022) *Representation* 58:2, 251-268, DOI:10.1080/00344893.2021.2017334

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

6.2.1 The Dichotomy between Populism and Science

In this context, the second discursive pattern that can be identified in the discourse of the Greek government during the management of the pandemic that involved the use of the signifier “populism” is the dichotomy between populism and science. Obviously, by “science,” the analysis does not refer merely to the signifier “science” but to a group of signifiers such as “scientists,” “technocrats,” “experts” or “scientific knowledge” that dominated the public discourse during the pandemic.

The analysis has identified two periods and contexts in which the signifier “populism” and the “populist” forces were constructed in contrariety to science and in equivalential relations to each other. The first period when this dichotomy was notably privileged in the discourse of ND extended from the management of the first ‘wave’ to the last two months before the beginning of the second. During this period, the governmental discourse attempted to connect the success in the management of the first ‘wave’ to the efficiency of technocratic knowledge that “populism” opposed during the ten-year economic crisis while also attempting certain generalizations regarding the relation between “populism” and “technocracy.” This connection created an equivalential link between the non-elected economists and bankers that were involved in the management of the economic crisis which were politically targeted by the ‘anti-memorandum’ discourse of SYRIZA as expressing an undemocratic way out of the crisis, and the infectiologists consulting the government during the pandemic, under the empty signifier “technocrats”:

“We have daily updates from experts - not politicians - who inform the people exactly about the developments. In a sense, after a decade of populism, when incredible things were heard in the public debate, it is really comforting that now those who know the issues well, the technocrats, who have been demonized for so many years, are the ones who guide us in terms of the adequate political decisions which we should receive.”²⁴⁹

And,

²⁴⁹ Interview of Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis on CNN and Christiane Amanpour, 01/04/2020

“Personally, I will stick to the language of truth and continue to trust the experts, the scientists, the technocrats, those who were so discredited during the years of crisis and populism.”²⁵⁰

What can be theorized here is that, during this period that the second ‘wave’ was not yet a reality, the governmental discourse attempted to capitalize on the first ‘wave’s comparatively successful management to further promote and legitimize its neoliberal technocratic agenda. This procedure can be examined in two dimensions, with the first being the re-negotiation of the charge, value, and meanings of the technocratic economic policies of the past through the ‘vindication’ of “technocracy” during the first ‘wave,’ and the second being the use of the successful management of the first ‘wave’ as a source of legitimation for future technocratic policies. In this process, as examined during the previous chapter as well, the “de-ideologization” of the crisis, its management and its stakes was also of crucial importance:

“Some choose, unfortunately, to give an ideological color to this pandemic.... In these moments the only ideology is the protection of public health.”²⁵¹

In this context and discourse, “populism” can be identified as being meaningfully linked to and representing the opposing values or the “non-technocratic” discourse, such as the “unscientific,” “undocumented” and heavily politicized/ideological discourses that do not properly represent (if not distort) reality, while simultaneously targeting or ‘demonizing’ the technocrats. In that sense, ND attempted to hegemonize the popular appeal, trust and respect that the infectiologists had acquired after the successful management of the first wave by re-articulating the floating signifier “technocrats” in a chain of equivalence that linked them to the economists and bankers of the 2009-2015 period, while also constructing them in contrariety to “populism”:

“I attach great importance to the fact that a documented technocratic scientific discourse has emerged again through the crisis, which I think is also a cross-

²⁵⁰ Speech by Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis to the Plenary of the Parliament during the debate on the ratification of the Act of Legislative Content on health measures (02/04/2020)

²⁵¹ Speech by Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis to the Plenary of the Parliament during the debate on the ratification of the Act of Legislative Content on health measures (02/04/2020)

*party response to populism, exaggeration, and fake news wherever they come from”.*²⁵²

And,

*“As you know, Greece has gone through several waves of populism and the first people who are always targeted when the populists come to power are the technocrats.”*²⁵³

The second period when the dichotomy between “populism” and “science” acquired a privileged position in ND’s discourse covers the second half of the second ‘wave’ when the first vaccines against COVID-19 were approved for conditional use by the regulatory authorities of the EU, signaling the beginning of the governmental vaccination campaign, the multiple and constantly revised regulations regarding the vaccination certificates and the mandatory vaccination of certain social and professional groups.

The antagonism that emerged after the decision for a second national lockdown between the opposition and the government was expressed through the accusations of the former targeting the “conscious decision” of the government to not support the public hospitals and the NHS during the seven months that interposed between the two lockdowns. At this juncture, SYRIZA articulated a, formally, populist discourse targeting the government’s conscious “inactivity,” favoring of the private sector, and refusal to spend resources on the NHS as something that “the people” will soon suffer from:

“When we told you that you have no right to stall, to play games with the owners of the private clinics, when we told you that you had an obligation to strengthen the NHS, the governmental representative Mr. Petsas came out and said that we will not “throw away” the money that SYRIZA and Tsipras call for by strengthening the ICUs...

²⁵² Video conference of Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis with the President of the Republic Katerina Sakellariopoulou (08/04/2020)

²⁵³ Interview of Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis to the Financial Times, 05/06/2020

So what the Greek people are experiencing and will suffer from Saturday and onwards is exclusively your political, moral and historical responsibility!..At the very least, you owe the Greek people a continuous apology!"²⁵⁴

Having set the antagonistic context in which the country entered the second ‘wave’ of the pandemic, the dichotomy between “populism” and “science” would return in relation to the complex topic of vaccination, including the interplay between the “anti-vax” conspiracy theorists, the mandatory vaccinations, and the critique of the opposition towards the governmental plans.

In brief, already from the summer of 2020 when the research for a COVID-19 vaccine was far from producing a safe product for mass use, anti-vaccination voices and protesters would join the wider popular anti-lockdown demonstrations in the European capitals and attempt to promote and combine their agendas with those of other protesting groups.²⁵⁵ In Greece, although not manifested by any forms of activism until 2021, the anti-vaccination theories would emerge around the same time in popular social media platforms, attracting the attention, although to a limited extend, of mainstream media and political forces. The following statement is a typical example of this phenomenon, that also incorporated an answer to SYRIZA’s critique, by ND:

"The announcements about the preparation of effective vaccines signify a ray of light to all of humanity in the darkness of the pandemic. But not on the "planet SYRIZA." Judging from their announcements and from the reactions of their leadership, they probably caused irritation to SYRIZA, which seems to be investing in the health disaster of the country.

The Government is proceeding with the development of a plan for the vaccination of citizens. SYRIZA, on the contrary, with its attitude “winks” to the followers of the anti-vaccination movement.

²⁵⁴ Speech by Giannis Ragkousis, member of the Hellenic Parliament elected with SYRIZA, during the Plenary Session, 05/11/2020.

²⁵⁵ Jonathan Jarry, “The Anti-Vaccine Movement in 2020” at *McGill* (22/05/2020) available at <https://www.mcgill.ca/oss/article/covid-19-pseudoscience/anti-vaccine-movement-2020> (last accessed 25/04/2023); “Germany: Anti-vaccinators, far-right and conspiracy theorists take the streets” at *AFTODIOIKISI* (29/08/2020) available at <https://www.aftodioikisi.gr/diethni/germania-stoys-dromoys-antiemvoliastes-akrodexioi-kai-synomosiologoi/> (last accessed 25/04/2023)

We will acquire a vaccine for the coronavirus. What about populism?"²⁵⁶

At this point came the first correlation of “populism” (attached permanently to SYRIZA) to the anti-vaccination movement through the metaphor “wink,” indicating a political “flirt” between the “populist” SYRIZA and these marginal (?) social forces. At the same time, the ‘Greek Solution’ party, also systematically accused as “populist” by ND and being the primary parliamentary voice of the Greek ultra-conservatives and far-rightists, would also ride the anti-vaccination ‘wave’ by flirting with conspiracy theories ‘imported’ from abroad. When the vaccines finally became available in the end of December 2020, the statements that the leader of ‘Greek Solution’ made when invited to symbolically take the first dose of the vaccine alongside the other party leaders are indicative of his party’s approach to vaccination:

“The prime minister expects me to go with him to get the vaccine and encourage more people to do so, while being wary of possible side effects and possibly bear the cost of the choice to encourage people to die. I will never do it myself. I will not turn my father into a guinea pig.”²⁵⁷

Regarding SYRIZA’s stance towards vaccination, the party stated from the first moment of the vaccination campaign that, although being a significantly important tool, the vaccine could not replace the NHS in the battle against the virus. In that sense, SYRIZA followed a strategy of focusing on the strengthening of the NHS through the hiring of permanent personnel, new infrastructure, and the requisition of private clinics:

“SYRIZA has been stating from the first moment that the vaccine, which the government has reduced to a panacea to justify its inaction in strengthening the NHS, is an important tool but by itself it is not enough to deal with the pandemic. Until a significant part of the population is vaccinated, citizens cannot remain exposed to an out-of-control pandemic.”²⁵⁸

The pandemic finally peaked in terms of deaths and cases between March and June 2021, producing, among other reactions, tense demonstrations against the restrictive measures, strikes by the exhausted health personnel etc.²⁵⁹ Entering summer, the anti-vaccination

²⁵⁶ Announcement of the Press Office of New Democracy (19/11/2020)

²⁵⁷ Speech by Kyriakos Velopoulos, President of the Greek Solution during the Plenary Session, (10/12/2020)

²⁵⁸ Statement by the Press Office of SYRIZA (16/12/2020)

²⁵⁹ For the official COVID-19 stats regarding Greece, see: <https://www.covidstats.gr/grstats.html>

‘movement’ would eventually acquire physical representation by organizing certain demonstrations in Athens’ central squares, focusing on the governmental plans for mandatory vaccination of certain professional groups like healthcare workers or fire-fighters and citizens over 60 years old. At this point, the government had taken a clear stance in favor of the mandatory vaccination of certain professions that could not continue working without a vaccination-certificate, but the public discourse had also incorporated views from certain governmental officials calling for a broadening of mandatory vaccination, a debate that at this preliminary stage could be theorized to have fueled conspiracy theories, although to a limited degree. It is in this context that the identity and political affiliations of the “anti-vaxxers” would become of significant importance for the identification of the meanings that “populism” acquired during the pandemic and the equivalential links that were created through the use of the signifier.

During the first anti-vaccination demonstrations in June 2021, having as their central slogan the opposition to the mandatory vaccination, the mainstream journalistic discourse would identify predominantly conservative and extreme-right political characteristics to the protesters. The photographs that accompanied the journalistic reports depicted banners referring to known neo-Nazi and far-right organizations or religious symbols accompanied by slogans correlating the vaccine to anti-Christian conspiracies, alongside physical attacks against members of leftist organizations occurring synchronically to the demonstrations, were some of the evidences to support the extreme-right identity of the ‘movement.’²⁶⁰

On the other hand, during the same period, the “populist” opposition of SYRIZA, as expressed by its leader, would also engage in the debate regarding mandatory vaccination taking a clear stance in favor of the measure for healthcare workers and certain social groups but opposing its implementation to the general population, since it could lead to social

²⁶⁰ Dina Daskalopoulou, “Fascists and anti-vaccination Nazis went wild” at *EFSYN* (15/06/2021) available at https://www.efsyn.gr/politiki/298453_fasistes-kai-nazi-antiemboliastes-bgikan-pagania (25/04/2023); “Anti-vaccination rallies tomorrow in major cities” at *AFTODIKOIKISI* (13/07/2021) available at <https://www.aftodioikisi.gr/koinonia/sygkentroseis-antiemvoliaston-ayrio-se-megales-poleis-afisa/> (last accessed 25/04/2023); “Syntagma Square: Golden Dawn members, far-rightists with crosses and anti-vaccine images” at *EFSYN* (14/07/2021) available at https://www.efsyn.gr/ellada/koinonia/302476_syntagma-hraysiaytes-akrodexioi-me-stayroys-kai-eikones-kata-ton-embolion (last accessed 25/04/2023); “Syntagma Square riots at the anti-vaccination rally” (21/07/2021) at *Kathimerini* available at <https://www.kathimerini.gr/society/561441526/plateia-syntagματος-epeisodia-stin-sygkentrosi-ton-antiemvoliaston/> (last accessed 25/04/2023); “Syntagma Square: A motley crowd of anti-vaxxers” at *Kathimerini* (22/07/2021) available at <https://www.kathimerini.gr/society/561441754/plateia-syntagματος-eteroklito-plithos-antiemvoliaston/> (last accessed 25/04/2021)

discrimination and “social cannibalism.”²⁶¹ Although this stance appears as relatively compatible and consensual to the governmental plans, ND’s discourse at this point would start to create equivalential links between SYRIZA and the anti-vaxxers by focusing on certain statements made by high-ranking members of the former, mainly the surgeon and former Health Minister of SYRIZA Pavlos Polakis, that challenged the efficiency or necessity and, therefore, the mandatory implementation of the vaccination for certain age groups while also advocating for the importation of “promising” COVID treatments, such as monoclonal antibodies.

Having briefly presented the identity of the antagonistic discourses and their struggle in the context of the vaccination campaign, ND’s discourse would attempt to create equivalential links between the “populist” opposition of SYRIZA as expressed by its ex-Health Minister, the anti-vaccination protesters coming from the extreme-right and the ‘Greek Solution’:

Mr. Polakis has declared himself the informal representative of the anti-vaccination movement along with Kyriakos Velopoulos (president of the ‘Greek Solution’). And there is a very interesting political feature here. If you look at all the public opinion polls worldwide, the anti-vaccination movement in the US, England, Germany, belongs by a percentage of 80-90% to the extreme right. In Greece we have an unprecedented phenomenon. The main representatives of the ‘anti-vaxxers’ are on the left. It is Polakis, it is SYRIZA.... SYRIZA cannot at this critical time pretend that it does not listen what Mr. Polakis is doing.”²⁶²

As indicated by the statement and returning once again to a reformed “theory of the extremes,” “anti-vaccination” acts as the empty signifier that incorporates the equivalential link between sociopolitical forces and demands that do not link themselves equivalentially. In this case, although SYRIZA and ‘Greek Solution’ represent and formulate very different readings of the role of vaccination in the struggle against the pandemic, with the former acquiring a more ‘mainstream’ and ‘scientific’ stance as opposed to the more ‘conspiratorial’

²⁶¹ Voula Kehagia, “What does SYRIZA say about mandatory vaccination and segregation in restaurants” *ETHNOS* (14/07/2021) available at <https://www.ethnos.gr/Politics/article/165958/tileeiosyrizagiaypoxreotikoembolismokaidiaxorismosthnestiash> (last accessed 25/04/2021).

²⁶² Interview by Adonis Georgiadis, Minister of Growth and Investments to the TV station OPEN (25/08/2021)

stance of the latter, they are discursively identified as serving the same goal of opposing or consciously sabotaging the vaccination campaign:

“You represent a particularity, Mr. Tsipras, because everywhere the anti-vaccination voices essentially came from the extremes of the political spectrum, more often from the far right and, sometimes, from the extreme left. You essentially allowed –or tolerated, encouraged, I don't know, that's what you'll answer for us you - within your own party a public bilingualism, which has undermined the concrete front of the vaccination effort.... Every time we made an attempt to increase the vaccination rates you criticized us.”²⁶³

And,

Ladies and gentlemen, I would have expected more seriousness from the Opposition. You know, in the discussion it was clearly manifested. Velopoulos and Polakis are the two sides of the same coin. They both flattered the ‘anti-vaxxers’.”²⁶⁴

The correlation of SYRIZA to extreme-right political forces that opposed the need for “collective discipline” towards the restrictive and preventive measures was also manifested during the party’s critique of the repressive measures that the government adopted during demonstrations demanding extra-support for the NHS. In this case, SYRIZA had claimed that the police practices of the government resembled the post-Civil War anti-communist state of the 1950s, with the government responding by correlating SYRIZA’s “demagogic” and “populist” stance to the far-right German AfD:

“Ladies and gentlemen, at the most critical moment of the pandemic, we must not let its consequences contaminate the social fabric. It is unacceptable...at this juncture to formulate accusations of a return to the 50s...it is unacceptable to change the meaning of words in the name of demagoguery. Not only because this way dialogue is abolished, and cheap populism prevails, but because through cheap impressions, the way can actually be paved for something much worse. After all,

²⁶³ Speech by Kyriakos Mitsotakis during the Plenary Session (18/10/2021)

²⁶⁴ Speech by Miltiadis Chrysomalis, Member of the Hellenic Parliament elected with New Democracy, during the Plenary Session (01/12/2021)

*the far-right AfD in Germany is also talking about a “coronavirus dictatorship.”*²⁶⁵

A question that naturally emerges at this point is, how can the description of this discursive practice and antagonistic context help in illustrating the big picture regarding the role and use of “populism” as a signifier in this juncture? Building on the statements that have been quoted so far, the chains of equivalence and the equivalential relations that have situated “populism” and the “populists” in certain positions towards concepts such as “truth,” “knowledge,” “science” and “expertise,” it seems safe to note that during the pandemic more than two discourses aspiring to establish a “regime of truth” emerged in Greece’s public discourse. By “regimes of truth,” the analysis refers to the Foucauldian term also utilized by Laclau and Mouffe to analyze the power, knowledge and discourse nexus. More specifically, the term denotes the frameworks that regulate public discourse and distinguish what can or cannot be said, what is perceived as credible and true or as incredible and false.²⁶⁶ In that sense, Laclau and Mouffe claimed that in a given historical period multiple competing discourses are struggling to establish a “truth regime” by constructing a certain truth as hegemonic while politically and discursively establishing a certain consensus around it.²⁶⁷ In the context under analysis, it seems that “populism” emerged as one of the empty signifiers that were used to represent the equivalentially linked discourses that the governmental truth regime evaluated as challenging and questioning its objectively true, rational, correct and scientific crisis management. In that sense, it is obvious that the common and shared truth of the first ‘wave’ that developed on the broadly cross-party accepted need to “listen to the experts” collapsed during the significantly more deadly second ‘wave’ while producing a radicalized political discourse in which “populism” came to signify the discourses that deviated from the governmental perception of “truth,” “rationalism” or “objectivity” that accompanied references to the “expertise,” “technocracy” and “science” that, allegedly, backed the governmental management. In that sense, the complex political struggles and language games that developed around the topic of vaccination and the strategy that should be

²⁶⁵ Response of Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis in the Plenary Session, as part of the "Prime Minister's Hour", to a topical question of the President of SYRIZA, Alexis Tsipras (12/03/2021)

²⁶⁶ Stavrakakis and Galanopoulos, note 145, 8; Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power’, interview given to Alessandro Fontana and Pasquale Pasquino”, (1991) in Paul Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader* (London: Penguin, 1991), 51-75.

²⁶⁷ Ibid. Jørgensen and Phillips, note 10, 17.

followed in order to protect the Greek citizens were reduced to “scientific,” on the one hand, and “populist,” “irrational” and so on, on the other.

Concluding, unlike the transition from the migration crisis and the ‘Evros events’ to the pandemic, the deaths correlated to COVID-19 complications would not decrease nor stop due to the development of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. On the other hand, it is safer to theorize that the transition from the one crisis to the other occurred on the media sphere, where the briefing on the pandemic’s development had become normalized as a daily media reality that the, seemingly impossible up to that point, ‘return of war at the heart of Europe’ would violently displace in the daily broadcasts.

7 Analysis: The Russo-Ukrainian Conflict and the EU Economic Crisis

7.1 Background

On February 24th, 2022, the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin authorized a ‘special military operation’ against Ukraine aiming “to protect the people that have been subjected to bullying and genocide for the last eight years,” a goal that would, allegedly, be achieved through the demilitarization and ‘denazification’ of Ukraine.²⁶⁸ This conflict that acquired global characteristics from the first moment, whether framed as an ‘invasion’, ‘war’ or ‘special military operation’, admittedly emerged during a period when the Greek and the EU economy were struggling to recover and deal with the economic challenges and human losses that the pandemic had inflicted.²⁶⁹

²⁶⁸ Andrew Osborn, “Russia's Putin authorises 'special military operation' against Ukraine” at REUTERS (24/02/2022) available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-putin-authorises-military-operations-donbass-domestic-media-2022-02-24/> (last accessed 26/04/2023)

²⁶⁹ COUNCIL OF COUNCILS, “The Invasion That Shook the World”, at COUNCIL OF COUNCILS (22/02/2023) available at <https://www.cfr.org/councilofcouncils/global-memos/invasion-shook-world> (last accessed 26/04/2023)

Focusing more narrowly on the Greek context, at the time that the Russian army formally entered Ukrainian soil the deaths associated with COVID-19 were nearly 80 every day,²⁷⁰ while the inflation had reached 6.2%, a rate characterized as the highest in 25 years.²⁷¹ Regarding political antagonism, Greece witnessed the beginning of the conflict during a period when the primary opposition and government were engaging in tense debates on the management of the pandemic, focusing on issues of suspected governmental corruption regarding direct agreement contracts, the funding of the mainstream TV stations with several millions Euros in order to promote the vaccination campaign and the rising prices of electricity and basic goods. Additionally, on the 30th of January 2022, SYRIZA filed a motion of censure during the Plenary Session of the Hellenic Parliament against the government, demanding the resignation of the Prime Minister and focusing on the “consecutive failed managements” of the government regarding the pandemic, the fierce summer wildfires, the inflation and the profound problems that the state mechanism faced during the heavy winter snowfalls.

Apart from the specific themes that SYRIZA’s discourse focused on during the last month before the beginning of the Ukrainian conflict, it can be safely stated that the primary opposition articulated a, formally, populist discourse to criticize the governmental tactics and the ‘altitude’ of the Prime Minister:

“While you fail, you defiantly continue to believe that you are not an elected Prime Minister who is obliged to be held accountable, but you behave as a prince whose power belongs to him by hereditary right and you do not care if the people suffer. You just build your own regime by giving the money of the Greek taxpayers in direct assignments, to speculators, to ‘golden boys’ and to ‘people of the night,’²⁷² while the vast majority of Greek households does not have enough to make ends meet.”²⁷³

²⁷⁰ <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus/country/greece>

²⁷¹ EUROSTAT, “Euro area annual inflation up to 5.8%” available at <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/14358044/2-02032022-AP-EN.pdf/617fee08-c46f-453a-a308-4fa3d33f4aae#:~:text=Euro%20area%20annual%20inflation%20is,office%20of%20the%20European%20Union.>

²⁷² ‘People of the night’ is a commonly used expression in Greek to refer to shady individuals that are associated with business activities of ambiguous legality, such as nightclubs etc. that take place usually in the nighttime.

²⁷³ Speech by Alexis Tsipras, President of SYRIZA, during the Plenary Session, 30/01/2022

At this juncture, the opposition constructed “the people” and their interests in direct opposition to the “regime” of the Prime Minister that incorporated certain economically strong actors representing an “establishment.” On the other hand, the government articulated a clearly technocratic anti-populist discourse to discard the accusations and discredit SYRIZA based on its inability and unwillingness to comprehend socioeconomic reality:

“Mr. Tsipras, judging from what you write in the motion of censure, I am sorry, but you are probably consciously trapped in a world of illusions, self-deception and populism, in a world that does not want and cannot read the messages of the times and the data that these times produce, especially in times of fluidity, uncertainty and restrictions.”²⁷⁴

Additionally, during the same period and just a few days before the beginning of the conflict, PM Mitsotakis would discuss publicly the essentially conflicting relationship between “populism” and democracy, a theme and polarity that is going to be of central importance in the context of this crisis and is indicative of the polarization that the party discourse was characterized by during this juncture:

“When the previous government tried to pass unconstitutional legislation to control the media, they (constitutional court) rejected it. In that sense, we had an institutional function that was strong enough to prevent a populist government from conquering the institutions and winning again.

My view is that these governments become very dangerous and can become dangerous for democracy if they win a second election. We managed to prevent this.”²⁷⁵

7.2 Framing the Conflict

²⁷⁴ Speech by Christos Staikouras, Minister of Finance, during the Plenary Session, 30/01/2022

²⁷⁵ Participation of Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis in a debate on "Stemming the Illiberal Tide: The Global Challenge of Eroding Democracy", within the framework of the Munich Security Conference February 18, 2022

In this polarized antagonistic political context, the Ukrainian conflict was immediately framed by the Greek government. as a brutal military invasion that violated international law, questioned the security architecture of Europe, and violated Ukraine’s territorial integrity and sovereignty.²⁷⁶ This discursive construction of the conflict that took place just a few hours after President Putin’s public statement was soon supplemented by broader ideological characteristics through the articulation of a discourse around the nodal point “Ukraine” (expressed also as “the Ukrainian people” or “the Ukrainian struggle”) linked through a positive chain of equivalence to the moments “freedom”, “heroism”, “democracy”, “progress”, “peace”, “independence” and “lawfulness.” During this early stage of the conflict, Ukraine also represented what DT calls a “myth” in ND’s discourse.²⁷⁷ More specifically, “myth” in this case designates that “Ukraine,” being a floating signifier that different discourses struggle to fill its meaning, refers to a totality (a country or society) that acquires its meaning by the moments linked to it (“freedom,” “heroism” etc.). In that sense, “Ukraine” at this juncture escapes the narrow meaning of an Eastern European country and symbolizes the struggle for the protection of the positive elements constituting the chain of equivalence.

On the other hand, a second chain of equivalence was articulated with a strongly negative charge meaningfully linking the signifiers “authoritarianism,” “violence,” “hegemony,” “backwardness” and “obsessions” with the signifiers “Russia” or “Vladimir Putin.” These chains of equivalence were obviously articulated in antagonistic terms, as representing two opposing camps and discourses that struggle for survival at the borders of Ukraine, with the nodal points “Russia” and “Ukraine” being articulated in contrariety to the elements of each opposing chain:

“..the forces of authoritarianism, violence, hegemony are tested today in the drama of Ukraine, with those of freedom, independence and democracy. Perhaps this is also why Putin's choices are perceived all over the world as a field where the progressive perception and action is competing against outdated ideologies and (ideological) obsessions.”²⁷⁸

²⁷⁶ Statement by Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis upon his arrival at the Extraordinary Session of the European Council (24/02/2022)

²⁷⁷ Jorgensen and Phillips, note 10, 50-51

²⁷⁸ Speech by Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis to the Parliament in the debate according to article 142A of the Rules of Procedure of the Parliament, with the purpose of informing the House about the crisis in Ukraine and the implications for Greece (01/03/2022)

Building on the quotation, the concept of (ideological) “obsessions” emerges once again, as observed during the first chapter of the analysis as well, to describe certain beliefs and practices that ND evaluates as politically, historically or even ethically bankrupt and problematic. In this case, the signifier “obsessions” is used to facilitate the transition to the national affairs of Greece, by becoming an empty signifier representing the “conservative,” “regressive,” “oppressive” and “extreme” social forces that are equivalentially linked to Russia and certain suspicious “interests”:

(continuing immediately after the previous quote) “Obsessions also present in our country, in which the most conservative and regressive sections of society meet, regardless of colors and party flags. A convergence of the extremes, aiming at enchainment and oppression. Having as their weapons myths and unacknowledged (suspicious) interests.”²⁷⁹

Focusing on this judgement made by the Prime Minister Mitsotakis regarding abstract “extreme” or “conservative and regressive” political forces, a question that emerges is, what was the stance of the opposition regarding the Russo-Ukrainian conflict during the formulation of this judgement, one week after the start of the conflict? Starting with the Greek government, the state mechanism decided to immediately send humanitarian and medical equipment to Ukraine, an action that was applauded by the totality of the opposition.²⁸⁰ However, the government immediately proceeded to also send “defensive,” as framed by the government itself based on the argument that Ukraine is simply defending itself, military equipment²⁸¹ without consulting or debating the opposition, a move that triggered the counter-hegemonic claim of SYRIZA that opposed the decision and the non-institutional process while asking for a different national strategy:

²⁷⁹ Deuteronomy of Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis in the Parliament in the debate according to article 142A of the Rules of Procedure of the Parliament, with the purpose of informing the House about the crisis in Ukraine and the implications for Greece (01/03/2022).

²⁸⁰ “Mitsotakis to Zelensky through a telephone conversation: “We are ready to help Ukraine” at Proto Thema (26/02/2022) available at <https://www.protothema.gr/politics/article/1216313/telefoniki-epikoinonia-mitsotaki-zelenski/> (last accessed 27/04/2023)

²⁸¹ “Two C 130s took off from Elefsina with defense material to Ukraine”, *CNN Greece* (27/02/2022) available at <https://www.cnn.gr/politiki/story/303101/apogeiothikan-apo-tin-eleysina-ta-dyo-ellinika-c-130-me-stratiotiko-yliko-pros-tin-oykrania> (last accessed 27/04/2023); “Greece sends military equipment to Ukraine with two C-130s: Ammunition, Kalashnikovs, launchers”, *iefimerida* (27/02/2022) available at <https://www.iefimerida.gr/politiki/ellada-stelnei-amyntiko-exoplismo-oykrania-c-130> (last accessed 27/04/2023)

*“Greece must actively support the Ukrainian people, the need to defend international law, the ceasefire, the return to the diplomatic path and, when possible, the promotion of a new pan-European security system on the basis of the OSCE. In this effort there must be no participation of the Greek Armed Forces in military operations – either with personnel or military equipment. Strong and targeted sanctions must be implemented to pressure the Russian Government to end the invasion and return to diplomacy.”*²⁸²

As indicated by the official position of SYRIZA, although agreeing on the framing of the conflict as an “invasion” and on the enforcement of sanctions, the privileged signifier in its discourse during this period is “diplomacy,” a signifier articulated in opposition to the sending of any military equipment which was interpreted as ND’s governmental tendency to act as the “advanced outpost of the West.” This expression has a long history in Greek foreign-policy debates which can be summarized as expressing the critique of the non-right wing political forces towards ND’s historical tendency to uncritically follow NATO’s geopolitical and military decisions and plans.

In this context, “the West” becomes a floating signifier, since both ND and SYRIZA articulate antagonistic discourses that give differing meanings to the signifier in order to ideologically support their approaches to the national strategy. On the one hand, ND argues in favor of its strategy by invoking the famous saying of its founder, Konstantinos Karamanlis, “We belong to the West,” claiming that it’s a product of Greece’s historical experiences and major geopolitical choices. These choices have, allegedly, situated Greece always “on the right path of history,” a recurring expression in the discourse of ND during this period, that is accompanied by Kyriakos Mitsotakis’ supplementation of the ‘dogma’ with the expression “We are also West” and “we belong to freedom, democracy and international legitimacy.”²⁸³In that sense, ‘the West’ can be analyzed as functioning as a nodal point for the organization of ND’s discourse at this juncture.

²⁸² The official positions of SYRIZA regarding the Russian invasion and its financial implications as formulated by the political council of the party on the 25th of February 2022, <https://www.capital.gr/politiki/3619525/ti-pisteuei-episimos-o-suriza-gia-ti-rosiki-eisboli-kai-tis-oikonomikes-tis-sunepeies/>

²⁸³ Speech by Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis to the Parliament in the debate according to article 142A of the Rules of Procedure of the Parliament, with the purpose of informing the House about the crisis in Ukraine and the implications for Greece, (01/03/2022)

In this context, SYRIZA replied by also articulating a discourse around the nodal point “the West,” claiming that:

“(Mr.Mitsotakis) Today you said: “We are also West.” Well, the answer in this question is that we are both West and East, we are both North and South from the ancient times until today. We are both West and East and North and South. We are the cradle of western civilization. We are the cradle of culture. We are not “also West.”

We are the cradle of Western civilization, and our own responsibility is to regenerate what is today called “the Western world” based on our principles, the principles of freedom, of democracy- true democracy, the rule of law, of social solidarity.”²⁸⁴

It becomes obvious that in this case the two major Greek political forces are assigning different meanings and values to ‘the West,’ with SYRIZA privileging typical left and social democratic notions, such as ‘freedom’ and ‘social solidarity,’ while also underlining the importance of “true” democracy. The latter, has been a major theme in left populist projects of the past, including SYRIZA’s own 2012-2015 project, being contrasted to either right-wing authoritarian regimes or to the contemporary post-democratic EU framework where power has moved from the European peoples to non-elected anonymous technocrats and ‘the markets.’²⁸⁵ In both cases, the adjective “true” tends to signify visions for a more egalitarian and inclusionary democracy that, accompanied by the rest of the signifiers, indicate a more critical stance towards the mainstream Western strategy and political status quo.

Against this theorization, ND would articulate a discourse indirectly correlating the Russian aggression and the Ukrainian struggle to Greece’s position and relation to Turkey. More specifically, ND claimed that the sending of military equipment to Ukraine is a clear, determined and certain message against future attempts of “authoritarian leaders” to revise and question the established borders and violate the international law that Greece uses as its ‘flag’ and symbol in its struggle to defend its sovereign rights. In this context, ND positions any “uncertainties” or expressions of doubt as potentially damaging to the national interests,

²⁸⁴ Speech by Alexis Tsipras, president of SYRIZA, during the Plenary Session of the Hellenic Parliament, (01/03/2022)

²⁸⁵

referring to the ‘ambivalent’ stance of SYRIZA, while stating that this stance acts as an investment that can be of particular importance in a future scenario where Greece faces similar revisionist actions. This hyper-realist approach to international relations that is formulated by ND, in which NATO and EU allies must act in accordance with a single paradigm in order to be entitled to assistance, clashes with SYRIZA’s “multi-dimensional” approach that perceives Greece as a “bridge” between the East and West thus entering a more precarious state by supporting a direct military involvement. In this context, where crisis management articulations antagonize each other, ND’s hegemonic claim consisted of the promise that only this approach (TINA) can safeguard the “national interests” in the future, while SYRIZA’s “bridge” approach represents a counter-hegemonic claim rejecting the idea that the “advanced outpost” dogma is a nationally benefiting stance. On the other hand, ND interpreted the stance of the minor opposition, Mera25, the Communist Party of Greece (KKE) and the ‘Greek Solution,’ as “disappointing” but revealing of their stance towards the war. More specifically, ND criticized the ‘Greek Solution’ as openly admiring and praising Vladimir Putin, while claiming that the two remaining left-wing opposition forces have an ideologically outdated reading of both history and the present.

In that sense, before advancing to the role of the signifier “populism” in this juncture, it is clear that ND had identified certain national and international parties and political forces that did not belong on the same ideological, cultural, geopolitical camp as itself and its construction of ‘the West,’ positioning the, as commonly described by ND itself, “populist” ‘Greek Solution’ and the minor Left opposition among them. On the other hand, “populist” SYRIZA seems to have adopted a rather “responsible”, based on ND’s perception of the term, position by openly condemning the invasion and the Russian aggression, although developing a rather abstract and “non-serious” theory of international relations expressed through poetic metaphors (we belong to the North, South, East and West etc.).²⁸⁶

In this global and national political context, “populism” would emerge dynamically during the early debates over the economic consequences of the conflict for Greece and the West. More specifically, the use and function of “populism” as a signifier in the discourse of

²⁸⁶ The characterization “non-serious” derives by the comment of PM Mitsotakis when asked to address SYRIZA’s position during an Interview with Antonis Schroiter two days after the debate. The prime minister decided to comment on the statement with the ironic expression: “other words so we can love each other”, meaning let’s change the subject; let’s say no more about it or let’s not even go into it. Interview of Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis on Alpha’s main news bulletin and journalist Antonis Schroiter, 03/03/2022

the Greek government addressing the Ukrainian conflict has been identified as following two discursive patterns. The first refers to the framing of “populism” as an anti-democratic threat, while the second reflects the accusations and equivalential relations that the actors which have consistently been accused of being "populist" by ND acquired during this period, with the most prominent of them being their direct or indirect association with Russian interests.

7.3 Populism as an Anti-Democratic Threat

Starting from the construction of “populism” as an anti-democratic threat, the tackling of the sharp rise in fuel and electricity prices was among the immediate priorities of the EU member states and institutions since the strategic goal of economically alienating Russia, alongside Russia’s own ‘weaponization’ of its resources, meant that the cheap Russian natural gas would no longer be available thus affecting the global supply and demand dynamics and driving the prices up. In Greece, the government proceeded rapidly to frame the upcoming economic hardships of the conflict as the necessary “consequences of the West’s decision to defend the values of freedom, democracy and territorial integrity.”²⁸⁷ In that sense, the Greek government articulated a discourse in which the economic challenges were predominantly presented as an imported pathology of the “deepest geopolitical crisis in almost eight decades” which the “European family” and the Greek state were struggling to manage, with the latter formulating “measures measured in the measure of reality” in order to further support the economy and the citizens without undermining the fiscal future of the country.²⁸⁸ In other words, ND articulated a mainstream European-liberal discourse, combining technocratic discipline with an ethical and political obligation to defend the “Western values.”

In this context, the signifier “populism” would emerge to characterize the political forces that would, allegedly, attempt to propagate easy and simplistic solutions and answers to difficult and complex questions by obscuring the international character of the crisis while blaming the national governments to acquire political benefits:

²⁸⁷ Interview of Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis on Alpha's main news bulletin and journalist Antonis Schroiter, (03/03/2022)

²⁸⁸ Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis' message to the citizens about the new support measures (16/03/2022)

“...the forces of populism across the continent once again attempt to peddle easy and simplistic answers to difficult and complex questions. They hide, for example, that the revaluations are imported, looking for national responsibilities. And they propose unimplementable solutions, which caress ears but tie the minds and hands.

Against all this, our weapon remains the language of truth, realism, and results...”

As indicated by the statement, “populism” is once again articulated in an equivalential relation to “unimplementable” solutions but also demagogic practices, a meaningful chain that is articulated in opposition to its counterpart linking the signifiers “truth”, “realism” and “results” with the practice and identity of the Greek government. In that sense, this recurring articulation organized from the very beginning the political space on which the management of the crisis was taking place between the political identities of the “realists,” signifying the mainstream liberal European political forces in which ND positioned itself in, and the “populists,” that act in the margins and proceed to take advantage of the crisis to enter the mainstream political scene.

The articulation of this discourse was accompanied, as noted above, by the presentation of a series of measures for “the relief of the economically weaker citizens and small businesses” that was criticized by the primary opposition as “an exhibition of self-admiration and an operation to obscure the Prime Minister’s responsibilities alongside the super-profits of the cartels and energy producers.”²⁸⁹ In other words, the primary opposition did not fully subscribe to the narrative that the economic challenges of the Greek society were predominantly a product of the war and, therefore, could only be resolved with the end of it, but identified certain peculiarities of the Greek economy that were attributed to the anti-social practices of certain economically powerful actors. In that regard, two antagonistic discursive articulations emerge at this point following the dislocation that the economic developments created. On the one hand, SYRIZA articulates the economic crisis both as a pathology of the war and as deriving from the practices of a problematic national economic establishment,

²⁸⁹ “Support measures - SYRIZA: Demonstration of self-aggrandizement and coverage of the cartels by Mitsotakis' speech” at *ETHNOS* (16/03/2022) available at https://www.ethnos.gr/Politics/article/199702/metrastrhixhssyrizaepideixhaytohaymasmoykaikalyps_hstonkarteltodiaggelmamhtsotakh (last accessed 01/05/2023)

while ND articulates it as predominantly imported in order to displace SYRIZA's "populist" counter-hegemonic claim and safeguard the existing hegemonic order.

The articulation of SYRIZA can be formally perceived as a populist one since the party constructed "the citizens" in an antagonistic relation to the government and the energy producers that acted as "cartels" by having super-profits and profiteering in times of crisis when "the citizens" were "spending the winter in frozen apartments while not been able to pay the bills and afford basic needs for months."²⁹⁰ In this context, the primary opposition articulated a chain of demands in the name of "the society that wouldn't tolerate any more mockery," such as the reduction of the special consumption tax in fuel, the imposition of tariff ceilings on electricity and natural gas, the reduction of the VAT on basic necessities and the increase of the minimum wage to 800 euros.²⁹¹ The association of ND with the energy companies or "cartels" as a bloc with common interests would eventually become a recurring pattern in SYRIZA's discourse, naming the rise in prices as "Mitsotakis' steepness." Obviously, SYRIZA's formulated demands clashed with ND's technocratic discourse to formulate "implementable" and "realistic" support policies and measures that wouldn't undermine the fiscal future of Greece, but also came to "vindicate" ND's "prediction" that the "populists" would attempt to blame the national governments for issues, such as inflation and steepness, that are imported and international.

What can also be noted at this juncture is that the "populist threat" gradually acquired more specific characteristics and antagonists, since the Greek government kept invoking it in relation to its calls and proposals in European forums for a "united European economic front" against issues such as the connection of the price of natural gas to the price of electricity that created "significant difficulties" for the Greek but also European citizens. In other words, apart from using "populism" pejoratively in order to de-legitimize any future alternative policy suggestions that would challenge the economic orthodoxy of its governmental program as belonging to the "populist Sirens,"²⁹² the Greek government can also be observed to have used the "populist threat" as a means to further promote its agenda regarding the necessity for

²⁹⁰ "Support measures - SYRIZA: Exhibition of self-aggrandizement and support of the cartels in Mitsotakis' speech" at *ETHNOS* (16/03/2022) available at <https://www.ethnos.gr/Politics/article/199702/metrasthrixhssyrizaepideixhaytohaymasmoykaikalypshstonkarteltodiaggelmamhtsotakh> (last accessed 27/04/2023)

²⁹¹ Ibid.

²⁹² Speech by Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis at the Joint Session of the US Senate and House of Representatives (17/05/2022)

collective action by the EU member states, a strategy that would obviously favor the smaller and economically weaker members of the union:

“However, it is clear that we cannot face this crisis alone.

*And that is why I would ask you to look at all possible options to see how we can deal with this issue on a European level. I want to be very clear, and I want to repeat to you what I said to my colleagues in the Council: if we do not manage to deal with this issue, the forces of populism will re-emerge in Europe.”*²⁹³

Finally, focusing on the more ideological characteristics ascribed to the notion by ND, “populism” would also be articulated as a threat coming from the past, meaning from the early days of the European crisis when SYRIZA, Podemos and other “populist” forces emerged, towards European unity and democracy. In this discursive articulation, the “populist threat” could possibly return, either as a “nightmare” or as a “specter,²⁹⁴” if the crisis was not dealt efficiently and collectively. The “combustible matter” that would allow “populism” to “flare up again” in this case is identified as the “reasonable popular discontent”²⁹⁵ caused by the increase in prices:

*This is a risk that threatens the post-pandemic recovery. But it is also a minefield for the European idea and for democracy. Could this energy crisis reawaken the nightmare of populism on our continent? And in this field, we Greeks paid a heavy price during the previous ten years. We must not, under any circumstances, see the same phenomena again.”*²⁹⁶

The concept of “European unity”, “the unity of the European peoples” or “the European idea” is a privileged ideological notion in the discourse of ND during this period, since it is established on a chain of equivalence with elements that are also repeatedly constructed, in various other articulations by ND, in sharp opposition to the “populist”

²⁹³ Information notes on the meeting of Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis with the European Union Energy Commissioner Kadri Simson 07/04/2022

²⁹⁴ Discussion between Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis and Netflix Co-CEO Ted Sarandos at an Endeavor Greece event (15/07/2022)

²⁹⁵ Speech by Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis at the Plenary of the European Parliament in Strasbourg (05/07/2022)

²⁹⁶ Statement by Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis after the four-part meeting with the Prime Ministers of Italy Mario Draghi, Spain Pedro Sánchez and Portugal António Costa (18/03/2022)

European forces but also to the Russian aggression. Additionally, the concept is accompanied by more “mythical” notions such as “the European way of life,”²⁹⁷ constructing a meaningful connection between the EU as a supranational political and economic union, the European peoples and the, alleged, cultural and political values that they share and are defended in Ukraine while simultaneously being threatened by “populism”:

*“This is the European way of life, at the end of the day. It is about how we organize our society. It's about democracy, human rights, tolerance. It's about being open to those in real need. And this is something that makes our continent unique.”*²⁹⁸

In that regard, the narrative that is constructed once again reproduces the idea that “populism” is a divisive way of doing politics, but this time on a European level.:

*“In such a difficult time, therefore, we need, more than ever, the unity of the European peoples...based on the principles that have made Europe a real protagonist until today: freedom, national independence, international legitimacy, democracy, open and creative societies, tolerance, tolerance of diversity.”*²⁹⁹

The articulation of this threat was also accompanied by more stereotypical anti-populist arguments, such as the, allegedly, equally possible “extreme right or extreme left” sources of the phenomenon, creating once again equivalential links between political forces that do not link themselves equivalentially based on their common “questioning of the European unity.”³⁰⁰ Finally, the concept of “European unity,” as expressed through relevant signifiers such as “social/political stability” or “social cohesion,” was at the same time articulated as strategically targeted by Russia as part of its plan to use the economic hardships to turn the European peoples against their governments by demanding the end of the assistance to Ukraine and the sanctions to Russia:

²⁹⁷ Discussion of the Greek Prime Minister with the President of the Parliamentary Group of the EPP Manfred Weber, in the context of the Conference on the Future of Europe (14/03/2022)

²⁹⁸ Ibid.

²⁹⁹ Speech by Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis at the event to celebrate 35 years since the start of the Erasmus program (27/06/2022)

³⁰⁰ Positions of Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis during a discussion with OECD Secretary General Mathias Cormann, in the context of the Delphi Economic Forum 09/04/2022

“...everything now shows that Moscow seeks through economic pressure to create social unrest, but also political instability within the countries that react to its plans. It is the cost borne by the front of freedom, International Law and Democracy.”³⁰¹

What can be observed at this point is that the “erosion” of the European “unity” or “social cohesion/stability” in the discourse of ND is articulated as benefiting, although for different reasons and without associating them directly, both the “populists,” that come from the margins/“extremes” of the political systems and seek national responsibilities for an international crisis while offering demagogic solutions, and Russia, which aims at the creation of multiple internal fronts for its antagonists. In other words, following ND’s logic and political analysis, on the one hand Russia can be identified as aiming for the emergence of “populist” actors in the mainstream political scene of EU member states, while the “populists” themselves can be theorized to perceive the economic hardships and Russian blackmail as a political opportunity to promote their “extreme” agendas.

In order to examine how the interests of these two actors are articulated by ND on a national level, the analysis is going to epigrammatically focus on the second discursive pattern that is identified in the Greek government’s discourse, which is the direct or indirect correlation of certain Greek, and systematically accused as, “populist” actors to Russian interests and the notion of “national stability.”

7.4 Populists and the National Stability

As 2023 was getting closer and the pre-election period was about to officially begin, the identification of ND with the forces struggling to preserve the “European unity” and “social cohesion,” alongside the accusations against “populist” SYRIZA of deliberately obscuring the Russian invasion’s contribution to the economic hardships to blame the government, would intensify:

³⁰¹ Introductory statement by Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis at the meeting of the Council of Ministers (30/08/2022)

”Mr. Putin does not hide it, but neither does Mr. Erdogan, who has publicly stated that he would prefer a different government in Athens.”³⁰²

And,

“..(answering to Tsipras) in your 474-word question you didn't find a single word to name the first culprit of this global onslaught of inflation: the Russian invasion of Ukraine... I would also expect today, not only for national reasons but also for profoundly economic ones, a clear condemnation of Mr. Putin. At last, directly denounce the Russian aggression that is fueling today's turmoil and finally admit that your almost-creditor in 2015 is an enemy of democracy and a danger to the stability and progress of peoples.”³⁰³

As indicated by the statements, the indirect association of SYRIZA with Russia and Vladimir Putin has two expressions. The first expression refers to the, alleged, provocative unwillingness of the party to publicly name the Russian invasion as the primary cause of the crisis or as expressed by Alexis Tsipras himself a few minutes before the quotation:

“You can no longer use propaganda to hide your own responsibilities, that is, the fact that a large part of the steepness we experience in our country is not due to the international situation and the war in Ukraine, but to your own governmental decisions.”

The second expression, framed through a “political urban legend” dating back to 2015,³⁰⁴ refers to SYRIZA’s traditionally loose geopolitical commitment to the West. This accusation, indicating “populist” SYRIZA’s ambivalent and unclear stance towards Russia, can be identified as a rather recurring pattern since the beginning of the conflict. A significant example when ND decried this unclear stance occurred after President Zelensky’s speech to the Hellenic Parliament, from which the Communist Party, the ‘Greek Solution’ and Mera25 were consciously absent while SYRIZA was represented by less than half of its MPs. After

³⁰² Ibid.

³⁰³ Answer of Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis to the topical question of the leader of the official opposition and president of SYRIZA Alexis Tsipras to the Prime Minister, in the context of the Prime Minister's Hour (14/10/2022)

³⁰⁴ “The truth about Putin's loans to Tsipras” *NewsBreak* (02/03/2023) available at <https://www.newsbreak.gr/kurios-maximos/437419/i-alitheia-gia-ta-daneika-toy-poytin-ston-tsipra/> (last accessed 28/04/2023)

the speech, the primary opposition fiercely criticized the event since, apart from Zelensky's speech, it featured a brief speech by an Azov-battalion³⁰⁵ member of Greek origins.³⁰⁶ As expressed by Alexis Tsipras on Twitter, although SYRIZA's representative had already stated that SYRIZA stands in solidarity, respects and supports³⁰⁷ Zelensky's defense:

*"The speech by members of the neo-Nazi Azov battalion in the Hellenic Parliament is a provocation. The sole responsibility rests with the Prime Minister. He spoke of a historic day but it is a historic disgrace. The solidarity with the Ukrainian people is something given. But the Nazis cannot have the floor in the Parliament."*³⁰⁸

ND proceeded to address the fierce critique coming from all oppositional parties by, firstly, constructing the "excuses and pretexts" behind the total absence of the three minor oppositional parties as a way to hide their true and sincere stance: "that they stand with Putin."³⁰⁹ Continuing on this discursive logic that resembles a 'horseshoe theory'³¹⁰ or, as more commonly referred to in the Greek context and literature, a "theory of the extremes," ND proceeded once again to create equivalential relations between these actors focusing on their, alleged, support of Putin who is linked to signifiers indicating war atrocities in sharp contrast to ND and the forces "who side with those that defend their country."³¹¹ Regarding SYRIZA, ND utilized the signifier "half-presence," which on an initial level refers to the literal and physical "half-presence" of SYRIZA's MPs to the speech, to once again imply an ambivalent stance which, however, in this case does not balance between abstract geopolitical notions but between "the killing of civilians," "atrocities," and "destruction," on the one hand,

³⁰⁵ The Azov battalion/brigade has been identified since 2014 by both Western and Russian media as carrying Nazi symbols and being suspected of committing war crimes. See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/10/azov-far-right-fighters-ukraine-neo-nazis> and <https://www.bbc.com/news/live/world-europe-60774819/page/7>

³⁰⁶ Georgia-Evangelia Karagianni and Marianthi Pelekanaki, "Zelenskyy speech at Greek parliament overshadowed by Azov video" *EURACTIV* (07/04/2022) available at <https://www.euractiv.com/section/europe-s-east/news/zelenskyy-speech-at-greek-parliament-overshadowed-by-azov-video/> (last accessed 28/04/2023).

³⁰⁷ "Gerovasili about Zelensky in the Parliament: It is unacceptable that a member of the Azov battalion spoke - Tassoulas must explain" at *ETHNOS* (07/04/2022) available at <https://www.ethnos.gr/Politics/article/202719/gerobasilhgiazelenskisthboylhparadektootimilhsemelostoytagmatosazofotasoylasnadoseiexghseis> (last accessed 28/04/2023)

³⁰⁸ <https://twitter.com/atsipras/status/1512023668662190082?lang=en> (last accessed 28/04/2023)

³⁰⁹ Announcement of the Press Office of New Democracy (08/04/2022)

³¹⁰ Simon Choat, "'Horseshoe theory is nonsense – the far right and far left have little in common,'" *The Conversation* (12/05/2017) available at <https://theconversation.com/horseshoe-theory-is-nonsense-the-far-right-and-far-left-have-little-in-common-77588> (last accessed 28/04/2023)

³¹¹ *Ibid.*

and a patriotic stance, on the other. Although the conclusions drawn from a single political incident like the one discussed here are always limited, the picture that ND constructs in its discourse regarding the Greek political landscape appears as profoundly problematic and polarized since only ND and PASOK, the only other party with a full parliamentary representation during Zelensky's speech, were represented as unquestionably aligning with the "Western values" and geopolitical interests.

Additionally, the official party statement criticizing the stance of the opposition was accompanied by two print-screens, one being the quoted tweet by Alexis Tsipras and the second being a tweet by Ilias Kasidiaris, the imprisoned second-in-command of Golden Dawn, that ironically commented "It now shows who the real Nazis are," referring to ND and the speech by the Azov member. By incorporating these tweets, ND made a reference to the "upper and lower squares" of Syntagma where in 2011 the mass *Aganaktismenoi* movement, that allegedly consisted of both far-rightists and far-leftists, was protesting the first Greek bail-out austerity program. It is thus obvious that ND's discourse attempted to stigmatize SYRIZA's stance by equivalentially linking it to the most "extreme" political force of the Greek political system, highlighting the high levels of political polarization during the period.³¹²

What can be noted from the analysis of the discourse articulated by ND to address this incident, alongside the expressed belief that "Putin would prefer a different government in Athens," is that the consolidation of the economic challenges gradually radicalized the party's discourse, leading to the articulation of a discourse that portrayed a deeply polarized picture of the Greek political system both in ethical and political terms. Similar to the party's governmental discursive strategy during the 2012-2014 period, ND attempted to highlight that the "populist" and "extreme" forces of the political system follow similar discursive strategies and, similar to a 'horseshoe,' tend to eventually end up at the same political position and produce identical critiques towards the government.

³¹² PASOK's announcement: <https://www.cnn.gr/politiki/story/308078/androylakis-aporadekti-i-emfanisi-toy-tagmatos-azof-sti-voyli-proxeirotita-apo-tin-kyvernisi>; Mera25's announcement: <https://mera25.gr/protofanis-aprepeia-tou-zelenski-stin-elliniki-vouli-me-tin-anochi-tou-proedreiou-kai-tis-kyvernisis/>; KKE's announcement: <https://www.902.gr/eidisi/voyli/292582/eimaste-perifanoi-poy-ta-edrana-toy-kke-itan-adeia-otan-heirotrotoysan-ton> Greek Solution's announcement: <https://elliniki-lisi.gr/anakoynosi-typou-dilosi-tou-proedrou-tis-ellinikis-lysis-kyriakou-velopoulou-gia-to-diangelma-zelenski-imera-ntropis-sto-elliniko-koinovoulio>

Apart from the recurring ‘horseshoe’ or ‘convergence of the extremes’ argument, these indicative statements can be identified as being part of ND’s broader discursive strategy to construct a, sometimes specific and sometimes more abstract, internal threat through a discourse articulated around the nodal point “stability,” a concept that would become closely associated to SYRIZA’s “irresponsible” calls for elections and, eventually, would become consolidated as ND’s central pre-election slogan.³¹³ In this context, “stability,” always articulated in sharp contrast to signifiers such as “instability”, “chaos” or “adventures,” would act as an empty signifier under which the “strong” and “stable” governance of ND would be linked to Greece’s “strength,” “the West” and “democracy”:

“ I repeat that in a very unstable world, strong countries are the stable countries. And I will not allow... those lurking inside and outside Greece to divert it from its positive course. I am well aware that there are interests that want weak governments, because they think that in this way they increase their influence... and I know well the forces inside and outside Greece - who have never tolerated the path of Western liberal democracy which our country has consistently chosen...

In the midst of this crisis, you come and ask for elections to lead the country to instability, to please those who do not want Mitsotakis and New Democracy in the government and they have told us so publicly.”³¹⁴

Furthermore, as indicated by the statements made after SYRIZA’s call for early elections, which is the ultimate democratic and constitutional expression of the opposition’s disapproval of the governmental management, this tense oppositional strategy is correlated to abstract internal and external interests that want to de-stabilize the country by substituting the “strong” and “stable” government of Kyriakos Mitsotakis with a “weak” one that would be easier to influence. This discourse structured around “stability” comes to be combined with the accusations and warnings about “populists” that “lurk” to take advantage of the crisis by offering sound solutions and the recurring accusations towards the opposition as not

³¹³ “PM Mitsotakis: The dilemma of the elections is stability or chaos”, Hellas Journal (27/04/2023) available at <https://hellasjournal.com/2023/04/pm-mitsotakis-the-dilemma-of-the-elections-is-stability-or-chaos/> (last accessed 28/04/2023)

³¹⁴ Speech by Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis in the Parliament, in the pre-Agenda debate at the level of Party Leaders (26/08/2022)

authentically supporting Ukraine, “the West” and democracy at best, or “standing with Putin” at worst. This narrative was also supported by the emergence of debates, provoked by governmental warnings and statements, regarding a possible Russian meddling in the upcoming Greek elections that was also accompanied by PM Mitsotakis’ acknowledgement that there are parties favored by Russia:

“Because there are also parties and forces within Europe which are close friends with Russia and Russia would have every reason to support these forces.”³¹⁵

This statement that was articulated as commonsensical and as reflecting a “known reality” by PM Mitsotakis was almost immediately supplemented by a journalistic “leak” from the US stating that Russia has spent hundreds of millions of dollars influencing foreign elections in twenty countries since 2014. Capitalizing on the report immediately, ND attempted to connect it with certain past journalistic reports connecting SYRIZA with failed attempts of Russian oligarchs to found TV stations in Greece, while also stating that “we wait with great interest the new information on whether any Greek parties were also financed by Putin, as well as which ones they were,”³¹⁶ contributing to the already strong sense of distrust among the parties and to the further polarization of the public discourse.

Concluding, ND articulated a discourse throughout the geopolitical and economic crisis that stressed the extremely fluid and unstable global geopolitical situation in which it privileged the “unity” of the EU member states and peoples in a united military and economic front against both the internal and the external forces that would attempt to sabotage and destabilize the collective effort and struggle against authoritarianism and in favor of democracy. In this struggle, ND identified the “populist threat” as marginal/”extreme” forces attempting to politically capitalize on the economic hardships by offering sound but unimplementable solutions while constructing its own identity as being the only political force that could guarantee “stability” against both internal and external actors that would benefit from Greece’s destabilization. Obviously, “stability” and “strength” are by no means ideologically neutral or objective notions but are equated to ND’s crisis management and political decisions, whether these reflect the party’s approach to international relations or the

³¹⁵ Press conference of Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis at the 86th Thessaloniki International Fair (11/09/2022)

³¹⁶ Announcement of the Press Office of New Democracy (14/09/2022)

technocratic management of the fiscal challenges that could guarantee the reproduction of the established economic and political order. In that sense, ND's discourse at this point has both negative and positive ideological characteristics, meaning that it both portrays its government as the only solution to "instability" while also equivalentially linking its policies and management to the production of "strength" and "stability."

Building on this narrative, ND would advance to the four-month pre-election period, which started on January 2023, as the party that "effectively managed more exogenous crises than any other government in the post-authoritarian period,"³¹⁷ claiming that the re-election of ND as a self-reliant government is a national necessity since the only alternative to it would be "chaos," "adventures" and "instability."³¹⁸

8 Discussion and Implications

During the introductory chapter of the present work, the overarching research question that was formulated was, "How was the signifier "populism" used in the political discourse of the Greek Government", accompanied by the research objective to connect this discursive practice to broader ideological and political goals in the context of the selected crises and to possible implications deriving towards Greek democratic politics. The present chapter is an attempt to critically discuss certain aspects of this discursive practice and identify possible political implications that derive from it towards Greek democratic politics and the ways that the populist phenomenon is approached.

Starting with the research question and the results of the identification of the occasions in which "populism" was used as a signifier in the political discourse of ND, it is clear that "populism" emerged and acquired the form of an empty signifier since it was used to describe a variety of different or even contradictory practices, ideological beliefs, conditions and actors

³¹⁷ Speech by the Prime Minister and President of the New Democracy Kyriakos Mitsotakis in Lamia (27/03/2023) available at <https://nd.gr/omilia-toy-prothypoyrgoy-kai-proedroy-tis-neas-dimokratias-kyriakoy-mitsotaki-sti-lamia>

³¹⁸ Speech by the Prime Minister and President of the New Democracy Kyriakos Mitsotakis in Xanthi (27/04/2023) available at <https://nd.gr/omilia-toy-prothypoyrgoy-kai-proedroy-tis-neas-dimokratias-kyriakoy-mitsotaki-stin-xanthi>

in diverse crisis-ridden contexts which incorporated varying political and economic stakes and antagonisms. A first note that can be made after the identification and analysis of these discursive practices is that ND used “populism” as a means to describe and as a vessel to discursively accommodate³¹⁹ almost every omnipresent pathology of the Greek political system. Additionally, “populism” was used to accompany almost all counter-hegemonic alternative suggestions, ideas, and practices in the context of the three crises that challenged the governmental crisis management and were eventually judged as “harming,” “dangerous” or objectively “wrong” by ND. These general observations and acknowledgements, however, must be supplemented by a more concrete procedure of identification of the implications of ND’s anti-populist discourse. In that sense, the implications that can be identified as deriving from this discursive practice operate in two levels: the analytical and the political.

Starting from the implications that this discursive practice has for any attempt to scientifically approach the phenomena of populism and anti-populism in the Greek context, the use, or even abuse, of “populism” as a signifier can be identified as creating certain problems and confusion. More specifically, a first question that emerges is whether this political instrumentalization and broad use of the signifier “populism,” which escapes certain historical, sociological, and politico-scientific definitions³²⁰ of populism as a phenomenon, boosts or undermines the analytical utility of the term. In other words, if populism as a term is capable of accommodating and discursively representing such differential and complex concepts and meanings like extreme xenophobia, demagoguery, anti-technocratic attitudes, hypocritical invocations of the popular subject’s demands, irresponsibility, authoritarianism, and ‘antiscientific’ beliefs, does it actually mean anything? The answer to this question is probably negative. In other words, this political practice seems to further distort and conceptually stretch the, already contested in academia, meaning of populism to the point that it becomes analytically useless, a point stressed by various influential scholars studying the phenomenon and the so-called “populist hype” of the last decade, a term used to describe similar practices and flexible uses of “populism.”³²¹ In that sense, a first implication that can be identified as deriving from this discursive practice of the Greek government during the 42

³¹⁹ Using Stavrakakis’ metaphor: Stavrakakis, note 117, 509

³²⁰ Galanopoulos and Venizelos, note 241, 264.

³²¹ Ibid; Art, D. (2020). The myth of global populism. *Perspectives on Politics*, online first, 1–13. doi:10.1017/S1537592720003552; Brown, K., & Mondon, A. (2020). Populism, the media, and the mainstreaming of the far right: The Guardian’s coverage of populism as a case study. *Politics*. Online First. doi:10.1177/0263395720955036

months under research is the creation of extra confusion over the already contested meaning of populism and the undermining of its analytical utility.

Proceeding to examine the implications of ND's anti-populist discursive practice on the political level, constantly substituting ideological and political terms such as "left," "far-right," "racist" or "xenophobic" with the signifier "populist" incorporates the risk of rendering "populism" a mainstream euphemism for political phenomena that could have been labelled or stigmatized with more precision and placed under less contested political categories.³²² Secondly, as discussed numerous times during the analysis, ND tends to use "populism" in a way that creates direct or indirect equivalential links between actors that don't seem to link themselves equivalentially in any way, while in certain cases they even identify as each other's ideological opposite. In this case, the use of "populism" to describe the practices of these actors or the general dichotomization and simplification of the political space between populists and non/anti-populists can be theorized as lumping together actors and forces that have little ideological and political connections with each other thus obscuring their specific ideological characteristics (e.g. exclusionary or inclusionary tendencies), political imperatives and programmatic intentions. However, it can be argued that this procedure never happens accidentally but is part of a discursive strategy to stigmatize a party's mainstream political adversaries (in this case SYRIZA) by correlating them to ideologically marginal groups.

Thirdly, focusing a little more on the aforementioned marginal groups, ND's discursive practice of using the signifier "populism" to describe both marginal far right and mainstream left-wing political forces, like SYRIZA, can be theorized as empowering the same political actors that ND claims to be struggling against, namely the enemies of liberal democracy. More specifically, as also stated in the literature,³²³ the substitution of ideological and political terms such as "fascist," "ultra-nationalist," "far-right," "racist" or "nationalist" with "populist" seems to be embraced by forces that have previously been identified as such, like Le Pen or Salvini, since these descriptors are perceived as carrying a more negative and stigmatizing meaning than "populism," since the latter is also frequently correlated to forces that advocate for social inclusion and tolerance. In other words, ND's recurring and broad use

³²² Galanopoulos and Venizelos, note 241, 264; Brown and Mondon, 2021, 285

³²³ Brown and Mondon, 2021, 290

of “populism” can be perceived as incorporating the risk of mainstreaming certain far-right forces that would have otherwise remained stigmatized and marginalized.³²⁴

Furthermore, focusing on the specific context of the selected crises, ND’s discursive strategy of formulating theoretical generalizations regarding the political nature of “populism” as a phenomenon or about the political behavior of the “populist” actors appears as having contradicted itself at least twice. More specifically, the stereotypes reproduced in ND’s discourse regarding the divisive and confrontational nature of the “populists” seem to have been challenged during the first two crises that the analysis discussed, with the first incorporating the broad consensus that was achieved on the closing of the Evros borders, and the second incorporating the consensus on the management of the entire first wave of the pandemic. In both cases, the major “populist” actor of the Greek political system (SYRIZA) seems to have complied with the governmental management and to have toned down its critique thus creating a contrast with the identity of the “populist” who is constantly seeking confrontation and division. Additionally, focusing on the qualitative characteristics of each case, SYRIZA’s support of the decision to close the borders in the Evros region and mobilize police and military forces to control the situation seems to collide with the accusation of subscribing to a “humanitarian populism that advocates for open borders.” On the same note, the compliance of the party with the scientific directions of the advisory committee during the first wave of the pandemic can be identified as conflicting with the accusation that emerged during the second wave and correlated populism to “anti-scientific” or “irrational” beliefs and conspiracy theories. What can be concluded from this apparent contradiction is that the formulation of generalizations regarding phenomena such as populism are not politically nor analytically useful. Whether referring to formally populist actors or to actors simply lumped under the “populist” umbrella, it seems safer to focus on their more concrete ideological characteristics, like their leftist or far-right identity, in order to evaluate their relation to concepts such as ‘science’ or migration.

Elaborating a little more on the interplay between “populism” and science during the second ‘wave’ and the conflicting discursive constructions of truth that emerged, it seems that discursive repertoires like the one of ND that privileged notions such as “truth,” “expert knowledge” and “rationality” have certain implications for politics in general. More

³²⁴ Ibid.

specifically, as discussed during Mouffe's critique of post-politics as well, the use of such notions, signifiers and polarities in the political discourse essentially transforms the political confrontation into a seemingly neutral epistemological debate around truth.³²⁵ This transformation reduces the struggle between the hegemonic policy paradigm and the different ideologically varying alternatives to a struggle between truth and lies, with the former presenting itself as self-evident or unquestionable and the latter being presented as objectively wrong, demagoguery or products of poor understanding.³²⁶ In that regard, the existence of a single truth possessed by the anti-populist technocratic camp implies and dictates a single policy paradigm that is rendered responsible and rational, while every other political project challenging the dominant doctrine is interpreted as lies, populism, demagoguery etc. Essentially, and returning to Mouffe's critique, if politics are to be understood as a struggle between different political projects, then this discursive practice that privileges the conflict between truth and rationality, on the one hand, and populism, lies and demagoguery, on the other, is deeply anti-political and must be situated in the broader post-political project.³²⁷

On the other hand, although ND's discursive practice appears as problematic and its critique seems necessary, it also seems important to allow this discursive strategy to make sense as a complete logic. More specifically, and operating as a conclusion to the chapter, the Greek government seems to perceive the global geopolitical and economic establishment that emerged in 2023 as highly unstable and crisis prone, with Greece not having fully recovered yet from the ten-year economic crisis. In this context, Greece is perceived as being on the 'correct' way of becoming a 'normal' European country, meaning liberalizing its economy further and reforming/rationalizing the state mechanism, without however being allowed to complete this transition during ND's governmental term due to the recurring crises that, however, were successfully dealt with without fully stopping the programmed economic reforms. The ideological dimensions that are expressed in this context have to do with this transition to the European 'normality' that is perceived as the only reasonable protection against the unstable and crisis prone geopolitical environment. In that sense, the dichotomization of the political field between populists and non/anti-populists can be ideologically justified through its correlation to this EU-centered version of the

³²⁵ Stavrakakis and Galanopoulos, note 145, 7.

³²⁶ Ibid.

³²⁷ Ibid.

‘modernization theory’ that closely resembles Diamandouros’ thesis. This argument can be further supported by PM Mitsotakis’ pre-election statements that focus on describing a “progressive,” “democratic” and “modernizing” trajectory that Greece should follow after the May 2023 national elections while also denoting that this project is taking place in a political environment that has surpassed the “old” ideological distinctions between left and right and is currently divided between authoritarianism and populism, on the one hand, and progressive pragmatic democrats, on the other:

“(referring to the 2023 elections) it is an electoral contest that should arouse interest outside the Greek borders as well, because many democracies are struggling with similar dilemmas. So, the old Right-Left division in my opinion is no longer as important as the distinction between more authoritarian populists and more progressive democrats who adopt pragmatic solutions. I think this is the real division today in many Western democracies.”³²⁸

And,

“Because we have proven, friends, that New Democracy is the real force of change and modernization of this place.... We will remind to everyone that the modernization of the state is a reality from which we are not going to back down.... But please know that our work is not finished. We are constantly fighting with pathologies that come from the past which we must fight to really lead the country to the path of progressive modernization and genuine patriotism.”³²⁹

Obviously, nearly every term that was used during the paragraph describing ND’s holistic political logic is deeply ideologically charged and represents broader economic and political power relations and established interests. Whether referring to the “recovery” of the Greek economy, the “European normality,” the “rationalization of the state” or the “necessary reforms,” the stance that must be adopted towards such terms, whether adopted by a social scientist during a research or a citizen that aspires to be democratically active and engaged

³²⁸ Discussion between Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis and journalist Fareed Zakaria at the World Economic Forum (19/01/2023) available at <https://www.primeminister.gr/2023/01/19/31082>

³²⁹ Speech by the Prime Minister and President of the New Democracy Kyriakos Mitsotakis at a gathering of citizens in Marousi (18/03/2023) available at <https://nd.gr/omilia-toy-prothypoygoy-kai-proedroy-tis-neas-dimokratias-kyriakoy-mitsotaki-se-sygkentrosi-0>

with the commons, should be critical and interrogative of the ideological foundations and sociopolitical interests that these terms aspire to serve.

9 Summary and Conclusion

To conclude, the present work attempted to identify the uses of the signifier “populism” in the discourse of the Greek government during three major consecutive crises that occurred in a 42-month period while connecting the findings to broader ideological and political goals. The analysis of the empirical material revealed certain discursive patterns that the discourse of the Greek government followed during each crisis, alongside certain antagonistic language games and hegemonic struggles that accompanied it. The results that emerged from the analysis indicated that “populism” acquired the form of an empty signifier in the discourse of the Greek government, incorporating a variety of different, or even contradictory, but certainly negative meanings that were attached to various ideologically and organizationally diverse actors that in certain occasions were also equivalentially linked to each other.

Briefly summarizing the findings of the analysis and starting from the refugee/migration crisis, the incidents under research developed during the last days of February 2020 and manifested, firstly, as tensions between groups of hundreds of migrants/refugees and the Greek border guard alongside the Greek-Turkish borders in the Evros region and, secondly, as riots between the Hellenic police and the local communities of Chios and Lesbos in the Northern Aegean. During this period and events, the signifier “populism” was used by the Greek government to describe certain “extreme” ideological and political positions regarding migration management that were, allegedly, shared by actors that questioned the governmental policies. More specifically, “populism” in this case was used to describe both the “humanitarian populism” of the left advocating for “open-borders” and the “populism” of the extreme-right advocating for “concentration camps,” two approaches that, although constructed as different, were portrayed as “feeding each other.” ND’s identity and position were self-constructed on the middle of the imaginary axis that incorporated these two approaches as its extreme ends and was expressed by the signifiers “strict,” “fair” and “rigor” to describe the balance between the protection of Greece’s borders and the state’s respect of human rights. Finally, the actors that were portrayed as representing these two mutually

constituting “extreme” “populisms” were SYRIZA, certain “suspicious” NGOs, and investigative journalists, on the one hand, and the ‘Greek Solution’ alongside certain marginal far-right groups, on the other, both perceived as exploiting the genuine “migration fatigue” of the local island populations.

Moving to the COVID-19 pandemic, the findings indicated that although the first ‘wave’ of the crisis was marked by a broad consensus among the “populist” and the anti-populist forces regarding the admittedly successful governmental management of the crisis, “populism” would return as a signifier, firstly, during the debates on the economic recovery of the Greek economy and, secondly, during the second ‘wave’ of the pandemic. More specifically, the first discursive repertoire of ND that was identified as including the signifier “populism” was the one correlating “populism” to “irresponsible” opposition. The meaningful connection between the two notions was accomplished through the correlation of “populism” to the notions of “bidding,” signifying the “irresponsible,” “irrational,” “unrealistic” and “understudied” alternative economic proposals formulated by the opposition, and the notion of “division,” signifying the opposition’s “irresponsibly” confrontational stance during times that required a “national front against the virus.” Proceeding to the Greek government’s second discursive repertoire, which developed during the significantly more devastating second ‘wave’ of the pandemic and the period when the COVID-19 vaccines were entering the battle against the virus, the findings indicated that the signifier “populism” was discursively constructed in opposition to “science.” More specifically, the contrast between the two notions was constructed, firstly, on the apparent hostility that the “populist” forces had shown towards the “technocrats” and their “expert knowledge,” both during the early years of the Greek debt crisis and during the second ‘wave’ of the pandemic, and, secondly, on the, alleged, mutual hostility and anti-scientific distrust of the “populists” towards the governmental vaccination campaign. In the second case, the findings indicated that the Greek government attempted to, once again, create equivalential links between SYRIZA, that questioned the strategy of prioritizing the vaccination campaign without further supporting the NHS, and the far-right anti-vaccination forces/protesters, alongside ‘Greek Solution,’ that opposed the vaccination campaign through the formulation of conspiracy theories.

Finally, moving to the third section of the analysis focusing on the governmental use of the signifier “populism” during and in relation to the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, the findings of the analysis indicated that “populism” was, firstly, used to describe and accompany the political forces originating from the “extremes” and margins of the political system that

would attempt to exploit the economic challenges deriving from the conflict by blaming the national EU governments instead of Russia. This discursive use of the signifier “populism” acquired particular relevance in the context of the antagonism between the government and the primary opposition (SYRIZA), since the latter identified governmental responsibilities in the (re)production of the economic hardships that were challenging the Greek citizens, accusing ND of supporting the anti-social profiteering of certain national economic actors characterized as “cartels.” Additionally, as the national elections of 2023 were getting progressively closer and the conflict was demonstrating no signs of de-escalation, the Greek government would also accuse, directly or indirectly, the “populist” actors of the Greek political system of siding with the Russian interests or facilitating the Russian economic “blackmail.” These direct or indirect accusations or correlations of the “populist” actors to Russian interests was facilitated by the creation of equivalential links between those that directed their critique towards the same governmental decisions or openly challenged, for different reasons, the geopolitical national strategy. Once again, the “populist” primary opposition was meaningfully linked to political forces that, allegedly, “stood with Putin” because of its “ambivalent” stance towards the “clear” support of Ukraine both in the humanitarian and military front, an accusation that seems to have pervaded the antagonism between the government and SYRIZA since the beginning of the conflict.

Having summarized the key findings of the analysis, it is safe to note that, on principle, the meanings that have been identified as ascribed to the signifier “populism” and the “populist” actors by ND seem to follow certain patterns that previous works have also identified during their research on the anti-populist discourse and the populism/anti-populism antagonistic frontier in the context of the ten-year Greek debt crisis.³³⁰ Whether referring to the correlation of “populism” to “irrationalism,” “extremism,” anti-technocratic attitudes or “division,” these meaningful links seem to emerge constantly in antagonistic contexts where one or more, formally or allegedly, “populist” actors engage in political confrontations with mainstream liberal parties.³³¹ Additionally, as underlined during the background chapter, the creation of equivalential links between actors that do not link themselves equivalentially or, in some cases, even construct their own identity in sharp opposition to each other, is also a

³³⁰ Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, note 19; Stavrakakis, note 19; Katsambekis, note 25; Katsambekis, note 143; Stavrakakis and Galanopoulos, note 145.

³³¹ Kim, note 130; Medarov, note 141.

recurring feature of the anti-populist discourse both in the Greek but also the European³³² context. In other words, the discursive practice of the Greek government can be observed to have followed certain stereotypical readings and accusations towards “populism” that seem to have emerged, although in different variations, in every Western liberal democracy during the last two decades.

Proceeding to examine the concrete contribution of the present work to the broad group of discourse-theoretical approaches to the study of the (anti-)populist phenomenon, but also to the general field of ‘populism studies,’ an element that the present work identified as been ascribed to the “populists” by the anti-populist discourse without belonging to the stereotypical readings of populism that have been stressed in the literature, is the correlation and accusation targeting “populists” as serving foreign interests. Obviously, this correlation must be examined in its specific context, meaning as a product of the political polarization and profound instability that the Russo-Ukrainian conflict created in Europe, a phenomenon that does not resemble any other geopolitical event of the recent past and, naturally, has influenced the political antagonism in a profound manner. Building on this acknowledgement, the overall contribution of the present work can be located in its attempt to present the full picture of ND’s anti-populist repertoire during three crises that have not yet been broadly scrutinized in relation to the populism/anti-populism antagonism. On the other hand, the limitations of the present work should also be mentioned since certain significant political developments that took place during the period under study were not analyzed sufficiently, as they did not involve any recurring antagonistic language games including the signifier “populism,” and, therefore, certain aspects of the political antagonism were not illuminated.³³³ In that sense, future research projects could investigate the period under study through different lenses, shedding light on certain antagonistic language games that developed around different floating signifiers like “corruption,” “democracy,” “security,” and so on.

Additionally, an interesting question that could be answered in a future research project regarding the period under study is whether the anti-populist discursive strategy of ND was actually successful in delegitimizing the suggestions and critique of its adversaries. Given

³³² Jonathan Dean, “Melancholia and Anti-Populist Discourse: The Case of the British Labour Party”, (2022) Working Paper. POPULISMUS Working Paper Series, 14 .

³³³ Some significant examples are the “Greek wiretapping scandal,” the corruption allegations against the Government including MPs and state officials, certain issues regarding Press Freedom and the legal disputes between the government and journalists and many more.

the fact that the present work was completed one week before the national elections of May 2023, it seems important to note that, according to the polls conducted only a month before the elections, the Greek government seems to lead by 7% in the polls measuring the vote intention of the Greek people.³³⁴ Although, in the Greek context, the pre-election polls have failed multiple times to accurately capture the sociopolitical reality in the past,³³⁵ it seems that in the case of PM Mitsotakis' government the popular appeal was never lost to the point of destabilizing or questioning the government itself. After all, both SYRIZA and the minor opposition filed and voted in favor of two motions of censure against the government on January 30, 2022 and January 25, 2023, respectively. Both motions resulted in the registration and confirmation of the parliamentary majority's confidence in the government.³³⁶ In that sense, one can theorize that ND's anti-populist discourse, which included the party's strategy of presenting the governmental crisis management as the only rational, responsible, and patriotic way to protect Greece and the well-being of the Greek people during times of instability, assisted in maintaining the governmental stability to some degree.

Concluding, a question whose answer can function as a final statement to this thesis is, how can the identification and analysis of the present work's empirical findings contribute to the broader understanding of the anti-populist discourse and the antagonism/frontier between, formally or allegedly, populist and anti-populist forces? Answering such a question with a generalizing intent can be particularly tricky since the historical and cultural specificity of every politico-discursive practice must be considered, especially when it concerns ambiguous notions such as populism. In that sense, focusing on certain general conclusions regarding the specific context of the study, anti-populism can be observed as functioning as a key extension

³³⁴ Athens Bureau, "Greek elections 2023: New Democracy leads SYRIZA with 6.9%" (24/04/2023) *Greek City Times* available at <https://greekcitytimes.com/2023/04/23/elections-2023-new-democracy/> (last accessed 08/05/2023); Athens Bureau, "Greek election poll: New Democracy at 35.4% and SYRIZA at 27.7%" (08/05/2023) *Greek City Times* available at <https://greekcitytimes.com/2023/05/05/greek-election-poll-new-democracy/> (last accessed 08/05/2023)

³³⁵ Manolis Kaloudas, "When polls don't always tell the truth: "Let me be wrong", (04/12/2022) *iEidiseis* available at <https://www.ieidiseis.gr/politiki/174969/otan-oi-dimoskopiseis-den-lene-panta-tin-alitheia-ase-me-na-kano-lathos> (last accessed 08/05/2023)

³³⁶ Alexandros Diamantis, "Motion of censure: Voted down in the Parliament with 156 "No" ", (30/01/2022) *ETHNOS* available at <https://www.ethnos.gr/Politics/article/193563/protashmomfshkatapshfisthkesthboylhme156oxi> (last accessed 08/05/2023); Newsroom, "The motion of censure against the government was rejected with 156 "no" - Fierce confrontation preceded", (27/01/2023) *ETHNOS* available at <https://www.ethnos.gr/Politics/article/243881/aporifthhkehprotashmomfshkatathskybernhshsme156oxiproghthhkesklhrhantiparathesh> (last accessed 08/05/2023)

of ND's hegemonic crisis management discourse, stigmatizing the vast majority of the counter hegemonic challenges towards the governmental management as "populist" while also forging a positive image for the government through the latter's construction as populism's exact opposite. Additionally, a general conclusion that can be formed is that the anti-populist discourse of ND has escaped the limited role of attacking discourses that invoke "the people" in order to form demands since "populism" has been functioning as a pejorative characterization to accompany political discourses and claims that do not articulate "the people" as their nodal point, while also accompanying differing political ideas, styles, ethics as well as capabilities. On the same note, it can be observed that "populism" remains attached to certain political forces no matter their formal relation to the concept or their contemporary/topical discursive practice and strategy. In other words, as occasionally expressed through metaphors by ND members as well, "populism" has become synonymous with certain political forces, thus triggering the reproduction of certain accusations that do not necessarily respond to contemporary practices but form more general, even stereotypical, political judgements and evaluations.

Finally, anti-populist practices such as the one examined during the present research can be examined in future research projects as part of a broader transition towards a new global political order where recurring crises are an established reality, and where ideological and political notions such as "neoliberalism" or "liberal democracy" are challenged and transformed, producing new discursive struggles and political antagonisms. In that sense, the qualitative characteristics presented by future dislocatory events, whether referring to new migration crises like the one across the Evros region, new health crises like the COVID-19 pandemic or profound armed struggles like the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, could potentially affect the established anti-populist repertoires by modifying their articulatory logic and providing them with new roles and objectives.

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