

# Populism, Anti-populism and Minorities: Governmental Discourses and Policies on the Romani People in Greece

Grigoris Markou<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

The early 21<sup>st</sup> century has witnessed a significant rise in extreme nationalism, racism, and xenophobia, deeply affecting the rights of minorities such as the Roma, who have historically faced systemic discrimination and racism. Given that many political leaders who downplay minority rights often engage in populist discourse, a debate has emerged about the relationship between populism and minority rights. While many scholars argue that populism inherently undermines liberal principles like the protection of minorities, the question remains whether populism is necessarily anti-pluralist and anti-minority. What about the case of left-wing populism? Furthermore, why is the relationship between anti-populism and minorities often overlooked? In this article, we examine the relationship between populism, anti-populism, and minorities through the case of two different governmental discourses in crisis-ridden Greece. Specifically, we focus on the governmental political discourse and policies of the populist SYRIZA (2015-2019) and the anti-populist ND (2019-2023) on Roma, with the aim of showing that populism is not necessarily anti-pluralist, while anti-populism is not always pluralist, as both phenomena can follow inclusionary or exclusionary logics.

## Keywords

Populism, anti-populism, minorities, Roma, SYRIZA, ND

## Introduction

We live in a time that is characterized by the explosive rise of extremism, nationalism, racism, and xenophobia. This is reflected in the escalation of racist discourse and the high numbers of racist violence targeting various social groups, including Jews,

<sup>1</sup>Department of Balkan, Slavic and Oriental Studies, University of Macedonia, Greece  
Email: gmarkou@gmail.com and gmarkou@uom.edu.gr

Roma, migrants, and Muslims (Nwabuzo, 2019, pp. 12-13),<sup>1</sup> as well as in the election outcomes, with radical and extreme right-wing parties espousing nationalist and xenophobic ideas gaining substantial support (Wang, 2021).<sup>2</sup> In several cases, these parties present an exclusionary populist cloak, opposing the domestic and foreign political and economic establishment, as well as migrants, refugees, and minorities in general, putting their rights and status in danger. In addition, anti-minority logic is not limited to rhetoric but often manifests in state laws. There are governments in Europe and beyond that pursue anti-immigration and anti-minority paths (Fernandez, 2019; Baer, 2021).

One of Europe's largest ethnic minority/groups that face diachronically blatant discrimination and racism that keeps it in poverty are the Romani people (Renzi, 2010, p. 40). McGarry (2017, p. 1) notes that Roma "is one of the most marginalized groups in Europe". The economic and the pandemic crisis seems to have caused them even greater problems, leading to larger anti-Romani discrimination (Frazer & Marlier, 2011, p. 6; Matache & Bhabha, 2020). For example, in Italy, according to scholars, the (exclusionary) populist Matteo Salvini of Lega (Cervi, 2020), has expressed a Romaphobic discourse, framing Roma as a threat to cultural values (Cervi & Tejedor, 2020), while in Hungary, as Baer underlines, Orban has instrumentalized Muslim refugees and the Romani community for political purposes, capitalizing on popular xenophobia and racism (Baer, 2021).

More than a few political leaders who underestimate the rights of minorities often express a mixture of nationalist and populist discourse and performance. Their discourse is usually based on nationalism, as *the nation* functions as a central signifier, however, in many cases, it is accompanied by populist elements.<sup>3</sup> For that reason a debate has opened up about the relationship between populism and minorities. For a section of scholars, the connection between populism and anti-minority logic is not surprising, as populism tends to undermine liberal features like minority protections, mainly because it seeks to promote and protect the rights and interests of the majority (Mudde, 2013, pp. 3-4; Weyland & Madrid, 2019, p. 16). Is populism necessarily an anti-pluralist and anti-minority phenomenon? What about the case of left-wing populism? What if anti-minority discourse is connected to nationalism and xenophobia and not populism? Furthermore, why do we avoid examining the relationship between anti-populism and minorities?

In this article, we focus on the relationship between populism, anti-populism, and minorities through the case of two different governmental discourses in crisis-ridden Greece. In that period, populism and anti-populism emerged as a crucial ideological cleavage in the Greek public sphere (Stavrakakis, 2014, p. 509), directly affecting

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<sup>1</sup> Between 2014 and 2018, racially motivated crimes have been increased in many EU Member States (Nwabuzo, 2019, pp. 12-13).

<sup>2</sup> In Greece, even a Neo-Nazi organization entered into the parliament (Yilmaz, 2014, p. 218) and remained there for some years. Moreover, in the election of 2023, three far-right parties managed to enter to the parliament (Fallon, 2023).

<sup>3</sup> For a discursive theoretical perspective on populism and nationalism, see: De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017.

discursive and performative repertoires. The Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA) launched a fierce populist attack against the establishment mainly for their austerity policies, finally managing to rise to power in 2015, while New Democracy (ND) accused the radical left of expressing dangerous populism that threatened democracy, managing to return to power in 2019. The multiple crises, austerity policies, political discourses, and governmental policies have directly affected minorities and vulnerable social groups who were in dire economic and social circumstances. Was populism a factor that negatively affected their status, or not?

After analyzing the main characteristics of the notions of the minority, the phenomena of populism and anti-populism, as well as the theoretical discussion on their relationship, we examine the governmental political discourse and policies of the populist SYRIZA (2015-2019) and anti-populist ND (2019-2023) on Roma. In Greece, there are thousands of Romani people who live in difficult conditions and have been clearly affected by the economic and pandemic crisis and governmental policies. How did the two recent governments approach the issues of the Roma community? Can we confirm the argument that populism undermines the rights of minorities, or not? What about anti-populism? We analyze populism and anti-populism as discourses through the methodological tools of the Essex School of Discourse Analysis. Our aim is to demonstrate through the Greek case study that populism is not inherently anti-minority or anti-pluralist, just as anti-populism is not invariably pluralist. Both phenomena can embody either inclusionary or exclusionary logics.

## **The Notion of Minority and the Romani People**

Over the years, various definitions of the concept of “minority” have emerged, with numerous references to minorities and their rights found in international organizations, constitutions, political manifestos, newspapers, and academic literature. However, it seems that there is not a widely accepted definition in the international community, despite the efforts of the UN. Furthermore, modern documents and treaties on minorities lack a definitive definition of the concept (Valentine, 2004, p. 445), likely due to the complexity of the phenomenon.

The first attempt to define ‘minority’ occurred in 1930 under the League of Nations, when the Permanent Court of International Justice (PCIJ) defined the concept of “community” (namely minority) in the context of the mutual voluntary exchange of the Greek-Bulgarian communities as outlined in the Neuilly Convention of 27 November 1919:

“the “community” is a group of persons living in a given country or locality, having a race, religion, language and traditions of their own and united by this identity of race, religion, language and traditions in a sentiment of solidarity, with a view to preserving their traditions, maintaining their form of worship, ensuring the instruction and upbringing of their children in accordance with the spirit and traditions of their race and rendering mutual assistance to each other” (PCIJ, 1930, p. 21).

Many scholars of International Law adopt the interpretative approach proposed by UN Rapporteur Francesco Capotorti, who identified several specific characteristics of a minority. These include its relatively smaller numerical size compared to the rest of the population, its non-dominant position within society, distinct cultural, traditional, religious, or linguistic features, and a sense of solidarity aimed at preserving its collective identity. (Capotorti, 1977)

Some years later, the next UN Rapporteur, Jules Deschênes, offered a definition of “minority” that closely aligned with Capotorti’s earlier definition (Deschênes, 1985, p. 31). Today, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) defines a minority as:

“an ethnic, religious and linguistic group, fewer in number than the rest of the population, whose members share a common identity. Members of minorities commonly share ethnic, religious, linguistic, and/or cultural characteristics that differentiate them from the majority, and generally seek to maintain these distinguishing identities. At the same time, the characteristics that define minorities vary widely from one context to another” (UNHCR a).

Building on these definitions, it is evident that minorities can be categorized into various types, including ethnic,<sup>4</sup> religious, linguistic, and others. In addition, some researchers identify additional dimensions within the concept of minority, referring to “minorities within”, like “women, children, gay men and lesbians,<sup>5</sup> religious dissenters and linguistic minorities within minorities” (Eisenberg & Spinner-Halev, 2005, p. 5).

Minorities are not always officially recognized by states (Morel, 2006, p. 125) and as a result do not fully enjoy their rights. However, as Morel (2006, p. 125) argues, they can be recognized “through direct constitutional recognition of groups, or through indirect policies or programs such as identification in census data”. The problem is that the non-recognition of their minority status (and the reference to them as a vulnerable or marginalized community) would deny them the extensive body of law on minority rights (Morel, 2006, p. 128). Since their rights as a minority are not fully recognized, it is easier to deal with discrimination. Minorities and indigenous peoples are often marginalized socially, economically, politically, and culturally in many societies, thus encountering obstacles to manifesting their identity (UNHCR b). Even though minorities have specific rights under the international human rights framework and laws (UN Human Rights Office), they can still be victims of serious human rights violations, conflicts, and persecution. In this article, we focus on the case of the Romani people, who are considered by most of the literature an ethnic

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<sup>4</sup>“An ethnic group generally shares a common sense of identity and common characteristics such as language, religion, tribe, nationality, race or a combination thereof” (UN, 2018, p. 91).

<sup>5</sup>Sexual minorities include lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals, whom their rights are often being violated (Math & Seshadri, 2013).

minority or an ethnic group (Von dem Knesebeck, 2011, p. 1; Ahmed, 2011, p. 174). The European Commission supports that:

“The Roma are Europe’s largest ethnic minority. Out of an estimated 10 to 12 million Roma living in Europe, approximately 6 million are citizens or residents of the EU. Many EU Roma are still victims of prejudice and social exclusion, despite the discrimination ban across EU Member States. The umbrella-term ‘Roma’ encompasses diverse groups, including Roma, Sinti, Kale, Romanichels, Boyash/Rudari, Ashkali, Egyptians, Yenish, Dom, Lom, Rom and Abdal, as well as Traveller populations (gens du voyage, Gypsies, Camminanti, etc.)” (European Commission)

Nevertheless, according to Horvai (2012, p. 112), the categorization of the Romani people as an ethnic minority “oversimplifies complex issues related to self-definition and the social construction of the identity”. McGarry (2010, p. 2) argues that “Roma are unlike other ethnic minority groups as they are a transnational minority without a kin state. Additionally, they are not united along linguistic, religious, familial, occupational and class lines and they are not territorially concentrated.” However, Horvai (2012, p. 113) notes that the definition of transnational minority “raises questions related to citizenship and the protection of legal rights in the national context.” Regardless of their status, there are specific legal frameworks that protect the Romani people (Horvai, 2012, p. 113).

In conclusion, in many countries the representation of the Romani people in decision-making structures is negligible and their size is often underestimated because they are undocumented, which limits their access to public services (Abdikeeva & MRG partners, 2005, p. 1). Even in countries where conditions are relatively better for them, they still face numerous challenges. Diachronically, Romani people deal with blatant discrimination and racism, keeping them in poverty (Renzi, 2010, p. 40). The economic crisis has put them in an even worse position. Cienski and Escritt (2019) stated that the economic slump hit Europe’s Roma particularly hard, as they have been facing obstacles in finding a job in the formal economy, while they have been among the first to lose their jobs during the crisis. In addition, anti-Roma racism has increased during the pandemic crisis. As Matache and Bhabha argue, “from Slovakia to Romania and Bulgaria, states have enacted disproportionate or militarized measures targeting Romani neighborhoods or towns. Some of these measures are driven by a racist narrative that casts Roma as a collective health and safety threat” (Matache & Bhabha, 2020). Racist discourse and behavior against the Roma has been explained through some terms like “anti-gypsyism” (Mirga-Kruszelnicka, 2018), “Romaphobia” (McGarry, 2017) and “anti-Roma racism” (Matache & Bhabha, 2020). According to McGarry (2017: p. 1), “Romaphobia is the hatred or fear of those individuals perceived as being Roma, Gypsy or Traveller; it involves the negative ascription of group

identity and can result in marginalization, persecution and violence”.<sup>6</sup> Regardless of the definition one chooses, the reality remains the same: Romani people continue to suffer from discrimination and racism.

## **Populism, Anti-populism, and Minorities**

In much of the literature, populism is associated with an anti-minority logic, undermining minority rights and denying the liberal principles intended to protect them. Many populism scholars support the idea that populism calls upon a homogeneous people with one single general will against the establishment/the elite, characteristics that do not allow for the representation of the interests of the minority. For instance, Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017, p. 81) argue that “populism holds that nothing should constrain ‘the will of the (pure) people’ and fundamentally rejects the notions of pluralism and, therefore, minority rights as well as the ‘institutional guarantees’ that should protect them.” Moreover, Kaltwasser considers that populism can use the notion and praxis of majority rule to circumvent minority rights, negatively affecting liberal democracy (Kaltwasser, 2012). For Müller (2014, p. 487), “while populism does not oppose the principles of representation and the practices of election, it necessarily has to deny any kind of pluralism or social division: in the populist imagination there is only the people on the one hand and, on the other hand, the illegitimate intruders into our politics, from both above and from below, so to speak.” Weyland and Madrid (2019, p. 16) note that, “populism rests on majoritarian notions of politics that diverge from the fundamental goal of liberalism to protect minorities against the potential abuse of power.” However, not all approaches to populism adhere to this logic.

There are indeed populist and nationalist examples around the world with anti-minority governmental discourse and/or policies. Baer notes that Orbán in Hungary has instrumentalized for political purposes Muslim refugees and the Romani community, while having also targeted the LGBTQ minority (Baer, 2021). Moreover, a project in the Columbia Human Rights Law Review notes that the Trump Administration in the US had undermined human rights, paving the way for expanded immigration detention and deportation, ordering the construction of a border wall, suspending refugee admissions to the United States for a period of 120 days, separating over 2000 children from their parents at the border, etc. (The Trump Administration Human Rights Tracker). Is populism inherently anti-minority, and does it systematically infringe upon the rights of vulnerable social groups?

In this article, we distance ourselves from the aforementioned approaches. Following the Essex School of Discourse Analysis, we consider populism as a discourse (with both linguistic and non-linguistic elements)<sup>7</sup> that separates society into two opposing camps, the “people” and the “elites/establishment”. According

<sup>6</sup> McGarry (2017, p. 5) writes: “I use ‘Romaphobia’ in preference to other similar terms such as anti-Tsiganism or anti-Gypsyism partly because ‘Gypsy’ and ‘Tsigian’ are considered offensive and many prefer the endonym ‘Roma’.”

<sup>7</sup> For Laclau and Mouffe, discourse is a network of meaning that articulates both linguistic and non-linguistic elements (Laclau & Mouffe, [1985] 2001, pp. 107-108).

to Ernesto Laclau, populism is “the dichotomic construction of the social around an internal frontier” and “the discursive construction of an enemy” (Laclau, 2005, pp. 38-39). Populism calls upon the popular subject against the political and economic establishment that promotes its own interests against the interests of “the many”, forming a chain of equivalence and providing specific meaning to the new discursive construction. Hence, in populism we have two important features, “people-centrism” and “anti-elitism” (Stavrakakis, 2019, p. 94).

In contrast to approaches that perceive populism as an anti-pluralist phenomenon with homogeneity within its people, discourse analysis does not necessarily recognize a homogeneous popular subject. Thus, the people can be constructed through the combination of heterogeneous demands (Katsambekis, 2020). According to Mouffe, “as a collective will created through a chain of equivalence, the people is not a homogeneous subject in which all the differences are somehow reduced to unity” (Mouffe, 2018, p. 62). After all, Mudde and Kaltwasser (2013), who follow the ideational approach, have referred to inclusionary populist cases that include different social groups (demands) within its people.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, discourse analysis does not recognize predetermined characteristics within populist discourse, while it analyses populism through the relationship between key signifiers (nodal points) and the other signifiers. There are no specific pathological elements of moralization within populism, while they can be found in a plethora of discourses (Stavrakakis & Jäger, 2018, p. 560). In short, populism does not contain predefined elements at its core, taking different forms depending on the signifiers that surround it. Thus, while many approaches that characterize populism as a moralistic or pathological phenomenon recognize an exclusive link between populism and anti-minority discourse, our theoretical and methodological framework does not. Besides, conceptualizing populism as inherently anti-minority leads to the equation of different types of populism, leaving out of analysis a plethora of populist examples with distinct features. How can one exclude inclusionary populist parties that often promote and protect the rights of minorities?

The central elements of a discourse surrounding the nodal point of “the people” can provide us with crucial information about whether it seeks the inclusion of the popular classes into the popular subject (inclusionary populism), or whether it excludes them due to racist/xenophobic reasons (exclusionary populism). Mudde and Kaltwasser (2013), who focus on different cases of populist parties and leaders in Europe and Latin America, underlined the fact that, in recent years European populism has been presented predominantly as exclusive (see radical right parties). While Latin American populism is presented mainly as inclusive (see left-wing populism). According to Stavrakakis, “in inclusionary populism “the people” operates as a fluid “empty signifier” without a fixed signified, while in exclusionary populism it usually refers back to a fantasmatic transcendental signified (the nation, race, etc.).” Furthermore, according to him, “in inclusionary populism the dichotomisation

<sup>8</sup> Katsambekis identifies this paradox of the approach of Mudde and Kaltwasser (Katsambekis, 2020, p. 64).

of the political space is arranged in a mostly vertical manner (up/down, high/low), while exclusionary populism involves a horizontal (inside/outside) dichotomic arrangement” (Stavrakakis, 2018). Filc notes that inclusive populism allows for the political integration of marginalized and excluded sections of the society, expanding the boundaries of democracy, while exclusive populism perceives the people as an ethnically or culturally homogeneous unit and excludes people or social groups on the grounds of racist or nativist reasons (Filc, 2015).

Similarly, anti-populism can manifest in both inclusive and exclusive forms. What is anti-populism? Anti-populist discourse is a strong criticism against the rise of populist parties through a fierce attack on populism and sometimes on the popular classes (Markou, 2021, p. 203), which together with populism have formed an antagonistic landscape that organizes the political meaning of the new environment (Stavrakakis, 2014). Anti-populism, of course, even if it includes liberal elements, is not always inclusive. For example, in Argentina, Macri’s anti-populist and neoliberal administration created significant challenges for vulnerable social groups and minorities. Macrism identified poor migrants as the primary perpetrators of crime through its immigration legislation (Basok, 2019). Additionally, “Indigenous peoples continued to be criminalized and discriminated against”, while “migrants’ rights suffered significant setbacks” (Amnesty International, 2018, p. 76). Notwithstanding, anti-populist discourse is not necessarily anti-popular as some anti-populist parties and leaders adopt inclusive perspectives within their agendas. For instance, the Communist Party of Greece has repeatedly denounced populism, advocating a democratic and inclusionary society.<sup>9</sup> Hence, it is not useful to predetermine populist and anti-populist discourses, as they can take different forms. After all, “both (pro) populist and anti-populist discourses can acquire ‘progressive’ or ‘reactionary’, democratic or anti-democratic forms” (Stavrakakis, 2017, p. 3).<sup>10</sup>

### **Populism, Anti-populism and the Roma in Greece (2015-2023)**

In Greece, many people are ethnically, culturally, or religiously different from the national majority. According to Triandafyllidou and Kokkali (2010), there are “co-ethnics”, such as ethnic Greek Albanians, there are “native minorities”, such as Muslims and Roma, as well as “migrant populations” like Albanians, Georgians, and Ukrainians. However, Miltos Pavlou (2007, p. 2) underlines that the Greek state acknowledges the existence of only one minority, the Muslim of the Western Thrace, which is recognized through international treaties of the early twentieth century. It is true that Romani are not recognized as an official minority<sup>11</sup> [(except from Muslim Roma) (Triandafyllidou & Kokkali, 2010)], but they are legally and institutionally

<sup>9</sup> For example, KKE demands substantial and personalized support and integration measures for refugees (Rizospastis, 2020).

<sup>10</sup> More for anti-populism find here: Markou, 2021.

<sup>11</sup> There are Greek political parties (and their MPs) that have referred in their discourse to the Roma as a minority, like SYRIZA, MeRA25 (SYRIZA, 2020; MeRA25, 2019).

identified as Greek citizens<sup>12</sup> (Reach, 2021, p. 11), as they were granted citizenship in the 1970s (Abdikeeva and MRG partners, 2005, p. 6). Moreover, the Greek Roma<sup>13</sup> are recognized as a “vulnerable social group” by the Greek state (Triantafyllidou & Kokkali, 2010).

Despite Romani people possessing characteristics that typically classify them as a minority—such as being fewer in number than the general population in a country and sharing a common identity—it is noteworthy that some Roma reject the characterization of their community as an ethnic minority (Abdikeeva & MRG partners, 2005, p. 6). Maria Tsampazi, SYRIZA’s MEP candidate in the 2019 European elections and member of the Panhellenic Confederation of the Greek Roma (ELLAN-PASSE), stated (Avgi, 2021) that the Greek Romani people do not belong to an ethnic minority, observing that the racist treatment towards the “tsigans” is a phenomenon of the last thirty years:

“Greek tsigans have brazenly stated since 1971 at the World Roma Congress in London that since they have never been persecuted in Greece and since there was no racist treatment of them by the Greeks, they do not want to be described as an ethnic minority in their country” (Avgi, 2021).

In Greece, vulnerable social groups and minorities, including the Roma, were significantly affected by the economic crisis, austerity measures, and the recent pandemic. Romani representatives have repeatedly highlighted that their problems have worsened with the onset of these major crises (Antonopoulos, 2021). Nevertheless, Greek Roma have long been facing social exclusion and discrimination, including the lack of adequate and permanent housing, poor health, low employment rates, unequal wages, illiteracy, and the stereotypical perceptions of a significant part of Greek society (Atsikpasi et. al, 2016, p. 398). Greek governments periodically plan specific policies that attempt to promote their social inclusion through strategies on education, employment, healthcare, and housing,<sup>14</sup> but they do not appear to have fully achieved their goal to this day. Additionally, the recent rise of the conflict between populist and anti-populist parties—each advocating either inclusionary or exclusionary logic—may have also impacted their lives. Did populist and anti-populist leaders and governments play a role in the deterioration of the position of the Greek Roma, or not? How did the SYRIZA-led and ND governments in Greece approach the Romani people? Does the evidence support the view of an “anti-minority populism”?

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<sup>12</sup>More for the Greek legislation for the Roma in Greece here: (Social Inclusion of the Roma, 2018).

<sup>13</sup>In 2018, the Special General Secretariat for the Social Inclusion of Roma recorded Roma in Greece, numbering them around 110000 (Avgi Newsroom, 2018).

<sup>14</sup>In Greece, the first attempt to construct a coherent framework of political support for the social integration of the Roma was in the mid-1990s. More on Greek legislation and initiatives for Roma integration here: (Social Inclusion of the Roma, 2018).

## **SYRIZA-led Government (2015-2019): An Inclusionary Populist Case?**

SYRIZA is a left-wing party which, both in the opposition and during a period of its rule, expressed a strong populist discourse that called upon “the people” to oppose the domestic and foreign political and economic establishment, the traditional parties, corruption, austerity policies and neoliberalism (Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, 2014; Markou, 2017). Specifically, after its rise to power in 2015, the left-wing party maintained its populist discursive and performative elements but not so much its radicalism, continuing to place “the people” in a central position and against the establishment. Nonetheless, it gradually reduced the intensity of its populist discourse, while its political decisions drove it away from part of the people (Markou, 2021, June 14).

At a time when many researchers analyzed the supposedly anti-pluralist character of populist parties, thus often equating left-wing and right-wing forces, there were scholars (Markou, 2017; Font et. al, 2021; Katsambekis, 2019), who focused on a type of populism with inclusionary/pluralistic elements. SYRIZA in power pursued a humanitarian agenda intending to support vulnerable social groups and minorities. After all, its political discourse constructed an inclusive popular subject (“the people” functioned as a nodal point) which among heterogeneous identities demands, included immigrants, the LGBTQ community, Romani people, Muslims, and vulnerable social groups in general. Moreover, despite the fact that SYRIZA formed a coalition government with a radical right party (on the basis of a “popular front” against austerity policies), it maintained its inclusive agenda, promoting and voting policies in favor of minority groups. For example, the government of Alexis Tsipras recognized many of the rights of the LGBTQ community, such as the civil partnership agreements between same-sex couples, the recognition of gender identity and the legislation that allows same-sex couples to foster children (Katsambekis, 2019, p. 38). In addition, the SYRIZA-led government implemented inclusive policies for immigrants, such as the law that grants Greek citizenship to second-generation migrants (Kotronakis, 2015). However, although SYRIZA, while in opposition, frequently criticized governmental policies on immigration and refugees, it did not achieve significant progress on these issues after coming to power. Although it demonstrated a willingness to address the issue from a new perspective—for example, by establishing a Ministry of Immigration Policy—it continued to face significant challenges in practice. To exemplify, their living conditions in “Reception and Identification Centers” were dire. It is characteristic that the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) of Council of Europe underlined in a report the unfavorable conditions that existed in reception centers in Greece (CPT, 2017).

Let’s examine how SYRIZA approached the Roma. During his governmental rule, Tsipras developed a special relationship with the Romani people, having meetings with representatives and members of the Roma community, referring to the discrimination they suffered and supporting their rights. Tsipras’ political performance frequently

featured images highlighting his warm relationship with the Roma, including hugs, warm greetings, and celebrations. The leader of SYRIZA tried, as part of his populist discourse and performance, to show his undivided support for the Roma. For example, when he visited a settlement in northern Greece where Roma live and people with different religious beliefs coexist, he stated: “Regardless of the God we believe in and the color our skin is, we are human beings, we are citizens of this country and we must have equal opportunities and equal rights” (CNN Newsroom, 2019). In 2019, the president of SYRIZA welcomed, as the prime minister, representatives and members of the Roma community in Maximos (Maximou) Mansion on the occasion of World Roma Day and said:

“Today is a special day. It is a day dedicated to the Roma. But I would say that it must be a day to remind all of us that there are no second-class citizens. Unfortunately, this is not, especially in our time, something that is self-evident. This discrimination based on gender, racial origin must stop. And this is a battle that cannot be won overnight. It is a battle against prejudice, it is a battle against stereotypes” (Tsipras speech, 2019).

Furthermore, a member of the Panhellenic Confederation of the Greek Roma (ELLAN-PASSE) participated in SYRIZA’s European ballot in 2019, forming together with the other candidacies a mosaic of identities, cultures, and ideas. In the election campaign for the 2019 European elections, a large part of the Roma community participated in SYRIZA events, a fact that was negatively characterized by a part of the media and conservative citizens. The president of SYRIZA reacted against racist views, saying: “We welcome them, there are no second-class citizens in Greece” (protothema.gr, 2019).

At the level of policies, the SYRIZA-led government tried to tackle the extreme poverty and social exclusion of the Roma through some crucial interventions. In 2016, it established a Special General Secretariat for the Social Inclusion of Roma with Law 4430/2016 (article 42) with the aim of implementing interventions in the education, employment, health care, and housing of the Roma, monitoring and evaluating policies related to them and conducting research on their living conditions, etc. (Lawspot.gr, 2016). The Special General Secretariat recorded Romani people for the first time in Greece, numbering them around 110,000, while mapping the 370 Roma settlements/camps to improve living conditions of the people (Avgi.gr, 2018). Moreover, special importance was given to strengthening the education of the Roma. For example, the Solidarity Social Income was granted to Roma on the condition that their children go to school (Government, 2017). In addition, the SYRIZA-led government promoted interventions related to housing support and the improvement of the living conditions of the Roma (Law 4483/2017) through the transitional relocation of Roma who live in makeshift or irregular accommodations to appropriately organized housing complexes with social support services (Government, 2018; Ziomas et. al, 2019, p. 13). Finally, in 2019 the government planned to strengthen Roma entrepreneurship within the

Operational Program “Competitiveness-Entrepreneurship-Innovation” of the NSRF 2013-2020 (taxheaven.gr, 2019).

Overall, the SYRIZA-led government seems to have moved more in an inclusive direction in its discourse and policies, but without bringing the desired results on immigrant and refugee issues. As an inclusionary populist party that constructed a heterogeneous popular subject, it put special emphasis on improving the lives of Romani people through a few policies and interventions, without, of course, providing solutions to all their problems. The truth is that Roma continued after the end of its rule to live marginalized and in poor living conditions. Nevertheless, SYRIZA’s efforts for Roma inclusion were appreciated by a large part of the Romani people. After all, the party received thousands of votes from them in the 2019 national elections. For example, in the Dendropotamos region in Thessaloniki, where many Romani people live, SYRIZA got 63.5 per cent of the votes, while on the contrary, New Democracy got only 15.8 per cent (Tovima.gr, 2019, July 10). Evidence suggests that the SYRIZA-led government demonstrated a notably greater emphasis on the inclusion of the Roma compared to many previous administrations.

### **New Democracy Back in Power (2019-2023): A Paradoxical Example?**

ND returned to power in 2019 after four and a half years of SYRIZA rule with a one-party government, securing 158 of the 300-seat parliament (Tidey, 2019). ND is a right-wing party that combines liberal and conservative characteristics with a pro-EU stance. Specifically, it exhibits a paradoxical character, characterized by a contradictory blend of rhetoric and ideas, oscillating between liberalism and nativism, with conservatism prevailing. Its rhetoric does not always go hand in hand with its political action and vice versa. In recent years, especially after the electoral rise of SYRIZA in crisis-ridden Greece, ND has expressed a strong anti-populist discourse that considers populism one of the greatest dangers to (liberal) democracy (Markou, 2021). Its anti-populism stems mainly from the discourse of its leadership, while at the same time, there is a part of the party that flirts intensely with populism. Nonetheless, its anti-populism is central to its political performance, directly affecting its relationship with vulnerable social groups. At the same time, ND embraces a nationalist logic on various issues, while its leadership discourse relies largely on the concept of security (safety), underlying the need to protect “our neighborhoods” and “our borders” (ND, 2019a). Its rise to power came with the promise:

“to lead Greece out of the “stagnation” of the Syriza years, deal with the refugee crisis, assert Greece’s position on the international stage, and introduce technocratic governance following five years of “populist mismanagement” (Tsimitakis & Panayiotakis, 2021).

The leader of ND, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, presents himself as a liberal politician who respects social diversity and believes in democracy based on the will of the many and

the protection of the few, underlying the importance of providing equal opportunities to everyone (Toumasis, 2020). Mitsotakis declares from time to time some statements against social discrimination (e.g. in the case of LGBTQ people), highlighting the need to eliminate it (Protagon Team, 2022). However, these progressive statements do not present the whole picture of his party's political discourse and performance. First, the president of ND refers to minority issues and rights only occasionally, primarily in the context of specific events or international days (e.g. International Day against Homophobia and Transphobia). Second, his references to vulnerable social groups and minorities in his public (pre-election) speeches are few and far between. For example, in his keynote speech in Athens before the 2019 elections, the president refers to all Greek citizens, including employees, farmers, professionals, retired, civil servants, unemployed, young mothers, and university students, but without focusing on minorities and vulnerable social groups, such as Muslims, LGBTQ community, migrants, etc. (ND, 2019, July 4). Third, the Mitsotakis' administration implemented policies that weakened the position of vulnerable social groups in the country, including the (temporary) cancellation of issuing the social security number (AMKA) to "migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, unaccompanied refugee children and non-EU nationals" (Pannia, 2021, p. 57).

What about the Romani? Both in opposition and in power, the leader of ND does not appear to seek a close relationship with the Roma or include them in his political agenda, and his references to them are infrequent. However, he presents himself as a politician with social sensitivities and an advocate for the social inclusion of the Roma. Specifically, ND president carries out some minimal actions to emphasize the importance of "equal opportunities for everyone", such as his participation (whilst in opposition) in a football match against the Greek Roma team, with the aim of "breaking down prejudices and stereotypes" (News247, 2018) and his statement that all children should have equal opportunities, referring to Roma families (Tovima.gr, 2019, April 8). Furthermore, in 2023 Mitsotakis met Roma families in Katerini, where he promised the removal of social exclusions, as well as the inclusion and the assurance of equal access of the Roma to public education and job opportunities (In. gr, 2023, June 10). Nonetheless, a part of the party has expressed racist and provocative comments about the Roma at different times, such as in the case of an MP of ND (former Deputy Minister of National Defense), who expressed racist opinions about Romani people, asking from them not to vote for him in the elections (Ertnews.gr, 2018, March 3). The problem is that the party did not take decisive action against this kind of racist comment.

At the policy level, ND promoted numerous initiatives for the social integration of the Roma, such as inclusive educational programs. Moreover, it planned to implement (after some years in the country's governance), within the framework of the National Strategy for the Social Inclusion of the Roma (2021-2030), a strategy to combat poverty and social exclusion of the Roma, strengthen their equal access to basic services and goods, prevent and combat stereotypes and discrimination against them and promote

their active participation in social, economic and political life (Social Inclusion of the Roma, 2022, March 9). In the context of this strategy, the program “Social Integration and Empowerment of the Roma” was presented in June 2022, with the aim of solving serious problems of the Roma (Social Inclusion of the Roma, 2022, June 6).

However, the initiatives and strategies for the inclusion of the Roma present many problems and seem to be going at a slow pace. According to the president of ELLAN-PASSE and its legal advisor, once again a national plan for the Roma is being drawn up without asking the opinion of the Romani people. These actions concern mainly the Roma in a state of extreme poverty (which means that not everyone is included), while the role of their higher-level body (ELLAN-PASSE) is not institutionally guaranteed anywhere (Konstantopoulos, 2022). It is interesting that representatives of the Roma community refer to the lack of communication between ND and the Roma community, as the right-wing party does not often come into direct contact with them.

Additionally, during ND’s tenure, a number of initiatives and decisions undermined and violated the rights and interests of the Roma. First, the “Special Secretariat for Social Inclusion of Roma”, which institutionally recognized the social integration of the Roma as a distinct public policy, was abolished by presidential decree [84/2019, Article 7 (5)], while its services came under the new “General Secretary for Social Solidarity and Fight Against Poverty” (e-nomothesia.gr). Second, according to the president of ELLAN-PASSE, thousands of Roma children were excluded from distance education during the pandemic, because several camps lacked basic necessities such as electricity and running water (Konstantopoulos, 2020). Third, the state implemented no protective measures during the pandemic for the Roma, who live under inadequate living conditions (Andrianopoulos, 2021). Fourth, there were many complaints of police violence against the Roma.<sup>15</sup> Not without reason. For example, in October 2021, an unarmed young Roma, who had stolen a car with two other persons, was killed by police fire after a police chase (Varvantakis, 2021). In that case, the Minister of Development and Investment and one of the two vice presidents of ND, Adonis Georgiadis, congratulated the police who had shot at the Roma, because according to him they “did their job well and protected both their lives and society by defending themselves”<sup>16</sup> <sup>17</sup> (Varvantakis, 2021).<sup>18</sup> ELLAN-PASSE characterized it as a “murder of a 18-years old Roma”, arguing that: “...the crime was committed by official state bodies with the seven police officers who fired 38 bullets against three unarmed young Roma” (ELLAN-PASSE 2021, October 24). In 2022, a 16-year-old Roma was killed

<sup>15</sup>ELLAN-PASSE has published statements on police violence against the Roma (see: ELLAN-PASSE, 2022).

<sup>16</sup>See: (Georgiadis, A. 2021).

<sup>17</sup>Some days later, Adonis Georgiadis said: “The state must help them to find a job and be included in the society. But they must also understand that what they are doing confirms the stereotypes” (Press Project, 2021).

<sup>18</sup>Varvantakis (2021), argues on this issue: “Observers may wonder what exactly was heroic about a frenzied shooting of three unarmed young people, which led to the killing of one of them. The answer may lie in the identities of those who were shot at and their status in Greek society.”

by the police during a pursuit because he did not pay 20 euros for gasoline at a gas station (tvxs.gr, 2022, December 22), while in 2023, a 17-year-old Roma was killed by police gunfire following another pursuit (Efsyn.gr, 2023, November 13). Hence, despite the purported declarations and plans for the social inclusion of the Roma, the approach taken by the right-wing government appears to result in their stigmatization and further marginalization.

In summary, ND presents a paradoxical image overall, as it integrates both inclusive and exclusive elements in its discourse and policies on minorities. However, regarding the Roma minority, despite Mitsotakis's declarations and some policy initiatives, his government has not done much to help them in practice. On the contrary, there have been instances where the Roma have been marginalized and have experienced social discrimination. The government appears to lack an understanding of the problems faced by the Roma community, as it does not engage in regular dialogue with them. Consequently, Romani people are often excluded from Greek society—a concern that has been repeatedly highlighted by community representatives.

## **Conclusion**

Through this analysis, we aimed to contribute to the academic discourse on the relationship between populism, anti-populism, and minorities by offering an alternative perspective on the issue and criticizing theories that posit a predetermined anti-pluralist element within populism. Moreover, we examined how the Romani minority was approached by both a populist and an anti-populist government in Greece, aiming to highlight the inclusive and/or exclusive characteristics of their respective discourses and policies.

As we have seen, on the one hand, SYRIZA and Alexis Tsipras (2015-2019) expressed—more or less—an inclusionary populist discourse that embraced Romani rights, promoting their social inclusion. Despite that SYRIZA failed to fully satisfy popular demands on the economic level due to Memorandum policies (Markou, 2017), the party made significant strides in advancing minority rights, although it did not resolve all the issues affecting these social groups. One of the most significant issues was its inability to find a solution to the immigrant and refugee crisis, as well as to improve the living conditions of these people in the country. On the other hand, the anti-populist Kyriakos Mitsotakis and his party demonstrated a paradoxical performance, characterized by some inclusionary and numerous exclusionary elements in their discourse and policies on minorities. Regarding the Roma minority, the ND government appears to have promoted their marginalization rather than their social inclusion.

The example of SYRIZA fully confirms our argument that populist discourse can construct a heterogeneous and democratic popular subject, without being necessarily anti-minority, while the case of ND proves that anti-populist parties may advocate for the inclusion of marginalized groups, however, their discourse and policies are not

always fully inclusive in practice. The Greek case shows that the anti-minority logic does not necessarily go hand in hand with populism, while underlining the importance of studying the anti-populist discourse and its effects on specific vulnerable social groups.

Finally, it is important to highlight two key issues raised by this article. First, the paradoxical stance of ND towards minorities prompts us to reconsider the efficacy of the “inclusionary” and “exclusionary” approach. While ND occasionally flirts with right-wing radicalism and incorporates many exclusive elements in its discourse and policies, it is not certain that it can be characterized as a (fully) exclusionary party, particularly given that its leader frequently advocates for the inclusion of some minorities. Second, the fact that SYRIZA, despite largely expressing an inclusionary populism, failed to address the issues faced by immigrants and refugees in Greece raises questions about the extent to which a political party can fully implement its inclusionary policies or ideas within the existing post-democratic and neoliberal capitalist context. It is true that even when a party comes to power with an inclusionary agenda and good intentions toward minorities and vulnerable people, it may struggle to effect substantial change if it does not confront the prevailing political and economic framework. Thus, even when inclusionary parties are in power, not all minorities necessarily experience an improvement in their living conditions. This implies that a government seeking to present itself as progressive should not merely address the immediate problems faced by minorities, but should also strive to fundamentally reassess these issues and advocate for structural and radical political changes.

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