

## Chapter 19

# The Rise of SYRIZA in Greece 2009–2015: The Digital Battlefield

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### Introduction

The Rise of Syriza from 2009 to 2015 when the party took power in Greece, governing the country till 2019, and its fall, when it lost to New Democracy, has been unquestionably a major political event. Given the context of European politics, the importance of the vote in a small peripheral country of the EU was surpassed by far by its domestic issues. Indeed, SYRIZA's anti-austerity agenda challenged dominant EU policies and echoed demands for social justice and democracy during that turbulent period, expressed by movements around the world, such as the *Indignados*, Occupy or the Arab spring (Karatzogianni, 2015), in a Europe riddled by socio-economic and political crisis (Spourdalakis, 2014). Multiple structural factors explain the rise of SYRIZA (Katsourides, 2016): Greece's particular political history, dramatic socio-economic crisis and extreme austerity, the nepotism and corruption of the two dominant political parties (PASOK and New Democracy), distrust of the mainstream media, but also another element in these structural conditions influenced SYRIZA's rise to power: The overwhelming mobilisation online in its favour. In this context, SYRIZA evolved from a minor coalition of the left with roots in the Euro-communist tradition, as well as the alter-globalisation movement, to the main unitary single-party of the Greek Left, and it developed a successful populist strategy during the crisis in order to gain access to power (Agnantopoulos & Lambiri, 2015; Karaliotas, 2019; Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, 2014).

An interesting characteristic of SYRIZA's accession to government is that it built on international support mainly through social networking sites, particularly Twitter, against domestic and European mainstream media that were extremely critical of its propositions. International support for the Greek radical Left intensified with the anti-austerity movement of 2011–2013 through to the 2014 European elections, in which the leader of SYRIZA, Alexis Tsipras, was the candidate of the European Left for the presidency of the European Commission against establishment politicians, such as Martin Schulz and Jean-Claude Juncker. The crisis as well as the particular institutional and political context of

this election fuelled interest on behalf of a large number of citizens for this election, and allowed Tsipras to gain popularity, and its party to connect with numerous organisations and activists outside Greece.

This chapter explains how SYRIZA managed to build international support up to the January 2015 election with very limited resources, and against mainstream coverage, by relying essentially on grassroots movements and social media. It also shows how, approaching to power, SYRIZA's political, but also communication strategy, became more institutionalised and relied less on grassroots campaigning. Methodologically, our research is based on the following research techniques: First, interviews with activists and members of the party as well as first-hand observations inside its social media team. Second, the study of online content and data from 2006 to 2015. Network analysis was employed to show how support for SYRIZA was structured on Twitter, which communities and players were involved, and how they evolved through time between 2014 and 2015. This involves four samples of several hundred thousand tweets on four key moments (the Tell Europe debate that took place in Brussels on 14 May 2014, the last week of the Greek elections campaign between 17 and 24 January 2015 and the days after the SYRIZA victory between 27 January and 3 February 2015 as well as the Greek referendum campaign on July 2015).

Overall, the chapter shows that SYRIZA's campaign on the Internet relied mainly on alternative media activists who acquired a specific *savoir faire* and developed international networks during the intense anti-austerity social movement that took place in Greece between 2011 and 2013. The campaign was also supported by young experts from the private sector that contributed on a voluntary basis. Nevertheless, its success was mainly due to the European political context and the opportunities it offered to the radical Left, rather than their communication strategy, which in any case suffered from a lack of means and from a somewhat chaotic (non) organisation.

The chapter is divided into the following sections to denote the phases in the rise of SYRIZA as a player in digital communication: the first phase of the early years (2006–2011); the second phase including the anti-austerity movements and the road to power (2011–2014), which also discusses #TellEurope on Twitter and the period where SYRIZA faces internal conflict; the third phase where SYRIZA wins the elections mapping the victory on Twitter; and the final phase of the social media polarisation during the Greek referendum, the result, and the response to this result.

### **First Phase: The Early Years (2006–2011)**

The early phase of Greek political activism online was limited to Indymedia Athens up to the middle of the 2000s. From 2006, what occurs is the rise of the Greek blogosphere, involving a modernist technophile elite, both from the left and from the center-right, that forms a liberal consensus opposed to the traditional conservatism of Greek society, and engages in political activism against corruption, in favour of secularism, etc. In May 2006, the 4th European

Social Forum that takes place in Athens provides further opening in the political opportunity structure and for anti-globalisation and social justice discourses to transfer and enrich the broad coalition of the radical Left. In October 2006, SYRIZA's successful election campaign for the municipality of Athens headed by Alexis Tsipras gains 10.5% of the vote, while the party had obtained only 3.26% in the Parliamentary election of 2004. In August 2007, the first protest organised by bloggers takes place in Athens. Several thousand gather in front of the Parliament in order to denounce government inaction against the massive wildfires of the period (see Chapter on Skouries in this volume). This was the first time in Greek political history that a protest organised solely online successfully materialised in a massive demonstration. It would serve as a paradigm for anti-austerity protests 4 years later, both in the fact that it was based on digital tools, but also in its non-partisan and apolitical character.

In February 2008, 33-year-old Tsipras became leader of SYRIZA thanks to the support of the party's former leader Alekos Alavanos. The taking over of the party by Tsipras brought the rise of a new group of party members composed of generation X anti-globalisation movement and social forum activists, with close ties to the blogosphere who attempted to modernise SYRIZA, and particularly its communication strategy. To that effect, Tsipras' first interview as SYRIZA's leader was to a citizen journalism webradio, Radiobubble, which later became a major hub for activists against austerity. Beyond the fact that this first interview of a leading politician to an online media is an innovation itself, the whole plan is original: for the first time in Greece, the public asked questions live during the broadcast. A dedicated team of bloggers of various political horizons filtered these questions. This participatory process consolidated the 'objectivity' of the interview and laid the foundations for the development of citizen journalism in Greece.

In December 2008, massive riots took place in Greece for several weeks after the assassination of 16-year-old Alexis Grigoropoulos by a policeman in the centre of Athens (Karamichas, 2009). On this occasion, there was an explosion of alternative media in Greece including progressive journalistic start-ups (TVXS), the aforementioned citizen journalism (Radiobubble) and hashtag reporting (#GRiots) (Fig. 19.1).

Tsipras' first circle with 'street credibility' resulting from long-standing participation in social movements as well as dozens of SYRIZA members and sympathisers connect to this galaxy of alternative media, gaining experience in reporting through Twitter, and in managing online political communities that will allow them to be at the heart of future campaigns. In April 2009, a member of Obama's Internet team was invited by SYRIZA, in order to share his experience from the successful 2008 US presidential campaign, and there is a strategic choice to invest on digital campaigning, in order to counter mainstream propaganda. It is worth noting here that this has been also a common practice in the UK, where Momentum from the Labour party and their volunteer-run 'distributed organising' model drew on the experience of a range of decentralised political campaigns because they sought advice among them from senior figures of the Bernie Sanders campaign of 2016 (US Elections).



Fig. 19.1. Screenshot of Hashtag Reporting with #GRiots During the 2008 Riots.

To continue, this particular period in Greece was characterised online by political polarisation mainly between ‘progressives’ (radical Left/SYRIZA & Center Left/PASOK) versus ‘conservatives’ (Right/New Democracy & nationalists) who were in power since 2004. Indeed, these online activists rally against the right-wing government of New Democracy, especially in the Greek blogosphere that is very active at that period, while social media start to gain some popularity. In October 2009, PASOK under Papandreou won snap elections with the first major online political campaign in Greece by co-opting the ‘progressive’ blogosphere. Many prominent Greek bloggers were invited to Brussels by PASOK European MPs to visit the European Parliament, and some of them counsel or work directly for Papandreou’s team. SYRIZA under Tsipras obtains 5.04% of the votes and 14 MPs (from 3.26% and 6 MPs in the regular elections of 2007).

While Papandreou was elected on the promise of a Keynesian spending programme and social policy, the situation rapidly evolved when it was recognised that Greece was ridden with enormous deficit and debt. In April 2010, Greece was declared bankrupt and the government of PASOK signed the first Memorandum of Understanding that included forced loans from the EU and the IMF, as well as the implementation of extreme austerity measures. A second Memorandum was signed in February 2011. This was the beginning of the process of *pasokification*, that is the electoral, ideological and cultural meltdown of European social democracy that developed the following years (Manwaring & Kennedy, 2018). This meltdown freed political space for the radical Left to grow.

### **The Second Phase: The Anti-austerity Movements and SYRIZA's Road to Power (2011–2014)**

In May 2011, Spanish activists occupied the Plaza del Sol in Madrid, in what became known as the 15M or the *Indignados* movement. Although resulting from the evolution of an autonomous collective identity predicated on deliberative movement culture in Spain since the early 1980s (Flesher Fominaya, 2015), the *Indignados* were characterized by significant differences compared to previous protests regarding staging organizations (recently created, without formal membership and mainly online presence), the main mobilisation channels (personal contact and online social networks, rather than co-members or broadcast media), and participants (younger, more educated and less politically involved) (Anduiza, Cristancho, & Sabucedo, 2014). The Spanish *Indignados* sparked protests against austerity with similar characteristics all over Europe and especially in Greece, where hundreds of thousands assembled at Syntagma Square in Athens following calls on social media.

Thus, the Greek anti-austerity mobilisations were in sync globally with the fourth wave of digital activism between 2010 and 2014 (Karatzogianni, 2015), which started with the WikiLeaks video release in the summer of 2010, the 'Arab Spring' revolutions in the MENA region, the Occupy Wall Street movement in 2011 and the spread of Occupy across the globe. The years 2011–2014 witnessed protests in countries as diverse as Portugal, Spain, Brazil, Turkey, Nigeria and India, to name but a few, as well as digital activism relating to feminist, LGBT and environmental issues (Karatzogianni & Schandorf, 2016). This period was also crucially marked by the Snowden revelations in the summer of 2013 (Karatzogianni & Gak, 2015), which provided significant evidence for the crackdown on digital activism by the United States and the United Kingdom and the allegedly forced cooperation of tech corporations, culminating in the mainstreaming of digital activism, and the end of its uniqueness and exoticism as a phenomenon. This was the period that Zeynep Tufekci (2017) called 'networked protests' where movements and publics were reconfigured through the incorporation of digital technologies and connectivity. Indeed, the Syntagma Square mobilisation took place entirely *via* social networking sites and

microblogs, and the networks established during the mobilisations were subsequently used to support bottom-up solidarity initiatives (Theocharis et al., 2016).

Through 2011 and 2012, there were massive protests in Greece, with repeated police brutality, and where social media were used to denounce repression and propaganda. Protests created hybrid hubs (digital/physical) like Radiobubble that combined a studio from where broadcasts were made *via* a web radio that covered the movement, but also a café bar where activists, journalists and political militants from Greece and from abroad met and mingled (Smyrnaioi, 2015). These hybrid spaces allowed SYRIZA members to further connect with social media activists and establish personal relations, but also political proximities that would later be very useful in electoral campaigns. They also fostered innovations such as the launch of #rbnews by Radiobubble which quickly became the most popular participatory news hashtag in Greece with a self-regulated code of deontology, later followed by the #antireport hashtag as a clear reference to its counter-hegemonic purpose.

At the same time, in Greece online political polarisation shifted to ‘pro-austerity’ (Center Left/PASOK & Right/New Democracy) versus ‘anti-austerity’ (Left/SYRIZA & nationalists), thus allowing for the left populist strategy of SYRIZA to fully deploy and gain momentum on social media. In November 2011, under the pressure of EU leaders, Papandreou resigned, and a great coalition government formed under ex-central banker Loukas Papademos with the participation of PASOK and New Democracy, as well as the far-right party LAOS. After the snap elections of May 2012, which resulted in a hung parliament, SYRIZA enjoyed its first electoral success in June with 26.89% of the votes and 71 MPs, becoming the main opposition party to the pro-austerity government led by Antonis Samaras, the hardliner leader of the right, whilst at the same time Greece saw the Neo-Nazis of Golden Dawn enter Parliament.

### ***The Collapse of the Greek Media System***

In the late afternoon of 11 June 2012, Samaras’ government announced its intention to close ERT, the public broadcaster. This announcement surprised by its brutality. It was taken without any concertation or discussion and imposed by force. The police intervened at 11:30 p.m. and stopped the transmission of the three national television channels and of dozens of public radios. 2,656 employees, technicians, administrative staff and journalists were dismissed overnight. The national audio-visual archive, the symphonic orchestra, ERT World, the channel for Greeks abroad, all were meant to be shut down.

The same day a call for a protest in front of the ERT building was launched which quickly became an occupation. The journalists and other employees of ERT decided to keep broadcasting. Various Internet sites carried the broadcasts and the European Broadcasting Union provided technical support. During the first days of the occupation, technicians appeared on camera and programme changes happened on air, breaking television conventions, while former ERT journalists freely expressed their own opinions, turning ERT into a polyphonic

medium with performative dimensions (Papagiannouli, 2018). Within days, a pirate online version of ERT was launched called ERT Open developing a collective, self-managed new online media, engaged against the government of New Democracy and the austerity policies imposed on Greece (Sotirakopoulos & Ntalaka, 2015).

Even if the powerful – and for many corrupt – union of public radio and television employees POSPERT was a key player, these events opened new perspectives for social media activists and strengthened the dynamics of independent online media in the country, which benefited from the arrival of numerous experienced journalists and technicians previously employed by ERT. The same applied for dozens of Greek media that went bankrupt during the crisis (Pleios, 2013). Since the privatisation of TV and radio in the early 1990s Greece was characterised by an oversized media system: in 2004 there were 17,000 professional journalists in Greece, compared to 32,000 for France at the same period, a country with six times the Greek population. In the early 2000s Greece had 150 private TV stations, 800 radios (national, regional and local) and 15 sports dailies. This was double that of Portugal. Given the small size of the Greek market most of these media were losing money but were useful to their owners for gaining political influence and pumping money from stock market and banks (Smyrniaios, 2013). When the economic crisis hit the country thousands of journalists were fired: the number of employees in media groups listed in the Athens Stock Exchange went from 8,631 in 2008 to 3,443 in 2012.

During the crisis, many of these unemployed journalists were active on social media or joined alternative media ventures. The case of the *Eleftherotypia* is interesting in this respect. The only major daily newspaper to oppose the dominant discourse by defending an anti-austerity stance, *Eleftherotypia* was in near bankruptcy following management errors but also because of the banks' refusal to grant it a loan essential to its survival. In February 2012, its journalists and workers on strike decided to produce an alternative newspaper, which proved to be successful. After this experiment, in November 2012 the same group launched *Efimerida ton Syntakton* (Efsyn) – the Editors' Newspaper – which is a cooperative print and online news medium run exclusively by its workers (Siapera & Papadopoulou, 2016). Efsyn was successful, jumping into the top five circulation rankings. SYRIZA derived an important benefit from the media crisis in Greece because its members, its MPs, as well as Alexis Tsipras himself, were present in the occupation of ERT, and strongly supported the experimentation of ERT Open as well as the whole media sector employee's resistance to austerity plans.

It is in this context that, in October 2013, the European Left designated Alexis Tsipras as its candidate for the presidency of the European Commission with an anti-austerity agenda. Tsipras started a European tour and SYRIZA reactivated the dedicated social media team that was created in 2012 for the new campaign, with a very small budget, but a lot of enthusiasm. Many experts (data scientists, communication strategists, journalists) worked for free. The social media team was not based at SYRIZA's HQs, and therefore enjoyed complete autonomy from politicians. The campaign federated dozens of bloggers and social media 'influencers' that established contacts with, and even rallied around SYRIZA

during the Syntagma Square protests. The strategy connected with social movements and was based on the spontaneous participation of thousands of sympathisers. It used media coverage about the Greek crisis to deploy an anti-austerity discourse about Europe and coordinated internationally (e.g. through the Transform! network). Crucially, it relied on creativity coming from the base and deployed a radical but also 'informal' discourse using humour and irony.

### ***#TellEurope: An Analysis of the Twitter Coverage of the EBU Debate***

One example of Tsipras' successful campaign on social media during that period is the debate between the five candidates for the presidency of the European Commission that took place on 15 May 2014 in Brussels. Although a small-scale political event, this debate was an important step in the gradual emergence of an embryonic common public sphere in the EU. In this regard, the debate that was organised by the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) in Brussels despite the inherent weaknesses of the project is interesting in many respects.

First, the five candidates, Alexis Tsipras (European Left), Martin Schulz (Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats), Ska Keller (Alliance '90/The Greens), Guy Verhofstadt (Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe) and Jean-Claude Juncker (European People's Party), represented the main political parties in Europe, except for the extreme right. There is therefore a match, even indirect, between the protagonists of the debate and the stake of the European elections. Second, the candidates were forced to defend the distinct role of the European Commission and Parliament against the Council of Heads of Member States, which exercises power *de facto* without the appropriate democratic legitimacy at the European level. Third, the televised debate had two original features: it was meant to address all Europeans at the same time – which is very rare and happens only for non-political events such as the Eurovision song contest for instance – and was designed for simultaneous commentary on the Internet.

According to the EBU, the debate was broadcast simultaneously in 28 countries of the EU by 55 TV channels, 88 websites and nine radio stations. In fact, there was little major media that broadcast the event. For example, in France it was two public channels of the Assemblée Nationale and the Senate, respectively, with minimal viewership, and a 24 hours news channel, iTélé, with a market share of approximately 1%. Participation in the online commentary was also relatively low, notwithstanding EBU's promotion efforts like advertising the hashtag and hiring a company offering detailed analytics from Twitter during the debate.

Indeed, in the first 2 hours of the broadcast, fewer than 20,000 users sent approximately 75,000 tweets containing the official hashtag. Comparatively, the Eurovision song contest held on May 10 produced 875,000 tweets including the #eurovision hashtag within 24 hours (Fig. 19.2). In total, the Eurovision song contest generated more than two million tweets, compared to 100,000 for the Tell Europe debate (Fig. 19.3).

The number is very small if one considers the fact that the election concerns 500 million Europeans. However, participation in the Twitter discussion doubled



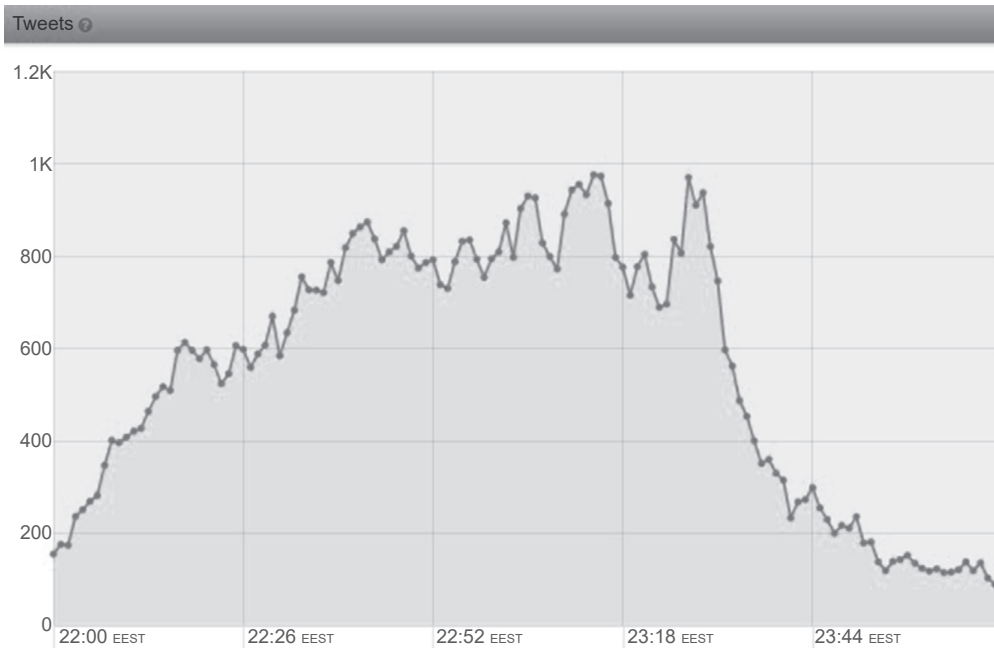


Fig. 19.2. Variation of Number of Tweets Containing the Hashtag #TellEurope During the Debate. *Source:* EBU.

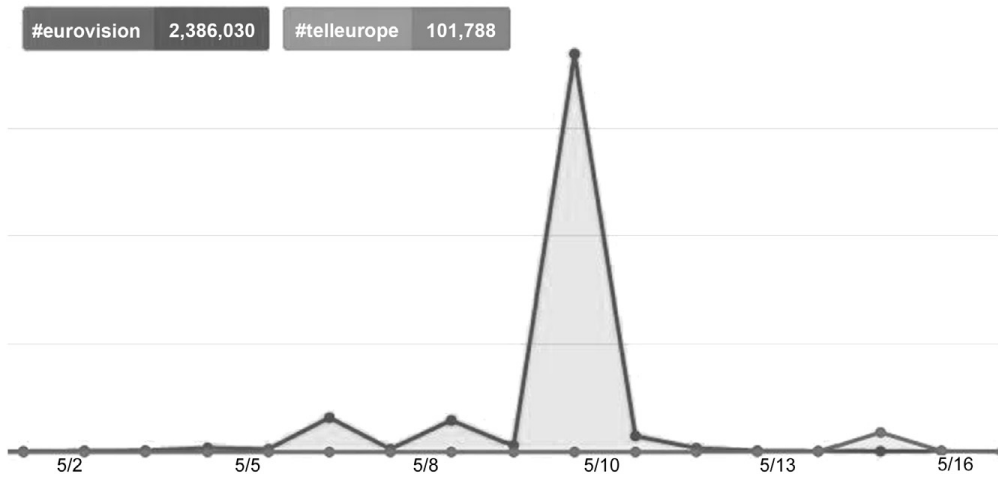


Fig. 19.3. Comparison of Number of Tweets Containing the Hashtag #Eurovision and #TellEurope From 2 to 16 May 2014. *Source:* Topsy.

compared to the previous debate organised by the University of Maastricht (hashtag #EUdebate), as shown in Fig. 19.4, showing an upward trend. So, despite its small scale, the livetweeting of #TellEurope offers an interesting field of observation because it is one of the rare cases where a political event creates an

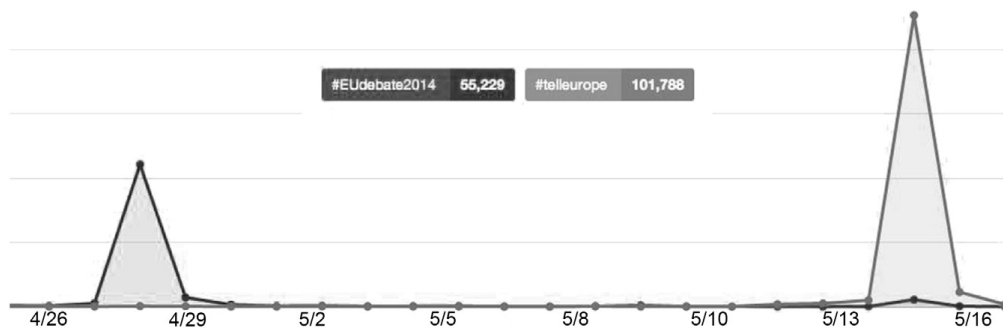


Fig. 19.4. Comparison of Number of Tweets Containing the Hashtag #EUdebate and #TellEurope From 26 April to 16 May 2014. *Source:* Topsy.

online European debate that is circumscribed in time and structured around a central hashtag.

In order to better understand the structure of the discussion on Twitter, we implement a network analysis. We thus collected 30,000 tweets containing the hashtag #TellEurope from 21h20 on May 15 until 9h51 on 16 May 2014. This allows us to collect both the livetweeting of the debate, as well as the comments that were tweeted the next day. We then generate a graph with the open source software Gephi using the OpenOrd algorithm. The lines between the dots represent the interactions between them (RTs and mentions). The topology of the graph is the result of interaction intensity between accounts. The more that the two accounts are characterised by bidirectional communication between them, the closer they are on the map. The size of the dots (from smallest to largest) depends on the number of RT and mentions received (Fig. 19.5).

The first trend that one observes in the network graph of #TellEurope is that political differences and affinities of the candidates clearly reflect in the structure of the debate that took place on Twitter. As shown, each of the candidates forms a distinct cluster around his/her official account.

The structure of interactions between these clusters (retweets and mentions) reflects, for example, the particularity of the community of Alexis Tsipras compared to the other candidates. While all four communities (Schulz, Keller, Verhofstadt, Juncker) are relatively close and connected enough to each other, the community of Tsipras interacts only with those of Schulz and Keller. Simultaneously, the community of Tsipras strongly associates with another sizable set at the top of the graph in red, whose more active members are Greek users. This means that the mobilisation of the Greeks of Twitter is far greater than it was in other countries, something understandable, if one takes into account the intensity and the stakes of the election in Greece. This is confirmed by the geographical origin of the user as shown in Table 19.1.

Participation in the discussion comes mostly from Southern countries such as Spain, France, Greece and Italy. It is precisely the part of Europe where the debate over the economic policies inside the EU is the most intense. In contrast, there is low interest in Germany and even lower in the Netherlands, in Great

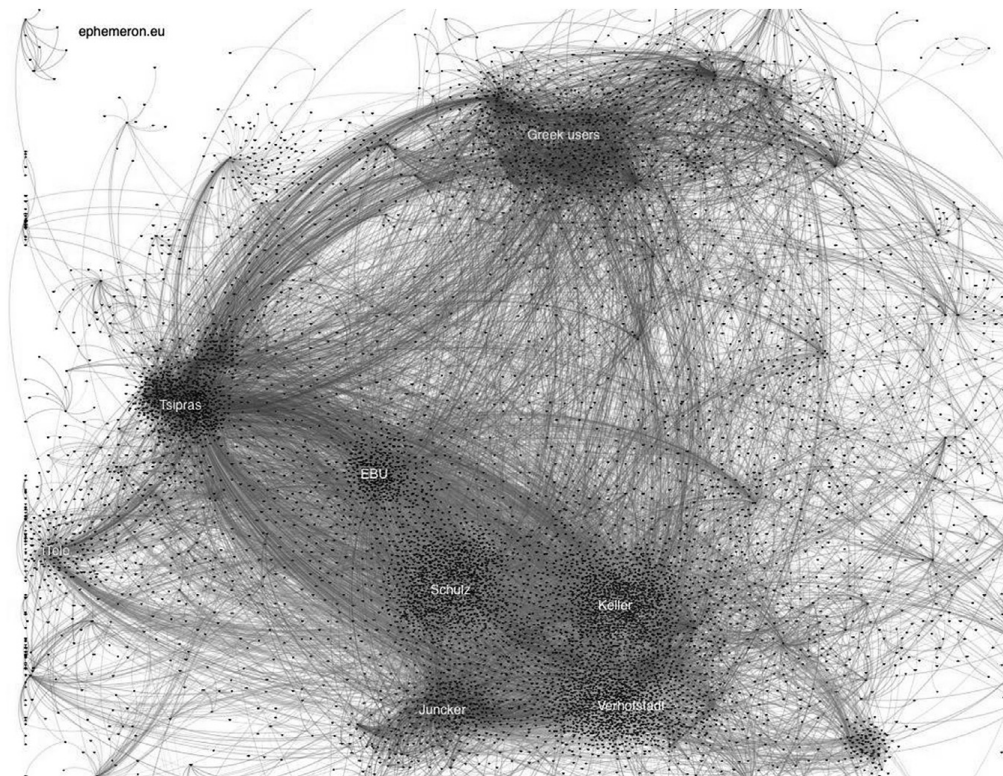


Fig. 19.5. Network of Mentions Around the #TellEurope Hashtag From 15 May at 21h20 to 16 May 2014 at 9h51. *Source:* First published on Ephmeron.eu by the authors.

Britain, in Scandinavia, as well as in Central and Eastern Europe. Since Greece has the smallest population of Twitter users among the four most active countries, there is definitely an overrepresentation of Greeks in the sample because of mobilisation that is due to domestic politics.

The admittedly good presence of Alexis Tsipras, together with the dynamic participation of the Greek users in #TellEurope, explain the fact that he was the most discussed candidate on Twitter, as evidenced by the data reported by the EBU (Table 19.2).

Tsipras and Keller were also the ones who gather positive comments from journalists and observers. This is evidenced by the fact that the share of mentions of those two candidates rises sharply on Twitter on the morning of May 16, as shown in Table 19.3, which corresponds to the media coverage of the following day.

The success of Tsipras, and to a lesser degree of Keller, is notable because their rivals utilised many more important resources in order to increase their influence online. For example, Schulz and Juncker have qualified staff engaged in community management and made significant advertising campaigns on social media.






The overall conclusion is that the debate around #TellEurope on Twitter was naturally affected by the dynamics of the political developments in Europe, and the specifics of the coverage of the event. In other words, the representatives of the

Table 19.1. Geographical Provenance of the Tweets Containing the Hashtag #TellEurope.

LOCATION	TWEETS	% ACTIVITY
World	76,804	0.177%
Spain	14,593	0.689%
France	12,802	0.747%
Greece	8,570	4.931%
Italy	8,454	1.354%
Belgium	5,665	5.932%
Germany	4,987	1.107%
United States	2,435	0.024%
United Kingdom	2,143	0.096%
Canada	1,379	0.150%
Netherlands	1,243	0.182%
Austria	1,180	6.051%
Colombia	769	0.182%
Sweden	714	0.396%

Table 19.2. Number of Mentions of the Five Candidates on Twitter During the Debate.

Leaders Mentioned on the Selected Period  
(Click on a Leader's Picture to Reveal his Individual ID Card)











Leaders	Followers	Following	Tweets Sent	Users	Tweets Per User	Mentions	Share of Voice
 Alexis Tsipras	7,335	118	541	6,207	3.0	18,512	25.1%
 Martin Schulz	106,614	3,653	2,909	6,073	2.7	16,640	22.5%
 Guy Verhofstadt	24,341	240	1,097	4,912	2.9	14,132	19.1%
 Jean-Claude Juncker	35,378	1,247	670	5,479	2.6	14,000	19.0%
 Franziska Keller	11,244	689	5,640	4,119	2.6	10,538	14.3%

Source: EBU.

European Left and mainly Tsipras benefited from the growing popular demand for an end to austerity policies, for growth and job creation that stems from the economic and social crisis that has plagued mainly countries of southern Europe.

Specifically, in relation to Greece, the highly charged political confrontation between government and opposition, and the national character of the election prompted a large number of users to participate, in an organised manner or not,

Table 19.3. Number of Mentions of the Five Candidates on Twitter on the Morning of May 16.

Leaders Mentioned on the Selected Period <small>(Click on a Leader's Picture to Reveal his Individual ID Card)</small>					Leaders	Followers	Following
Tweets Sent	Users	Tweets Per User	Mentions	Share of Voice▼			
 Alexis Tsipras		7,670	118	545	276	1.8	508  35.0%
 Martin Schulz		106,810	3,655	2,919	176	1.6	285  19.6%
 Jean-Claude Juncker		35,452	1,247	670	148	1.5	227  15.6%
 Franziska Keller		11,750	689	5,646	137	1.6	219  15.1%
 Guy Verhofstadt		24,597	240	1,099	125	1.7	213  14.7%

Source: EBU.

in commenting on the televised debate. Also, the two young candidates of the Left benefit from age factors allowing them to have a strong impact on groups of Europeans with specific characteristics (young, highly educated but not necessarily well off, intensive users of the web and active consumers of news) that are overrepresented among Twitter users.

But the prevalence of specific candidates in this dynamic had implications for wider layers of the population in Europe as shown in Fig. 19.6. From April 22, the name of Alexis Tsipras was the most searched compared to all other candidates and got even more searched after the debate. Ska Keller who was mostly unknown literally exploded in May. The successful European campaign of Tsipras materialised in a gain of 17 supplementary European MPs for the group of the European Left (52 from 35 in the elections of 2009). In Greece, SYRIZA became the first party with 26.6% of the European vote, while the governing New Democracy obtained 22.7%. Thus, it became clear to everyone that there was a strong possibility for SYRIZA to gain a majority in the Greek parliament in the following general election.

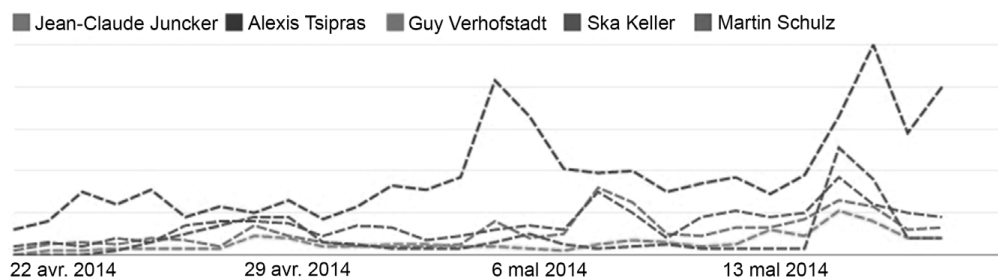


Fig. 19.6. Search Queries About the Candidates From 22 April to 22 May 2014. Source: Google.

### ***The Internal Crisis of SYRIZA***

Nevertheless, the success in the European elections brought division into SYRIZA's social media activists' first circle. The perspective of SYRIZA winning the next national elections became tangible in the second half of 2014. While it faced the hostility of the mainstream media and the business community up to then, suddenly Alexis Tsipras and some of his advisors became less frightening for the establishment. Meetings took place between Tsipras and some of the media magnates that abhorred him until recently. At the same time, SYRIZA faced its own organisational and political weaknesses. Indeed, there were many problems in coordinating the campaign, composing lists of candidates, reducing the polyphony of its representatives in the media, mobilising grassroots activists and motivating supporters. The question of alliances illustrates well the internal situation of the party. As such, the negotiations between SYRIZA and the small party of the Democratic Left have been characteristic of the complexity of the internal balance of power. Indeed, the challenge for SYRIZA was to set in motion a broad rallying dynamic while avoiding compromising with those who have taken part in austerity governments since 2010. The Democratic Left is a social-liberal formation resulting from the split that took place in 2010 within the main component of SYRIZA. In the 2012 legislative elections, it won 6% of the vote and participated in the government of Samaras until the summer of 2012, taking part in the implementation of austerity measures.

Nevertheless, despite the fact that Alexis Tsipras and the management team around him were favourable to the rapprochement with the Democratic Left, numerous reactions from the base and the left wing of SYRIZA prevented the achievement of a pre-electoral coalition. In reality, it was a compromise because the text voted in the central committee of the party, with the abstention of the left wing, left a certain margin to Tsipras to include in its lists defector candidates from PASOK, who had distanced themselves from the politics of their former party. Nevertheless, the method used shocked many activists. To force the left wing to accept its alliance strategy, the majority of Tsipras called an extraordinary party convention. But it was cut short because the compromise was finally reached in the party's central committee the previous day. Suddenly hundreds of activists who had come to participate and express themselves were unable to do so. Thus, the risk for SYRIZA, which crystallises around the affair of the alliances, was its evolution towards the model of a 'party of the cult of the leader', consistent with Greek political tradition, and detached from the party base.

In this regard, the European elections of 2014, which Syriza won, left its mark. Decisions attributed to Tsipras' close advisors and especially to his chief of staff Nikos Pappas but also more generally to the party leadership – notably choices linked to the communication strategy that already appeared in 2012 – were strongly criticised and pushed certain members, such as Alexandros Bistis who was in charge of the 2012 and 2014 campaigns, to distance themselves. The latter, along with other members of the mainstream or the left wing, such as Stathis Kouvelakis, did not cease since the summer of 2012 to warn of the risk of drifting the party towards the centre, to the detriment of collective and democratic decision-making processes:

After the 2012 elections there was a general perception that it was just a matter of time before Syriza took office, one way or another. The Tsipras leadership made very clear and, in a sense, very tough decisions in that summer of 2012, about the party's line and about the type of party they wanted. First, they needed to turn a coalition of disparate organizations into a unified party (...) They also wanted to use the unification process to transform the culture of the party and its organizational structure at a very deep level. Instead of a push to recruit people who'd been active in the social mobilizations of the period, the aim was to open the gates to the sort of people who want to join a party when they think it has a serious chance of accessing power (...) This process also included bringing in figures associated with the political establishment. This wasn't done to win votes, because these people were completely discredited in electoral terms; it was a signal to the establishment: we are in the process of becoming a normal party (...) Turning Syriza into a leader-centred party was the second aspect of the process. The aim was to move from a militant party of the left, with a strong culture of internal debate, heterogeneity, involvement in social movements and mobilizations, to a party with a passive membership which could be more easily manipulated by the centre, and keener to identify with the figure of the leader. *Source: Kouvelakis (2016).*

When snap elections were announced for January 2015, these stakes materialised in the choice of Tsipras' and his lieutenants like Pappas to outsource the campaign to advertising agencies and consultants that had previously worked for PASOK, something that had already happened in the past but in a smaller scale. There was very little coordination or consultation with party members and activists who managed the European elections campaign online. Instead of relying on social movements and the participation of grassroots social media activists, the choice of SYRIZA's campaign was to focus on the leader, whose popularity was on the rise. This disconnection of the leadership of the party from the popular base of Left sympathisers and activists was visible both in the atrophy of internal democratic procedures and in the way the campaign did not appeal to social media activists anymore. This new 'mainstream' strategy was justified by the necessity to attract voters from the centre and the centre left of the political spectrum, in order to obtain a majority. But this choice already bore the premises of the social-democratic turn of SYRIZA, and the party would in fact gradually abandon its radical line while in government (Rori, 2016).

### **The Third Phase: SYRIZA's Victory in 2015**

SYRIZA finally won the general election of 25 January 2015, and formed a coalition with a small nationalist party, ANEL, with an anti-austerity agenda.

Alexis Tsipras became the Prime minister who was meant to clash with the EU and to negotiate a debt relief for Greece. This victory was unquestionably a major political event. Given the political environment, characterised by the rise of protest against austerity policies that were imposed within Europe, the elections in this small peripheral EU country took an importance surpassing by far its, nevertheless dramatic, domestic issues.

The change of strategy described above when it came to social media did not affect the international support for SYRIZA on Twitter. As it can be seen in Fig. 19.7, the results announced in the evening of January 25 produced a gigantic peak of tweets containing the word SYRIZA. This peak lasted almost 48 hours and was followed by a significantly long tail. In total between 22 January and 3 February, 338,585 unique users produced almost 1.5 million of such tweets.

The graph of the network that forms around the term SYRIZA revealed the most committed groups of users. To better understand the effects of Tsipras' victory on the level of interest on Greek elections, we conducted an analysis throughout two periods, one preceding the vote, and the other following it.

The first period covers the last week of the election campaign and runs from 17 to 24 January 2015. The number of tweets (76,999) and users (30,426) is relatively low signifying a real but limited interest. However, 57.3% of the tweets contain a link, indicating that they intend to share information. The analysis of the network is quite revealing of the main protagonists. Unsurprisingly, in the heart of the graph lie the official accounts of SYRIZA and its leader Alexis Tsipras. But the most mentioned account is that of Pablo Iglesias, leader of Podemos, the Spanish party with close ties to Syriza. This observation confirms the proximity between the two leftist parties on Twitter that we already spotted during the European elections campaign in 2014. This proximity resulted in the presence of Pablo Iglesias at the last meeting of Tsipras in Athens before the elections (Fig. 19.8).

It is probably the first time in EU history where two political parties in different countries and their activist bases networked at that point on social media. This is undoubtedly a force that has had a beneficial effect on the campaign of SYRIZA. Alberto Garzon, the leader of Izquierda Unida, the other party of the Spanish radical left was also present in the network, but to a much lesser extent. The interest of Spaniards about SYRIZA was not limited to the networks of Podemos and of Izquierda Unida. Several other accounts from that country were important nodes of the SYRIZA network during the campaign. This is true of progressive media such as Eldiario and Publico, journalists like Gerardo Tecé and Hermann Tertsch, but also citizens like Alberto Sicilia, a physicist and blogger and Hibai a Spanish activist and journalist living in Greece. Each one of them had a real impact on the dissemination of information around SYRIZA in Spain.

Two other very important nodes in the network were the British: journalist Paul Mason from Channel 4 and media personality Russell Brand. Each of them brought together a large number of accounts interacting around SYRIZA. But if Russell Brand interacted with a group in the periphery of the rest of the SYRIZA network and mostly of British origin, indicating that it is his own fans, Mason had a much wider impact, involving many different groups. Presumably, this is because of the credibility that the journalist had acquired on the subject throughout the years he had been covering the Greek crisis.



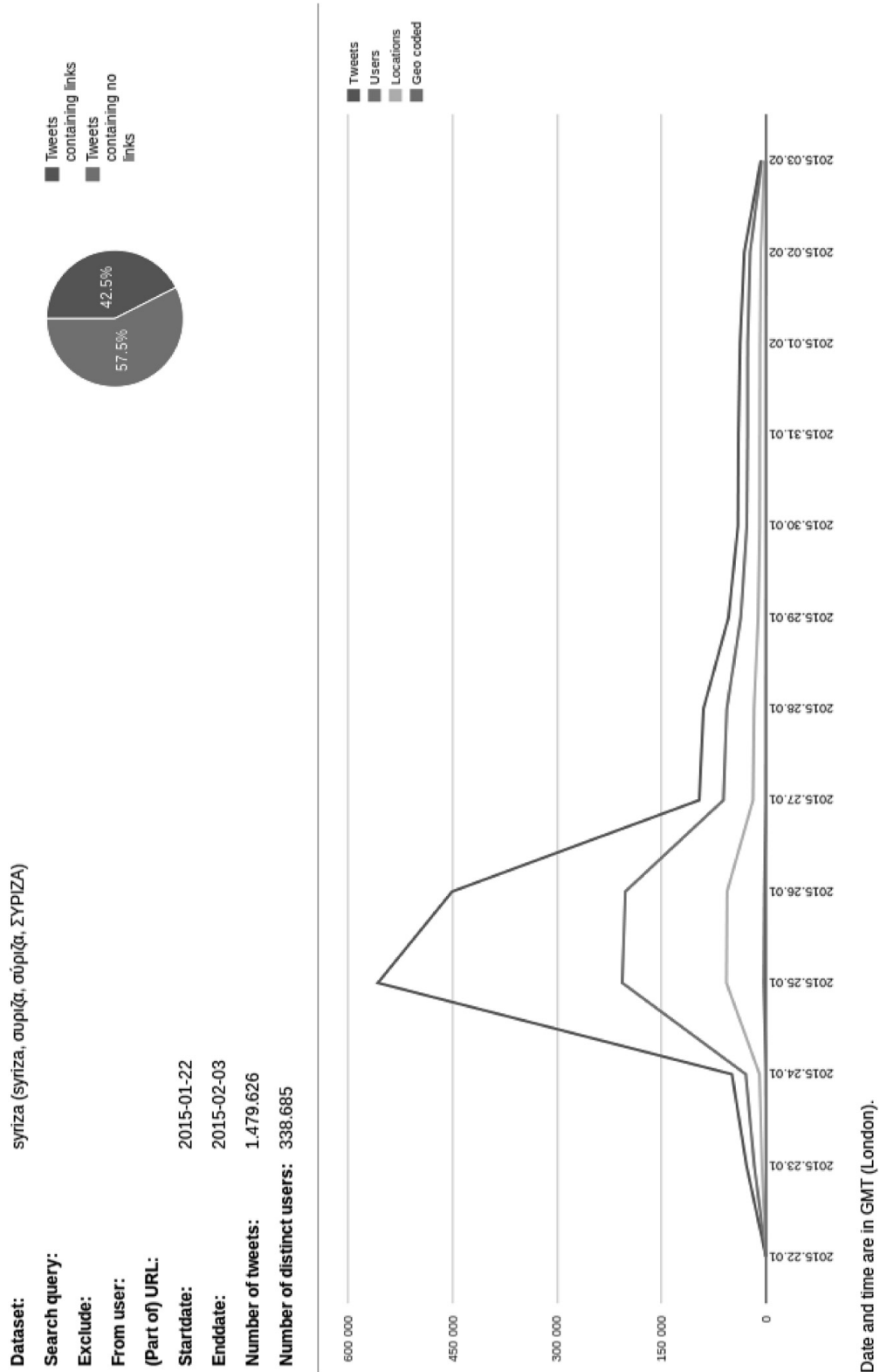


Fig. 19.7. Number of Tweets Containing SYRIZA From 22 January to 3 February 2015. Source: Authors.

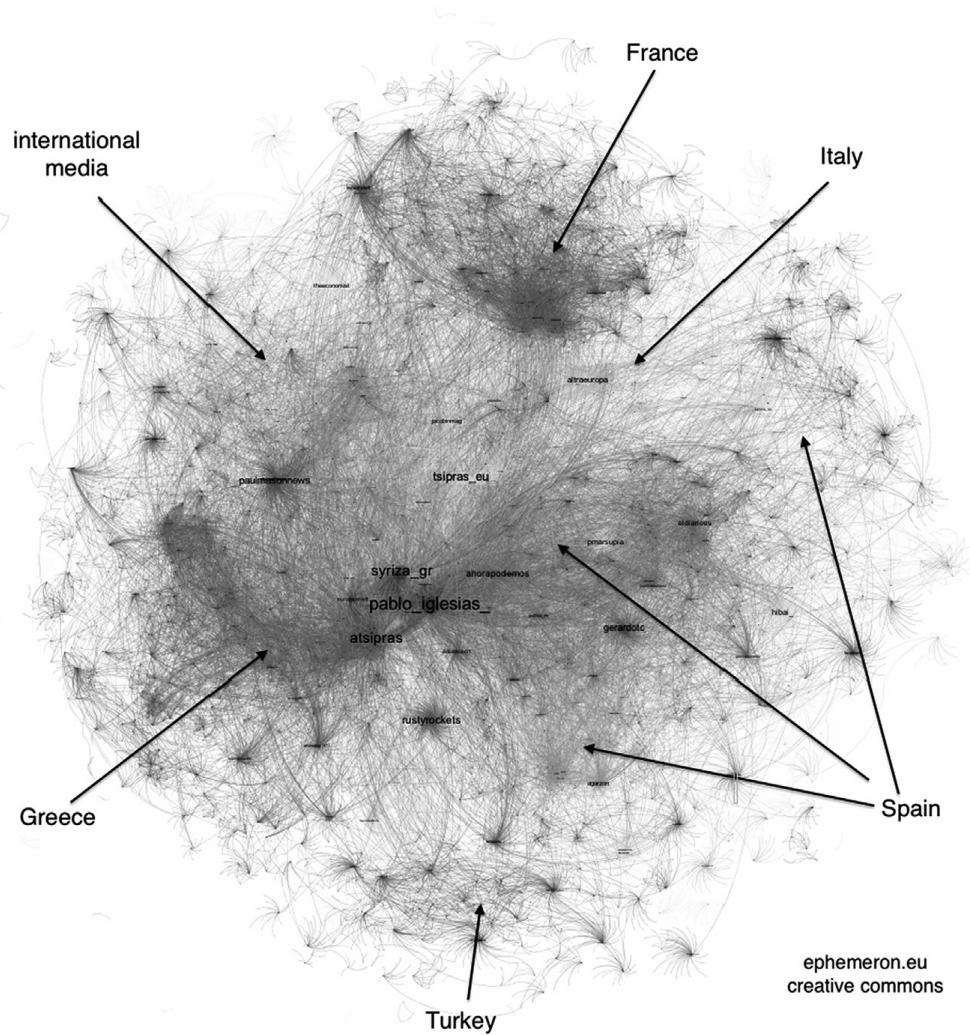


Fig. 19.8. Network of Mentions Around SYRIZA From 17 to 24 Januray 2015. *Source:* First published on Ephmeron.eu by the authors.

Another significant group was the French where we distinguish representatives of the whole spectrum of the left that took part in the Paris meeting in support of SYRIZA: Parti de Gauche (Jean-Luc Mélenchon, Alexis Corbière), Ensemble (Cléméntine Autain), PCF (Pierre Laurent), Nouvelle donne (Bruno Gaccio), the left wing of the Parti Socialiste (Benoît Hamon, Arnaud Montebourg). It can be also noted that the significant presence of mainstream media such as *Le Monde*, *Libération*, *Les Echos* and alternative media, such as *Reporterre* and *Mediapart*, as well as individual journalists like Michel Soudais, Edwy Plenel and Michel Mompontet.

Finally, two other important, but smaller, national/linguistic clusters were those of the Italians and the Turks. One should also note the high activity on the topic of two Anglo-Saxon media that are situated politically in opposed poles: *The Economist* and *Jacobin*, a magazine that is situated in the radical Left. If the

former concentrates on economics and mainstream politics, the latter is very engaged in the conversation around SYRIZA, staging interviews with Greek intellectuals of the radical Left, such as Stathis Kouvelakis, and sharing information about Greek and European politics.

The analysis of the graph around the word SYRIZA after the elections was also interesting. Indeed, the victory of SYRIZA, although anticipated by the polls, came as a shock to many. Subsequently, the new Greek government made some impressive announcements during its first week in office that triggered major political wrangling in Europe and beyond, attracting the attention of the media and the public. Within seven days following the day after the election, the number of tweets containing SYRIZA increased fivefold compared to the week before to 396,000 tweets by 137,000 distinct users. This time, only 51% of the tweets contained links, meaning probably that there was proportionally more comment and discussion than before the elections (Fig. 19.9).

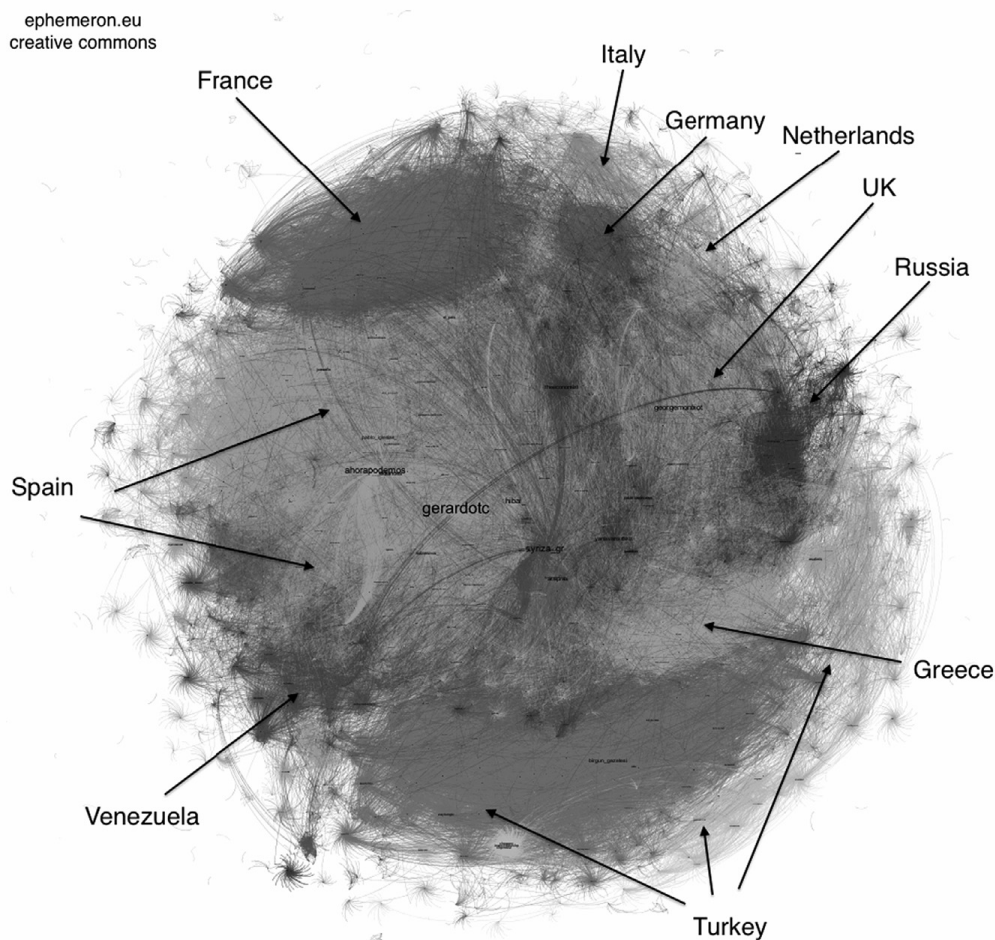


Fig. 19.9. Network of Mentions Around SYRIZA From 27 January to 3 February 2015. *Source:* First published on Ephmeron.eu by the authors.

This explosion of tweets, and hence of interest in the subject increased the number of countries involved. The Spaniards continued to form the heart of the graph, being the largest and among the most highly interconnected groups. The French also remained in the continuity of the campaign as well as the British, who saw the emergence of a new central node, that of the *Guardian* journalist and environmental activist George Monbiot who was extremely active after the elections. However, the interest for the Greek elections and the victory of SYRIZA exploded in Turkey, whose users made at least three large interconnected clusters. Geographical proximity and traditionally complicated relations between the two countries certainly played a role in this. But it might also be the result of the parallel political trajectories in recent years, including a violent crackdown on popular mass movements in both countries that pushed the Turks to rejoice in the victory of SYRIZA.

Another important community to appear was that of the Russians whose interest was probably awakened by one of the first initiatives of the Greek government, which was to block a resolution calling for tougher EU sanctions against Russia, because of the conflict in Ukraine. On the other side of the globe, in Venezuela, a large number of users also expressed themselves after the victory of SYRIZA, led by Chavez sympathisers with whom the Greek party had close ties. Northern Europe's interest in the Greek elections formed two clusters – one German and one Dutch. The latter formed after the eventful visit to Athens of Jeroen Dijsselbloem, Minister of Finance of the Netherlands and President of the Eurogroup. He was hosted coldly by the new Minister of Finance of Greece Yanis Varoufakis, who otherwise also emerged as an important node in the graph after the elections.

Concluding this third phase, the coverage of Greek elections on Twitter was completely disproportionate compared to the size and importance of the country. It echoed much further than Europe, as far as South America, the US and Russia. Networks were based mainly on political homophily and ideological affinity (Spain, France, Italy, Venezuela), but also empathy (Turkey), interest for some particular issue (Russia), or curiosity (Netherlands and Germany). SYRIZA and its leader Alexis Tsipras succeeded in trending on Twitter because of the political context, but also because they were early adopters of the medium. Being extremely badly treated by mainstream media, it was an opportunity for him to get directly in contact with a very dynamic and influential part of voters, the one of 'digital opinion leaders'.

### **The Final Phase: SYRIZA and the Greek Referendum**

The first five months of 2015 were characterised by the intense negotiation between the SYRIZA government and its creditors. The former promised voters it would ditch austerity and renegotiate the country's gigantic debt with the creditors, the European Union and the International Monetary Fund. While Alexis Tsipras and his finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis initially took a tough stance, only a month after the elections, they found themselves under high pressure, were finally forced to compromise and produced a document to that effect, in order to convince creditors that Greece can keep its finances afloat and stay in the Eurozone.

At the same time the social movement that had brought SYRIZA to power had practically disappeared from the streets of Athens. This was due to the fact that the people had put their hopes in the hands of the new government to end austerity through negotiation. Alexis Tsipras had already seized to address the social movement, preferring to address the electorate, months before he gained power. Nevertheless, when the negotiation revealed itself to be a blackmail, him and his ministers still continued to operate under the logic of representative government, while one would think that a radical Left government would mobilise the masses in support, in order to obtain a more favourable balance of power during the negotiations.

Eventually, after five months of dead ends and humiliations, Tsipras and his government made a last attempt to mobilise the Greek population for support online and offline. But it was too late. The protest of 17 June 2015 was the first against Greece's creditors and austerity politics since SYRIZA came to power after the January 2015 elections. This mobilisation took place 13 days before the bailout expiration, with many ministers of the SYRIZA government also participating. This was the first time that an anti-austerity mobilisation was also perceived as being pro-government. On 27 June 2015, Tsipras announced a referendum on the bailout conditions and agreement proposed by the so-called troika (IMF, EC, ECB) to be held on July 5 in which he called to vote NO. This unexpected initiative suddenly brought the democratic question back to the heart of the political crisis that divided Europe around the Greek crisis.

The two conflicting political and ideological poles found expression in two antagonistic Twitter campaigns (Ferra, 2019): the #Oxi (vote NO) and #MenoumeEvropi (vote YES), while both used the #GReferendum hashtag. The #MenoumeEvropi front was comprised of New Democracy, PASOK, the Democratic Left and smaller parties of the right and the center and benefited from massive support from the Greek and international mainstream media as well as from EU political figures. For instance, the official Twitter account of the representation of the European Commission in Athens tweeted a photo of the #MenoumeEvropi demonstration with an enthusiastic comment.

The #Oxi front was comprised of SYRIZA, its government ally ANEL and smaller left-wing parties. Its campaign developed *via* left-wing-oriented media as well as independent and citizen media in Greece and abroad while making strong references on the SYRIZA-Podemos coalition (The Nazis of Golden Dawn called also to vote NO but didn't participate in the same campaign). As we can see in Fig. 19.10 (mentions network based on a sample of 324,957 tweets from 112,908 distinct users collected between July 4 and 6 2015), there was also a large international interest on Twitter about the Greek referendum. Despite wide support from mainstream media as well as European political personalities, the pro YES users are a minority. On the other hand, the pro NO users are much more numerous and well connected to large international communities in Spain, Italy, France and Latin America as previously.

Ultimately, the use of Twitter hashtags made a good prediction of the result of the vote, as did the number of Google queries (Mavragani & Tsagarakis, 2016). The NO won by a crushing 61.31%. Despite the result of the referendum, a week

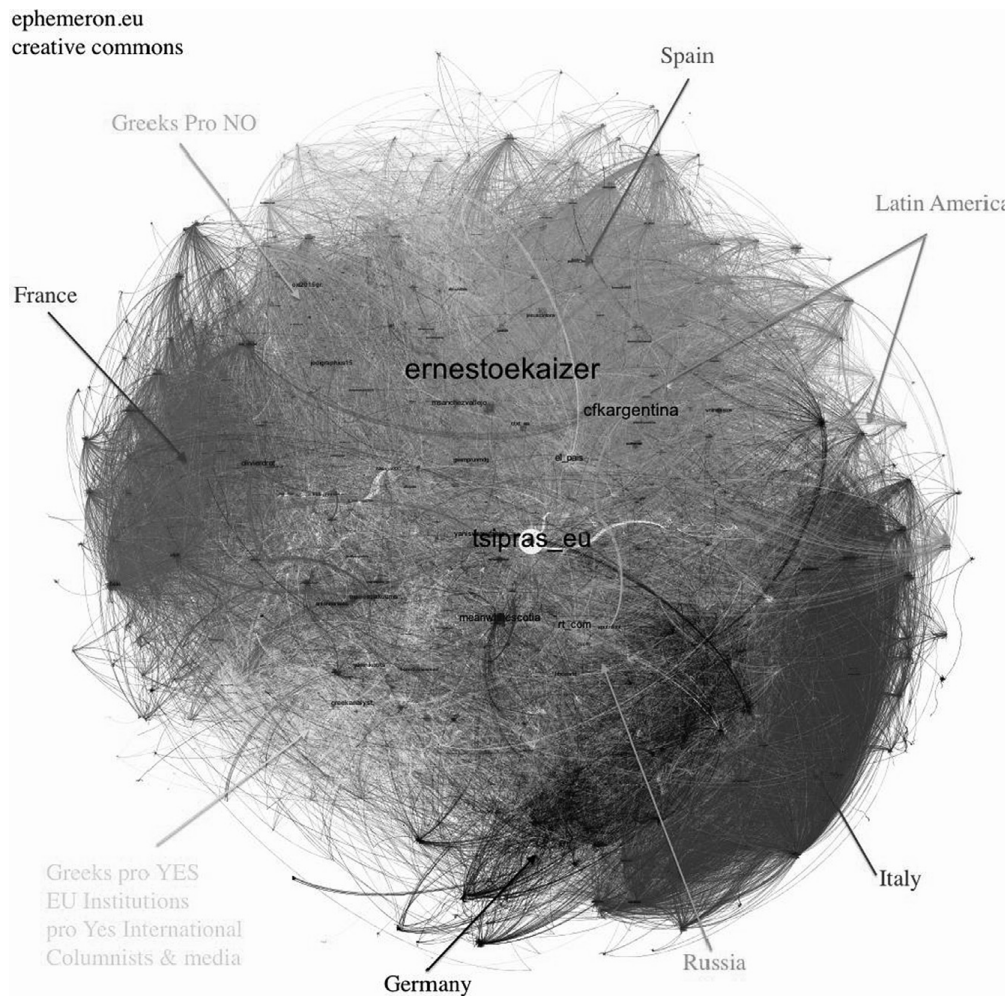


Fig. 19.10. Network of Mentions Around #GReferendum From 4 to 6 July 2015. *Source:* First published on Ephmeron.eu by the authors.

later Tsipras was forced to sign an agreement with the European authorities for a three-year bailout with even harsher austerity conditions than the ones already rejected by voters. After the signing of the bailout there was one last digital mobilisation around Greece with the #thisisacoup hashtag. It meant that the creditors had imposed on Greece a decision that was democratically illegitimate. This was the swan song of digital resistance in the Greek crisis.

## Epilogue

In September 2015, SYRIZA won the elections following the referendum and entered a second era of being in government while accepting austerity and privatisations. This period of political stability lasted almost four years until the elections of July 2019 that were again won by New Democracy. But this political and economic stabilisation of Greece took place on a basis far removed not only

from the anti-austerity program of the ‘original’ SYRIZA but also from certain basic principles of the Left.

This turn cut the party off from the social movement, the only one capable of pushing in the direction of breaking with the hegemonic political culture and its apparatuses. Bureaucratisation of SYRIZA and the emergence of autonomous power structures, free from democratic control, have weakened its legitimacy. Finally, its growing dependence on the traditional political system and his almost blind adherence to EU ideology moved the party leadership away from a perspective of deep social transformation in Greece.

To conclude, SYRIZA and Alexis Tsipras exploited the international and European structural conditions, as well as the broader alliances of left radical anti-austerity movements to accelerate fast both in the streets and in the tweets. However, they were opportunistic, since the moment they saw power was approaching and the possibility to be a party in government, they dropped the grassroots and movement alliances, particularly in relation to their communication strategy. When the conditions forced SYRIZA to reconsider this strategy, it was already too late to matter.

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