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Anatomy of a Populist Speech

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In January 2021, two party leaders in the Greek parliament debated the government's handling of the Covid-19 epidemic. This made possible a detailed analysis of the populist argumentations of one of the speakers. His basic method was the repeated use of arguments that were "true" but irrelevant to the matter at hand. Other "methods" were accusations made out of context, mixing up issues, deriving generalities based on singular cases, ignoring certain aspects, and making unfounded insinuations. Analysis of these discursive aspects contributes to our understanding of populist discourses.

Usually, one feels that one is confronting populism when one hears a particular kind of discourse. There is a palpable sense of deceit and demagoguery. In this article, I will try to show that populist argumentation is basically composed of a "plethora of irrelevant true arguments," even though it may or may not include other methods such as lying, silencing, and the like.^[1]

The opportunity to study a populist speech in detail was given to me when I listened to a debate in the Greek parliament between Prime Minister Kostas Mitsotakis and the leader of the main opposition party, Alexis Tsipras. Mitsotakis leads the New Democracy Party, and Tsipras heads Syriza (united left and environmentalists). The debate took place on 15 January 2021 and on the topic of the Greek government's approach to the Covid-19 pandemic and its performance in addressing the crisis. My study focuses just on the debate between the two leaders, excluding the

arguments advanced by other political parties in the Greek parliament.

Mitsotakis presented graphs and statistics showing Greece's performance in handling the Covid crisis relative to other European countries. The comparative approach demonstrated that Greece had been relatively successful in coping with the pandemic, at least until the day of the debate. I was curious to hear the opposition's counter-arguments. I tried to put myself in Tsipras' shoes. It occurred to me that the opposition leader had two alternatives, either to acknowledge the government's positive performance or to claim the opposite. Tsipras had little choice but to pursue the latter, given any opposition leader is "compelled" to hold the government to account. Thus, Tsipras' only option seemed to be a refutation of the argument of Mitsotakis by all means.

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I foresaw a populist counterattack and decided to take notes of the arguments. Later, I found the complete debate on the parliamentary website, and I transcribed it.^[2] I had ample time to carefully examine the arguments and the counter-arguments and decipher Mitsotakis' and Tsipras' "methods." The leaders spoke five times in total. After an initial speech from the prime minister, all the other party leaders presented their views; a second round followed, with Mitsotakis assuming the final right of reply. Mitsotakis spoke for a total of 89 minutes and Tsipras a total of 94 minutes.

I summarize Tsipras' argumentation—which I will discuss in further detail below—as follows:

1. He mentioned many "truths"—that is to say, situations and evaluations that nobody can deny or oppose. Usually, this kind of argument is known as "truism."
2. He shrewdly used his body language (and style of address) to support his arguments.
3. He repeated the same accusative and pejorative characterizations against Mitsotakis.
4. He "returned serve" to accusations launched at him to get even.
5. He condemned successful government initiatives as failures on the ground that they could have been "even better."
6. He used the technique of irony, insinuation, silencing, and arbitrary, debatable views as valid assumptions.
7. He asserted general conclusions based on isolated singular events.
8. He associated unrelated situations to reach conclusions.



Former Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras gives press conference of 81st Thessaloniki International Fair in Thessaloniki, Greece on Sept. 11, 2016. Photo: Alexandros Michailidis

1 – Mentioning various self-evident “truths”

This tactic composed the basis of Tsipras' argumentation. The truisms had nothing to do with the agenda of the debate — namely, the policies vis-à-vis the Covid-19 pandemic that were followed (or ought to have been followed) by the government and their consequences. The first big part of his speech included the following: “We experience a pandemic... the Greeks are facing problems ... we should be showing solidarity... the politicians are usually hypocritical and express extreme views ... citizens lives should be the main concern of everybody ... we should help those who are fighting on the front-line of the epidemic ... one should learn from one's mistakes... we should face reality ... tomorrow looks problematic ... all of us should do something about the situation... ideological prejudices may result in death ...”

Tsipras elaborated at length each of these logical, self-evident, and widely-accepted arguments, but they were not supported by corresponding examples of government action (or inaction). These truisms could have been voiced by any politician, in any country, and under any circumstances. Nobody could object to these comments. Why then did Tsipras voice them?

The answer is that they proved useful since populism is addressed to the sentiments of the listeners. The citizens who follow a debate pursued

^[1] This article does not aspire to define populism. It is a case study of a special discourse which, as a working hypothesis, here is called populist. This discourse is characterized by a special technique which, if it is encountered repeatedly in other cases, too, it may shed light on “populist argumentation.”

^[2] See: <https://www.hellenicparliament.gr/Vouli-ton-Ellinon/ToKtirio/Fotografiko-Archeio/#7fb5d5dd-3f51-4456-8432-acb1015ed39d>. Or see: [hellenicparliament.gr](https://www.hellenicparliament.gr).

in this manner and are short of critical thinking see and listen to a person who is clearly espousing some basic, sound principles; they feel that they share the same principles with him. They see somebody who thinks like them and who has the same sensitivities. He is for the needy; he sees the same social problems, and so on.

That the other side does not speak in the same way or repeat the self-understood realities is usually interpreted as indicating a lack of “sensitivity” and an inability to act accordingly. In this sense, populist argumentation is very effective. Probably, the strongest point of this discourse is that its refutation is impossible simply because all arguments are true—they are, in fact, truisms.

During the rest of his speech, Tsipras adopted this approach many times, re-iterating a similar set of “arguments,” “proposals,” “warnings,” and “advice”: “One should accept and learn from one’s mistakes ... due to the lockdown, retailers are facing problems ... the timing of an action is important ... delays have a price ... many of our compatriots are dying ... vaccines should belong to the people ... we should face reality ... one should not be pedantic ... one should take the initiative... we should discuss the issues between us ... vaccines save lives ... the economy faces problems ... people are losing their jobs.”

2 – Body language and style of address

The shrewd use of body language while speaking is not unique to populism and is, in fact, a common feature of all rhetorical debate. Yet, since populist conclusions are not related to inductive reasoning but to emotional insinuations, the body language and the style of the orator are of particular importance. All politicians have this in mind, and they

pay attention, not so much to the consistency and sense of their arguments, but to the appearance of the speaker—his posture, his self-confident style vis-à-vis his opponent, and so on.

Tsipras often appeared as being ready to compromise and to come to terms with Mitsotakis for the sake of the common good while simultaneously accusing Mitsotakis of ill-will to the point of insult, as I show below. Tsipras also often appeared shocked and exasperated with Mitsotakis’ policies and actions. A couple of times, when Tsipras referred to well-known numbers, facts, and examples, he declared, “these are not my numbers, not my sayings, but yours; they are numbers from independent agencies... This is not something that I say; scientists all around the world are saying it ... It is not us who say that, but the media worldwide.” This is all redundant as it could hardly be otherwise. Facts, data, and statistics cannot be “somebody’s” —they have to be from a reliable source. It suffices to mention the source. Utterances of the kind “these are not my numbers but of the X source” is an unnecessary, excessive emphasis that seeks to create a favorable impression on the unsophisticated listener.

3 – Repeated pejorative characterizations

Many derogatory accusations against Mitsotakis accompanied Tsipras’ speech. The following phrases were used as general characterizations: that Mitsotakis has ideological prejudices, believes himself to be omniscient, has no sense of responsibility, is detached from reality, lacks awareness of reality, is in favor of the elite, and is in favor of exploiters. In addition, words or their derivatives directed against Mitsotakis by Tsipras included arrogance, hypocrisy, complacency, indifference, unclear mind, carelessness (2 times), negligent, obsessive, slanderous, unseri-

ous, divisive (2 times), incompetent (3 times), irresponsible, vulgar (returning the same expression used earlier by Mitsotakis), without dignity, and liar. All these were heard in a speech that lasted 90 minutes.

This tactic serves a purpose. The listener watches a speaker who is against all these vices, which means—logically—that he is exempt from these. Since Tsipras is so much against ideological prejudices, arrogance, and the like, this should mean that they do not apply to him. This approach is the other side of the “repeating of irrelevant truths” mentioned above. The mentioning of many “truths” works in favor of the speaker’s image, which is enhanced. Derogatory characterizations work against the image of the Other; the opponent’s image depreciates.

4 – “Returning serve” against accusations

Anyone familiar with Greek political life over the last decade will notice that the above-mentioned negative characterizations present a peculiarity. Some of them are new utterances in Greek political life, having been first used against Tsipras and his political party. A closer look at the above accusations recalls that there is a process of “returning serve” against adjectives that have been used lately against “us” (in this case, Tsipras and Syriza). Some of these are the following:

“Having ideological prejudices” — this was originally used against Tsipras for his leftist ideological vision. “Arrogance” was once used to characterize Tsipras’s harsh accusations against the Right. Tsipras’s wish to change the “right-wing” policies of the European Union was cast as a “lack of awareness of reality.” His anti-liberal stand has been called “obsessive,” and his policies in dealing with the EU were labeled “incompetent.” Finally, Tsipras has been called

a “liar” for going back on promises that he would not follow the EU’s instructions and “memorandums.”

The use of such language is a strategic choice. By “returning” the accusations with the same wording, the “charges” are neutralized, and Tsipras gets even. As mentioned, many of these characterizations were used in the past against Tsipras and regarding some of his actions and policy decisions. Now, they are “returned,” mostly out of context. This is a way to counter-balance attacks. Probably it is reckoned that this kind of a symmetrical counterattack will cancel out and nullify the accusations recently addressed toward “us,” thus cleansing the record of them. The repeated use of some accusative adjectives also nullifies their worth through superfluous repetition. All in all, the method can be seen as a psychological and political defense mechanism.

5 – Things could have been “even better”

This is another “true” argument that cannot be contradicted. The best performance could have been better. An Olympic champion can be criticized for failing to run a little faster and break a record. Mitsotakis demonstrated by graphs and statistical analyses that Greece had a much lower death rate per 1 million people relative to other European countries. He said that it is a macabre and sad endeavor to talk about people who have lost their lives, but that still, in general, Greeks have followed the rules and done fairly well, comparatively speaking. Mitsotakis showed a map of Europe with the national death rates indicated by different color codes; Greece and Finland were colored the same, sharing the lowest death rate in Europe at the time of the parliamentary debate.

Tsipras resorted to comparing Greece to the unreasonable bench-

marks, not comparable cases. In fact, he compared Greece's record to that of other countries only once — when he noted that Greece had experienced the worse economic recession in Europe due to Covid-19. He said: "Greece in this field is the last in Europe. You may say that this is due to the epidemic. All countries are experiencing an epidemic but not the same impacts. These are the comparisons that one has to take into consideration." In all the other cases, he was adamantly against any "comparative" approach, unless it was to compare Greece to "the hypothetical condition."

In all the other cases, he used the conjunction "if" as a conditional. "If you had taken some more precautions... if you had made more tests... if you had put more busses into circulation... wouldn't we have fewer deaths?" At some point, Tsipras said: "If, if, if, if, I can use many ifs of this kind." And, actually, he did. This is a common trend of populist argumentation: good outcomes could always have been better.

6 – The use of irony, insinuation, silencing, and debatable views as valid assumptions

Defense mechanisms operate rather unconsciously and as automatic reflexes in all debates, not just in populist discourse. For example, some facts are "forgotten," and others are unduly emphasized according to the purposes of the speaker. These tactics operate to complement the populist approach.

Irony involves humor or sarcasm. It is an indirect way of expressing criticism. It is also an accusation that is difficult to respond to since it is not openly stated. Usually, it is a sneaky way of voicing an attack that would not be possible to bring to the fore otherwise, either because it cannot

be documented or it is ethically not permissible. In sum, it is difficult to answer an ironic statement for two reasons. First, the criticism is not openly stated, and any effort to counter it implies that one accepts the accusations —namely, that "what is insinuated concerns oneself." Secondly, the accuser may hide himself behind the pretext that he is simply "making a joke" and that his opponent lacks a sense of humor.

Tsipras, for example, was ironical and "humorous" when he attributed the sentence "coronavirus is not contagious in the buses" to his opponent. Meanwhile, he overlooked or obscured what Mitsotakis had really said —namely, that the government had increased the number of buses to control congestion. Tsipras jokingly said that somebody living on the island of Lesbos had been required to go to the island of Limnos to be vaccinated. In contrast, it was in fact claimed by others that the person concerned had given Limnos as his home address. He was also sarcastic when he asked rhetorically, "how many deaths do you need to accept that you have been unsuccessful?" A probable answer of the kind "how many deaths do you think would make me successful" would sound macabre and counterproductive for Mitsotakis. So, the sarcasm was ignored.

An example of assuming characteristics—the validity of which first needs to be proven—is when Mitsotakis is presented as the proponent of the "elite," of the privileged classes, and of his immediate environment. This was repeated quite often by Tsipras, placing himself "on the side of the needy." This supposedly diametrically opposite social status of the two leaders is presented as self-evident. That there is no need to prove the accusation makes it even more persuasive: it does not need to be proved because "everybody knows it." This is the vicious circle of truth.

It was insinuated (because it could not be demonstrated) that Mitsotakis has said that “the pandemic cannot be managed” or “God will help us in that.” In both cases, it was not made clear precisely who had said these things or when and where they had been said. For these accusations, one may use the term “lies.”

There were various cases of arbitrary characterizations: “You are working in favor of certain social groups ... you are in favor of the elite ... you are against the social security system (and in favor of a privatized one) ... you have not recruited new personnel into the hospitals (that Mitsotakis had, in fact, announced the opposite was ignored) ... you only support private interests ... some of us cannot pay the €500 fines handed out for violating the restrictions you impose while others go to Dubai to celebrate Christmas (inferring that those heading abroad are in the same camp as Mitsotakis—the “elite,” and the “neoliberals”).

Naturally, the political programs of the socialist Tsipras and center-right Mitsotakis differ. Moreover, each part has its self-evident facts and truths, which form its respective ideological framework. The “truths” of each are valid within each group, and the supporters of each group perceive the arguments of their leader as rational and understandable. Each argument, however, needs to be documented and proved when presented to the other side, as it was in the case in the parliamentary debate. Therefore the “numbers” that Mitsotakis presented were more persuasive to the third-party listeners, whereas the “arguments” of Tsipras were persuasive only to his in-group. Actually, no single personality can be the conclusive judge of a reality for everyone.

7 – Conclusions based on isolated events

The method of reaching conclusions based on an isolated case of secondary importance is an everyday phenomenon. It usually starts with a saying of the kind, “let me give you an example...” That is to say, a single example is considered enough to prove a case. If there is some bad guy in the village (in a family, a city, a nation, etc.), the whole community can be blamed. This is the way stereotypes and prejudices operate.

Tsipras said, “you vaccinated your own families, and if we had not made it an issue, you would have continued doing that.” But how many families were they? Were they really going to continue with the vaccination?

On the other hand, Mitsotakis presented numbers, statistical analyses, and graphic presentations. Tsipras demonized these because they impair the stereotype, i.e., the populist story. The listeners who are unaccustomed to numbers do not see the populist approach anyway. The single “typical” example is more persuasive to many people (How can one be sure that an example is “typical”?).

During this debate, Tsipras said: “If you feel content saying ‘the pandemic cannot be managed’ [without evidence this was ever said] and if you make macabre comparisons of the dead, as you did a while ago mentioning the percentages of the dead, then you will never learn anything from your mistakes.” And again, “4,500 deaths! The people mourn for their fathers, their grandfathers, grandmothers, for their wives. Furthermore, the government, instead of trying to limit the pandemic, tries to find refuge in the statistics.” Or, “The dead people are not statistics; they are human beings. When you say that the numbers are positive in comparison to other countries, the families that at this moment feel the pain of their losses will not feel any

better.”

That many people mourn is true. It is also true that the “good numbers” are not a consolation for those who feel the pain of their losses. One may add that the people are also worried; they are concerned for the coming days, anxious about the future, etc. Naturally, the sound management of the pandemic cannot rule out the pain that comes with a single death.

Is there, however, anybody who would disagree with the above? Don't all politicians see what is happening? Here, one sees the same tactics: various “truths” that are irrelevant to the debate are repeatedly mentioned, all addressed to the listeners' feelings. On top of this, the populist, through rhetoric, makes an effort to demonize the numbers. And that is because numbers are difficult to cope with. They give a clear picture of the situation. Tsipras tried to “discredit” the numbers since he could not reject them.

The sentence “the dead are not statistics; they are human beings” is devoid of meaning. It is voiced either because of ignorance or as a conscious choice, as demagoguery. Statistics and human beings cannot be compared; they are heterogeneous categories. Statistics are tools that humans use and, like photographs, depict some situations. They may be about heart attacks or traffic accidents in a country. The numbers themselves are not heart attacks or accidents; they only give information about these. Similarly, the statistics about the pandemic inform us about the pandemic. I feel embarrassed to be in a position to try to demonstrate what is self-evident!

The numbers and the statistical information on 15 January, the date of the debate, showed that among the 30 countries of Europe and in the case of Covid-19 deaths per million inhabitants, there were only three countries that were in a better situation than Greece: Norway, Finland,

and Iceland. These numbers change every week, but in general, Greece managed the pandemic reasonably well. This is not a consolation to the people who have lost loved ones, but it is a consolation to many Greeks that feel that they do not belong to the unfortunate countries that had many more losses. The demonizing of numbers is a way out for populists but does not serve self-awareness.

8 – Associating unrelated situations to reach conclusions

This method is basic for populists and is, to boot, an ancient technique. There is an ancient Greek story known as the Paradox of the Court or Protagoras' Paradox. It is said that the famous sophist Protagoras took on a promising pupil, Euathlus, on the understanding that the student would pay Protagoras for his instruction after winning his first court case. After finishing the course, Euathlus decided not to enter the legal profession but entered politics instead, not paying Protagoras for the lessons. Protagoras decided to sue Euathlus for the amount owed.

The teacher argued that if he were to win his suit, he would be paid his money. If Euathlus were to win, Protagoras would still be paid according to the original contract because Euathlus would have won his first case. Euathlus, however, claimed that if he won, then by the court's decision, he would not have to pay Protagoras. If, on the other hand, Protagoras won, then Euathlus would still not have won a case and would therefore not be obliged to pay. The question then is, which of the two men is right?

There are various versions of this story and many more uses of its hidden demagoguery. There are actually two distinct cases that are shrewdly combined to reach the desired end. In the first case, Protagoras loses;

in the second, he wins. The student simply repeats the first trial, in which he wins, avoiding mentioning the possible second suit. It seems as if history is being repeated—in the same land—in the parliamentary debate of 15 January 2021.

Tsipras said: “According to Mitsotakis, nobody asked him to take more austere measures in Thessaloniki where there were a high number of virus cases, whereas the local authorities had warned him.” Mitsotakis answered that he had said, “Nobody among the opposition in the Parliament had warned him.” At this point, Mitsotakis seems to be correct. However, Tsipras answered back, saying: “The opposition cannot tell the government what to do since the relevant information is not in its possession.” Now it seems that Tsipras is correct, and consequently Mitsotakis wrong!

The approach of Tsipras was to introduce new issues to the initial claim, which was simply “what Mitsotakis had said.” In so doing, he first stated that the opposition could not tell the government what to do since it does not control the situation, and second, he indirectly accused Mitsotakis of (naively) expecting the opposition to propose what the government should do. Tsipras is right in both these new issues. And by this approach, the initial argumentation is bypassed. The changing of the agenda is used repeatedly in populist discourse.

An assessment

1 – Populist speech is characterized by arguments that are “true” (truths) but irrelevant to what is being discussed; by the merging of various unrelated issues; by the repetition of negative characterizations against the opponent and by some other “auxiliary” techniques such as silencing, irony, insinuations, “tools” which are used in almost all debates. “Lies,” per se, are secondary. Examples of all these were presented above.

2 – The populist discourse is both difficult to notice (to recognize) at first glance and very influential. In the case of populist politicians, this technique is a powerful tool precisely because populist speech is hard to distinguish, but also because the messages are addressed to the unconscious part of the human intellect, to the feelings. This article is written hoping that it will help the receptors of the populist speeches be more ready to understand what is being done.

3 – The populist approach presented above differs from demagoguery and lies due to its social dimension. Populism is a term that presupposes two components: The addressor and the addressee; the populist agent that propagates the populist views, speeches, promises, hopes etc., on the one hand, and a group of audience, followers, and believers that share the populist messages as a social group, on the other hand. In other words, for the listeners who do not believe in the populist leader, orator, etc., the populist person is only a charlatan, a demagogue, a liar. In connection with this, it is understood that the way to cope with populism is not limited to fighting the populist agent. Improving the ability of the listeners’ comprehension is also needed. The opposition should not be directed to the addressor only but to the addressee, too. Intelligent persons with critical thinking skills are the best barrier against populism.

4 – Finally, all the above are about the techniques that populists use, the tactics, and the methods. What populism actually produces is a different topic. Still, in the above example, we see some of the “essence” of the populist worldview, understanding, ideology, or whatever other names one may see fit to describe this phenomenon. We see:

1. A Manichean world of good (“us”) versus the negative, the dishonest, the unpatriotic “other.” This is done mainly on an ethical basis.
2. Socially, the supposed divide is between the “people,” the in-group, “us” versus the “elite,” the rich, the out-group. It is a quasi-class divide.
3. The out-group beyond the national borders are the foreigners, the leftists, the Jews, the enemies of “our” country (if the source is politically right-wing and conservative), or the imperialists, the capitalists, and the neoliberals if the accuser is a leftist.
4. In the last resort, the whole endeavor leads to a world of strife, nationalist stereotypes, and widespread othering.

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