

# From the Italian Communist Party to Tsipras: The path of Europe's radical left

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This essay is aimed at analysing the history of the Confederal Group of the European United Left/Nordic Green Left (GUE-NGL). The group, formed by the Party of the European Left and by the Nordic Green Left, gathers the communist, socialist, and ecologist parties represented in the European Parliament (EP). Its member parties are inspired by the ideals of international solidarity that are characteristics of the communist ideology. Indeed, the group's constituent declaration states that despite being opposed to the Union institutional structure, it is actively committed to fostering European integration. In other words, without characterising themselves as Eurosceptic parties, the members of the GUE-NGL aim at modifying the structure of the EU, in order to increase its democratic character and promote policies in line with their reference ideology.

The communist and socialist parties represented in the European Parliament have been cooperating since 1973 when the Communist and Allies Group (GCA) sanctioned the collaboration of the French and Italian communists in Brussels. With the first European parliamentary elections in 1979, the group won the 11.1% of the seats. The GCA, with Italian, French, and Danish delegates, was therefore the fourth largest group in the EP. Its expansion continued when Greece joined the EU in 1981. Both the Greek radical left parties (Greek Communist Party and *Synapsimós*), in fact, joined the group. At the European elections in 1984, the Communist and Allies Group confirmed its positive performance, obtaining the 9.5% of the preferences. With 41 members, the group confirmed itself the fourth largest in the parliament.

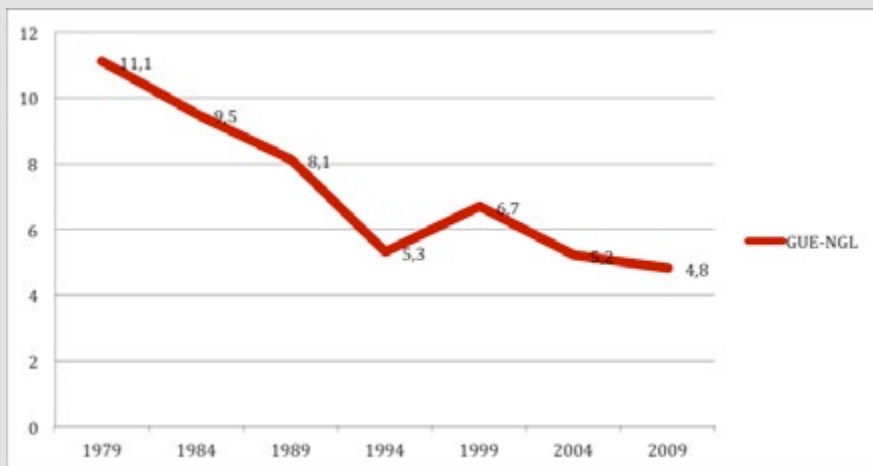
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The arrival of Spain and Portugal in the Union, in 1986, triggered a process that would have led, three years later, to the birth of two new parliamentary groups. The Italian Communist Party, the Spanish *Izquierda Unida*, the Greek *Synapsimós*, and the Danish People's Party formed the group European United Left (*Gauche Unitaire Européenne* or GUE). On the other hand, the communist parties of France, Portugal, and Greece, together with one delegate from the Irish Worker's Party, formed the *Coalition Des Gauches*. In 1989, the two groups obtained, respectively, the 5.4% and 2.7% of preferences, almost matching the result of the GCA in the previous elections.

The history of the groups hit a turning point at the beginning of the 1990s, also due to the radical changes occurring within the Italian party system. The newborn *Partito Democratico della Sinistra* (PDS), willing to remove every legacy of its communist roots, abandoned the GUE in order to join the Party of European Socialists (PES). The exit of the PDS had a heavy repercussion on the results of 1994 elections. The *Coalition des Gauches* was not represented in the new parliament, and the European United Left (GUE) obtained a mere 5.3%, with its members falling to 28. The exit of the Italian PDS from the group was, virtually, responsible for the loss of 16 delegates (this is the number of members of the PDS who entered the EP and joined the PES). Such electoral defeat was probably the decisive incentive to start the process of gathering together all the forces within the nonsocial democratic European left. Such process started with an enlargement of the European United Left (GUE). Besides the original members (the communist parties of Italy, Spain, and Greece), the *Parti Communiste Française*, the *Partido Comunista Portugues*, and the Greek *Synapsimos* joined the group. The second decisive step was the "EU northern enlargement," on January 1, 1995. Austrian delegates joined the GUE while the Swedish and Finnish parties, together with the Danish socialists, formed the Nordic Green Left. Finally, on January 6, 1995, the Confederal Group of the European United Left-Nordic Green Left (GUE-NGL) was born. In 1998, following the arrival of the British Ken Coates, former member of the PES, and of the Italian Carlo Ripa di Meana, previously in the Green party, the group counted 34 members. However, the GUE-NGL had its electoral debut only in 1999. The group, presided by the Spanish Alonso José Puerta (*Izquierda Unida*), obtained the 6.7% of the seats, improving the result of the *Coalition Des Gauches* in 1994. All the parties adhering to the group in the previous term were able to obtain representation in the new parliament. To these, added themselves the German Party of the Democratic Socialism and a third Greek party, the DIKKI (Social Democratic Movement). Finally, five members of the French *Lutte Ouvrière* also joined. The GUE-NGL arrived thus at 42 members, once again representing the fourth largest group in the EP. If we analyse the electoral trend of the communist and socialist parties from 1979 to 2009 (see figure 1), it is apparent that the birth of the GUE-NGL produced

Figure 1 - Electoral trend of communist and socialist groups within the EP. Percentage of seats within the EP (1979–2009)



For 1979 and 1984, the figures refer to the GCA while for 1989, to the total of the preferences of the European United Left and the Coalition des Gauches. For 1994, the data refer only to the European United Left. Finally, for 1999, 2004, and 2009, the figures refer to the GUE-NGL

positive electoral results, with a partial inversion of the negative trend recorded in previous years. Nonetheless, it is also evident that such results were quite ephemeral and, moreover, that the figures do not even get close to the ones registered in the period antecedent to the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Nevertheless, the group continued its expansion during the fifth legislature, counting 49 members in 2009. Moreover, following the arrival of 10 new EU member states, in 2003, the group welcomed observers from Cyprus, Czech Republic, Lithuania, and Slovakia (who became full members in May 2004). In the meantime, the French Francis Wurtz (French Communist Party) was elected to the presidency of the group. This positive trend, however, was abruptly interrupted with the elections in June 2004. The GUE-NGL settled with a mere 5.2% of the preferences, and its members went down to 40. The Northern Irish *Sinn Féin* and a second Portuguese party joined the group with one member each. It seems clear that the expansion strategy, while successful, was not enough to compensate the losses the European communists and socialists inevitably were to suffer in a post-ideology era.<sup>2</sup> In fact, analys-

<sup>2</sup> On this point, see Hay (2007).

Table 1 - Electoral results of the GUE-NGL in the member states (1999–2009)

Country	GUE-NGL member parties, total % of votes		
	1999	2004	2009
Austria	0.73	0.78	0.66
Belgium	0	0	0
Bulgaria			0
Czech Republic		20.26	14.2
Croatia			5.8*
Cyprus		27.89	34.8
Denmark	7.3	14.17	7
Estonia		0	0.8
Finland	9.1	9.13	5.9
France	12	8.44	6
Germany	5.8	6.13	7.5
Greece	20.8	13.64	13
Hungary		0	1
Italy	6.3	8.93	7
Latvia		0	19.6
Lithuania		0	0
Luxemburg	0	2.86	3.4
Malta		0	0
Netherlands	5	6.97	7.1
Poland		0	0.7
Portugal	10.7	14	21.3
Romania			0
Slovakia		4.55	1.65
Slovenia		0	0
Spain	5.9	4.71	3.77
Sweden	15.8	12.79	5.7
UK	1.1	0.85	0.6

\*Elections held on April 14, 2013.

ing the data by country (see Table 1), we can notice that the new members (the Czech, Cypriot, Irish, and Northern Irish parties) brought the GUE-NGL 10 new parliamentarians. At the same time, however, the poor electoral performance of the older member parties caused the loss of 12 delegates.

The electoral decline of the group continued with the 2009 elections, with a poor 4.8% (see Figure 1). In this case, however, the disastrous performance

Table 2 - GUE-NGL member parties' list on the eve of 2014 European Elections

Country	GUE-NGL members
Austria	
Belgium	
Bulgaria	
Cyprus	Progressive Workers' Party
Czech Republic	Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy
Denmark	Enhedslisten - De Rød-Grønne
Estonia	
Finland	
France	Parti communiste français; Parti de Gauche; Parti Communiste Réunionnais; Marie-Christine Vergiat
Germany	Die Linke
Greece	Synapsimos (Syriza); Partito Comunista Greco
Hungary	Socialist Party
Ireland	
Italy	
Latvia	Latvijas Sociālistiskā partija
Lithuania	
Luxemburg	
Malta	
Netherlands	Socialistische Partij
Poland	
Portugal	Bloco de Esquerda; Partido Comunista Português
Romania	
Slovakia	
Slovenia	
Spain	Partido Comunista de España
Sweden	Vänsterpartiet
UK	Sinn Féin

of the Italian member parties is mainly to blame for the disappointing results. Three parties adhering to or affiliated with the GUE-NGL ran in European Elections in Italy: *Rifondazione Comunista*, *Sinistra e Libertà*, and the *Partito Comunistadei Lavoratori*. None of them went above the 4% threshold, necessary to obtain representation in the EP. Because of this, the GUE-NGL lost seven members. This brought the count to 35 members from 17 states (this

includes the loss of the Finnish delegate and the new member from Latvia). The group thus became the sixth, and penultimate, for number of members in the EP.

During the last term, first, the German Lothar Birky (Party of the Democratic Socialism) and then his conational Gabriele Zimmer (Party of the Democratic Socialism) presided the group.

The elections that will be held in May represent a precious occasion for the GUE-NGL. Radical left parties have always adopted a critical attitude towards the economic management on the part of EU institutions. The current European system, accused of pursuing excessive economic liberalism, is considered the agent of the current economic and financial crisis rather than its victim. The declared goal of the GUE-NGL is therefore to reform the EU institutions, and promote policies in line with its reference ideology, thus improving the life of European citizens.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, it is easy to understand why these parties may benefit from the current economic situation and from the anti-Europe climate, which is also fuelled by the national media. Moreover, the GUE-NGL is betting on the charisma of the young leader of the Greek *Syriza*, Alexis Tsipras. Indeed, an article published by the think tank *Notre Europe*, by Bertoncini and Kreilinger (2013), foresees a particularly positive electoral performance for the Spanish *Izquierda Unida*, for *Syriza*, and possibly for the French and German parties as well. This would substantially increase the group's membership. The authors go as far as hypothesising 50 members in the next term. If such previsions were to be confirmed, it would be the best electoral result for the socialist and communist parties in Europe since the birth of the EP. The challenge is hard, but it is possible that the GUE-NGL will be able to reverse the negative electoral trend observed in over a decade.

## References

- Hay, C. (2007). *Domestic sources of depoliticization*, in C. Hay, *Why We Hate Politics*. Cambridge: Polity, pp. 90–122.
- Bertoncini, Y., and Kreilinger, V. (2013). *What Political Balance of Power in the Next European Parliament*. Policy Paper, Notre Europe Jacques Delors Institute.

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<sup>3</sup> On this point, see the official GUE-NGL website (<http://www.guengl.eu>).