

Left Prospects in the Post-PASOK Era

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In the last few years, the political alignments in the European Union (EU) countries have changed drastically. In the 1990s, social democratic parties and centre-left political forces were dominant. Under the banners of “progressive governance” or “modernization” these parties ruled numerous countries and dominated the political scene on the continent. Today, it is no secret that after long years in government, these political forces, what some like to call the “governmental left” are, to say the least, in retreat. It is indeed no secret that social democracy is in deep crisis: The recent congress of the French Socialists proved that this party is going through a period of self-questioning over the issue of its leadership, but also that it had nothing new to offer or, as a conservative daily commented, it appears as if “it does not think any more.” In Germany the situation is even worse as the social democratic party, the SPD, is displaying an unprecedented obsession over the personalities of its leadership. In the UK, George Brown and his Labour Party resemble more and more John Major’s Conservatives just before their devastating defeat in 1997. In Italy, after its defeat by the right wing Forza Italia of Silvio Berlusconi, the Democratic Party has turned into a *real* Babel, which has completely paralyzed its capacity to oppose the government’s often reactionary policies.

This trend, with the possible exemption of Spain under the Prime Ministership of Jose Zapatero of the Socialist Party, is clear and the conclusion rather obvious. The “third way” of the “governmental left” has led to a turn to the right. The rejection of the so-called European Constitution in the French and the Dutch referendums in 2005, and even the recent Irish rejection of the latest

version of the new neoliberal EU Constitutional Treaty (Lisbon Treaty), did not slow down the deepening of social democratic crisis. In fact, the gap created by the decay of the reformist left has brought to the fore the need to resist right-wing policies and hegemony. This has energized once dormant attempts to mobilize the radical left and has generated initiatives towards the mobilization of those political forces on the left that do not subscribe to the conformism of “new social democracy.” *Die Linke* in Germany and the *Bloco de Esquerda* (Left Bloc) in Portugal seem to be the most prominent and successful examples of the rising new left forces on the European scene.

The situation in Greece is no exception to this pattern. In fact as recent developments have shown, the “Greek case” could provide a good example for the direction of the left and leftists where the local social democratic, centre-left, or labour parties are incapable of resisting right wing aggression and have definitely abandoned any intention of or even promise for the structural transformation of the society.

Indeed, PASOK (Pan-Hellenic Socialist Movement) dominated the Greek political scene for eleven consecutive years, most of it under the banner of aggressive “modernization.” It was then followed by two consecutive victories of the right-wing New Democracy (ND). But today, with its modest but hopeful performance in last year’s election (5%), the radical independent left, under the name the Coalition of Radical Left –SYRIZA, is expected to at least double its electoral support in the next election. The sudden explosion of the influence of the left in Greece be-

comes even a greater surprise when one considers that the Communist Party of Greece (KKE) commands eight percent of the popular vote. What has happened? Under what conditions is the radical left in Greece about to make a major breakthrough? Before we look at these questions, let us briefly turn to the developments of the Greek Left after the fall of the Junta (1974).

CHARTING THE GREEK LEFT

1974 was the turning point not only for the Greek left but also for the overall politics of the country. After some three de-



ades of a restricted democratic regime and a seven-year dictatorship, a genuine transition to democracy was inaugurated. This gave the left, in both its social-democratic and communist form, a chance to develop freely. Thus, on the one hand, Greece had the creation of the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) and, on the other, the legalization of the parties of communist origin and orientation.

PASOK's "socialism," a mixture of populist radicalism and Keynesian reformism, was far from a class-based politics, without at the same time excluding those who subscribed to the latter. In the context of the post-dictatorship radical environment, PASOK, thanks also to its charismatic leader Andreas Papandreou, gave the impression that it was not only further to the left than its European counterparts but even more radical than the country's communists. In the 1980s, the Greek Socialists came to power and were nothing more than a typical example of mainstream social democracy at the time. This reformism was enough, however, to co-opt a large segment of the traditional left's social base. After a short interlude away from government, PASOK regained power in 1993, but the new PASOK – especially after the 1996, under the leadership of K. Simitis, a firm proponent of modernization – bore no resemblance to its radical foundation. The new PASOK, which dominated the country's politics until its defeat in 2004 was very close to the politics of Tony Blair's New Labour and in tune with the new governmentalist European social democracy.

On the other side of the left spectrum the KKE, even after the collapse of the regimes of Soviet inspired communism, is a typical party of the Third International tradition. It is the heir to the 'glorious party' that led the resistance during the War and was defeated during the civil war that followed. During the Junta years it underwent a major crisis and split into the KKE and the KKE-Interior (1968). The former dominated communist politics and the latter developed as a Eurocommunist party. In 1988, the two parties of the communist left and a number of other independent socialists formed Synaspismos, (the Coalition of the Left and Progress – SYN). Three years later the KKE left SYN, which in effect led to another split of the KKE since almost half of its central committee and thousands of its members remained in SYN. The KKE maintains a strong stand against the EU and its discourse is often simplistic and anthropomorphic. To the KKE, all other parties, including SYN, are the same since they all promote capitalism and reproduce the system, which provides it with the excuse to rule out any possibility for co-operation and legitimizes its segregationist strategy, even in the trade union movement. At the same time, as the problems of the economy and in the Balkans mounted, the KKE's anti-imperialist stand often gets sidetracked into populist xenophobia and nationalism.

In 2000, at the height of PASOK's modernizing project, a number of small leftist extra-parliamentary organizations, groups and networks as well as a number of independent activists formed the Coalition of Radical Left –SYRIZA. The Coalition was an initiative of SYN, which was struggling to meet the threshold of three percent required to enter the parliament. As could have

been expected, SYN became the backbone of SYRIZA. In 2004, a former member of KKE and a European MEP (Member of the European Parliament) for many years, Alekos Alavanos took over the leadership of SYN and crafted a strategy to strengthen SYRIZA. SYRIZA would have to become the unifying agency of the entire left – a presence so strong that it would no longer feel squeezed between the PASOK's conformist governmentalism and KKE dogmatism. Support for this project had to come from the labour and social movements that the new leadership actively tried to strengthen by forming ties with them. The strategy was founded on the principle of "empowering the powerless." It evolved through giving increased opportunities for positions to the party's young members, something rather unusual for the communist origin left.

The much criticised choice of Alexis Tsipras, then a thirty two year old engineer, to stand as the party's candidate for major in Athens in the fall of 2006 municipal elections is a very good example of SYN's new spirit. The success of this initiative (Tsipras won an unprecedented 10.5 percent of the popular vote) strengthened and stabilized the party's new strategy. However, the real political impact of this strategy was demonstrated during the 2006-07 mobilization of students against the constitutional amendment that would allow the establishment of universities by the private sector. SYN was pivotal in changing public opinion to such an extent that PASOK was forced to change its position on the issue, a development that annulled the Government's efforts on the issue. More importantly, SYN's strategy on this and other issues seems to be breaking away from instrumentalism vis-à-vis the power structure, as was traditionally denoted by the strategy and the tactics of the Left. This was an instrumentalism that revealed a formalistic perception of political power expressed either when the left-wing movements and parties are completely preoccupied with their presence in public office; or when they separate their mobilization initiatives from the societal base through the functioning of the state institutions. By mid-2007, it was becoming clear that SYN, along with its front organization SYRIZA, was much more confident about the outcome of the upcoming elections.

The result of the 2007 September election was not a surprise. SYRIZA won 5 percent of the popular vote and 14 seats in the 300 seat parliament and KKE an impressive 8.1 percent and 22 seats. PASOK experienced its second consecutive defeat by a further loss of 2.5 percentage points and started to display signs of fatigue and a political inability to mobilize effectively. The slim parliamentary majority (by only two seats) of ND and the entrance of an ultra right party into the parliament, in combination with the leadership crisis of PASOK elevated SYRIZA to the prime opposition force to the government. In February 2008, SYN held its 5th Congress where Tsipras was elected as party leader. He thus replaced Alavanos, who remains however the leader of the SYRIZA. Since the election, SYRIZA has displayed a steady increase in its popularity. In fact for more than half a year, all the public opinion polls show that the party has more than doubled its popular support.

CONDITIONS RIPE FOR HOPE ON THE LEFT

Clearly the developments noted above cannot be taken as proof of a turn of Greek society to the left. This is not simply due to the pessimism of left intellectuals. It is because the turning of a society to the left is a rather complicated process that cannot simply be detected through conjunctural electoral gains. It has more to do with the change in the balance of social powers and radical changes in the society's values to such an extent that realistically result in the building of counter hegemonic structures.

However, although it is obvious that the dynamic of SYRIZA on the Greek political scene does not prove we are witnessing a general turn of the society leftwards, at the same time it is more than clear that the Greek left has drawn upon certain important social developments that characterize advanced capitalist societies. These developments have created a conducive environment for the Greek radical left to make a major break-through and to reshape the balance of power in the country. This will be so as long as its leadership and its political organizations continue to see these as new openings, and insist on capitalizing on them in a creative fashion as they have done in the last couple of years.

This is not the place to elaborate extensively on the overall developments that have facilitated the prospects of the Greek left wing making advances a realistic and even short-term goal. *However it is worth highlighting three wider European developments.*

First, the impact of various applications of the strategy of neoliberalism for the restructuring capitalism in the last three decades has radically shaken the long lasting belief that the young generations could realistically hope to have a better and more prosperous life than their parents. The years of security and of improved real incomes seems to belong to the past. Even Eurobureaucrats and the political elites openly admit that the maximum the EU countries can hope for is to introduce policies in order to manage the social issues in a way that there are not going to result in major social shake-ups. The debate on "flexicurity" across Europe is a good case in point.

Second, the frequent alternation in power between right-wing, conservative or Christian democratic and reformist social democratic parties in power in the European countries, has generated a political cynicism that has forced large numbers of citizens to seek their political representation elsewhere. The mobilizations around the European Social Forum and other campaigns and movements, which were not so much part of the political tradition of Europe as they were part of the tradition in North America, are good examples.

Third, the combination of the above two developments, along with the liberating effect of the collapse of the "actually existing socialism" and the end of the "cold war," has widened the audience for the radical Left.

In addition to this situation that seems to be more or less common to most EU countries, *the Greek case displays several additional traits that have had a positive impact on the Left's recent positive dynamic.*

First, for the last five years, the right wing government has introduced a number of what it calls "reforms" that have generated tremendous social reactions. These "reforms" are justified as necessary in order to deal with PASOK's governmental errors. But they have resulted in policies whose origin and philosophy can in fact easily be attributed to the Socialist modernizers. This strategy is part of the government's tactics of "blaming everything on PASOK." Along with PASOK's internal rivalries over its leadership, the parliamentary scene gives wide space for SYRIZA's intention to express social discontent – it is a realistic and viable project. Indeed, SYRIZA was the only political force to challenge the government's incomes policies and bring to the fore the issue of what it calls the "700 Euro generation" (the G700 generation of young Greeks between ages 25 and 35 who make 700 Euro a month and are overworked, underpaid, debt-ridden and insecure) to play a key role to hamper the government plans to privatize universities and to mobilize against the reforms in country's pension plans system. On all these issues, SYRIZA's political action was innovative. It adopted a fresh discourse which, although remaining within its overall strategy for the unity of country's left, managed to demarcate itself from PASOK without at the same time sliding into the alienating simplistic logic of KKE that wants to equate PASOK with the ND.

Second, although part of PASOK's defeat can be attributed to widespread phenomena of corruption during its' terms in government, it did not take long for the ND government to elevate corruption and the mismanagement of public funds to a real art. This phenomenon further contributed to an *extensive* disenchantment with the two government parties of the country or with what it called "system of bipartism." As this disenchantment has also been expressed in anti-party, anti-collectivist and a-political attitudes, SYRIZA's effective opposition strategy has managed at least to stop this trend from spreading.

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Third, EU policies have, in the last few years, become more and more reactionary. The great alliance in the early 1990s formed around the axis between the French socialists and the German Christian Democracy, which managed to somehow to protect the EU from Thatcherism has long collapsed. Instead the phenomena of complete submission of the Union's policies to finance capital and the market are far too frequent. The latest decision of the Council of Ministers to extend maximum working hours to 60-65 per week, the complete deregulation/privatization of the energy sector, the increase in interest rates, which contributes to the phenomena of recession and the recent policies on immigration that intend to "fortify" the EU against the invasion of immigrants – all highlight the political direction of the EU. SYRIZA once again has been the only political force in the country that can legitimately challenge these policies. As PASOK and ND offer their unconditional support to the EU initiatives and KKE has always been a dogmatic Eurosceptic, SYRIZA, with its pro-EU background can now convincingly challenge these policies and promote a well-grounded vision of a socialist EU along with the parties that participate in the *Party of the European Left*.

Finally, another very positive factor contributing to the advancement of the radical Left is the fact that neither PASOK nor ND and even less so KKE have renewed their political personnel. This phenomenon has contributed to the anti-political and anti-party sentiment of the population. At the same time the fresh and young leadership – both in style and in age – of SYRIZA creates an obvious comparative advantage. This point may sound rather superficial, however, in the age of electronic media, such phenomena cannot be considered insignificant.

CHALLENGES AHEAD

The above presentation of all the positive elements in the socio-political environment of the Greek radical Left, may have led the reader to picture the future in rather rosy hues. One should not rush to conclusions. There are still a number of serious dangers and challenges in the future prospects and the dynamics of SYRIZA and the Greek left in general.

The major danger for the building of a new Greek left derive from an over-anticipation of the rapid success of its strategy. This may lead its often young and/or inexperienced leadership, and even its membership, to strengthen its understanding of politics as a public relations project. It would not be so difficult for something like this to happen under the present conditions of "media driven politics". This, in turn, may shrink its ambitious strategy to focusing on success at the polls. Winning elections is part of the project but an obsession with elections can lead to a paralyzing and short-sighted electoralism.

Furthermore, the international and domestic social and political dynamics have generated so many pressing contradictions that they have made SYRIZA's opposition and mobilization efforts an easy affair. This ease may result in the creation of an

anti-neoliberal but not anti-capitalist political party. Such a development could lead to the absurdity of a "left wing party without socialism." Signs of the latter can already be seen in *Die Linke* in Germany and they may spread to its Greek counterpart, given their close collaboration within the Party of the European Left.

In addition to these dangers, the Greek Left is faced with a number of other important challenges. Key among them is how to transform its political, electoral advances into social gains. How, in other words, can it convincingly demonstrate that the problems faced today are structural by-products of the system and not simply side-effects that can be treated through some kind of reforms? To put it crudely: how can it prove that reformism is probably the most illusionary idea of our times?

All these dangers and challenges can be confronted if SYRIZA manages to put forward a comprehensive plan for party-building that can capitalize on the experience both of its origin and of the new social movements. It needs to be an organization that would respect our society's social division of labour between parties and other movements and capitalize on the new technology of political mobilization. This social project, in addition to everything else, is about an organization, a political party. For, it is our organized collectivity that is not only the cornerstone of our current struggles, but also a small scale model of the society of tomorrow about which we dream. **R**

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