

Greece: The Return of the Right

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Abstract

New Democracy (ND), the centre-right party founded by Constantine Karamanlis in summer 1974 and currently led by Kyriakos Mitsotakis, scion of a powerful political family, won the twin electoral contest of May and June 2023 with a landslide. The victory was comprehensive both in terms the votes received – over 40% of those who cast their vote (abstention was over 45%) – and because of the near collapse of Syriza (17,83%) and the weak recovery of the other centre-left party, PASOK (11,46%). Moreover, far-right and conservative parties, three in total, entered parliament amassing some 12% of the vote. We argue that two strictly interlinked phenomena account for these developments. The first was the eclipse of conditions that created the Syriza phenomenon in Greece (the 2010-15 debt crisis); and the second was the lack of a credible programmatic alternative that speaks to middle classes on behalf of both centre-left parties.

Keywords

New Democracy, Spartans, Syriza, neo-liberalism, PASOK, cosmopolitanism

Introduction

Greece's first election, held on 21 May 2023 with an electoral system based on proportionality gave no parliamentary majority for the first party, the New Democracy (ND), so no government could be formed. Elections were repeated on 25 June on the basis of a first-past-the-post system, which gives bonus seats to the first party. The trend of the popular vote, nevertheless, was visible from the first round: it was a rout for the largest centre-left opposition party, Syriza (the "Coalition of the Radical Left"), which had only secured just over 20% as opposed to just below 41% of Mitsotakis' centre-right. The victory for the incumbent ND came despite social discontent and serious scandals, such as the wire-tapping by the state's secret services of the leader of PASOK (Panhellenic Socialist Movement), Nick Androulakis, for reasons that still no-one can understand. Also, the result was not impacted by weeks of mass protests following the horrific death of 57, mainly young, people in a train crash in the Tempi valley in February

2023, attributed to decades of cuts, the slashing of staff and lack of professional training following the privatisation of the sector under Syriza's cabinet in 2017.

The other party of the centre-left, PASOK, founded by Andreas G. Papandreou in September 1974, did not fare better. It increased its vote from 8% in 2019 to just over 11% in 2023. This is unimpressive because it disables it and the centre-left more broadly from generating a new progressive dynamics capable of challenging the dominant position of the centre-right. The other centre-left party of significance, Diem25, led by the former finance minister, Yianis Varoufakis, failed to reach the threshold of 3% and did not enter parliament, something which succeeded to do in the election of July 2019. More successful was *Plefsi Eleftherias* (Freedom Course), led by Zoe Konstantopoulou, securing entry for eight MPs. The Greek Communist Party (KKE), one of the most successful traditional communist parties in the world, secured over 7% of the vote and 20 MPs.

On the far-right, three ultra-conservative parties entered parliament, although by no means they can be lumped together in terms of political outlook or ideology: *Niki* (Victory), is a socially conservative party with many references to Christian orthodox religion; *Hellenic Solution* is a nationalist party with an anti-migration agenda; and the *Spartans* a rather xenophobic and extreme right-wing militant formation, whose real leader, a former member of Golden Dawn, is in prison.

What do these results tell us? What are the elements of change since the election of 2019? Why did Syriza experience such a dramatic fall failing to take advantage of several governmental blunders? We argue that the overall rise of the centre-right and the far-right, as well as the concomitant decline of the centre-left is bound up with two strictly inter-connected factors: the elimination of crisis conditions that paved the ground for the emergence of Syriza as the main radical anti-austerity force in Greek society and politics; and the lack of a strategic opposition and programmatic alternative on behalf of both Syriza and PASOK during the entire period of the ND in office (2019-2023). At the same time, as we shall see, the management of governmental power by the ND was quite competent, especially during the pandemic and the geopolitical crisis with Turkey. We will examine these factors in turn, shedding also light on factors that contributed to the rise of the extreme right, especially the Spartans.

The rise and fall of Syriza

The radicalisation of Greek society and politics from 2010 to summer 2015 was the result of a severe debt crisis. The bailout agreements signed between the troika (IMF, ECB and the EU) and various centrist coalition governments of PASOK and ND before the advent of Syriza in office (January 2015), transferred the mass of private debt onto public institutions making the Greek taxpayer responsible for its repayment. This entailed harsh austerity measures,

including lay-offs in the public sector, pay cuts and emergency taxation. Syriza, a party hardly receiving more than 4,5% of the vote in 2009, rose to prominence thanks to popular discontent that eroded the electoral base of PASOK and ND composed of middle and lower middle classes. These two parties had identified themselves with the post-1974 regime and the clientelistic misuse of public finances. In January 2015, Syriza won the election with over 36% of the vote, sending the ND to the second place with just under 28%, whereas PASOK collapsed to under 5%. The third party that had arisen in this period of extreme social radicalisation was the neo-Nazi aggregation of the Golden Dawn (6,30%).

On 5 July 2015, following six months of intense negotiations with the lenders of the troika, Syriza held a referendum on whether Greece should accept austerity by taking a third bail-out package, even harsher than the previous two signed by the ND and PASOK. A majority of 62% voted "No" to austerity. That would have signalled the exit of the country from the Euro-zone and, perhaps, the EU. Tsipras and the leading group of Syriza overturned the referendum result, accepting a third bail-out package and even harsher austerity. That was a turning point. Syriza, aiming at legitimising the referendum compromise, called for a new election in September 2015, which it won with just over 35%. A harsh austerity programme was implemented throughout its term in office until 2019, initiating a process of de-radicalisation and embedding in popular imagination the TINA doctrine ("There Is No Alternative"). As we have shown in our previous contribution to *The Political Quarterly* when examining the 2019 election result, this development sapped Syriza's evolution into a mass type of social democratic party embedded in social movements, the trade unions and the local government. Instead, we witnessed the transformation of the party into a new "cadre" type of political formation. It entailed detachment from working and lower middle classes, whereas the bulk of its elite assumed key positions in the state apparatus, especially in ministries and public enterprises, neglecting even the party's statute which was advising otherwise. The divorce of Syriza from working class interests led the party to the electoral defeat of 2019, although, as we argued, the relative replenishment of the state machine with its cadres and political personnel, as well as the new clientelistic networks created as a result of it, contained the magnitude of its defeat. However, the failure of Syriza to embed itself in civil society and act as a class organiser of it on a mass basis, on the basis of an alternative political programme while in opposition, proved costly. In opposition for four years (2019-23) and unable to influence policy, its political appointments and new clientelistic networks were curtailed or even neutralised by the effective and experienced administration of the centre-right led by Kyriakos Mitsotakis, scion of a powerful political family with solid connections to the Euro-Atlantic establishment.

The centre-right government and the pandemic (2019-2023)

During its period in office (2015-2019), Syriza boasted that it took Greece out of the surveillance framework of the bailout agreements bringing the country back to international (borrowing) markets. Although this is true, the legal obligation of Greece to produce primary surpluses to the tune of 3,5% until 2022 and 2% for many years afterwards remained in place.ⁱ Syriza followed the bailout agreement religiously producing even higher primary surpluses than those demanded by the lenders. When the ND assumed office in 2019 followed exactly the same austerity policy framework. However, it failed to produce primary surpluses due to welfare and health costs triggered by the pandemic. There was a hidden element of luck in the pandemic, accompanied with a number of popular and smart policy measures that gave the centre-right an additional boost, further embedding in people's political imagination that There Is No Alternative (TINA) to austerity and EU-imposed governance.

The element of luck concerned the relaxation of the monetarist rules of the Stability and Growth Pact of the EU in order to assist member states to deal with health and welfare costs. Taking advantage of the occasion, the EU also offered additional support financing procedures for the digital and green transition of member states. Of the 750bn Euros of the Next Generation EU fund, Greece was allocated over 30 bn Euros of which 17,8bn was in grants and 12,7bn in loans. Mitsotakis' cabinet was also successful in renewing the country's participation in the so-called ESPA programme of the EU (Mutual Fund for Peripheral Development) for the 2021-2027 period. The centre-right managed these funds quite competently, especially as regards the containment of unemployment and the digitalisation of the state's bureaucratic – and hitherto inefficient – services. Importantly, taking advantage of the “stay home” campaign, the government distributed some 20m Euros to over 1,200 media outlets everywhere in Greece. Apart from some rare exceptions, there was hardly a major TV channel or even local media outlet privileging opposition parties during the centre-right's term in office, including the pre-election campaign.ⁱⁱ

The government managed the period of the pandemic quite well. The average salary in Greece as of May 2021 was just over 1,000 Euros per month before tax, whereas the minimum wage varied from 524 to 641 euros per month, depending on the insurance scheme of the worker.ⁱⁱⁱ Those who were on suspension from work, the monthly income was 534 euros per month. The basic policy principle the Greek government pursued in order to encourage liquidity in the market, was the division of costs by 1/3 to all concerned: 1/3 to be covered by the government, 1/3 by the workers and 1/3 by the entrepreneurs. The result of this allocation might have been a further decrease in wages, but enterprises employing more than 500 workers had been incentivised to keep their workers in employment. The regulation was that as soon as they do so, then the company would be relieved from paying back loans for five years. The smartest policy to contain unemployment rates concerned subsidies towards workers whose employer's enterprise was placed provisionally out of economic activity. Just for the first month of lockdown, this subsidy was 800 euros and free of tax. In enterprises that were out of economic activity for long, the subsidies went down to 534 euros a month – note that until September 2020 some 205,984 small enterprises reduced their cycle of business by 56%.^{iv} In this way, unemployment in Greece was, to a certain degree, contained: it only increased by 1,8% to 18,3% in 2021, whereas on the eve of the 2023 elections it went down to below 11%. This is a significant achievement given the state of finances of the country and the significant loss of income from tourism for two consecutive years (summers of 2020-21). In most Western countries, however, unemployment increased to between 3% and 9% as the recession caused by the pandemic unfolded.^v

Lockdown and the ensuing recession influenced massively Greece's working conditions. Like anywhere in the world, many non-manual activities and service activities became telework from home. Rooms in families were turned into working spaces. In Greece, telework was institutionalised as a voluntary activity with Law 3846/2010, which determined the normative framework and the costs involved in it. In practice, however, this remained on paper. Telework started on 13 March 2020 in secondary education establishments with universities following suit. From September 2020 onwards a strategy of selective quarantine was followed, imposing a regime of quarantine for 40% of the personnel that was able to carry out telework (Law 4727/2020). The institutionalisation of telework with possibilities for extension, created an ideological and policy framework upon which the state could call if similar circumstances arose or if perceived that they arose.

The pandemic created such social and working conditions and needs that pushed the centre-right to invest to modernise the state's bureaucratic machine to the great relief of many citizens. Although e-government schemes and policies had been initiated by earlier governments in the early 2000s, the centre-right gave a substantial boost to *e-government.gr*, diverting significant amounts of EU funding to digitalisation.^{vi} To give only one example, until very recently, the certification of signature in Greece was a gruelling bureaucratic process involving countless visits to public services and unnecessary paperwork. The government minimised the citizens' troubles with bureaucracy by allowing digital certification of signature, relieving hundreds of thousands of people, especially the elderly and the disadvantaged. All this, undoubtedly, were positive policies that came to be appreciated by the electorate.

The government managed also competently the geopolitical crisis with Turkey over the issues of illegal migrants and maritime borders, such as the delimitation of the Exclusive Economic Zone in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean. Whereas many on the centre-left (Syriza and PASOK) and other leftist aggregations – including the DiEM25 of Yianis Varoufakis – called for “open borders” with the radical right embracing extremely racist positions, the government followed EU policy and, in March 2020, contained a mass crossing of illegal migrants and refugees from the Evros river, the only land border Greece shares with Turkey. This incident, coupled with tensions in the Aegean in August-September of the same year, could have got out of control leading either to border clashes between Greek and Turkish troops at the Evros river or a more generalised conflict in the Aegean involving naval and air forces. The Greek right-wing government presented itself as the beholder of international and European Law in all bilateral issues with Turkey, exposing Turkey's aggression along neo-Ottoman expansionist lines, a strategy that resonated well in Western establishments. In addition, upon the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, the Greek government sided immediately with the West offering even military assistance to Ukraine. On the contrary, Turkey procrastinated pursuing an ambivalent policy, certainly not without benefits. Of note is the acquisition from Turkey of the S-400 missile system from Russia, something which outraged the USA leading the superpower to exclude Turkey from acquiring F-35 jets, although it included Greece in the same programme. Further, the government managed to conclude a bilateral security pact with France while securing two defence agreements with the USA concerning expansion of American bases and military facilities in Greece. For the Greek middle classes recovering from the debt crisis, this type of geopolitical management provided an increased sense of security reinforcing the centre-right's credentials in absence of any meaningful programmatic alternative in the field of national security on the part of the centre-left. If there was no alternative in political-economic terms, there was no alternative also in terms of foreign policy and security.

All in all, the ND government used the EU funds in a smart way and, taking advantage of the relaxation of the Stability and Growth Pact, remained unaffected by its failure to produce

primary surpluses due to the pandemic. Despite the fact that the entire framework of its policy remained faithful to neo-liberalism, the centre-right managed to contain inequalities and even the number of deaths caused by the pandemic – Greece holds the 23rd position in Europe with 503 deaths per 1m people and the 45th worldwide by the same measurement. As we saw earlier, unemployment on the eve of the election was below 12%. The success of the centre-right in managing the pandemic and reducing unemployment eliminated the crisis conditions caused by the debt crisis whereas the two centre-left parties, Syriza and PASOK, failed to produce any meaningful and realistic opposition to government policy. On geopolitical issues, the government, pursuing a pro-NATO and pro-EU policy, managed to re-gain trust from the middle and lower middle classes providing them with stability and security. But why the extreme right registered such a success? To this issue we should now turn.

The rise of the extreme right: responsibilities of the centre-left and centre-right

Of the three nationalistic parties that entered parliament, one of them, the Spartans, are worth of attention for a number of reasons. The leader of the party, Vassilis Stigas, is a former member of ND. He left the party and after short stints in soft nationalist parties, he created the Spartans in 2017. Of totally insignificant political and electoral influence receiving even less than a hundred of votes in some election contests, the Spartans rose to prominence just three weeks before the ballot of 25 June 2023, when the imprisoned founding leader of *Hellenes* and former MP of Golden Dawn, Ilias Kassidiaris, instructed his followers to vote for the Spartans. They received 4,64% of the vote, placing them 5th in the contest with 12 MPs. *Hellenes*, founded by Kassidiaris, was blocked from participating in the election following a decision by the supreme court. Similarly, Kassidiaris and other former leaders of the Golden Dawn that face criminal charges, have been prevented from standing for election thanks to a firm decision by the court. Kassidiaris denounced the court decisions as politically motivated plots, rendering him a hero in the eyes of many good-will people. Outspoken, young and well-informed his rhetoric is fiercely anti-socialist, anti-communist, anti-migrant, militaristic, shauvinistic and anti-systemic. In parliament serving the Golden Dawn, as well as in various parliamentary committees he participated, challenged his peers with aggressive, yet comprehensive, arguments castigating their opportunism, obscure connections and clientelistic relation to politics. He appears solid, radical and pro-working class at a moment when the centre-left seems to have relinquished its radicalism and pro-working class references. One major responsibility of both centre-left parties which contributed to the rise of the extreme right is the elimination of references to the working class and the deprived, freeing large political and ideological spaces that the extreme right is keen to fill in. But the centre-right can be blamed for something else.

Was Kassidiaris' exclusion from the election contest the right legal and political decision? In Germany, the AfD, which has surpassed the social democrats in the polls, remains a legal political force, and so is the pro-Franco Vox in Spain. The Spartans registered their electoral

support mostly among the male young population, the unemployed, the deprived and the part-time workers of the private sector, especially in the so-called “gig” economy. Of note is that the centre-right came first in the preference of the voters in all professional categories, whereas many voters of the ND went to the Spartans in the second election round of June.^{vii} This means that the centre-right of Mitsotakis had a vested interest to exclude and eliminate the Hellenes party led by Kassidiaris because of the threat it represented for him in the ballot box. Yet, as we saw, Kassidiaris found a way to enter politics from his prison cell via the Spartans. The Greek Communist Party was outlawed from 1947 to 1974 and this resulted in scoring high election results via its umbrella democratic party, the United Left (EDA). The persecution of its leaders and members was so barbaric, making them symbols of freedom and justice not only in Greece but internationally. The centre-right today, by disallowing Kassidiaris and his party to participate in the election might have created a political hero with stakes in the future of Greek politics. It also shows the ND’s political and ideological impotence to deal with him and his neo-Nazi entourage with political arguments, social policies and democratic faith. This is a tall order in the Greek context, because the Greek centre-right has historically pioneered the values of nationalism, family, tradition and religion. Today it has turned itself into an agency of globalisation, Europeanisation, liberal values and individual rights, abandoning all elements of its historic identity. Essentially, both centre-left parties embrace the same outlook with the centre-right. Observed closely, the centre-left and the centre-right have more things in common than apart, something which gives an extra boost to the populist discourse of the extreme right led by Kassidiaris.

The biggest contradiction of democracy is that it has to provide space for political expression even to those who might damage democracy itself. But the centre-right, same as the centre-left, proved incapable of dealing with extreme right-wing movements that have stormed European politics over the last two decades. The reason is rather simple: by way of endorsing and celebrating globalisation, European “integration” and liberal cosmopolitanism (e.g. “open borders”), they have been deprived of two very significant political tools: the use of working class references and the use of nation as a point of confluence of interests for the conduct of realistic policies with visible beneficial outcomes. The only force that has solid national(ist) references while employing anti-systemic class referents is the extreme xenophobic right.

Concluding remarks

We have tried to argue that the overall rise of the centre-right is bound up with its competent distributional policies during the pandemic, as well as the rational pro-EU and pro-NATO management of the geopolitical crisis with Turkey. By being faithful to the EU and NATO, the centre-right deprived the centre-left parties of Syriza and PASOK of any meaningful

programmatic element that could convince the public that an alternative to the centre-right's Euro-Atlantic programme exists. As we have argued, the decline of the centre-left is bound up with two strictly inter-connected factors: the elimination of crisis conditions that paved the ground for the emergence of Syriza as the main radical anti-austerity force in society and politics; and the lack of a strategic opposition and programmatic alternative on behalf of both Syriza and PASOK during the entire period of the ND in office (2019-2023). Alexis Tsipras, the leader of Syriza, resigned in the wake of his party's second defeat. Yet, PASOK seems to be unable to overtake Syriza as the leading force on the centre-left. Both parties, however, together with the centre-right, are comprehensively responsible for opening up a massive political space for the development of the extreme right, whose political – and not coercive – containment in the near future should become the chief priority for all democratic forces in Greece.

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ⁱ Primary surplus is the fiscal surplus that is composed of government spending minus income from taxes and excluding interest paid on government debt. It is a fundamental tool for *enduring* austerity if the surplus is not invested productively yielding profits and generating employment.

ⁱⁱ For the famous "Petsas list", after the name of Stelios Petsas, government spokesperson, which outlined all media outlets in the country and the amount of money each one of them received, see Editorial, "This is the Petsas list" (in Greek), *Protagon*, [Αυτή είναι η «λίστα Πέτσα» με τα ΜΜΕ και τα ποσά της καμπάνιας «Μένουμε Σπίτι» | Protagon.gr](#), 6 July 2020 (accessed on 23 July 2023).

ⁱⁱⁱ We follow here Constantine Dimoulas & Vassilis K. Fouskas, "The Covid-19 crisis: global (competitive) geo-politics, labour regimes and the case of Greece", in Alan W. Cafruny and Leila Simona Talani (eds), *The Political Economy of Global Responses to Covid-19*, Palgrave, London & New York, 2023, pp.57-73.

^{iv} See, ELSTAT (Hellenic Statistical services), Press Release, 17 September 2020.

^v Dimoulas & Fouskas, op.cit., p.69.

^{vi} See, Diomidis Spinellis et al., "Electronic governance in Greece in the post-Covid-19 era" (in Greek), September 2021 [e-gov policy-paper.pdf \(dianeosis.org\)](#) (accessed on 21 July 2023)

^{vii} See, Vicky Katechaki, "2023 Election: How did People Vote According the Age, Profession, Sex and Ideological Attachments" (in Greek), *Kathimerini*, 27 June 2023.