

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

# GREECE'S EMBATTLED CENTRE

How the Leftwing opposition line up

Nikos Konstandaras



Despite the seismic changes in Greece's political scene, the Centre remains large and decisive in determining elections. The opposition parties SYRIZA and PASOK are competing for the same reservoir of voters in the Centre-Left and Centre.



SYRIZA's challenge is to adapt in order to contain voters from the Centre-Left and Centre who supported it in previous years. PASOK is in a struggle to survive and has chosen to be absorbed by an alliance, the Movement for Change, that it created.



New Democracy does not appear to face any threats from the Right or in the Centre-Right, whereas SYRIZA is competing with PASOK, Yanis Varoufakis's MeRA25 and the Communist Party of Greece.



## INTRODUCTION

Greece's economic crisis caused a political earthquake, fragmenting the two-party system in which Centre-left PASOK (the Panhellenic Socialist Movement) and Centre-right New Democracy alternated in power for four decades, accounting habitually for some 80% of votes in elections. Ten years after the start of the crisis and over a year since the third bailout agreement between Greece and its EU partners and creditors was completed, in August 2018, the crisis continues to shape the political landscape. The national elections of 7 July 2019 saw the restoration of a new two-party system, with New Democracy succeeding in winning an outright majority in Parliament, with 39.85% of the vote, ousting SYRIZA, which still held on to a significant 31.53%.

Analysis of the results shows that despite the convulsions caused by the crisis, as this was reflected in the fate of individual parties, the number of voters who see themselves in the Centre of the political spectrum – from Centre-Left to Centre and Centre-Right – appears stable. What has varied is the ability, or inability, of parties to win a share of that vote, the vote which determines the results of elections. After the last elections, research by polling company Metron Analysis found that the number of voters who describe themselves as Centre-Left increased from 20% in January 2015 to 21% in July 2019, the number of those who saw themselves in the Centre increased from 16% to 19%, while Centre-Right voters increased from 14% to 17%. The Centre grew while those who described themselves as Left dropped from 18% to 17% and those on the Right from 17% to 15%. This would suggest New Democracy, in order to win nearly 40% of the vote made significant inroads into the Centre, whereas SYRIZA lost votes there.

This is the cause of the current debate in SYRIZA (acronym for the Coalition of the Radical Left) as it tries to come to terms with its loss in the elections and prepares to reshape itself by expanding more towards the Centre, abandoning its roots on the far left and moving towards policies more characteristic of social democratic politics. In its rise to power, from 4.6% in 2009 to 16.8% in May 2012 and 27% in June 2012, SYRIZA had gained from PASOK's crashing from 43.9% in 2009 to 12.3% in June 2012. In subsequent elections, SYRIZA held on to voters from the Centre and Centre-Left, leaving PASOK with only 6.29% in 2015 and 8.10%

of the vote in 2019. SYRIZA contested the last elections as part of a Progressive Alliance, which includes smaller groups from the Centre-Left and former PASOK cadres. PASOK has been part of the Kinima Allagis (KINAL), or Movement for Change, since 2017.

Greece's political Centre remains large and is decisive for electoral outcomes. What remains unclear is whether SYRIZA will adapt successfully so as to be able to dominate the Centre and Centre-Left in coming years, or whether PASOK, as part of KINAL, will be able to reconstitute itself and recover some of the territory it lost from the start of the crisis. In neither party's case is success a given.

## THE JULY 2019 ELECTION

The July 2019 elections signified not only a return to a strong two-party system, they also marked the end of the division between pro-bailout and anti-bailout factions, seeing as both New Democracy and SYRIZA were parties that had signed bailout agreements – New Democracy in 2012 and SYRIZA in 2015, following PASOK in 2009. SYRIZA and New Democracy's election campaigns were very different. Kyriakos Mitsotakis, New Democracy's leader, pushed the need for reforms and for correcting SYRIZA's mistakes from its four-and-a-half years in a coalition government with the nationalist right wing Independent Greeks (ANEL). Alexis Tsipras and SYRIZA campaigned with the claim that they were in favor of "the many" while New Democracy looked after only "the few." They accused Mitsotakis of being extremely right wing and "neoliberal," making their campaign very much about Mitsotakis. This failed to prevent New Democracy from winning and it had two significant effects: it reinforced Mitsotakis's position in his own party, confirming his authority to its greatest extent since his election in 2016; it also garnered SYRIZA a large enough percentage to show that it had not suffered a crushing defeat. The people appeared to have voted for change but had not given the new government carte blanche for radical reforms.

SYRIZA, then, did not suffer as great a loss as opinion polls had suggested and had managed to hold on to a large number of voters that were not part of the small core of party members and supporters from the pre-crisis years. What

SYRIZA appears to have underestimated, though, was that its handling of the wave of migrants and refugees and its relative tolerance of civil disobedience were fueling a backlash. On 28 November, pro-SYRIZA newspaper *Efimerida ton Syntakton* presented a poll showing strong right-wing opinions among those polled: 45% said that Refugees and Migrants were the country's number one problem, with corruption a distant second at 22%. Also, 58% said that they would feel safer if the police intervened on university premises (following the new government's scrapping of a university asylum law) and the same number supported police action for the eviction of squatters. The newspaper suggested that the Centre-Right government was influencing people with its law-and-order emphasis, but it is equally possible that the policy coincided to a great extent with public exasperation with SYRIZA's policies. To all intents, the SYRIZA government's reaching an agreement for Greece's northern neighbor to be called Northern Macedonia, which fuelled angry protests when it was signed, does not appear to have influenced the election result, nor does it feature strongly in the current debate, as New Democracy which opposed the Prespa Agreement in opposition is implementing it in government.

## THE SHIFTING CENTRE

The finding by Metron Analysis that some 60% of voters describe themselves as belonging to the Centre-Left, Centre and Centre-Right suggests that the share of centrist voters remains relatively stable and it is up to the parties to inspire them. New Democracy managed to do so, in terms of holding on to Right and Centre-Right voters and making gains in the Centre. The Centre may still be holding, but the issues and the voters have changed with the times. When the Centre-Left was dominated by PASOK, this reflected a major shift that the party brought about in politics in the 1970s and 1980s, when it created a faithful following of what party founder Andreas Papandreou termed the "unprivileged" – the workers and farmers. The party's election victory and free-spending years in government coincided with Greece's accession to the European Community (later European Union) in 1981. Its clientele was mainly farmers and people working in the broader public sector, creating a new middle class in terms of incomes and spending. This established a paradigm in which it was clear that parties could hope to gain power only if PASOK fell from power or if they made similar promises. Whether Left or Right, Centre-Left or Centre-Right, almost all parties tried to outbid each other with what they would give in terms of hiring people and public spending – including, notably, pensions.

The inevitable debt crisis brought about a collapse of PASOK's clientele and its disillusion, especially when the party was forced to sign a bailout agreement entailing strict austerity. With little to offer, accused of mismanaging Greece into crisis and then agreeing to the hated "memorandum", as the bailout agreement with creditors and partners was known, the centrist parties lost out to more militant voters on the extreme Left and Right. As SYRIZA rose from the fringes on a wave of anti-memorandum sentiment, so did the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn, which entered Parliament for the first time in

May 2012 (and failed to do so last July). SYRIZA's surprisingly quick agreement in January 2015 to form a government with Independent Greeks, a nationalist Right party, was based on their common stand against the bailout agreements.

By the 2019 elections, however, the "anti-memorandum" passions had run their course; Greece, after 10 years of austerity and shaky governments, was a very different place. The Middle Class had been ravaged by job losses, lower incomes and higher taxes. Most new jobs were for very low salaries and over half a million young people, mostly university graduates, had sought their future outside Greece. SYRIZA had not brought a new spirit to government, nor reformed the public administration and judiciary. New Democracy won an outright majority in Parliament but SYRIZA maintained a large percentage of the vote. Since the election, Prime Minister Mitsotakis has moved quickly to implement change – from restructuring the top of the public administration to introducing the vote for Greeks living abroad – and to create a strong presence on the Centre-Right and Centre. It is now up to SYRIZA, PASOK/KINAL or some other, hitherto unknown party, to challenge New Democracy for the Centre.

## SYRIZA'S CHOICE

SYRIZA is a changed party after its term in office, when, after its six-month negotiations with EU institutions and the International Monetary Fund the government was forced to accede to its partners' and creditors' demands and accept a new bailout agreement. Faced with the choice of sticking to a hard line and seeing Greece crash out of the Eurozone, Alexis Tsipras toned down the party's anti-systemic rhetoric and kept the country on track, until the third bailout agreement of the crisis was completed in August 2018. After Tsipras's turnaround and before his return to office in the September 2015 elections, the more hardline "anti-memorandum" factions left SYRIZA. The party was left to govern (in coalition again with the Independent Greeks, or ANEL), keeping Greece firmly within the Eurozone, and even leading to an improvement in ties with the United States. Tsipras and his government, despite the protests of ANEL, negotiated the Prespa Agreement, ending a dispute that had kept Northern Macedonia, as it is now called, in limbo with regard to membership of NATO and of the European Union. This achievement was condemned by nationalist and hard rightwing circles but it gained Tsipras and SYRIZA points in the Centre: They had dared to solve a problem that had been a thorn in relations between Athens and Skopje, and between Athens and its EU and NATO partners, since the breakup of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s.

Today, few in SYRIZA believe that the 31.53% of the vote that they won in July belongs to the party. Tsipras, who is not disputed as leader of the party, has made clear his intentions to guide SYRIZA more towards the Centre, to hold on to the voters that supported it in recent years and to gain greater influence in the Centre. As the party moves towards a congress sometime next year (it is expected by the summer), it has established a Central Committee for Restructuring, with

close to 700 members, and will select a smaller body, the Political Centre, to coordinate the debate ahead of the congress. Regarding the direction that Tsipras wants, it is worth noting that at the European level in the past few years, although SYRIZA has been close to the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D), it has not moved towards associating formally with this group, instead of the European United Left-Nordic Green Left (GUE-NGL), of which it is a member.

Speaking at the inaugural meeting of the Central Committee for Restructuring on the weekend of 30/11-1/12/19, Tsipras made clear what is at stake, in reply to critics who said that the party was in danger of losing its Left spirit. At root of the debate is whether moving towards the social-democratic sphere SYRIZA will lose its identity as an anti-systemic movement.

“Regarding our leftwing spirit, comrades, believe this: If there is any possibility of this danger being serious and fatal for the future of our project, it will be if we do not succeed in broadening and transforming SYRIZA and the Progressive Alliance”, Tsipras said. He argued that SYRIZA had to develop in terms of organization to consolidate the support it had gained in previous years.

Tsipras referred to the findings of a poll published that same day by the party’s newspaper, *Avgi*, in support of his position. “It shows that the vast majority of our voters is in favor of this initiative” of enlargement, he said.

The poll, conducted on behalf of the GUE/NGL by Palamos Analysis, found that 57% of supporters agreed that SYRIZA should open its doors to new members and cadres from the Centre and Centre-Left, while 21% disagreed. More ambiguous was the response to the question as to whether SYRIZA should express the whole space from the Centre to the Left, with 45% agreeing and 43% disagreeing. The poll did not describe the reasoning for this, but from the public debate it appears that those who disagree with the move towards the Centre do not challenge Tsipras’s leadership but are concerned that the party may lose identity and direction as it expands.

A significant problem for SYRIZA is that, unlike PASOK which was formed in 1974 and acquired serious party mechanisms and experienced cadres through its years in power and in opposition, the party does not have a significant number of members, nor a serious party structure, nor a process for educating, evaluating and developing cadres. It was propelled to power as a result of the crisis of representation which brought about the collapse of the traditional parties, without having had the opportunity to create a secure party structure. Until 2013, when SYRIZA became a unified party, it was a coalition of various constituent movements, the Coalition of the Radical Left. The party’s term in power may actually have damaged it internally. With its cadres moving into ministerial positions and other posts in the government and state, the party organization was weakened and its structures were not replenished. The party became synonymous with the prime minister’s office, Maximos Mansion. Although many new voters supported SYRIZA and people

from other political parties presented themselves for positions in the government and state bodies, party membership remained low compared to SYRIZA’s electoral support. This weakness was particularly evident in the European Parliament elections in May 2019, with the eclectic mix of candidates that the party fielded; in the local elections of the same day, SYRIZA’s lack of strong candidates helped New Democracy triumph across the country, forcing Tsipras to call early elections in July.

In its current membership drive, Tsipras had set the target for 180,000 members, or a tenth of those who voted for the party in the last elections but this has not been achieved yet. Now officials hope to reach 100,000 members before the congress.

Among those who disagree with the move towards Social Democracy, the leftwing tendency “53+” has been most lucid. Euclid Tsakalotos, the former Finance Minister and a leading figure of “53+”, said in a recent interview with *Avgi*: “The Centre-Left and Social Democracy were defeated in the crisis and today they are looking for ways to escape their existential dead-end.” Members of the “53+” tendency (organized tendencies are recognized by SYRIZA’s charter) believe that SYRIZA should remain a party and not become a loose “front,” as the Progressive Alliance appears to be. They believe it should be able to express a more anti-systemic approach and that moving towards the Centre will isolate it. Critics also note that although Tsipras has good qualities as a leader, he has also made poor personnel choices. These include Yanis Varoufakis, the telegenic former finance minister whom Tsipras appointed in early 2015 to lead the confrontational negotiations with the EU institutions and the IMF and who resigned after Tsipras backed down. Varoufakis now leads MeRA25, part of the Democracy in Europe Movement, DiEM25, which he co-founded. MeRA25 scraped into Parliament in the July elections and its support remains low. It is highly critical of SYRIZA and will remain a thorn in Tsipras’s side. The Communist Party (which won 5.3% in July’s elections) has made clear its joy at SYRIZA’s dilemma. Its leader, Dimitris Koutsoumbas, commented: “The further Right that SYRIZA goes, the better for us.”

With Tsipras unchallenged in the leadership and with the party looking for a new identity and direction, it is likely that SYRIZA will be in a state of introspection for several months, most likely focusing on criticizing the New Democracy government while cultivating a more centrist image, which could lead to closer ties with the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) than with the European United Left-Nordic Green Left (GUE-NGL). Tsipras has a tendency to wait and to avoid confrontation, so it is likely that there will be no major developments within the party until the congress, barring surprise developments in the political scene.

## PASOK’S EXISTENTIAL STRUGGLE

Whereas SYRIZA’s debate concerns how best to preserve its Left credentials while consolidating its influence over the po-

litical area long dominated by PASOK, PASOK has chosen to be “absorbed” by the Movement for Change (KINAL), the alliance that it established in 2017 along with other Centre-Left parties. At the same time, SYRIZA's growth has been at the direct expense to PASOK. As PASOK's support, membership and cadres dropped since 2009, the party has hemorrhaged voters and cadres Left and Right. Former PASOK figures are in the New Democracy government and many are in SYRIZA and the Progressive Alliance. Also, PASOK has reacted angrily to the contacts between SYRIZA and the Socialists and Democrats (S&D) at the European level, because there, too, SYRIZA gains at PASOK's cost.

PASOK's leader Fofi Yennimata is facing challenges for the party's lackluster presence and its lack of political initiatives that could attract voters (or hold on to those it still has). As KINAL has lost some of the parties that constituted it, Yennimata has pushed for PASOK's party organs to become one with KINAL's, which she achieved at the PASOK congress on late November this year. PASOK was absorbed by KINAL and Yennimata is leader of both, until leadership elections by the party base in November 2021. Her most serious challenger is Nikos Androulakis, a Member of the European Parliament who was runner up in the election for KINAL's leadership in November 2017 (when Yennimata won 56% of the vote). He and another critic, former Culture Minister Pavlos Yeroulanos, favor PASOK remaining autonomous and active, constituting KINAL's backbone rather than disappearing. Although they both argued that the recent congress was not representative of the party, they did not challenge Yennimata directly. She has described the criticism as “an artificial crisis” and has now called for unity. “My aim is for the progressive, democratic front to become big again and to be the Left that really can govern the country,” Yennimata said. The implication is that what SYRIZA will lose in support KINAL will gain, from the same reservoir of Centre-Left voters. Yennimata hopes that SYRIZA's missteps in opposition may benefit KINAL and points out SYRIZA's mistakes in government.

PASOK/KINAL's great problem, though, is that the result of the July 2019 elections put it in a position where it has to choose whether it will be New Democracy's “tail” or SYRIZA's, to use a term beloved of Greek politicians. Will PASOK/KINAL support the government or will it align itself with SYRIZA? Will it present itself as the “serious” Left that can support government policies when it agrees with them, especially on issues like law and order, or will it try to steal from SYRIZA's confrontational opposition tactics? A crucial test for PASOK/KINAL will be whether it will back the government's effort to change the electoral law back to something like the current system, which provides a bonus in seats to the winning party. This would replace the simple proportional representation system adopted by SYRIZA, which will come into effect in the next elections and will most likely lead to hung Parliaments.

In any case, PASOK/KINAL has struggled to make an impact on its own. Even the environmentalism agenda, which would be a natural direction for it to take, as European Centre-Left politics have shown, has been adopted by the Mitsotakis government. Another serious handicap: PASOK is struggling

to cope with accumulated debts of 258 million euros (at the end of 2018).

PASOK paid a high price for signing the first bailout agreement after being the dominant force in Centre-Left politics for decades. It successfully managed to adapt from its strong Third World mentality in the 1970s and 1980s to become a driving force for reform between 1996 and 2004, adopting policies reflective of European Social Democracy, culminating with Greece's membership of the Eurozone. The crisis brought about its collapse not only because of voters' anger at the country's mismanagement and the adoption of reforms and austerity, but because the very nature of its political clientele changed. The farmers and workers in the broader public sector who saw themselves as “unprivileged” reacted to the loss of incomes and status, with many finding new homes in the anti-systemic and anti-bailout rhetoric of SYRIZA and other parties. This is the group that Tsipras addresses with his support for the “many,” against the “few” that New Democracy supposedly favors, while Yennimata wants to draw support from those who favor a more “systemic” opposition policy. However, neither PASOK nor SYRIZA appear to have specific proposals to deal with pressing problems of a country that has changed very much since PASOK's heyday.

## THE WAY AHEAD

It is still early days for the Mitsotakis government, but with the introspection in SYRIZA and PASOK/KINAL and the Centre-Left in general, it appears that New Democracy will be able to consolidate its position as the dominant force from the Right to the Centre. On the Right it is barely challenged, with only the marginal, nationalist Hellenic Solution having scraped into Parliament. In the Centre, its policies appear to be winning support. Much will depend on voters seeing an improvement in their daily lives, in their pockets and in their perception of law-and-order. In four years, when the government is due to complete its mandate, the political landscape may be very different. Most probably, though, the Centre and Centre-Left will endure, remaining large and decisive in elections. By then it will be evident whether it is occupied by SYRIZA, which may have become a mainstream party, ready to return to power, by PASOK which will have managed to survive and to present a serious alternative to both New Democracy and SYRIZA, or by a new formation not yet visible on the horizon.

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## GREECE'S EMBATTLED CENTRE

### How the Leftwing opposition line up

Centre-Right New Democracy succeeded in holding on to its Right and Centre-Right voters and made gains in the Centre to win the July 2019 elections with an outright majority.

In opposition, SYRIZA (Coalition of the Radical Left) and PASOK (Panhellenic Socialist Movement) are competing for influence in the Centre-Left and Centre. Both have formed alliances with smaller parties. PASOK is losing members and cadres to SYRIZA. Serious debate and introspection in SYRIZA, ahead of a party congress next year, concerns leader Alexis Tsipras's wish to enlarge

the party in order to expand further into the Centre-Left; dissenters oppose the adoption of a Social Democratic agenda. This could determine whether, at European level, SYRIZA moves to join the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D), leaving the European United Left-Nordic Green Left (GUE-NGL).

PASOK is in a struggle to survive, having forged an alliance called Movement for Change (Kinima Allagis, or KINAL) and choosing to be absorbed by it, prompting criticism of the party leadership.

Applying an agenda of law-and-order and reform, the New Democracy government appears to be tapping into a conservative turn by voters. SYRIZA's policy, ahead of a Congress next year, will most likely be based on reacting to New Democracy's policies and mistakes. With a strong following, SYRIZA can afford to wait for the government to lose support, but it must be careful not to alienate centrist voters. PASOK is in danger of being seen as supportive of New Democracy, losing more voters to SYRIZA, or of being too close to SYRIZA, and losing more voters to New Democracy.