

Reshaping politics of the left and centre in Greece after the 2014 EP election

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The European Parliament elections in Greece earlier this year highlighted a conundrum: that of minority political parties struggling to mobilise voters in the event of snap national elections in spring 2015. The political landscape is confused and volatile; the right and extreme-right on the political spectrum are accorded a disproportionately large place in political debate, while ideological positioning by the centre and centre-left does not seem to be a major concern for political analysts. The radical left-wing SYRIZA party is attempting to maintain a ‘leftist’ profile while demonstrating its capacity to govern through a strategy of image normalisation. SYRIZA faces a profound challenge in defining a modern political programme in which policy-specific party positions will be clearly identified, and in which political engagement can be matched with concrete political proposals. This conundrum looks even more insoluble in the face of internal criticism about attempts by the party leadership to broaden its electoral base to be more inclusive.

Electoral winners and political losers from across the spectrum

Official electoral results showed SYRIZA to be the winner of the 2014 EP election. But if we look more closely at the results and compare them to those of the last national elections (2012), we see that despite a spectacular launch in 2012, SYRIZA recorded a loss of more than 100,000 votes in the EP election. This loss could partly be attributed to poor voter turnout, although traditionally in Greece the opposition significantly increases its vote share in EP elections. Similarly, although more seriously, support for the two coalition governing parties is slipping. New Democracy lost 6.94% of its vote share; converted into numbers this represents a loss of 520,000 votes. As far as the social democratic political party PASOK is concerned, the party is continuing to shrink since its last showing of 43.92% in the 2009 and 12.28% in the 2012 national elections. The Olive Tree alliance – comprising PASOK and two political formations of former PASOK MPs (the current Minister of Education Andreas Loverdos and Ilias Mosialos) – lost an additional 4.26% of vote-share since the last national election. The neo-Nazi Golden Dawn is the only party that managed to increase its voter share (see Table 1).

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Table 1: Parties' 2012 and 2014 election performance (%)

	SYRIZA	ND	GD	Olive Tree (Pasok & allies)	KKE	The River	ANEL	DIMAR
European elections May 2014	26.57	22.72	9.39	8.02	6.11	6.6	3.46	1.2
National elections June 2012	26.89¹	29.66	6.92	12.28*	4.5	-	7.51	6.25

* PASOK.

No doubt, a considerable number of minority parties are spread out across the wider political spectrum.

As shown in Table 2, below, the latest poll indicates that SYRIZA (25.3%) has a 3.6% lead over New Democracy (21.7%) in terms of voting intentions. The River, a new political formation founded by Stavros Theodorakis, a well-known TV journalist whose credo is to tackle the lack of 'real-life experience' in politics while renouncing ties with the current political establishment, seems to be losing voters' trust and initial enthusiasm as time passes. A party with a rather nebulous decision-making system, vaguely moderate and with a liberal economic philosophy, thus finds itself in the middle of political spectrum, despite its fading dynamism.

SYRIZA and ND seem to fare around 1-1.2% below the 2014 European elections results while PASOK and the River are losing ground (-3.7% and -2.9% respectively). Golden Dawn is halting its march (-2.1%), while the moderate left party DIMAR doubles its percentage, but without reaching the 3% threshold for parliamentary representation.

Table 2: Latest poll results (%)

	SYRIZ A	ND	GD	PASOK	KKE	The River	ANEL	DIMAR
ALCO Poll 04.09.14	25.3	21.7	7.3	4.3	4.6	3.7	3.5	2.3

Note: Unidentified vote: 12%.

Prospects for centre and centre-left parties

The above trends reveal slim prospects for the formation of a majority coalition government along left-right lines, whatever the outcome of the national election results. The formation of a majority government is becoming a thorny issue given the partisan fragmentation and parties' ideological dilution across the political spectrum.

Given the political environment since the EP elections, it seems that SYRIZA, which is placed ahead in the polls, is struggling to turn the electoral and political weakening of the New Democracy-PASOK coalition government to its strategic advantage. The coalition government stresses at every occasion that the four-year term will be completed and national elections will take place in 2016. Nevertheless, the election of the president of the Republic has to be concluded by 12.02.2015, which could lead to early elections due to the difficulty of any candidate garnering the support of 180 MPs (out of 300).²

¹ SYRIZA recorded a percentage of 4.6% in the 2009 national elections.

² Antonis Samaras' coalition government appears to be reaching an agreement to propose Democratic Left leader Fotis Kouvelis for Greek President. SYRIZA has stated that it will not support the candidate proposed by the

The moderate-left party DIMAR seems to be drowning in the political backwash. DIMAR entered the Greek Parliament for the first time in 2012, represented by 17 MPs – now the party representation has shrunk to 10 MPs. DIMAR's participation in the coalition government offered an alibi to the government's strict austerity measures and signalled its progressive shrinking. There are voices in the party proposing rapprochement with SYRIZA and others expressing their discontent; suggesting a more moderate stance and favouring rapprochement with PASOK or even The River.

DIMAR is caught between different strategic orientations; whether to make an alliance with SYRIZA, the Olive Tree, or even The River. Whichever strategy prevails depends on the alliance that offers the best prospects for its ongoing viability. A first formal meeting between PASOK and DIMAR since the party left the coalition government in 2013 took place on July 22nd to discuss the possibility of a centre-left alliance. This discussion opened on the basis of the nebulous topic of Troika's interventionist role, mainly in labour and social security matters. PASOK persists in cultivating loyalty with ND as the most appropriate government partner, promoting a liberal centrist profile. At the same time, it makes no secret of its ambitions to create a political faction that will play an important role as a third political force. The basic disagreement between PASOK and DIMAR lies in the fact that PASOK argues that the centre-left should have an autonomous and well-defined role, and not only fill the gap between ND and SYRIZA. According to PASOK, there is a need to draw a clear line between neoliberalism and left populism. DIMAR insists that SYRIZA should not be demonised.

The positioning of The River does not facilitate the process of drawing a clear dividing line between left and right either. The River declared that it is seeking a solid ideological identity following its first congress at the end of June 2014. As strange as it may seem, journalist-turned-politician Stavros Theodorakis was the only candidate and was elected leader of the party by a show of hands. Although the two elected MEPs of The River have joined the S&D group, the party cannot easily be categorised as a centre-left political formation. Its economic values tend towards liberalism. Prominent members of the small liberal party Drassi are flirting with The River; among them the vice-president of the party Antigoni Lymperaki. President Theodoros Skylakakis, the party's president, has stated that Drassi is not going to participate in any other elections independently; yet he did not dissolve the party.

The leader of The River Stavros Theodorakis recently stated that he is not interested in the reconstruction of centre-left political space but does want to see the reconstruction of Greece. In reference to the current public and party discussions, junior coalition government partner PASOK included, regarding the reorganisation of the centre-left segment of the political spectrum, Theodorakis noted that "instead of heading to better governments, we are reaching worse ones. We are not exploiting the potential of the country, but instead we are using veteran politicians, making them ministers". Furthermore, The River's president underlined "that's what PASOK should be discussing, not how to re-set up a game in order to be able to be part of the developments".³

Walking the political tightrope: SYRIZA's bargaining power

The Greek left has suffered numerous divisions and party splits in its long history. SYRIZA has chosen to keep the party's 'revolutionary' profile, which alienated certain party members from the so-called 'reformist wing' that decided to found DIMAR back in 2010. On the one hand, there are voices in SYRIZA that urge the leadership to leave behind the sterile opposition and lower the tone of disputes within the party to attract moderate voters. On the other hand, although there are still numerous minor left and far left parties on the Greek political spectrum that SYRIZA could 'absorb' one way or another to create a major left political formation and maximise its power, the party's strategy of image normalisation blocks this prospect.

coalition government and may not even nominate a presidential candidate. The coalition government currently holds a 153-MP parliamentary majority (125 New Democracy and 28 PASOK MPs), while SYRIZA is represented by 72 MPs. In this context the stance of the other opposition parties will be decisive.

³ Radio station Real FM, 8 July 2014.

The vice-president of the Hellenic Parliament and SYRIZA MP Giannis Dragasakis stated recently in an interview in *To Vima* newspaper⁴ that SYRIZA was created to overcome old political pathologies of the Greek left, proposing a ‘new contract’ for left politics.

“SYRIZA’s goal is the creation of a new model of the Left developed through dialogue, joint action and a propulsive synthesis of ideas. This is the founding contract of SYRIZA and only strict compliance by all sides will enable the left to meet its historical responsibility”, underlined Giannis Dragasakis. “The left that resolves disputes with factionalism and divisions has no future” the MP continued.

Nevertheless, this tactic is not so easy to implement. SYRIZA is trying to balance fixing prerequisites for cooperation (a cooperation pattern) that conform to its ideological image and presenting itself as the next natural party of government. Faced with the near impossibility of forming a government on its own, SYRIZA’s target is to form a minority government in the next legislature, with as much support as possible from left parties with the tolerance vote of ND, or at least a part of it.

The hard-line Greek Communist party (KKE) remains intransigent in refusing to participate in discussions about possible cooperation with SYRIZA. DIMAR’s President, Fotis Kouvelis, recently stated that he favours a dialogue with SYRIZA to discuss the conditions of a ‘progressive power block’. The party’s leadership has finally set the basis for dialogue for the creation of a left ‘front’ directly inviting DIMAR to participate by stating the following points as granted: disengagement from the EU-IMF Memoranda; debt renegotiation (partial debt relief); the establishment of an institutional framework that would protect workers’ rights and collective bargaining; the reintroduction of a minimum wage of €751; the enhancement of the welfare state; public and social control of the banking system to restore liquidity to the economy, and corporate and household debt restructuring for the most vulnerable groups; income redistribution through a radical tax system, adoption of a proportional representation electoral system and the reconstruction of the country’s productive activities. Partial debt relief and control over the banking sector are the thorniest issues that provoke considerable domestic opposition.

After the success of recent initiatives a more positive climate has been created and SYRIZA party members are optimistic. The party adopts a citizen-centric strategy by focusing on issues of social policy and societal relevance without overshadowing the party’s tradition of developing and supporting grassroots social movements. The party’s recent initiatives have demonstrated that its main intention is to shape the conditions for creating a broad and more solid ‘opposition front’, which may cancel the coalition government’s effort to gather the votes of 180 MPs needed for the presidential election. The party tries to exploit the opportunities arising after the European Parliament elections. The government’s controversial bills (small Public Power Cooperation and seashore bills) offered a couple of opportunities here. SYRIZA managed to create political turmoil by attracting the support of MPs and party members from the centre and centre left of the political spectrum against the aforementioned bills at a time when the government appeared confident of controlling the parliamentary body during the sluggish summer session.⁵ In this context, Alexis Tsipras, the party’s president and a self-proclaimed atheist, took advantage of the summer vacation to pay a visit to Mount Athos,⁶ a visit with strong political and religious connotations, quite unusual for a leftist leader. Tsipras visit was translated as an “apparent” attempt to attract religious voters and appeal to more conservative social groups, thereby causing speculation about snap elections and eliciting criticism.

⁴ *To VIMA*, Sunday edition 20.07.2014.

⁵ While the Greek government declared that the seashore bill would be postponed until next summer (2015), a new multi-bill of reform measures has been submitted for adoption in early August 2014. This multi-bill contained the prerequisites for the disbursement of the next €1 billion sub-tranche in September 2014, as claimed by the government. Initially it included a regulation to determine the seashore of the entire Greek coastline and a new forestry bill. Finally, the provisions regarding the seashore were withdrawn at the end of July 2014 before the adoption of the multi-bill due to heated social and political objections, even in government circles.

⁶ Mount Athos is a [World Heritage Site](#) and [autonomous polity](#) in the [Hellenic Republic](#). The ‘Holy Mountain’ as Greeks commonly refer to it is home to 20 [stavropegial Eastern Orthodox](#) monasteries (Greek, Russian, Serbian and Bulgarian). Only males are permitted to visit the territory.

SYRIZA's strategy involves an inherent contradiction between different purposes, i.e. being a political force for change that participates in the debate on the establishment of a new broad socio-political cluster coalition fighting neoliberalism, austerity and the EU-IMF memoranda's policy in Greece and Europe. At the same time the party tries to convince reluctant conservative, devout Christians and older voters to elect a majority government of the left and be governed by members of the former KKE of the 'Interior'.⁷ It remains to be seen how feasible it is to align these purposes in a politically convincing strategy and win the support of large sections of Greek society.

Officially, SYRIZA rejects dialogue with the centre-left by trying to show that its concern is not the reconstruction of the centre-left political space. According to SYRIZA, the centre-left parties' alignment with neoliberalism proved to be an astute strategy to secure their political viability. In fact, the dividing line between the radical and the moderate left lies in SYRIZA's intolerance of austerity policies; the party blames the centre both in Greece and in Europe for accepting or even supporting them. At the same time, the party is aware that its political mutation from a protest party to a government party requires significant concessions.

Prime Minister Antonis Samaras is blaming the opposition for being irresponsible in leading the country to elections; underlining that the stability of the country and the fragile course towards growth are at stake. The current political landscape is unclear, which makes it very difficult for the Greek government to stick to the EU's tough reform agenda. The governing coalition is trying to conceal the social effects of implementing structural policy reforms, even postponing some measures to avoid bearing their political cost. At the same time, it adopts a very rushed, and thus quite worrying, attitude towards a fast-track growth agenda, without taking into consideration the conditions for sustainable economic development. SYRIZA seems to be comfortable commenting on the government's difficulties and hiding its own weakness in formulating an alternative and coherent pro-EU reform agenda. The question is to what extent the potential transition from an adversarial and anti-establishment radicalism towards a kind of 'radical new centre' can reinvigorate the political image of SYRIZA, as well as its policy agenda.

⁷ The Greek Communist Party (KKE) was split into two parties in 1986: the KKE of the 'interior' and that of the 'exterior' – the latter denoting a Moscow-oriented party – the former denoting a Euro-Communist agenda.