

Interview with Eleftherios Antonopoulos*: the future of progressive parties on the eve of Greek elections

(Llegeix la versió en català [aquí](#))

Dídac Gutiérrez-Peris (DGP): There's a common understanding that Syriza has the upper hand. There is less commentary on what Syriza will be judged on, both by its voters and at the international level. How to combine the opportunist, the reformist, and the radical message?

Eleftherios Antonopoulos (EA): There is a lot of rhetorical denouncement of Greece's commitments from the Syriza campaign. However, from outright opposition to the fiscal adjustment programme the party has moved to more contradictory positions. For example, the existence of debt is recognised, but not the terms of the memorandum with the creditors. The troika is demonised but not the ECB, European institutions or the Commission. The ECB decision last Thursday of [not buying Greek bonds without a programme](#) is a key one and it will inform decision makers as well as the Eurogroup meeting in February.

Another example: there has also been an insistence in the Syriza discourse on securing a majority that will allow a standalone Syriza government. In parallel, the party is already trying to shift the blame regarding some of their promises to its potential partners in a coalition.

The country has missed an opportunity to talk about reform and evidence based policy

In my opinion a reformist left should engage its constituents through a reformist public discourse and adopt an evidence based policy. We have not seen much that will contribute to deliberative democracy from Syriza, or even the rest of the parties. The public sphere has been weakened by a New Democracy and Syriza collusion towards a new two party system dominated by parallel monologues on austerity vs anti-austerity. Both parties decided not to hold a public or televised debate, and Syriza has not nominated a candidate for the office of the President of the Republic. There has been very limited public discussion of domestic issues such as education reform, overhauling a health system that treats low income users unfairly, innovation and skills building, active labour market policies, public administration reform or improving business environment. The country also missed the opportunity to reform an anachronistic constitution which provides impunity to incumbent ministers and MPs.

DGP: How you describe the team behind Tsipras?

EA: The team comes basically from Synaspismos [Greek communist party active between 1991 and 2013], but post-2011 the party has been enriched with MPs, trade unionists, organisers from what is called "*deep Pasok*". In addition his economic team consists of economists Stathakis, Milios, and I would say maybe as well Varoufakis. The main figure in Europe, Papadimoulis, sitting at the European Parliament, has a reputation as a more moderate figure. A close aide of Alexis Tsipras is Nikos Pappas. There is also the large number of leftist coalition partners, which gives headaches to analysts including the strong within Syriza "Left platform" whose hard left or neocommunist leader Lafazanis might find difficult to contemplate a move to the centre. Finally, I would mention Zoe Konstantopoulou, who is a key woman and heir to the large legal firm of her father, former leader of Synaspismos Nikos Konstantopoulos.

DGP: is Greece then departing from the ideological narratives that organised politics since the 70s in Europe?

EA: Since 2011 the left-right axis has been blurred in favour of a memorandum-antimemorandum dichotomy. Syriza leadership has been very open to collaboration with anti-austerity personalities and parties from the populist Right (for example the Independent Greeks party), while at the same refusing a post-election alliance with centre-

Syriza promises a return to the ex ante situation without evaluating some of the domestic causes of the crisis

left Pasok and pro-Europeanist Potami. [Some comments by eurosceptics welcoming the results are](#) hard to explain based on a Left-Right cleavage. Another point of confusion is that Syriza promises a return to the *ex ante* situation before austerity. There is not so much critique as to the domestic causes of the crisis. In addition the party has aligned

itself with almost every protest movement in the country, from NIMBYism [Not In My BackYard] in the case of waste processing plant in Keratea, in Attiki region, to opposition to goldmining in Skouries in the Chalkidiki region. It has also been embracing a general "won't pay tax" campaign regardless of socio-economic situation of taxpayers. In the last year there has also been a rapprochement with the Orthodox Church.

It is difficult to explain all these instances if you define Syriza as a left-wing reformist political organisation. Tax dodging is certainly not the bedrock of social democracy... and is a *casus belli* for the left in so many parts of Europe. Perhaps a vote maximisation strategy can explain all this, not left-wing policy shaping aspirations.

DGP: You mentioned 'To Potami', a relative unknown progressive party abroad, but which might be running third. Could the centre-left be really [kingmaker of Syriza](#)? What are their objectives and their sociological base?

EA: Polls show that centrist, pro-European Potami will be running third or fourth, before or after the fascist party Golden Dawn. Its founder Stavros Theodorakis, a renowned journalist with a career in mainstream media and owner of the political and social commentary portal [www.protagon.gr](#) is one of the most popular political figures in the country. Potami has set out three main goals: to secure Greece's membership in the Euro, defend Greece's commitment to European integration and engage in sweeping domestic reforms that will create the conditions for endogenous growth.

Potami could be kingmakers, but they have insisted in ending the system of old parties capturing the state, and their refusal to cooperate with extreme members of Syriza or New Democracy

It remains to be seen if they will be kingmakers. In that case they have insisted that a red line will be to put an end to the old parties capturing the state by refusing to condone the appointment of party *apparatchik*'s as civil servants in the public administration. They will also refuse to cooperate with extreme left or extreme right figures from Syriza or New Democracy. An interesting point though is that according to the Potami

programme, general secretaries should be permanent through an open competition and not politically appointed. Their electorate is very volatile, but regarding their sociological basis some [initial work](#) shows that Potami could be more popular among economically active people, young professionals and women.

DGP: Gianni Pittella, leader of the Socialists & Democrats parliamentary group in the European Parliament said recently that [he hopes Greece will form a progressive](#)

[government, with all the left parties, including Syriza](#). Would that be possible or it will depend simply on the majority reached (or not reached) by Tsipras?

EA: From a progressive point of view Pittella's statement sound as a wise one. It keeps an equal distance from all formations of the Greek left and is open to what seems to be the most likely winner, thus helping to downplay fears that Greece will find itself isolated after Monday and nearing exclusion from mainstream EU policy-making. I suppose it reflects a concern in the S&D group to engage with people that have been disillusioned with austerity and it also tends a strategic hand to the radical left, potentially leading to its legitimation or a repatriation of disenchanted voters.

DGP: How Pasok, or the new Papandreou party, holds with that?

EA: Pasok will most likely reach its historically lowest share of the vote but one should not be quick to write it off completely. However, the much delayed process of renewal is a prerequisite for its continued relevance especially one that involves change at all levels. If Pasok or some structures within it can find the capacity to change, this will give them a new lease of life, perhaps as a motor of a revamped scheme of the centre-left. However, a resurgence of the centre-left in Greece is something that may be only appear in the long-

Pasok will reach its historically lowest share. The much delayed process of renewal is a prerequisite for its continued relevance

run, unless Syriza decisively moves to the centre-left and manages to overhaul the economic situation. Also Potami is something to be watched closely if it becomes a medium-sized party with representation in the legislature.

As for Papandreou, he was an institutional loser within Pasok. He relinquished the premiership to allow cross-party consensus in the most troubled times of the end 2011 but in fact he was handed over a time bomb by the conservative government in 2009, at a time that we have discovered the country had a deficit of 15.4% and led to the accumulation of 57 billion of debt in 2007-2009. Under Papandreou, and with the supervision of the Eurostat and the Hellenic Statistical Service, Greece was revamped to follow EU standards, and the ELSTAT figures have been proven, validated and accepted by the Eurostat since 2010. Pasok under Venizelos has been conspicuously shy to defend Papandreou's reforms in the state education and open government and has generally avoided friction with coalition partners from New Democracy.

Papandreou is running in an attempt to defend his name and his term in office

So in that sense Papandreou is campaigning in an attempt to defend his name and term in office as well as Greece's credible statistics and Herculean fiscal adjustment but he is doing it too late. Papandreou's Movement of Democrats-Socialists seems to lack strong media support and is polling below the

threshold to enter parliament according to all but one of the polls released.

DGP: With all these statistics, do you think public opinion has analysed the crisis in Greece too much from an academic point of view? Ulrich Beck argued that our [incapacity of calculating the social cost](#) of European policies is because we lack an efficient 'European public sphere' where we can create the solidarity bonds that take usually place in more recognisable territorial units...

EA: To be sincere I think there has been a very deep academic reflection on Greece, but maybe more abroad than internally. Yes, there is a widening gap between Greece and the rest of the EU, and public perceptions and trust in both domestic and EU institutions now differ a lot between Greece and other EU countries. A

A European public sphere cannot emerge overnight

vast majority of the Greek people cannot be held responsible for the country's woes but it's difficult to empathise with other people's suffering. A European public sphere would cure this problem but it can't emerge overnight.

DGP: Thanassis Gouglas has published some findings regarding what he calls the '700 euro generation' in Greece. Around 80% of the aged 18-34 voted for the two main parties in 2007 and 2009, but in 2012 only 20% voted for them. Syriza, who was supported in the past by 8% of young people is now credited to be supported by 35% of them, more than any party...

EA: The reason in my opinion is a very simple contractual reaction, considering the high youth unemployment and the incapacity of the past governments to tackle this. In Greece, as many other countries, fiscal adjustment has been achieved at the expense of younger people through slashing unemployment benefits. Approximately [150,000 graduates](#) have fled Greece in the crisis years. This brain drain will aggravate challenges associated with ageing population. Erasmus, Erasmus+ and Erasmus for young entrepreneurs are in the right direction; however we need to see more active labour market policies and more connection of the education and training system with the labour market. As there is an ongoing battle at EU level on labour mobility, some upcoming national elections in large member states such as in Spain will be decisive as regards maintaining free movement of labour in the EU.

DGP: Finally, if Syriza starts to rule tomorrow, what do you think will be the first three things they will do?

EA: The paradox is that most of the Greek people according [to the polls](#) do not expect a Syriza government to necessarily be able to fulfill its plans. In addition the majority of the people asked prefer liberal economic policies. So maybe voters expect Syriza government to be a better negotiator, but not necessarily a game-changer.

** Eleftherios Antonopoulos, PhD in European Public Policy, Affiliate Researcher at European Policies Research Centre, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow. FEPS – Young Academic Network. [Publications](#)*

** Dídac Gutiérrez-Peris, MPhil in Politics and Government in the EU at LSE, Affiliate Researcher at University College London. Member and Working Group Coordinator FEPS – Young Academic Network [Publications](#)*

Further readings:

Steffen Stierle, [¿Cómo está Grecia?](#) - 2014

Wolfgang Münchau, [Radical Left is right about Europe's debt](#)- 2014

Thanassis Gouglas, [The young precariat in Greece](#) - 2014

[El vicio intergubernamental](#) - 2012

Jean Pisani-Ferry, [We Need to be Able to Disagree on European Policies'](#) - 2006

Surveys:

Metapoll website centralising 'polls of polls' in Greece ([here](#))