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Greece

â€™Going on this way can only mean defeat’

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After Greece’s agreement with the European Union – with the aid programme being extended in exchange for the continuation of structural reforms – the new government has arrived at an impasse. The hopes of those seeking an end to austerity have not even lasted a month. Stathis Kouvelakis, member of the Syriza central committee and reader in political theory at King’s College London comments on these developments in the interview below.

What is the symbolic importance of Syriza’s victory?

Syriza’s victory represents a historic turning point. It is the first time in European electoral history that a party of the radical Left – that is, to the left of social democracy – has won the elections and entered government.

Up till now, the only times that parties from this political family exercised governmental roles they were part of wider coalitions, and even that was in very particular circumstances. This unprecedented success undoubtedly marks a turning point, one that is all the more important in that Europe is in the grip of a social and economic crisis that has led to growing political turmoil.

Some have noted that in the countries of Northern and Central Europe far-Right forces and the radicalised Right are the ones benefiting from this. Conversely, in the peripheral countries, which have been subjected to the harshest austerity policies, it is instead the forces of the radical Left that seem to be raising their head. We see this in Greece but also in Spain and Ireland.

And that places heavy responsibilities on Syriza’s shoulders?

Yes, indeed, it has very serious responsibilities. And this means that if it were to fail, that would have a really serious effect on the balance of forces in the period to come.

Since Syriza did not win a parliamentary majority, on the day after its victory it announced a coalition with the Independent Greeks (ANEL), a split from New Democracy. What explains this coalition, how has it been put together, and what do the electorate think of it?

There are two misunderstandings about ANEL that we ought to shake off right away. Firstly, it is not a far-Right party, as many media wrongly suggest. It is effectively a faction of New Democracy that has combined with a few people who have defected from other political forces, some of them from the Left.

In France we would call this kind of party â€“sovereigntyist’, though we should also bear in mind that sovereigntyist and patriotic ideas do not have the same meaning in a major power like France with a history of imperialism and colonialism, and a country like Greece that has been dominated throughout its history.

ANEL is a party that has taken a position against the Memorandum and against austerity policies – and it has done so on a patriotic basis. But it also represents a â€“social’ tendency that was once a constituent part of New Democracy, which, let’s not forget, was up till recently a mass party with a popular electorate and a significant base among trade unionists.

The second thing to note is that there is no grand strategy, here. It was a pragmatic choice, corresponding to the given constraints of the current moment. Syriza knew that it would face a very difficult situation, and it needed a majority in Parliament.

Since the Greek Communist Party (KKE) has for many years refused any sort of political coalition with Syriza, the only possible allies were on the Right or centre-Right. And Syriza was sure to avoid the trap of allying with To Potami. This party is totally a creature of the system. It presents itself as a â€“joker’, ready to participate in absolutely any governing coalition.

Moreover, that is why foreign media constantly posed To Potami as an alternative, thinking that this party would force Syriza to make concessions. That is precisely what Syriza wanted to avoid, and that is why it chose to ally with a party that would not cause it any difficulties in its negotiations to get rid of the Memorandum. So if Syriza makes any retreats – as is the case at the moment – then it only has itself to blame.

The whole media campaign against Syriza presenting ANEL as a far-Right and xenophobic party – speaking of a â€“Red-Brown’ coalition, like [the Le Monde journalist] Mr. Quatremer, for example – sought to punish Syriza for refusing to ally with To Potami and thus to conform to the system’s demands.

The reaction in Greece has been very positive, though. It ought to be understood that the opposition between supporters and opponents of the Memorandum has become the central dividing line in Greek political life, even though it has not erased the division between Left and Right. It made a lot more sense to ally with ANEL than with To Potami.

It’s now a month since the election. What is your assessment of Syriza’s record so far?

The new government has announced a first set of measures, expressing its desire for transparency and increased democracy. The changing of the nationality code – handing automatic Greek citizenship to immigrants’ children born in Greece – is a considerable shake-up of Greek society’s definition of nationality, citizenship and even national identity.

Another objective of these measures is media transparency, putting an end to the entanglement of political personnel and business interests linked to the state – a combination that often includes media moguls. That is not anything particular to Greece, as Berlusconi in Italy and Bouygues in France demonstrate, but in Greece it has reached really huge proportions.

The distribution of cabinet portfolios shows that Syriza was not going to give up any ground, at that level. Notably, the Interior Ministry was handed to a leading figure in the anti-racist movements, involved in struggles supporting immigrants; and the new president of the Greek Parliament, Zoe Constantopolou, is well-known for her fight against corruption and her involvement in the struggle for individual freedoms. So that sends a strong message.

From a social and economic perspective, the re-establishment of workplace rights – which the previous governments had got rid of – is another important measure that Syriza has announced, as are the re-hiring of laid-off civil servants; the re-connection of electricity for households that had previously been cut off; and the re-establishment of the ERT (public radio and TV). These announcements seek to demonstrate the new government’s break with the previous governments’ policies serving the Memorandum.

This set of measures – which correspond to Syriza’s mandate and are meant to put an end to austerity policies – has

quickly come up against the demands imposed by the European Union and the Troika. These latter have forced the Greek government into a series of retreats, paralysing the implementation of Syriza's programme. Only just after having been elected, the new government has run into difficulties that give us a glimpse of what a grave situation we will face if it fails.

What does the accord signed on 20 February tell us?

The agreement insists on the full and timely repayment of Greece's debts. Most importantly, it foresees the existing programme being followed through in full, which means the country agreeing to remain under the supervision of the Troika – or as it's now called, 'the institutions'.

Indeed, the Greek government has committed to not taking any unilateral measures that might endanger the budgetary objectives laid down by the creditors.

This accord thus neutralises the Syriza government's activity and its capacity to implement its programme. We ought to be clear – it keeps almost the entire Memorandum framework in place.

What explains such a rapid defeat?

Firstly, right from the start the European institutions exercised enormous pressure. This began on 4 February when the European Central Bank announced that it had stopped the refinancing of the Greek banks – because it no longer accepted Greek debt bonds – at the same time as there was massive capital flight out of the country.

Having been around â‚¬2bn a week, according to reliable sources capital flight hit around â‚¬1.5bn every 24 hours in the last few days. My information from Athens is that the Greek banks could not have opened on Tuesday if Greece had not come to an agreement with Europe. The ECB has blackmailed Greece in exactly the same way as it did Cyprus in 2013 and Ireland in 2010.

The Greek government is being strangled, exploiting its weakest link, namely, the banking system. There was increasing pressure on Greece during the Eurogroup meetings, in an effort to force it to accept the terms of the Memorandum. If Germany was the most vindictive country – and there is a degree of theatre at moments like this – the others were no different. No one took a stance against Germany.

Greeks saw some hope in France when Franois Hollande was elected. Did that country absolutely refuse to come to Greece's aid?

If you took a superficial view, you might have expected that. But you can't implement austerity and vote through the Macron bill [for economic liberalisation] and at the same time offer political help to a country that wants to break with austerity.

What are Syriza's responsibilities now?

We ought to be clear. Some of the debates that we have had in Syriza have now been resolved in a negative way. The idea that we could break with austerity policies and yet avoid confrontation with the European Union has been refuted in practice. The majority tendency in Syriza avoided giving a clear answer to what would happen if Greece's creditors refused to negotiate.

Those who upheld this position also thought that our European partners would be obliged to accept Syriza's legitimacy and thus accept the Greek government's demands. And we can clearly see that this is not the case. The dominant tendency in the Syriza leadership has the illusion that it is possible to change things even within the existing European Union framework.

These institutions have shown their true face, which is the imposition of extremely harsh neoliberal policies and other policies leading to the economic and social marginalisation of entire countries.

What explains these ‘illusions’?

There is a real stumbling block, not just a psychological barrier but also one that concerns political strategy. Like almost all the European radical Left, Syriza believes in the idea that it is possible to reform and transform the existing European institutions from within.

That's the whole problem. Syriza ever more clearly dug itself into a position refusing not only to break from the Euro but even to consider this a possible threat it could make during the negotiations.

And indeed we have seen that neither Tsipras or Varoufakis ever made use of this possibility. This tendency refuses to take full account of what the EU institutions and the integration process consist of – yet this is a process that has neoliberalism in its DNA.

These institutions were created in order to entrench neoliberal policies and liberate them from any kind of popular control. We cannot break with austerity policies and the Memorandum measures unless we mount a confrontation with the European Union, and leave the Eurozone if need be. During the negotiations Greece showed that it feared ‘Grexit’ more than its interlocutors did, and that was a fatal error.

What conclusions ought we draw from this accord?

We could describe it as a major defeat for Syriza, possibly even a fatal one, and this failure affects each and every one of Syriza's components. The Left did not succeed in imposing its point of view, having been defeated by the leadership's strategy, ever since the 2012 elections, of shifting closer to the centre. The idea was that since we had already won as many votes on the Left as we could, what we now had to do was go in search of centrist voters.

This electoralist logic is mistaken, because given the extent of the social crisis the tendency of public opinion is not at all the strengthening of the centre ground. On the contrary, it is radicalising, and it is this radicalisation that explains the audience for Golden Dawn as well as for Syriza.

There is a really fundamental error of analysis, here. For a political force of the anti-austerity Left to give up on essential points of its programme can only lead to defeat. And sadly that is precisely what we are seeing play out at the moment.

The Syriza government will thus have no choice other than to administer the Memorandum framework. The small changes it can make will certainly be improvements, but they will not succeed in transforming the totally disastrous economic and social situation. This will disappoint the hopes and expectations that the popular electorate placed in Syriza.

Going on this way can only mean defeat. I think it is possible that Syriza could disintegrate, and that there could be a reconfiguration of the current political alliances. If Syriza continues with this policy then there is no reason why pro-Memorandum forces should go on refusing to collaborate with it. To Potami, PASOK and even a wing of New Democracy could do so – and it was precisely this latter that Syriza was giving a nod and a wink to when it chose Pavlopoulos, a leading figure of New Democracy’s centrist wing, for President of the Republic.

How might the Greek people react?

Syriza’s victory gave the Greek people hope again. After the ECB started with its blackmail we saw people spontaneously heading into the streets to give their support to Syriza. The current retreat risks putting a stop to all this, leading to very severe disappointment.

Should we fear disappointed voters turning to Golden Dawn?

The current success of far-Right parties in Europe essentially owes to the fact that very large sections of public opinion see them as genuine anti-systemic forces. They seem more credible and more radical than the Left.

Thanks to the extent of the mobilisations between 2010 and 2012 the electorate that has broken from the traditional ruling parties has mostly turned to the Left.

Nonetheless, the possible recomposition of politics entails the enormous danger of us abandoning the terrain of challenging the existing order to the far Right.

Syriza has been forced to accept continuing with Troika supervision of Greece. This feeling of national humiliation is very important to understanding the breakthrough that Golden Dawn has made. Its rise is really a regressive nationalist reaction to this feeling of national humiliation, combined with economic and social breakdown.

European Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker recently declared that â€“There can be no democratic choice against the European treaties’. Are our societies – in Greece as well as elsewhere in Europe – really democratic?

The Juncker quote sums up the reality that we face. Since the 1980s the construction of the European Union has been the vehicle of neoliberal policies. Neoliberalism is in its DNA, it is written into its treaties. Its underlying logic is constitutively anti-democratic.

It seeks to dissolve the instances of national control, establishing a detached supranational order freed from any mechanisms of popular control. And this is what has driven oppositional political forces to paralysis. Syriza’s defeat faced with the European Union is the most striking illustration of this – and also the saddest.

For any force that wants to oppose the dominant economic policy decisions, it is indispensable that they break with this construction.

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Translated by David Broder for [Verso](#).

See the original piece [here](#).