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Special Edition of the **transform! europe** newsletter on the recent elections in Greece and France

SYRIZA comes second in the Greek elections, with 16.8% and 52 MPs

A Triumph of the Radical Left in Greece – A Message to Europe

By Haris Golemis, Athens*

The recent electoral results in Greece was a serious blow to the governments of Merkel and Sarkozy, as well as to all those arrogant neoliberal parties, politicians, analysts, EU, ECB and IMF officials who thought that the European people can suffer passively and for an indefinite period the extreme austerity policies of neoliberal orthodoxy, which supposedly aim to an exit from the capitalist crisis in Europe.

Although resistances in the streets and hopeful results in the ballot boxes have happened in almost all EU countries since the crisis began, it is interesting that the clearest message against neoliberalism in the EU came from a small country of the European South. The people of the most notorious of the PIIGS, instead of accepting either to willingly go or forcibly be drawn to the slaughter house, decided to revolt by voting massively against the centre-left *Panhellenic Socialist Movement* (PASOK) and the centre-right *New Democracy* (ND), the two parties which, together with the extreme right *Popular Orthodox Rally* (LAOS) had signed the Memorandum of shame with the “Troika” and participated recently in the Papademos’ government.

One could legitimately claim that the election results were due exclusively to the fact that the crisis and the policies for a way out of it destroyed the traditional ties connecting the lower and middle strata of the Greek society with PASOK and ND, creating a rupture to the powerful bi-party political system which dominated the country since the fall of the dictatorship in 1974. In fact, within the two years that passed since the bail-out package agreed between the Greek government(s) and the “Troika”, a large number of PASOK and ND deputies resigned, became independent, created other political parties or entered other parties or coalitions.

However, neither the rupture of the political system happened automatically nor the increase in the power of the radical Left was a “natural” consequence of the crisis. Early elections were proclaimed not out of the free will either of the collapsing Greek political system or of Merkozy, Lagarde, Trichet/ Draggi or Barroso – in fact, the wish of this “Holy Alliance” and of the “markets” was that the three-party government under the unelected technocrat Papademos remained in office for two more years, just like Monti in Italy. The most important

reason why the country went to the polls should be traced to the resistance of the Greek people mainly in the streets, but also in the workplaces (through the movement of the squares, the strikes and mass demonstrations, civil disobedience like the “no pay movement”, the jeering of mainstream politicians wherever they appeared in public etc).

At the same time, the success of the radical Left in the elections was not a linear function of the bad economic situation. History has taught us that unemployment, poverty and generally the worsening of economic conditions do not necessarily create a favourable political environment for the Left. The situation in the countries in Central and Eastern Europe after the demise of the so called “really existing Socialism” is a painful example.

The unexpectedly high electoral percentage of the radical Left can, to a large extent, be attributed to good political party strategies: a) the establishment and maintenance of the *Coalition of the Radical Left* (SYRIZA), a difficult alliance of “Synaspismos” with smaller parties and groups mostly of the extreme Left, b) the alliance of SYRIZA with groups or individuals coming from PA-

SOK who had a large appeal to the general public (in fact the name of the electoral list was *SYRIZA-Unitary Social Front*), c) to the appeal made to all forces of the Left, mainly to the *Communist Party of Greece* (KKE) and the *Democratic Left* (DIMAR) – the party which was created two years ago after the split of *Synaspismos* – to forge an alliance which could govern the country – an extraordinary ambition for the communist, post-communist, renovating and radical Left in Greece. In a country where personalities play a crucial role in politics, one of the reasons for the success of SYRIZA should also be attributed to the personality of its leader Alexis Tsipras, a charismatic and popular young politician.

Coming to the actual election results, the *Coalition of the Radical Left* (SYRIZA) achieved a percentage as high as 16.8%, overtaking PASOK which lost 30% of its power and collapsed from 43.92% and 160 seats in 2009, to 13.18% and 41 seats in 2012. *New Democracy* fell from 33.47% and 91 deputies to 18.85%, but due to an incredibly unjust electoral law now has 108 deputies (getting a scandalous bonus of 50 seats – out of a total of 300 – which go to the first party, independently of its percentage), while the *Communist Party of Greece* (KKE) marginally increased its power from 7.5% to 8.5%, losing for the first time its dominant position within the broader Left. LAOS, the party of the extreme Right which participated in the recent Papademos coalition government, didn't manage to enter the parliament and the same happened with the *Ecologists-Greens*, a member of the European Greens. The rest of the seats are occupied by the party of the *Independent Greeks* (a nationalist, xenophobic party created by a split of *New Democracy*, which denounces the "Memorandum" with the "Troika" – 10.6%), the *Democratic Left* (the party created in 2010 from the split of *Synaspismos* – 6.11%) and the fascist group of *Golden Dawn*, which managed to gather 7% of the votes and 21 seats in the Greek Parliament.

Although SYRIZA was certainly the big winner of the elections, one should not miss another very important fact. Ignoring the funny claim of KKE that they are communists and not leftists (!), the combined result of the admittedly fragmented Left in Greece is the biggest in recent political history, overshooting 30% and thus breaking the record of the old party of *United Democratic Left* (EDA), which in 1958 (9 years after the end of the civil war) managed to reach 25% of the vote creating a shiver to the then "free world".

Although it is too early for a detailed analysis of the radical Left vote, we think that it is useful to refer to some of its important qualitative characteristics: SYRIZA came first among young voters, as well as among the voters ageing up to 55 years. It prevailed in the big urban centers, where the economic and social crisis is particularly acute. It even managed to represent big parts of the popular strata in the poor neighbourhoods of Athens and other big cities, where traditionally its penetration had been low.

Allow me to close this first note on the Greek election results with two final remarks:

First, one of the reasons why the victory of SYRIZA is such an important development on a European scale is due to the fact that, although one could expect that the two – former – big parties would lose power because of popular dissatisfaction, the political force which would benefit from the delegitimization of the political system and the mounting of social unrest was not obvious. Nationalist, xenophobic and even fascist groups were racing to this end, propelling arguments for "a strong, pure and independent country". Fears and blackmails for the dangers of an exit from the Eurozone – that would amount to a complete collapse of the country's economy – were consistently spread by the political elites, inside and outside the country, as well as by the mainstream media. At the same time, the Left remained fragmented, with the *Communist Party* refusing to engage in any kind of dialogue

and the *Party of the Democratic Left* (DIMAR) failing to define the limits of its juxtaposition. This is why the victory of SYRIZA was so important. But there was also one additional reason that made all of us proud for being members or supporters of *Synaspismos* and the other groups of this political alliance. Despite intensive pressures from almost all parts of the political spectrum and the media, SYRIZA did not retreat from its values of defending immigrants – opposing clearly the, not so unpopular, establishment of concentration camps for their containment, the first of which incidentally opened just a few days before the elections – and of arguing for the protection of human rights in a period where society was open to mass propaganda of this type.

The electoral results in Greece are important not only for this country, but for Europe as a whole. Now, it is more evident than ever how interdependent the European countries are, since developments even in a small country of the Southern periphery can create a "butterfly effect", so strong that it can shake European decision-making in its core. This is the reason why *Synaspismos* never accepted the dilemma that Greece should either accept the present political and economic framework of the EU (as supported by the PASOK and ND) or voluntarily get out of the Union – a demand put forward by KKE, but also some groups of SYRIZA. On the contrary, we believe that struggles and disobedience at the national level should be combined by coordination at the European level for the refoundation of Europe, which is also the aim of the *Party of the European Left*. EU will either change or stop existing.

In our hard times, victories of the movements and the radical Left in one European country can positively influence the political and social struggles in another. The victory of SYRIZA in Greece belongs also to the indignant movements around Europe, the victories of the Spanish strikers, the success of comrades of the *French Communist Party* and the *Front de Gauche* in the

recent French elections. We were inspired by them and had the conscious feeling that we were returning this inspiration. In this framework, we will never forget the actual presence of representatives of the parties of the European Left in our rallies and the moral support we got from comrades all over Europe.

Election in France

By Elisabeth Gauthier, Paris

First and foremost, Hollande's election is a clear rebuff for the "President of the Rich" and the power of the oligarchy he embodies which has become stronger in the crisis.

In spite of the relief felt about Sarkozy having been voted out, the mood can by no means be compared to 1981 (Mitterand's election). It is too uncertain what Hollande's politics will consist of, if he will act against the causes of the crisis and challenge the neoliberal direction Europe is moving to. It is also quite uncertain which majority the parliamentary elections on 10 to 17 June will produce. In case of a left majority the weight of the representatives of the *Front de Gauche* will decide if the political orientation will shift to the Left.

In the first ballot Hollande received 28.7 % of the votes, with all left candidates together gaining 43.6 % (compared to 36% in 2007). The entire "Left of the Left" gained 13% in 2012 (8% in 2007), with the *Front de Gauche* (11.11%) representing a pole of a new quality.

The *Front National* (FN) has gained 17.9% (compared to 10.44 % in 2007 and 17% for FN and 2.5% for a splinter group in 2002). The (right) centre of Bayrou was weakened, the polarisation of Left / Right has increased, in particular under the impact of the offensive campaign of *Front the Gauche* (FG).

Altogether the weight has shifted from Right to Left, while at the same time

Despite our victory, we are well aware that no victory can be taken for granted. In our struggle we have to face, on a daily basis, two big enemies: a) the political forces of the establishment who want to subjugate the peoples of Europe to their austerity policies and b) the forces of the reactionary radicalism, the extreme and fascist Right, the *National*

Sarkozy himself became more "rightist" and the FN stronger.

Many votes for Hollande were cast without enthusiasm, thus on the one hand, being regarded as votes against Sarkozy and at the same time as votes to prevent Le Pen. As opinion polls showed, J.-L. Mélenchon had to pay the price for this, since many potential voters decided in the very last moment to cast a "useful" vote.

Backed by her election result, Le Pen has announced that "the struggle for France is just beginning", that in the future she wants to be the "party of the patriots on both the Right and the Left side". In her endeavour to become the number one force on the Right, she recommended to the voters in the second election campaign not to vote for Sarkozy but to invalidate their ballot.

Although in opinion polls the majority of the French claim unemployment, the loss of purchasing power and the decreasing quality of the health care and education systems as their major concerns, with only a minority of 15 % saying that they are worried about the problems of integration, these play a disproportionately important role in the political debate, a fact which only serves the *Front National*. The FN pretends to be critical of the system without indeed tackling the core questions of the economic and social development. As a kind of "comfort devil" it also serves to keep the two-party-system alive.

Front in France, the *Golden Dawn* in Greece and their allies in other European countries.

The struggle goes on!

* This article is the result of discussion and exchange of views and ideas between the author and Elena Papadopoulou.

In its campaign, the *Front de Gauche* (FG) had presented a new and further-reaching political ambition. On the one hand, by calling for voting Sarkozy out of office, while at the same time linking this up to the perspective of a political change instead of a mere change of majorities. With this position the *Front de Gauche* opened a broad debate reaching far beyond its own ranks, on what left politics could consist of in times of the Great Crisis.

It is interesting to observe that Le Pen's ideological discourse only works as long as she does not have to answer to precise arguments. When that is the case (and only Mélenchon takes such an offensive position) it becomes visible that she is indeed positioned very far on the Right.

French society today is deeply divided: During Sarkozy's time in office, unemployment has risen from 7.8% to 10.5%, unemployment among the youth to 23% and among migrants to 15.3%. Today, the number of poor people in France amounts to 8 million. That is what the alliance around J.-L. Mélenchon tries to respond to with a new conception of a society of solidarity and of mixtures ("société métissée"), the demand of participation embedded in the demand for a Sixth Republic, for a social re-foundation of the state, in which the people itself are seizing power – that is what it says in an election poster.

With well above 11% of the votes, the Left succeeded for the first time in politically uniting the once split camp of Communists, anti-globalists, left Socialists and left Radicals. In the parliamentary elections taking place early this summer, the SP and Hollande will supposedly not be able to win a majority of their own, thus depending on the Left Front. Therefore one of the major political challenges of the FG will consist in providing an answer to the question of which ways will lead to a Left which sets as its task to disarm the financial markets and to initiate a change of politics.

With the *Front de Gauche* (11.11%, almost 4 million votes) a new political force is presenting itself in which the constructive and radical Left are united. This is an alliance which does not understand itself as a coalition of parties, but rather as a partnership between left parties and social movements in which also citizens without any party-affiliation can join in. The political tradition and culture reach from the left wing of the Social Democracy to left radical movements. “We represent six parties and even more trends. No member of the alliance had to abandon anything, an approach which is constitutive of our

identity. Our discourse lends a common perspective to each of us” (Mélénchon in *Humanité*, 20 April 2012).

The consequences at a European level of Hollande’s victory, to which the Left has contributed decisively, cannot yet be overlooked. The extent to which his suggestion for European growth will be able to challenge the power of the financial markets and of austerity politics, will also depend on the future movements and power relations in France and Europe. In any case the goal of the *Front the Gauche* is to put into question the Fiscal Pact and to mobilise against it in France and all over Europe.

Challenges of a Historic Moment

By Elisabeth Gauthier, Haris Golemis and Walter Baier

6 May 2012 is marked by two election results with historical consequences: With the election of socialist candidate, Francois Hollande, to become France’s new president to which the *Front de Gauche* has quantitatively and qualitatively contributed through its campaign in the first round of the presidential election, a period of long years of conservative rule will find an end in France. But this is not all there is: For all of Europe the fatal axis Merkel-Sarkozy has also become history. If this will be true as well for the politics forced upon Europe only the future will show. This is particularly essential for questions to be immediately asked in terms of European politics towards Greece, as well as the fiscal pact whose goal is centralist control of national budgets and a highly authoritarian course of austerity for its implementation by the European Commission, by means of which the final destruction of the social welfare state, of labour laws, of public services, of parliamentary sovereignty, as well as a dramatic lowering of living standards of the people of Europe will become reality.

The parliamentary elections in Greece amount to an earthquake in the political

landscape of Europe, a small but important member-state of the EU in the South of the continent which is suffering most deeply from the brutal austerity-politics. Hitherto incumbent parties such as the conservative New Democracy and the Social-Democratic PASOK which have both turned themselves over to become executors of the banks and barbaric savings politics decided by the EU following the dictates of Merkel and Sarkozy can rally no more than a bit more than a third of the vote. At the same time, with 17% of the vote for the left party-alliance SYRIZA, an anti-capitalist and simultaneously pro-European party became second strongest force in parliament.

Similarly to the French *Front de Gauche*, whose candidate of could rally the “Left of the Left” and attained 11% of the vote in the first round of the presidential elections, SYRIZA is an alliance of diverse forces of the Left. Two of its components, Synaspismos-the strongest party of the alliance- and AKOA are members of the *European Left Party*.

The strategies of these alliances which are fiercely opposed to the rules of fi-

nancial market-capitalism and Neoliberalism seem to have been approved under varied circumstances in this past election process. Attempts by the mainstream media to denounce SYRIZA and the *Front de Gauche* alike as “extremist”, “populist” or “nationalist” were not only shown as weak, they are also indicative of the ruthlessness come upon political and ideological confrontations on the future of European integration.

In this context the expanding growth of right-wing electorates throughout Europe must be especially registered. Experiences of Greek and French election campaigns demonstrate that only the Left has openly taken a clear stance of opposition and that the right-wing growth can only be impeded under the condition that in these confrontations the system-immanent character of the Right can be made visible.

The successes of the Left in France and in Greece which combat the dominant logic of financial market-capitalism and Neoliberalism on a national as well as a European level seems to affirm a change in the political dynamic in Europe which had already been alluded to in several elections throughout the

year. Europe seems to enter into a political period in which the dominant and unilateral strengthening of xenophobic, nationalist, and authoritarian right-wing forces, evident since the beginning of the crisis in 2007 and 2008, is being replaced by a new polarization between Right and Left for which the strengthening of a radical Left is a condition precedent.

Indeed, the election results of 6 May have shifted the balance of power in part to the Left. But at the same time the situation is complex and not without dangers. In her first comments, Angela Merkel and senior officials of the European Central Bank have signalled without ambiguity that they are unimpressed by losses of representatives of anti-democratic and anti-social political forces in these past elections, and that they intend to uphold the current course in spite of the fact that it threatens to destroy European integration and democracy. Obviously the elites believe that they are able to intimidate the population with menaces to exclude Greece from the Euro-zone. By contrast, the solidarity of the European Left as well as of all forces opting for a new foundation of Europe, and especially their de-

mands for cancellation of the Memoranda and the "loan agreement" are an absolute necessity.

Yet, something else has changed in Europe. With large union and social struggles in Italy, Portugal, Spain, Romania, Belgium and Greece during the last 12 months many new activists have been mobilized and raised their voices. Simultaneously, new appeals by critical intellectuals, representatives of unions, of social movements, and of politics have been made. The necessary responds of the Left to the existential crisis in Europe and the accelerated destruction of the social welfare model and of democracy as such lie in an enforced struggle for a new social and democratic foundation of Europe.

There are new possibilities for such a social and political dynamic. Today we can detect significant new debates taking place all over Europe. In many European countries people are taking to the streets, they go on strike and embark on new and varied activist forms in order to defend their social and political rights. In front of this development the need to build a political alternative, a European alliance, or a European movement is an urgent necessity. Thus, the elections of

this past weekend at once demonstrate the necessities and the possibilities of acting on a political plane.

The Joint Social Conference and the Alternative Summit which took place at the end of March 2012 have shown that a multiplicity of forces are now ready to open up for a process hitherto unheard of – a process in which unions, social movements, intellectuals, and political forces are able to cooperate with the explicit goal to change the balance of powers in Europe. The elections of this past weekend have pointed out the necessity and the options to enact a new political agenda. In contrast to the oligarchy ruling over singular countries and in Europe we are dealing with the question of a radical change of power structures. With it there arises the challenge to create new alliances which would enable social and political players alike to mobilize in order to act up on a united and equitable way in immediate confrontations, as well as to work on an equal footing on the crystallization of a new hegemony in Europe.

In this feat lie the challenges of this historical moment.

An Important Political Call

Founding Europe Anew!

Recently a group of renowned personalities of German trade unions and of academia launched an appeal which aims at impacting on the German and

European public opinion. Therefore we call for supporting and signing it!

Founding Europe Anew!

Stop the March into Ruin! Overcome the Crisis with Solidarity!

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