

Greece's "The River" party: A populist fraud

By Robert Stevens
23 March 2014

The Greek coalition government of New Democracy, PASOK, is in crisis. Since it came to power in June 2012, with the Democratic Left, which departed the government last year, it has pressed forward with ever-greater austerity measures.

As a result, the three parties are largely discredited. PASOK—Greece's social democratic party—has virtually disintegrated. It has now joined forces with a few other smaller parties in its orbit, under the Olive Tree alliance, and is barely polling 5 percent in opinion polls.

The other main party in the coalition, the conservative New Democracy (ND), which along with PASOK has been the bedrock of bourgeois rule since the fall of the military junta in 1974, is widely hated and has suffered a series of defections. It faces defeat in the upcoming European and local elections.

The political vacuum has seen the emergence of around 15 new political formations, mainly from the breakup of the existing organisations.

The latest—To Potami (The River)—was formed at the end of February by the television journalist Stavros Theodorakis, who hosts a weekly show, "Protagonistes", in which he deals with social issues such as homelessness, poverty and drug addiction.

Within a week of Theodorakis announcing the founding of To Potami at a press conference, the party had moved just above PASOK and other established parties in opinion polls, winning nearly 6 percent support. A further poll by Alco showed it had increased its support from 5.7 percent to 8.8 percent in just one week. The latest Alco poll had Theodorakis, with an approval rating of 44 percent, as the most popular party leader compared with ND prime minister Antonis Samaras of 31 percent.

This is under conditions where Theodorakis has not yet even outlined a programme or policies, except in the vaguest terms. Reuters said Theodorakis's appeal

"comes from being outside the old crony culture blamed for bringing Greece to the brink of bankruptcy."

In his press conference, however, it was clear that Theodorakis is putting forward a right-wing populist appeal for national unity, based on an acceptance of essentially the same neo-liberal, austerity politics as those of the coalition.

Theodorakis uses a certain left colouration, stating, "From childhood I have defined myself as left-wing. For me, the crucial point is to identify what being on the left means today."

"We have to include in our programme both leftist and neo-liberal ideas because Greece needs solutions immediately," he added—making clear that there is nothing genuinely left about him. He is a defender of the European Union (EU), despite its savage austerity measures. His party is not "eurosceptic", he stressed, stating, "No matter what the current problems are that Greece is dealing with regarding its partners, Europe is still a valuable ally."

Regarding possible political collaboration, Theodorakis made clear his readiness to collaborate and enter coalitions with virtually anyone. "There are many politicians who could be useful and we would welcome collaborating with them to change the political rulebook.... Democracy-Europe-Humanity: a basic values system for whichever political collaboration," he said.

In a Reuters interview, Theodorakis expanded on his theme of all political persuasions coming together for the sake of the nation. "In this country, there is no point saying whether you are on the left or right. When there are so many problems, when you feel that the boat is sinking you don't ask whether there is a good left-wing or right-wing engineer, you just want a good engineer.

"Greece has huge problems that could not be solved without foreign aid," he declared. "Our major issue is

not to find out what has gone wrong but to invent a new national strategic plan to give an end to the economic and social crisis.”

Under the slogan “politics for everyone”, Theodorakis advances the conception that it is possible to achieve a national economic revival within the framework of the capitalist profit system: “Greece will have to produce in the post-memorandum period. We must urgently deal with our country’s problems on our own and should of course get Europe to support this plan. The country needs a stable framework without nasty tax surprises and political aggro. We must start up the Greek engine.”

Theodorakis seeks to appeal to all social and political layers—from those hit hard by mass poverty and unemployment to those who demand even greater inroads against what remains of Greece’s social provisions. Thus he argues that, “The country does not need to sack public sector workers,” but then continues that “[i]t has a bad public sector. What’s needed is the redistribution of the workforce. It is inconceivable that some people are denying that there is an assessment needs to be carried out.” His description of a “bad public sector” is not too different from those on the right who routinely describe it as “bloated” and “inefficient” in order to justify huge cuts.

On this basis, he proposes to “extend unemployment benefit from 12 to 24 months and find ways to keep young people within the Greek economy through the collaboration of the public and private sector based on supporting innovation.” With unemployment among young people at 60 percent and the minimum wage for under-25-year-olds already cut by 32 percent, to just €500 a month, no doubt the “innovations” called for by Theodorakis will result in even further cuts in pay and the introduction of some form of compulsory labour.

To Potami was endorsed in a recent meeting by a group of 30 personalities mainly from academia, the professions, journalists and writers. Support for Theodorakis also came from Thanos Tzimeros, an arch-libertarian who heads the small Dimiourgia Xana (Creation Again) party. In November of last year, after an outcry regarding a hotel owner who advertised for a job vacancy with only food and board as payment, Tzimeros wrote, “If some homeless and hungry person that agrees to work for food and sleep, why should the state prevent the agreement between these two

parties?”

Speaking in his hometown of Hania on the weekend, Theodorakis said, “We have a clear proposal for the other parties. They should tear up their manifestos and sit down with the people voters will choose in the elections to create a national salvation programme. We need to find 30 solutions for the 30 problems we have.”

An initial survey revealed that To Potami drew most of its support from the Democratic Left (12.8 percent), Independent Greeks (12.1 percent), PASOK (8.1 percent) and SYRIZA (7.7 percent). A later survey from the *Efimerida ton sintakton* newspaper found that as many as 17.5 percent of SYRIZA supporters also supported To Potami, as did 16 percent of PASOK voters and 3 percent of supporters of Independent Greeks. Ten percent of voters from other parties endorsed To Potami. *Kathemerini* stated, “It is worth noting that whereas most of Potami’s support appears to come from the center-left and left, it also draws from the right-wing, populist Independent Greeks.”

The media has raised concerns that the sudden rise of To Potami is indicative of a population that is largely hostile to the existing political setup. *Kathemerini* added, “Clearly, citizens are looking for something new.”

The working class can put no faith in forces such as Theodorakis and his pro-capitalist “solutions” that have plunged millions into levels of poverty not seen since the Second World War. As a supporter of the EU, Theodorakis endorses the very body that has demanded of successive Greek governments since 2009, the imposition of ever-deeper cuts. Were To Potami to secure seats in a future government, of whatever political colouration, the EU would demand the same of them and find in its ranks ready supporters.

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