

Greece: Where “pasokification” was born: A glimpse of PASOK’s collapse

Saturday 6 April 2019, by [GIANNOPOULOU Angelina](#) (Date first published: 26 March 2019).

Greek PASOK played a key role in the political life of this country since the fall of the military junta in the 1970s. In European political context, it became a paradigmatic example of the decline of social democracy. In just a few years after the breakup of PASOK’s last government, the party declined into marginality. A deep economic crisis that started in 2008 had damaging social and economic consequences in Greece. Main political victims of the crisis were precisely Greek social democrat

It is a common ground for politicians and political scientists as well, that European social democracy is currently undergoing the most serious crisis since its foundation. This structural crisis results from various factors that emerged during the past twenty years. Some of these factors are related to the socioeconomic transformations that started developing from the late 1970s, which consequently formed the neoliberal capitalism within a new globalized environment, some others originated from the clear abandonment of the traditional social democratic values and aims, such as the redistributive justice, the reduction of the social and economic inequalities and the vision of a Social Europe.

The conclusion about the decline of the Social Democracy doesn’t come up only from the election results and the breakdown of the votes, though this aspect is obviously crucial and reveals the current potentiality of the Social Democracy to assert itself as a leading political power. Social Democracy’s weakening appears also as a result and simultaneously as a cause of the sweeping crisis of the political systems in Europe. Subsequently, social democrats have great responsibilities for the rupture in the European integration process, mainly due to their determinant role in the building of the European project as we know it (EU, Eurozone).

Social democratic parties were the political entities which were called to materialize the new social contract of the postwar settlement and to ensure that a Europe of prosperity, social justice, peace and economic growth become the present and the future of the European people. This colossal promise – and political strategy – started crumbling after the establishment of the neoliberal doctrine in Europe combined with the U-turn of the Social Democracy towards the so-called Third Way. The Third Way was an effort to implement the “Social Europe” vision within the neoliberal and globalized framework. This strategy resulted, in the beginning, in electoral success; however, it was also the crystallization of the social democratic shift to more centrist ideas and policies. While the social democrats of the 1970s, such as Willy Brandt, Olof Palme and Bruno Kreisky were arguing in favour of a) welfare state and full employment, b) modernisation in the sense of political and cultural liberalism and c) the pursuing of a peace agenda, the social democrats who headed during the 1990s kept only the political and cultural liberalism in their agenda, though they were represented in 12 out of 15 European governments and held the post of President of the European Commission. [\[1\]](#)

The above point is one of the most significant in the study of Social Democracy’s decline. Social

democrats essentially abandoned their electoral and political core, namely the interests of the working class. Within a world in which the multinational capital has transformed the whole of the social and economic relationships, as well as the social classes, Social Democracy insisted on its traditional perception of the labour and the working class. Meanwhile, the social democratic policies were affected by the neoliberal orthodoxies and the TINA ("there is no alternative") doctrine. Therefore, Social Democrats never concerned about the political and electoral support that the working class used to offer to them. It seems that they didn't have second thoughts about their ability to remain the hegemonic political force in Europe, thinking they can adjust themselves to the new conditions without losing the traditional social alliances they had built. However, as far as the neoliberal capitalism was expanding across more and more spheres of the social life, asking for new fields of profit-making (education, social welfare etc.), the working and the lower middle class started suffocating from the decrease in the labor costs, the collapse of the welfare state, the democratic deficit within the national states and mainly within the EU and more and more widespread precariousness. The foundations on which Social Democracy was built through the years crushed, and besides that, the social democrats themselves accepted the TINA doctrine by declaring that the wealth produced through neoliberal capitalism would trickle down.

Capitalism as an economic system and also as a system of power relations has totally changed. Social classes, social interests and social representations have been subjected to crucial and multifaceted transformations. The globalization relocated the actual field of politics and of decision-making processes. The transition from the local/national level to the European and the transnational level transformed the power relations at the expense of the working class, the minorities, the immigrants, the youth and the emerging "class" of the precarious workers. Furthermore, the establishment of neoliberalism denoted the long-lasting austerity policies.

The politics of austerity, precariousness and employability became the principal strategy in the EU after the crisis's outbreak. Many social democratic parties were in power by the time crisis started unfolding its dramatic effects on the European people. Since social democracy was for years obeying the neoliberal guidelines, the followed policy reactions to the crisis were pretty unsurprising. Looking back on the Gerhard Schröder's "Agenda 2010" we can partially understand the political decision taken by the social democratic party in Greece, PASOK, in 2010 to agree on the First Economic Adjustment Programme with the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund. This political decision was determinant for the future of this hegemonic political party which governed Greece for a period of 20 years.

However, it would be quite superficial and methodologically fallacious to reach the conclusion that PASOK collapsed only because of its decision to accept and implement the first 110€ billion bailout programme. Consequently, the so-called "pasokification" [\[2\]](#) of the social democratic parties in Europe should not be analysed exclusively under the scope of the economic crisis of the last ten years and its management from the social democrats. A brief look at the genealogy of PASOK will highlight some of the key points that reveal its role in the Greek political system during the Third Hellenic Republic ("Metapolitefsi") and help us to illustrate the framework of its collapse.

PASOK was the party-protagonist of the political transition period that we could roughly presume that reached its "end" with the crisis's outbreak in Greece. It was the party that led the democratic transition in Greece and moved to a direction of overcoming the civil war's wounds of the Greek society. Standing as the formidable adversary to New Democracy, the traditional right-wing, conservative party that was linked with all the dark sides of the Greek political history until the fall of the dictatorship, PASOK managed to occupy the major part of space on the left in political, social, and cultural terms. It was clearly the hegemonic party of the Third Hellenic Republic, the party that shaped the Greek state for almost three decades and governed for twenty years. In parallel, and certainly not secondarily, it was the party that served as a model for the entire party system in

Greece and it determined the kind of the relation between society and the state. PASOK was not only a party of the state [3], PASOK met all the characteristics for being a hegemonic party: [4] a) it established its structural model in the Greek party system as an example, b) it shaped the agenda of the party competition and created the framework of the political debate, c) it formulated the characteristics of the charismatic leadership, d) it promoted its view as the hegemonic one that is based on an agreement led by a collective will which unifies different social groups and finally e) even when it has not been in the government, its hegemonic position in the party system remained unaffected, since its choices have been considered suitable and taken for granted.

We could say that PASOK's history is the history of the Greek political system after the fall of the military junta and the history of the Greek state's strategy as well. Therefore, one of the most essential strategies of the Greek state, the Europeanization, became a strategy for PASOK as well and the rising contradictions between the economic goals that had to be fulfilled for Greece and interests of social groups that were the social and electoral base of PASOK contributed the most to the loss of the ideological identity of the party. As Spourdalakis and Tassis [5] pointed out "under the leadership of the modernizers, PASOK came closer to the economic orientation and strategy that are hegemonic worldwide and are presented as if 'there is no alternative'. Its coordination with the political hegemony of the time was enriched and further supported by the country's candidacy to participate in the Euro-zone [...] Turning the country's membership of the Euro-zone into the sole national dogma for the country, Simitis's government created a significant social deficit. The popular discontent generated was not enough to challenge PASOK's modernizing discourse. The party insisted that the privatization programme would be realized; promising that completing all the infrastructure projects would make the country competitive in the international division of labour, which in turn would lead to economic development [...] After 2002, with the country's membership in the Euro-zone, PASOK's popularity fell drastically..." Europeanization and the consequent submission to the mainstream economic doctrine in the EU, neoliberalism, were promoted and implemented by PASOK that tried to present these processes as a national interest. However, the social implications of these strategies and its concrete policies changed dramatically the living conditions of the social strata that PASOK used to represent and most importantly, the vision of a society of social justice, strong welfare state, redistribution, protection of the workers etc. was forever gone.

At the peak of Greece's "golden ages" in 2004 PASOK lost the elections from New Democracy, mostly because of its deprivation and not because of its opponent's strength. After five years of a right-wing government that had almost clearly stated that austerity is the only way for Greece to survive, because of the height of the public debt and the public expenses, and without New Democracy is able to present a positive vision for the society, PASOK, a bit renewed, after five years outside the state's control, won the elections in 2009 receiving 43.92 percent of the vote. The party gained the trust of the citizens with a program including: reduction of the economic and social disparities, fair redistribution, increase of public investment etc. George Papandreou gave such programmatic promises during the speech at the "Thessaloniki International Trade Fair", when he highlighted that "There is money, it is only that Mr. Karamanlis prefers to give it to the few and powerful." This was meant to become his vote-catching slogan.

Eight months later Greece was entering its first bailout program, and one year later Giorgos Papandreou resigns and the cabinet of Lucas Papadimos follows, as an interim three-party coalition cabinet. The electoral base of PASOK, that has been standing with the party for years, started to crumble after all these developments. In the next elections held in 2012, PASOK received the 13,18% of the votes, a historic low percentage. In the elections of January 2015, when SYRIZA came into power, PASOK reached 4.68% of the votes, becoming the weakest party in the Greek Parliament.

Generally, the party's reaction to the crisis could easily be characterised as "business as usual". In

parallel, the complete loss of the party's political and ideological identity through the years led it to even cooperate officially with its greatest opponent, New Democracy. Despite some minor party antagonisms, there has been a clear attempt to achieve the widest possible consensus on the management of the crisis [6]. PASOK's fall is not only the fall of a bipolar party system. It is the fall of the Greek political system of the Third Hellenic Republic, the closure of a process that started with the democratisation of the Greek society after the dictatorship and ended up with the catastrophic consequences of Greece's participation in the European project. PASOK, as a genuine party of the state, after failed to continue serving the state strategy, it got thrown out of the game.

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Footnotes

[1] Baier, W. (2014) *The Crisis of European Social Democracy and the Radical Left*, Presentation at the Seminar “The Neoliberal Agenda and European Social Democracies” in Florence on 16 November 2014

[2] For concrete case studies’ analyses on the social democratic parties in Europe, see the reports from the two workshops that transform! co-organised with the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation. The first one in November 2016 in Helsinki

<https://www.transform-network.net/blog/article/analysing-european-social-democracy-the-stance-of-the-left-1/>, and the second in March 2017 in Madrid

<https://www.transform-network.net/blog/article/european-social-democracy-opponents-or-potential-partners/>

[3] Vernardakis, Ch. (2016) *The concept of the “party” on contemporary Political Science. An epistemological swift to Antonio Gramsci at Metaxas, A-I D. Political Sociology (4th volume). Social representation and political participation*, (in Greek), Athens, Sideris

[4] Eleftheriou C., Tassis Ch. (2013) PASOK. *The rise and the fall (?) of a hegemonic party*, (in Greek), Athens, Savalas, p.p.27-28

[5] Spourdalakis M., Tassis Ch. (2009) *Party Change in Greece and the Vanguard Role of PASOK*, South European Society and Politics, 11:3-4, 497-512

[6] Lyrintzis, Ch. (2011) *Greek Politics in the Era of Economic Crisis: Reassessing Causes and Effects*, GreeSE Paper No 45, Hellenic Observatory Papers on Greece and Southeast Europe.