

# Greece: Broad response to the neoliberal authoritarianism of the right-wing government

Tuesday 30 March 2021, by [PETROU Panos](#) (Date first published: 19 March 2021).

**“The vibrant energy of the younger generations, combined with a possible reactivation of a sector of political activists with experience of struggles can constitute an element favourable to a new political phase”**

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In Greece, the year 2021 began with an offensive by the government led by prime minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis. A new law aims to accelerate neoliberal reform in higher education and establish a permanent police presence on the campuses. The right to demonstrate has come under constant pressure, either through various laws and decrees or “de facto” through police repression of demonstrators. Hunger striker Dimitris Koufontinas [sentenced to life in 2003, see below] has met with a cynical (and murderous) denial of his minimal and legitimate rights in prison. The common thread has been the government’s desire to rule by force and to wage a “war” against the radical left. The authoritarian campaign provoked a serious retaliation on all fronts, which culminated in an astonishing explosion of anti-government sentiment over the weekend of 13-14 March in many cities in Greece and in most neighbourhoods and districts of Athens. A resurgence of mass action in the streets is creating a new situation. Let us review the context of these events and recent struggles.

A week before the January 2015 elections, right-wing politician Makis Voridis [the current Minister of the Interior] spoke at a small local meeting in support of the right-wing New Democracy party. He then declared: “We will never cede the country to the left [...] What our grandfathers defended with their rifles [a reference to the civil war of 1946-1949, when the nationalist armies imposed a regime of white terror against the guerrillas of the Communist Party], we will defend with our votes next Sunday. Don’t kid yourself. Next Sunday, it’s not just about choosing a party, or choosing an economic program. This is a huge ideological confrontation between two different worlds.”

His camp lost the battle that time and Syriza ended up forming a government [the first government took office on 27 January 2015]. The rest is known. The effort to find a compromise with the troika [IMF, ECB, and European Commission] and the Greek ruling class led to the capitulation of Alexis Tsipras and the signing of the third austerity memorandum. The demoralizing defeat of 2015 [Tsipras accepted the conditions of the troika, despite the victory of the “no” vote by more than 61%, in the referendum of 5 July 2015] paved the way for the return of the right to power.

In the 2019 elections, New Democracy won an important electoral victory, which was also a political victory. The polls suggested a shift to the right in public opinion. Syriza's capitulation and the ideological shift that followed in an attempt to justify this betrayal and defend the austerity policies that the Tsipras government implemented reinforced the TINA (There Is No Alternative) doctrine. Neoliberalism (a.k.a. "creating a favourable environment for investors") was rehabilitated as the only way out of the crisis, while New Democracy had stimulated feelings of social conservatism as a way to strengthen its position while in opposition.

Makis Voridis was now in the mood for revenge: "We will make all necessary interventions to ensure that the left never returns to power". He wasn't that worried about Syriza's electoral prospects. As he said in 2015, "it isn't a party". Voridis is one of the most sophisticated representatives of the contemporary far right in Greece. He spent his youth in neofascist groups, using weapons against anti-fascist protesters in the streets of Athens. He then joined the more "parliamentary" far right party LAOS (Popular Orthodox Rally), before joining New Democracy. He likes to mention Antonio Gramsci and the concept of "hegemony" in his speeches, in order to explain his long-term plan of "forcing a strategic defeat on leftist ideas - something greater than a given electoral percentage, something that exists in universities, in the arts, in the trade unions, in the minds of people".

Of course, while emphasizing "hegemony" and "ideas", Voridis also knows the importance of force and violence in governing. But his days as an armed right wing fighter are over. And today we find him in love with "our liberal democracy". He will defend the repressive forces of "our liberal democracy" against trade union strikes, left-wing mobilizations, anarchist squats and protesters who block the streets. You could say that as Voridis moved away from his past extreme neo-fascist tactics, "our liberal democracy" was moving in his direction, so they met halfway. Since January 2021, Makis Voridis has been the Minister of the Interior. And the decades-long "war against the left" is now the real project of the current right wing government led by the so-called "centrist" Kyriakos Mitsotakis.

Kyriakos Mitsotakis hoped to use the political defeat of the left to impose a strategic defeat. The demoralization after 2015 seemed like a golden opportunity to render concrete the slogan of successive governments over the past decades: "We should end Metapolitefsi". "Metapolitefsi" literally means "change of political regime" and describes the transition to democracy after the fall of the military dictatorship in 1974. But it is a politically charged term, which is used to refer to the militant traditions of the 1970s, to the conquests of the workers' movement and to the "hegemony of the left" which haunts the thoughts of Voridis.

### **Governmental offensive**

Very quickly, the government of Kyriakos Mitsotakis went on the offensive, aiming to implement ultra-neoliberal policies and upset the balance of power between workers and employers. He drew on the tragic precedents set by the Syriza government and tried to accentuate this orientation, without the "ideological reservations" Alexis Tsipras's party had entered during its changes.

Since last March, the appearance of the pandemic has been a new factor. On the one hand, the management of the pandemic has been a disaster. The government has refused to implement any policies that might help deal with the situation. Bars and restaurants can be closed for months as retail businesses open and close, but there has never been a real shutdown in major sectors of the economy (factories, construction, offices and so on), nor any effort to impose health safety measures on employers. The already crumbling National Health System (NHS) had to go to war without new soldiers (doctors) or weapons (intensive care units, massive capacities of analysis and so on). The

public transport system, also in poor condition, has not been strengthened to avoid rush hour crowds. Indeed, most employees are still forced to go to work as usual and then endure curfews and restrictions that affect their “free time”. Student demand for smaller class sizes that would allow schools to reopen safely went unanswered, as this would involve hiring more teachers and/or building more schools.

Any effort to deal with these problems would mean a break with the neoliberal orientation. New doctors, new hospital units and beds for the NHS, new drivers and a new fleet of vehicles for public transport, new teachers and new schools, new staff for the employment inspectorate could be “permanent” solutions and therefore remain in place after the pandemic, which the neoliberals cannot tolerate.

These elements contributed to the failure of the fight against the pandemic. While various travel restrictions and night curfews have been in place continuously since last November, cases of infection continue to rise [233,000 cases and 7,361 deaths]. At present, intensive care units in Athens are full, and doctors say hospitals in the Greek capital are about to face a “Bergamo” situation (choosing which patients to save, as was the case in the Italian city). Meanwhile, financial support for workers in sectors that are closed or have been most affected by the downturn is the bare minimum. Most of the public funds are used to “support” the proprietors, while crumbs are left for the employees.

The government has not simply failed to deal with the health and economic crisis. It has used the pandemic to deepen its neoliberal option. As protests, trade union meetings, student meetings and all manner of activities were made more difficult or impossible by the pandemic, the government refused to back down on further attacks. It began to pass law after law in parliament, hoping to sidestep social resistance. It also instrumentalised the pandemic in order to strengthen repression. One part of the state has benefited from an increase in public spending, for new staff and advanced equipment: the police.

After the incredible anti-fascist rally last October during the Golden Dawn trial, the government launched a preventive counteroffensive. Article 11, which protects the right to demonstrate, has been suspended twice, by a decree of the chief of police (!), in order to ban mass gatherings on 17 November (the anniversary of the student uprising against the military junta in 1973) and 6 December (the anniversary of the murder of 15-year-old Alexis Grigoropoulos by the police, which sparked a youth revolt in December 2008). Subsequently, a dozen left-wing feminist activists were arrested for simply waving a banner in Syntagma Square in protest against violence against women on 25 November. The law passed last summer, aimed at “regulating” protests, gives the green light to police to arbitrarily decide “the extent of the estimated threat” and to ban or reduce public gatherings.

### **Resistance in the pandemic**

Meanwhile, fear of the pandemic itself and state repression forced us to organize a kind of “delegated resistance”. Small symbolic activities organized in a “semi-clandestine” environment by militant minorities expressed the feelings of a wider layer of the population who were unwilling or unable to take to the streets. Given the weakness of the social movements, we considered that the new law and the disproportionate use of the police against small symbolic mobilizations had a preventive character. The government, realizing that anger is boiling below the surface and that the impact of the economic crisis will worsen over time, has attempted to impose a “new normal” where protests are dangerous, where activist minorities will be isolated and face severe repression before

they can appeal to and mobilize more people.

The main problem with New Democracy is that a pillar of its “counter-revolution” has been broken. Neoliberalism has been in a state of permanent crisis since 2007. Mitsotakis wanted to follow in the footsteps of his idol, Margaret Thatcher, forgetting that the “Iron Lady” asserted herself at a time when neoliberalism was booming, and economic growth could sustain the false promise of “trickle down effects” for some time. In contemporary Greece, the glorified private sector has been hit hard during the pandemic. The economic crisis has even hit part of the government electorate hard: small business owners and some professionals; a sector of the petty bourgeoisie who hoped that a “business friendly” government would be the solution to their problems and who are now facing disaster. Employees have been under extreme pressure since 2010 (and even the “good old days” before the crisis weren’t so good for many of them). The restoration of neoliberal orthodoxy as “common sense” and the transformation of Greek society into a “business-friendly” environment encountered obstacles, including struggles by workers. The government has therefore strengthened the second pillar of its “war on the left”: authoritarianism and conservatism. While the police repress, an ideological offensive attempts to discredit the radical left by presenting it as the “enemy within” which deserves to be brutalized. “Law and order” became the only rhetoric New Democracy had to offer to its conservative support base, which was crumbling under the weight of the financial crisis.

This mentality has guided the government ever since. Here is a small but telling example. Right in the middle of a Greek version of #MeToo, where women, mainly in the arts and sport, broke their silence and told their stories of sexual harassment, it was revealed Dimitris Lignadis, appointed by the government as artistic director of the National Theatre, had systematically raped adolescents. After the initial efforts to cover for him failed, he was eventually sacrificed. But the Minister of Culture, Lina Mendoni, has remained in her place, despite numerous calls for her resignation. Normally, replacing her would have been easy and inexpensive “damage control”. But this is where the “war cabinet” mentality prevailed. Mitsotakis protected his minister. She has been presented by the right-wing media as a victim of left-wing propaganda targeting her for promoting “investment-friendly” policies in the field of culture. Lignadis’s lawyer decided to build on this account, trying to portray his client as the victim of some sort of leftist conspiracy. He was supposedly paying the price for trying to reconnect the National Theatre with the “traditional ancient Greek spirit” and eliminate “decadent leftist influence in the arts”.

### **The Dimitris Koufontinas case**

It was in this situation that the prisoner Dimitris Koufontinas, a former member of the dissolved armed group “November 17” (17N), began a hunger strike to protest against his (umpteenth) unfair treatment. Koufontinas was treated harshly throughout his time in prison, with state bureaucrats consistently denying him rights that are accorded to all other prisoners with similar sentences. Both New Democracy and the US Embassy have traditionally been very firm in their opposition to any humane treatment of the 63-year-old prisoner. The latest example is scandalous. The government has passed a law that prohibits a certain category of prisoners from being transferred to rural prisons. It also has a retroactive effect. The only prisoner who fit the profile of this new arrangement and who was already in a rural prison was Koufontinas, so this was essentially a law designed specifically to remove him. The law provided that detainees were to be transferred to the prison where they were previously held. But the government circumvented its own law and transferred Koufontinas to Domokos high security prison [central Greece], not Korydallos prison [Piraeus district], where he had spent most of his sentence (and where it would have been easier for his family to visit him). Koufontinas was forced to go on hunger strike on January 8 to demand the

correct application of a punitive law that had been passed against him in the first place!

The government has treated the hunger strike with savage cynicism. Vengeance against Koufontinas was combined with the “war mentality” of New Democracy. Mitsotakis has made it clear that the government will not back down and is ready to let Koufontinas go to his death. It was a new impersonation of Margaret Thatcher, who left Bobby Sands and his comrades to die in prison [in May 1981], in order to prove that “the lady’s not for turning”. This vengeance also carried a strong symbolism. Dimitris Koufontinas was forged during the militant years following the military junta, and “17N” is a product of that time. Displaying zero tolerance and denying minimum rights to this particular prisoner fit into the logic of the slogan “we should end Metapolitefsi”.

For some analysts, this was an imitation of the “strategy of tension”. The original strategy was implemented in Italy in the 1970s, at a time when there were left-wing armed groups. In the absence of such groups, the contemporary Greek version has raised the spectre of “armed violence”, 20 years after the dissolution of 17N and the end of this cycle, through a scandalous effort to change the narrative: a matter of human rights and democracy has been portrayed as a “fight against terrorism”. Hence, all those who supported the hunger strike and demanded respect for Koufontinas; rights were portrayed as “sympathizers of terrorism”. The media acted as if the issue concerned Koufontinas’ past actions (for which he had been in prison for 17 years) and not his treatment as a prisoner. Right-wing commentators have suggested that this “serial killer who has no remorse” should not have any rights (or even that it is fine to let him die). Facebook posts supporting these demands have been removed and user profiles have been removed for “supporting the actions of a terrorist group!” Police have set a new standard in law enforcement. Attempts to rally a few dozen people in support of the hunger striker were violently dispersed by riot police units even before they had a minimum of time to assemble and raise their placards.

The cynical handling of the hunger strike, which included tolerance of Koufontinas’ potential death, was the culmination of the campaign to destroy the radical left, while appealing to the instincts of “law and order” conservatives and radicalizing them to a higher level (that of coming to terms with the idea of imposing a death sentence on an “extremist” and brutalizing anyone who opposes this as a terrorist sympathizer). This strategy was intended to set a precedent for all future struggles. The vision of this strategy could be roughly described as follows: a tiny minority who insist on active resistance will face brutal repression, while part of the population is too afraid to mobilize and the other applauds the police for dealing with the hated “extremists”.

But things have changed. Over January, university students staged massive resistance against the new law accelerating the neoliberal transformation of higher education and establishing the permanent presence of police forces inside the campus. The weekly protests against this new law brought together thousands of students, marking the end of the period of “delegated resistance”. The “Koufontinas affair” took a different turn. Week after week, his health deteriorated, and it became evident that Greece was on the verge of becoming the country where a hunger striker had died for the first time in Europe since 1981. Academics, artists, doctors, lawyers, members of the European Parliament called for their rights to be respected. The Greek Ombudsman, the Greek section of Amnesty International, the Greek Association for Human and Citizen’s Rights, and even the Association of Judges and Lawyers blamed the government. The whole parliamentary opposition (except the far right) demanded his transfer to Korydallos. Demonstrations in support of the hunger strike are becoming daily and growing. A significant section of society, whose opinions on Koufontinas vary (from sympathy to hostility and everything in between), express their rejection of the state’s brutal behaviour towards him. The only public intervention clearly supporting the government has been that of US state officials, who are responsible for the Guantanamo prison and secret CIA detention centres around the world.

## Police repression

Meanwhile, something different was bubbling under the surface. The police did not just brutalize demonstrators. Charged with enforcing curfews and travel restrictions, educated to regard “unruly youth” as an enemy, high on the government strategy of “law and order”, the cops rampaged through the neighbourhoods, parks, and the public squares of Athens. People have accumulated bitter experiences of daily encounters with a police force that operates with the arrogance and brutality of an “army of occupation”. At an underground level, the “paradox of repression” appeared. According to this schema, repression is constantly used as a means of pacifying a population which cannot be won over by persuasion. But at some point, the constant use of repression ceases to terrify the population and ends up exasperating them even more. The events in Nea Smyrni, a municipality in Attica, served as a catalyst.

In the public square of Nea Smyrni, police threatened a family which was sitting on a bench (and therefore not doing “active exercise”, which is the officially authorized reason for going for a walk). The local youth supported the family and soon police reinforcements arrived to “pacify the hostile crowd”. A young man was brutalized, but this scene was recorded by other citizens with their smartphones and spread around the internet. The initial version of the police which was readily reproduced by all the mainstream media (the police faced a “violent ambush” and so on) was ridiculed by locals who described what really happened. That same evening, more than a thousand residents marched from the square to the local police station, where they were attacked with tear gas and dispersed.

The video was broadcast everywhere, and the young man’s cry “I’m in pain!” while he was being beaten became a battle cry to thousands of people, akin to the impact of George Floyd’s “I can’t breathe” on US society. Even the media were forced to change their rhetoric for a day, to show some sympathy to the victims of police violence and to exert some pressure on the police representatives who shamelessly supported their colleague, who “made a mistake” and who “unfortunately was filmed” (!). These images “should not be used to discredit the valiant police force by the usual people suspected of anti-police sentiment”.

The next day came the earthquake. More than 10,000 people gathered in the central square of Nea Smyrni. In the difficult times we have been through, a demonstration of this size would be celebrated as a great success, even if we were talking about a central mobilization for all the citizens of Athens in Syntagma Square. But this was only a local protest. Everybody was there. Unions affiliated with the Communist Party, forces of the radical left, anarchist collectives, residents who had never demonstrated before, even football supporters decided to put aside their differences for a day and march together against police brutality. Later that day, skirmishes broke out between some protesters and the police. A motorized police unit - notorious for its brutality and constant tactic of charging protesters with their motorcycles - attacked. This has happened many times in the past, but this time some protesters fought back, and a unit member was beaten and ended up in hospital.

It was then that an ideological counterattack was unleashed. The media immediately shifted the debate from police brutality to that of “violent thugs who almost murdered a police officer”. The prime minister intervened on a television special to denounce the incident (without even mentioning the victim of police brutality). All of a sudden, everyone was supposed to forget everything that had led to this outburst of rage and sympathize with the police. Meanwhile, in the streets of Nea Smyrni, the police sought revenge. An entire municipality suffered from their frantic activity that night, in the surrounding streets, inside shops and apartment buildings. A video was posted that summarizes their state of mind after the attack on their colleague. His unit was filmed yelling “They’re finished! We’re going to kill them! We’re going to fuck them!” Many incidents of police violence were



recorded by local residents and posted online.

## **Two parallel universes**

It was like two parallel universes. For the mainstream media, the “story of the day” was the drama of the injured policeman, while social media was overrun with various videos of savage police violence in the streets surrounding Nea Smyrni and locals shouting from their balconies “Get out of here!” or “Leave the children alone!”. The distance between reality and media coverage was another factor that enraged people - as in the 2015 referendum, when the mass media were heavily discredited for their role in supporting a yes vote for the measures of the troika. Kyriakos Mitsotakis did not strengthen his position when he warned young people that “social media is a threat to democracy because it provides a distorted view of reality”, at a time when it is the “respectable” media who constantly distort reality to protect the government and the police.

The ideological counteroffensive has failed miserably. The first national poll showed a majority with a negative opinion of the police (excessively violent) and believing they were responsible for the small riot in Nea Smyrni. But what is more important than opinion polls are the streets. By the weekend following the events of Nea Smyrni, all parts of Athens and many cities in Greece were filled with demonstrators. It is difficult to estimate the total number. But many municipalities or districts have seen the biggest local protests for many years. Dozens of simultaneous local protests each gathered a few thousand people each. The “decentralization” of the protest was a strategy discussed in the radical left as a way to deal with the twin problem of the pandemic and state bans. Some groups had attempted such a tactic on 6 December 2020, with many local events commemorating Alexis Grigoropoulos and the 2008 uprising, instead of trying to assemble once again at the traditional downtown meeting point in Athens where dozens of police units were already “waiting” for us. It was a success, but nowhere near what happened on 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> March. This time around, the strategy of “decentralization” met the real need for a critical mass of people to protest in their neighbourhoods, to claim their right to public space against the police. The police did not even show up to try to stop what can be described as a “peaceful revolt” made up of multiple “guerrilla” type protests.

Local protests were diverse. Local anarchist groups, left-wing organizations, some trade unions, and collectives active in social solidarity organized them, according to their strength in each district or neighbourhood. They were filled with anger. Against the police, against the management of the pandemic, against the priorities of public spending and so on. A single cry combined all the grievances: “Mitsotakis, you bastard!” It was an echo of the past: this slogan was launched in 1965 against the father of the current Prime Minister, Konstantinos Mitsotakis, during the “Youliana” (the “July events”), a revolt against the monarchy unleashed when the Palace toppled a centrist government with the help of Mitsotakis, who had orchestrated the defection of a crucial number of centrist deputies. The slogan became popular again in 2021, to express disdain for the son of one of the most powerful families in Greek politics. Michalis Chryssochoidis, the minister in charge of the police, was another target of the protesters’ chants. This former social democrat [a member of Pasok in 1974, who switched to New Democracy in 2019], who became the favourite of the CIA and a star of “anti-terrorism” after the dismantling of “17N” [in 2002], is now the widely despised and ridiculed “sheriff” for his earlier statement that “the inhabitants of poor neighbourhoods applaud when they see our police force marching through their streets”.

Young people made up the bulk of the local demonstrations. Of course, people of all ages came, but the massive presence of young people was significant. It’s an interesting development. There are generations of people whose brief lives were marked by two major economic crises and a pandemic

which is still ongoing. They face bleak prospects in the job market, their social life is under constant pressure, they are the ones who usually suffer daily harassment from the police in squares and public parks and the prime minister constantly designates to lecture them. But they are also the ones who did not experience the defeat of 2015 in the same way as felt by previous generations who struggled for many years before Syriza came to government and felt exhausted and demoralized after the betrayal.

## **Other struggles**

This feeling of defiance also feeds into other struggles. The same week as the demonstration in Nea Smyrni and the local protests, we also witnessed: the feminist strike of 8 March, a student march against the new university law, a central protest that combined solidarity with Dimitris Koufontinas and the overall struggle against authoritarianism and repression. Several thousand people took part in these mobilizations. In the following days we had the mobilizations of actors from various cultural backgrounds, combining their grievances for the lack of financial support during the lockdown, their rejection of efforts to impose censorship in the arts using “anti-terrorism” legislation (similar to that which recently led to Catalan rapper Pablo Hasel being imprisoned) and the anger unleashed by the Greek #MeToo in the arts. Then, on 17 March, a mobilization of health personnel was supported by many people. In short, a government that has embarked on a campaign to seriously curb public protests has recently faced almost daily mobilizations.

This development has had another side effect. It is said that determined and desperate hunger strikers need something to hope for in order to change their minds and not sacrifice themselves. While New Democracy refused to grant Dimitris Koufontinas his rights, happy with or even desiring his death, the brief “spring” of social resistance gave Koufontinas reason to hope for the future. He finally ended his hunger strike, saying that “what is going on there is far more important than the question that started it” and that the existence of dynamic social forces resisting authoritarianism “is a new hope”. While the mass movement did not force the government to back down, it avoided the grim prospect of a tragic death.

The government is under pressure and the days of arrogant self-confidence that defined the beginnings of his term are behind it. But its future is far from determined. The “war on the left” may prove successful by “circling the wagons” of the conservative electorate, which has become radicalized. The main opposition party, Syriza, is hardly an “opposition”, choosing the conciliatory language of respectable politics, national unity and so on. The anti-capitalist left is still fragmented, confused and/or healing its wounds from 2015. The trade unions have been severely weakened and the “new movements” lack critical foundations for the moment.

But it seems that we are entering new ground, with possibilities to counteract, in a very initial way, the effects of the political defeat of 2015. The vibrant energy of the younger generations, combined with a possible reactivation of a sector of political activists with experience of struggles can constitute an element favourable to a new political phase. Today, mainstream media columnists tend to refer to the youth uprising of 2008 and the “movement of the plazas” of 2011. Optimists reassure their audiences that “this will not happen again”. The more cautious warn that “we have to make sure this does not happen again”. In any case, it is revealing that the ghosts of past struggles are coming back to haunt them.

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- Translated by International Viewpoint from A l'Encontre. Subheads by IVP. Friday 26 March 2021:  
<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article7084>