

Balkan socialists can write new pages of common struggle!

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The Greek left needs to promote a national and regional identity that stresses unity of people's struggles

LeftEast: *It is interesting to think if, to what extent and how the left in each country has influenced the left in the other. The Greek left has had a formative impact on the Macedonian left- has the (development of the) Macedonian (new) left in any way influenced the Greek left? Is that so, and if yes, how is this influence reflected in your conversations, strategies and ways of organising?*

Panagiotis Sotiris: The realisation that there is a radical left in the Republic of Macedonia, represented by Levica, and the fact that this radical Left had played an important role in the development of mass protests and an anti-government movement was important to us. One of the main problems in the post 1989 political landscape in the Balkans has been the retreat of the radical left. The fact that there is a radical left in the Republic of Macedonia means that there is starting point to organise common struggles in opposition to neoliberalism, imperialism and nationalism. It also helps us fighting nationalism in Greece by pointing to the fact that on the other side of the border there are movements that struggle for the same causes.

LE2: *Recently, the dispute over the name "Macedonia" has re-emerged. We have been informed of squats being burnt down in Thessaloniki following/as part of the nationalist rally; tens of thousands gathered at a nationalist rally in Athens last Sunday. What is behind this re-emergence of nationalism and why do you think it happens now?*

P.S: As you know, the negotiations between Greece and the Republic of Macedonia have reopened under pressure from the United States that wants to make sure the Republic of Macedonia becomes a member of NATO. In reaction to this development there has been a new wave of nationalism in Greece. The initiative came from circles associated with the "hard right" wing of New Democracy, the centre-right party in opposition, but also with political circles that would have preferred the emergence of a new hard-right authoritarian and xenophobic party. At the same time the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn also took part in the rallies with the leadership appearing among the protesters in order to present itself as a "national" political force. On their side they had from the beginning the more conservative wing of the Greek Orthodox Church and other "political players" such as Ivan Savvidis, a Russia based millionaire and owner of one of the biggest football clubs, PAOK, who openly called to football fans to take part in the rally. The main speaker in the Thessaloniki rally was retired general Fragoulis Fragkos, ex Greek Army Chief of Staff, well known for nationalist and right wing positions, who was decommissioned in 2011 because the then government had suspicions that he was planning something close to a coup d'état. The mass rally in Athens also reflected the reaction of the New Democracy leadership and the leadership of the Church who decided to ride the wave of nationalism in order to avoid the danger of a change in the balance of forces in favour of the "hard Right". So the Athens rally was mainly organized by New Democracy and the Church. However, the neonazi Golden Dawn also went to the rally, including all its leadership (a leadership

that is currently under trial for creating a criminal organization that among other crimes ordered the murder of the anti fascist rapper Pavlos Fyssas in 2013). Mainstream mass media also called for mass participation in the rally (they had started by presenting the Thessaloniki rally as bigger than it actually had been). The reason for this re-emergence of nationalist reactions from the part of the Greek Right has to do with the political and ideological conjuncture in Greece. Currently, the SYRIZA-led government is implementing a program of extreme austerity, imposed by Greece's creditors as part of the infamous Memoranda agreed with them in the name of keeping Greece within the Eurozone. New Democracy, which along with the social democratic PASOK actually started these policies, in fact offers an opposition from the right, by proposing even harder austerity measures and more privatizations. Consequently, in an opportunistic manner, they think that nationalism is the only terrain upon which they can confront the government and have some political gains. In a certain way even SYRIZA somehow hoped for a split in the Right on the question of the "name issue" and perhaps this was also one of the reasons to open the debate now. At the same time, we have to stress that SYRIZA, which had a central position in favor of the "composite name" and had many members, including current ministers, who had signed a declaration demanding the recognition of the Republic of Macedonia with its constitutional name, mainly decided to open up the issue mainly as part of its pro-US and pro-NATO policies and by a political calculation to be the government that "solved the issue".

LE3: *How are different Left groups in Greece dealing with the renewed spread of nationalism and the absorption of neo-nazi and fascist tendencies into the current nationalist wave on the name-issue?*

P.S: The Greek radical Left has been engaged in anti fascist activism for many years and anti-nationalism has been an important aspect of antifascism. It is obvious that the neonazi Golden Dawn is trying to present itself as part of the "national spectrum" and to gain legitimacy as a "patriotic force" by participating in the mass rallies regarding the "name issue". That is why we are trying to combine the struggle against fascism with the struggle against nationalism. An example of such action was the mass rally organized by left wing organizations on February 3, one day before the Athens nationalist rally. This left wing rally was organized in response to the announcement of Golden Dawn that it was going to hold its own party rally on February 3. The result of our anti fascist rally was that Golden Dawn did not manage to hold its rally and parade.

LE4: *What is (if any) the spectrum of divergences within the Left in the interpretation/responses to the "Macedonian name" issue?*

P.S: One of the most problematic aspects of the past days has been the fact that figures historically associated with the Left, such as the composer Mikis Theodorakis took part in the nationalist rally in Athens. Actually Theodorakis - who also had expressed nationalist positions in the past-, was the keynote speaker. Another negative example of support to the nationalist rhetoric, was the fact that Zoe Konstantopoulou, former Speaker of the House of the Greek Parliament during the first SYRIZA government, and now the leader of a small party, also openly called for participation in the rally. The Greek Communist Party (KKE) has opposed the nationalist rallies and at the same time has accused the SYRIZA government of opening the issue only because the Americans want to make sure that the Republic of Macedonia becomes a member of NATO. KKE is in favor of a "composite name". At the same time the KKE rhetoric stresses that there is a problem with Macedonian "irredentism" that has to be solved and refuses the existence of a "Macedonian nation" or of a "Macedonian minority" within the Greek territory. In a certain manner, the rhetoric of KKE can also be found in other segments of the Left. "If the entire debate on the name issue has been reopened because of NATO and US plans, shouldn't we be suspicious of it?", many people think. I can understand the suspicion and indeed I think that we must struggle against NATO plans, but at the same time we must also deal with the question of recognition and in general with relations between the two countries. Most

groups and currents of the anti-capitalist Left strongly oppose nationalism, stress the NATO problem and the need for anti-imperialist struggle and one way or the other accept the right of self-determination including the right for a people to choose the name of its own country, on the basis of respect of borders and refusal of territorial or other claims. The differences within the radical Left are more tactical and not strategic. Some groups for example suggest that we must campaign in favor of recognition of our neighbor country with its constitutional name, others suggest that a mutually agreed "composite name" might be better in order to take into consideration the sensitivities of a large part of Greek society. However, all tendencies agree on the need to struggle against nationalism and against NATO and EU imperialism.

LE5: *There have been multiple solidarity actions across the borders- in the theory and praxis of shaping a left critique of neoliberal capitalism, in its application in relation to the Greek austerity crisis, in the interpretation and response to the refugee crisis, and anti-mining struggles across the borders most recently. What is the level of interaction (if any) between the left on the two sides of the border in relation to the name dispute?*

P.S: Common struggles are the way forward for social movements and the radical Left. In contrast to the political calculations and cynicism of the leading elites, we must focus on the fact that on both sides of the borders we are facing the same problems: the same attacks on social rights by neoliberal policies of austerity and privatisation, the same undermining of democracy and popular sovereignty by international organisations and the exigencies of the internationalisation of capital, the same disastrous policies of mining companies. We must work together, build movements of solidarity and common struggle and also learn from the experiences of struggles. Common struggles also build the kind of mutual recognition that we need in order to struggle against nationalism. To give an example: especially in Northern Greece nationalists are trying to persuade the local Greek population that the "Skopians" (as the citizens of the Republic of Macedonia are being pejoratively called by nationalists) want to take a Greek land. It is important that we help them realize that the people living across the border are fighting for the same issues, for example they are also struggling against environmentally disastrous mining corporations such the one we have been struggling against in Halkidiki, corporations that "are actually taking the land" and destroying it. Until now there has not been much interaction between left currents in both sides of the border. It is important that we work more on that direction. Solidarity based upon common struggles and a common vision of the Balkans without imperialist interventions, without nationalism and without neoliberalism!

LE6: *What do you see as the central problem behind the name problem, and what is your position on its "resolution"? What would qualify as a positive outcome in your view?*

P.S: As it is well known, the collapse and break-up of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s created a strong sense of insecurity in Greece. It was also a period when the Right, but also the political mainstream in general wanted to change the ideological balance of forces to the right. This could not be performed solely by investing in neoliberalism. Nationalism also seemed like an important ideological investment, especially since it could also be used as a form of anticommunism, returning to the rhetoric of the Greek Civil War. At that period the Greek bourgeoisie, also wanted to react to the new balance of forces in the Balkan and the rapid changes in traditional alignments by finding a point to exercise pressure and also show that it can also be powerful player. One might say that as it is often the case with countries that are in a certain "middle" position in the hierarchy of economic and political power, Greece was a country that was getting a lot of pressure but at the same time the political system so wanted to find an issue upon which to put pressure itself. And this was the "name issue" and in general the question of the relations with the Republic of Macedonia. This can explain the cynical investment in 1992 of both New Democracy and PASOK on nationalism which was materialised in the state-orchestrated 1992 mass rallies and an entire spectrum of nationalist propaganda. The internal splits in New Democracy and the fact that Antonis Samaras, the then

Foreign Minister of Greece was in favor of the “hard line” also contributed to the climate of that period. Samaras would soon afterwards leave New Democracy, create his own party, and return in New Democracy in the 2000s and become leader in 2009 and Prime Minister in the 2012-2015 government. To this we must add another reason. The fear that the question of the treatment of Slav-Macedonian minority in Greece would come forward and the years of persecution and discrimination, including the fact the many of them had been forced to leave Greece after the end of the Civil War. At the same time, even from the early 1990s the Greek governments knew that in the end the only possible solution would be a compromise based upon some kind of composite name that would include the word “Macedonia” with an geographical or other adjective (“North”, “New”, etc). However, they wanted to avoid the political cost, because of the nationalist climate already created. Regarding the relations between Greece and the Republic of Macedonia, I believe that the main problem is not the “name issue”. The main problem lies in the fact that in both countries we have governments that are pro-NATO and pro-EU. This means that both countries are being pulled into broader imperialist designs as part of the growing antagonism between the US and Russia. I know that many people think that being a member of NATO offers a country a guaranty against aggression and destabilisation. Recent Greek history points to the opposite. Participation of countries to such imperialist organisations exposes societies to problems. Only a path of independence from imperialism and at the same time co-operation can offer a real chance of hope. So I think that the first demand of the Left on both sides of the border should be “Let’s kick NATO out of the Balkans”. The same goes for the EU. As it is well known the Greek radical Left opposes the EU and the Eurozone. The Greek experience and the tragedy of the austerity packages offers all the evidence needed to support the claim the European Union represents not “stability” but aggressive neoliberalism, privatisations and reduced popular sovereignty. And of course we must fight nationalist mythologies on both sides of the borders. Nations are the product of modernity and the emergence of capitalism and bourgeois hegemony. Modern Greeks are not the direct descendants of Ancient Greeks and in the same way there is no reason to suggest that modern Macedonians are the descendants of heirs of Alexander the Great. Such rhetoric, on both sides of the border only serves the reproduction of nationalist ideologies. At the same time there must be a solution to the “name issue”. I think that a solution that would be for the interest of the peoples on both sides of the border and against nationalists on both sides of the border would be the following.

- Both countries should declare that there no territorial demands that the current borders are inviolable and that they oppose any form of irredentism and nationalism, that they will work together on eliminating nationalist rhetoric from official histories, schoolbooks and curricula.
- Greece must recognise the existence of the Macedonian nation as the main ethnic group of the Republic of Macedonia and respect its right to be defined and named as such.
- The right to a cultural and language identity of those persons in Greece that define themselves as “ethnic Macedonian” must be respected and issues regarding the right of return of political refugees that were forced to leave the country after the end of the Greek Civil War must be solved.
- The two countries must agree on the name. Although I personally believe that in terms of principle Greece should have recognised the Republic of Macedonia under its constitutional name, in the current conjuncture if a composite name (which will include the name Macedonia with some adjective) were mutually accepted this would be also a solution.

Such an approach should also be based upon increased cooperation between the two countries. I am not referring to the kind of “economic relations” that were developed in the past when Greek companies saw the Republic of Macedonia as “investment opportunity”, but forms of co-operation for the actual mutual benefit of societies. I also think that if we are to oppose the internationalisation of capital induced by mechanisms such as European Integration we need to work on new forms of regional cooperation and we need this kind of regional cooperation in the Balkans.

LE7: *How do you see the socio-political situations in the two countries evolving?*

P.S: I think that in both countries the main problem is that governments are presenting as stability the prospect of neoliberalism and deeper involvement in imperialist designs. In both countries we have governments that are investing in the defeat of strong popular movements and are mainly keen on attracting investors by attacking the rights of workers. At the same time in both countries we have right wing politicians investing in nationalism as a means to move the political debates to the right and to obfuscate the real problems that both societies are facing. Consequently, in both countries real political change and real political hope can only come from below, that is from social movements and demands, and from the left, that is from processes of recomposition of a radical Left that would combine anti capitalism with anti-imperialism.

LE8: *What do you see as the future of the left in the region?*

P.S: Well, all over the region we need a new Left. In a certain way what we are witnessing is the deep strategic crisis and defeat of all the main ‘paradigms’ of the Left in the region. Not only the crisis of the old “socialist regimes” and the crisis of the Balkan version of “social democracy” that ended up as pure neoliberalism, but also the crisis of the SYRIZA version of “radical left” which because of its refusal to even think the rupture with the EU ended up implementing austerity and privatizations. What we need is a new radical Left, based upon the bringing together of different anti-capitalist currents and radical social movements, a radical Left that must work not only towards rebuilding resistances and forms of solidarity but also lay down the foundations for a transformation of the aspirations of the subaltern classes into a new hegemonic project for social transformation. This requires work on the transition program, a confrontation with the question of political form and the elaboration of democratic organisational forms that could transform political organisation into collective laboratories for the experimentation with social and political alternatives. And of course we need more exchanges of ideas and experiences on the Balkan level.

To conclude: Many people think that history divides the peoples in the Balkans. Yet history can offer examples that unite the peoples. I will just state two: The first woman that was executed by the monarcho-fascists on the beginning of the Greek Civil War in 1946 was Mirka Ginova (Eirini Gini), a Slav-macedonian teacher and communist who had fought against the Germans during the occupation. She has been part of the collective memory of heroism on both sides of the border. The biggest mass grave of dead soldiers of the Democratic Army of Greece (the military wing of the Greek Communist Party in the Civil War 1946-1949) is outside the Greek city of Florina. They died heroically in the struggle for democracy and socialism in Greece against the monarcho-fascist army supported by American imperialists. Many of them would have used the slav-macedonian name “Lerin” (Лерин) for the same city. Their memory is honored on both side of the border. It is true that the history of the Balkans is filled with many tragedies and many pages of it are filled with violence, injustice and discrimination. We cannot rewrite these pages, although we have to go back to them and make sure that they are not repeated. But we can write new pages of common struggles, common hope and common projects of emancipation.

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P.S.

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