

Tsipras defends record of austerity in Greek election debate

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15 September 2015

Syriza leader and former Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras debated Evangelos Meimarakis, the leader of the right-wing New Democracy (ND) party, in a three-hour, nationally-televised debate on Monday. After ND pulled alongside Syriza in the polls, both candidates were seeking to win a last-minute advantage before Sunday's general elections.

The event was a largely empty and ceremonial affair, shaped like the rest of the campaign by Syriza's cynical betrayal of its election promises to end European Union (EU) austerity policies. It took power in January with a mandate to end EU austerity demands, and won a landslide "no" vote in a referendum on EU austerity in July. Nonetheless, given the support in Syriza's base within the bourgeoisie and the affluent middle class for keeping the euro and good ties with the EU, Tsipras capitulated and signed a new €13 billion EU austerity package.

In a few months, Tsipras has almost effortlessly completed his conversion from a young politician hailed in the media as a left-wing firebrand to a conventional, pro-business politician. With Tsipras campaigning on the basis of austerity and the EU agreement he signed, the policies advanced by Syriza and ND in the election campaign are largely indistinguishable.

In the lead-up to the debate, sections of the Greek ruling elite warned that such a political elite is not in a position to effectively control the popular opposition that will emerge to the EU. On Friday, *To Vima* carried an editorial titled "They must talk about the elephant in the room," criticizing last Thursday's seven-party debate for not taking up the consequences of the EU austerity package that Tsipras signed in July.

"Everyone knows that whoever prevails in the elections will have to face a binding agreement with a

slew of specific measures and reforms that will affect everyone's life. And yet at Wednesday's debate, the major issues that we will face in a few days were barely discussed. The changes, for instance, in the pension system that will affect millions was not even on the agenda," the paper wrote.

Calling for Tsipras and Meimarakis to try to prepare the Greek people for the onslaught of right-wing measures that will be imposed under the new EU austerity package, *To Vima* wrote, "it is absurd for the political clash to be limited to who is the most capable, new or old, to implement the agreement with our creditors." It complained that politicians were refusing "to openly talk about how the next day will not be a walk in the park..."

In the event, however, neither Tsipras nor Meimarakis addressed the devastating impact that the sales tax increases, subsidy cuts, and pension cuts will have on Greek working people, preferring instead to trade accusations of corruption or incompetence in talks with the EU. The event was a colorless affair, with the two debaters generally smiling with each other and on good terms.

Meimarakis repeatedly stressed that he also intended to implement Tsipras' austerity deal with the EU, but he tried to discredit Tsipras by pointing to Syriza's 180-degree turn on EU austerity.

Thus, in the run-up to the debate, Meimarakis repeatedly chided Tsipras for turning down his offers of forming an ND-Syriza coalition government: "Why does he [Tsipras] not respond positively? What is he afraid of? Why does he want to stay on the outside? To start throwing stones again? So as to turn anti-memorandum again in six months? To tell us that we should come and implement what he signed because he wouldn't?"

As for Tsipras, while admitting to “mistakes,” and trying to verbally distance himself from the worst of the EU austerity policies to which he has agreed, he also endorsed the EU bailout package, trying cynically to present it as the result of a “militant” struggle by his government.

Asked to “explain to the people why they should prefer a prime minister who has admitted that he made mistakes on politically important issues,” Tsipras said: “I gained experience in a short period of time. I tried to do everything, to fight. Someone who tries will also make mistakes. We fought, we didn’t sell out the fight. We gained some ground for our country. We brought the people to the fore with the referendum, we brought an agreement that opens the way forward to progress, we avoided the Grexit [an exit of Greece from the eurozone].”

This account is a travesty of what occurred. Not only did Tsipras gain no “ground” for Greece, he accepted a savage austerity package entirely on the terms dictated by German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s government. He did not fight, or make any appeal to broader opposition to austerity in the European population, but signed an agreement with the EU that deepens the unprecedented social retrogression that the EU has imposed in Greece over the last five years.

As for Tsipras’ claim that he brought the people “to the fore” with his referendum, this is a cynical fraud. He called the referendum as a maneuver, as Syriza officials have since confirmed, in the hope of being defeated and using the resulting “yes” vote to austerity to justify a capitulation to the EU’s austerity demands. In the event, the plan failed, and the Greek population voted “no.” However, Tsipras trampled the vote and imposed the social cuts, anyway.

Another journalist asked, “In January, you said you would rip up the Memorandum. Nothing was realized. Why do you want to govern with a Memorandum that will not change?”

Tsipras replied, “Our fight created a feeling. The agreement is a living organism. There are open issues: the debt, the Asset Development Fund, the red debts. The people will decide whether these issues should be handled by a government that is going to fight or a government that says yes to everything.”

This presentation of Syriza as a government that “is going to fight” to modify a few technical terms of the

EU bailout memorandum, unlike ND, that “says yes to everything” that the EU might demand, is another lie. Syriza did not fight; it said yes to all the demands of the EU. What is emerging ever more clearly is that the fundamental social rights of the working class can only be defended in an independent political struggle against Syriza and its political allies across Europe.

While presenting himself as a fighter, Tsipras did not miss an opportunity to kowtow to Merkel and praise his good relations with her, stating: “My relationship with Merkel was based on mutual respect of my institutional role but also sharp differences and conflict. ... The one who challenges with confidence and respectability is respected by a political counterpart.”



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