Greek government appoints right-wing extremist Athanasios Plevris as health minister

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After the devastating forest fires in July and August, Greece is now heading into the next wave of the pandemic with sharply rising COVID-19 infections and a low vaccination rate. On August 24, authorities registered a record 4,608 COVID cases. On September 2, 106 people died from the virus—the third highest figure since the pandemic began. In the small country of around 11 million inhabitants, more than 14,000 people have already died from COVID-19.

There is growing concern and anger in the population about the lack of resources in the health system and the dangerous "herd immunity" strategy of the government. The reopening of schools next week in particular will fuel the spread of the Delta variant and put thousands of children, young people and their families at risk. At the same time, only about 56 percent of the population is currently fully vaccinated.

The Greek government under the right-wing New Democracy (ND) party is reacting to the social tensions escalated by the pandemic with a further shift to the right and is bracing itself for a confrontation with the working class. Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis therefore reshuffled his cabinet last week and gave positions to radical right-wing forces.

The new health minister is Athanasios (Thanos) Plevris, a lawyer and the son of Greece's most influential fascist and Nazi Konstantinos Plevris. Until his defection to ND in 2012, Thanos Plevris was an MP for the far-right party LAOS (People's Orthodox Alarm). This means that three ministries are now in the hands of former LAOS politicians: Health under Plevris, Interior under Makis Voridis and Development under Adonis Georgiadis. All three are notorious right-wing extremists known for their xenophobic rants.

LAOS founder Giorgos Karatzaferis, himself a racist and anti-Semite, commented on the cabinet reshuffle over the weekend on his own television station, Art TV, with evident satisfaction. "Half of my faction is currently running the country," said Karatzaferis, who sees this as a concession to right-wing opponents of vaccination. "Thanos Plevris was my protégé," he stressed. When Plevris's father's Nazi propaganda was too much in the public spotlight, the son was promoted instead and first entered parliament in 2007.

Although Thanos Plevris has been trying to distance himself from his father in words for a long time, a closer look at his political background proves what kind of politics he has.

The father, Konstantinos Plevris, is considered the ideological pioneer of the neo-Nazi party Chrysi Avgi (Golden Dawn). During the military dictatorship from 1967 to 1974, Plevris worked closely with the junta and is also said to have been on the payroll of several secret services, including the CIA. Already in 1965, he founded the "Fourth of August Party", whose name goes back to the dictatorship of General Ioannis Metaxas (1936–1941) who bloodily suppressed the workers' movement in the interwar period. Plevris senior is not the only one in this tradition. His son, too, has reportedly referred positively to Metaxas on several occasions, calling him a "comrade" and a "leader".

In 2006, Plevris senior published the anti-Semitic book "Jews, the Whole Truth", in which he promoted the Holocaust and bluntly declared that he despises the Jews and regards them as "subhumans", as the German online magazine *Telepolis* reported . This book was promoted on television by the current Development Minister Georgiadis. When K. Plevris was sentenced to 14 months in prison on probation for "incitement of the people and racial hatred" in December 2007, he appealed and was defended in court by his son Thanos in the following trial—and won. In 2009, the old Plevris was acquitted, which his son praised as proof of "freedom of expression in Greece".

In a statement on September 1, the Central Board of Jewish Communities in Greece expressed concern about the appointment of Thanos Plevris, recalling how he explained to the court in 2009, as a defense lawyer, why it was perfectly legal for his father to want to exterminate other people. Commenting on K. Plevris's reference to Auschwitz, he said: "I will examine the most extreme interpretation. That the defendant with this reference means: 'Keep the camp of Auschwitz in good conditions because I want, at some point, the national socialist regime to come back, Hitler to come back, take the Jews and put them in Auschwitz.' What kind of instigation is this? What incitement is this? Is it that one is not allowed to believe and want to believe that 'I want to exterminate someone'?"

Plevris responded to the accusations of the Central Board by apologizing to the Jewish population and speaking out "against any form of anti-Semitism". But such worthless phrases are only meant to cover up his extreme right-wing views.

As early as the 1990s, Plevris marched with the neo-Nazis. He is

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on friendly terms with the former spokesman of Chrysi Avgi, Ilias Kasidiaris, as this photo proves.

In 2020, the trial began for the murder of an LGBT activist who was beaten to death in Athens two years ago. The defendant's legal counsel is Thanos Plevris, according to a *Deutsche Welle* report.

In 2010, Plevris appeared with Georgiadis before the extreme right-wing "Patriotic Association of Thermopylae", where they ranted about the "purity" of the Greek race and the importance of "blood ties".

Moreover, the new health minister is a vaccine sceptic. When the H1N1 influenza pandemic spread in 2009–10, he encouraged right-wing opponents of vaccination and railed in parliament against doctors calling on citizens to get vaccinated, denouncing them for creating "panic". This July, he spoke out against the government persuading people to get vaccinated against COVID-19.

Particularly shocking are his inhumane statements from 2011, when he called for the killing of refugees at an event hosted by the right-wing *Patria* magazine. "There is no border protection without deaths," Thanos Plevris declared to the applause of his fascist followers.

He threatened immigrants, "When you're here, there will be no social benefits, you won't get anything to eat or drink, you won't be able to go to the hospital, and you'll be telling others in Pakistan, 'We're worse off here.'" Migration to Greece should be deterred, he stressed. "Hell must look like heaven to what they will live here!"

It is not just Plevris's ilk in Europe like Hungarian prime minister Orban or German politicians of the AfD who have made similar diatribes. In recent years the entire ruling class in Greece and the EU has followed precisely this path, terrorizing refugees with gunfire at the border, 'pushbacks' in the Mediterranean and hellish living conditions in detention camps.

The strengthening of fascist elements in the Greek government must be understood as an open declaration of war on the working class. The new extreme right-wing health minister will relentlessly impose reopening policies and cuts in the health system under the conditions of the new Delta wave.

Mitsotakis has made other changes in his cabinet. Citizen Protection Minister Michalis Chrysochoidis, discredited for his fatal inaction during the recent wildfires, has been replaced by Panagiotis Theodorikakos, who is also in charge of the police and fire brigade.

Theodorikakos has had a long march to the right—from the youth organization of the Communist Party of Greece to the social democratic PASOK to the ND. His history means he is seen as a suitable man for suppressing social protests. A few days after taking office, he applied for the first time the new law restricting demonstrations that was passed last year. A demonstration of around 200 students in the centre of Athens was pushed to one side of the street by the police last Friday so that car traffic could continue as normal.

The government also set up a new ministry for the climate crisis and civil protection to deflect popular anger over the consequences of this year's forest fires. Mitsotakis first appointed Evangelos Apostolakis, a former navy general and defence minister in the Syriza government, to the post, with the aim of integrating the opposition party. He declined, and the job was given to Cypriot right-wing conservative politician Christos Stylianidis, previously EU Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Protection from 2014 to 2019.

The current right-wing shift in Greece is part of an international process. Everywhere, the ruling class is turning to dictatorial forms of rule and relying on far-right forces to suppress the growing opposition among workers and youth.

The year began with the storming of the US Congress by a fascist mob instigated by former President Donald Trump. In Germany, the bourgeois parties' candidates for the Bundestag are vying to see who can most aggressively push a militarist agenda and implement school openings most ruthlessly. In all EU countries, the public health system is in danger of collapsing due to the spread of the Delta variant as governments let the virus run rampant, removing all protective measures except vaccinations. A year and a half into the pandemic and after more than a million deaths in Europe, the ruling elites continue to pursue the same agenda: "profits before lives".

That is why there was no outcry in the international media about the fact that a politician in the mould of German fascist Bjorn Höcke now heads the Greek Ministry of Health. Major newspapers like *Spiegel Online*, the *New York Times* and the *Guardian* have remained silent, as have most EU politicians and international pseudo-leftist parties.

The largest opposition party, Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left), feigned verbal criticism of the cabinet reshuffle. Party leader Alexis Tsipras spoke of an extreme right-wing "government of LAOS ministers" and Syriza MP Euclid Tsakalotos quoted Plevris's anti-refugee rants in parliament. "A man who made this statement and thinks like this cannot be a health minister in any European country," Tsakalotos said.

But he then immediately offered to accept Plevris if he distanced himself from the statements: "In our view, there are only two options: either he retracts his statements now, before the inauguration, or Mr Mitsotakis revises his decision."

In fact, Syriza itself is part of the right-wing turn in Greek and international politics and directly responsible for the rise of far-right forces to the highest government offices. During its 2015–2019 term in government, it formed a coalition with the ultra-right Independent Greeks (Anel) to impose the austerity dictates of the Troika of the European Central Bank, International Monetary Fund, and European Commission in the face of enormous popular opposition. In the process it also armed the police state apparatus and the military, and pursued a brutal refugee policy in the spirit of Plevris.

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