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For Greece's centre-left, Pasok redux won't do

Newly elected Fofi Gennimata faces the monumental task of forming a movement to give Greece's social democratic forces a common purpose

Greece's centre-left died with Pasok, the socialist party that took most of the blame for the country's debt-fuelled spiral into economic depression and prolonged austerity. Now, Greek social democrats are hoping the centre-left can be reborn from the shell of this once-mighty party.

On 19 November, more than 150,000 Greeks went to nationwide polling stations in a run-off vote to elect the figure who will lead this effort. They picked the current Pasok leader Fofi Gennimata, who held off a challenge from her younger rival, Nikos Androulakis, an MEP with the same party.

Gennimata is now in charge of a party that has yet to be formed, a policy programme that is unwritten and a team that has not been assembled. In the coming weeks, she will have to address these issues and give Greece's social democratic forces a common purpose. The former deputy health and interior minister has provided a steady hand on the tiller since taking over the Pasok leadership in 2015 after a turbulent few years, but has not been able to build any momentum since then. Many see her as an uninspired choice as the centre-left's saviour.

She did, however, agree this year to support efforts to unite Pasok, centrist To Potami and various other smaller left-of-centre groups in a bid to form a third option for Greek voters, beyond left-wing Syriza and conservative New Democracy. This was billed as an attempt to breathe new life into the centre-left, which was decimated in the maelstrom that ripped through Greek politics after the country signed its first international bailout in 2010.

Taking the blame

In the autumn of 2009, Pasok gained 43.9 per cent of the vote to return to power for the fifth time. Less than three years later, in June 2012, its support had plummeted to 12.3 per cent, as it was held largely accountable for public finances veering off track and painful measures being needed to rectify the situation.

This is what produced the term 'Pasokification', which is now used in political analysis around Europe to describe the collapse of centre-left parties and the rise of more radical alternatives. Given that Greece was the canary in the mineshaft for these political developments, could it also prove a test case for the revival of the centre-left across the continent?

To put itself in such a position, the new grouping has to overcome several challenges. The first is to find a way to re-engage with voters. The Greek centre-left has splintered over the past few years, and numerous personality-driven initiatives – such as the Movement of Democratic Socialists launched by former prime minister George Papandreou in 2015 – have added to the sense that social democrats are more interested in competing among themselves than challenging for power.

There was some encouragement from the turnout in the two rounds of voting for the centre-left leadership in Greece. More than 210,000 people cast their ballots in the first round, in which nine candidates took part. This was higher than most experts had expected, and pollsters believe this would translate into at least a 10 per cent share of the vote in national elections.

Greece's Macron

To harness this momentum, 53-year-old Gennimata must find a way of freshening up the public face of the centre-left, which is her second big challenge. This means involving younger people and bringing in personalities from beyond the narrow confines of the party system. In some respects, the electoral success of Emmanuel Macron in France has set the tone across Europe for this type of renewal. In Greece, New Democracy leader Kyriakos Mitsotakis, who casts himself as a local version of Macron, has begun the process of refreshing the party's candidate lists and bringing in experts from outside the political arena.

The biggest test, though, for the newly elected leader is to ensure the new party does not become Pasok under another guise. Part of the success of the first round of the vote was that it allowed candidates from other parties or from outside national politics to take part, mainly To Potami

leader Stavros Theodorakis and Athens mayor Giorgos Kaminis.

Though these two hopefuls gained less than 25 per cent of the vote in total during the first ballot, their participation allowed Gennimata to argue that she won in an open contest that was not just a Pasok affair. She will now have to find a way to lead in a similarly inclusive manner if the centre-left wants to ditch the baggage that Pasok carries from its many years in power. Pasok, though, has not shown itself so far to be open to the idea of change. In 2014, it worked with another seven social democratic movements and parties to form the Elia (Olive Tree) alliance for the European Parliament elections of that year. But after electing two MEPs, the alliance was soon discarded by Pasok's leader at the time, Evangelos Venizelos.

Photos of Gennimata, the daughter of one of Pasok's founders, celebrating her win last Sunday with Pasok officials who built their reputations in the 1980s did not give the impression that the centre-left is about to enter a new era. She faces plenty of work to dispel the feeling among sceptics that the current process is just an excuse to revive the socialist party formed in 1974 by Andreas Papandreou rather than a genuine attempt to forge a new identity.

How to be relevant?

Survey data suggests it would be a mistake for Gennimata to miss the chance to rejuvenate the centre-left. In the September 2015 elections, her first as Pasok leader, the party gained just 6.29 per cent of the vote, despite teaming up with Papandreou's movement and minor centre-left groups. An opinion poll by the University of Macedonia in Thessaloniki last month put support for Pasok and its associates at 6.5 per cent, meaning the needle had hardly moved over a two-year period. It suggests there is no appetite for the socialist party continuing in its age-old form beyond a small, hardcore following of mostly ageing supporters who have stuck with it since its glory days in the 1980s.

Gennimata's task is not to produce a Pasok redux, but to lead Greek social democrats in something much more ambitious: a campaign to reshape the centre-left and make it relevant to the country's post-crisis era. This week, a University of Macedonia poll indicated that 56 per cent of Greeks believe the new grouping must pursue an independent path; 13.5 per cent say it should ally itself with Syriza, which prime minister Alexis Tsipras has attempted to move away from its radical leftist roots as he tries to claim the social democratic mantle.

To really make an impact, Gennimata must find a way to carve out a

space between New Democracy, which leads opinion polls as it tries to freshen up its image and move away from the populist right-wing attitudes prevalent in the centre-right party for years, and Syriza, which is searching for a new identity.

Greece is due to exit its third, and hopefully final, bailout next summer. Although this will be supported by a return to international bond markets and the first signs of an economic recovery, significant problems will remain. These include the poor state of the country's healthcare, severely reduced labour rights, high taxes and social security contributions, a creaking public administration and the lowest level of social justice in the European Union, as measured by the Bertelsmann Stiftung.

These are the issues that Greece's social democrats will need to address with progressive policies. The evidence suggests that the solutions cannot be found in the Greek centre-left's past. It is incumbent upon Gennimata and those who will join her to find a way to move on. If they manage to do so, they may provide a hopeful story for colleagues in other parts of Europe. If they decide, instead, to bask in Pasok's faded splendour, social democracy in Greece will remain an example for others to avoid.



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