

Political Extremism: A Threat to the European Project?

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An Interview with Lorenzo Moretti and Tomas Navia
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George Papandreou is president of Socialist International, an organization of political parties worldwide that aim to establish social democracies. He served as prime minister of Greece from 2009 to 2011 and as minister for foreign affairs from 1999 to 2004 and from 2009 to 2010.

Brown Journal of World Affairs: To what extent do you think the rise of extremism in the political scenes of countries like Greece is due to the recession and the EU's response to it?

George Papandreou: Political extremism is obviously linked to the economic crisis. I think, however, that it goes a bit further back to a feeling in Europe. As globalization has taken hold, we've seen the rise of emerging markets and more competition between emerging markets and Europe, and therefore rising unemployment. In a sense, this competition with emerging markets has triggered a race to the bottom and a loss of some basic benefits and welfare rates. I think what happened is that a more nationalistic rhetoric emerged that played on these fears rather than adapting to deal with some of the underlying problems in our economy. Such nationalism, in turn, became a stumbling block in solving the sovereign debt crisis not only in Greece but also in other parts of Europe. Instead of dealing with urgent priorities and addressing the real causes of the crisis, we saw scapegoating of different groups or different countries.

Journal: Why do you think the people of Greece can identify with these types of right-wing, extremist parties?

Papandreou: Well, I think that is a question for the people of Greece. We see this in a number of countries, and there are different expressions of this. There may be nationalistic or antisystemic politicians who speak out against the political status quo and tap into a growing sense of insecurity—both financial and otherwise.

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One of the lessons from the Greek crisis is if we exclude people from the political process and try to impose policies without public consultation and consensus, they will lose faith in democratic institutions. In

the midst of dealing with a crisis—when people feel they are losing something, there's pain, or they feel a sense of disempowerment or disenfranchisement—they sometimes will look for saviors or scapegoats. So, fundamentalism and absolutism will emerge, or there will be an authoritarian figure saying, "I am here to save you." In the midst of a crisis, that can appeal to people. It can offer a feeling of empowerment. But I believe it is false empowerment because it really only empowers extreme personalities. These figures can be political leaders, religious leaders, or whatever else, and they become spokespeople for these movements.

Now, in Greece, these movements also look for scapegoats. They don't look at the real problems. Obviously, migration is a big question in Greece because there is a lot of illegal immigration from crisis areas—Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Africa, the former Soviet Union, and other parts of the world. We have been, up to now, quite capable of absorbing a large number of migrants. But as the financial crisis has hit us, obviously this has caused a lot of unemployment, and it is quite easy to say, "Oh, we're losing jobs to some foreigners." I would say simply that we're losing jobs, that we're losing the economy. Very often I see these extreme movements trying to exploit the more primal instincts of society. But we shouldn't forget that extremist movements also exist in other European countries, even in some of the Nordic countries—some are larger; some are smaller.

The European Union is based on the opposite set of values—transcending nationalistic rhetoric and transcending the dividing lines of nations and cultures. This extremism, therefore, is tearing at the basic fabric of the European Union, creating major problems for the Union itself. This type of un-European rhetoric is not confined to the extremist fringe, it has found its way into mainstream European discourse. We can see that in the stereotypes that have propagated

throughout the economic crisis. For example, some say the Greeks are lazy, but it just so happens that, according to the OECD, the Greeks work more hours than any other Europeans. These stereotypes, however, are deeply embedded. These kinds of stereotypes undermine the sense of solidarity that one would expect and want from the European family.

Journal: How do you think the rise of extremist parties is changing the political sphere in these countries? What do you think the future might hold?

Papandreou: I think a lot will depend on three things. First, it will depend on how long this crisis prevails. If there is 60 percent youth unemployment, like in Greece and Spain, it's not a sustainable social situation. So youth employment is where we either need investment or more European social programs. I have advanced a proposal to create the so-called Erasmus program for the unemployed. Since we currently have a program of university student exchange, why not extend such a program to the unemployed, who can be moved around, trained throughout Europe, and funded with European resources? We need these types of policies and positive stories in Europe to deal with the crisis.

Second, the future will depend on a sense of justice. There is a sense that some people are shouldering a disproportionate burden of the financial crisis while others are not paying their fair share. Tax evaders—those who can take their money out—and tax havens reinforce this notion of inequality. Some can't evade and do pay their taxes, and they are often poorer people. The brunt of this crisis really hits them. So there's a sense of injustice, and the greater the sentiment, the more people will be antisystemic and extreme.

Third, the future will depend on how we can empower our citizens and how they can be part of decision making. In October 2011, my government negotiated an unprecedented debt reduction and aid package with our European partners. But this package had tough terms attached to it and there was much resistance from certain segments of Greek society. I felt that it would be very important to have a national referendum on the program, so that ownership would lie with Greek society. I believe that would have minimized the extreme voices and marginalized those viewpoints.

Journal: On the whole, how did the people of Greece feel about the referendum?

Papandreou: Many political leaders inside Greece were opposed to it, partially because they felt that they would be losing power. As a politician, when people

154 speak, then you don't have to speak for the people. So some of these leaders who were supposedly speaking for the people and advancing all kinds of ideas were going to be marginalized because the people would have spoken, one way

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or another. But there was also fear of this democratic process even among some of the conservative leaders in Europe. That wasn't a positive sign, and I think it was

the wrong response. If it is to succeed, the European Union is not going to be a project of the leaders but a project of the people, and we have to move in that direction. I think we've reached limits right now of how many elite decisions our societies will accept. The people will have to become a greater part of the decision making process.

Journal: In what direction do you think this takes democracy in Europe? If we have leaders with an explicit interest in maintaining their power, on what do you think their parties' future successes will depend since they don't really represent the people well?

Papandreou: I think that, if things remain as they are today, we will see a lot of antisystemic and antiestablishment parties popping up in the European elections in a little over a year's time. We will have all kinds of political movements—some will be extreme, some will be populist, and some will be anti-European. These movements will serve as a very important sign to Europe that we're not on the right course. However, if we do make changes, I would like to see that we not only strengthen people's representation at the national and local levels but also that we democratize our European institutions. For example, why not give European citizens the chance to elect the European Union's President? Why should we wait to elect the president from the European Council, which consists of the heads of state and government of the 27 member countries, and then ratify the election at the European Parliament? That is not the most democratic way to do this. I think we need to bring in the people, and to do that we should have an elected European Union president with the clear ability and legitimacy to speak on behalf of them when these crises take place. This individual should be able to go beyond our borders without speaking for Greece, for Germany, for France, or for Italy in particular, by speaking for all these countries and for all the citizens of the European Union.

When we were talking about the European constitution, we had pushed—

and I was a strong proponent of this—the citizens' initiative, which now of course is part of the treaty in the European Union. As a result, when a number of citizens sign a petition, it has to be answered by the Commission. There is the idea of a peace corps—a European volunteer force that brings in citizens to work on European issues. These are the types of proposals I think we need to look at institutionally in addition to strengthening the European Parliament.

Further, we must look at some of the possibilities to pool our resources rather than fear the risks of working together. There's a sense of mistrust of working together in Europe, rather than a sense of the power we can have when we join forces. For example, we could deal with the debt crisis much more effectively if we had created a Euro bond instead of having had each country go out on the markets by itself. This measure was, for some countries, too risky because that would involve pooling our debt. However, it would have made things much easier to handle during the financial crisis and would have made it much less painful to undertake the necessary reforms and structural changes in certain countries.

Journal: Do you think this fear of working together has been around for a long time, or is it a more recent development that came with the economic crisis of certain countries and not others?

Papandreou: I wouldn't say that we're not working together. In the European model of the single market, the Commission has directors that set certain common standards for the market. In that area, we have pooled our risks and costs, but we've also pooled our benefits. So let's say the European Union decides that we won't import GMOs [genetically modified organisms], or we will protect privacy in data collection in a certain way. If our policies affect global regulations, then we're strong. If big companies like Google, Apple, Amazon, or monopolies and big conglomerates have to divide up to deal with antitrust laws in Europe, it is clear we can be powerful in the world when we pool our resources.

But we haven't followed that model in dealing with the sovereign debt crisis—basically we have sort of minimized the common risk and cost while also minimizing the benefit. We haven't really pooled our resources. I think this stems from a number of things. First of all, Europe expanded quite quickly—we were 15 [member states] only nine years ago, and we're now 27—we're much wider and more diverse. Second, at some point the conservative forces in Europe started using the politics of fear—it was xenophobia, then it was migration, then it was Islamophobia. This was a substitute—even in mainstream parties—for dealing

with the real problems at hand. That narrative was easily linked up to some of the narratives we have today about the profligate South and the austere North, and so on, which I think have really nothing to do with the deeper problems we have to face and the potential reforms we have to make. We're missing an opportunity, but we're also creating a lot of animosity and even bitterness inside Europe. And this may stay with us; it will create a legacy—a negative legacy—that we will have to work hard to get rid of.

Journal: What do you think is the solution to Greece's economic problems and change in political climate, as well as this culture of not working as closely together as possible? Given the options that Greece currently faces regarding whether or not to stay in the eurozone, which do you think would be most appropriate for the Greek people, politicians, and Europe?

Papandreou: I think we've made our decision to stay in the eurozone. Prime Minister Antonis Samaras has now made that decision despite the very onerous terms imposed. As I said from the very beginning, I would have prioritized looking at the deeper problems in the Greek economy rather than at the symptoms. The symptoms are the deficit and the debt. Of course we have to deal with those symptoms. But in Greece, the real need was to reorganize the state. We had to bring in more transparency, reorganize our tax system, make sure there wasn't waste of resources, and fight corruption, while also opening up many potential new areas of investment—green energy, the Mediterranean diet, agriculture, high quality tourism, fisheries, shipping, and exportable services in education and health. These are things that I think we could have handled in a different way. We needed investment in new kinds of sustainable growth for Greece with the help of the European Union rather than simply trying to solve all our problems with austerity.

Now, we've chosen that path because there weren't many choices and the priority was to avoid a catastrophic national bankruptcy. But the larger issue is that Europe must deal with the eurozone problems in a wider context and with a long-term agenda. We need to get away from stop-gap measures and take a comprehensive approach towards issues like creating a banking union, deepening economic integration, fostering cross-border infrastructure investment, or providing stimulus to fight unemployment—just to name a few. I think this will be a determining factor not only for the rise or fall of extremism in Europe but also for whether the eurozone itself will be able to survive.

Journal: You discussed an economic solution, but do you think the political solution is attainable? Do you think it's possible to eradicate these movements that scapegoat others and create an uncomfortable atmosphere for democratic nations?

Papandreou: I think we have to get away from punitive rhetoric and policies. Greece has a debt problem. Solving the problem is painful enough without having to punish Greece—or Cyprus, Portugal, Spain, or Italy. We need to make the Greek economy sustainable: we should work to see what we need to do to

increase competitiveness, to create better infrastructure, and to invest more in comparative advantages, rather than succumbing to the painful, deep recession, which is on the verge of a major depression in some countries. So that's one thing. In addition, it is also important to reflect on how we will empower Europeans to make sure this is a project they own. We need to ensure that this is not simply an elite project where solutions are imposed and the majority of Europeans have no say. So I think more democratic decision making is an essential precondition for overcoming both the economic and political issues we face in Europe today.

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Journal: In the midst of all these conflicts and problems, do you think that EU membership constitutes an element that safeguards democracy and makes it easier for the people of Greece to attain their goals?

Papandreou: Obviously the European Union stands for democracy. One cannot become a member of the European Union without being a democratic country. There are even stipulations in the European Court of Human Rights; there are important institutions that ensure that democratic processes are followed. A country can be ostracized in a sense—its vote can be taken away—if it doesn't follow basic democratic rules. So we certainly stand for democratic rule. As I said before, however, Europe itself and European institutions themselves have to be democratized. Institutions now have increasing power and influence in a way that is not always easily transferred or fair. Sometimes two or three countries will be the ones to make the decisions, imposing them on the others. I would say we have to Europeanize certain decisions while democratizing them at the same time. Otherwise, citizens will see the European project as elitist and distant. When our forefathers built this European continent, they looked at linking our

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economies together so that we would not go to war with each other again and go against our own interests. I think we've achieved that. We are interdependent, but part of this interdependence now seems to many as a straitjacket. Dealing with some of these major challenges is where policies that can really empower us will be more effective. This will be better than being constrained and following closed-minded policies such as austerity, which I think is not a solution to Europe's complex problems. 

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