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Exploring the Practices of Greek Municipalities with Left-wing Majorities between 2014-2019: The Battle for the Commons and the Limits of Action

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I will speak about the period of 2014 in Greece, when left-wing parties came to power in many municipalities and/or left-wing mayors were elected - where they remained in power until 2019. This was a good period and we had big expectations. In 2014 we had the expectation that SYRIZA would form a government and fight against the EU memorandum and its neoliberal policies. We had some, let us say, "emblematic victories" in some municipalities. I will speak about two and a half cases. One case I would like to deal with here is that of Kozani, a town very near the northern border, which has serious problems with the lignite exploitation taking place there. I will also speak about the island of Corfu, which is still suffering through waste management problems. I will also refer to a more emblematic case, one that is also very simple - the municipality of Aristotelis, in Chalkidiki, where the Canadian company Eldorado, is currently operating a gold mine.

¹This transcript is based on a recording of an oral presentation and has not been formally authorized by the speaker.

These electoral victories reflected the will of the voters. In some of these municipalities it was the first time that there was a left majority in power. This novelty was the expression of the will of people to fight for the commons. We will see how much we have succeeded in this respect. The left-wing mayors in these municipalities ended their terms in office in August 2019. We will attempt the first assessment of their work in the environmental field and summarize a narrative of small steps. Despite the economic conditions, against an outdated institutional framework and in the absence of any common ground with organized ecological grassroots movements, these municipalities attempted to carry out left-wing governance. So let us go to our first case, which is Kozani.

As we have already said, it is near the border with Macedonia. It was a surprise victory in 2014 for Mayor Lefteris Loannidis who was the choice of SYRIZA and a member of the Green Party. Though he did not win in the first round of the local elections, with a margin of around 20%, he managed to win the second round by forming a majority based precisely around the predominant environmental issue of the local community - the transition to a long-awaited post-carbon/post-lignite era. The previous mayor was considered to be very friendly with the Union of Public Power Corporation called in Greek PPC (which is how we will refer to it from here on) and was a local supporter of the use of lignite. Before I introduce what the new mayor's plans were and what actions this red-green coalition would take in the municipality of Kozani, we need to first present the local social and financial conditions during that time and briefly examine the energy policies of the Greek state.

Kozani is at the center of an area with a long history of power production, mainly due to the presence of lignite. There are now six lignite plants in the greater area of Kozani, Ptolemaida, Amyntaio and Florina which all draw from the same deposit that reaches as far as Bitola, where the REK plant is. The first plant in the area was founded in 1956 and opened in 1959. Nowadays, the six plants employ around 16,000 people in the prefecture Dytiki (West) of Makedonia or the western part of Greek Macedonia. It is one of the poorest areas in the EU. We said there are 16,000 employees. However, there is also a population of 300,000 in which the general unemployment rate is 30%, which rises to a staggering 70% for those aged 25 or

younger. It is not difficult to assume that the power plants have created a lot of jobs, but at the same time, they have contributed vastly to the lack of development in/of any other sector of the local economy. For example, at least ten villages have been evacuated during the last couple of decades due to the opening of mines, and the creation of acid-containing landfills. It is like a lunar landscape with a black depressing color. They have taken over more than 16,000 hectares; land that was left uncultivated was taken by the PPC for mining. The company refused to cover any expenses for the necessary removal of the village, as it claimed that it did not use the land under the village's houses: "we did not touch your houses - we have left you without any other recourse - but we did not touch your houses and we have no obligation to you."

There has not been a single act of epidemiological research done in the area to measure the public health effects resulting from lignite exploitation. At the same time, everyone knows that the area is polluted and that the water is contaminated with chromium. Everyone there has lost at least one relative to some type of cancer. On the other hand, there is plenty of data pointing to the importance of lignite for the Greek power system and, therefore, the importance of Kozani, Florina and their plants. Throughout the country there are a total of fourteen plants, six of them, as I mentioned are in Kozani, which produces around 4,500 megawatts of energy. Lignite remains the main source of the Greek energy system covering around 30% of the country's needs.

The investment in green energy in Greece could be described as "too little, too late." With all this in mind, we must understand that the passage into the post-lignite era is not an easy transition. Lignite exploitation and extraction has deep roots and cutting them would obviously damage the local community and the Greek economy. This situation seemingly went on forever, with the main pressure to change it coming from the EU, which was pressing for many years to stop the use of lignite.

Initially, Greece decided to shut down their older plants, which were causing the most harm to the environment. The reason for this was not to actually respect the environment, but the fact that back in 2013 the Greek energy plants entered the Gas Emissions System,

which meant that they had to pay costs relative to the amount of CO₂ they produced. Because they were not environmentally friendly, they had to pay large sums of money. Thus, what climate change and/or a sharp decline in public health had failed to produce, the financial measures of the EU began to achieve. But at the same time, when Greece started to reduce the number of old plants, including those in the Kozani area, they already had plans for creating new lignite plants, modern ones like Ptolemaida station, which is famous in Greece. It was supposed to employ 3,000 people. Even if the plants survive, I will come back to that later, they still would not cover more than 30% of the jobs. The lack of EU funding led the new government to announce, just a few days ago, that the plan for Ptolemaida would not go on. The post-lignite era now looks to be one step closer, which brings us back to our topic of the role of municipalities and the example of Loannidis, the local mayor.

During his five years in office he focused on building a plan for the social and environmental recovery of the area. In my opinion, he did exactly what he had to do, or perhaps it is better to say - what he could do. He cooperated with big organizations like the WWF and others and they worked together on creating this plan. He took care of his international allies, and the city of Kozani entered the coalition of European Citizens, who are part of the same platform. Of course, he pressed the PPS, the power company, the government and the EU for funding his plan. He proposed that it should be funded, in part, by a percentage derived from the gas emission system. At the same time, the mayor had to defend himself from the criticism he received for not fighting for the existing power plants and the jobs of his citizens. A lot of the people, employees mainly, did not seem convinced about the new era and were unaccepting of the changes. The PPS union leader has recently called the transition "a violent procedure." His mayor's plan was based mainly on the idea of keeping Kozani as an energy center while also using a lot of the land fields for solar panels to produce clean energy. However, the answer from the locals was: "His plan will not create enough jobs to cover the investment" - which is more or less true. The second pillar of his plan was agriculture. It is difficult for people who have grown used to a standard salary and all of the benefits they received by working in the PPS to accept the mayor's new vision. They know

that all of that will be lost if they become farmers, that they will have the uncertainty of a farmer's life. The population of Kozani thought they had left all of that behind, some decades or even generations before.

Having all this in mind, in 2019 Mayor Loannidis and the Green coalition lost the elections. The plan has now been reformed by the new mayor. So people have gone back to fight for the stability provided by the factories that are damaging the environment and human health. The majority has spoken. This was our first example of how Green politics fails in underdeveloped countries.

The second case study I will speak about is the island of Corfu, which has a strong history of leftist tradition. However, before 2014, when left-wing Mayor Kostas Nikolouzos - supported by SYRIZA - was elected, it had been a decade since Corfu had its last left-wing mayor. He has a background as a bank manager. The island is one of the most famous travel destinations worldwide. It is 585 m² and provides the grounds for a gigantic tourism industry. According to official statistics, in 2018 Corfu accepted two million visitors.

Over there, the environmental battle is about waste management. This is a problem which was created throughout many decades, as there had never been pressure from either local activists or organizations. There had never been a serious plan for waste management from the local authorities either. Of course, the waste management industry would be completely privatized. There was also a tricky term in the agreement concerning the minimal number of kilos or tons of waste that would have to go to the waste plant on a daily basis. We have experienced that when something like this is applied, every recycling program would intentionally mischaracterize their materials in order to meet the necessary requirements amount to be processed in the waste plant. This is how recycling programs are being destroyed - with such agreements.

So he did the right thing and stopped this plan. Generally speaking, recycling is still a challenge in most Greek cities. Most communities and local authorities have given little interest or investment. Almost everywhere there are only two choices, either the green or the blue box, green is for all garbage and blue is for all recycling material,

such as glass and paper; everything goes into this one box and we claim that we are recycling. In order for such a thing to work, you need a facility that creates jobs and allows for the separation of materials. In Corfu, they do not have either. This is a fact in most Greek cities. Just now, we are starting to see in some cities the use of underground boxes. They do not take up too much space, so they can use three or four different systems for recycling. Apart from this, we had not had a system, or any idea of separating materials at the source. This is the main reason why they cannot significantly reduce the amount of disposals, and thereby create a positive long-term effect on the environment of the island.

When Nikolouzos took over as left-wing mayor of the municipality, he had to deal with both long-term and short-term solutions. What happened is that the left-wing majority of Corfu was trapped into managing the urgent part of the problem and pursued short term solutions.

A short-term solution was chosen, a landfill site at the southern part of the island, the place called Lefkimmi. Initially, it was supposed to be part of a more ambitious plan according to which, along with two additional landfill sites, it was supposed to provide a solution for the rest of the island - a station for separating the recycling materials. Eventually, due to the change of plans, court rulings and things like this, Lefkimmi was left as the only landfill site. Adding to this bad planning, there were a lot of technical problems that made the Lefkimmi landfill site an environmental hazard. For instance, they did not have enough security concerning liquid run-off that would enter the water. But with no other choices available, the government and the municipality decided not to use it. This is what I call being trapped in the short-term situation.

A massive local movement, which was created around the decision of making this landfill, grew in the last few years during our left-wing government and the red-green coalition in the municipality. It had big support from vast parts of the political spectrum: the Communist Party was there, even the Golden Dawn, and the Nazi party, all participated in this movement. There have been violent battles, losses of lives. Around 600 policemen were stationed in the area until this summer, but the Lefkimmi plant started to operate nonetheless.

You can imagine what political cost it had for the local left-wing authorities. The repetitive argument of the locals is that the choice of Lefkimmi was the choice of downgrading the quality of life of the poor, while protecting the life of the rich. One can assume that this was one of the reasons why Nikolouzos was eventually left without allies in the local community. He paid the price in 2019 elections.

Eventually, toward the end of August 2019, about twenty days ago, and a few days before he handed over power to the new mayor, his plan for waste management was approved. It contained all of the necessary stations, but still no source separation - except in some very touristic centers. We do not know if this plan will be followed by the new mayor. I hope it will, but the real glimmer of hope, for me, comes from initiatives that were born in the last two-three years. Since 2017, volunteers have created green corners in private ownerships that have been offered to the public. This has caused more and more residents of Corfu to start separating waste at the source and functions as an example of the sorts of measures they must demand from authorities.

The third case is a half case. It is half because it is a very simple story, about the municipality of Aristotelis in Chalkidiki. Over there, there is a long history of gold mining for synthetic minting. Gold deposits still exist, but only in small percentages and it has become very difficult to extract. Over the last few years, a Canadian company, "Eldorado", has taken over the gold mines. This has been perceived as a hazard by the local community. The Green Party was the first to support the local population's opposition to the mining. Syriza very soon joined in and there was a huge movement growing, with big support all over Greece.

The battle in Chalkidiki became the center of the environmental discussion in Greece. Although it was a local thing, it was very important for the country as a whole. It functioned as a symbolic battle, pitting a big international company against a small local community. There has been a big battle over public opinion, meaning that the system, the company, the media and all right-wing governments did everything to stop them and to defame the movement. They created rioting incidents and made huge campaigns to defend them. The green initiative aimed at implementing pedagogical practic-

es in non-violence adopted from a Belgian teacher. Local activists were trained in how to state their point of view, and make their presence felt, without giving the system the right to stop them. All local movements did what they had to do; they connected with people from everywhere, with initiatives from everywhere and they made very good policy in the local field. They used the law, sued the mayor for everything, and wrote papers.

In 2014, a left-wing mayor won with a big margin for first time in this area. We had a leftist mayor and, along with it, a left-wing government which was elected one year after. They continued the fight against the gold mine. The government lost this battle, which was easy to predict. Eldorado is a Canadian company and Canada plays a strong role in the International Monetary Fund. The government became politically weak after its confrontation with the EU and the International Monetary Fund. So, every plan for rescuing the Greek economy was connected underneath by the need to protect investments coming from foreign countries. This was one way to tie the situation, the other way was the decision made by the previous government. Of course, there was also the option of international trade deals, agreements which allowed the left government to try to follow the law and make their life a little bit difficult without stopping foreign investments. This was not enough to stop gold mining in the area. In a very short time, the local movement turned against the government and against the mayor. The elected mayor had to resign, and another SYRIZA member became the new mayor, who followed the strategy of the government, which was not enough to stop the company. So, another loss.

So in 2019, we are witnessing three cases of former red-green mayors who lost in the next elections from the right.

Transcribed by Iskra Gerazova-Mujchin