

# **What Does Syriza's Victory Mean for Greece's Immigrants? - "perhaps the diverse elements of Greece's poor will begin to recognize each other's common humanity"**

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The election in Greece has jolted Europe's political landscape: as a response to years of vicious austerity measures, the decisive victory of the radical left party Syriza has shaken up a country and a region long mired in economic and social despair. But while the sweeping support for an anti-capitalist party—in opposition to the neoliberal restructuring imposed by European Union institutions—is impressive, deeper societal and cultural shifts are churning beyond the electorate: in fact, some of the folks with the most personally at stake are not Greek citizens. They are Greece's migrants: itinerant workers, displaced families, and uprooted refugees fleeing persecution, poverty and war in Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

Although Syriza is most famous for its pointedly populist economic program—based on resisting debt obligations, bolstering welfare programs, and reducing inequality—some migrants see hope in their more obscure immigration policy proposals.

As part of their broader push for social equality, Syriza has championed policy changes such as speeding up the asylum petition process—which could help migrants secure their right to resettle and protect them from deportation; repealing the EU-wide rules restricting migrants' travel within the region; guaranteeing human rights protections for immigrants currently in detention; promoting reunification of immigrant families (who are often separated on the grueling and dangerous journey); and overall, "Social inclusion of immigrants and equal rights protection."

It's unclear how many, if any, of these policies will lead to actual legislative reforms. Given that Syriza just formed a dubious coalition with the Independent Greeks (ANEL, in the Greek abbreviation) an anti-immigrant right-wing party, these initiatives could quickly be neutralized or perverted by the contradictory alliance. But if we take the platform on its word, the immigration proposals open a concrete avenue for protecting immigrants' rights, breaking from the European status quo of tightening borders, criminalizing the undocumented, and shutting out asylum seekers.

In contrast to the reactionary surge that elevated the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn as a leading opposition force in 2012, the leftward social shift seems to counter the conventional wisdom: economic hard times can often precipitate rises in xenophobia and chauvinism, fueled by fears of "job stealing" foreigners. But the massive hardship weighing on Greece's populace has also created an opening for progressive, rather than reactionary, political ideas. From a democratic standpoint, there's perhaps an intuitive realization that, in a system of ruthlessly free-flowing, global exchange of capital, restraining people's free movement doesn't make much moral or political sense.

Greece has one of Europe's most porous border zones, with Turkey immediately to its east. Amid rising internal turmoil, however, the border has tightened and Greek society, from the notoriously fierce police to the white supremacist fringe, has become increasingly hostile to outsiders.

According to a 2012 Amnesty International report, this key destination point soon became a place to flee from: tens of thousands of undocumented migrants and asylum seekers crossing into Greece en route to other European countries often ran into a ferocious onslaught of detention, police brutality, systematic discrimination and racist neo-nazi attacks.

Due to EU rules on internal migration, many were forced to apply for asylum within Greece and became ensnared in an incompetent byzantine bureaucracy. Greece's crowded detention centers were condemned by advocates as dungeon-like and squalid, and often children wound up in facilities meant for adults. With government collapsing and right-wing extremists capitalizing on the disorder, it seemed as if all of Greece's political actors were conspiring both to neglect and to destroy migrants.

One migrant told Amnesty researchers: 'When we ask the police for protection they tell us 'fight back.' "Of course, Syriza faces a tough fight on immigration, too. Structurally, Greece alone cannot revamp the entire EU's immigration policies, embedded in the conventional framework of nation-states and borders. However, it has generally endorsed foreign policies that try to tackle root factors driving people across borders. In a 2012 interview with Il Grande Colibri, Syriza representative Panagiotis Pantos of Nea Smyrni advocated for EU reforms to establish "strong frameworks to finance development in Asian and African countries, and also change its foreign policy to one that promotes peace and prosperity in the world, instead of war and the rights of multinational companies." Partnering with the right-wing ANEL, on the other hand, looks like a dangerously opportunist move to bolster anti-austerity populist forces. Takis Pappas, author of *Populism and Crisis Politics in Greece*, sees immigration as a fixation of the Greek right, but historically not central for the left. "Since Golden Dawn has already acquired most of 'issue ownership' over immigration," he tells *The Nation* via e-mail, "the other two parties in the right [including ANEL] try to both exploit the issue, each in its own way, but without being associated with Golden Dawn. Now, what may happen regarding immigration after a coalition between Syriza and ANEL is everyone's guess. "So watch this space. Syriza is now a Rorschach for a country and continent adrift—a portent of anxious instability and a slim crescent of radical hope among left movements worldwide. Practically speaking, the party's idealistic campaign-trail social program may tragically dissolve if it opts to compromise with anti-immigrant reactionaries in its parliamentary maneuvering. But Syriza may shepherd a cultural turn in Greece that has encouraged solidarity, rather than antagonism, between "natives" and migrants. Or at least, a sharper class politics has somewhat drawn the humiliated working class and disillusioned precariat away from self-defeating, bigoted ideologies. After all, austerity brought a drastic leveling of disparate groups of dispossessed: the unemployed youth, impoverished pensioner, and embattled immigrant are all fighting for survival.

Before, the neoliberal establishment could manipulate and feed off social crises as frustrated factions fought against each other. Today the profile of the real enemy is clearer. And in identifying the nefarious institutional actors behind European austerity, perhaps the diverse elements of Greece's poor will begin to recognize each other's common humanity. And they just might get their chance to "fight back" at last—on the same side.

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\* "What Does Syriza's Victory Mean for Greece's Immigrants?" *The Nation*. January 27, 2015 -

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