

# 1. TAKING STOCK OF GREECE'S 50-YEAR DEMOCRATIC EVOLUTION

Μέσο: . . . . . INTERNATIONAL NEW YORK TIMES\_KATHIMERINI

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Σελίδα: . . . . . 2



## Taking stock of Greece's 50-year democratic evolution

Three-day conference organized by Kathimerini, Delphi Economic Forum, MIET cultural foundation and LSE's Hellenic Observatory

Has the **Metapolitefsi** completed its circle? What lessons does the transition to democracy impart? Is its overall legacy positive? These are the key questions guiding discussions at the "50 Years of the Metapolitefsi" conference taking place in Athens.

Running through Saturday, the three-day event organized by Kathimerini newspaper, the National Bank of Greece Cultural Foundation (MIET), Delphi Economic Forum, and the Hellenic Observatory of the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) at the National Gallery, invites prominent figures from the post-dictatorship era to candidly address the inconvenient truths accompanying milestones such as the transition to democracy, accession to the core of Europe and the decade-long debt crisis.

In a packed auditorium, Alexis Papachelas, executive director of Kathimerini, took the stage following Syrgo Tsiara, director of the National

Gallery, to shed light on the inspiration behind the event. "The idea originated two years ago. It's an initiative that can teach us something about the future – to delve into the essence of the Metapolitefsi and extract valuable lessons from it. We sought individuals who shaped the destiny of our nation to join us. And we aimed for pluralism of opinion," he said, dedicating the proceedings to businessman Costas Apostolidis, who died on Tuesday at the age of 76.

One prevailing viewpoint expressed on the first day of the conference was that "the economy has been subservient to politics," potentially explaining Greece's persistently low growth rates over the past five decades, averaging just above 1% of gross domestic product. The issue of political cost featured prominently in panel discussions, with key figures of the Metapolitefsi conceding that certain measures couldn't be implemented due to such constraints. Day one also stood out for notable



Kathimerini, the National Bank of Greece Cultural Foundation, Delphi Economic Forum and the London School of Economics' Hellenic Observatory joined forces to start a discussion on Greece's transition to democracy since the fall of the military dictatorship 50 years ago.

displays of candor and introspection. Noteworthy among them were the revelations from three former finance ministers who publicly admitted to regrettable decisions: Euclid Tsakalotos, who served under leftist SYRIZA in 2015-2019, expressed remorse for imposing an advance tax payment system during a period of economic distress. Giorgos Papaconstantinou (2009-2011, under center-left PASOK) similarly regretted introducing the so-called "solidarity" levy on income taxes during the economy's most tumultuous times, while Giorgos Algoskoufis (2004-2009, under conservative New Democracy) lamented a statement asserting that the Greek economy was "shielded," when his intention was to appease markets.

Of particular significance was Puse RC's survey on public attitudes toward the Metapolitefsi. The survey illuminated varying perspectives, influenced by factors such as age and first-hand experience of pivotal poli-

cies and events. The consensus suggests that as time elapses from the historical events associated with the Metapolitefsi period, there emerges a more discerning and cautious evaluation of the achievements of Greek democracy.

The rare public appearance of former caretaker prime minister (2011-2012) Lucas Papademos garnered significant attention, as he elucidated how he defended Greece's place in the eurozone and the necessity for restructuring Greek debt during the implementation of the bond devaluation, or private sector involvement (PSI). Central to his critique of the chronic shortcomings of the Greek economy was the assessment that macroeconomic policies aimed at stimulating demand were not accompanied by reforms to bolster supply. Nevertheless, he was optimistic about Greece's future, linking it to the trajectory of Europe as a whole.

VASSILIS KOSTOULAS

### PM vows 'profound changes that will never be reversed'

Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis highlighted his commitment to a political agenda of reforms that "will never be reversed" during his discussion with Kostas Kostis, director of MIET and professor of economics and social history at the University of Athens, and Alexis Papachelas, executive editor of Kathimerini, at the "50 Years of the Metapolitefsi" conference in Athens on Thursday night.

Mitsotakis noted that Greece has a strong democracy, with strong institutions and the political system as it has been shaped is not the root cause of the country's problems. He added that in the 50 years since the restoration of democracy, Greece has made progress in strengthening the institutions through a series of constitutional interventions and certainly has the best democracy since the establishment of the Greek state.

Reflecting on the country's past leadership, Mitsotakis acknowledged the legacies of figures like Andreas Papandreu and Konstantinos Karamanlis.

"Konstantinos Karamanlis restored democracy and pursued Greece's membership of the European family. This legacy alone makes him, in my view, the most important politician of the Metapolitefsi era," the prime minister said.

Andreas Papandreu, Mitsotakis said, was charismatic and expressed empathy for the underprivileged. But he added that he bears responsibility for the country's financial deterioration in



Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis (left) is seen in discussion with Kathimerini Executive Editor Alexis Papachelas at the National Gallery on Thursday evening.

*'What can I say about the opposition? I wish them luck, it's not my problem'*

the 80s and for cultivating an attitude that prioritizes rights over obligations.

On his own legacy, Mitsotakis expressed his aspiration to enact "profound changes that will never be reversed. People may approach things differently, but the direction needs to be focused on reforms."

According to Mitsotakis, many had been afraid to go down the route of reform due to potential political deficit;

however, he believes he represents a large portion of Greek citizens. "What can I say about the opposition? I wish them luck, it's not my problem," he added.

He highlighted the imperative of addressing economic vulnerabilities, emphasizing a shift toward an economy focused on innovation and higher value-added activities to boost wages.

The tragic incident of the Tempe rail crash, which marked its anniversary on Wednesday, has been the most difficult moment for the prime minister's tenure. "The tragedy comes down to human errors intertwined with the chronic ailments of the Greek administration, with only justice being able to give the final answer," he added.

### Papandreu: ND bears responsibly for populism in 2009

New Democracy bears a "huge responsibility" for its populism in undermining his government after Greece's financial woes became known and for prolonging the country's bailout regime, former prime minister George Papandreu said on Friday.

Papandreu, who was prime minister from 2009 to 2011, told the "50 Years of the Metapolitefsi" conference that a "spirit of unity" was lacking when he took office and the true extent of the country's indebtedness emerged.

"I had said that if we didn't all move together, the memoranda would be very long, and that if we moved in the right way we could have gotten a [debt] haircut," he said.

He added that in 2011 he had called New Democracy leader Antonis Samaras twice to offer to step down as prime minister, even though he had won the election with a 44% landslide. But his plans were quickly leaked to the press.

"We were talking about the future of the country and it started with bad faith and undermining. It undermined the prestige of a [possible] coalition government," he said.

His proposal eventually materialized in the Papademos cross-party government in 2011, he said.

Papandreu said that the IMF had told the preceding New Democ-



Former socialist prime minister George Papandreu told the conference on Friday that he believes Greece will face a debt problem again in less than 10 years.

*'We have a period of grace until 2032. Then there will be a lot of debt that we will have to deal with'*

racy government in 2007 and 2008 that the country was on route to bankruptcy.

Ten days before the 2009 election he said he was informed by then interior minister Prokopis Pavlopoulos that "we are not doing well," but when he asked Prime Minister Kostas Karamanlis for the facts he received no reply.

Noting the recent European Par-

liament motion sounding the alarm on the decline of the rule of law in Greece, Papandreu said that Greece has experienced a "regression" in terms of its independent institutions and the functioning of democracy.

He also warned that the country will face a debt problem again in 2032.

"We have a period of grace until 2032. Then there will be a lot of debt that we will have to deal with," he said.

Commenting on the debate to legalize private universities, he said that private universities should be allowed operate with the same freedoms as public universities.

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## EU accession, relations with Turkey, Cyprus, Prespes

One of the areas where Greece made some of its greatest strides during the past 50 years has been in foreign policy, a panel moderated by Kathimerini English Edition's editor in chief, Tom Ellis, agreed on Friday, touching on milestones good and bad, and demonstrating how, despite significant differences on specifics, the country's main political forces have achieved consensus on the broad strokes of the big issues.

With three outspoken and influential former foreign ministers on the panel – Dora Bakoyannis from New Democracy, Evangelos Venizelos from PASOK and Nikos Kotzias from SYRIZA, which Ellis described as having made a “distinct imprint” on Greece’s foreign policy – the discussion was lively.

Completing the panel were Constantinos Filis, a professor of international relations at the American College of Greece and director of the ACG’s Institute of Global Affairs, and Konstantina Botsiou, a professor of history and international relations at the University of Piraeus and director at the Council for International Relations.

On the issue of Greece and Turkey and the current thaw in relations, Venizelos warned that this “momentum should not evolve into a simple moratorium,” with Bakoyannis agreeing that a “window of opportunity” has presented itself for Greece. However, she added, “it takes two to tango.”

“But if a real opportunity arises, should Greece go ahead? This is where the condition of national consensus comes in,” Bakoyannis added.

Commenting on Greece’s westward orientation, Bakoyannis, a New Democracy MP, argued that despite being “deeply hurt” during the 1967-1974 military dictatorship and “angry” at the part played



Former New Democracy foreign minister Dora Bakoyannis speaks on a panel with her counterparts Evangelos Venizelos from PASOK to her left and Nikos Kotzias from SYRIZA to her right, in a discussion moderated by Kathimerini English Edition Editor in Chief Tom Ellis (third from left), as professors Konstantina Botsiou (second from left) and Constantinos Filis (left) look on.

*‘We agreed that we’re a European, Western country, but this consensus also has a second level, which is a consensus for “strategic inertia”’*

by the United States, the country’s alignment with the West “has never been in doubt.”

Venizelos spoke at length about how former prime ministers Konstantinos Karamanlis and Andreas Papandreou shaped Greece’s foreign policy approach during the Metapolitefsi, which, he argued, “is not one single period.”

The coup in Cyprus in 1974 and the Turkish invasion that followed

was a “national defeat” that scarred Greece’s foreign policy approach with a “guilt complex,” he said, adding that a consensus was nevertheless built in the ensuing years. “We agreed that we’re a European, Western country, but this consensus also has a second level, which is a consensus for “strategic inertia,” Venizelos added.

The Greece-West relationship was shaken to its foundations during the 2010-2019 economic crisis, Venizelos added. “I lived through the collapse of public opinion’s idyllic relationship with the EU,” he said. Filis picked up the thread to address Kotzias, noting that despite his left-wing leanings, his term in the Foreign Ministry also marked a significant improvement in Greek-American relations. “Activism is one thing; having an immediate responsibility

toward the nation is another,” Kotzias responded, defending the SYRIZA-led government’s rapprochement with Washington as serving the “tradition of state continuity.” Kotzias, who signed the Prespes name deal in 2018, also staunchly defended the accord with North Macedonia, noting that “despite the great personal and political cost, few admitted that we resolved the issue.” The agreement, he noted, also prevents Turkish foreign policy ambitions which are detrimental to Greece.

On the subject of that agreement, which deeply divided public opinion in Greece, Bakoyannis noted that she had opposed the deal on the grounds of the matters of identity and language, but conceded that it was a successful negotiation, a view also shared by Venizelos.

## Samaras: The troika pulled the plug on me

Former conservative prime minister Antonis Samaras believes that the country’s lenders pulled the plug on his government in late 2014 so as to prevent Greece exiting the bailout agreements before Alexis Tsipras and SYRIZA came to power.

Speaking on the second day of the “50 Years of the Metapolitefsi” conference, Samaras, who was prime minister from 2012 to 2015, said that the lenders insisted that his government bridge a 900-million-euro fiscal gap in full knowledge that SYRIZA would win the next election.

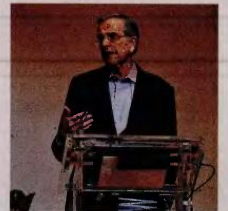
He was responding to a question from Kathimerini Executive Editor Alexis Papachelas, who asked the former premier, “Do you have the feeling that at some point when SYRIZA was [going to win the next election] and our lenders maybe legitimately thought that this would happen, that they pulled the plug on you?”

“I’m convinced that it was certain that we were going to come out of the memorandum completely in February 2015, instead of June 2016. We’re talking about €900 million. And they insisted on this €909 million,” Samaras said.

He added that the lenders were aware that his minor coalition partner Fotis Kouvelis would not vote for a president nominated by Samaras and that elections would follow that Tsipras was bound to win. “And they did not want to release me from the memorandum in advance,” Samaras said, adding that they knew that they would not be able to exert pressure on Tsipras if the country was not under the same fiscal constraints.

Samaras added that “it was fortunate that there was a 180-degree turn” during 2015 under the SYRIZA-Independent Greeks government.

The former prime minister also revealed that in his first meeting with



Former conservative prime minister Antonis Samaras gestures during a so-called “fireside chat” with Kathimerini’s Alexis Papachelas at the conference, on Friday.

German chancellor Angela Merkel, she presented him with a PowerPoint presentation showing how difficult the situation was for Greece.

“I have to suggest that you leave the eurozone,” Merkel told me,” Samaras said. “I stopped her and said: “We are not having this conversation. We will stay [in the eurozone] and do what we have to do.”

Samaras lauded his cooperation with PASOK leader Evangelos Venizelos, saying that the two of them rarely left the prime minister’s office before midnight at the height of the crisis.

He also said that the Prespes name agreement, negotiated by Alexis Tsipras with North Macedonia, “betrayed generations and generations of fighters.”

Samaras also responded to a reference by former foreign minister Dora Bakoyannis that if there is a real opportunity for Greece and Turkey to find a solution to their issue, there should be a consensus.

“When I hear the word consensus with all three parties, it smells like compromise in the air,” Samaras said.