

FINANCIAL TIMES

June 14, 2012 6:32 pm

Syriza aims to double number of supporters

By Kerin Hope and Tony Barber

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Faded posters on the walls depict a bearded Greek civil war hero, the hardline Italian communist party Rifondazione and a work of French modern art. The choice of decor inside Syriza's Athens headquarters points to the eclectic politics of the coalition now fighting to become the first Greek party of the radical left to win a national election.

Syriza hopes to double the 16.8 per cent of the vote it captured at an inconclusive election on May 6 and push the centre-right New Democracy party into second place at Sunday's re-run.

Its charismatic leader pledges to replace a harsh austerity programme agreed with Greece's international lenders with a "national plan" to rebuild the economy without assistance from the so-called troika – the European Union, International Monetary Fund and European Central Bank.

"We ourselves will take on the responsibility of governing this country and putting an end to a rotten, corrupted and ineffectual political system," Alexis Tsipras told an enthusiastic crowd in the port of Patras, 200km to the west of Athens, on Wednesday night.

His words were carefully chosen. Until last month's election Patras was a stronghold of the PanHellenic Socialist Movement, or Pasok, which governed Greece for 20 of the past 30 years and now bears most of the blame for the country's economic collapse.

Party platform

Syriza has modified its platform in the run-up to Sunday's elections, though it still proposes to change the terms of the deal agreed with the EU and IMF in February

The bailout

Instead of unilaterally denouncing the EU-IMF programme, Syriza wants to replace it with a national plan to rebuild the economy, to be drawn up by its own economic team. The plan would follow the same timetable, achieving a balanced budget by 2015 but through tax increases, not

Syriza's bold proposals to reverse deep cuts in pensions and the minimum wage, raise unemployment benefits and preserve public sector jobs – all to be financed by collecting more tax from the rich – resonate with angry, frustrated voters as Greece endures a fifth year of recession with a cumulative loss of output approaching 20 per cent.

Yet its overnight transformation from ex-communist fringe group to serious contender for power has shocked both Greece's European partners and the country's political class. Even its own officials seem bemused.

"It is extraordinary how our small country has become a focus of the world's attention," says Natasha Theodoracopoulou, a member

spending cuts.

The EU task force

Experts sent by the the EU to assist Greece with administrative reform would be sent back to Brussels. Greece would make bilateral arrangements with individual member states offering expertise.

Tax

The aim would be to increase the tax take by 1 percentage point of national output yearly. A Syriza-led government would crack down on tax evasion and try to negotiate regular tax contributions from Greek shipowners for the first time.

Banks

Syriza has reversed a threat to nationalise banks and would follow the previous government's scheme for a €48bn recapitalisation of four big banks financed by international lenders. New shares issued would be controlled by the state.

Privatisation

The €50bn privatisation programme agreed with the EU and IMF would be abandoned. Greek utilities would remain under state control. The coastal site of the former Athens international airport would become "a huge metropolitan park".

Coastal ferries

Would be nationalised to ensure that Greece's 150-odd inhabited islands have regular connections with the mainland.

Riot police

Force would be disbanded.

of Syriza's international affairs team. "But I think it's a positive sign of how things can change."

Others fret that changes wrought by Syriza, if it comes to power, could provoke a confrontation with Greece's international creditors followed by a disorderly default and exit from the euro.

A bank "jog" accelerated this week with outflows rising above €500m daily. Since May 6, more than €10bn has left the banks. "Depositors fear that if the left comes to power, Greece will very soon have to readopt the drachma," said one Athens banker.

Syriza's parliamentary candidates are enjoying a burst of exposure on television talkshows. Their backgrounds are varied, from former Stalinists, Trotskyites and Maoists to trade unionists, ecologists, radical academics and lawyers, representing a dozen factions in a party cobbled together by Mr Tsipras's predecessor.

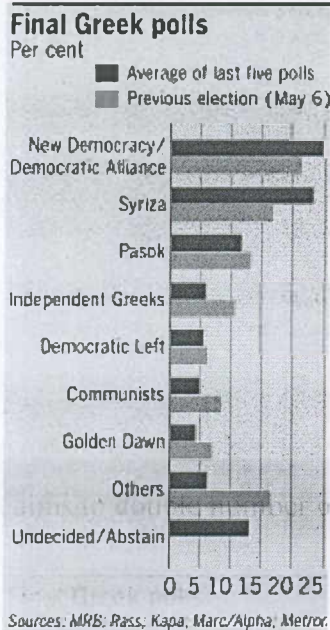
Mr Tsipras himself, a civil engineer with a background in student politics, has bolstered the position of Synaspismos, Syriza's largest and most pragmatic faction, while leaving space for small extremist groups that still call for "armed struggle" against global capitalism.

Yet he is "far from being in control" of the coalition's disparate factions, according to Thanos Veremis, a political historian. If Syriza wins the election but fails to form a coalition government, "they may continue to do what they know best – street protests", Mr Veremis said.

Voters have discounted ideology and flocked to Syriza as the party most likely to provide a breather from austerity and the threat of widespread public sector job cuts. Its biggest gains have come from Pasok as droves of socialists, including leaders of public sector trade unions, have switched sides.

Young voters from the Greek communist party (KKE) are also backing Syriza, frustrated by the refusal of Aleka Paparriga, its Stalinist leader, to participate in a government of the left despite repeated invitations from Mr Tsipras.

Yet Syriza could still be pipped at the post. On Thursday it had slipped one or two points behind the centre-right New Democracy party in private opinion polls, according to a senior Syriza official. A



conservative campaign official claimed the conservatives held a two- to three-point lead.

On Thursday Greece's stock market soared 10.1 per cent on speculation that New Democracy would win on Sunday.

Ms Theodoracopoulou warned, however, that a conservative-led coalition government trying to implement further austerity measures required by the EU and IMF would face strong popular reaction.

“If the next government tries to make spending cuts of €11bn [the proposed amount, equal to 5.5 per cent of national output], do you think people will stay quietly at home?”

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