

# Hopes and Doubts: Kyriakos Mitsotakis as New Democracy Leader

 [blogs.lse.ac.uk/greeceatlse/2016/01/15/hopes-and-doubts-kyriakos-mitsotakis-as-new-democracy-leader/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/greeceatlse/2016/01/15/hopes-and-doubts-kyriakos-mitsotakis-as-new-democracy-leader/)

HO  
Editor **By Angelos Chrysogelos**

2016-1-15

On 10 January the supporters of New Democracy (ND), Greece's centre-right opposition party, elected in the second round of a primary Kyriakos Mitsotakis as the party's eighth leader since 1974 (not counting two interim leaders). After a year of dominance of Greek politics by Syriza and Alexis Tsipras, Mitsotakis' election by hundreds of thousands of voters carries the promise of a real alternative slowly materializing. This note will present some conclusions from the election process, and the questions and prospects that are opened up by Mitsotakis' victory.



The first conclusion is that the outsider status is an advantage in an era of fatigue with politics-as-usual. Mitsotakis beat in the second round of the primary experienced ND insider Evangelos Meimarakis. While Mitsotakis, the scion of a political dynasty, cannot be considered an outsider in the literal sense of the term, he projected himself as a voice of renewal against the older Meimarakis who was supported by the majority of the party establishment, especially ex-ND leader and Prime Minister Kostas Karamanlis. In this sense, ND supporters continued on the trend established in the party's previous primary in 2009, when Antonis Samaras, then also an outsider, beat Mitsotakis' sister and establishment representative, Dora Bakoyannis.

The second conclusion is that this primary, unlike the one in 2009, attracted the attention of many beyond the hard core of ND partisans. The reason for this heightened interest lies in the political and economic developments since Syriza's rise to power in January 2015. The creation of a radical-left/populist-right government coalition with ANEL, the collision with Greece's creditors, the referendum of 5 July, and the signing of a new painful austerity package in August, led many politically moderate pro-European Greeks to despair. While many of them had voted for smaller centrist parties in the past, they were attracted to ND as the party best placed to defeat Tsipras. Based on journalistic and social media accounts, all such voters who took part in the primary supported Mitsotakis, who thus can claim to represent not just ND but the whole of Greece's pro-European camp (embodied in the almost 40% Yes score in the July referendum).

In his victory speech, Mitsotakis positioned himself against the 'populism' of the Tsipras government. Cultivating the 'modernization/Europe vs. populism/nationalism' cleavage seems like a promising electoral tactic for ND. It can expand the party's appeal to the centre, where smaller parties like PASOK and To Potami have disappointed voters, and capitalize on discontent with Syriza and the third bailout. Redefining party competition away from charged ideological terms and towards the question of effective management of the country's affairs has been an element of past winning strategies for the centre-right – underpinning Constantine Karamanlis' dominance in the 1950s and 1970s and Mitsotakis' father's success as leader of ND to unseat Andreas Papandreou and PASOK in the 1990s.

But this isn't 1990 anymore (the year Mitsotakis' father defeated Papandreou). In the years of the crisis the traditional electorate of ND, which for decades remained loyal to the party while successive leaderships pursued centrist tactics, has suffered significant erosion towards the right and the left. Mitsotakis aims to build a broad coalition to defeat Tsipras. But cultivating his appeal to the centre and rallying ND's traditional base may turn out to be contradictory goals.

First, unlike his father or the elder Karamanlis in their time, Mitsotakis has important competition on his right for conservative voters who may be alienated from liberal positions ND will take on social and values issues. Already Tsipras' coalition partner, leader of ANEL Kammenos, tried to present himself as true heir of ND's

conservative/patriotic tradition. Further to the right, the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn maintains a significant hard core of support and will be eager to capitalize on any centrist moves Mitsotakis makes on issues like migration and law and order. One should also not underestimate the strength of traditional conservatives, rallied around Karamanlis, inside ND proper. Mitsotakis only beat Meimarakis by a 52%-48% margin after all, and he will need to tread carefully lest painful internal policy debates flare up in ND.

Second, Mitsotakis cannot underestimate the degree to which Tsipras had managed to penetrate the core of ND support in 2015. In the January 2015 elections Syriza attracted a significant number of ND voters (even of middle-class background) who had been badly battered by austerity. In the July referendum, a full quarter of ND's voters followed Tsipras to vote No. In the snap elections of September 2015 ND failed to repatriate these losses despite Tsipras' U-turn on austerity. Tsipras' mix of patriotic and economic populism may have run out of steam, but Mitsotakis' identification with liberal economic positions will do little to attract economically disgruntled voters back to ND. After years of economic collapse, the Greek electorate is much less wedded to the party system than in the past. Voting for smaller parties or simply abstaining (as they did last September) may be a more palatable choice for these voters unless Mitsotakis allays their fears that he is too 'neoliberal'.

Mitsotakis' task is also complicated by the European factor. Mitsotakis has promised to turn the pro-European stream in Greek society into forceful opposition against Tsipras. But Tsipras is now implementing a government program sanctioned by Greece's Eurozone creditors. Will Mitsotakis vote against anything put forward by Tsipras, even at the danger of the government falling (given the Syriza-ANEL coalition's tiny majority)? This seems to be the idea, but is ND going to revert to the 'anti-memorandum' tactics of Samaras in 2010-11? Ultimately, the EU is interested in the smooth implementation of the bailout. Mitsotakis may see his promise to swiftly push Tsipras out of power be reigned in by the realities of the Greece-EU relationship.

There is of course the opposite scenario, as Hugo Dixon has suggested: That Tsipras will feel compelled, due to Mitsotakis' victory, to initiate a new round of confrontation with Greece's creditors. In this case Mitsotakis will find it easier to align ND's opposition strategy with its pro-European vocation and the instincts of his centrist liberal following. But shifting political discourse back to the question of national sovereignty and social justice means moving political competition again very close to Tsipras' comfort zone. And it also means making the task of repatriating parts of the core electorate of ND (whose absolute number of votes has decreased in every national election since 2004) that is economically disgruntled all the more difficult.

Kyriakos Mitsotakis' election to the leadership of New Democracy undoubtedly opens up a new phase in Greek politics. His victory has reignited the competitive element in Greek party politics after a long period of dominance by Tsipras. But Mitsotakis is faced with the internal contradictions of his expressed goals: building a pro-European and pro-reform political alternative, reestablishing ND's broad social appeal, and forcefully opposing Syriza and Tsipras in the context of the third bailout. His efforts will be closely monitored not only in Greece but also throughout Europe.

**Dr Angelos Chrysogelos** is a National Bank of Greece Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at the Hellenic Observatory, LSE