

A Country in Ruins. Life on a Greek Island

An Open Letter to Dimitri Sevastakis, the Newly Elected Syriza MP for Samos

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Region: [Europe](#)

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Dear Dimitri,

Congratulations on becoming the new Syriza MP for Samos. You don't need us to tell you that the challenges faced by you and the new government are massive. This is something that everyone who lives in Greece knows only too well. The country is in ruins, so little works well, and most people are living with and in a humanitarian disaster.

The situation is so bad that there is no need to put together the evidence to prove the case. It is before our eyes, in our homes, amongst our friends, on the streets. But this is not a time for weeping. Our tears are exhausted. Like so many who live here we want the Syriza victory to mark the beginning of a new epoch in Greece and one which will extend far beyond our borders.

Yet the wreckage of Greek society cannot be solely placed at the feet of the Troika. Although we fully agree with Yanis Varoufakis' assessment that the austerity measures forced on the Greek people by the banks and their agents in the ECB, IMF and the EU are nothing less than fiscal water-boarding; torture. But sadly some of our torture comes from within and has deep roots in Greek history and society.

From many of our discussions and meetings on Samos, it is clear that many people here recognise that whilst the Troika has brought horror to the country, there was much deeply wrong here prior to the crisis. Nikos, a taxi driver from Pythagorio reflected the views of many on Samos when he told us that we all need to recognise our part in the mess and that unless we change and do things differently, then it matters little what party is in government.

We have heard this from you too. It is important that you say this for without an accurate assessment of our situation we will end up with poor strategies. It is an important and positive first step when we recognise our own responsibilities both in terms of how things are what they are and how we can all join together to make things better. This also means that it is not just a matter of what we do but how we do it. We can not just sit back and wait for the government to act for us. We believe that nothing will change unless the people as a whole are engaged, involved and united. It will be messy. We will have arguments but it is going to be the most exciting journey of our lives.

The sheer scale of the problems we face is daunting. It can sometimes lead to feeling defeated and depressed as it all seems too much. But we don't feel this way and our sense of you and your party is that you don't either. Precisely because so much needs to be changed, precisely because so much is rotten and does not work we have the most extraordinary opportunity now to create something different and better. Who can stand

before us and say don't change because all is well here? The rich? Those who have deserted Greece with their bags of loot and now make up 2% of those who own property costing over 3 million euros in London? Nearly all those who have enjoyed and exercised power in Greece over the past 40 years have lost all credibility and legitimacy. We should act on this and build a new Greece based on the very solid and powerful idea that "WE CAN DO BETTER"!

There is much to do on the international stage as the government grapples with the blood suckers of finance capital who clearly have no morality and no humanity. We know that these parasites have never met or engaged with the people here who are suffering and living from the bins. We don't expect anything from them for the simple reason that they just don't give a damn. They exemplify what Adam Smith warned of so many years ago, namely these people live by what he termed 'the vile maxim of the masters' - which is all for us and nothing for the rest!

But Dimitri whilst these manoeuvres go in the capitals of Europe we should not sit back and wait. With your help we want to get started on changing things on Samos. In our eyes you made an impressive start during the recent election campaign. It might seem trivial to you but for the first time we experienced political meetings where people (nearly always men) did not shout and scream at each other; where conversations took place where people listened to one another, had a smile on their face and began to see that they had far more in common than they thought. It was a revelation. And the principal reason for this shift was because of you! Your style was humane, polite, generous to criticism, and informed by such an overwhelming sense of justice and concern. This is the way to go! It is as crucial and necessary as dealing with the hated Troika.

We simply don't stand a chance of making a better Greece as long as we shout and bawl at each other. It is a form of behaviour that guarantees that the majority of women and young people will never get engaged. The sexism of Greek politic culture is terrible as is its ageism. Grey haired men in suits with big voices need to be controlled just as much as those who come to meetings and dominate by being allowed to talk endlessly sometimes from prepared scripts. KKE members are especially good at this! As you know none of this is rocket science but we would urge you and your colleagues in Syriza to continue setting a new style to Greek politics and political activism.

The possibilities for progressive and collective action are now greater than ever before but they won't be realised unless we do something. On Samos at least there is a widespread revulsion at the sheer incompetence and corruption evident in so many sectors of the economy and the society. We live with the consequences daily. Now we have the winter weather where yet again the boulders tumble onto the roads and lanes because of shoddy construction. New roads break up because the contractors have cheated with materials and specifications. We all know about the 50 euro men who with passing of the envelope turn a blind eye when they come to inspect the quality of the work. We know that pollution goes unchecked in Kokari because false samples are submitted. We know that public sector works are all too often no more than troughs which feed the rich. We see everyday waste and misuse of resources. Why are so many of the EU funded museums such as those in Agios Constantinos and Ambelos never opened years after their completion? Why is the open air swimming pool in Karlovassi still empty and rotting years after its completion? Why have we got a non functioning new port in Karlovassi which must have cost millions? Indeed why was it built at all when in Vathi we have one of the great natural harbours of Greece? Why is the camping site near Agios Constantinos not open to the public? This camping site is

lit up every night with lamps yet it is virtually never used. Its crazy especially on an island with no other camping site! And the list goes on and on.

Yet with your help we could mobilise people on these issues and start to make a better Samos. Just imagine the jobs we could create if we were given these resources and empty buildings.

Why don't we follow the example of Chavez who in Venezuela created groups from the general public to monitor and audit all public bodies and their contracts and activities. The hospital, schools, the police, the judges, the port and so on would all be expected to be accountable in the first instance to such groups. If we took actions like this we would take a massive first step in accountability and transparency with very little cost involved. Corruption will continue to drain the island if there is no light shining on the areas where they plunder and thief. Simultaneously we would be creating a system where the people instead of being abandoned and neglected by the state would start to become actively engaged.

There is such a general clamour for decency and honesty now that it is hard to see how such demands could be resisted.

There is much which unites people on Samos not least the love of its beauty and nature. We live in what could be a paradise. Again there is no rocket science involved here. The beauty of our island, its capacity to enchant our minds and feed our bellies has become even more crucial as the crisis has deepened. Again and again we hear people who in the most difficult of circumstances talk of how they are nourished by the beauty and splendour of our island. Many might be poor in cash terms but we also have this great treasure.

Surely we can and ought to build the future of our island around this natural wealth to the benefit of us all. We already know that Samos has an international reputation amongst walkers yet we have no island wide strategy for its development. We seem to have no obvious plan for the opening up of over grown footpaths or for the creation of a network of mountainside kalivis which could provide basic but beautiful accommodation for walkers and hikers which in turn would extend the tourist season with all the benefits which would follow. It seems obvious to us and many others on the island that our long term and sustainable future has to be 'green' but no one organisation appears to be prepared to take a lead. The wine co-operative in particular ought to be playing a key role and it is disappointing that it does not play any significant role in the creation of a 'green' Samos. Not only does the co-operative fail to encourage the kind of biological production which must be the future of wine production on the island but it remains one of the biggest suppliers of poisonous chemicals which threatens the incredibly rich flora of Samos. This is not good enough!

We face a situation where the potential of Samos is not being developed to provide the kinds of meaningful and creative employment which we so desperately need if we are to put an end to the constant haemorrhaging of talent. Samos as with Greece as a whole cannot afford to see so many people, especially the young, leaving to find their fortunes outside of the country. And lets be clear, we believe that most of those departing are doing so out of necessity and not from choice.

Finally there is one area where we must stand out clear and loud and that concerns the situation of the refugees and the fact that Samos because of its geographical location close to the Turkish coast is sure to remain one of the gateways into Europe for refugees.

We hope that you and Syriza will take a clear and unequivocal stance in condemning as completely unacceptable current Greek and European policies with regard to refugees. The closed Detention Centre in Vathi is like a poisonous tumour on the island. It shames the island and its people. It is an affront to humanity that this Guantanamo style camp exists in our midst. There is simply no justification for criminalising and punishing those who are fleeing war and terror. There is no reason at all why unaccompanied children are locked up when there are families on the island who are more than prepared to open their homes to care for such youngsters.

We need no more research to tell us that the deterrence policies of Greece and Europe will never halt the flow of refugees. Such a policy approach is not only cruel but it patently fails. But no matter, the vast bulk of resources concerning refugees goes on patrol boats, surveillance, drones, detention centres and prisons and the like. It is a form of utter madness.

Even if the policy changes needed may take time to implement there is no reason to do nothing now. Even if the camp cannot be closed today we can at least remove the locks and the barbed razor wire. Let's open the camp. Let's allow teachers and youth workers and all other concerned islanders to enter freely and create meaningful activities that will nourish and support those who have been traumatised and terrorised in their own countries. We have on Samos an animal care centre that has a deserved reputation for its high welfare standards. It is shameful to us that the care for refugees comes nowhere close to what a stray dog would receive in the animal sanctuary.

It is absurd for the police to be the key agency for the care of refugees. This is a task for which they are not equipped to undertake. It is a welfare not a policing issue. And again, from our own experience we are aware that many of the police who work with refugees are appalled and shamed by what they expected to do and long for a completely different and humane approach to such human suffering. They too want to be part of the solution and not part of the problem.

There are so many things that need attending to on Samos. Many don't need vast additional resources to make a real difference to our lives as long as we can mobilise the talents and energies of the people. Just imagine what we could achieve if we unleashed the imagination of the people! It would be beautiful.

We could say so much more on all of the above, not in terms of setting out proposals and plans as they need to come from the people and not a few self-appointed specialists who leave the people unmoved and detached. That will lead us nowhere.

At times living on Samos feels like living in a room full of people seething with anger and frustration; full of people with wonderful ideas and plans but the door is locked. For many of us your election and that of a Syriza government feels like there might just be a chance that the door might be unlocked. We don't expect and indeed we don't want you to think that we are waiting on you for all the solutions. But if you can help us unlock the door so that Samos and Greece can become a garden in which a thousand flowers bloom; where the people are not abandoned and ignored but are encouraged to flourish and realise their potential then we would be dancing for joy. We look forward to working with you.

With our best wishes,

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