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Interview of Rania Antonopoulou, former Alternate Minister of Labor of Greece
by Journalist Nikos Sverkos

(translated version, text in brackets has been added for enhanced clarity)

Q: Over the past few days, you have been at the forefront of negative publicity about the issue of the “rent subsidy” which caused your resignation. Would you like to comment on this?

A: What saddens me the most in this unfortunate turn of events, is the false perception that has been created, and the way I have come to be seen in the eyes of my comrades and, even more so, in the eyes of people struggling with deep cuts in their incomes, high unemployment, unpaid mortgage loans, and the fear of their modest property being foreclosed. Along with my “apology” to them I feel the need to present my own side of things, my own truth, which has disappeared amidst false, inaccurate, and defamatory commentary of the opposition parties and the media that befriends them.

Q: Would you like to clarify the phrase: “your own truth”? Was there no moral issue for the rent subsidy you received?

A: Words carry social meaning and their precise choice is important. The term “rent subsidy” is associated with support for poor and low-income citizens who become beneficiaries on the basis of income criteria. This type of support, in other words, is traditionally means-tested. Work-related benefit packages, on the other hand, are part and parcel of one’s job compensation. They are offered on the recognition that it would be difficult for someone to accept a job offer or perform her/his duties without supplemental benefits. Employees both in the public and private sector are offered benefit packages depending on the type of their appointment.

To Members of Parliament and Ministers, whose permanent residence is not in Athens, there exists a benefit provision [voted into law in 1994], that covers expenses of either hotel accommodations or apartment rentals. This is part of the wider parliamentary and ministerial “work-related benefits” package. In addition to a Minister’s salary other included benefits are, for example, the use of an official car, a driver and accompanying security provided by the police, several mobile phones, a stipend for the smooth functioning of a political office, etc. It is perhaps time for the Members of Parliament (MPs) to debate anew and legislate which of these “benefits” are still deemed appropriate and “ethical”; if access to them ought to be means tested [for all MPs, including those that are appointed in the cabinet]; and whether the same benefits should be extended to non-parliamentarian “technocratic” government cabinet members or not. However, we must engage in this discussion and debate calmly and carefully, and without populist fanfare, if we do not want to turn holding political office into a monopoly for the wealthy elite or the game of influence by “private interests.”

Q: Are we playing with words? By putting to the forefront an issue that ought to be discussed, are you not avoiding a direct answer?

A: Let me repeat it again: I have always thought the reimbursement of rental cost of living in Athens an integral part of ministerial compensation, just as we accept the use of a car, driver, police protection, and other benefits. Had I not been informed, bona fide, about the provision of the rent cost reimbursement, I would have been unaware of the existence of such a benefit. Moreover, because some people and opposition-friendly media are still reporting inaccuracies about continuing receipt of this benefit, let me make it clear that there is official documentation provided from the Ministry of Labor to anyone wishing to inquire clearly showing that since August 2017 I have neither requested the continuation of this benefit and nor have I received it.

Q: Was then no moral issue raised in your opinion?

A: Yes, of course it was raised. For that reason the option of my resignation was put at the discretion of the Prime Minister, via a text message I sent to him, on Sunday, February 25 [we have always made use of text messages for urgent communication needs]. As I explained to the Prime Minister in my text message and in a subsequent telephone conversation on Sunday evening, I did not want to divert attention at this crucial stage from focusing on the effort to complete the requirements of the international lenders' MoU and get the country out of the crisis. Furthermore, I did not want to become the pretext for the main opposition, diverting thus the public's attention away from its scandalous involvement in the humongous corruption of the Novartis case. It was a moral choice I had to make, and I thank the Prime Minister for acknowledging it in public.

In my opinion, however, it is imperative that politicians be judged not by "appearances" but by "their deeds." It is good that "Caesar's wife appears to be honest in the public eye," but the essential issue is to make a contribution for the public interest. I will not provide an account of what has been accomplished during my tenure in the three years I held office, but I am proud of the implemented changes to policies supporting job creation and the reintegration of the unemployed in the labor market, and equally of creating and shaping legislation that established the new framework of the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE). And mind you, this was accomplished despite the resistance of big interest groups. The up-to-date, measurable results in affecting the lives of thousands of people are very significant and we have put sound institutional foundations for this part of the economy [SSE] to grow. To my mind, this is and ought to be the moral advantage of this government of the Left. In that, undoubtedly "We are not all the same."

I would also like to say a few things about my being "rich" and the owner of much accumulated wealth and property of which a lot was reported in the media and commented by thoughtless individuals.

Q: Please, go ahead.

A: Those who have read the publicly accessible annual household income/revenue statement of the "richest couple in the government" would understand that I did not come to Greece and join the government to become richer. Yet, behind the numbers one observes, there are details that are ignored or misrepresented. For example, the "huge" investments in stocks and bonds are the employer-employee contributions for

our pensions, sizable as they maybe, after decades of well-paid work in the US. These are assets subject to the rules of the US capital markets for private pensions that yield no annual payments and cannot be liquidated before actual retirement [therefore they do not yield income to our household, not now, not three years ago, not ever]. As for the three properties—consisting of a one-bedroom apartment in New York [110m²], a summer house in Syros large enough to accommodate our daughters and their families during vacations, and a small [31m²] studio apartment in Glyfada—none of them yield any rental income. Incidentally, the studio apartment [that has been the focus of Mr. Voridis and Mr. Fotilas, both deputies of the conservative New Democracy party, I want to inform them, that as is shown in the public records which they have willfully misrepresented], belongs to and is being used by my elderly aunt, and that it will be passed on to me upon her death. Thus, my disposable income is solely that of my current compensation. Indeed, my monthly salary in the US up to three years ago was very high, especially by the standards prevailing in Greece today. But it cannot be assumed that income earned in the distant past could [miraculously be available now and on a monthly basis] still be used to support my expenses in Greece today.

Q: You have had a brilliant and long-term career in the US academic field. What made you leave it in late 2014 and come to Greece to get involved in politics? And finally, today, are you regretting this decision?

A: I knew that getting involved in politics carried risks. Hopes could be betrayed, compromises against one's beliefs could become necessarily imperative, marginalization could be a hard-to-avoid penalty if one fails to deliver results within the limited time available, "alliances" like-it-or-not must be built, and the above mistakes must be faced and corrected, especially those affecting unsuspecting citizens. All these were known risks. The risk I never anticipated was to be accused of being "immoral." The decision to be part of a government of the left required me to respond to a strong moral-political dilemma: to leave a safe and well-paid career in the US and get involved in an unpredictable, unstable political position with a very much lower salary or stay put? I admit, I did not hesitate for a moment. I decided spontaneously, following a nearly universal current wave of hope that was triggered by the prospect of a leftist government established in Europe and I have no regrets in so doing. And I do not regret it even now, despite the heavy "injury" bestowed on me. After all, Greece is my beloved home-country and the proposal of SYRIZA to work for it was an honor.

Q: Here is another "irritating" question: "Does Rania measure up to the Left"?

A: I do not know what kind of "left-meter" one uses to respond to such a question. What matters ultimately? Your level of wealth? Whether you wear expensive clothes? Whether you live in [the expensive area of] Kolonaki or [the working-class borough of] Peristeri? Whether you accept or refuse ministerial perks? If we give priority to "appearances" against "being and doing" we are in danger of falling into the trap of "communication uber alles." I do not underestimate the importance of one being a role model and resisting the misuse of power. Good personal behavior and private charity can neither be equated with moral choices in the world of politics nor can they replace the need for progressive responses to social problems. Otherwise, we have to declare the philanthropist pair Bill and Melinda Gates as the "most left" citizens of the world.

To me, the important question to be asked is: What did Antonopoulou do for three years of her government position to serve the public interest? How did she face and resist the enormous private interests that for decades dashed the hopes of the unemployed by squandering billions of EU funds and other public resources?

Q: Which were the worst and the best times in your ministerial tenure?

A: I think the answer to the first is self-evident. Obviously the last few days while the media and the opposition parties used the “morality meter” to measure my performance in government. This indeed qualifies as one of the most difficult times of my life. It never occurred to me that my moral status and ethical standards would be questioned. I do not hide my bitterness as I feel I was left defenseless to the “cannibalism” I was subjected to by the media and the opposition parties.

As for the best, undoubtedly the three-day expo of the Social and Solidarity Economy that was organized for the first time in Greece, last November in Gazi. I felt great satisfaction seeing the positive responses of the participants of the SSE cooperatives and of the hundreds of visitors, and the enthusiasm of civil servants and the employees of the Ministry of Labor who were joyous with the results of our collective efforts. We saw our vision of the SSE taking shape: his alternative way of producing and consuming is destined for all citizens and all types of economic activity [transforming the previously encouraged participation of mostly vulnerable and marginalized groups, providing cleaning and other such services to the municipalities]!

Q: Do you intend to re-engage in politics?

A: It is still too early for an answer to this question. I wish all the best to my colleagues and comrades in the government, and I look forward to seeing a successful and definitive exit from the crisis under this government’s watch. What is important is to lead the country to a path of prosperity and stability. The project of the Left in Greece must succeed. We owe it to society, but also to ourselves.