



Weekly Briefing

Greece Political briefing:

A fluid political landscape in view of the next national election

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The Greek political landscape is divided. SYRIZA and the Independent Greeks are attempting to clear existing obstacles to preserve the stability of the coalition government while they are openly blaming old-guard politicians of the main opposition New Democracy and PASOK party for corruption. From their part, New Democracy and PASOK are reacting to accusations – mainly in the context of the Novartis affair – and see a rift in the coalition government. Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras is endeavoring to persuade voters of the center-left political spectrum to support SYRIZA while the Movement for Change (PASOK constitutes its core) is bringing the theme of a constitutional review to the agenda. The scenario of an early election is widely discussed in the media discourse.

The Novartis affair and deep political divisions

In March 2018 the SYRIZA-led Greek government continued to play the Novartis investigation political card. Its objective has been to present itself as a bearer of transparency and attribute the label ‘corrupted politicians’ to its principal political adversaries of the main opposition New Democracy and the centre-left PASOK party (now the core of the Movement for Change party). It should be mentioned that the Greek Parliament threw out a request by New Democracy for a probe of three health ministers of SYRIZA (Panayiotis Kouroubliis, Andreas Xanthos and Pavlos Polakis). So, the whole-process is not targeting the ruling party but only the ten politicians allegedly involved in the scandal (two former prime ministers, the central bank governor, Greece’s current EU commissioner and six former health ministers as already mentioned in the previous weekly note on Greek politics).

At the time of writing, the identities of the three key witnesses, whose testimonies have been the basis for the relevant prosecutor report, remain

protected. Politicians allegedly involved in the scandal are pushing for their name to be revealed. European Migration Commissioner, Dimitris Avramopoulos, for example, recently filed a relevant request. A similar request has also been made by the former leader of PASOK and ex-finance minister Evangelos Venizelos. Subsequently, MPs of the opposition parties have boycotted the relevant parliamentary committee and the ten politicians arguably involved in the scandal have refused to appear before it until the protected witnesses are called. While it remains debatable whether the committee is competent to continue with the investigation or the file needs to be returned to prosecutor, SYRIZA believes that the preservation of theme on top of the political agenda was supporting its political cause. That is because the majority of Greek citizens finds New Democracy and PASOK as being first responsible for the problem of corruption in the country (and not SYRIZA).

Polarization in Greek politics is the obvious painful result in a period during which the national economy is slowly returning to growth. On the one hand, Premier Alexis Tsipras is publicly saying that he was only interested in fighting against corruption. But on the other, his political opponents are openly criticizing his style of governance. Former Prime Minister Antonis Samaras, for instance, wrote an op-ed in Financial Times in which he is blaming his successor for turning ‘a case involving the Swiss pharmaceuticals company Novartis from an international health sector scandal into an opportunity for political mudslinging’. In Samaras’ view, ‘the Novartis case is the final chapter in the story of a failing government of demagogues who have tried to take advantage of democratic rule in order to install a Latin-American type illiberal leftist regime in Greece [and who] must not be allowed to win’. Greece’s international image is naturally tarnished by deep political divisions and disagreements among members of the political personnel.

Coalition government remains strong

Another issue of interest in Greek politics is whether the coalition government composed of the leftist SYRIZA party and the right-wing Independent Greeks party might prove to be stable. Despite their different political orientation and ideology SYRIZA and the Independent Greeks have managed to cooperate in a harmonious way, especially in critical votes in the Parliament about new austerity measures and difficult reforms. Nevertheless, ongoing negotiations between the governments of Greece and FYROM on the name issue (of the latter) have generated some concern in the Independent Greeks party. Its leader and Defense Minister, Panos Kammenos, does not agree with a potential solution containing the name 'Macedonia'. But he does not believe that the name issue will come to the Greek Parliament before the new national election because FYROM is not determined to change its Constitution (this is a requirement set by Athens as explained in the weekly note on foreign policy).

Generally speaking, Kammenos has shown a remarkable degree of flexibility and political endurance since January 2015 when his party first started to cooperate with SYRIZA. While in terms of political communication he is often publicly advocating for some different views from the ones of SYRIZA Ministers – for example on the name dispute with FYROM – he will hardly be prepared to challenge the symbiosis of his party in the government. Recently, the Greek Defense Minister gave an interview admitting that the difference of opinion on the name issue would not cause problems for the coalition as the two parties 'were fully coordinated on all issues'. It is clear that Kammenos is attempting to enhance the chances for his party to pass the 3 percent threshold in the next national election without causing a governmental crisis in day-to-day politics. In his effort to manipulate public opinion and politically capitalize he is also illustrating as 'hostages' the two Greek soldiers who are for a fifth week in a row detained in a Turkish prison, while SYRIZA Ministers avoid to publicly use this term (Deputy Defense Minister Fotis Kouvelis argues that the lemma 'hostage' had a different legal meaning).

Media speculation on a rift between SYRIZA and Independent Greeks is rising. This speculation was recently rebuffed by the Government spokesman Dimitris Tzanakopoulos. Tzanakopoulos though, Tzanakopoulos presented the relationship between Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras and Kammenos as ‘excellent’. This view is not shared by leader of New Democracy, Kyriakos Mitsotakis. According to Mitsotakis, ‘the Left of Mr Tsipras does not know what the Right of Mr Kammenos is doing’. All in all, experience from Greek politics suggests that the will to stay in power dominated in the end. Therefore, Tsipras and Kammenos are frequently finding a consensus way notwithstanding some verbal disagreements. Political cynicism prevails on several occasions in Greece.

The initiative from the Movement for Change

In the month of March the discussion about a potential review of the Greek Constitution also came to the forefront. In particular, the center-left party Movement for Change unveiled a set of proposed changes recommending that the process be initiated by the current Parliament. These include the introduction of a fixed electoral calendar, the abolition of several privileges enjoyed by the political class, the strengthening of the independence of the judiciary and independent authorities in general and the enhancement of the transparency of party financing. Proposed changes also refer to the enhancement of the powers of the country’s president, which are largely ceremonial and a change of the election process, lowering the required majority from 180 to 160 MPs.

Pushing for a constitutional review, the leader of the Movement for Change, Fofi Gennimata, urged SYRIZA as well as New Democracy to clarify their positions on the proposed reforms. The governing party declared its willingness to discuss a revision of the Constitution welcoming the initiative. Prime Minister Tsipras himself positively responded to the relevant letter he received by Gennimata, although he practically saw it as an opportunity for further dialogue on the matter. However, the leader of New Democracy, Kyriakos Mitsotakis,

disagreed with her (Gennimata). That is because the conservative party is supporting a much broader overhaul of the Constitution than that the one envisaged by the leader of the Movement for Change. Furthermore, Gennimata was criticized by influential politicians even of the centre-left political spectrum. Former leader of PASOK, Evangelos Venizelos, publicly expressed his opposition to the proposed changes.

Within this context, Premier Tsipras, who sees his SYRIZA party behind New Democracy in all opinion polls, is looking to attract voters from the centre-left political spectrum. In so doing, he is attempting to deliberately cause some internal problems to Movement for Change party and send the message to its potential voters that SYRIZA could better represent them and constitute an ideal political family for them. Tsipras, for example, recently met the leader of the centrist To Potami party, Stavros Theodorakis, This meeting was not welcomed by the leader of the Movement for Change. Alternatively, some commentators see a broader picture and believe that Tsipras was eyeing a closer cooperation between SYRIZA and the Movement for Change in the future. Under current circumstances such a scenario is unrealistic but cannot be excluded in the future in spite of Gennimata's objection to it.

A snap election?

For Greece to organize a snap election is not unusual. This scenario is being currently discussed in the media discourse while political cleavages are deepening. Although the new national election should normally take place in September 2019, it might be called earlier. While all opinion polls do not spread optimism for a SYRIZA's electoral win, Premier Tsipras could prefer the solution of a decent defeat in 2018 instead of a larger one in 2019. The corruption political card he is playing as well as his positive response to the Movement for Change initiative for a review of the Constitution are serving this goal. As already mentioned though, the will to stay in power normally prevails in Greek politics.