



Weekly Briefing

Greece Social briefing:
Maladministration, Football and Greek politics
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Maladministration, Football and Greek politics

The so-called Novartis scandal and the name dispute with Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) remain two themes of high interest for public opinion in Greece. A new foreign policy theme also attracts attention: the arrest and detention of two Greek soldiers by Turkish authorities. However, another development deserves attention. This is Greek football and its impact on the society. Owner of PAOK Thessaloniki FC, Ivan Savvidis, widely considered a businessman having a good relationship with the SYRIZA-led Greek government, marched recently onto a football field carrying a gun following a disputed goal in a match. As a result Savvidis himself and PAOK Thessaloniki FC are encountered with legal consequences while the football team might lose its chances to win the championship causing reactions among its supporters.

Public opinion and Greek politics

The Novartis issue and the name dispute with FYROM remain important for Greek public opinion. Starting with the Novartis affair a Pulse survey (presented by SKAI TV channel) demonstrates that 39 percent of respondents believed the Greek government could be benefit by a political discussion on scandals and corruption. Another Pulse survey (published by Dimokratia newspaper) exhibits that 78 percent asked for catharsis and 73 percent for a change of the law about the responsibility of ministers. More importantly, 81 percent considers the Novartis affair a scandal. Among the ones who believe so, 92 percent supports SYRIZA and 65 percent the conservative main opposition New Democracy party.

As far as the name dispute with FYROM is concerned a Rass survey demonstrates that 57,1 percent of respondents were concerned that a potential solution would be closer to the national of FYROM than that of Greece (26,9 percent). SYRIZA voters trusts the government more in that regard (39,7

percent believe that a solution would favor FYROM) while New Democracy less (74,5 percent believe that a solution would favor FYROM). What is worrying for the SYRIZA-led government though is that the lack of trust is homogenous among different age groups suggesting that the Greek society on the whole was suspicious about the government handling of foreign affairs. Subsequently, the SKAI TV Pulse poll outlines that 51 percent of respondents considered the government's management of the arrest and detention of the two Greek soldiers by Turkish authorities negatively and only 32 percent positively. It also sketches out that 78 percent of respondents saw this theme as important or very important.

Additionally, a poll organised by Metron Analysis shows that the division between the systemic and anti-systemic blocs were widening. Several Greek citizens feel disenchanted with Greek politics and are continuously losing their optimism for the future. The conservative New Democracy (23,0 percent) is still having the lead over SYRIZA (16,6 percent) according to the 'intention to vote' question. The Golden Dawn is the third more popular party (6,2 percent), followed the Movement for Change (5,6 percent), the Communist party (4.6 percent) and Independent Greeks (1.6 percent). Smaller anti-bailout parties such as Popular Unity exceeded 1 percent while the percentage of undecided voters reached 11.7 percent and that who do not seek to vote 13.6 percent.

Generally speaking, Greek citizens are not satisfied with the performance of the SYRIZA-led government. However, a Rass survey demonstrates that only 25.8 percent of respondents attributes the current problematic status of the economy to SYRIZA. The majority (64,1 percent) is firstly blaming New Democracy and the centre-left PASOK (now the core of the Movement for Change) for it. Also, 45 percent of respondents is not optimistic that a typical exit of Greece from bailout schemes this August could result in a real change in economic and social policies. Some positive news for the SYRIZA-led government come from a Pulse poll (published by altsantiri website) showing that for 33 percent of respondents paid less social security fees in 2017 in

comparison to 2016 as opposed to 27 percent who paid less. Theoretically, the government can capitalize by delaying its negotiations with Greece's creditors if the economic policy recipe will change (47 percent believe that the delay was worth vs 34 percent who believe the delay was not worth).

Football on the public agenda

For many years Greek football was suffering by a lack of transparency. The SYRIZA-led government promised to bring this to an end. Recent developments are challenging its alleged effort though. On 25 February 2018, Greek Super League derby between PAOK Thessaloniki FC and Olympiacos FC was called off after Olympiakos fFC coach Oscar Garcia was struck in the face by a toilet roll thrown by a spectator minutes before kick-off. Garcia left Toumba Thessaloniki Stadium for a local hospital to seek treatment for a bloodied lip. The incident prompted the Olympiacos FC team to leave the pitch in protest before riots erupted outside the ground.

Two weeks later another game of PAOK FC – this time against AEK FC – did not finish at the Toumba Thessaloniki Stadium. A disallowed a goal from PAOK FC Fernando Varela in the 89th minute was the reason for the halt. In particular, photographs and footage showed owner of PAOK FC, Ivan Savvidis, walk onto the pitch at Thessaloniki twice once wearing an overcoat, the second time with the coat off and his holster in plain view. Police said it wanted to question Savvidis for unauthorized entry to the soccer pitch. The police statement did not mention a weapon but this could not be questioned. Although Savvidis publicly apologized two days later, he is encountered with disciplinary charges that could lead to a lengthy stadium ban and a point deduction for his team

Subsequently, the Greek government decided to indefinitely suspend the Super league. For its part, FIFA urged Greek authorities to take swift action against PAOK FC owner or face a possible suspension. Nonetheless, PAOK FC fans who see that their team would lose its hopes to win the Greek championship

after decades, are strongly reacting. On 17 March 2018, for instance, a speech by New Democracy MP, Adonis Georgiadis, was postponed following an interference by PAOK FC supporters. A few days before this incident some hooligans had invaded state-run TV station in Greece to complain against their team's alleged unfair treatment by judges. In order to leave from the TV studio they forced a sportscaster to read a five-minute protest message on the air.

The unjustifiable reaction of PAOK FC supporters might fuel some new demonstrations in the coming weeks. However, what is more important is how the owner of PAOK FC, Ivan Savvidis, would be treated by the Greek court. Savvidis, who was born in Russia and is the owner of the Agrocom Group located in Rostov-on-Don, is being considered an important investor in Greece the investment of whom are giving job positions to many Greeks in the Northern part of Greece. He is also widely regarded as being close to the SYRIZA-led government. The Greek media he owns, for instance, are openly supporting SYRIZA. This said, the leftist party might be entrapped: on the one hand it is promising to fight against corruption and on the other it is favoring or at least tolerating a businessman who is facing serious legal consequences for entering a football pitch carrying a gun.

Appraisal

Months ahead will be particularly tough for SYRIZA. While for the majority of Greek citizens the party is not first responsible for the ongoing problematic status of the Greek economy, new themes are further damaging it. The party's difficulty in dealing with foreign affairs (the name dispute with FYROM and Greek-Turkish relations following the arrest of two Greek soldiers) are outlining that it is significantly unable to provide efficient solutions in policy areas not defined and controlled by the country's creditors (as it is happening with the bailout). The crisis in Greek football revealing SYRIZA's close relationship with a businessman is seriously challenging its alleged 'moral advantage' vis-à-vis New Democracy. It seems that the last card to be played by

SYRIZA in relation to motivating some of its supporters to rally around it is the Novartis affairs. With surveys exhibiting that this might be a scandal indeed, the Greek government should proceed with catharsis indeed if relevant evidence is existing. Otherwise the affair could even function as a boomerang for it.