



# Weekly Briefing

## **Greece Political briefing:**

**Division and polarization mark the Greek political landscape**

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## **Division and polarization mark the Greek political landscape**

*In the second half of June and the first weeks of July SYRIZA and New Democracy strongly disagreed in the Greek parliament on a variety of themes. These included the Prespes Agreement on the name of FYROM, the national economy and the possibility of the Greek diaspora to vote in national elections. Division and polarization have been the principal elements in heated parliamentary debates. Being under pressure by New Democracy, the government majority lost one MP but remains rather stable despite the unclear stance of the Independent Greeks regarding the Prespes Accord.. From another perspective, the effort of the Movement for Change political party to inspire Greek voters by offering a reliable centre-left governance model in being encountered with serious internal problems.*

### **Parliamentary debate on the FYROM name deal**

The agreement between Greece and FYROM on the name issue as well as the status of the Greek economy are the main themes causing a heated political debate in the country. Starting with the Prespes Agreement the main opposition New Democracy party filed a no-confidence motion against Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, the first since he came to power in 2015. In the view of New Democracy leader Kyriakos Mitsotakis the deal does not serve the Greek national interest as it, inter alia, accepts the ‘Macedonian language’ and the ‘Macedonian ethnicity’. In his own words, the solution that was agreed ‘is a bad agreement’ and ‘some people do not realize it or, even worse, they do not care understanding it’.

The stance of New Democracy on the Prespes Agreement is obviously non-constructive. Taking into account that a complicated foreign policy obstacle will be possibly overcome after the compromise reached between Tsipras and his counterpart from FYROM Zoran Zaev, a more prudent behavior could have

been expected by the main opposition party. On the whole, this lack of political consensus reflects the inability of Greek politicians to put the national interest above the party one. The leader of New Democracy is currently interested in politically capitalizing by the damage of SYRIZA, especially in areas of Northern Greece. While public opinion in Greece has been misinformed on the name dispute for years, citizens in Northern Greece tend to believe a solution without containing the name Macedonia might have been possible for the Greek government to achieve. Instead of publicly acknowledging the reality that a solution without containing the name Macedonia was out of the agenda – as the conservative government under Prime Minister Costas Karamanlis had done ten years earlier in 2008 – Mitsotakis now prefers to fuel populism and cultivate illusions.

On 14 June the Greek parliament began debating the afore-mentioned no-confidence motion. The main objective of Mitsotakis was to expose the governmental coalition partner of SYRIZA, the right-wing Independent Greeks party. The Independent Greeks had said publicly they would not support the Prespes Agreement but would not topple the government either. Tsipras survived the confidence vote and the motion brought by New Democracy party was rejected by 153 MPs – with 127 in favor. Among the MPs who voted in favor of the motion was Independent Greeks MP Dimitris Kammenos though. Dimitris Kammenos was immediately expelled from the parliamentary group of party on the basis of a decision made by its leader Panos Kammenos. In that regard, Mitsotakis' decision to file a no-confidence motion was partly successful at last because the governmental majority was reduced from 154 to 153 MPs. Later, Dimitris Kammenos also left his post as vice president in the parliament.

### **Parliamentary debate on the economy**

Following the parliamentary debate on the FYROM name accord, Mitsotakis sent a letter to Tsipras urging for another debate on the economy at the beginning of July. In this letter he suggested the Greek Premier could no

longer ‘hide behind public relations fiestas’ and should prove the so-called ‘clean exit’ from the bailout in August could be a real development and not a firework. As opposed SYRIZA celebrations, New Democracy believes Greece will continuously be under supervision by its creditors for the years to come as measures already agreed almost equal with a fourth bailout. In the relevant parliamentary debate, Tsipras focused on what he sees as significant achievements including the recent Eurozone settlement for the Greek debt (21 June 2018) and the reduction of unemployment. He also personally attacked Mitsotakis, making reference to corruption cases where he and his family are allegedly involved. Generally speaking the Greek Prime Minister found this debate a good opportunity to promote SYRIZA’s ‘impressive’ economic policies.

Mitsotakis responded to Tsipras in a similar style calling him to a ‘liar’ and publicly protecting his wife who had been accused by the Premier for arguably failing to satisfactorily explain how her wealth came from. Further to this, he criticized Tsipras for completely ignoring his ideology and abandoning ideas he had set out in the first month of 2015 and added the national election – which he can win according to all opinion polls – could not be far away. As far as the future of the Greek economy is concerned, the leader of the main opposition party expressed his pessimism reiterating the fundamental position of New Democracy that the full re-access of Greece to financial markets could not be taken for granted in the short-term. Last but not least, Mitsotakis concentrated on problems of the real economy in the country by explaining the high primary surplus targets already agreed between the Greek government and its creditors will cause asphyxiation.

### **Can Greeks living overseas vote?**

Although the deal on the FYROM and the status of the Greek economy were the themes generating serious political contradiction in the parliament in recent weeks, another issue discussed – in a more polite and calm way – was the

perspective of Greeks living overseas to vote. Specifically, the Greek government rejected a proposal put forward by New Democracy to amend voting laws permitting Greeks living overseas to participate in general elections. Interior Minister Panos Skourletis submitted an amendment to parliament calling for a committee to be formed which will examine details in the matter within the next six months. For its part, the main opposition party was represented by its MP and former Minister Makis Voridis who accused the government of procrastination

In the aftermath of the parliamentary debate on the future possibility of the Greek diaspora to vote, the spokesman of the government Dimitris Tzanakopoulos gave an interview in which he did not go into the substance of the matter. He only said it is ‘good to have such discussions’ in the parliament. Again, this subject mirrors the cynicism dominating Greek politics. Most of Greeks who live abroad tend to belong to the so-called elite and would rather vote for New Democracy than for SYRIZA. So, the disagreement between the Greek government and the main opposition goes beyond the future ability of the Greek diaspora to vote. It is interwoven with the will of SYRIZA to prevent New Democracy from acquiring more votes and with the will of New Democracy to see its electorate base expand.

### **Movement for Change suffers internal crisis**

Another significant political development in Greece is related to the internal crisis of the centre-left Movement for Change (KINAL) political party. This constitutes a new version of the old PASOK party and the name KINAL only offers a new label for a ‘toxic’ political product which is unable to change its personnel and restructure its policies. On 1 July, members of the To Potami (this is a centrist political party which had joined the Movement for Change) decided to leave the Movement for Change. With a vote of 97 in favor and 16 against, To Potami’s representatives adopted the position supported by its leader Stavros Theodorakis. In the view of Theodorakis this was a difficult but

necessary decision because To Potami ‘could not accept any ultimatum given by the Movement for Change.

The withdrawal of To Potami from the Movement for Change is outlining how difficult it is for the traditional centre-left political spectrum in Greece to reorganize itself following the political and moral collapse of PASOK. SYRIZA – despite its revolutionary rhetoric in the first six months of 2015 – is currently attempting to fill this vacuum. From another perspective, future political choices of To Potami might be critical for the shaping of the Greek political landscape. Theodorakis has dismissed rumors that his party is considering the possibility of joining forces with SYRIZA. But such a scenario cannot be excluded. In March 2018 for instance – while To Potami was supporting the Movement for Change – the leader of the latter Fofi Gennimata was frustrated because Theodorakis had decided to meet Greek Premier Alexis Tsipras in the Maximos Mansion in Athens. Another possibility, which Theodorakis equally refutes, is that of a future collaboration between To Potami and the main opposition party New Democracy.

### **Greece’s principal problem is its political personnel**

Heated parliamentary debates as the ones presented above and internal problems within political parties such as the Movement for Change cannot spread optimism for the future of Greece. The lack of a political consensus on important issues – either related to the economy or to foreign policy or to the possibility of the Greek diaspora to vote – shows that Greek politicians prefer to disagree in order to serve political interests. Parties in the government tend to do exactly the opposite from what they advocate for while being in the opposition and vice-versa. Also, politicians who belong to the same political spectrum regularly fail to find a common denominator for personal reasons. The existence of this political personnel and its limited renewal with fresh and young voices will – to large extent – keep Greece entrapped in a vicious circle of cynicism and economic as well as political stagnation.