



Weekly Briefing

Greece Political briefing:
The referendum in FYROM and Greek politics
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The referendum in FYROM and Greek politics

SYRIZA and Independent Greeks disagree on the Prespes agreement with FYROM. While the first believes this accord will strengthen Greece's position in the Balkans, the latter sees it as violating its red line based on the position: Macedonia is Greek. When the Prespes agreement is discussed in the Greek parliament in 2019, a governmental crisis will be possibly erupt, leading to a snap election. For its part, the main opposition New Democracy party prefers to object the accord but has clarified it will respect it, if it is approved in the Greek parliament before the national election.

The Prespes agreement between Greece and FYROM on the name issue primarily affects Greek foreign policy. Its impact on domestic politics cannot be ignored though. The June 2018 accord clearly states in article 4 that FYROM is the country that first has to ratify it before Greece takes the baton. This means domestic developments in FYROM affect the process in Greece. The most important development (so far) has been the referendum of 30 September 2018. While the overwhelming majority of FYROM's citizens voted in favor of the Prespes agreement, abstention was the main winner. As a result the fourth and fifth steps of Article 1.4 that FYROM needs to take and proceed with constitutional amendments might be endangered.

The referendum had been given the label 'advisory' by FYROM. So, its importance is largely political. According to Athens the result is positive but the low turnout is certainly generating some skepticism. Athens also hopes the constitutional amendments process will not be derailed. FYROM's Prime Minister Zoran Zaev is determined to normally proceed and cooperate with his country's main opposition party VMRO – or at least some of its members. Zaev

needs to obtain a 2/3 majority and therefore some VMRO support is a prerequisite. If he fails to do so, a snap election will be the only political alternative.

The Greek government is closely monitoring the situation in FYROM because it is not theoretically united on the Prespes agreement. While the leftist SYRIZA party supports it, the small coalition partner, the right-wing Independent Greeks party, negatively sees the accord. In particular, leader of the second, Defense Minister Panos Kammenos, regularly says he will not vote in favor when the Prespes agreement will be discussed in the Greek Parliament. Following the FYROM's referendum Kammenos tweeted about an 'invalid' result. Greek government's spokesperson Dimitris Tzanakopoulos spoke about a 'legal interpretation' of Kammenos. But Greek Foreign Minister exposed Kammenos and said the referendum constituted no legal presupposition or condition in the Prespes agreement. In an interview on the Hellenic Broadcasting Corporation (ERT) on 1 October Kotzias read article 1.4 of the Prespes agreement. As far as the political aspect is concerned, he connected the high abstention percentage in FYROM with the stance of the opposition which preferred to avoid a significant defeat by participating in the referendum.

The image of the Greek government on the Prespes agreement can hardly be considered good. Minister of Digital Policy, Telecommunication and Media Nikos Pappas said so commenting on disagreements between Kotzias and Pappas following FYROM's referendum. The question that is raised is what repercussions these disagreements could portend. There are two scenarios that can be analyzed:

- 1) If the Prespes agreement is approved by FYROM's parliament, then the Greek parliament will also have to convene and vote, perhaps at the beginning of 2019 or a bit later. Nonetheless, if an early election takes place in FYROM following a potential failure of Zaev to cooperate with VMRO or some of its MPs, the Greek parliament will convene at a later stage (should Zaev's Social Democratic party wins the national election in the country).

2) If the Prespes agreement is not approved by FYROM's parliament or if VMRO win the national election in FYROM, the whole process will collapse

In scenario 1, the coalition government of SYRIZA-Independent Greeks will be endangered, if Defense Minister Kammenos insists on his position and votes against the Prespes agreement. On the whole, Kammenos counts on his objection to the Prespes agreements to show to supporters of his Independent Greeks party he does not make concessions on this important foreign policy issue. But even if Kammenos insists on its position, it is not clear how all Independent Greeks MPs will behave. One of them, Thanassis Papachristopoulos, has already said he does not agree with his leader. And, in spite of Kammenos' stance, it seems likely that the Prespes agreement will be approved in the Greek Parliament. Some individual MPs (from parties such as Movement of Change, to Potami and Union of Centrists) are expected to join SYRIZA MPs (145 in total) and together reach the required majority of 151 seats. Also, if some political parties abstain, an even lower majority is needed. In that regard, the external pressure cannot be ignored. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg recently gave an interview in Greek leading newspaper in which he expressed his strong belief the accord will be ratified.

A differentiation between SYRIZA and Independent Greeks will possible pave the way for an early election. SYRIZA will have to find another coalition partner to stay in power. In an interview Prime Minister Alexis Tsirpas granted to Wall Street Journal on 27 September 2018 he said his government can survive but is uncertain about the coalition. Obviously, the later the Greek parliament debates the Prespes agreement, the longer SYRIZA and Independent Greeks can govern together. That is why Kammenos was keen on tweeting about the 'invalid result' of FYROM's referendum as he prefers the others side (FYROM) to undermine the process of ratification than himself.

In scenario 2, the coalition government of SYRIZA-Independent Greeks will not be endangered. Prime Minister Tsipras, however, will lose an important

political card of linking a potential ‘yes’ in parliament on the Prespes Agreement with a relaxation of bailout measures. In particular, Tsipras seeks to postpone already agreed pension cuts for 2019 suggesting a draft-budget including those cuts, will hardly be approved in the Greek parliament. In such a case the government will collapse and the future of the Prespes agreement will be at stake. So, Tsipras associates the approval of the deal with FYROM in Greece with the political survival of his government.

The stance of New Democracy

Beyond the politics of SYRIZA and Independent Greeks, the stance of the k main opposition party New Democracy on the Prespes agreement deserves some attention. New Democracy opposes this accord because it believes the Greek government should not have made concessions on the Macedonian nationality and language. This said it blames the government for being incompetent to handle significant foreign policy themes. New Democracy and its leader Kyriakos Mitsotakis say they will vote against the Prespes agreement in the parliament. They also urge Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras to call a snap election before this vote in order for Greek citizens to express their opinion about it.

Mitsotakis finds it convenient to reject the Prespes agreement while in the opposition. But he clarifies, should the accord is ratified in the parliament, he ‘will have to respect this national commitment’. The leader of New Democracy anticipates the majority of 151 MPs can be obtained in the parliament, even if his party votes against. So, he can easily employ a critical stance to attract voters belong to the right-wing political spectrum, especially in the Northern part of Greece. Mitsotakis’s position will become awkward, if the Prespes agreement is not debated before the election – as he easily asks for – but after this election.

As a Prime Minister Mitsotakis will find it hard to keep his pre-election words. He will then be placed under heavy pressure by the US and the EU to vote in favor of the Prespes accord (following, of course, the relevant approval of constitutional changes in FYROM). He will have either to make a turnaround paying the political cost of unreliability or ignore the stance of Greece's international partners. The ideal scenario for New Democracy is to 'respect the national commitment' without having to vote for the accord in the parliament.

Conclusion

The Prespes agreement signed between the governments of Greece and FYROM last June is impacting on the political landscape of both countries. Greece is closely monitoring developments in FYROM as they might affect the timing of the national election. As long as SYRIZA and Independent Greek disagree on the Prespes agreement, the survival of the coalition government cannot be taken for granted. But if FYROM's Prime Minister Zoran Zaev fails to cooperate with VMRO on the required constitutional amendments after the referendum of 30 September, the whole process will be delayed or even derailed. Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras hopes to connect the potential approval of the accord in the Greek parliament with a postponement of already agreed pension cuts. For his part, leader of Independent Greeks, Defense Minister Panos Kammenos will be in the dilemma of either causing an early election and partly satisfy the electorate of the party or remain in power. New Democracy is joining the political discussion by opposing the accord but clarifying it will respect it, if it wins the next national election.