



Weekly Briefing

Greece Political briefing:
Separation of State and Church in Greece?
George N. Tzogopoulos

China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin

Kiadásért felelős személy: Huang Ping



1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.



+36 1 5858 690



office@china-cee.eu



china-cee.eu

Separation of State and Church in Greece?

On 6 November 2018 Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras announced the Greek government reached a historic agreement with the Greek Orthodox Church to settle the issue of Church assets, as part of a constitutional revision aimed at changing relations with the State. According to the joint communique issued after Tsipras' statements, the two sides will set up a fund to manage and develop property claimed by both the Church and the state since 1952, along with any other asset the Church voluntarily transfers to this fund. The revenues and obligations from the property development will be equally divided among the two sides. However, the agreement is provisional and debatable. Critics argue it is not aligned with the proposal to include the 'recognition of the religious neutrality of the state to the Constitution. Also, it has to be approved not only by the Greek Parliament but also by the Holy Synod. The clergy does not appear particularly satisfied and the mission of Archbishop Ieronymos to persuade Bishops about its necessity is difficult.

According to Article 3 of the Greek Constitution the prevailing religion in Greece is that of the Eastern Orthodox Church of Christ. The Orthodox Church of Greece, acknowledging Lord Jesus Christ as its head, is inseparably united in doctrine with the Great Church of Christ in Constantinople and with every other Church of Christ of the same doctrine, observing unwaveringly, as they do, the holy apostolic and synodal canons and sacred traditions. Also, the Orthodox Church of Greece is autocephalous and is administered by the Holy Synod of serving Bishops and the Permanent Holy Synod originating thereof and assembled as specified by the Statutory Charter of the Church in compliance with the provisions of the Patriarchal Tome of 29 June 1850 and the Synodal Act of 4 September 1928. Moreover, the ecclesiastical regime existing in certain districts of the State shall not be deemed contrary to the provisions of the

preceding paragraph. And the text of the Holy Scripture shall be maintained unaltered. Official translation of the text into any other form of language, without prior sanction by the Autocephalous Church of Greece and the Great Church of Christ in Constantinople, is prohibited.

Generally speaking, the Church has been able to play a role in political developments in Greece. In 2000, for example, when the then Greek government decided to remove religious affiliations from state identity cards, the Church viewed it as an assault on Greek nationalism, identity and its own authority. It subsequently organized impressive demonstrations and public events to block the process. The impact of religion on public opinion is significant. Greece is an overwhelmingly Orthodox Christian nation – with similarities to Russia, Ukraine and other Eastern European countries. A recent Pew Research survey demonstrates Greeks embrace Christianity as a key part of their national identity. Three-quarters of Greeks say being Orthodox is at least somewhat important to being truly Greek. Religion is also more important in Greeks' personal lives than it is in those of many Western Europeans. Nine-in-ten Greeks (92 percent) believe in God – including 59 percent who say they believe with absolute certainty. And 55 percent of Greek adults say religion is very important in their lives.

Despite the tradition and public opinion stance, Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras planned to elaborate on the separation of State and Church for some months in his effort to review the Constitution. In his proposals, he, inter alia, envisions changes to 23 articles of the Constitution, including the 'recognition of the religious neutrality of the state'. The attempt is yielding initial results. On 6 November 2018, Tsipras and Archbishop Ieronymos announced their intention to reach an agreement after a meeting at the Maximos Mansion in Athens. The two sides will set up a fund to manage and develop property claimed by both the State and the Church since 1952 in parallel with any other asset the Church voluntarily transfers to the fund. The revenues and obligations from the property development will be equally divided among the

State and the Church. Additionally, the priests will no longer be considered civil servants and will therefore be excluded from the official payroll, known as Single Payments Authority. Alternatively, the State will pay the same amount to the Church in the form of a subsidy.

Tsipras hopes to politically capitalize. To start with, he safeguards the political support of Archbishop Ieronymos ahead of the national election and hopes to attract some voters who define themselves as being in the center of the political spectrum. The Prime Minister also seeks to demonstrate to Greek citizens he is an active, successful and responsible politician who dares to tackle chronic problems (as he also did with the Prespes Agreement). Moreover, following the provisional agreement the Greek government wants to proceed to the hiring of new civil servants in replacing circa 10,000 clerics who will be excluded from the Single Payments Authority. Although it is not certain Greece's creditors will give the green light for this hiring, the announcement is placed in SYRIZA's pre-election campaign. Government spokesperson Dimitris Tzanakopoulos said the agreement with the Church gives the government the option to fill the vacancies created by hiring public-sector staff to cover the needs of the social state, primarily, such as doctors, teachers and nurses.

For its part, the main opposition New Democracy party accuses SYRIZA for hypocrisy. New Democracy explains that in 2013 SYRIZA – then as the main opposition party – had not voted in favor of law 4182 (article 83) for the establishment of a fund to manage and develop property claimed by both the State and the Church. At that time, SYRIZA members – including the current Parliament Speaker Nikolaos Voutsis – had insisted the payment of the clergy should be exclusively the responsibility of the Church. Furthermore, New Democracy is demanding clarifications concerning the management of the subsidies to be given by the State to the Church. It asks whether the Archbishop or the Holy Synod will be responsible.

Beyond disagreements between SYRIZA and New Democracy, the association of Greek clerics is complaining. In its view, if the status of civil

servants is removed, existing rights of the clerics will be lost. So, it called for a stop to the ‘shameful’ agreement, saying its members felt ‘betrayed’ for not being consulted. Amid objections within the Church, Ieronymos stressed a firm deal was still a way off. The country’s 82 bishops will discuss the matter soon. Furthermore, the Ecumenical Patriarchate, which has jurisdiction over the churches of Crete and the Dodecanese, is asking for more details. Ecumenical Patriarch Vartholomaios and Education and Religious Affairs Minister Costas Gavroglou met in Istanbul on 10 November to discuss this issue. Speculations about a rift in the relationship between Ecumenical Patriarch Vartholomaios and Archbishop Ieronymos have been fueled in recent months. At the beginning of October a meeting between them was cancelled.

A subsequent question that is raised is whether the proposed constitutional change of introducing the recognition of the religious neutrality of the state is in line with the provisional agreement between Tsipras and Ieronymos. While conventional wisdom suggests so, former Vice-President of Greece Evangelos Venizelos disagrees. As he explains the Greek Constitution already stipulates for religious freedom without limitations. He also says it is unclear what will happen if other religious communities will also ask for state subsidies as it is the case in Germany. Venizelos also believes the Church gains much more from the provisional agreement as the State recognizes its obligation to pay for the salary of clerics as a compensation for the expropriation of the Church’s property.

It is also debatable whether the provisional agreement makes a real difference. Critics argue it does not because the State agrees to pay the same amount of salaries to the Church in the form of a subsidy. But supporters of the deal present a different argument. In their opinion, the fact that the clergy is not paid by the State cannot be accompanied by the claim that European states should not have pending economic issues concerning their relationship with the Church. In addition, the joint utilization of the so-called controversial property is an indirect financing tool – essentially from resources of the Church – of the

compensation the State itself will give to the Church. In the long run this will drastically reduce the real cost of compensation.

Conclusion

The provisional agreement between Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras and Archbishop Ieronymos is a step towards the separation of the State from the Church. The process will be lengthy and difficult though. The agreement is only provisional and has to be approved by the cabinet, church leaders and the parliament. Also, a parallel deal has to be made between the Greek government and the Ecumenical Patriarchate. All in all, even if the intention of Premier Tsipras and Archbishop Ieronymos to reach a final agreement flourishes and the Greek Parliament approves a final agreement, the role of the Orthodox Church from the Greek public life will hardly be limited.