



Weekly Briefing

Greece Political briefing:
Greek Politics in 2018: An Overview
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Greek Politics in 2018: An Overview

The possibility of an early election was high in 2018. However, the wildfires hitting the Attica region in July led the Greek government to shelve its plan to announce a snap election after Greece's exit from the bailout in August. Throughout the year the governing SYRIZA and the main opposition New Democracy party participated in heated political debates. As a result the Greek political landscape became largely polarized. This new tendency might favor SYRIZA in its effort to achieve a political rally of its supporters, although New Democracy did enjoy a clear lead in all opinion polls.

2018 was a year of intense political debates and confrontations in Greece. The Novartis scandal in which some politicians of New Democracy and PASOK are allegedly involved, the Prespes Agreement paving the way for FYROM to join NATO, the July wildfires causing death to approximately 100 people in the Attica region, the day after for the Greek economy following the official exit from the bailout in August and the perspective of constitutional changes generated serious disagreements between the governing SYRIZA party (and its minor coalition ally, the Independent Greeks) and opposition parties, mainly New Democracy, the Movement for Change (formerly known as PASOK), to POTAMI and the Union of Centrists but also the Greek Communist party and the Golden Dawn party. Even December 2018 finds political parties clashing in Parliament discussing these issues.

Tsipras's performance

Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras has shown a remarkable ability of leading Greece in a period of domestic and international turmoil. Despite his dramatic mistakes in the first six months of 2015 which could have pushed Greece outside the Eurozone and the inconsistency between his pre-election promises and the policies he is practically exercising, his government has managed to successfully complete all reviews of the third bailout and obtain a modest agreement for settling the Greek debt last June at the EU level. Additionally, as Greece is continuously creating budget surpluses that exceed targets set by its creditors, Tsipras is able to take some measures partly relieving the pain of the society. He has, for example, persuaded Greece's creditors about the negative effect of new pension cuts (already agreed and voted in 2017). The latter approved the revoking of this measure which was finally not included in the 2019 budget indeed. This was certainly a political victory for the Greek

Premier. Such a concession from the side of the country's creditors was unthinkable a few years ago.

Tsipras's worst moment in 2018 was his handling of the July 2018 wildfires. On the day of the wildfires he was in Bosnia-Herzegovina and had to interrupt the official visit and return to Athens. In his first media appearance he refrained from talking about victims. But as it was revealed later he had been already aware of human losses. So, the dominant perception in the Greek society is that he lied pretending the crisis was under the control of the state. Generally speaking, the wildfires, damaged the image of the Greek government which failed to coordinate actions of relevant state services and respond to extraordinary needs. They also altered its strategic planning. The scenario of an early election last September – almost immediately after Greece's exit from the bailout – was shelved. It would have been a political suicide for Tsipras to announce a snap election while Greece was mourning its victims.

From another perspective, the Greek Premier believes political polarization is serving SYRIZA's interests. By focusing on the maladministration of New Democracy and PASOK and their alleged tolerance for corruption as well as attempting to reveal new scandals, he hopes to demonstrate to Greek citizens – principally indecisive voters and disenchanted SYRIZA supporters – that a potential victory of his main political opponent Kyriakos Mitsotakis in the 2019 election will signal a return to sinful practices of old-guard politicians. Tsipras finds it easy to be engaged in personal political confrontations with Mitsotakis as he is thus able stigmatize nepotism, talk about the latter's family's linkages with some businessmen and expose his apparent neoliberal profile.

Mitsotakis' performance

For his part, Kyriakos Mitsotakis is following the typical policy of a leader of a main opposition party in Greece. In particular, he invests in the political damage of the Prime Minister and his governing party. All opinion polls organized in 2018 have shown that New Democracy is having the lead indeed. So, Mitsotakis have sought to criticize Tsipras and the government in almost all fronts in order to point their weaknesses. However, he has not managed – until now – to offer a reliable policy alternative. On the whole, there is no real room for a Greek government to deviate from fiscal targets already approved by Greece's creditors. So, the economic program of New Democracy (which now theoretically promises lower taxes and more growth) needs to be evaluated by these creditors for it to be applicable. Until this happens, its significance remains low.

The lead of New Democracy in the opinion polls does not mean Greek citizens tend to trust Mitsotakis. The existing frustration about Tsipras and his bailout policies have not created a political momentum for the main opposition. Throughout the year Mitsotakis has failed to inspire the society and only saw his popularity rise among New Democracy supporters. His stance on the Prespes Agreements, for example, demonstrates he puts the political interest of his party above the national one. While this agreement is based on a fair compromise and will solve a difficult dispute opening the door of NATO to FYROM as Greece also wishes, Mitsotakis has preferred to oppose it. By focusing on the concessions Greece is making (on ‘Macedonian’ language and ethnicity) he creates the illusion his party could strike a better deal and is continuously fueling populism. In his effort to publicly accuse Tsipras, Mitsotakis has said in the Greek Parliament that the Prime Minister bargained with the US and the EU to avoid pension cuts and – in exchange – betrayed Greece’s red lines in solving the name issue with FYROM.

While it is likely for New Democracy to win the new election, its approach is not particularly constructive. The success of SYRIZA in implementing the bailout has weakened New Democracy’s argumentation making it almost irrelevant. This became evident in 2018 as it had also happened in 2017 and 2016. The main opposition party did not expect from the Greek government to fulfil its obligations, generate growth and be appraised by the country’s creditors. So, it often associates its criticism of SYRIZA with the latter’s choices in the first months of 2015. This is a fair point as the Greek economy could have certainly been in a better shape without this setback. But SYRIZA has been transformed into a completely different party since it signed the third bailout in July 2015. New Democracy has not yet found a remedy to efficiently respond to a party that could be described as the ‘new PASOK’ in Greek politics.

Political alliances

In 2018 the coalition government between SYRIZA and Independent Greeks has proven to be resistant. The opposition of Independent Greeks to the Prespes Agreement has certainly caused cohesion problems in the government – marked by the resignation of Foreign Minister Nikos Kotzias following his personal dispute with Defense Minister Panos Kammenos and that of two Independent Greeks MPs, namely Dimitris Kammenos and George Lazaridis. However, the government is still having a majority of 152 MPs in Parliament. On the whole, SYRIZA and Independent Greeks have managed to govern in a harmonious way, although they publicly disagree on several issues. Leader of

Independent Greeks (and Defense Minister) Panos Kammenos decided to keep to coalition government alive in 2018 amid speculation that his party could withdraw from it after the Prespes Agreement was signed last June.

Beyond the cooperation between SYRIZA and the Independent Greeks, 2018 was a difficult year for PASOK. Under its new name (Movement for Change) it has failed to create a solid core for the center-left political spectrum. The decision of To POTAMI to withdraw from it – in spite of their initial agreement – was characteristic. The Movement for Change could theoretically even act as a coalition partner of SYRIZA in the Greek government, should Independent Greek would withdraw. But its leader Fofi Gennimata refuted this scenario. While the Movement for Change is endeavoring to acquire a clear and independent political identity and attract voters, its communication strategy is based on criticism of both SYRIZA and New Democracy. It seems that the Movement for Change will cooperate with New Democracy in the future though. Mitsotakis and Gennimata do enjoy a good working relationship.

Conclusion

An analysis of domestic politics in Greece for 2018 could lead to the conclusion that SYRIZA did fight hard to regain the trust of citizens, while New Democracy enjoyed a lead in opinion polls – but without generally inspiring the society. Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras decided to employ the tactics of polarizing the political landscape and be involved in personal debates with leader of the main opposition party Kyriakos Mitsotakis who has not yet managed to offer reliable policy proposals. The political damage of the governing SYRIZA party still render the latter as the favorite to win the next election though. Last but not least, the coalition government kept the majority in the parliament defying some cohesion problems while smaller parties such as the Movement for Change attempted to play the political card of their importance as potential allies in coalition governments.