




Weekly Briefing

**Greece social briefing:
The Greek society in 2019
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The Greek society in 2019

Fatigue for the SYRIZA-Independent Greek administration became evident in 2019. The majority of Greek citizens preferred a governmental change and voted for New Democracy in the national election of July. The disappointment with SYRIZA's policies did not entail enthusiasm for New Democracy but the acceptance of a grace period during which critique on the governmental work was lenient. Most Greek citizens appeared thus satisfied with the performance of new ministers as well as with some initiatives such as the enforcement of the anti-smoking ban. They were also concerned about a crisis in Greek-Turkish relations, although they approved the handling of the situation by the government.

The year of 2019 saw a governmental change in Greece. New Democracy won the July national election and came to power after 4.5 years of the SYRIZA-Independent Greeks administration. The result of the national election did not necessarily reflect a conservative turn of the Greek society. Despite the victory of New Democracy that garnered 39.85 percent of the vote, SYRIZA's performance was remarkably high (31.53 percent) and much higher in comparison to that of the May European election (23.75 percent). Also, SYRIZA's natural political damage does not mean Greek citizens refrained from voting other parties of the center-left or left spectrum. The Movement for Change garnered 8.10 percent and Diem25 former by former Finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis 3.44 percent. Also, the percentage of other center-left or left parties not passing the 3 percent threshold to enter parliament, should be calculated. The Union of Centrists (1.24 percent) and the Course of Freedom (1.46 percent) are indicative examples.

In an election year that included three different polls – the national, the European and the local one – people had the opportunity to have their voice heard. 2019 was thus a year of small scale public reactions such as demonstrations and strikes. What requires more attention is to look at the level of satisfaction of the performance of the new government following the national election of 5 July. Notwithstanding the grace period that is given to all new governments for the immediate period after they come to power, some interesting data can be found in recent surveys. A Pulse poll conducted in November, for instance, exhibits 63 percent of respondents believed the 'direction of things' in Greece was correct whereas 31 percent said it was wrong. This marks a significant difference in comparison to April 2019 when the same

company presented results showing 30 percent believed the ‘direction of things’ was correct while 61 percent disagreed. But the Pulse poll outlined a very small increase in the percentage of citizens considering their personal economic status comfortable. This percentage was 13 percent in March and 14 percent in November. Further to this, 47 percent of respondents regarded their personal economic status as ‘average’ in March and almost the same percentage (48 percent) shared this view in November.

As far as political preferences in Greece were concerned, Opinion Poll conducted research in December that outlined the clear lead of New Democracy. In particular, 40.50 percent of respondents would vote for New Democracy and 23 percent for SYRIZA in a national election. Smaller parties followed: The Movement for Change (5.3 percent), the Communist party (5.1 percent), the Greek Solution (4.5 percent) and DIEM25 (3 percent). The leader of New Democracy and Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis (49.9 percent) was considered ‘more appropriate for the position in comparison to the leader of the main opposition SYRIZA party Alexis Tsipras (16.8 percent). But 29.8 percent of respondents believed no one was appropriate. With reference to ministers, most citizens were satisfied with their work in December. Minister of Foreign Affairs Nikos Dendias (57 percent) and Minister of Citizens’ Protection Michalis Chrysochoidis (56.5 percent) received the highest scores. State Minister George Gerapetritis (40 percent) and Health Minister Vassilis Kikilias (45 percent) has the lowest grades. The Opinion Poll survey also demonstrates 70.5 of respondents were not happy with the opposition tactics of SYRIZA.

An important political decision Premier Mitsotakis had to make after his election was whether to re-nominate Prokopis Pavlopoulos for the position of the President of the Hellenic Republic or propose another figure. A December MRS survey showed 44.8 percent of respondents preferred Pavlopoulos to start a second five-year term whereas 41.1 percent hoped a new president would be voted for in parliament. With speculation on a potential new name to be nominated by Mitsotakis flourishing, the most popular was Costas Karamanlis (26 percent), followed by Antonis Samaras (11.2 percent), Dora Bakoyanni (8 percent), Evangelos Venizelos (5.9 percent) and Maria Damanaki (4 percent). 30.4 percent of respondent preferred a person not necessarily discussed in the media discourse. Mitsotakis nominated finally President of the Council of State Aikaterini Sakellaropoulou to succeed Prokopis Pavlopoulos.

For many years foreign policy was an issue of minor importance for Greek public opinion. In 2018 – and especially in 2019 – the Prespes Agreement brought the theme back to the agenda. The New Democracy escaped politically from the pain of waging difficult negotiations with North Macedonia, which had been conducted by the previous government but became

encountered with serious tensions in Greek-Turkish relations. The MRB survey exhibits that 59.2 percent of respondents regarded a small-scale conflict between Greece and Turkey likely in the next twelve months. The percentage of more optimistic respondents was 35.1 percent. In parallel with the MRB poll another one conducted by Pulse in December demonstrated 61 percent was concerned about recent provocations from the side of Turkey. 54 percent of the respondents agreed with the handling of the situation by the Greek government while 34 percent disagreed. Polarization was clear. Supporters of New Democracy agreed (81 percent) and voters of SYRIZA disagreed (54 percent).

The Prespes Agreement and more importantly the deterioration of Greek-Turkish relations have influenced the media discourse. While the economy had been at the epicenter of journalists for years, this tendency was reversed in the last months of 2019. Media reports and front-pages of newspapers were full with items focusing on tensions in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean. Against this backdrop, a dilemma started to dominate the media coverage: whether a recourse to the International Court of Justice could be beneficial for Greece to prevent the potential scenario of a small-scale war with Turkey. Commentators were divided between the ones advocating for dialogue in line with the governmental policy and the ones criticizing this approach and employing patriotic – often populist – arguments. There are also a few analysts who avoid the trap of this dilemma and are seriously looking for a third way. Obviously, the Greek society is susceptible to populist messages.

From another perspective, the Greek society generally agreed with the will of the governing New Democracy party to allow police into university campuses. This was the result of the abolishment of the so-called asylum law that had banned policies from entering universities in order to theoretically respect the freedom of ideas. According to the November Pulse survey 66 percent agreed or rather agreed with the abolition of the asylum law whereas 23 percent disagreed or rather disagreed. Polarization was, again, clear. 93 percent of New Democracy voters approved the law while the percentage for SYRIZA supporters was 40 percent. In the aftermath of the voting of the new law police raid did occur, for instance on the premises of the Athens University of Economics and Business in September. Moreover, light clashes between the police and students took place on 17 November.

Another interesting element was the approval of most Greeks of the decision of the government to reinforce anti-smoking efforts. Specifically, the government decided to inspect whether the law banning smoking in enclosed public places was enacted. It therefore made no exemptions – including casinos, night-clubs and betting shops, and established a hotline (a four-digit phone line, 1142) to report violations of the law. Several fines were subsequently imposed.

The afore-mentioned Pulse poll shows that 75 percent of respondents agreed or rather agreed with the anti-smoking policy. 87 percent of New Democracy supporters and 66 percent of SYRIZA supporters expressed this opinion. Also, both smokers (64 percent) and non-smokers (86 percent) agreed with strict measures. According to a study conducted by the Hellenic Cancer Society approximately 15,000 people die every year in the country due to smoking related reasons. Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis heralded his initiative by saying: ‘The enemy is tobacco smoke, not smokers’.

Conclusion

The performance of SYRIZA in the national election of July 2019 did not mirror the decline of the center-left in Greece. The turn towards a conservative government was a natural reaction of citizens following 4.5 years of the SYRIZA-Independent Greeks administration. In the second semester of the year New Democracy benefited by the so-called grace-period that is given to all government winning an election in Greece. Against this backdrop, the level of satisfaction for governmental policies was high. Society polarization on important affairs – such as the handling of Greek-Turkish relations – was evident though. To sum up, 2019 was a calm year for public opinion reactions because three different polls took place and citizens had the opportunity to have their voice heard and finally decide for a governmental change.