



Weekly Briefing

**Greece political briefing:
Greek Politics after COVID-19
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Greek Politics after COVID-19

The Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis has efficiently managed the first stage of the novel coronavirus crisis. He decided to impose lockdown measures in mid-March considering public health his top priority. But his ability to overcome the economic challenges of the novel coronavirus is doubted. Scenarios for an early election in 2020 are flourishing in Greece. Mitsotakis can take the leader of the main opposition SYRIZA party Alexis Tsipras by surprise and cause him significant political problems. However, it is not very clear what he could achieve by calling a snap poll three years before his mandate expires and how he might justify his decision to Greek voters.

It is not particularly easy to make safe predictions about Greek politics. Politicians, who regularly put the political interest above the national one, are developing strategies which aim at taking their political opponents by surprise. For Greece to organize a snap poll has almost been a political habit, especially in the last decade of high tensions because of the impact of bailouts on the society. Following the national election of September 2009, which had been already an early poll as the normal one should have been normally organized in 2011, several other rounds followed until July 2019: the twin elections of May 2012 and June 2012, the one of January 2015 and of September 2015. Drawing on this experience the ongoing public discussion about a new early election – less than a year after the landslide victory of New Democracy – goes hand in hand with the Greek political culture.

Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis has publicly said that the possibility of an early election is non-existing. However, media do continuously fuel relevant scenarios. An early election could have both opportunities and risks for the governing New Democracy party. At the writing, New Democracy enjoys a clear lead in all opinion polls. The main reason is its successful management of the first stage of the coronavirus crisis. In particular, Mitsotakis decided to take measures early, in mid-March, and considered public health as his top priority. His decision produced positive results. At the beginning of May lockdown measures were lifted as the number of COVID-19 cases was relatively low. Most Greek citizens had respected the measures and stayed home. And they certainly appreciate the fact that their government seriously managed the public health crisis instead of employing dangerous strategies of delaying the necessary lockdown for economic reasons.

There is no question that Greece does not constitute a tourism hub in the winter as it is the case for Italy, France, Spain or the UK. But irrespective of the relative easy task of the protection of public health, Mitsotakis deserves a credit for acting on time. The international media, principally US TV networks such as CNN, have praised the Greek government. It is a very good period for Greek-American relations and this has been publicly evident also during the COVID-19 crisis. Mitsotakis is keen on granting interviews to American journalists as well as to speak in events organized by American universities and think tanks. This good climate is then being reproduced by Greek national media – which largely support New Democracy – and is being perceived an indication of the good job of Mitsotakis and the Greek government. Since the outbreak of the economic crisis in 2009, Greek national media tend to largely focus on how Greece is illustrated abroad. While the image of the country was negative on several occasions, the New Democracy government has managed to temporarily alter this attitude. Whether this will continue will be seen in the future.

Obviously, the Greek government cannot only rely on its management of the first phase of the COVID-19 crisis to boost its political communication strategy and increase its performance in public opinion polls. The most difficult challenge will be to cope with the economic impact. During the weeks of the lockdown, Mitsotakis supported employees who could not work by offering them economic support. In a period during which most people were staying home, the allowance of €800 that was given to many – but not all – affected employees for a duration of six weeks relieved some of the pain. Expenses for the median household were low – in comparison to other normal periods – because of their inability to spend in services. Greek citizens, for example, were not allowed to travel during the Easter holidays. The government, of course, would not be continuously able to provide the afore-mentioned allowance. The gradual reopening of the national economy since the beginning of May reflected its will for a return to economic normalcy. It is here where several employees – with the exception of civil servants – will face several economic difficulties.

The Greek economy is largely based on consumption in services. Restaurants, for instance, reopened in May by respective social distancing measures. This means they cannot host as many clients as they used to host in good time. Additionally, several Greek citizens remain hesitant to come back to their daily routine as long as no medicine against the coronavirus is found. The lower the turnover of a restaurant is, the more difficult it is for their owners to pay the personnel as well as to rehire the ones who had been put in layoffs during the weeks of lockdown. This is also the case for other service-related aspects of the Greek economy. These include shopping centers, coffee shops etc. Above all, Greece's economic recovery will

significantly depend on the course of tourism during the summer season. If Greek citizens decide to avoid travelling or spending their holidays in hotels and foreign tourists prefer to stay in their countries, the recession will be much deeper than anticipated (below 10 percent) and unemployment will certainly increase. Higher unemployment means lower social contributions and more state expenses in necessary allowances.

Mitsotakis can count on his success in stopping the COVID-19 contagion in March, April and May but it is unclear if Greek citizens – suffering economically – will reward him in the scenario of an early election. The majority of Greeks tend to vote by assessing the economic situation and their personal economic status. They will be perhaps keen on expressing their anger, should the tourism season will be seriously hit. Furthermore, it will be hard for the Prime Minister to explain why a snap election is necessary as his mandate will normally expire in 2023. Mitsotakis can perhaps talk about the necessity of the relaunch of the economy under his leadership. Another excuse could be the deterioration in Greek-Turkish relations requiring the election of a fresh government to deal with Turkish provocations in the Eastern Mediterranean. Nonetheless, almost all opinion polls outline that the majority of respondents did not favor an early election.

From a political perspective, Mitsotakis knows that the main opposition SYRIZA party is not well-organized. Its leader, former Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, has decided to employ a soft rhetoric during the COVID-19 crisis. Although he criticizes the government for its economic performance, he needs more time to formulate efficient governmental policies following his defeat in July 2019 and also achieve a rallying of parties of the center-left around his figure. Having said that, Mitsotakis can arguably attempt to put Tsipras in a more awkward position by challenging him with a new poll that certainly he (Tsipras) does not want in 2020. But these tactics will jeopardize Mitsotakis' interest in showing to the Greek public opinion that he honored his words by normally organizing the election in 2023 in order for his work to be judged in the end. All in all, a new election will require either a second round due to different electoral laws or a cooperative will by Mitsotakis in building a coalition government with other parties, while he is currently governing alone. For this reason, it seems that the scenario of a reshuffle of the government is more likely and less risky than an early election – except Mitsotakis decides to take Tsipras by surprise.

Conclusion

The governing New Democracy party has a clear lead in all opinion polls. Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis has efficiently stopped the contagion of COVID-19 in the country by imposing a lockdown in early-March. But the new challenge for him is to successfully relaunch the national economy. Should he decides for an early poll – as the Greek media speculate – he will attempt to renew his mandate and politically expose his main political opponent Alexis Tsipras. However, disenchanted and disillusioned Greek citizens – who want to see their economic life go back to normalcy instead of a snap poll – will not necessarily give Mitsotakis the sweeping victory he envisages. A reshuffle of the government is more likely than an early election, although experience suggests that Greek politicians are unpredictable and put the political interest above the national one.