



Weekly Briefing

**Greece political briefing:
SYRIZA under political pressure
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SYRIZA under political pressure

One year after the national election of July 2019, the main opposition SYRIZA party has not yet proceeded to the renewal of its political personal and the preparation of new political proposals. With the exception of a few significant speeches given by its leader Alexis Tsipras and typical criticism of governmental actions, it largely remains inactive. That is because its performance in all opinion polls is lower in comparison to its percentage in the national election. In the last weeks, SYRIZA is also being encountered with several alleged political scandals which are revealed by Greek media which are aligned with New Democracy. The main opposition party is thus placed under political pressure while Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis attempts to politically benefit.

In the first weeks of July 2020 the main opposition SYRIZA party is being encountered with the revelation of alleged political scandals. To start with, Greek businessman Christos Kalogritsas, who was perceived to be close to SYRIZA in the years of its administration, filed a lawsuit with the Athens prosecutor's office. In this lawsuit he referred to a deal he had made with the Consolidated Contractors Company (CCC) from which he received a letter of guarantee of €3 million to participate in the competition for TV licenses. The SYRIZA government sought to organize this tender in order to change the media landscape and fight against powerful media businessmen who were cooperating with mainstream political parties for years. If Kalogritsas had bought a TV license, his channel would have probably treated SYRIZA preferably. This, however, did not occur because he withdrew from the competition.

The Kalogritsas issue deserves perhaps particular attention because he arguably claimed – according to a report published by *Proto Thema* newspaper – that high ranking government officials had been aware of his afore-mentioned deal via specific documents and electronic communication. The person who was allegedly involved in talks with Kalogritsas about the deal of his company with CCC is former State Minister and close aide of former Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, Nikos Pappas. The name of Pappas almost immediately dominated the Greek media discourse. Current Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis endeavored to politically benefit and attack SYRIZA by suggesting in an interview with *SKAI Radio* that the dismissal of Pappas was 'unavoidable'. He also said he could not understand why Tsipras had not already distanced his former aide. It is evident he sought to exert pressure on his main political opponent.

SYRIZA initially reacted to the revelation of information by criticizing Christos Kalogritsas. In its announcement, the main opposition party also exposed hypothetical ties between the businessman and Minister of the Interior, Takis Theodorikakos. Theodorikakos refuted SYRIZA's claims and said that he and Kalogritsas had not been business partners. However, *Avgi* newspaper, which is affiliated with SYRIZA, asserts that the 'two' have closely cooperated in GPO, a polling company. Additionally, former Minister of Labor and Social Affairs Efi Achtsioglou, spoke on *Mega Channel* and questioned the validity of information published by *Proto Thema*. She said that SYRIZA – while in government – did not allow Kalogritsas to be awarded with a media license. In her opinion, this development itself could prove the transparency of SYRIZA policies when organizing the auction of media licenses.

In parallel with the Kalogritsas case, Nikos Pappas is arguably involved in a bizarre conversation with Greek-Israeli businessman, Sabby Mionis that had been recorded by the latter in 2016. According to the transcript the former Minister of State was heard saying that the then Alternate Justice minister Dimitris Papangelopoulos had set his own agenda and had made a lot of money while the Swiss company Novartis was paying bribes to boost its sales in Greece. Pappas questioned the content of the telephone conversation with Mionis. He talked about dangerous methods to divert the attention of Greek public opinion from the Novartis scandal. He also criticized Mionis for his actions and saw a threat for democracy in Greece.

Tsipras, for his part, decided to lightly reprimand Pappas. As *Hi Kathimerini* newspaper reports, the former Greek Prime Minister said that Pappas should offer clarifications regarding his conversation with Mionis. The former State Minister took an apologetic tone according to the same media source which also revealed that former Finance Minister Euclid Tsakalotos had not hidden his frustration with him. As far as Papangelopoulos is concerned, the Greek Parliament voted on 22 July to charge him over allegations he sought to incriminate political opponents over the Novartis scandal. In 2018 he had ordered an investigation into 10 senior opposition officials but the probe found insufficient evidence to support the indictment. Along with Papangelopoulos, the head of Athens' prosecutor's office ordered the criminal prosecution of the leading corruption prosecutor Eleni Touloupaki for a series of offenses, including abuse of power.

Last but not least, SYRIZA's image is hit by the memories of the 2018 wildfires tragedy in Mati, a region of Eastern Attica. Two years after the deadly incident, *Hi Kathimerini* newspaper exposed practices of the then governing SYRIZA party. While the unsuccessful management of the crisis by SYRIZA was on the main reasons it lost the national election one year later, as more than 100 people lost their life in Mati, justice is yet to be administered.

According to the Greek newspaper, SYRIZA officials attempted to cover-up the mishandling of the situation. In particular, its investigation shows that authorities prevented the fire service officer appointed by the first instance prosecutor's office from doing his job. A characteristic phrase allegedly used to blackmail the job of investigator was: 'If you write about your superiors having any blame, we will close ranks and tear you apart'.

Following the report published by *Hi Kathimerini* Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said that the SYRIZA administration had made a 'cover-up attempt'. He also appeared confident that the responsible for the tragedy would be held accountable for their actions. For its part, SYRIZA accused the governing New Democracy for seeking to exploit the Mati wildfires for political purposes. Head of the Athens prosecutor's office, Evangelos Ioannidis, decided to act after the publication of the report and ordered a preliminary inquiry into allegations. But Olga Gerovassili, who had been Citizen's Protection Minister in the 2018 summer sued *Hi Kathimerini*. In an interview with *Mega Channel* she also criticized the recording of telephone conversations during the SYRIZA administration as 'a threat to democracy'.

The managing editor of *Hi Kathimerini* Alexis Papachelas commented of Greek pathogenies by writing: 'The former fire chief [who allegedly attempted to influence the investigation of the Mati wildfires] is a symptom of a disease, the product of a cancer that has been eating away at the Greek state for decades'. In his opinion, SYRIZA could have worked hard on eliminating Greek pathogenies, as a new political force which undertook the country's administration in 2015, but in most cases followed convenient tactics. Papachelas's argument is correct. On the whole, SYRIZA's choices rather marked its interest in punishing its political opponents than in introducing meritocracy to the country's politics.

In a nutshell, the July political climate in Greece is far from reconciliatory. Mitsotakis and Tsipras met on 24 July to discuss Greek-Turkish relations but – according to media reports – they could not but focus on political affairs. SYRIZA remains suspicious on the continuous bombardment of reports against the party by media organizations which clearly support New Democracy. The Greek government has given state aid to those media organizations during the novel coronavirus crisis and arguably shapes the production of news.

Conclusion

In the last weeks, several Greek media, which clearly support New Democracy, have revealed alleged political scandals which expose SYRIZA practices while in government, from 2015 until 2019. These include the hypothetical cooperation between former State Minister Nikos Pappas and businessman Christos Kalogritsas in order for the latter to obtain a letter of guarantee from an Arab company and participate in the media auction to buy a TV license. They also encompass Pappas's participation in a recorded conversation with Greek-Israeli businessman, Sabby Mionis, where he talked about the role of former Alternate Minister of Justice Dimitris Papangelopoulos in the Novartis bribery case – Papangelopoulos was later charged by the Greek Parliament. And they refer to SYRIZA's responsibility for the 2018 Mati wildfires, which cost the lives of over 100 people.

Against this backdrop, Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis is attacking the main opposition party whereas Alexis Tsipras finds himself on the defense. Whether all these revelations are linked to the potential intention of New Democracy to call a snap election remains to be seen. Even if this is not the case, New Democracy manages to exert pressure on SYRIZA in a period during which the novel coronavirus is seriously impacting on the national economy and Greek-Turkish relations are strained. Alexis Tsipras will soon have to become more active in politics and renew his party as he has promised after losing the national election in July 2019.