



Weekly Briefing

**Greece political briefing:
Political Review of 2023
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Political Review of 2023

Summary

The briefing presents the main political events in Greece during 2023. The 2023 national elections majorly characterized the political sphere of the country and are the main focus of this analysis. The impressive win of the conservative New Democracy (ND) party, following the elections, and the defeat of the main opposition party SYRIZA, as well as the rise of the far-right parties have largely impacted the political profile of Greece. On the one hand the country has a strong government with aspirations to deliver major reforms in order to reach economic stability and development but on the other the absence of a strong opposition may cause challenges to the proper functioning of the democratic processes.

Introduction

The 2023 national elections results indicated that the ND and the PM Kyriakos Mitsotakis will rule the country for four additional years. The ND administration has successfully passed major reforms and upgraded numerous functions of the state. Further reforms need to be implemented in many sectors but overall, during 2023, the country entered the path to economic recovery. Following of a decade of economic recession and uncertainty, the Greeks - this time - voted for stability and trusted PM Kyriakos Mitsotakis to deliver the promising future of economic development. The main opposition party SYRIZA witnessed a major defeat. This defeat triggered an existential crisis for SYRIZA. The leader of SYRIZA since 2008 Alexis Tsipras resigned from the leadership of the party. Internal elections followed and a newcomer in politics, Stephanos Kasselakis, was elected as new leader. His vision is to reform the party from within. However, this vision has generated a split inside SYRIZA and several old members decided to leave the party. Nevertheless, the declined power of SYRIZA, as well as the internal political turmoil has prevented the party from exercising an effective opposition, which is much needed especially during times of global uncertainty. The new year finds Greece under favourable economic circumstances, however, geopolitical issues may affect the path to recovery. In addition, the instability inside the opposition may also affect Greek politics. During

2024, the parties will start preparing for the upcoming European Parliament elections -to be held in June. It is expected that the political debate within the country will increase.

The double national elections

Undoubtedly the most important development in Greece's domestic politics for 2023 was the double national elections that took place on the 21st of May and the 25th of June 2023 respectively. The first elections were held under the system of the simple proportional representation, which was introduced in 2016 by the then government of SYRIZA. This system minimized the possibility of the formation of a one-party government and promoted the cooperation between parties in order to form a coalition government. It should be mentioned that in Greece, historically, the enhanced proportional representation system prevails. Under this system, bonus seats are given to the winning party in order to assist the formation of a single party government. In fact, the formation of coalition government was something difficult to be reached, especially under extreme political polarization, which prevailed in Greece's political scene.

Thus, as expected, this was the case with the elections held in May 2023. The results of the first elections indicated a clear win of the conservative ND party. In particular, ND came first with 40.79%, SYRIZA acquired the second place with 20.07%, the socialist PASOK third with 11.46%, the communist party KKE followed with 7.23% and the nationalist Greek Solution came last with 4.45% (1). However, despite the major win of ND in the elections, the party acquired 146 seats in the parliament, not reaching the necessary majority in order to form a government. Since, a coalition government could not be formed, a second round of elections was decided to be held in June. Following the announcement of the election results, the major decline of the votes percentage of the main opposition party SYRIZA was largely discussed among the political and public sphere. The 20% gap in votes between the ND party and SYRIZA was not predicted by any polls. This decline in its popularity alerted SYRIZA, which immediately focused on changing its campaign and image on the onset of the second round of election.

It should be mentioned that prior to the May elections the win of ND was predicted. However, two factors were expected to affect the popularity of the government. First was the phone tapping scandal, which generated a shadow of mistrust over the ND government and the PM himself. Second and most important, as well as recent to the elections, was the deadly train

accident in Tempi, which costed the lives of at least 57 people -most of the passenger were students returning after the holidays break. Nevertheless, the positive results of the elections for the ND party indicated that the citizens still trusted the government to rule for additional four years. On the other hand, an existential crisis for SYRIZA party was generated which was called to take radical decisions in order to improve its electorate results. The party introduced its new “Electoral Committee” which consisted by younger and more capable members of the party, leaving aside some of the older members, which represented the more “partisan” side of the party. In addition, SYRIZA presented a more comprehensive political agenda.

The second round of elections was held under a different electoral system, introduced in 2020 by the ND government. This system re-established the enhanced proportional representation concept, meaning that bonus seats would be given to the winning party in order to assist the formation of a single party government. Thus, the leader of ND party expected that the second round of elections would give him the necessary seats in the parliament to form a government. The elections results confirmed exactly this. The ND party won the elections with 40.56% and 158 seats in the parliament, formed a government with Kyriakos Mitsotakis in the position of the Prime Minister for four additional years. SYRIZA acquired the 17.83% of the votes and only 47 seats in the parliament. PASOK came third with 11.84% and 32 seats in the parliament. KKE followed with 7.69% and 21 seats. Four additional parties entered the parliament which are the SPARTANS with 4,68%, the Greek Solution with 4.44%, the party Victory with 3.70% and Course of Freedom with 3.17% (2). It should be mentioned that three parties, namely the SPARTANS, Greek Solution and Victory belong to the far-right political spectrum. The leader of the party Greek Solution Kyriakos Velopoulos has declared that the party does not belong to the extreme right, however, many political analysts and journalists identify the party as such (3).

The rise of far-right

The results of the June 2023 national elections indicated that 34 seats in the parliament were acquired by far-right parties. Especially the sudden rise of SPARTANS - a so far unknown - far-right, ultranationalist party, alarmed the society. It is worth noting that its success was primarily based in the strong support by Ilias Kasidiaris, the former frontman of neo-Nazi Golden Dawn and since 2020 convicted for running a criminal organization. Kasidiaris, despite been in prison, was aiming to run his own party during these elections. However, the Greek

court decided to ban his party. Following this event, Kasidiaris started openly supporting the SPARTANS. Before the elections he wrote on Twitter “I will vote, and support with all my strength the Spartans”. It should be mentioned that Kasidiaris, despite been in prison regularly posts from jail in his social media accounts and attracts thousands of views and followers. Following the elections results the leader of SPARTANS Vasilis Stigkas stated “The support of Ilias Kasidiaris was the fuel that gave us the impetus to achieve today’s election result”. Moreover, the spokesman of the party Charalambos Katsivardas stated that “Ilias Kasidiaris was excluded from the elections in an unconstitutional manner. However, he became a regulator and catalyst of the elections” and highlighted his support towards the convicted former member of the Golden Dawn criminal organization and the important role Kasidiaris played for the SPARTANS win (4).

Especially, after the Golden Dawn case and the decision of the court in 2020 to convict the leaders of the party for running a criminal organization, it was believed that ultranationalist and extreme right ideology in Greece was weakened. However, the recent elections showed that this was not the case. The appeal of the extreme right ideology especially among the younger population needs to be addressed. Most importantly following the conviction of Golden Dawn members, Greeks are well aware that several members of the party had orchestrated murders and extreme anti-migration activities. Voting for a party that is the reincarnation of Golden Dawn and actively supported by Kasidiaris is a factor of major concern. The spreading of racism and hate speech through the social media channels, along with factors such as financial and social insecurity is a dangerous mix which turns people towards more extreme conservative solutions. The rise of far-right is observed not only in Greece but in many EU countries, such as Germany, France, Spain, Italy, the Netherlands etc. The increase of the popularity of far-right parties in the EU member states may also be reflected in the upcoming 2024 European Parliament elections held in June 2024. According to polls the far right and Eurosceptic parties would be the big winners of the EU Parliament elections (5).

The fall of SYRIZA

The major defeat of the main opposition party SYRIZA in the first, but most importantly second round of elections triggered an internal crisis inside the party. Three days after the June elections and specifically on the 29th of June the - since 2008 - leader of the party and a former Prime Minister from 2015-2019, Alexis Tsipras, announced that he is stepping down the

leadership of the party. He stated “The time has come to start a new cycle. The negative result can and must become the beginning of this cycle” (6). Tsipras announcement on the one hand was more or less expected but on the other brought skepticism for the future of the party.

Tsipras, with his political charisma, managed to take a small party comprised by leftwing radicals, ex-communists, social democrats and ecologists and bring it to the center of Greece’s political stage. In 2015 the small party SYRIZA dramatically increased its popularity to 36% and formed a government. This achievement was attributed to the political skills of Tsipras, who became one of the most successful politicians of the left in Europe. In addition to this astonishing achievement of SYRIZA, the party ruled under the most difficult economic and social circumstances Greece has seen in the 21st century. The economic recession and the demands of the creditors had generated rage among the citizens. This period worked as a window of opportunity for SYRIZA. Tsipras used the wave of populist rhetoric to increase the popularity of the party. However, the policies that he followed in the first period of his rule as a Prime Minister drove the country in the edge of leaving the eurozone. It was only then that the SYRIZA government decided to agree to the bailout terms. Hence, Tsipras and SYRIZA were largely stigmatized by this difficult period for Greece. For some Tsipras was a political gambler that further pushed the country into the crisis but for others was a great reformist that contributed to the current economic recovery of Greece. Nevertheless, no one can deny Tsipras’ political charisma. Hence, his resignation as a leader of SYRIZA -at the early age of 48 - undoubtable brought major shocks to the cohesion of the party.

The defeat of SYRIZA at the recent national elections can be attributed to the fact that the party and its policies were stigmatized by the economic crisis period, as well as by the populist narrative used by the party. Populist rhetoric in a period of economic stability proved to not be appealing to the voters. SYRIZA did not manage to offer an effective opposition, but rather a “blaming” political rhetoric. Moreover, during the elections campaign SYRIZA did not propose a robust governing plan but again was mainly focused towards accusing the ND government. This time Tsipras did not manage to correctly read the signs of the society and shift the party’s political strategy accordingly, in order to increase its popularity on the onset of the national elections. On the contrary the major opponent of SYRIZA, namely ND, invested in the narrative of economic stability and future economic development of the country, which proved to be the main voting criteria of the Greek voters.

Following the resignation of Tsipras as SYRIZA leader, he announced that the party will proceed to elections for a new leadership in which he will not be a candidate. Two party

elections were held for the leadership of SYRIZA, the first on the 17th of September and the second on the 24th of September. Until the end of July four members of the party declared candidacy to the elections. Specifically, the four candidates were Efi Achtsioglou, a young but skilful member of SYRIZA and former labour minister from 2016-2019, as well as Euclid Tsakalotos, the former minister of finance from 2015-2019 and a core member of SYRIZA. The third member that announced candidacy was Nikos Pappas, who had served as a minister of digital policy, telecommunications and media and last was Stefanos Tzoumakas, a former member of socialist PASOK party.

Unexpectedly enough a newcomer declared that he would participate in the elections of SYRIZA leadership, as the fifth candidate. It is worth noting that he announced its participation to the elections quite late, by the end of August. In addition, this new candidate was unknown to the public, including SYRIZA. His name is Stefanos Kasselakis. Kasselakis portrayed himself as a hardworking Greek living in the US. He announced that he was working in the shipping sector and has managed to become really successful. He stated that despite being inexperienced as a politician he has plenty of working knowledge which gives him the advantage to understand better the reality of workers, employees, employers and entrepreneurs. In addition, during his video presentation Kasselakis announced that he is gay and married to Mr. Tyler McBeth, an American citizen. Since the announcement of his participation to the elections, the media were highly interested in his personal life and lifestyle. Some media were even calling him “the phenomenon Kasselakis” due to attraction of high popularity in just some weeks. However, due to the lack of any political experience he was generally considered as an outsider.

The first round of elections proved that Kasselakis was a strong opponent. In particular, Kasselakis won the first round of elections achieving 45,54% and 51.615 votes. Efi Achtsioglou followed with 36,21% and 41.098 votes (7). These results were a big surprise to the other candidates as well as the general political sphere. Despite this major victory for Kasselakis, many journalists and political analysts believed that Achtsioglou will certainly win in the second round of elections. However, the results of the elections proved them wrong. Kasselakis won the second round as well and became the leader of the main opposition party SYRIZA. He attained 56,69% of the vote against 43,31% of the votes acquired by Achtsioglou (8). This was a major defeat for the more traditional leftist members of SYRIZA, who argued that this signals the end of the leftwing of SYRIZA as we know it. An internal political turmoil followed with many members not accepting the new leader and seeing him as a threat to the

existence of the party. Kasselakis wants to transform the party in order to become more popular and have the ability to win over ND. For many SYRIZA members this means that their party will be transformed to a bad replica of ND or PASOK. Thus, many old members resigned. Specifically, the so-called “umbrella” of SYRIZA, comprised by 45 members, announced that they are leaving the party. Among them were active MPs Euclid Tsakalotos and Peti Perka. Given this circumstances SYRIZA lost two deputies and instead of 47 members in the parliament has 45 (9). On the one hand this is a clear sign of split within SYRIZA but on the other may be a window of opportunity for Kasselakis to reform the party. Nevertheless, it is yet to early to estimate the consequences of this political turmoil inside SYRIZA.

Conclusion

The political sphere in Greece during 2023 was mainly characterized by the parliamentary elections. The results of the elections dictated that ND shall rule the country for four more years. The major defeat of the main opposition party SYRIZA has generated a crisis within the party. The third party, the socialist PASOK has increased its popularity. The far-right parties have also gained ground into the Greek parliament. In a nutshell, the country, following the parliamentary elections, is ruled by a strong conservative government and a weak and fragmented opposition. This may cause challenges for the Greek political arena in the future. The upcoming 2024 elections for the European Parliament will be the next political gamble for the Greek parties. The European parliament election will be significant concerning the performance of the ND government, approximately one year after the national election, regarding the party that will get the second position and with reference to the number of parties that will be able to pass the 3% threshold.

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