

New Democracy is the favourite in the Greek general election of 7th July

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ANALYSIS

On 26th May, just a few hours after the announcement of the results of the European, regional and local elections held in Greece, Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras (Coalition of the Radical Left, SYRIZA), whose party came second to the main opposition party, New Democracy (ND), declared: *"I cannot ignore this result. It is for the people to decide and I am therefore going to request the organisation of an early general election"*. Organisation of an early general election (3 months' early) surprised some observers of Greek political life who thought that the head of government would call on compatriots to vote as late as possible to allow the country's position to improve as much as possible. New Democracy won in the European elections with 33.12% of the vote, ahead of SYRIZA, with 23.76%. The Movement for Change (Kinima allagis, KINAL), the left-wing opposition party which includes the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK), the Social Democrats Movement (KIDISO), the River (To Potami) and the Democratic Left (DIMAR), collected 7.72% of the vote and the Greek Communist Party (KKE), 5.35%.

Alexis Tsipras had made these elections a referendum on the action of his government. *"We are not voting for a new government, but it is clear that this vote is not without consequence. The people are voting for the policy to be implemented in Greece over the next few years"* he declared to the TV channel ERT, just a few days prior to the elections.

Turnout for the elections was higher than predicted (voting is obligatory in Greece). The gap between Kyriakos Mitsotakis' New Democracy and SYRIZA is the biggest ever seen in elections in Greece since the country returned to democracy in 1981. *"Greece has sent a strong message. The people have withdrawn their confidence from Alexis Tsipras' government. The best thing for him to do is to take his responsibilities and resign"*, declared Kyriakos Mitsotakis.

The second round of the regional and municipal elections was held on 2nd June. New Democracy won 12 of the country's 13 regions, including the largest of which, Attica, which surrounds Athens and had been governed by SYRIZA since 2014. Only Crete remains in the hands of the left-wing (alliance of the Coalition of the Radical Left and the Movement for Change).

Costas Bakoyannis (ND), the new mayor of Athens, belongs to a political dynasty: he is the son of Dora Bakoyannis, former Minister of Culture (1992-1993) and Foreign Affairs (2006-2009), former mayor of Athens (2003-2006) and is the grandson of the former Prime Minister (1990-1993) Constantin Mitsotakis and the nephew of the current leader of New Democracy, Kyriakos Mitsotakis. ND also won in Thessalonica and in Piraeus. The Communist Party, a party that is firmly opposed to SYRIZA, won the city of Patras.

"This is a real turning point for the country. The series of social measures adopted last May – reduction in VAT, help for small pensions, etc. -, after the increase in the minimum wage in February, were not sufficient to wipe away the anti-government swing at the ballot box." says Elias Nikolakopoulos, political scientist at Athens university. *"The main reason for the success of New Democracy lies in the fact that Greek people had put a lot of hope in the Coalition of the Radical Left and its leader, Alexis Tsipras. Unfortunately, their hopes have come to nothing because the middle classes pay a lot of tax and this policy has not been explained to the ordinary citizen,"* points out Maria Kara Klioumi, political analyst for the Rass website.

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According to the latest opinion poll carried out by the PulseRC/Skai institute and published in mid-June, New Democracy is set to come top in the general election on 7th July, with 37.9% of the vote, ahead of the Coalition of the Radical Left which is set to collect 28.8% of the vote. The Movement for Change is set to come 3rd, with 7.3%. The Communist Party is on 6.2% and Golden Dawn (XA), Nikolaos Michaloliakos' far-right party, is forecast to take 5.3% of the vote.

WHAT IS ALEXIS TSIPRAS' POSITION, AFTER BEING AT THE HEAD OF GREECE FOR THE PAST FOUR AND A HALF YEARS?

"The Coalition of the Radical Left is not the loser in the absolute because the party has managed to maintain the result it achieved in the European elections of 2014. What he did lose was his wager in terms of the vote of confidence he asked from the Greek people on the eve of the vote", indicates Elias Nikolakopoulos.

Alexis Tsipras had promised to continue to increase social aid if his party won the people's confidence on 26th May. "Legitimation of the popular verdict will give us the strength to apply the social measures and it will enable us to combat the election of Manfred Weber (PPE), a fervent supporter of the strictest budgetary discipline, to the head of the European Commission" the Prime Minister had declared.

Alexis Tsipras, who has always presented himself as *"the voice of ordinary people"*, is offering the Greek people a choice between "shadow and light", that is between his party, which promises to get out of austerity, and its rivals, which are favourable to austerity, defenders of the elite and of the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

However, Alexis Tsipras is threatened on both sides. On the one hand a large number of Greeks criticise him for having polarised the political stage. This polarisation, which is very real, prevented SYRIZA from seeking alliances, notably with the left-wing, which were at their lowest point 4 years' ago. The

left has now regained strength and the Movement for Change is now Greece's 3rd largest political party. On the other hand, many of Alexis Tsipras' supporters reproach him for having, over time, drifted towards the centre of the political stage. The Prime Minister's party is seeking to re-establish a left/right, progressive/neoliberals divide. Certain political observers say that SYRIZA is becoming *"social-democratised"* and call New Democracy the party of extremes. *"The Coalition of the Radical Left has implemented a losing strategy. After 10 years of austerity, it was impossible to convince the electorate just by saying "New Democracy is worse than us".* This was a negative comparison, which completely eliminated the question of European policies" pointed out Vangelis Iagos, sociology professor at Athens Panteion University. "Alexis Tsipras did not take the opportunity to lastingly establish his party in society, to be in a position to rival the traditional parties that have been present for decades" says Manos Papazoglou, political scientist at the Peloponnese University.

On 7th May, Alexis Tsipras announced a tax reduction, a reduction in the VAT on certain food products, restaurants and electricity and he committed to re-establishing the allowance for the lowest pensions (which have been reduced 23 times over the past 8 years). The Prime Minister increased the monthly minimum wage, which increased from €586 to €650, a first in the past 10 years (the minimum wage was €751 before the crisis) and he gave a 13th month to pensioners. He also allowed a return to collective agreements in several professional sectors.

On 20th August last year Greece exited its 3rd international aid plan of €86 billion, exceeding the budgetary objectives that had been set for it by international creditors, which gave the government of Alexis Tsipras a certain amount of room for manoeuvre. "The modern odyssey that our country has been through since 2010 has now come to an end. It is now important to ensure that the sacrifices made by the Greek people are rewarded," declared the Prime Minister. This exit from the aid plan does not, however, seem to have had any true impact,

whether real or symbolic. Although the Greek economy has returned to growth since 2017 (2%) the population is still struggling to recover from 8 years of recession. Greek GDP is at its 2003 level. Forecasts say that the growth rate should be 2.3% in 2019. Unemployment is at 27.9%. According to Alexis Tsipras, 350 000 jobs have been created over the last 4 years.

"I will not run away from or abandon the fight for equality, solidarity and social justice", repeats the Prime Minister. He has promised the creation of 500 000 jobs over the next parliament, a 15% increase in the minimum wage by 2021 and lots of new jobs in health and education. He has said that he wants to reduce VAT by lowering the highest rate to 13% and the lowest to 11% (they are currently respectively at 24% and 13%). The head of government also wants to suppress payment of the solidarity tax for people with annual income of less than €20 000 and also reduce this tax for other income levels. He also wants to bring corporation tax down from 28% to 25% between now and 2021.

THE NORTH MACEDONIA "QUESTION"

On 12th June 2018, the two Prime Ministers, Alexis Tsipras for Greece and Zoran Zaev for Macedonia (Social-democratic Union of Macedonia, SDSM) signed, close to Lake Prespa, located at the confines of Albania, Greece and Macedonia, the so-called Prespa agreement which puts an end to 27 years of quarrels on use of the name of Macedonia. The country has now officially taken the name of "North Macedonia".

This agreement has been very badly received by most Greeks, who see in the adoption of the name of Macedonia by their neighbour a threat to the territorial integrity of their country and a violation of their history and their national identity.

The opposition parties all rose against signature of the Prespa agreement. Panos Kammenos, leader of the Independent Greeks Party (ANEL), member of the government coalition of the time,

declared *"Alexis Tsipras has committed suicide with the Prespa agreement"*. In fact, ANEL left the government after the Prime Minister won the vote of confidence initiated on 16th January 2019, i.e. 7 months after signature of the agreement.

Similarly, Kyriakos Mitsotakis (ND) criticises the Prespa agreement continually, although he has said several times that he would not change it at all if he were to come to power.

Resentment is very strong in the north of Greece, and SYRIZA has been heavily penalised by voters.

OPPOSITION FORCES

"The sun has risen on a much brighter Greece, which has suffered much but which has found the strength to change", declared Kyriakos Mitsotakis, adding *"Citizens put their trust in us, not only for our promises to reduce taxes, to create good jobs and to guarantee security, but also for our ethics and our style of government"*. *"We have shown that a centre-right party can marginalise the far-right and yet continue to extend towards the centre",* he indicated in reference to the poor result obtained by Golden Dawn (XA), (4.88% of the vote) in the European elections.

As is often the case with Greek politicians, Kyriakos Mitsotakis belongs to a dynasty. He is the son of the former Prime Minister (1990-1993), Constantin Mitsotakis.

If Alexis Tsipras has polarised the political stage, the same cannot be said for Kyriakos Mitsotakis, who presents himself as a reconciler seeking for balance in all things. The ND leader wants to restart the Greek economy by attracting investors and reforming the country's tax system. He wants to keep the tax exoneration ceiling at its current level but reduce corporation tax from 28% to 20%, lower the lowest VAT rate to 11% and cap the highest rate at 22%. Finally, he wants to reduce by 30% the standard tax on property owned by individuals and corporations, and on land.

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According to Elias Nikolakopoulos, "we cannot be sure that New Democracy will not achieve an absolute majority". The last elections recomposed Greece's political landscape. Thus, the Independent Greeks Party collected only 0.8% of the vote in the European elections. Penalised for its 4-year participation in government, ANEL has even decided not to take part in the general election on 7th July. Golden Dawn has dropped below the threshold of 5% of the vote, rivalled by a new nationalist party, Greek Solution (EL) founded in June 2016 by Kyriakos Velopoulos, which won 4.18% of the vote. Finally, on the left, the former Prime Minister (2013-2015) and Foreign Minister (2013-2015) Evangelos Venizelos left the Movement for Change after the decision by its leader Fofi Gennimata to open up the party, welcoming onto its lists the outgoing mayor of Athens, Giorgos Kaminis.

THE GREEK POLITICAL SYSTEM

The Parliament (*Vouli Ton Ellinon*) has a single chamber and has 300 members, elected for 4 years in 59 constituencies by proportional representation (reinforced proportionality). A party has to reach 3% of votes cast in order to be represented in Parliament. People vote on an open list on which they can express their preferences. 51 constituencies elect 288 members designated using the Hagenbach-Bischoff method; the remaining 12 seats are distributed according to the results of each of the political parties in a constituency representing all Greeks (these MPs are known as national MPs and hold an honorary position). Finally, 7 other constituencies have only one seat.

The party that comes top benefits from a bonus of 50 seats. This system has recently been abolished but this change to the electoral law will not be applied for the election on 7th July, since it has not been approved by the necessary majority in Parliament. Candidates in the general election have to be at

least 25 years old. The right to vote was reduced to age 17 in July 2016.

Voting is obligatory in Greece until the age of 70. Abstaining is officially punished by a prison sentence of between one month and one year and by the offender being made redundant, but these punishments are not applied.

7 political parties are currently represented at the Vouli:

- The Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA), a far-left party created in 2004 and the result of the joining of the former Synaspismos party and several radical left-wing organisations of communist and ecologist militants. Led by the outgoing Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, it has 145 MPs;
- New Democracy (ND) founded in 1974 by the former President of the Republic (1980-1995) and Prime Minister (1955-1963 and 1974-1980), Constantin Caramanlis. Led by Kyriakos Mitsotakis, it has 75 seats;
- Golden Dawn (XA), a far-right party created in 1980 and led by Nikolaos Michaloliakos, it has 18 MPs;
- The Panhellenic-Left Democratic Party (PASOK-DIMAR), a party created in 1974 by former Prime Minister (1981-1989 and 1993-1996) Andreas Papandreou, which in March 2018 became the Movement for Change (Kinima allagis, KINAL) after the merger of PASOK and the Socialists-Democratic Movement (KIDISO), the party created by George Papandreou after he left PASOK. Led by Fofi Gennimata, it has 17 seats;
- The Communist Party (KKE), founded in 1918 and led by Dimitris Koutsoumbas, has 15 MPs;
- To Potami (The River), the centrist party of Stavros Theodorakis has 11 seats;
- The Independent Greeks Party (ANEL), a populist right-wing party created on 24th February 2012 and led by Panos Kammenos, has 10 MPs.

Reminder of the results of the general election held in Greece on 20th September 2015

Participation : 56,57%

Political parties	Number of votes obtained	Percentage of votes cast collected	Number of seats
Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA)	1 926 526	35.46	145
New Democracy (ND)	1 526 205	28.09	75
Golden Dawn (XA)	379 722	6.99	18
Panhellenic socialist left democratic Movement (PASOK-DIMAR)	341 732	6.29	17
Communist Party (KKE)	301 684	5.55	15
To Potami	222 349	4.09	11
Independent Greeks Party (ANEL)	200 532	3.69	10
Centrists Union (EK)	186 644	3.44	9
Others	346 456	6.40	0

Source : <https://www.hellenicparliament.gr/en/Vouli-ton-Ellinon/To-Politevma/Ekloges/Eklogika-apotelesmata-New/>

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