

European
Elections monitor

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ANALYSIS

New Democracy of Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis is expected to come out ahead in the general elections but maybe without a majority

On 21 May, 9 million Greeks are being called to the polls to renew the 300 members of the *Vouli Ton Ellinon*, the single chamber of parliament.

This will be one week after Turkey, which will be electing the President of the Republic and renewing its Parliament on 14 May. The two Mediterranean countries have difficult relations, especially in terms of managing migrants, and they have territorial disputes amplified by the quest for hydrocarbons in the Mediterranean Sea. Ankara has asked Athens to withdraw its armed forces from the Aegean islands (owned by Greece except for Uzun Ada and the islands of Imbros and Tenedos) located close to the Turkish coast.

Scheduled to take place in April, the election was postponed for a few weeks after a collision between a passenger train and a goods train travelling between Athens and Thessaloniki on the night of 28 February and 1 March killed 57 people and injured at least 90 in Larissa, a town in Thessaly 150 km north of the capital. It was the worst rail disaster in Greece's history. The accident revealed serious shortcomings in the management of the railways and exposed the dilapidated state of the rail network as well as delays in the modernisation of the rail traffic safety system.

The day after the tragedy, Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis (New Democracy, ND) described the collision as a "tragic human error", provoking the anger of the population who strongly criticised him for his handling of the disaster and who then gathered in many cities to express their frustration with the government. On 16 March, a general strike was called. "Everyone has taken this train line at least once in their lives," said Yiorgos Vassalos, a political science professor. "New

Democracy was elected on the promise of a return to normality after a decade of crises. Clearly, it has failed," said Loudovikos Kotsonopoulos, professor of political science at Panteion University in Athens. "The political and moral responsibility for this accident lies mainly with the government, which will be the most affected," said Stella Ladi, professor of political management at Panteion University and Queen Mary University of London. The Prime Minister finally declared three days of national mourning after the collision.

According to the latest opinion poll conducted by the GPO/Parapolitika institute at the beginning of April, New Democracy is expected to come out ahead in the general elections with 35.6% of the vote, followed by the Coalition of the Radical Left-Progressive Alliance (SYRIZA), the party of former prime minister (January-August 2015 and September 2015-July 2019) Alexis Tsipras, which is expected to garner 30.2% of the vote. The Panhellenic Socialist Movement-Movement for Change (PASOK-KINAL), led by Nikos Androulakis, is projected to take third place with 10.8% of the vote. It is due to be followed by the Communist Party (KKE), with 7.1% of the vote; the ultra-nationalist Greek Solution (EL), led by Kyriakos Velopoulos, with 4.1%; the European Realistic Disobedience Front (MeRA25), the radical left party of former finance minister (January-July 2015) Yanis Varoufakis, 3.6%, and the National Party of Greece (EKE), led by Anastasios Kanellopoulos, 3.1%.

The general elections will be held under full proportional representation (for the first time in 33 years), a voting system that makes it difficult to form a government majority.

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After the election, the President of the Republic, Ekateríni Sakellaropoulou, will mandate the leading party to form a government. The latter will have 3 days to do so. If it fails, the Head of State will ask the party that came second to form a government, and if in turn it also fails, the party that came third will try. If all fail, new elections will be called a few weeks later.

If the gap between New Democracy and the opposition parties is narrow, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to achieve a majority. This is why many analysts and politicians believe that a new election will be necessary, which might then be organised, at the latest at the beginning of July. It should be remembered that the Parliament's mandate ends on 7 July.

Several different scenarios are possible after the election. First, Kyriakos Mitsotakis wins a majority and governs with his party alone. Second, New Democracy joins forces with PASOK-KINAL to form a coalition. Thirdly, the left-wing opposition joins forces with Nikos Androulakis' party and forms a government. Fourthly, the left-wing parties win enough seats so that they do not need PASOK. Finally, New Democracy joins forces with Greek Solution if both parties obtain an absolute majority.

Nikos Androulakis said that PASOK is ready to work with the "big" parties after the elections if it is given the assurance that the elements of its programme that it considers to be priorities are taken up by these parties and if the next government is led by someone who embodies real change, which excludes the outgoing Prime Minister, whom the PASOK leader accuses of elitism, and Alexis Tsipras, who is accused of populism.

FOUR YEARS OF MITSOTAKIS GOVERNMENT

"The country and the citizens need clear horizons. There have been mistakes but we are here to correct them. Our motto now is to move forward together," said Kyriakos Mitsotakis as he launched the campaign of his party (ND).

"Our first mandate is our passport to a second one. I said we would cut taxes and we have cut 50 taxes and contributions; I promised jobs and investments and we have created 500,000 jobs; I said we would strengthen

security and we have done so by concluding contracts for new planes and frigates," he said, adding, *"This is the Greece of the future that I promised you and that we are implementing, the one where pensions are paid on time, the one where kindergartens accept children from the age of 4, the one that builds new high schools, new vocational schools and new universities with campuses that belong to the students and are not occupied by anti-establishment squatters".*

Kyriakos Mitsotakis has a few results to draw on in his campaign. Inflation recently fell to 5.4% in March, after being over 10% last year. He did not reduce the 24% VAT on food products, but he pressured supermarkets to offer low prices on 51 basic products. The minimum wage (which stood at €650 in 2019) was raised to €780 on 1 April. This is the third increase since July 2019, when Kyriakos Mitsotakis took office. He recalls that this minimum wage fell during the 4 years of the Tsipras government (2015-2019). The basic retirement pension has increased (€775). The unemployment rate is decreasing: 17% decrease among the youngest (17-29 years) over the last 3 years.

"Our policy has been a success because it is both liberal, as it has created development, and it has been progressive, since it has supported the weakest in society", said the outgoing Prime Minister, adding *"it is now clear that the 6% growth in GDP, the fall in the unemployment rate, the rise in investment, the increase in salaries are the result of the bold reforms we have carried out. The growth we have achieved allows us to have a more effective social policy".* He stressed that he had strengthened the country's defence by improving border protection. He also announced the extension of 35 km of the existing wall between Greece and Turkey, which will cover almost the entire 192 km of border between the two countries. 250 new border guards will be deployed in this sector in which the outgoing Prime Minister will be a candidate on 21 May. Finally, he prides himself on having moved Greece forward in terms of digitisation.

"With SYRIZA, the country was in default and on the verge of exclusion from the European Union (...) The image of Greece has changed: the country is no longer

a pariah," said Kyriakos Mitsotakis, who believes that he has given back to the middle class what Alexis Tsipras had taken from it. New Democracy is promising to increase salaries over the next four years at a time when rising prices are the Greeks' main source of concern. ND wants to develop green energy so that by 2027, 80% of the electricity produced in the country will be sustainable.

Kyriakos Mitsotakis' government was shaken by the revelation in August that several personalities, including PASOK leader Nikos Androulakis, Labour and Social Affairs Minister Kostis Hadzidakis (ND), Chief of Staff Konstantinos Floros, four other military personnel and at least three journalists had been wiretapped by the intelligence services (EYP). This organisation has been under the authority of the prime minister since Kyriakos Mitsotakis came to power. The latter, who admitted the facts, refused to reveal the reasons for the tapping, which was carried out with the help of Predator software, citing national security reasons. "This affair has raised the political thermometer considerably and has served as a pretext for the opposition to open a long informal pre-election period," said Stella Ladi. On 27 January, the opposition parties tabled a motion of no confidence in the government, which failed after 156 MPs rejected it. According to Dimitris Christopoulos, head of the political science department at Athens' Panteion University, the Greek population is struggling with inflation and the economic crisis, and is therefore not very concerned about phone tapping. The outgoing Prime Minister has called it the worst moment of his term.

A WEAKENED AND DIVIDED LEFT-WING OPPOSITION

For Alexis Tsipras, who added the words Progressive Alliance to his party's name, victory looks difficult. The left-wing leader seemed, before the train collision at Larissa station, to be fighting mainly to limit ND's victory. Now he is putting forward the defence of the social state, accusing Kyriakos Mitsotakis of wanting to privatise or even destroy it. "People need a substantial programme and concrete policies they can trust" he said defending the formation of a progressive

government made up of parties of different colours to represent the diversity of the social majority.

In recent opinion polls, the majority of Greeks said they were satisfied with the way their country is being governed. Could the Larissa accident change this? Until recently, an alliance of left-wing forces (SYRIZA, European Realistic Disobedience Front, Communist Party and PASOK) seemed impossible. The latter party sees itself as a kingmaker.

But it has been affected by the corruption scandal in which the MEP and vice-president of the European Parliament, Eva Kaili, is implicated.

The Communist Party has rejected any alliance with Alexis Tsipras. "The last time this formation called for opposition to the austerity measures implemented by the European Union and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), it then formed the closest government to the establishment that we have known," general secretary Dimitris Koutsoumbas pointed out to the daily Ta Nea, adding "Alexis Tsipras governs like PASOK and New Democracy: he serves the interests of the capitalists by privatising property and land."

THE GREEK POLITICAL SYSTEM

The Greek Parliament (Vouli Ton Ellinon) is unicameral and has 300 members, elected for 4 years in 59 constituencies by proportional representation.

A party must win 3% of the votes cast to be represented in Parliament. The electorate votes on an open list in which they can express their preferences for up to 4 candidates. 51 constituencies elect 288 deputies appointed according to the Hagenbach-Bischoff method; the remaining 12 seats are distributed according to the results of each political party in a constituency representing the whole of Greece (these elected members are called national deputies and hold an honorary position). Finally, 7 constituencies have only one seat.

For the first time in 33 years, the leading party will no longer benefit from the bonus of seats to obtain an absolute majority. This bonus was abolished by the 2016 electoral law but restored in 2020, but in an

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optional and incremental form. The leading party with more than 25% of the vote receives a bonus of 20 seats, plus one seat per 0.50% increment above 25% of the vote up to a maximum of 50 seats for a total of 40% of the vote. The remaining seats are allocated by proportional representation so that the total is always 300. As the law failed to achieve a two-thirds majority in Parliament, it will not apply to the general elections of 21 May, which are therefore being held under full proportional representation, but it will be in force at the next election.

Article 37 of the Greek Constitution states that the leader of the party that obtains an absolute majority of seats in Parliament must be appointed Prime Minister.

Candidates for the general elections must be at least 25 years old. The voting age was set at 17 in July 2016. Young people who will celebrate their 17th birthday before 21 May, about 420,000 people, are therefore eligible to vote. About half of them are expected to fulfil their civic duty according to opinion polls.

Voting is compulsory in Greece until the age of 70. Abstention is officially punishable by imprisonment of between one month and one year, as well as dismissal from work, but these penalties are not enforced.

6 political parties are represented in the Vouli:

-New Democracy (ND), a liberal party founded in 1974 by former President of the Republic (1980-1995) and Prime Minister (1955-1963 and 1974-1980) Constantin Caramanlis. Led by the outgoing Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, it has 158 members;

- The Coalition of the Radical Left-Progressive Alliance (SYRIZA), a radical left-wing party formed in 2004 from the merger of the former Synaspismos party and several radical left-wing organisations of communist and environmental activists. Led by former Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, it has 86 seats;
- The Movement for Change (KINAL), a political coalition of the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK), the Movement of Democratic Socialists (KIDISO), The River (To Potámi) and the Democratic Left (DIMAR) founded in 2018. The River and the Democratic Left has left the coalition, which changed its name on 9 May 2022 to PASOK-KINAL. Chaired by Nikos Androulakis, the party comprises 22 MPs;
- The Communist Party (KKE), founded in 1918 and led by Dimitris Koutsoumbas, has 15 seats;
- Greek Solution (EL), an ultranationalist radical right party founded in 2016 by Kyriakos Velopoulos, a former member of the Orthodox People's Alert (LAOS), has 10 deputies;
- The European Realistic Disobedience Front (MeRA25), the radical left party of former finance minister Yanis Varoufakis, has 9 seats.

Reminder of the results of the 7 July 2019 general elections in Greece

Turnout: 57.78%

Political parties	Number of votes won	% of votes won	Number of seats
New Democracy (ND)	2 251 618	39.85	158
Radical Left Coalition (SYRIZA)	1 781 057	31.53	86
Movement for Change (KINAL)	457 623	8.10	22
Communist Party (KKE)	299 621	5.30	15
Greek Solution (EL)	209 290	3.70	10
European Realistic Disobedience Front (MeRA25)	194 576	3.44	9
Golden Dawn (XA)	165 620	2.93	0
Independents	472	0.01	0
Others	289 650	5.13	0

Source : <https://ekloges.ypes.gr/current/v/home/>

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