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Back to normal

After ten years of crises, the result of the Greek elections sends a clear signal: the country wants to enter calmer waters

The results of the snap parliamentary elections in Greece send a clear signal: not only economically, but now also politically, the country wants to enter calmer waters. Since the outbreak of the financial crisis, Greek politics has been in a constant crisis mode. With the landslide victory of the conservative Nea Demokratia (ND), the new prime minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis can rule alone with a comfortable majority. With Syriza's unexpectedly strong performance he faces a large opposition party in parliament. In short, the two-party system has been largely rehabilitated. Since 2011, changing alliances had repeatedly worn each other out. With Syriza's defeat, the era of populism in Greece, which other European countries still face, seems to have been overcome.

Alexis Tsipras is right when he claimed on election night that he will hand over the country in a much better condition than when he took office. Of course, he did not live up to people's expectations. Starting with the promise to free the country from the austerity dictates of its creditors, he aroused a feeling of hope among the population in 2015. It brought him into office, but he was unable to fulfil it.

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His tenure's tougher austerity measures left the country scarred and created a lot of dissatisfaction. That's what he was now punished for. But it wasn't only his inability to bring about a tangible economic recovery that discredited him among the electorate. The political newcomer with a clean record, who opposed the corrupt political establishment, assumed a similar arrogance in office in his four years as those who he always considered his enemy. His latest practices included the use of public offices for party-political purposes, the non-transparent treatment of financially strong businessmen as week as influencing the media

and the judiciary.

New Democracy's rebranding

At the end of his term, Tsipras lacked a clear vision for the future. He only polarised and defamed, his rhetoric stuck in crisis mode. But the Greeks want something else: to leave the time of crisis behind, to look ahead and to come up with a plan on how to move forward together.

Mitsotakis was able to present his vision more convincingly when, as an economically liberal conservative, he came up with a plan for economic growth: reductions in corporate taxes and administrative reforms should attract foreign investors and tax cuts for low incomes boost domestic demand. There are plans for the streamlining of the state, digitalisation, public investment, privatisation – an economic programme for a country that still hasn't seen an upswing one year after the end of the bailout plans.

At the same time, many fear that Mitsotakis' election would mean a return to the political dynasties and nepotism that had prevailed before, and that would let the country slide into the crisis with its eyes wide open. After all, it was the ND leadership that tried to conceal the country's actual debt with falsified statistics. It's remarkable that, ten years later, the future of the country is entrusted to the same party.

Faced with these image problems, Mitsotakis repeatedly presented himself as an outsider and distinguished himself – apparently successfully – from the history of the family and the party. He gave the party a facelift: the candidate lists boasted 70 per cent new and over 40 per cent female faces that gave the party the necessary modern touch. He calmly promoted trust and stability, condemned vanity and arrogance. 40 per cent of voters were apparently convinced by this image of a 'New New Democracy'.

The open left spectrum

Syriza, with more than 30 per cent, has done much better than expected, and Tsipras confidently accepts his mandate as a strong leader of the opposition. He stands for a shift towards the centre and the formation of a broad progressive alliance involving other forces such as the Greens, but above all the PASOK successor party KINAL (Movement for Change) – of course under his leadership. We can therefore expect that he will distance himself from his populist street fighting rhetoric and expand the statesmanlike image he has acquired in office. Only 44 years old, he will

work on his return to government.

KINAL retains its claim to be the sole representative of social democracy in Greece.

KINAL has not succeeded in rehabilitating its pre-crisis structures as successfully as its conservative competitor. The party stagnates at around eight per cent, slightly above the results of the previous election. The party has not yet achieved a renewal of its programme or a clear position in today's party spectrum. It would've probably even entered in a pact with ND if the latter had done worse. There's unrest in the party: the different wings argue about its future orientation, the party leadership around Fofi Gennimata is neither able to discipline the ranks nor make the party attractive for other voter groups, above all young people.

KINAL retains its claim to be the sole representative of social democracy in Greece. In any case, it's clear that the centre-left spectrum has done just as well as the election winner. If this camp could come to an agreement and form an alliance, it would have a strong perspective on political power. That's even more so the case since the next election will be based on simple proportional representation and the 50-seat bonus for the strongest party will be abolished.

Another familiar face: Yanis Varoufakis

There's also another familiar face among the left spectrum back on the political stage: Yanis Varoufakis jumped just over the three-percent hurdle with DiEM25, but he's more likely to stir up the plenary debates than to exert real political influence.

On the extreme right, Golden Dawn fortunately failed to join parliament. It achieved nearly three per cent, which represents its core voter group. Most of the protest votes they received in the last seven years have been transferred to the new radical-nationalist – albeit not fascist-criminal – 'Greek Solution'.

For Germany and Europe, the change of government in Athens isn't bad news at first sight: the conservative government intends to stabilise the country's economy in agreement with its European partners. In foreign policy, it promises continuity – including the recognition of the North Macedonia Agreement. Like his predecessor, Mitsotakis will have to be judged according to his promises.



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