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Two years after Tempi

A deadly train crash exposed serious failures in Greece's railway system and governance. Public distrust in institutions has only intensified since

Mass protests are expected in Athens and dozens of other Greek cities and towns on 28 February, the second anniversary of the train crash near Tempi, central Greece, which caused the deaths of 57 people. It was the country's worst rail disaster and a moment that shook the nation, but what has followed has compounded the human tragedy and fermented a political crisis.

The Tempi crash occurred when a passenger train travelling from Athens to Thessaloniki was diverted onto the same track as a freight train travelling in the opposite direction. Although the fatal mistake appears to have been made by a station master with minimal training, the crash was not only due to human error but the result of a systemic failure. The signalling on the stretch of the line in question was not working, a remote monitoring and safety system had not been installed, and communication was problematic. Clearly not what a railway system in a European Union country in the 21st century should look like.

Understandably then, Greeks demanded answers. Why was their railway, partly privatised during the Greek debt crisis, in such a ramshackle state? Why had an EU-funded scheme to install an automatic protection system connected to the European Train Control System (ETCS) not been completed several years after it was scheduled to be in place? Who was responsible for this mess?

Declining all responsibility

The failings that led to the Tempi crash stretch back many years and were clearly not the responsibility of just the current administration or even one single Greek government. But the fact that the accident occurred a few months before national elections prompted Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis to act in a way that would protect his 'New Democracy' party from shouldering any blame.

The government immediately zoomed in on the role of 'human error' in the crash, playing down any other deficiencies in the system. Authorities intervened in the crash site only days after the accident, clearing away carriages and scorched earth before a full forensic investigation was carried out. Mitsotakis also immediately ruled out the possibility that the freight train had been carrying any flammable cargo even though the collision between the two electric trains produced a large explosion and fire, which some experts believe may have caused most of the deaths. The ruling conservatives also stifled a parliamentary inquiry into the accident.

Over the last two years, and with nobody having been convicted, these actions have been challenged by the opposition parties, but most vehemently by the relatives of the 57 victims. Led by the determined Maria Karystianou, who lost her 20-year-old daughter in the crash, they have relied on the work of independent experts to raise questions about what happened, such as whether there was a load of unregistered chemicals on board the freight train.

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As the victims' families have drawn attention to apparent deficiencies in the way the Greek railway operated as well as how the crash investigation has been carried out, they have found that public sentiment is in step with them. Opinion polls have shown fairly consistently that around three in four Greeks believe the government is involved in a cover-up. They also show that the majority of Greeks do not trust their judicial system.

The anger over the accident and the way it has been handled culminated in what were probably the largest protests in Greece in more than a decade being held across the country on 26 January. The demonstrations due on 28 February might be even larger given that several unions have called strikes in solidarity.

Unlike other recent scandals, the Tempi issue was one that Greeks felt directly affected by in some way. Most households in Greece had someone who either used or knew someone who used the Athens-Thessaloniki railway connection, which was the cheapest way to travel between the two cities. The fact that so many of those killed were young people also struck a chord: 30 of the victims were aged 35 or younger. Many were students.

The role of the victims' families in raising awareness and keeping this issue in the public debate has also been vital in gaining the public's

attention. And it has made it difficult for those in power to frame this as a political dispute. The non-political dimension was a major factor in the mass attendance at the rallies on 26 January.

Under scrutiny

This crisis is also unique in the way that Mitsotakis has found himself directly in the firing line. In previous crises, the government was able to create an effective firewall around the prime minister. This time, though, his judgement is under severe scrutiny.

The tarnishing of Mitsotakis' image is significant because the prime minister's consistently high popularity has been a life vest for the government (the centre-right 'New Democracy', which came to power in 2019). His strong ratings and reputation also protected him against those on the right wing of the party who viewed him with suspicion because of his liberal leanings. If Mitsotakis starts to become an unpopular leader, his party loses its insurance policy and he loses his safety cordon.

Indeed, it appears that the Tempi issue has already begun to inflict significant damage on the government's ratings, as well as the prime minister's popularity. An opinion poll by ProRata published on 25 February indicates that support for 'New Democracy' has fallen from 25.5 per cent in December to 22.5 per cent. The survey found that justice and transparency are currently considered the second most important issue by Greek voters, just behind inflation.

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This decline in popularity compounds what had already been a difficult period for the centre-right administration. Since last year's European Parliament elections, it has been on a downward trajectory that created doubts about whether it will be able to win a parliamentary majority in the next national elections, due in 2027.

The blow to the government's ratings and its reputation puts even more pressure on Mitsotakis. For the time being, he is helped by the fact that the main opposition party has not gained support. The ProRata poll shows that, since December, support for social democrat PASOK has fallen by one point to 15 per cent. Its efforts to hold the government and the judiciary to account have not really registered with an angry public.

The parties that have benefited most from this simmering anger are those that style themselves as anti-systemic. On the far right, ultranationalist 'Greek Solution' has increased its support by three points to 11 per cent,

while nativist ‘Voice of Reason’ has gone up by two points to six per cent. On the far left, populist ‘Course for Freedom’ has doubled its share of voting intentions, rising to nine per cent.

There is a real danger that the Tempi issue could radicalise some voters in Greece, particularly younger Greeks. They have seen so many people of a similar age killed on an ordinary train journey on what they now realise is a sub-standard railway network — followed by what they perceive to be a cover-up. These events are likely to have left them with the impression they live in a country that does not care much about their present or future. Failure to address this would be a grave mistake.



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