

GREEK ELECTIONS 2014

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First thoughts on the 18 & 25 May 2014 elections in Greece

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Crisis as a constant

The outcome of the European elections indicated an impressive rise of protest parties critical of the current status quo in Brussels. More specifically, Eurosceptic (that reject the EU project and establishment in general) and Euro-critical (that question the current bureaucratic and political status quo in Brussels) parties having various “flavors”, from Austria, France, Britain, Greece and Denmark gained a foothold in the European Parliament. The international media used the buzzword “earthquake” to capture these results. If someone follows the numbers, they would disagree with this catchy narrative since the majority of the seats has been gained by the so-called pro-EU parties.

Adding to this, European Parliament elections have been always considered a tailor-made environment for a protest vote, since they provide voters with the opportunity to signal a firm message against the EU institutions’ or the government parties’ policies without running the risk of having an ideologue directly put into a position of power.

Furthermore, the pro-EU parties feel relieved by the significant ideological (left-wing and right-wing) dividing lines within the Eurosceptic and the Euro-critical parties. These dividing lines are likely to impede the capitalization of this “anti-EU stance” into an integrated single voice. In other words, the ideological divisions – attributed to the protest parties, critical of (the current status of) the EU – might hinder the delivery of a united, concrete and politically viable “anti-EU message”. Thus, the pro-EU parties consider that the current outcome cannot fundamentally reshape the political landscape in the EU.

Nevertheless, this optimistic picture might become subject to further questioning in the near future. This assumption moves beyond the political momentum that the protest parties have gained in these elections. In 2005, the citizens of France and The Netherlands had registered their non-acceptance on the EU constitution during the respective referenda. The reason why they did this should have already become an issue of a more profound study (or concern) for the EU officials. Legitimacy is here the keyword. In a period of increasing EU integration, the EU takes daily decisions with an enormous impact on the lives of its citizens. However, these decisions fall short of the proper transparency. There are many EU citizens who strongly believe that non-elected Brussels’ officials adopt a mix of technocracy intertwined with lobbying and intergovernmental negotiation to come up with their policy proposals.

Unfortunately, transparency, political responsibility and an attentive approach to the particularities reflecting each member’s idiosyncrasy and sensitivities have been left aside. Bearing this in mind, the European Parliament, being the only EU supranational body whose members are directly elected by the citizens – even after the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty – looks relatively weak when compared to the European Commission (whose members are mainly appointed by the governments) and the Council (the governments of the member states). Thus, due to constitutional constraints, the only elected EU body does not have a strong say in the lives of the EU citizens although the people have provided it with the legitimacy to do so. Thus, the low turnout in the European Elections as well as the vote of disapproval should not take us by surprise.

Another challenge is closely related to the efficiency of the EU in cracking the crisis down. The concept of crisis, in general, emerges when shared values and meanings, which previously served a community well, break from the reality of a particular situation. In our case, the particular situation is the economic turbulence, the recession and the consequent unemployment that have hit a majority of the EU citizens.

Nevertheless, what we are facing in Europe is not a particular situation. After six consecutive years of discussions, blame-games, austerity-laden policies and pointing fingers over the economic turbulence – along with its socio-economic-security-cultural effects – in our region and how it should be handled, the EU has reached a point where ‘crisis’ has been established as a constant rather than an exceptional and temporary situation for Europe in its entirety. The size of the unemployment rate in the EU in general, seems reluctant to decrease while youth unemployment has reached extremely dangerous records in the Mediterranean countries.

The whole situation has been sharply exacerbated by the hugely augmenting influx of immigrants and refugees especially in the EU periphery states, emanating mainly from countries suffering from unrest (like Libya, Egypt, Syria, Somalia, Sudan, Afghanistan, Pakistan etc). As a consequence, people within certain EU member states are incapable even of fulfilling basic humanitarian needs since they struggle to put food on their table, heat their houses and provide for basic health care. Thus, the image of the EU and the Eurozone has been eroded since both have become synonymous to austerity-driven measures and the existing poverty.

To the extent EU officials and leaders prove to be incapable of pragmatically echoing and addressing these issues, the support for the European institutions will follow a downward trend. The results of the EU elections signaled a loss of trust in the current European political, institutional and monetary edifice. If the EU leaders do not carefully read into the reasons of these results and do not draw the proper lessons, they might encounter even bigger surprises in the 2019 elections.

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