

119
MAY
2015

THE FOREIGN POLICY OF GREECE'S SYRIZA-ANEL COALITION GOVERNMENT: An Early Appraisal

Ioannis N. Grigoriadis, Assistant Professor and Jean Monnet Chair of European Studies at the Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Bilkent University.

Greece's ongoing economic crisis has inevitably attracted strong international attention to Greek politics. The inability of successive government schemes to deliver solutions for the country's burning economic, social and political challenges has led to discussions about the systemic dimensions of the crisis. While the effect of the crisis on domestic politics has been extensively discussed, in particular the rise of the popularity of radical political parties and the neo-Nazi "Golden Dawn", its impact on foreign policy has been less researched. While foreign policy questions have been sidelined by urgent domestic issues, the former maintain their relevance. This paper aims to explore the extent to which the rise of the SYRIZA-ANEL coalition government to power as a result of the 25 January 2015 parliamentary elections could affect Greek foreign policy in the Eastern Mediterranean, in particular the Cyprus issue, Greece's bilateral relations with Turkey and energy developments in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The January 2015 Elections and the SYRIZA-ANEL Coalition Government

The parliamentary elections of 25 January 2015 became a milestone. New Democracy and PASOK (*Panellinio Sosialistiko Kinima*), the two parties that constituted the pillars of the Greek political party system since the collapse of the junta in 1974 and formed the backbone of the 2012-2015 coalition government were punished by the Greek voter. SYRIZA (*Synaspismos Rizospastikis Aristeras*-Coalition of Radical Left), a party which captured popular discontent and opposition to austerity and reform won an impressive victory. With 36.34 per cent of the votes and 149 seats of the Greek parliament SYRIZA fell only two seats short of an absolute majority. The former government coalition partners suffered substantial losses. New Democracy (*Nea Demokratia*-ND) collected 27.81 per cent and 76 seats, while PASOK collected only 4.68 per cent and 13 seats. The neo-Nazi Golden Dawn

The continuity in foreign policy is manifested in Cyprus, the Aegean, as well as the Eastern Mediterranean energy issues. The presence of the ANEL in the government does not appear to tip the balance towards a more nationalistic foreign policy.

While most experts expected that SYRIZA would choose a moderate coalition partner to dispel concerns about its policies at the domestic and international front, Alexis Tsipras' coalition partner choice was the far-right populist ANEL.

SYRIZA co-opted a considerable part of the nationalist left that used to comprise a substantial part of the PASOK political clientele.

Tsipras' meeting with members of the Turkish Cypriot community was the first of a Greek prime minister aiming to communicate Greece's willingness to support a compromise solution in Cyprus along the UN-brokered principles of a bizonal, bi-communal federation.

Greek-Turkish trade has increased exponentially over the last few years, and contacts at the academic, business and NGO level have soared in quantity as well as quality.

The EEZ question in Greek-Turkish relations was linked to the discovery of sizeable natural gas fields within the EEZ of Israel and Cyprus. And the debate about their monetization was inevitably affected by longstanding regional conflicts.

SYRIZA ended up adding to its ranks members whose approach to minority issues was mainstream nationalistic.

The uncertain course of developments in Greece's negotiations with its creditors remains a substantial risk factor as far as Greek foreign policy is concerned.

(*Hrysi Avgi*-HA) won 6.28 percent and 17 seats, the centre-left “The River” (*To Potami*) won 6.05 percent and 17 seats and the far-right populist “Independent Greeks” (*Anexartitoi Ellines*-ANEL) won 4.75 percent and 13 seats. On the other side, the “Democratic Socialists Movement” (*Kinima Dimokraton Sosialiston*-KIDISO), the party which George Papandreou founded shortly before the elections, failed to cross the 3 percent threshold for parliamentary representation by collecting 2.46 percent of the vote.

While most experts expected that SYRIZA would choose a moderate coalition partner to dispel concerns about its policies at the domestic and international front, Alexis Tsipras’ coalition partner choice was the far-right populist ANEL. SYRIZA and ANEL looked like really strange bedfellows. This raised speculations about key policy choices of the coalition government. The two partners disagreed on most domestic and foreign policy issues, but agreed on their fierce opposition to the economic and political reform programme imposed by the creditors, the European Commission, the European Central Bank (ECB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), as well as their preference for a populist version of Greek nationalism. As the ANEL leader, Panos Kammenos, became Minister of Defence in the SYRIZA-ANEL coalition government, strong concerns rose regarding his impact on Greek defence and security policy. Throughout his political career, Kammenos has been one of the most vocal opponents of the Greek-Turkish rapprochement and he

In foreign policy continuity rather than rupture appears to be the rule.

objected to the base upon which Cyprus negotiations were held and favoured unilateral Greek moves in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Kammenos’ views were in stark contrast with the ideological roots of SYRIZA. With the origins of its core in the pro-European Greek left parties such as the Communist Party of Greece-Interior (*Kommounistiko Komma Ellados Esoterikou*-KKE Esoterikou) and Alliance of the Left and Progress (*Synaspismos tis Aristeras kai tis Proodou*), SYRIZA has been a party with a distinct opposition to nationalism and strong support for international solidarity and cosmopolitanism. Strong support for Greece’s membership of European political institutions, Greek-Turkish rapprochement and multilateral compromise solutions for Greece’s bilateral disputes with its neighbours constituted the foreign policy of SYRIZA’s predecessors. Even in the 1980s and 1990s, when such ideas were anything but popular, Greek left-leaning political parties and NGOs were trying to break nationalist stereotypes at a considerable electoral cost.

On the other hand, the meteoric rise of SYRIZA to power and to 36.34 percent of the vote meant that the ideological cohesion of the party came under considerable stress. SYRIZA co-opted a considerable part of the nationalist left that used to comprise a substantial part of the PASOK political clientele. Most of the new party members and voters originated from PASOK, the former dominant left-wing political force of the Greek political party system. These party

members and voters were not convinced about the need for compromise solutions in Cyprus and bilateral Greek-Turkish disputes. They rather professed the view that Turkey is solely responsible for both the Cyprus question and all bilateral disputes; therefore, a solution can only occur if Turkey backs off from its positions. In light of these, there was a strong pressure to move the party towards a more nationalistic line. This bifurcation was manifested in July 2014, when the 40th anniversary of the Greek military coup and the Turkish invasion in Cyprus was marked by two diametrically opposed statements signed by tens of SYRIZA members each. While the first statement confirmed the objection of SYRIZA to the imposition of an “unfair” solution by the international community and the full support for the Republic of Cyprus, the second statement highlighted the importance of resuming intercommunal dialogue and focusing on confidence-building measures. Inevitably, this eventually led to intra-party tensions, which were only amplified by the choice of ANEL as government coalition partner. Similar concerns were raised due to Tsipras’ choice for the office of the Minister of Foreign Affairs. Nikos Kotzias used to be an adviser to George Papandreou during the blossoming of Greek-Turkish rapprochement before joining SYRIZA and adopting a more nationalistic overtone in his writings. Nevertheless, if one looks into the first initiatives continuity rather than rupture appears to be the rule. This becomes manifested in Cyprus, the Aegean, as well as the Eastern Mediterranean energy. The presence of the ANEL

in the government does not appear to tip the balance towards a more nationalistic foreign policy.

The Cyprus Question

The Cyprus question was anything but high on the agenda of the January 2015 elections campaign. SYRIZA and the other political parties focused on the economic crisis, and little attention was paid to foreign policy. The October 2014 interruption of the bilateral negotiations in Cyprus following the exploratory activities undertaken by Turkey in the Cypriot Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the south of Cyprus also contributed to the absence of any developments that would require Greek political parties to take a clear position. In any case, Prime Minister Tsipras maintained the tradition according to which Nicosia is the first capital to be visited by new Greek prime ministers. Tsipras reiterated the full support of his government to the President Nikos Anastasiades and the government of the Republic of Cyprus, on the question of Cyprus’ energy exploration activities within its EEZ and condemned Turkey’s activities. On the other hand, Tsipras added to his schedule a meeting with members of the Turkish Cypriot community. This was the first such meeting of a Greek prime minister aiming to communicate Greece’s willingness to support a compromise solution in Cyprus along the UN-brokered principles of a bizonal, bi-communal federation. It also reminded of similar initiatives that George Papandreou undertook as Greek Foreign Minister. Meanwhile, the election of Mustafa Akıncı to the “presidency” of the internationally unrecognized “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC)” in April 2015 was welcomed by the Greek and Greek Cypriot left and boosted hopes about a possible

compromise solution in the near future. Akıncı himself was a leading politician of the Turkish Cypriot left who distinguished himself as a key figure of the pro-solution camp in northern Cyprus. As the resumption of the stalled bicomunal negotiations was expected, SYRIZA was expected to support from the background, if not lead from the front.

Yet this picture did not fully reflect the views of all government members. Tsipras' stance was modified during the visit of the president of the ANEL, the coalition government's junior partner and Minister of Defense Panos Kammenos. Kammenos appeared much less forthcoming than Tsipras in his public statements regarding the prospects of conflict resolution and its conditions. His messages focused rather on opposing and militarily ending Turkey's occupation of northern Cyprus rather than finding a mutually agreed compromise solution for the Cyprus question. Through his meetings with hard-line political figures across the Greek Cypriot political spectrum, he aimed to reinforce those Greek Cypriot views that viewed the ongoing negotiation process with suspicion if not outright opposition.

This bifurcation may have shed considerable doubt about the cohesion of the Tsipras government, in case a breakthrough development in Cyprus negotiations made it necessary that Greece took an outright position. On the other hand, this situation was anything but limited to Cyprus. The SYRIZA-ANEL coalition government appeared to disagree on several important policy areas beyond foreign policy. Yet ANEL's desire to stay in power was expected to have a decisive effect on its propensity to concede to SYRIZA policy positions. Most experts agreed that absent a major disruption in Greece's economic crisis negotiations with its creditors, the coalition government would follow the path of moderation in foreign policy.

Bilateral Disputes and the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) Controversy

An overview of recent developments in Greek-Turkish bilateral issues would not change these fundamental observations. While no progress has been achieved in any of the longstanding bilateral disputes over the delineation of territorial waters, continental shelf, Flight Information Region (FIR) and even the sovereignty of some islets, Greek-Turkish relations have thrived on the level of economy and civil society. Greek-Turkish trade has increased exponentially over the last few years, and contacts at the academic, business and NGO level have soared in quantity as well as quality. This was in line with –and could also be seen as a vindication of– civil society activities of core SYRIZA members throughout the much more difficult years of the 1980s and 1990s.

This situation appeared to become questioned, with the rise of a strong debate in Greece on the unilateral declaration of Greece's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean. The discovery of sizeable natural gas fields within the EEZ of Cyprus and Israel stirred hopes and expectations that similar findings would boost

Greek economy and change the future of the country amidst a severe economic and political crisis. Although any revenue from potential energy discoveries could only accrue after several years, many Greeks saw in energy a panacea for the country's economic ills and an opportunity for its strategic appreciation. On the other hand, a unilateral declaration of the Greek EEZ was more than likely to provoke a severe Turkish reaction given that Greek and Turkish principles on its delineation substantially differed. The influence of Greek islands on the delineation of the Greek and Turkish EEZs, in particular the island of Megisti (Kastellorizo) and its adjacent islets were disputed by Turkey. Hence a Greek EEZ declaration recognizing full effect to all Greek islands would face a Turkish objection and probably a Turkish unilateral EEZ declaration along completely different principles. While official statements insisted on Greece's sovereign right to declare an EEZ alongside the provisions of international law which recognized islands an EEZ effect, in practice the New Democracy-PASOK coalition government appeared to be in no hurry. Instead, it attempted to establish contacts with other littoral states which were concerned about EEZ delineation in the Eastern Mediterranean. Such states were in particular Libya and Egypt. While Libya's collapse into anarchy and civil war meant that no meaningful diplomatic deliberations were possible, these continued with Egypt. The rapid deterioration of Turkey's diplomatic relations with Egypt following the July 2013 military coup against the Morsi government and the rise of General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi to power was arguably

Greek-Turkish relations have thrived on the level of economy and civil society.

the main reason for the Egyptian shift on the EEZ question. While the Morsi administration refused discussing the delineation of the EEZ despite repeated suggestions by Greece, the el-Sisi government changed course. The Tsipras government continued on this policy path introduced by its predecessor. The organization of a series of trilateral summits between the leaders of Cyprus, Egypt and Greece, with the latest one taking place in Nicosia in April 2015 where the EEZ delineation was one of the issues discussed, was a diplomatic success of the Greek government. Yet it remained questionable whether the three states would go as far as to delineate their EEZ at the absence of Turkey.

Energy Discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean

The EEZ question in Greek-Turkish relations was linked to the discovery of sizeable natural gas fields within the EEZ of Israel and Cyprus. The discovery of the Tamar and Leviathan natural gas fields within the Israeli EEZ was followed by the discovery of the Aphrodite natural gas field within the Cypriot EEZ. The debate about the monetization of these natural gas fields was inevitably affected by longstanding regional conflicts. The option of building a natural gas pipeline to Turkey in order to access the international natural gas market was stalled due to the persistence of the Cyprus issue and the bleak state of Israeli-Turkish relations. On the other hand, the construction of Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) unit in Israel and/or Cyprus was hampered by security and economic con-

cerns. In particular, the failure to confirm new sizeable natural gas quantities in the Onasagoras and Amathousa plots together with volatility in global energy prices meant that the feasibility of a Cypriot LNG unit remained questionable. The construction of an undersea pipeline along the Eastern Mediterranean from Israel and Cyprus to Greece was a third option which enjoyed political support in all countries but lacked feasibility due to its enormous cost. The advent of the SYRIZA government brought about no noticeable change on this issue, either. Verbal support for a Greek-Cypriot-Israeli “energy axis” did not dissipate, yet no concrete steps were made towards that direction. The construction of a natural gas pipeline from Israel and Cyprus to Greece stayed far from reality, and other options remained on the table.

Minority Issues

Last but not least, the position of the SYRIZA-ANEL coalition government on minority questions in Western Thrace attracted considerable attention. While SYRIZA used to be one of the most pro-minority Greek political parties, this changed with its enlargement and meteoric rise to power. SYRIZA ended up adding to its ranks members whose approach to minority issues was mainstream nationalistic. While the large majority of the Muslim minority in Western Thrace voted in favor of SYRIZA, concerns about SYRIZA minority policies became stronger with the announcement of the SYRIZA-ANEL coalition government.

Many Greeks saw in energy a panacea for the country's economic ills and an opportunity for its strategic appreciation.

Given ANEL's vehement opposition to any improvement of Greek minority rights policies, there was ample reason for concern. Nevertheless, despite alarming signals due to the appointment of ANEL party members in sensitive administrative posts in Western Thrace, no major policy shift against minority rights was recorded. Continuity seemed to prevail once again.

The advent of the SYRIZA-ANEL administration has hitherto failed to produce a U-turn in Greece's foreign relations, in particular with relation to Cyprus, Turkey and the Eastern Mediterranean. Foreign policy remained at the backburner of Greek politics, given the urgency of the economic situation. The Cyprus issue, the bilateral disputes in the Aegean and the EEZ question, the issues linked with energy discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean and minority issues were all examples for this. Yet the uncertain course of developments in Greece's negotiations with its creditors remains a substantial risk factor as far as Greek foreign policy is concerned.