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## GREECE: ITS EUROPEAN ELECTIONS

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The Greeks are worried about the EU and the EU is worried about Greece. The attention the rest of Europe is giving to Greek politics is a clear demonstration that what happens in one EU member state –especially one in the eurozone– has clear repercussions for the rest of Europeans. Much has been said about whether a European *demos* does or should exist, whether there are debates that transcend national realities, and whether there is a European political and social space. But without going that far, what *is* shown by the political and media attention on the Greek elections of the 25th of January is their European importance. These elections can be considered European for at least six reasons:

**Because Greece's weight in the European structure does not correspond to its size.** This is not just about the rhetoric on the importance of Greece in the collective imagination, in the culture and symbology of Europe (no need to look further than the name of the continent itself). It is about Greece's capacity to influence large decisions on the integration project. Greece joined the EU late (1981), but it managed to do so before Spain and Portugal. It is also a country that dared to threaten with the veto the great enlargement of 2004, pushing for the admission of Cyprus without having resolving the conflict that divides the island, and it is a country that managed to jump the queue for the eurozone before it was ready to enter. In 2010, Greece also brought the EU to the edge of the precipice, leading the then president of Brazil, Lula da Silva, to express his stupefaction that the Greek economic crisis could put the whole of the EU at risk. Lula compared it to someone dying of a gangrenous toenail. It remains to be seen whether the evolution of Greece will continue to shake up not only the European economy but its politics as well.

**Why Europe has a central role in Greek political debate.** The causes of the current Greek crisis date back to the problems of the competitiveness of its economy, the inefficiency of its state structures and that fact that its elites have done everything possible to avoid paying taxes. The reforms introduced since 2010 have not attacked those problems. All the attention has been placed on paying back debts and making budgetary cuts. With the international markets closed, today Greece depends on European financing and it is those creditors who have set the course of Greek politics. Although in this campaign other subjects have been discussed, such as the privileges of the oligarchy and necessary state reforms, the EU has been climbing up the political agenda. More and more Greeks have formed their

own ideas about the kind of relationship they want with Europe. It is not a discussion between experts and activists, Europeanists and Eurosceptics, it is something that affects the day-to-day life of every citizen in a way that is not only direct but also evident. The parties standing in the elections propose three models of relationship with the European Union to Greek voters. Those who opt for Syriza bet on the renegotiation of the bailout conditions and the restructuring of the debt, even if this forces them into bitter negotiations and a loss of confidence by the markets: they believe that this will be the foundation for economic lift-off, taking advantage of the primary surplus in the public accounts. Those who opt for New Democracy, PASOK (PanHellenic Socialist Movement), the Movement of Democratic Socialists and To Potami (the River) share, with subtle differences, a reluctance to put the membership of the EU and the eurozone at any risk at all, even if this obliges them to comply to the letter with the agreements reached with the Troika. Those who, from very different positions, incline towards Golden Dawn or the Greek Communist Party are voting for political forces who want Greece to leave not only the euro but the EU as well.

**Because of its impact on the European economy.** Greece made its capacity to destabilise the eurozone clear in 2010. Now, it is announced that the contagion risks are much lower and that the EU has more and better mechanisms with which to face a period of uncertainty. After the electoral results, we shall see if this message corresponds to a new European reality or on the other hand, whether every country –including Greece–continues to pose a systemic risk to the eurozone. What *has* changed since 2010 is that today Greek debt is in public hands. This has changed the terms of the discussion on its restructuring and an eventual writing off of the debt. Further, the result of the elections could condition a wider range of policies. If, in the end, the EU agrees to renegotiate the debt and adjustment measures, it will try to present the situation as exceptional. But it would then be practically inevitable that other bailed-out countries would also try to renegotiate the terms of their aid packages. Whether there is agreement or not, the terms of these packages and the results they generate will also have an impact on the European debate on the compatibility of austerity measures and growth.

**Because of the impact of the Greek elections on the political map of southern Europe.** A potential Syriza victory would generate, in equal parts, expectancy and fear among the political forces in the south of Europe and especially in countries such as Spain and Portugal, who are holding elections at the end of 2015. Let's focus on the case of Spain. Whatever the result of these elections, the Socialists (PSOE) will be in an uncomfortable position. By contrast, Podemos and Izquierda Unida (United Left) will try to take further advantage of this situation, whether by announcing that it is possible to alter the system of two large political parties, or that there might be a change of direction in economic terms. The Popular Party will also have to make a move and will present itself at the Spanish elections as a vote for stability. In fact, what Syriza does the day after the elections is just as important (or even more so) than the election results themselves. A predictable restraint and constructive attitude from Syriza (in government or in the opposition) would calm some, but it might also demobilise those who hope for a clean break with current politics. It would remain to be seen whether the effect of this would be to encourage or deflate the Syriza phenomenon in its role as a reference point for other European political forces.

**Because Greece also conditions other European politics.** As the future of the eurozone and the public debt are still hogging the debate on the Greek elections, the fact that Greece will have a voice and a vote on the totality of European policies has gone unnoticed. A potential Syriza victory would not have the immediate impact of an eventual political turnaround either in the Parliament or in the European Commission, but what about in the Council? With the Treaty of Lisbon, the subjects that require unanimity are increasingly few, but not irrelevant. This is

the case for fiscal policy, cultural policy and a large part of the foreign and defence policies. Placing itself in a blocking position always carries costs, especially for a small country, but it will not be ruled out—although only in terms of a threat—when a country feels it has been cornered. On the other hand, Greece is a key country when speaking of the EU's external borders, one of the central themes on the European agenda. And, let us not forget, it is a member of NATO. Greece's membership of the alliance causes divisions in Syriza, and, for this reason, it has been put on the back burners in the electoral campaign. That New Democracy and Syriza embody distinct projects is true when we speak of public debt and adjustment programmes but also on other subjects that make up the day-to-day European agenda.

**Because the European reaction to the election results could put to the test the connection of a number of citizens with the European project.** As we have seen, a vote for Syriza is not an anti-European vote. Their voters want to remain part of the EU but also hope for a change of direction in EU policy. They represent what we could call a euro-critical or euro-alternative current. If some parts of European power (the institutions, some governments, the private sector and the media) react to an eventual Syriza victory by seeking to show that the Greeks have made a mistake in their vote, in order to show the rest of Europeans—and especially those in the south—the path that should not be taken, it would have damaging consequences for the European construction project. One of the main problems of connection with the not insignificant number of European citizens who are disillusioned where they were previously enthusiastic about integration, is that the association between European construction and a specific economic programme has been made too explicit. On this and on other points we will be able to determine the importance not only of the Greek vote but also of the European response.