

European interview
n°86
22nd September 2015

The Greeks have understood that there is no way of avoiding the implementation of the agreements (of 13th July) without risking something worse.

Interview with Georges Prévélakis
Professor at the University Paris 1 – Panthéon Sorbonne

1) On 20th September the majority (35.47%) of Greeks voted for SYRIZA – What explanation can you give to this result? What will the coalition most likely be? Might there be a government of national unity?

The success of the Radical Left Coalition SYRIZA, in spite of the public's disappointment in its failure to hold its promise of bringing the memorandum and austerity policies to an end, finds explanation in the management of its communication policy and more generally in a political strategy that has proven particularly effective. Alexis Tsipras's personality, the embodiment of a more youthful political scene and the break with the clientelist past had an important role to play. The way he succeeded in promoting his "fight to counter European blackmail" brought him sympathy. Moreover during its seven months in office SYRIZA/ANEL did not introduce any further austerity measure. The elections were organised after the summer break and before the autumn bills arrived. The timing has been perfect. For the Greek electorate SYRIZA succeeded in appearing to be the lesser evil in the face of New Democracy, even after the setback in July. We should note that SYRIZA succeeded in rallying a significant share of the vote from the centre that it had lost on the far left. However a record level of abstention (45%), the further successes of the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn, as well as other factors show that SYRIZA's success took

place to a backdrop of failed credibility in the republic's institutions.

Contrary to forecasts the question of government was solved as soon as the results were announced. ANEL, the sovereignist right-wing party, the outgoing government's ally enters parliament with 10 seats. Added to the 145 SYRIZA MPs they will again ensure an absolute majority (155 seats out of 300). The hypothesis of a wide coalition has therefore been set aside for the time being. It might be raised again with possible difficulties in terms of the next assessments as planned for in the 13th July agreement.

2) The 13th July agreement introduced a third rescue plan of 86 billion € over three years. Can this agreement be challenged? Have default of payment and an exit of the euro zone been made totally impossible?

The 13th July agreement is different from the previous ones since it is bound by more conditions and supervision. With this agreement Europe crossed the line in terms of the way it functions, as it implicitly accepted the principle of placing a Member State under tutelage. Like the USA in 1948, Europe is now aware that the Greek political system does not have the necessary means to prevent the collapse of the country, along with everything that this implies in terms of regional geopolitical balance. The July decision

The Greeks have understood that there is no way of avoiding the implementation of the agreements (of 13th July) without risking something worse.

means that for reasons that are more geopolitical than economic Europe and the USA are prepared to do everything necessary to remove the possibility of a default of payment and a "Grexit". This also means that a great deal of pressure has to be put on Greek political players to move forward regarding reform and the need to provide administrative and technical competence to palliate the inadequacies of the Greek administration.

3) What do these elections shows about how the Greek population sees the European rescue plan? What do the Greeks feel about their creditors, the European governments, the European institutions? How has Greece's view of Europe developed over the last five years?

These elections show that the Greeks have resigned themselves to the logic of reform and austerity, but with the hope that the SYRIZA government will resist the creditors as much as it can. When the crisis began the social classes most affected by the reforms placed their hopes in massive protest, a kind of fight that brought results on several occasions in the past. After the failure of this method the population then placed their hope in SYRIZA's promises: voting took the place of protest. Following the disappointment of July they understood that they could not avoid the implementation of the agreements without risking a worse situation. The strategies undertaken by people and families are now becoming much more individualistic: it's every man for himself. This situation explains the high abstention rate. It is clear that this development has left a bitter taste which Alexis Tsipras's rhetoric exploits and heightens as he blames his defeat on "Europe's blackmail". Along with the credibility of the republic's institutions it is also the pro-European feeling that has regressed – mainly because of poor information being given by the political classes.

4) In spite of the development of opposition to advocated financial orthodoxy Greece has adopted its 9th austerity plan in five years. What plausible scenario is there for an end to the crisis?

The strategy to end the crisis is simple, on paper at least. A clean-up of the judicial system, simplification of administrative procedures, the guarantee of fiscal stability and the establishment of normal conditions for competition would enable the rapid arrival of capital, prepared to invest under these conditions in a country with enormous comparative advantage. These obvious reforms, described clearly and explicitly by the OECD came up against the resistance of a complex network of interests of all shapes and sizes which developed, consolidated and stood by each other during the decades of abundance and unconditional wealth provided by Europe. Oligarchs, petty, corrupt civil servants, clientelist MPs, and businesses taking advantage of the lack of competition, players in a para-judicial network and journalists supporting political blackmail are some of the elements in a system that has been extremely resilient during the crisis. We must hope that the new agreement, which illustrates a significant step forward regarding Europe's understanding of the mainly political nature of the Greek crisis, will succeed in getting rid of the "bad apples" that are preventing Greece from starting along the path of growth.

5) We have just witnessed the fifth Greek election in six years. What can be said of the connection between political uncertainty and the economic situation in Greece?

We cannot understand what has happened from a political point of view since 2009 without extending the analysis to the previous decades and even beyond that. Since the end of the military dictatorship in 1974 and especially since Greece's entry into the EU in 1981, the Greeks have gradually found themselves in a secure, prosperous, unprecedented environment in its history. This country, which as it stood was "underdeveloped" until the 1960's, has accomplished a unique leap towards achieving western normality in a record length of time. The post-1981 generations started to believe that the benefits of the new situation were gifts from heaven which supposed no effort, no discipline. The systematic benevolent attitude of Europe towards the "cradle of democracy" in economic and diplomatic areas helped to consolidate this view which conditioned the development of the political

The Greeks have understood that there is no way of avoiding the implementation of the agreements (of 13th July) without risking something worse.

system. The politicians who tried to counter this and bring public opinion back to reality were systematically rejected. Opportunism and populism have dominated the political arena creating a political world that has been poorly prepared to confront difficulties.

With the crisis the psychological and political system has collapsed. This enormous shock triggered a break-up since the various parties, unable to decide between the need for reform and their populist habits, suffered the consequences of the rejection of both the creditors and the Greek people. SYRIZA will face the same problem over the coming months.

In addition to the weakening of the parties, the shock of this awakening to reality is undermining the very foundations of the republic.

6) Greece is facing an unprecedented influx of migrants. Indeed, the country which is an entry point into Europe has been unable to manage the intense migratory flows of the last few months. Catastrophes are rising and the situation seems to be out of control. What European assistance is Greece hoping for given this mass migration?

The size of the problem and the weakness of the political system and especially of the Greek administration has made the issue of migration an extremely critical one. It is an area in which Europe will be forced to intervene in a drastic manner. European assistance in the migratory area is no different in nature from its help in other areas. We are facing a European problem that goes beyond the limits of Greece and is

the cause of real dilemma: can we afford to interfere in the affairs of a Member State when threats are extremely serious?

7) What are the trends in public opinion regarding immigration? What are relations like with Turkey over this?

Greek public opinion is not as hostile towards the migrants as it is in other European countries affected by this phenomenon. For a diaspora, having experienced the direct effects of mass migration (1.5 million refugees in a country of 5 million in the 1920's), of ethnic cleansing and war, empathy towards those suffering the effects of forced migration is natural. This general observation does not rule out the occasional xenophobic incident in certain poor areas where daily life has become excessively influenced by the massive presence of immigrants. This is where – and also in some islands that have been over exposed to floods of migrants – that Golden Dawn has achieved some of its highest scores. However Golden Dawn's successes can be explained to a large extent via the political crisis rather than via migratory phenomena.

With Turkey the migratory issue is part of a general joint context between two neighbours and the antagonism of two regional powers that have been separated by disputes that especially involve the maritime area i.e. the area of migrant transit. In this area Europe's role is also vital. The European Commissioner for Migratory Issues Dimitris Avramopoulos, is well placed to understand and manage this issue.

See all of our publications on our site:
www.robert-schuman.eu

Publishing director : Pascale JOANNIN

THE ROBERT SCHUMAN FOUNDATION, created in 1991 and acknowledged by State decree in 1992, is the main French research centre on Europe. It develops research on the European Union and its policies and promotes the content of these in France, Europe and abroad. It encourages, enriches and stimulates European debate thanks to its research, publications and the organization of conferences. The Foundation is presided over by Mr. Jean-Dominique Giuliani.