

Greek Elections of June 17<sup>th</sup> 2012

*Through the prism of the Greek press*

ΑΓΓΕΛΙΚΗ ΝΕΒΣΕΡΗΛΙΟΓΛΟΥ (AGGELIKI NEVSERHILIOGLOU)

*Abstract*

On June 17<sup>th</sup>, Greece is the field for a major election process, the results of which could possibly alter the future of the international political and financial scene. These are the second elections of the year 2012, after the inability of the political parties to form a coalition government after the 6<sup>th</sup> of May. The extended pre-election period has definitely put fuel in the fire, as social instability becomes all the more prominent and extreme political groups and beliefs slowly but surely gain ground.

In this environment of charged feelings and in favor of objectivity in a decisively liquid situation, this article has been written at two different time periods, pre-election and post-election. As such, the review of the Greek press has been composed without any prior knowledge of the result. This method has been chosen because in this kind of situations, when the most obscure of theories come and go freely and populism and petty political ambitions bypass any reasonable standard, it is of utmost importance to observe what was said and heard before the facts were final and unchangeable. Hopefully this type of presentation will make clearer to outside observers the conditions in Greece in the period of austerity and political and social instability. In such vital times, there is nothing more destructive and dangerous than strained impressions.

*Keywords:* Greek Elections, Greek Parties: New Democracy (ND), Pasok, SYRIZA, KKE (Communist Party), Independent Greeks, Democratic Left, Golden Dawn; Greek Dailies: Ethnos, Kathimerini, Ta Nea, Eleftherotipia, Eleftheros Tipos, Real News, H Ellada Avrio; Eurozone.

\*

*I. The (violent) road to elections*

The pre-election period is a major point in time for every national democracy. It is then that every political formation mobilizes to accomplish the assumption of power and as such the safeguarding of the interests that they hold dearest. What, however, is every political party prepared to do to get to that point? The answer to this question can only become known during the pre-election process and it is certain that it causes more or less wide tensions among the electorate.

Especially in a time of not only financial, but moreover political and social instability, a prolonged pre-election period may, as it is observed by a part of the Greek press, contribute to the destabilization of society. The almost sixty days of worry that stretch from the final days of April up to the elections of June 17<sup>th</sup>, the continuous fruitless efforts for the formation of a national government, the gigantic disagreements among the parties and the pressures coming from abroad are definitely steps towards such a direction.

The last weekend before elections, the news were monopolized by the never-before seen (?) violent incidents that had taken place a few days before. The violent acts of candidate MP and Press Representative of Golden Dawn Ilias Kasidiaris during a live TV show against the female candidate MPs of the KKE (Communist Party) and SYRIZA Liana Kanelli and Rena Dourou respectively, news that went around Europe, caused huge reactions from the political world and the media, who for quite a time had been trying to show the true face of the far-right formation. The same day, the public opinion was shocked by another episode that had taken place in Paiania, a region close to Athens. There, a young inhabitant had shot and killed a thief, who had invaded his property during the night and was threatening the man's mother with a knife. It was not however just the act of taking the law into one's hands, that the perpetrator himself condemned, that made an impression, but also the inability of the police to prevent the situation. It is noted that the police had already been called to the scene, but was unable to locate the thieves and left some time later. This case is only one of thousands that have been committed across the country in the past months, and sadly it is not the only one where there was a victim. The abduction furthermore of a 15 year old which had thankfully a happy ending was one more example of the rising violence and criminality in Greek society.

The reaction of the Greek press was solid and unanimous. In Kathimerini newspaper of that Saturday many were the writers who believed that previous violent happenings like the throwing of food and the profanities against politicians should not have been ignored, seeing as they were indeed the beginning of the present situation. “The clash between far-right and far-left political groups is evolving into a violent and bloody vendetta” reads the second page of the same paper, in regards to the increasingly often conflicts between the far-left and the far-right supporters. The newspaper called *Ta Nea* also held a similar opinion, also pointing out that “the phenomena of racism and xenophobia appear more easily during a crisis”, regarding the frequent attacks of far-right formations (including as it appears the Golden Dawn) against helpless immigrants. The newly opened newspaper by the name of *H Ellada Aurio* of Thursday the 14<sup>th</sup> of June is of similar mind, having the title “The army divisions of “Golden Dawn” – The Far-Right leads Greece to execution” on its front page.

The subject of violence in everyday life kept a major role during the rest of the pre-election period. The guilty past of SYRIZA and its components and their connection to the much more violent anti-authoritarian space caused intense worry to the Greek media, and especially to those leaning towards the political right. Two incidents, one after the other, empowered this impression even more. Firstly, the party of New Democracy (ND) made public a video of a member supposedly of SYRIZA, by the name of Ifikratis Amiras, in which video he talked about an urban rebellion with violent means, in order to surely ensure the interests of the people. SYRIZA was quick to differentiate itself, noting that Amiras was never included in its list of candidate MPs, because of exactly those extreme views. The very next day, a letter of the SYRIZA candidate MP Nikos Chaniias was publicized, in which Chaniias claimed among other things that the governing of SYRIZA in Greece for even one hour could possibly lead to the destruction of the country. The event was widely discussed, even though many believed that Chaniias had acted for his own personal interest.

In its Friday June 15<sup>th</sup> edition, just two days before elections Kathimerini hardened its opposition to violence, stressing that it is of vital importance to exterminate the Greek notion of “good and bad violence”, where whoever believes to be in the right can act violently without any actual penalty. An important truth, if one thinks about how many agitators coming from any political space are known to the police and yet they are never punished for the extreme actions and the episodes that they cause. Of course, the allusion for the involvement of SYRIZA in all this is in this case quite obvious and not necessarily justifiable.

It is difficult to tell if all these events are indeed coincidences and not instead the next level of a dangerous situation that had already come to be without anyone noticing. Either way, it is certain that so many continuous upsetting occurrences are going to influence, one way or another, the election result.

## *II. Political games*

Being close to the end of the pre-election confrontation, it is tough to make predictions. It is however obvious, that the majority of the political parties made no good impression on Greek voters. During the parties’ conflict, many “fouls” were committed, which touched the limits of despair and did not go unnoticed by the people.

The never-before so fervent “mud war” (a conflict between two sides based on sycophancy) is certainly something that was unpleasant to many, especially seeing as most of the parties, old and new, are considered more or less responsible for the present situation. Each political formation tried to locate every incriminating detail about the others, so as to, by exposing them, raise its own percentage. The obsession of New Democracy with SYRIZA’s guilty past, even though in a way explicable, certainly showed such an intent, as well as the concentration on fear and the threat of the day after tomorrow. SYRIZA mostly employed populist means, saying in short what everybody wanted to hear. Pasok and the Democratic Left altered their intents according to the most likely winner of the elections (Kathimerini characterizes them as “wild cards”), the Independent Greeks focused on national matters, while KKE and the Golden Dawn maintained their traditional agenda.

Real News weekend newspaper sets the expected question: After such a confrontation, how will a coalition government be formed tomorrow? Because, as it has become clear by the results of the 6<sup>th</sup> May elections, the people are looking forward to such a government. They want the petty political spats over and for a serious and responsible solution to be decided. As Nikos Chatzinikolaou of Real News says, “May he (the President of the Republic) “lock” them into the presidential House, until white smoke comes out...”.

But the trick arsenal of most parties does not limit itself to “mud”. Exploiting the law concerning the prohibition of publishing of polls during the pre-election period (in order to protect the public sentiment), “the ND and SYRIZA headquarters attempt to create an impression of victory through leaks, targeting the concentration of votes and the indecisive”, according to Yannis Sarantakos of Ethnos. The two leading

parties, being of course aware of the content of said hidden polls, tried to create impressions in order to acquire a few more votes, ND through insinuating a great victory against SYRIZA and it by stressing that the difference is small and easily taken care of if concentration takes place.

The timing of the cases of Amiras and Chantias holds of course intense political and party interest. On one side, these two events became a support for the rest of the parties, and especially ND, to question SYRIZA's credibility. On the other hand however, they show a major issue that SYRIZA and the Left in general has always faced inside themselves, and that is their components. Components much more suspicious and radical than the main line that SYRIZA is attempting to follow. As Errikos Bartzinopoulos of Ethnos newspaper points out, "...the problem for SYRIZA is not that some skeletons are discovered in its wardrobes. It is that these skeletons are many, too many". So many, to the point where one could say that SYRIZA's greatest enemy is its own self. Especially during the last few days before elections, SYRIZA takes fire from a great part of the Greek press, considered as dangerous and able to destroy the European route of the country by being an adventurist with external partners. Some newspapers, such as Kathimerini and Ta Nea, obviously express their distaste to SYRIZA's promises. On its Friday paper, Kathimerini draws parallels of SYRIZA with the old form of Pasok based on their pre-election commitments, which it considers anachronistic. The same view is expressed on Nea of Tuesday, June 12<sup>th</sup> by Panos Kazakos: "What the members of SYRIZA dream of is the enlargement of public sector. They aim to return to models that failed. They think in terms of permanent income, cut off from any sense of productivity". "A people's vision other than hedonic parasitism has not yet appeared (in Greece)" underlines Christos Giannaras as far as the vision that SYRIZA claims to have is concerned. Anna Panagiotarea of Eleftheros Tipos agrees and adds that "We are not mad enough to want to return to the Greece of the 60s".

New Democracy, considered by many as one of the main responsible parties for today's situation, does not garner too many negative comments, as it is faced by many as the "less worse" and safest choice to ensure the stay of the country in the common currency. Stathis Kalivas comments on this on Sunday's Kathimerini: "It would be terribly irresponsible to refusal of a choice between certain and possible disaster.". The only newspaper that openly opposes ND is Eleftherotipia, which printed a special strike version for the weekend of the vital elections, after the decision taken by the workers there. It should be noted that these workers have earned no money whatsoever and have started a front to get all the money they are entitled to. In this version it is mentioned, in an obviously anti-memorandum character, that the first place for ND would mean the not at all changed continuation of the memorandum policies, despite the party's promises for renegotiation of the deal on a pre-election level. Eleftherotipia also condemns the situation in a general sense: "Despite the page-turning the pathogeneses of the time after the dictatorship, with the bipartisanship of fools, seem to have had a drastic impact. The "we'll cross this bridge when we come to it" logic still follows us", commenting on the inability of political parties to offer a complete solution during their pre-election speeches.

### *III. The external partners*

The developments in the Eurozone and in the world in general have also definitely influenced the period before the Greek elections. The victory of Francois Hollande in the French presidential elections and the dissolution, as such, of the "Merkozy" line, which supported the hard austerity measures as part of financial reform was good news to many. Of course their hopes were soon somewhat grounded, as Hollande was quick to note that Greece had to honor its commitments, at the same time leaving a window for development measures open. SYRIZA, having based a great part of its arguments on the "merciful" policy of the French socialists, did not seem to particularly react to the new French President's admonitions, something that the newspaper Ta Nea of Friday June 15<sup>th</sup> quite disapproved of. Anymore there were many who believed SYRIZA's promises to be nothing more than science fiction.

Soon another "headache" came up for the leaders of the Eurozone. As expected, Spain was now in need of participating in the stability mechanism to evade default. The speed with which the matter of financial aid to the country was handled was a pleasant surprise for many. Moreover, the fact that the Spanish government was not obliged to take further austerity measures, after the intervention of French Finance Minister Moscovici, made quite the impression. "Spanish window for renegotiation – new conditions created by the ...light memorandum of Madrid and the German fold" is the title of Monday June 11<sup>th</sup> edition of Eleftheros Tipos, seeing the light at the end of the tunnel of the hard austerity of the present memorandum. The Irish also realized the opportunity, and were quick to ask for a similar arrangement. The newspaper Ethnos of the following day supported in one of its articles that the inclusion of Spain in the mechanism shows the failure of the austerity policy.

The newspaper Ta Nea of the same day were not as optimistic. The paper presented a great number of scenarios that considered Eurozone under preparation for a possible Grexit. The title on the front page is quite telling: “The Greek ghost is over Europe – Orange alarm in Brussels – they are preparing a last resort plan in case of a Grexit”. The title of Wednesday’s Kathimerini is “State has enough money until July 20<sup>th</sup> – the formation of government, a prerequisite for the installment payments of international aid”, underlining once more the critical situation and the unquestionable need for a government.

The newspaper H Ellada Avrio of Thursday warns the need for more delicate handling of the relations with external partners, as they are in the position to materialize their threats and consequently lead the country outside the Eurozone. “Angela Merkel strict or worried?” wonders Kathimerini, basically expressing the principal question that dominates the total of the pre-election debate. Are the partners bluffing or not? Could they confront the consequences of a Grexit? Would it be possible by putting pressure on them for the country to get a better deal? There are numerous opinions, but no-one is ready to take over the responsibility of materializing the one or the other policy.

The parliamentary elections that will take place in France on the same day of the Greek elections will probably ensure Hollande’s power, not only inside, but also outside his country. Even though the situation in Spain seems to be somewhat calm for now, no-one can honestly tell whether the intervention of the member-states of the Eurozone will prove enough for its salvation. Especially now, that both the already burdened Italy and the up to now role-model Cyprus seem to be in need of participating in the stability mechanism to preserve the balance (?) in the Eurozone.

#### *IV. The right path*

The journalists of the Greek press do not hesitate to offer their own thoughts on the route the country should follow. Almost all agree to a pro-European government, which will ensure the continuation of Greece’s existence inside the Eurozone. Kathimerini notes the need for the voting to take place with a clear head, without the voters letting themselves be conquered by anger towards the rotten Greek political system, in order for logic to prevail. The weekend before elections edition of Ta Nea newspaper notes that it is of vital importance that the Greek people commit actively to following the new European path. Everyone seems to be for stability and against beliefs which could lead to anachronistic practices. Fifty Greek academicians have published their views on the matter in Kathimerini of Sunday June 10<sup>th</sup>: “What is at stake in these elections is not just the fiscal management or the economy” they point out. “It is the loss of the European vision, which we won’t be able to change for many generations”. They also add: “In the coming elections Greece’s future will be decided. Never again were our actions and our decisions so important, so decisive for us and our homeland”.

The gravity of the situation is also addressed by Yannis Voulgaris in Ta Nea newspaper: “The situation is exceptionally difficult but its description is quite simple. We stand in that phase of turmoil when a simple alteration, a small “accident”, has huge consequences leading the situation to develop in opposite directions”. As such it is recommended to pay attention to our actions as a state on both an international and national level. It is so because, according to the edition of Monday June 11<sup>th</sup> of Ethnos newspaper, it is necessary for reforms to take place in the inside of the state mechanism in order for not just the common currency, but the Greek society as well to withstand this difficult phase. The renegotiation thus is indeed essential, but it must not be attempted with knee-jerk reactions and risky efforts. As such, the unilateral denouncement of the memorandum that many parties, including of course SYRIZA, propose, is out of the question as a strategic approach.

As far as the composition of the government that will be formed after the elections goes, one may find a variety of opinions in the Greek press, which however do not differentiate themselves too much in comparison. The vital need for new parties and able leaders is unquestionable, as Kathimerini points out. These leaders however, the article continues, do not have to be necessarily politicians, but on the contrary technocrats, who will stay away from political tricks. According to the writer if anything, the failure of the government of L. Papadimos occurred greatly due to the petty political ambitions of the political participants inside it. In that sense, even the caretaker government of Pikrammenos could have been proven useful, if of course it had not been formed simply for the purpose of leading the country to elections. Let us not forget that Mr. Pikrammenos gave up his income for the time he was the caretaker Prime Minister.

#### *V. The time of results*

It is early morning of June 18<sup>th</sup> 2012. The second Greek elections this year have been completed, the results are now ascertained and discussion has flared up about the forming of a coalition government. No-one seems to be particularly surprised by the developments. It appears that three parties with similar and most importantly pro-European orientation will collaborate so as to end the prolonged lack of governing.

The detailed results are as follows: New Democracy 29.66%, SYRIZA 26.89%, Pasok 12.28%, Independent Greeks 7.51%, Golden Dawn 6.92%, Democratic Left 6.25%, KKE 4.5%. SYRIZA's inability to come first was caused by a great margin because of the risky strategy that it supported, which ND judged whenever possible. We should note at this point that the same was done by an important part of the Greek press. The formerly powerful Pasok ended up with an even smaller percentage, and as result it is preparing for total rebuilding of its interior. The Independent Greeks suffered an important decrease in votes, as they "got lost" in the sea of sycophancies traded between the two greater parties. Golden Dawn managed to preserve its percentage, proving according to its leader that "the nationalist movement is here to stay". The Democratic Left also did not experience any notable loss, despite the concentration of the Left on SYRIZA. But one cannot say the same for KKE, which has shrunk considerably. It is obvious that its refusal to cooperate in a Left coalition government with SYRIZA and the Democratic Left has cost it quite a lot.

ND, as the leading party and according to Pavlopoulos' electoral law, collects an extra fifty seats in the Greek Parliament, having a total of 129, and is in need of at least 22 more to form a government. Of course, given the present situation, an absolute majority (150+1) will not be enough to appease not only the worries but also the rage of the Greek voters, who mostly voted based on fear rather than identification with each party's values. SYRIZA made it immediately clear that it does not intend to participate in a coalition government, but instead will take over the role of the main opposition in Parliament. The newspaper *Ta Nea* of Monday June 18<sup>th</sup> claim that the party members were quite relieved after it became clear that they stood in second place. The responsibility is indeed immense, regardless of how ready SYRIZA was to govern. Either way, the truth is that during the past few decades the parliamentary opposition was more "decorative" than anything else, as the two parties in power alternated their roles every once in a while. It will be particularly interesting to see how another party fares in that position, a party with enough power for its say to hold some gravity.

Now the path is open for other co operations. Up to now, it appears that ND, Pasok and the Democratic Left will manage to form a coalition government, which in this case will have a total of 179 out of 300 seats in Parliament, quite an impressive number compared to the unstable 159 total of Papandreou's 2009 government. Negotiations seem to be faring well for now, as the three parties may be close to an agreement. The government that will be formed will possibly have Antonis Samaras, the leader of ND, as Prime Minister, while the Ministers will come in their majority from the leading party. Even though Pasok at the beginning did not intend to have any of its members on ministerial posts, numerous negative reactions in the inside of the party may alter the situation in some way. Moreover, Pasok considered the absence of SYRIZA from the coalition government as unthinkable, but it seems that this line has been abandoned. The Democratic Left has proposed until now some technocrats, while the stay of two of the technocrats who were appointed as Ministers in the caretaker government of Pikrammenos is still discussed.

#### *VI. The morning after*

Will a government be formed? What will its composition be and how long will it last? It is questionable whether the parties participating in that government will be able to work in harmony, something that notably has never been managed in Greece in cases of coalition governments. Perhaps the harsh conditions will force the politicians to have a more serious outlook and to set aside their party-related interests. What is indeed pleasant in this phase is that most likely the country won't have to suffer through a third election procedure, which would probably lead to the complete decomposition of the (remaining) Greek social fabric. We will know the conclusion to this period for sure in the next few days. Let us hope that after these episodic elections the political, social and financial stability will steadily prevail.

\*