

CAN GREECE CHANGE – AND SURVIVE?

Q&A

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We can easily forgive a child who is afraid of the dark; the real tragedy of life is when men are afraid of the light. The price good men pay for indifference to public affairs is to be ruled by evil men.

Plato

Greece has a new government that broadcasts encouraging signals on how the country will be soon a model EU state after years of sharp decline. How realistic are these pronouncements?

There is no government, in Greece or elsewhere, that will choose to bluntly tell voters the harsh truths, especially when this government has just come to power. The Mitsotakis administration is no exception to this rule. For the past two months, the tune is one of optimism and pro-active determination.

Yet, truth is Greece is a country with insurmountable deep-rooted problems, which no government to date has had the backbone to debate openly along with the painful solutions necessary. Thus, along with each new bulletin about proposed “solutions” and “rationalization” of problems, Greece is served the same fare it has been consuming for decades, only with new innocuous and “forward-looking” dressing.

For Greece to be “a pleasant surprise for Europe” there must be reforms that will cut down to the bone and challenge powerful special interests, deeply-rooted political

fiefdoms, intertwined business cabals, and a society at large that is steadily sliding into boredom, disinterest, and morose resignation in the face of day-to-day but, also, existential problems.

The proverbial “average Greek” often expects miracles that can be delivered preferably from *outside* Greece and without much local sacrifice—and that, in itself, does not bode well for reform. It underlines the unwillingness of the Greeks to roll up their sleeves and take on the challenges head on *by their own accord* and not because of some external stimulus or obligation.

How would you describe the approach of the proverbial “average Greek” to the political, social, and economic problems of the country?

This “average Greek” is, above all, a profound complainer. He will go into extended diatribes on how governments fail to address this or that problem; he will slam politicians for their unwillingness to act; he will condemn political corruption and the flow of illegal money to oil the innards of political collusion; and he will shoot poison darts at those who exploit “the people” for their own ends.

Yet, this very same “average Greek,” who has perfected the art of acidic reproach, will applaud enthusiastically *Peronista* “saviors” of the nation, who make no effort to conceal their personal and political corruption and eye-gauging involvement with often borderline criminal persons and entities—and will mimic with ease imported models of “political correctness” and behaviors that dismiss traditional values, patriotism, and laugh at demands to defend the homeland.

As voter, the “average Greek” is also a curious and irrational creature demanding entitlements he does not deserve. Elections bring no backlash for out-and-out crimes against the public good; and they rarely, if ever, punish blatantly corrupt politicians and, indeed, reward them time and again by sending them back to parliament.

It took the unprecedented catastrophe of the 2010 national default for Greek voters to finally punish the country’s two major parties, alternating in power for forty years, the socialist Pasok and the centrist-conservative New Democracy. Pasok was literally vaporized, crashing down to the bottom of the vote tally never to recover; New Democracy, on the other hand, was badly mauled but, thanks to Mitsotakis, recovered to fight and win another day.

The “average Greek” is not to be trusted as a potential force for change. Indeed, those few, who choose to go against the grain, are ridiculed, vilified, accused, and, eventually, are run out of town by the pitchfork-yielding mob. At the same time, battalions of the corrupt enjoy immunities that, by EU rules, constitute a national crime.

What is the role of political parties in the effort to change and bring the country to safer growth territory?

No clear-headed and serious observer of Greek affairs would accept the political party as a force for change.

Greek political parties are fragile affairs with random “coffee shop” organization and usually no card-carrying membership. Elections routinely involve two dozen or so contenders. With the exception of the two main contestants of the “left” and “right” (in their varied incarnations) the rest of these groupings are fragile quarreling affairs usually representing only those who created them –and very few beyond that limited circle.

Public party “debate” remains empty of political substance; one prominent “clash of wills,” for example, emerges from the pedestrian squabbles over the sharing of media air time during election campaigns.

Political party conferences (rarely held) are rowdy affairs dominated by boilerplate monotonous speeches. In the case of the major contestants, the occasional “debate” ignores points of substance and instead focuses on how each of the in-party feuding clans can elect as many delegates as possible, who sit on inconsequential “central committees” numbering hundreds.

Greek political parties do not generate intelligent and fact-worthy fare. They expend most of their time in promoting their unique form of blinkered provincialism, articulated via the repetitive drone during TV morning/evening news, and have little, if any, proposals for sound change and workable answers.

In all, no serious observer of things Greek would ascribe game-changing value to political parties as frontrunners of graduating the country to the next big step.

What is the mood of Greek society? How can we describe the collective spirit and identity of the people?

The years since the 2010 default have contributed to the steep deterioration of public mood and the strengthening of negative “national identity” features that have been permanent corollaries of the Greek condition going back ages.

Those familiar with the Greek character will tell you right away the famous Greek personal feature called *Philotimo* has dangerously deteriorated, often to the point of extinction. *Philotimo* has no specific definition but it [“...gives meaning to life that stretches well beyond ourselves.”](#) *Philotimo* is essentially choosing to be an honorable and just person. In Greek eyes, anyone without *Philotimo* is the equivalent of an antisocial, maladjusted, and deeply alienated individual who consciously avoids the Good and accentuates the vulgar, the hostile, the dishonest, and the crass. A Greek social commentator [describes](#) a Greek society without *Philotimo* as follows (source in Greek):

The worst thing is that Greek society has lost all vestiges of self-respect because of its misery and resignation. People do not respect their own existence and personality. [People] degrade themselves publicly and they don't pay attention to those around them. They have forgotten the basic rules of fellowship and indeed they scorn those who invoke them. To say today "thank you" and "I am sorry" is considered fake courtesy and it becomes a cause for mockery.

The breakdown of *Philotimo*, and the deep malaise engendered by the brutalities of the German-inspired catastrophic austerity programs, put into question the ability of Greek society to rebound in meaningful fashion. To make matters worse, most Greek commentators also agree the current accelerated deterioration is only the latest phase of creeping decay that dates back to the mid-19th century. In all, reviving the old values and boosting collective morale, in an effort to cause lasting reform, is a Herculean effort with poor prospects.

Much has been said over the years about the effects of the deep-rooted leftism present in Greek society. How important is this factor in assessing the ability of Hellas to clear the hurdles toward necessary change, reform, and improvement?

The history of the organized Greek Left, beginning in the early 1920s, is a continuum of efforts to overthrow governments so that the Proletariat would impose its "just" dictatorship on the rest of society.

The Stalinist Communist Party of Greece (KKE, est. 1922) actively tried to sabotage Greece's war effort against the Axis powers because of the temporary rapprochement between Hitler and Stalin via the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact that led directly to World War Two.

KKE did not hesitate to launch all-out guerrilla war against the Greece's legitimate governments in 1944-45 and 1946-49 costing the country enormously in blood and treasure. The communist insurgency 1946-49 and its indescribable barbarities came only two years after the end of the Nazi occupation, which had already imposed on the country unprecedented death and destruction.

The communists, however, lost the war but did win the peace. Beginning in 1974, and the fall of the military junta, there was a highly successful mass intellectual movement to rehabilitate communist leftism and elevate it to the status of quasi-religion.

Being castigated, derided, and publicly condemned, if you were not friendly towards the "proletariat," became the most fashionable persecution trend among Greek "intellectuals."

In the face of such a mass leftist assault on all "undesirables," both Old Right and centrist conservatives retreated in disarray. They developed massive political guilt that quickly delivered the legitimation of the outlawed Stalinist KKE, the return of thousands

of KKE guerrillas from self-imposed exile in Eastern Bloc countries, and even the inclusion of a veteran senior KKE *Kapitan* guerrilla leader, responsible for hideous atrocities, in a short-lived provisional conservative government in the 1990s.

This deep-seated leftism, keeping conservatives in quarantine, in combination with the electorate's desperation over EU-imposed austerity, delivered the 2015 electoral victory to the radical leftist SYRIZA party. What followed that unprecedented event was 4 and 1/2 years of gargantuan corruption, blood-curdling lies and scandals, and kowtowing shamelessly to creditor demands.

But, despite this overwhelming somersault of the "radical communists," the July 2019 election demonstrated that leftism is "too tough to die:" SYRIZA, the party of saying "yes" to even the most outlandish demands of the EU directory, still captured 31.5 percent of the vote to the centrist conservatives' 39.9 percent.

The most recent example of how the center-right docilely approaches the Stalinist Left was the eye-popping *refusal-by-abstention* of Mitsotakis's Europarliament deputies to support a [resolution condemning the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact](#) that stressed how Nazi Germany and the USSR colluded in attacking, occupying, and dividing Poland among themselves (indeed, one of the conservative deputies voted *against* the resolution thus openly approving the Nazi-Soviet conspiracy).

Socially, leftism abhors anything that appears "elitist" –with the definition of "elite" being so broad as to include all but the kitchen sink that is deemed, even remotely, anti-proletariat. It is also opposed to anything that is associated with reasonable practical reform and the necessity of rationalizing loss-making economic policies, such as keeping the bulk of the economy under state control.

Leftism allows itself enormous wiggle room for avoiding necessary change and waging a pitiless attack on all "enemies of the working class" conspiring to rob the "proletariat" of their rights. The net result of this crusade is giving fodder to practices that result in dire injustice and unending scandals. The practice of leftism under SYRIZA provided irrefutable evidence of how defending and applying the Stalinist mind distorts and corrupts government; annuls simple logic; and [elevates](#) a functionally illiterate former waiter to the office of strategic planning adviser to the prime minister.

The SYRIZA regime gave us all the evidence necessary to outright reject Greek Leftism as a source of change.

So, we can say the jury is still out on whether Greece is honestly prepared for the “great leap forward” that will change the very substance of Greek society, politics, and state apparatus. Where do we go from here then?

Two (pessimistic) examples:

- Shortly before capital controls came into effect in 2015 it leaked that a relative of a SYRIZA minister was quick to withdraw substantial funds from his bank account and transfer them abroad. The move obviously benefited from advance warning—and this, at least in theory, was a felony that should have been prosecuted immediately. However, nothing happened. It is almost certain many similar withdrawals took place in the exact same manner just before Greece’s capital flows were locked down inside the banks. Greeks take into their stride such barefaced illegalities and few, if any, protest or demand punishment of those responsible. The guilty are indeed safe in the knowledge nobody cares.
- It is well-known Greece faces a dire demographic problem. An aging population and the shrinking number of births are “seriously undermining the long-term growth prospects of the country’s economy.” Furthermore, half the population of the country now resides in the two largest cities, Athens and Thessaloniki. The countryside is wilting and illegal immigration from Turkey is injecting the country with steadily growing undocumented alien arrivals. These factors, in combination, paint a deeply discouraging picture for the immediate and more distance future and stability of Greek society. And any intervention to correct the shrinking numbers of Greeks is a long-term project that won’t bear fruit before the passage of decades.

The above two examples testify to the stasis that permeates the whole Greek system. Change of a system as ossified as that of Greece requires not just courageous and farsighted political decisions but the *true mobilization of the whole of society in pursuit of well-defined concrete targets*. Presently, there is *no individual or collective actor* in the Greek system that could undertake such necessary action.

Greek popular tradition often invokes the help of the “God of Greece” when confronted with the dire Sisyphean predicament of the country. Yet, it is obvious the deity is either otherwise engaged or has forgotten the country at the tip of the Balkans. Other methods, past the metaphysical, are obviously necessary but, so far, those who would plan and implement them are nowhere to be seen.

