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Dealing with the outliers

For a nation facing so many diverse and challenging issues as well as the realities of its own political size in Europe, one might assume a certain amount of bitterness and resentment stemming from Greek politics regarding the EU. The statistics of the 2019 Spring Eurobarometer show a massive wave of mistrust towards the EU with the Greek citizens feeling unheard, uncared and unrepresented. It is true that before the gruelling Eurogroup meetings and the spectacular and often harsh press coverage, Greeks were amongst those highly supporting the EU. But given the developmental regional EU policies of the 90's we can see a clear distinction between utilitarianism and the overarching support.

There is also the deeper issue of perception. The country has been misrepresented for years by its own politicians, academic community, the foreign press and most political institutions. At best Greece is seen as an attractive vacation destination; at worse as a lawless no man's land. Culturally, historically and politically the country has been cut off from Europe. Its geographic location and neighbours haven't helped to bridge the gap. The question of West vs. East, North vs. South has been a chronic one; and the question that shapes the ordinary Greek citizens' relationship to the EU. And even though the legislation coming from the European Parliament influences massively the national policies, voters approached the EU elections as they have always done. Focusing on expressing resentment or admiration, hope or fear, protest or support to the Greek government. But this is clearly a top-down stance rather than just a popular misconception.

Following the Greek case, it is mostly three external factors that pushed the European agenda into almost oblivion. First of all was the decision to stack up the European elections on the local and regional elections, misdirecting part of the electorate as to the purpose of the European elections. While the intention of mobilizing the voters on three distinct and very important elections is commendable, the combination clearly favoured national politics over the EU. Secondly, the fact that the political leaders of the government and opposition made clear that the European elections were really about gauging the popular sentiment a few months prior to the national ones. For the Greek voters who didn't have a chance to voice their opposition or support since the referendum and the elections of 2015, this development was a chance to do so, a point advertised repeatedly by the opposition. The government found itself on the defensive and stroke back by declaring that voting in Greece or the EU held the same meaning; Greeks should choose between the "Greece of the many" and the "Greece of the elites". Lastly, while the candidates for the EU parliamentary elections campaigned vigorously, they were overshadowed by the two main party leaders who on every occasion managed to supplant the EU electoral campaign presenting it as part of the national election process. In a space of few months the party leaders campaigned up and down

the country spreading polarization, promises and grandiose proclamations.

The results were as follows: As polls showed SYRIZA party, failing to present as "the party of the many", was surpassed by the opposition New Democracy party by almost 9 per cent. With per cent of the popular vote, it is worrisome that the New Democracy is but the certain victor of the upcoming national election, especially when the national agenda is concerned. The Kin.Af, socialist party, and KKE communist party gained only marginally compared to 2014. In regard to the previous EP makeup, the big losers were the liberal "Potami" party and right-wing populist party of "Independent Greeks" who were pushed out on the national controversy as they supported the agreement with North Macedonia. Many were happy to see the extreme right wing party of Golden Dawn losing almost half of its voters. However, the big surprise was the far-right conspiracy peddler "Greek Solution" party which managed to capitalise on low EU trust.

Another interesting point is that while facing 10 years of austerity, crisis and still a record high unemployment rate, almost half of the Greek population respond that remaining in the EU has been a positive experience for the country, while 17 per cent maintain the opinion that the EU has harmed the country. No one should be surprised that the Greek citizens overwhelmingly feel that their voices and their country's interests are not being heard inside the EU.

It could stand as a point of grace for Greek society that despite multiple near bankruptcies and punishing austerity programs, the demonization and mockery of the foreign press, as well as an unprecedented refugee crisis the society showed resilience in resisting to devolve into the extreme far right ideology. However, we should not celebrate the Golden Dawn losing a significant part of its electoral base from previous years. The sudden rise of the "Greek Solution" party should hint towards a bigger concern; 4 per cent of the voters still support extreme right ideology albeit in the disguise of conspiracy theories and pseudo-patriotism.

More importantly, the rise and fall of SYRIZA is a cautionary tale. Greek citizens still have not come to terms with the underlying causes and trauma of the harsh austerity measures. This dissociation has given spark to flights of fantasy. Along the aforementioned distrust to the EU, Greek citizens report unprecedented mistrust against the state and most of its institutions. This complete dismissal of democratic institutions should worry us all.

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