

Commentary

Greece in Modern Europe: Aftermath to Alexis Tsipras Visit to Russia

As it was expected by most observers the visit of the Greek prime-minister to Russia eased the way for better relations between Athens and Moscow without either rocking the boat of the European Union or committing Russia to extravagant financial deals difficult to materialize in these difficult times. Mr Tsipras' pragmatism and President Putin's common sense prevailed over the atmosphere created by run away comments of various speculative media. It is positive that the two leaders made it clear that they see into the future a relationship mutually beneficial in understanding each other's ideas and sensitivities as well as in expanding their economic relations. Agricultural innovation and energy proved to be the two fields on which particular emphasis will be placed as far as the cooperation between the two countries is concerned.

The Greek government appears to be firmly devoted to the European project and has defused any issues of euroscepticism, which may have been brooding in the background of the Greek political system. It has also made it more difficult for other European leftist parties to embark on campaigns of doubting Europe. SYRIZA's acknowledgement that Europe can only be the country's destiny has made it difficult for similar parties in Spain and Portugal to portray ideas of a possible mistrust of Europe. This is rather obvious in the plummeting of PODEMOS electoral results in Spain. There is still euroscepticism in Greece and in Europe but it is gradually concentrated almost exclusively to parties of the far – and even anti-democratic-Right. They place emphasis on negating the system which inevitably limits access to public funds for personal betterment and clientelism. People who used to believe that democracy was all about state handouts to petitioning voters are disappointed now because of the necessary reforms that place responsibilities on the hands of the citizens themselves, turn against the system and find refuge in extreme views targeting immigrants for all society's ills. Likewise, they blame reformist Europe for all their misfortunes. They find refuge in extreme right wing parties, which, under the guise of populism, offer them sanctuary from every frustration they face.

As far as foreign policy options are concerned, I believe that an EU member country is not prohibited from sounding its particular views and pursuing its own national goal. Provided it is based on rationality while adhering to Europe's rules and practices. In the case of the Ukraine crisis, for example, member states could have pointed out that Europe was violating its belief in democracy when it agreed to help a movement that had violated some basic democratic principles by toppling a democratically elected government through an unconstitutional process. At the same time, they should have proposed solutions to the impasse without the use of military means, the annexation of territory and a big east-west rift in Europe. There are always options for member states to reaffirm their independence and express their national views.

As far as the Greek austerity program implemented due to the Europeans' policy options there have been grave misunderstandings. The lenders give you money, which you can never expect to receive without strings attached – i.e., terms to be observed. Initially the bailout program did not call for severe austerity. It enabled the

government to limit its public expenses without further taxation and cuts in pensions and salaries. However, the Greek government did not want to limit the size of the public sector and it was their decision to impose new taxes and cut salaries and pensions. It is therefore unfair to blame the lenders for the burden of the austerity. Since we demand financial assistance, we have to guarantee some sort of overhauling of the state finances so that we can pay back the loans. Since the Greek government didn't want to limit the vast Greek public sector they chose to stifle the market and destroy the private economy. They thus pushed up unemployment and imposed tremendous burdens upon the backs of the taxpayers. It is true that the Europeans love taxes but they wouldn't have objected to the same results achieved through a generous reduction of public sector spending by means of cutting down the size of the state.

Greece remains a full member of NATO and observes its rules and collective decisions. NATO however has in recent times a relatively diminished status. Its actions and activities concentrate more on the threats emanating from the world of Islam than from the fringes of Europe. It is exactly this new kind of danger that should wake up Europe to the possibilities of catastrophe. The West and Russia should abandon any issues involving strains and indirect confrontation over Ukraine and settle in a collaborative way over the negotiating table. They should emphasize their collective alert over the mortal danger, for all of them, of the Islamic reawakening. This should tie the interests of the East and West together enabling them to present a united front. The danger is active and close to all of us.

Within this context Greece should work to bring Europe, the West in general, and Russia together so that the cool climate of recent times marginalized and a new period of closer cooperation be initiated. Europe should recognize Russia's sensitivities about its 'near abroad' and Russia also agree to play by the rules and not show off its strength to weaker neighboring nations. Here should be no reason for sanctions within the European context but also the possibility of violence and military might should be excluded from the soil of Europe forever. Greece, due to deep historical reasons, could and should play that bridge role between Europe and Russia for the emergence of a new political dawn over our continent.

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