

1. CONVERGENCE , IN SPIE OF IT ALL

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Convergence, in spite of it all

COMMENTARY | BY DIMITRI A. SOTIROPOULOS *

This is politics in Greece in the fall of 2024, half a century after the restoration of democracy: intense and constant fighting between the opposition and the government in Parliament, infighting for influence in the main opposition parties, a Council of State that is being questioned by bar associations, and mounting strikes and protest rallies, like those declared this week.

This is the small picture. The bigger one is different. From the fall of 1974 and until the elections of 1977 at least, political parties, opinion shapers and social movements agreed on very little apart from their convergence on the task of the democratic transition. University amphitheaters buzzed with debates on which was the best path forward among the socialist models available at the time, including the Soviet, Chinese and Albanian ones, and workers at several factories were actively pursuing self-managed production (industrial democracy). On the other side, regimes such as the constitutional monarchy (31% of the vote in the 1974 referendum) and pro-dictatorship parties (with the National Alignment party securing 7% of the vote in the 1977 elections) were popular among the more conservative segments of the electorate. The prospect of the country's entry into the then-European Community sparked reactions ranging from indifference to hostility, with just a few political officials being in favor of it. The divergence among all these political forces and ideologies could not have been greater.

At the end of the day, 50 years later, the convergence at the political and ideological level is quite impressive. At the governance level, we have strong support for the institutions and procedures of liberal democracy, as shown by numerous studies (European Social Survey, World Values Survey). Ideologically, comparatively few people advocate for a different system of government or an alternative version of democracy. This is the case even though there are democratic shortcomings, such as an inefficient judicial system, a lack of transparency inside political parties and a media oligopoly, among others.

As for the country's European prospects, we have adopted institutions, procedures and public policy mechanisms and content that come from the European Union. A certain amount of Euroskepticism exists, of course. It started growing before the economic crisis and peaked in



While Parliament is a hotbed of contention and tension, Greece's main political parties agree on the core principles of democratization, Europeanization and modernization, the writer argues.

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the early 2010s, remaining at a relatively high level to date: 25% of Greeks had a negative or very negative view of the EU in May 2024, against a European average of 18%, according to a Eurobarometer poll. This skepticism, however, is directed chiefly at how the Union is structured and operates. It is not deep enough to shake people's conviction in the common European identity. How many people would honestly want to replace the European model of capitalism and democracy (with such an emphasis on the welfare state) with one of the other political-economic models of the 21st century (the neoliberal capitalism of the United States or the authoritarian capitalism of China)?

Last but not least, though, the issue of how the country should be modernized is extremely contentious, there are no serious objections to what its aims should be, namely more industrialization, infrastructure and education/training. And this is in a country that is already dealing with the heavy impact of climate

change and it would not be surprising if citizens objected to these trends on ecological grounds. Ideologically, almost the entire political spectrum agrees on this form of modernization, which is summed up by the notion of "catching up with the West" – to whatever extent that goal has yet to be achieved.

The fact that, in contrast to 1974, political and social forces in 2024 agree on the broad strokes of democratization, Europeanization and modernization is the result of policy learning, of experience stemming from the bitter mistakes of a neoliberal bent, such as the erroneous calculations of the first fiscal adjustment program in 2010, and dead-end experiments of a radical bent, like the ill-fated 2015 referendum. What's more, other ideas that occasionally rallied the crowds, like Greece's exit from the eurozone and NATO, are espoused only by small political forces today.

What Greece enjoys, in short, is a fundamental convergence between most citizens and the big political parties on a core of political values and the country's international orientation. None of this, however, means that the convergence of the past 50 years will survive the wars in Greece's broader vicinity, ecological disasters in the Mediterranean and socioeconomic inequalities.

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