

Greece's U-turn in negotiations signifies a new era in Syriza's internal politics

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Editor **By Eleni Xiarchogiannopoulou**

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Ever since Syriza came in power the interplay between the intergovernmentalist and supranationalist dimensions of EU politics is present. For the European Commission the rise of Syriza represented an opportunity to regain the political influence it had lost since the beginning of the crisis. On the day of the elections and in line with the spirit of Syriza's pro-growth/anti-austerity discourse, the Commissioner for Economic and Financial Affairs, Pierre Moscovici stated that the Commission wants Greece to be able to pay its debt and ['to stay on its feet, creating jobs and growth, reducing inequality'](#).



During the 16 February 2015 Eurogroup meeting, Moscovici took another initiative and circulated a statement/plan , which Yannis Varoufakis, the Greek Minister of Finance, was ready to sign but the rest of the Eurozone members rejected. Then it was Varoufakis' turn to reject the alternative statement which Jerun Dijsselbloem had proposed at which point the Eurogroup meeting collapsed.

Yet, less than two days after all this, Greece is ready to apply for the extension of [Loan Facility Agreement](#) based on the plan Pierre Moscovici presented at the Eurogroup.

The U-turn in Greece's stance is understandable. Tsipras seems to have realized that he needs to be more flexible and more pragmatic. Greece's negotiating strategy has been unsuccessful. Varoufakis style has been [questionable](#), so was the impact of the demonstrations which took place in Greece and around Europe, designed to add pressure to politicians.

Greece's application for an extension has always been a non-negotiable element for its European interlocutors. [Moscovici himself admitted that the ongoing programme is the reference point of Brussels. Even Spain and Portugal rejected Greece's demands.](#) With national elections approaching and the left on the rise, in both of these countries, supporting Syriza equals to supporting their political opponents.

Tsipras' choices of action can be understood if we look at Syriza's internal politics. Up to now he has not been alone in this game. This was made evident during the previous Eurogroup meeting when he stopped Varoufakis from signing a common statement that both himself and the Deputy Prime Minister, Yiannis Dragasakis, had agreed upon. The reason being was that it referred to the 'extension' of the ongoing programme, which the Left Platform, headed by Panagiotis Lafazanis, Minister for Productive Reconstruction, Energy and Environment viciously opposes. In relation to this, Lafazanis stated that there will be no agreement if Greece's European partners insist on extending the existing programme.

Lafazanis has been operating more like a member of the party rather than of the government, questioning the authority of Tsipras by blocking and postponing governmental decisions, giving the impression that this is a three rather than a two-party coalition. Indicatively, he vetoed the candidacy of Dimitris Avramopoulos, EU Commissioner for Migration, Home Affairs and Citizenship, for the Greek Presidency even though the leaders of the coalition, Tsipras and Kammenos, had already agreed and despite the fact that the President of Democracy has ceremonial responsibilities only. Avramopoulos is a member of right-wing New Democracy (ND) and Lafazanis was in favour of a left-wing candidate.

Lafazanis' stance has a lot to do with the way power is executed within Syriza. Although the Central Committee is

the supreme decision-making body of the party, its agenda and decisions are co-formulated and taken collectively with the local Member Organisations. The Central Committee meets every three months and for many this means that the content of governmental policy can be monitored and revised from the bottom-up. Earlier in February Dimitris Belandis, a lawyer specializing in constitutional law from Lafazanis Left Platform questioned the decision-making authority of the government altogether when he stated that the party and not the Ministerial Council should decide about the governmental policy.

With this switch in Greece's position and the intention to apply for the extension of the loan agreement, Tsipras consolidates his authority in the government and the party. He has clearly delegated more authority to his Minister of Finance, Yannis Varoufakis, who today went so far as to make [public his negotiations dossier](#).

With these moves Tsipras is building alliances with the centre-right and left. Effectively he sidelines the Left Platform, just like Tony Blair did with the left branches of the Labour party in the 1990's. Tsipras is indeed in a position to do so. Similarly to Blair his popularity is high reaching 74% in just three weeks after the elections. Admittedly, the Greek economy is in a much worse shape than British in late 1990's, but the fact that Tsipras won the elections increases his leverage into the party. Eventually, he proposed another ND member, Prokopis Pavlopoulos, for the Presidency of the Greek republic. The leaders of PASOK and Potami support fully his decision to apply for an extension.

Moreover, the stakes of a non-agreement are high. Tax revenues in January fell short by 20% and the primary budget surplus by 60%. The majority of Greeks are still in favour of euro and thus a Grexit would annihilate Syriza politically. On the top of this, the coalition parliamentarians are unlikely to risk their careers with a Grexit even if the governmental choices go against their principles.

Eleni Xiarchogiannopoulou (PhD Exeter) is a Post-doctoral fellow at Université Libre de Bruxelles and a Scientific Collaborator in Governance at the International Centre for Research on the Economy and the Environment.