

Zombie Politics

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The Greek political system increasingly resembles something that is deemed dead yet still animated: a zombie. The sovereign debt crisis has been considered by many a fatal blow to the Greek political system. The country in order to secure the much needed economic growth would have to abandon its state-centred model of economic governance. As a result, many predicted, the Greek political system firmly intertwined with the state would not survive the shock. This is hardly the case.

The reaction of political parties to a future that will probably not include them, at least in the present form, resembles that of zombies, in b-movies, chasing the living and destroying everything on their way. The practices of the past that transformed the state apparatus into a high politicised environment precluding transparency and accountability may be proclaimed dead but they still walk among us. There is plenty of evidence for this. In the two years that follow the MOU, Greek politics revolve around red lines, zero-sum political games on crucial reform issues and failed attempts for consensus. These are not the reactions of a political system that is willing to reform in order to survive.

Discursively the Greek political system may have shown indications of remorse. Political rhetoric in Greece has been centred along one major narrative: assuming responsibility for past mistakes and moving forward to a future of economic growth and prosperity. The political system has developed a strong rhetoric of remorse assuming accountability for policies that essentially obstructed Greek economy from opening to the challenges of a globalised world. Despite however, this discursive turn political practice remains the same. Political parties still operate around zero-sum games that distort the political agenda and block any attempt for actual change.

The time-line of events, from the MOU to this date, provides clear evidence that the Greek political system not only refuses to adjust to the new circumstances but essentially clings to its old habits. To begin with, the MOU was never adequately explained to the Greek society. It has been developed by the inner circle of advisors to the Prime Minister and most MPs had only a vague understanding about it, especially the technical parts. Then, it has been ratified as the only viable political alternative to a pressing problem in the usual fashion that critical bills are passed in the Greek Parliament. The Greek Parliament indulged into the production of laws and decrees for its implementation. In most occasions, political parties opted for bickering on most critical reforms delaying implementation of necessary policies. At the same time, they failed to diagnose that the executive branch of the government, the public sector was essentially a big failing machine with no information infrastructures, obsolete and occasionally non-existent administrative procedures and demoralised personnel that was moving legal documents around thinking that this is actually policy implementation.

The triptych authoritarian leadership/strong rhetoric/weak implementation characterising Greek politics remains strong as ever. Political elitism in the inner circle of government and emphasis on propositions without alternatives grows even stronger. However, in the post-2008 world, such practices are not only inefficient, they are also dangerous. In view of its imminent death, the Greek political system opted to operate in a vacuum ignoring that in an interconnected world dominated by financial markets everything is under scrutiny. Political manoeuvring is quite limited and even large countries like the USA are penalised by financial markets. The inability to deliver healthy macro-economic indicators, and most importantly, bickering over economic reforms are indications of weak government and severe political instability. Investors, already alarmed by the 2008 financial crisis, cannot trust such countries. Greece is bound to sink even more to its problems.

Where does that leave us? As I write this post, the Greek political system is in full disintegration, albeit still quite present. The inability to successfully implement and monitor the necessary reforms led to a series of highly unpopular measures attacking primarily Greek civil servants and pensioners. This triggered fierce societal unrest

that the Greek political system chose to interpret in ways that position political parties as saviours and society as the culprit. Suddenly, Greek society started to be portrayed as a backward society that fears progress and resists every attempt to become a modern society. And yet, Greek society does not resist change. It protests against the lack of accountability, the absence of punishment and the politics of fear of the last two years. It is mainly the inability of the political system to shed its past practices and cleanse itself which are rejected by Greek society. It is definitely not modernisation.

Which are the outcomes of these zombie politics where existing solutions are failing and alternatives are nowhere to be found? I think mainly it is the distortion of reality. Political parties frame reality in ways that preserve the paternalistic and authoritarian elements of the political system. In this vein, consensus and collaboration are used as political leverage losing their significance in the process. Elections are presented as an act of political irresponsibility. Direct democracy (i.e. the referendum) becomes an instrument of pressure towards society. The Greek indignados are dismissed as not having a coherent political agenda. Political parties are the only legitimate actors in the political game; civil society is once more suppressed. Then, it is also international isolation. Greece's image shifts from a recalcitrant European country to a highly unstable one with a political system rejected by society. It becomes obvious that reforms will never happen on time in a system of fierce political confrontation and societal unrest. Greece seems to reject liberal capitalism which makes its counterparties wonder why it joined the EMU in the first place.

In any case, Greece runs out of alternatives. Isolation seems now a very possible prospect and this will not only turn Greece into a barren place with no real prospects of recovery. It will also perpetuate the political practices of the past since there won't be any space for alternative political propositions to emerge. As such, Greek people will be stuck in the strong embrace of their zombie political system with no real prospect of release.