

## Trudging to the polling booths

*Exhausted* electorate disengaged by vote to decide who will implement tough bailout



A worker hangs a banner with an image of former Greek prime minister and leader of leftist Syriza party Alexis Tsipras

By **Panos N. Polyzoidis**

With the policies for the next parliamentary term already in place (dictated by the €86-billion bailout agreement negotiated at the eleventh hour by PM Alexis Tsipras approved in parliament) Greeks are heading for the ballots in a rather subdued campaign atmosphere.

Even the seven-leader televised debate this week failed to capture the excitement of an electorate that looks more and more cynical after five national elections in the last 17 months.

This certainty has drained the campaign of the bipolar rhetoric that has dominated the last five years. There is no longer a question of whether the country will escape the economic crisis within the EU-IMF-imposed adjustment programmes or seek alternatives that would remove it from the European core.

As things stand, Tsipras' left-wing Syriza and his coalition partner, Panos Kammenos', Independent Greeks, have now forcibly joined the camp of EU loyalty. The anti-austerity, anti-European wing now consists of the newly formed People's Unity party, Syriza's radical left-wing

off-shoot, the Communist Party and neo-Nazi Golden Dawn. Combined, they are not projected to receive more than 20% of the popular vote at most, which seems to settle the dispute on strategic orientation that marked the previous six years of the crisis. Tsipras' decision to abandon his anti-austerity hard line and sign a third bailout, after a protracted negotiation that ate away most economic gains made in the previous period, appears to have persuaded a large part of the electorate that painful policies are indeed necessary. Something similar had happened a few years ago, when Antonis Samaras, then leader of conservative New Democracy, was forced to make a similar U-turn.

As such, the main issue that must be settled by voters on September 20 is the composition of the government coalition that will undertake the unenviable task of implementing three more years of economic austerity and unpopular reforms to the state and markets.

For the first time in history, ND appears content with the role of leading a coalition, as this is the election aim declared by its caretaker-turned-permanent leader, Vangelis Meimarakis.

**Aiming for majority**

Tsipras is now aiming for an overall House majority that would allow him an unhindered full four-year term in government. If opinion polls are not way off target, the election result will teach him a hard lesson in consensus politics, forcing him to work towards a coalition with some of the people he still denounces as untouchable. Europeans appear certain that Tsipras will be the key person in the process of implementing the programme, as he is the one who negotiated the agreement; they believe he is the one who can best convince the public of its necessity, especially given his past anti-bailout rhetoric. In any case, the notion of a broad coalition as the optimal agent to carry through painful but indispensable policies has been gaining ground to the point of being recognised as an inevitability - both in Greece and abroad.

Greek voters look set to offer their seal of approval to the idea and determine a new political and parliamentary balance of power. Then it will be up to politicians to sort out the mechanics of a new style of governance that will attempt to lead Greece out of the ordeal.

## Fighting fear, hunger, rain

*Migrants* battle the elements in Greece

By **Costas Kantouris** (AP)

As if fear, hunger, thirst, worry and exhaustion were not enough to endure, new trials emerged yesterday for those on the 1,000-mile-plus trek into Europe: torrential rains and thick mud.

About 7,000 refugees and migrants, including many families lugging young children, braved relentless downpours yesterday to cross Greece's northern border into Macedonia in what Greek police said was the largest single wave they had seen so far.

At the northern village of Idomeni, crowds gathered before dawn, using anything they could find - plastic sheeting, garbage bags, hooded jackets, even a beach umbrella - in a futile attempt to stay dry. Sneakers stuck in the mud. Rain dripped off hoods and caps. All were soaked to the skin.

Parents held their children aloft in the rain, to make sure the Macedonian police would see them and let them through checkpoints. Other mud-splattered children dragged luggage and stumbled into rain-filled potholes, climbing out crying.

By early afternoon, all had crossed but thousands more were on their way, heading to the Greek mainland in ferries.

The surge came after Greek authorities managed to register about 17,000 people on the eastern island of Lesbos in



BOY passes from the northern Greek village of Idomeni to southern Macedonia as other refugees and migrants wait

just a few days, speeding their trip north.

Greece's caretaker government chartered two extra ferries and sent additional registration staff to Lesbos to ease overcrowding on the Aegean island, where more than 20,000 refugees and migrants had been living in precarious conditions after arriving on dinghies from the nearby Turkish coast.

Greece, Italy and Hungary have been overwhelmed this year - and especially this summer - by a flood of refugees and migrants seeking safety in Europe.

The vast majority of those arriving in Greece are Syrians fleeing their country's vicious civil war, followed by Afghans.

In Brussels, the 28-nation European Union is seeking backing for plans to distribute 200,000 people among its members, but is meeting fierce resistance from some nations. Most of those head-

ing north hope to settle in wealthier EU nations like Germany or Sweden.

At Idomeni, about 4,000 stood in a muddy field early yesterday, waiting for Macedonian police to let them across. Thousands more sought shelter under tents pitched in fields or headed to the Idomeni train station, where they huddled around fires to stay warm. The train station's cafe was converted into a shelter for women and children, some of whom were running fevers.

Macedonian police formed a human chain on the border to limit the flow of refugees into more manageable groups, letting families with young children cross first. Occasionally they used batons and shields to push back migrants attempting to rush through ahead of their turn.

For some, the chaos, the cold and the rain were unbearable. One Iraqi man

was asking anyone he could find how he could return home.

He wanted to fly back to Iraq, he said, he couldn't bear the conditions any more to reach Europe.

Abas Jizi, a 30-year-old supermarket employee from Deir ez-Zor in Syria, huddled around a fire with his wife and three children at the Idomeni train station, cradling his one-year-old son.

"I was hit by the police" in Lesbos, he said. "The situation was very bad. We waited for 10 days to get our papers. We got to Athens yesterday and we set off straight away for here."

He had no choice but to leave Syria, he said. "In my country the situation is very bad. The helicopters fly over the city and they bomb."

Jizi is aiming to get his family to Denmark. "I don't have anyone there but I believe I can rebuild my life."