

LV 1 Aug 19
(17-30 juin)



Greek politics

Immigrants as scapegoats

ATHENS

As Greece is forced to make more budget cuts, right-wing extremism is on the rise

PROTESTERS in wheelchairs jeered and whistled as officials from the "troika"—the European Commission, the IMF and the European Central Bank—arrived at the labour ministry on October 2nd to press for yet more public-expenditure cuts. Beleaguered Greeks are set to endure a sixth year of recession in 2013. Greek budget planners forecast a 3.8-4% contraction, the IMF a more pessimistic 5%.

Yannis Stournaras, the finance minister, is under huge pressure to find an extra €2 billion (\$2.6 billion) of last-minute savings to appease the troika. Antonis Samaras, the centre-right prime minister, has an even harder task: persuading the coalition government's left-wing partners to accept tighter austerity. Both still sound confident a deal will be reached, though the timetable is likely to slip by a couple of weeks.

Delays are not helpful for Mr Samaras. He has struggled during his first 100 days in office to keep his fragile coalition together while Mr Stournaras put together a €13.5 billion austerity package in return for Greece's second €130 billion bail-out. At the European summit on October 18th, the premier promised that he would seek a two-year extension until 2016 for implementing the new measures, thereby softening their impact. But European leaders will not grant Greece's request until the package has been agreed to with the troika and approved by the parliament in Athens. As a result Greece's next €31.2 billion loan

tranche, needed to recapitalise Greek banks so that they can start lending again, may not arrive until mid-November.

The draft budget for 2013 already includes almost €5 billion of cuts in pensions and public-sector salaries. Mr Stournaras hopes they are deep enough to achieve a primary budget surplus (before making debt repayments) of 1.4% of GDP. The troika chiefs are concerned tax revenues will be lower than forecast, and that the budget still leaves space for spending overruns by the defence and health ministries and in local government.

Once again the government has shied away from sacking civil servants, despite a commitment to cut the bloated public-sector payroll by 150,000 over the next three years. Instead a total of 15,000 civil servants are to be eased out of their jobs, taking early retirement after a year on 75% of their previous salary. It is an unsatisfactory solution reached to accommodate Mr Samaras's coalition partners.

Greece's official unemployment rate hit 24.4% in June, the EU's second-highest after Spain. The jobless rate among young Greeks rose to 55.4%, overtaking Spain's for the first time. Many private-sector workers, among them teachers and nurses, complain of not being paid regularly. "In our profession, you can't not turn up for your shift," said Yolanda, an intensive-care nurse taking part in a protest outside the health ministry, which owes more than €1

billion to private clinics for looking after state health-service patients.

Public-sector trade unions are planning rolling strikes to protest against the latest wage cuts. Extremists are stirring up trouble. Opinion polls show that Golden Dawn, the far-right, anti-immigrant party that won seats in parliament for the first time at the June general election, has overtaken the socialists to occupy third place behind Mr Samaras's New Democracy and Syriza, the main opposition party.

Golden Dawn is opening more offices in provincial towns to increase support among the unemployed young. Recognisable by their black t-shirts with a swastika-like emblem, its members are growing bolder in their harassment of immigrants. One group recently attacked several stallholders at an open-air market in Rafina, a port near Athens, after posing as plainclothes police checking their permits. The police were not much help: as often happens with Golden Dawn's transgressions, sympathetic police officers looked the other way.

Golden Dawn is not only stepping up its vigilantism and attacks against immigrants. Nikos Michaloliakos, the party leader, encourages displays designed to show Golden Dawn's social conscience, through public distributions of food parcels to the needy. But beneficiaries must first register with the party and prove they are Greek, by showing their identity cards.

Nikos Dendias, the citizens' protection minister, says that Golden Dawn's stormtroopers will not be tolerated. Shopkeepers around Plateia Amerikis, where some immigrants run small businesses, are not convinced. "Racist violence is on the rise, and many people are in need of protection," says Javed Aslam, a Pakistani community leader. Few immigrants trust the police any more. ■

The Economist October 6th 2012

790 words

L'ATTENTION DES CANDIDATS

Ne pas écrire sur le texte, ne pas surligner ou souligner
Rendre l'article à l'examineur avant de quitter la salle