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TEXTE AU VERSO

How Greece became Europe's unlikely model student

So long as its finances are in order, no one cares what else it does

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Brussels can be a patronising place. In the EU, prime ministers are sometimes treated like schoolchildren. In a favourite phrase, stern officials declare that national governments must “do their homework”. If Brussels is a classroom, then Greece has become an unlikely swot. Its handling of the pandemic has been praised. Its plans for spending a €31bn share of the EU's €750bn (\$915bn) recovery pot got a gold star from EU officials. Greek ideas such as a common covid-19 certificate are taken up at a European level. After a decade in which Greece found itself in remedial lessons, enduring three bail-out programmes and economic collapse, it is a big shift. Syriza, the leftist party that ran the country from 2015 to 2019, was the class rebel. By contrast, the government of Kyriakos Mitsotakis, the smooth centre-right prime minister since 2019, is a teacher's pet.

Partly, the change in reputation is a question of politics. Syriza set itself up as a challenger to the EU's current order, hoping to overhaul the club from the inside. But ... in the technocratic world of EU politics, Mr Mitsotakis fits right in. A former management consultant, he speaks English, French, German and Davos, a dialect used by middle-aged men in snowboots at high-altitude conferences. He wears the school uniform well. Explicitly, New Democracy was elected in 2019 on a plan to overhaul Greece. Implicitly, their task was to make Greek politics boring and turn Greece into a normal European country

They are having some success. After a decade in bail-out programmes and almost leaving (or being kicked out of) the euro zone, Greece had put its finances in order long before covid-19 hit. Greek bond yields are near record lows, as the European Central Bank is no longer reluctant to buy Greek debt. Its plan for spending that €31bn of EU funds came with a 1,400-page audit, longer than some countries' entire proposals. (Years of being bludgeoned by commission officials mean Greek bureaucrats know what keeps those marking the homework happy.) While countries such as Finland rowed over the ratification of the scheme, Greece's plan zoomed through its parliament.

Dire conditions for migrants stuck on Greek islands should be a blemish on the government's record, along with reports of “pushbacks”, when asylum seekers are illegally forced back to the territory from which they came. But the staffroom in Brussels seems content. In the minds of European politicians, pushback rules are designed to stop refugees from being mown down by border guards, not to stop dinghies from being towed back to the Turkish coast. By the same brutal logic, miserable conditions on Greek islands deter others from coming....