

# Greece PM Tsipras in new anti-austerity rhetoric

*Technocrats handling fiscal adjustment measures called "silly" by PM overseeing its implementation for last 16 months.*

by John Psaropoulos

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Tsipras promises infrastructure works worth \$64m until 2020 [Reuters]

**Athens, Greece** - After 16 months of implementing austerity measures he had once railed against, Alexis Tsipras, Greek prime minister, has returned to his old, anti-austerity campaign rhetoric.

Speaking from the southeastern Aegean island of Nisyros on Tuesday, he called the technocrats overseeing Greece's fiscal adjustment programme "silly" for failing to agree on the level of austerity Greece needs to implement.

"In theory, we have technocrats to tell us the right numbers, but they can't even get the numbers right," Tsipras said.

"They've often admitted that they've been wrong, but now they're telling us again, 'What's wrong is right'."

Tsipras was alluding to the International Monetary Fund's attempts to distance itself from the latest Greek bailout, which has been financed solely by the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) - the eurozone's sovereign distress fund.

**WATCH:** [Disabled in Greece fear austerity measures \(2:33\)](#)

In a blog post on Monday entitled "The IMF is not asking Greece for more austerity", Poul Thomsen, once the IMF's overseer of the Greek programme, said that Greece needs to modernise its economy, not cut social spending further.

"We think that these cuts have already gone too far, but the ESM programme assumes even more of them," Thomsen writes.

Thomsen highlights the IMF's chief disagreement with the ESM in calling for a major overhaul of Greek debt, to which eurozone hardliners, led by Germany, are adamantly opposed.

"Greece's debt is highly unsustainable, and no amount of structural reforms will make it sustainable again without significant debt relief," Thomsen said.

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Taking advantage of this rift, Tsipras has now fired a broadside against the programme in its entirety.

Last week, he promised to spend an additional half a million dollars on low-paid pensioners, although he promises to keep spending within limits agreed to with creditors.

On Nisyros, he promised to suspend a sales tax rise on Aegean islands, which creditors imposed on his government last year.

"I'm talking about all the islands of the North Aegean and the Dodecanese," Tsipras said, "which are bearing the burden of the receiving and hosting [refugees]."

Among those islands is Chios, which on November 30 held a one-day strike to protest against the increase of sales tax from 17 to 24 percent, in line with the rest of the country.

## Costs and hardships

Islands have traditionally enjoyed a few benefits because of the additional costs and hardships of island life. The hoteliers' association of Lesvos called the rise "an unexpected gift to our competitors".

Tsipras says he will hire more than 1,500 teachers and 1,000 medical personnel on the islands. He also promises infrastructure works worth \$64m until 2020.

"I'm waiting to see what, of all this, will actually get done, and whether it will be done in such a way as to be effective," Manolis Vournos, mayor of Chios, said.

"The prime minister made a mistake in tying these things to the refugee issue, whereas he should have tied them to island status. Greece is the only country in the European Union without a recognition of island status."

Eastern Aegean islands have become increasingly restive over the presence of more than 16,000 migrants and refugees, who have been building up there since an EU-Turkey Statement in March.

## A vast processing zone

Under its terms, Turkey will take back those who do not qualify for international protection in Europe, but applicants may not leave the islands for the Greek mainland and continental Europe.

This has turned places like Chios and Lesvos into a vast processing zone.

Last month, hoteliers on Lesvos refused a rent subsidy from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees in return for putting up migrants, fearing that the refugee industry will replace the tourism industry.

Chios's municipal council went back on an agreement to allow the government to build a massive new refugee camp on the island, demanding the refugees' removal instead.

The islands' stance is changing national policy.

In a letter to the European Commission, Yannis Mouzalas, the migration minister, asked on Tuesday for permission for migrants from countries with low recognition rates to "be temporarily transferred to pre-removal centres in the mainland".

SOURCE: AL JAZEERA NEWS

*I became brave enough to face everything. But I'm afraid of the memory... My heart [does] not accept these things [happened]. What I saw were incidents that I cannot forget...*

Idris Roban

"If you go to the police they say go, we will call you. GCR, or any other organisation ... they are following what the police say. The same answer. You cannot find the question, you cannot find the answer, even you cannot find the help," he said. "Now the system is changed. We don't know what we can do, just we are waiting."

Roban has been reluctant to try his luck in another European nation, because of the repercussions on his asylum request here if he is caught. He says he has several friends who have been sent back to Greece several times after failed attempts to enter other EU countries.

"I don't have another choice. Only to wait to see finally what [the decision] will be," he said. "When you don't have choice, you must have patience to wait for another chance. If you hurry, maybe you lose everything."

Every three days he visits the same police station where he had his appeal interview more than two years ago, hoping to find someone that can clarify the status of his application.

"I am trying to correct my situation," he said. "I'm not angry ... I'll say, maybe this is not my place. How can I push myself to a new place, to find my rights and find my place?"

## No future in Greece

"Until today I'm struggling ... and now there is no work even," said Roban. "Every time, when I [fall asleep], I ask, what wrong I did? I cannot find the answer. I don't have any bad thing in my heart [toward] others."

The unrelenting economic crisis of the past decade has made life even more difficult for Roban, like most others in the country. He has not worked steadily in more than three years and depends on informal painting work, which is occasional at best. Today he lives in a shared house with other asylum seekers arranged by a local NGO - a luxury he knows many other refugees do not have.



Idris Roban [Lauren Zanolli/Al Jazeera]

He follows a set schedule to give shape to the long days of waiting. At 5am every day he wakes to pray, then checks the news online on his laptop and spends a few hours at a nearby square where there is a Sudanese-run cafe. He reads widely, in both English and his native Arabic, and his small room is lined with shelves of used books. His dream is to study veterinary science and run a poultry and cattle-farming operation.

Still, he is keenly aware of the limitations of Greece as its own citizens have struggled through years of economic crisis with little hope for change.

"I tell you the truth," said Roban. "I hope to live here but here, if I [do], I cannot find my future."

## A broken heart and a journey back home

While he wants to return to Sudan, going back home remains a remote possibility. Not only does he fear for his own safety and that of his family, he is also haunted by the memories of what happened to his family and friends there.

"Even if they push me back, I cannot go," he said.

"I became brave enough to face everything. But I'm afraid of the memory ... My heart [does] not accept these things [happened]. What I saw were incidents that I cannot forget ... Maybe one day, it is easy for me I lose my control [and] fight. Because of this, I'm going to be a killer. It's better for me to stay away," he says.

"If I don't have this kind of problem, tomorrow I will go back because here I am sitting without work. And there I am sitting without work but it's my land, my people, my area."

Still, if forced to return, he says he would go to war-torn South Sudan before returning to his home, if only to get a fresh start. "It's a different place," said Roban. "There, I am a foreigner."

For now, he continues to wait in Greece for a decision that will at least set him free from this 13-year-long era of insecurity and ambiguity.

"We know this is their country, and we are knocking [on] the door. Until now we are waiting who is inside the door to say 'enter' or 'go back'."

SOURCE: AL JAZEERA