NATIONAL RESEARCH FOUNDATION "ELEFTHERIOS K. VENIZELOS"
E-LEARNING INITIATIVES

LEARNING MATERIAL TO BE USED AT E-LEARNING COURSE TITLED

"THE BALKAN WARS 1911-1913"

Chapter 1
Eleftherios Venizelos, the Prime Minister of Greece.

Eleftherios Venizelos, the Prime Minister of Greece.

The beginning of the 20th century found the Greek state, counted just seven decades of life, in dire straits. Greece was experiencing a deep and multi-layered crisis. First and foremost an economic crisis, as the growth potential of the Greek kingdom was limited; the tax was unfair and disproportionately impacted the working class, the public debt stood at stratospheric levels, while the main pillar of the national economy, which was agriculture, was under the control of a handful of landowners. The crisis also had profound institutional dimensions. The old political order was completely discredited; clientelism undermined the proper functioning of the public administration, stillborn government shapes, structured in terms of transaction alternated in power. The parties were controlled by the big capital. The armed forces were also in decline, especially after the devastating war adventure of 1897, when a result of the domination of extreme ultra-nationalist voices in the public discourse and their increased influence on public opinion, Greece had crawled for internal consumption, without proper war preparation in a hopeless and lost outset confrontation with Turkey. In this context, in Goudi, Athens a revolutionary coup broke from the Military League, an organization of junior officers.

The coup sought to express the reform request of Greek society, which was constantly intensified and involved more and more layers and rooted in the resentment caused by the practices of the old political order. In this context, the government was replaced, the princes were removed from the army and the next time some reform laws passed. Also, the coup called from Crete, Eleftherios Venizelos, who arrived in December in Athens. It was a choice that embodied the mood of the League to come into conflict with the representatives of the old political order. Venizelos was relatively young at the age of 45 years, and had gained international recognition for his action in the political, diplomatic and revolutionary field for his timeless efforts that aimed to promote the settlement of the Cretan issue. The coup was prepared to sell him dictatorial powers but he refused, considering it necessary to win popular support, and returned to Crete.

In the elections of August 1910, however, the old parties remained strong. The results were in favor of them of the two thirds of the seats. The remaining seats occupied MPs elected as independents, among them Venizelos himself. He was the first MP in votes in Attiki & Voiotia with a festive rate of 83%, although he was abroad, he had not participated in the election campaign and had not made himself a candidate. However, despite the considerable personal success, the new Parliament was not able to promote the widespread reforms, required by the people, in all spheres of public life. It was suggested that this could be done only by a Constituent House and

soon this adopted by a large part of public opinion. In Venizelos' first speech in Athens, the gathered people in Syntagma Square emphatically demanded the establishment of a Constituent House. Venizelos imposed the crowd his own, different view. The House should have revisionist nature, and not structural, since he believed that such an option would be catastrophic in the given time and would put the country in serious adventures. He believed that the rift with the palace should be avoided at all costs because it will cause serious unrest within the country and international complications. Instead, he considered that the Government's cooperation with the palace would prove extremely useful and effective. The persistence of Venizelos vindicated. The protesters retreated, accepted by their silence his view of a Revising House. At that moment he certainly established himself as a political leader, who is not at the mercy of the moods of the crowd, not wishing to be occasionally likeable but effectively exercise his influence and manages to convince for the correctness of his own position.

Venizelos assumed Prime Minister on October 6. While receiving the vote of confidence of 80% of the MPs, he realized that he controlled very few of them, while his reformation program required a broad support and full acceptance of the draft. The appeal to the popular verdict offered this support. From the new elections on November 28 Venizelos exited sovereign. 307 of the 362 elected deputies belonged to the Liberal Party he had founded three months earlier. The call of his opponents, the old political parties, for abstinence

found no response. The rate of abstinence only increased by 8% compared with the figure in the elections of August.

The Venizelist triumph of November 1910 created the conditions to promote the rupture with the past, without undermining the role of the palace, and Greece to enter a new era. Venizelos immediately launched his program, which provided wide-ranging reforms aimed at economic recovery, the establishment of rule of law, the upgrade of the defense forces of the country, as a vehicle to meet the irredentist aspirations of the Greek foreign policy in view of the prescribed warfare on the Balkan Peninsula. The condition for the effective promotion of those objectives was to consolidate political normality. The political face of the country renewed in an unprecedented rate. It is indicative that about 9 out of 10 members of the Liberal Party were elected for the first time in the elections of 1910, while all members of the government formed by Venizelos undertook for the first time ministers. Also, the new prime minister invested in the cultivation of normal relations with the palace and in this context his first act was to restore the princes in the army.

Venizelos personally dealt with the reconstruction of the country's armed forces, both by increasing the quality of human resources and also the modernization of their equipment. For this purpose, he assumed the Ministries of War and Navy. The training of the army and navy commissioned respectively to thr French and British military mission. The revision of the constitution was completed in

May 1911. This laid the foundations for the modernization of institutions and the shielding of justice and the general democratic functioning of the Greek state. Venizelos himself was actively involved in the revision process, which widened and strengthened the protection of individual rights. The new constitution introduced guarantees on property, tax equality, personal security, asylum residence, on the right of association and the freedom of the press. For first time the permanence and the immovability of officials were established, who until then linked their fate with each change of government. Also the compulsory and free primary education was introduced along with the expropriation of large tracts of land for the public interest. The administration of justice was shielded by introducing the livelong of the magistrates. Furthermore, were promoted arrangements to facilitate the legislative work of the House and the process of revising the Constitution was simplified. The Council of State was reestablished, but without its reopening.

Also, the first Venizelos government launched major reforms that radically changed the landscape in the functioning of the state, justice, public safety and labor laws. These reforms were experiencing burning questions and answering to the demands of the Greek society and several of these have withstood time. Specifically, the eight-hour labor was established, Sunday was a day of obligatory holiday, the employee insurance was promoted and the trade unions were recognized. Measures were taken to restore the landless and new laws were passed on the security, the order to

trade, the carrying of weapons, the theft and killing of animals, the fugitives, the usury, the profiteering and unfair competition. Moreover, from the early days of the premiership of Venizelos impressive results were recorded in the recovery of the national economy. The Government contracted external loan of 110 million francs and 1911 ended with a significant surplus. So, with the war clouds over the Balkans, Greece was able to allocate significant funds to the work of the military reorganization. Venizelos, giving great importance to the role Greek navy had in an upcoming showdown, launched the purchase of the Battleship "Georgios Averof" and ordered cruisers, destroyers and another battleship.

The Second Revision Parliament considered that completed its work in early 1912. In the elections of March 11, the Liberal party was again triumphant: received 151 out of a total 181 seats.