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.
The great modernizer, the voice of a renewed political life.

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In August 1909, an organization of junior officers, the Military League led by Colonel Nikolaos Zorbas organized a military coup in Goudi, Athens. The promoters of the coup supported the direct promotion of reforms in various areas of public life, such as the armed forces, the conduct of policy, the management, the education. The League tried in this way to dynamically respond to the request of the consolidation of the state and the modernization of the country, according to the standards of the developed European countries, which had begun to be way more compelling by large sections of Greek society, as the beginning of the 20th century had found the Greek state without orientation.

During the past two decades in to the country was developing a generalized, profound economic and institutional crisis. In public administration, in economy, in to the political system, the armed forces, the justice the disarticulation was complete. Political life was dominated by specific families; the parties remained under the control of the rural landowners and on the hands of the large capital in the cities and on the political stage were alternated stillborn government figures. The interference of the palace and of the armed forces was intense. The old political order, fully discredited in

the minds of the Greek public opinion, was watching awkwardly the rise of new dynamic social strata, which had begun to assert role (city dwellers, merchants, craftsmen, farmers). Clientelism, which was consolidated from the early years of the Greek independence, had eroded all levels of public administration, making it completely ineffective. The economic downturn was widespread, the working classes suffer from an unfair tax system, the public debt was recorded at very high levels and agricultural production remained in absolute control of the rural landowners. The first wave of migration to the countries of Europe and North America was in progress. A crucial fact of the period was the painful war adventure of the Greek-Turkish war of 1897, in which Greece had been crawled completely unprepared under the responsibility of the palace and the government of Diligiannis. This had as an outcome the imposition of international economic control. The collective self-esteem of the Greeks had been severely affected.

Within this context, the movement of 1909 succeeded in the first place to gain popular support and to be supported by large sections of Greek society (farmers, middle and lower middle classes). It also gained effective control of the executive and the legislature. The Government of D. Rallis was replaced by a new one, under Kyriakoulis Mavromichalis who appeared willing to meet many of the demands of the military. He also accepted their request for the removal of the Crown prince and the princes of the army and in the forthcoming months passed several laws that promoted their

reform plan. However, soon the military was deadlocked. The old political order had not said its last word. Although in this momentum the coup expressed widespread dissatisfaction and demanded the reform of the Greek society, however, the horizon of the changes they were planning to promote was limited and could not deny the core of the status quo.

The leadership of the movement sought outlet in the delegation of power to a politician who will not come from the old political order and who should be able to embody the political change. Most suitable considered being the Cretan Eleftherios Venizelos, who had distinguished himself in the revolutionary and diplomatic struggles of the previous twenty years for the union of Crete with Greece and was instrumental in shaping the constitution and the institutional system of the Cretan State. The Military League invited him to Athens to assign him the premiership. Venizelos, who arrived in the capital of the Greek state in December, was negative, considering that the conditions were not yet ripe to take on the axiom: he was "stranger" and he was followed by the reputation of the “anti-dynastic ". Therefore, his possible assumption would cause serious reactions in political and diplomatic circles. Moreover, Venizelos rejected the proposal of the League to surround himself with dictatorial power. He considered preferable to secure the popular support, utilizing the reformist desire of Greek society. The palace and the leaders of the old parties, although initially seemed hesitant, they finally adopted the recommendation of Venizelos to

replace the Mavromichalis government, to dissolute the Military League and to convene a Revisionary Parliament. Stephen Dragoumis was the new prime minister, the formerly leader of the Regenerative group of "Japanese". Venizelos himself after staying 25 days in Athens, he returned to Crete. He was now a leader in waiting. At the first opportunity, which will not be long in, he was to assume the power.

The already scheduled elections for the March of 1910, following a proposal of Venizelos, were postponed in order to be avoided the possibility of international complications due to the insistence of the Cretans to force the union with Greece by participating in them. In the double revisionist parliament that emerged from the elections of August, the old politicians (K. Mauromichalis, D. Rallis, G. Theotokis, A. Zaimis) still controlled the majority of the members of the body (240 of 362 MPs). The rest were elected as independents. Several of them were young politicians, actors of radical ideas, who faced positively the prospect of reforms. However, they were not a group, nor they had similar positions on the policies that should be followed. Among them, was Eleftherios Venizelos, who was elected triumphantly, with 83% of votes, as a first deputy of Attiki and Viotia. In fact, his candidacy had been filed by the Bar of this region, as he, during the period, was absent in Switzerland.

The composition of the Parliament did not capture the entrenched now spirit of the majority of citizens for change. The convergence of

a Constituent Parliament considered marking the beginning of a new era in the political life of the country. In the first speech of Venizelos to the Athenian people, in Syntagma Square, in September, the crowd called urgently for the new parliament to have a structural character. Venizelos rejected such a possibility, fearing that within the country the people would divide and, secondly, that it would lead to serious international complications that could prompt Greece on adventures with an uncertain outcome. In this context, he considered untimely and extremely dangerous a breach with the palace and thus with the Great Powers. He believed that his rectifier program could only be promoted in a context of inner calm and stability, given the collaboration of the top state officials and the support of the international community. The eventual adoption of a new Constitution will inevitably pose a constitutional issue. In Syntagma Square Venizelos imposed his will to the people. At their insistence for a Constituent Assembly, he countered with greater insistence the need of the formation of a Revising Parliament. The crowd fell. It Silenced. It disciplined to Venizelos. As noted by George Ventiris it was the silence of the people who imposed him as a leader. In his first appearance before the Athenian people, he was established as a protagonist of the Greek political life.

On October 6th 1910, Venizelos assumed the premiership. Although, his government received a vote of confidence from the parliament with a large majority (208 of the 266 deputies present),

he could count on the support of just 15 MPs. But his ambitious reform program, the incisions and lacerations to the established perceptions and interests, would only be promoted by a representative body with renewed synthesis, controlled by him. So, at his suggestion, adopted by the majority of MPs, King George announced new elections for the 28th of November. With the dissolution of Parliament were opposed the strongest of the old parties and urged their supporters to abstain. The election results fully justified the expectations of Venizelos. The newly formed Liberal Party, with himself at head, gathered 307 of the 362 seats. Moreover, the vast majority of voters remained unmoved at the call of the old parties, since the level of abstention recorded only an 8% higher than this of the elections of August.

Only one year since his first rise in the capital, after the coup of Goudi, Venizelos laid the foundations for the return to political normalcy, the promotion of crucial reforms, the economic recovery and the establishment of a State of Law. Powerful in parliament, head of a parliamentary majority, of which almost nine out of ten members were elected for the first time in the elections of 1910, president of a government that almost all its members assumed for the first time as ministers, he was also building relationships of trust and sincere cooperation with King George. Resetting the eldest son of the king, the Crown Prince Constantine in the leadership of the army, proclaimed his good intentions towards the palace.

The reorganization of the armed forces was Venizelos' first priority. The Prime Minister himself took over the ministries of War and Navy and personally oversaw the reorganization of the army and navy and their training by foreign military missions -fifteen French officers led by General Eydoux and a British naval expedition led by Admiral Tufnell, respectively, arrived in Athens in early 1911. Venizelos expressed his desire to make Greece an "element of peace "in the East. From the first moment he worked to improve Greece's relations with Turkey, which had seriously deteriorated in response of his involving among other candidates from Crete in the elections of August 1910. He also instructed the Foreign Ministry to the moderate John Gryparis, as at that time ambassador of Greece in Istanbul.

Domestically, the revision of the Constitution, which was completed in May 1911, laid the foundations for the modernization of the institutions and shielded the democratic functioning of the state. The incisions that were then introduced were so important and related to several levels of the public sphere, which only typically considered a revised version of the Constitution of 1864. Basically it was a new constitution. The personal involvement of the Prime Minister to the revision process was intense. It is significant that he took an active part in 41 of the 42 relevant meetings.

The constitution of 1911 extended and substantially strengthened the protection of individual and social rights, such as property and

freedom of the press and introduced guarantees on tax equality, personal security, asylum residence and the right of association. It also introduced for the first time:

• The permanence and immovability of officials

• The compulsory and free basic education (Primary School)

• The expropriation of large tracts of land in the public interest, such as the rehabilitation of the landless

• The lifelong incumbency of the judicial officers, which have contributed to strengthen the independence of Justice.

Also promoted arrangements to facilitate the legislative work of the Parliament, simplified the process of the constitutional revision and reestablished the Council of State, which was unable to function.

Moreover, the first Venizelos government launched a series of important reforms that radically changed the landscape in the operation of the state, the justice, the public safety and the labor laws. The tax system, which until then disproportionately burden the lower income groups, were reorganized. Measures were taken in order to restore the landless, such as the distribution of land in Thessaly, and were abolished the feudal system of the Ionian Islands. The eight-hour work was established, Sunday was a day of obligatory holiday and the insurance of the employees were

promoted. Also, the trade unions of Athens and Piraeus were recognized and the involvement of employers in labor organizations was denied. Moreover, new laws passed on security and order in the trade, the theft of animals, the animal killing, the fugitives, the carrying of weapons, the usury, the profiteering and the unfair competition.

The recovery of the Greek economy since the early days of governance of Venizelos was spectacular. The government concluded a large foreign loan of 110 million francs, while in 1911 ended with a substantial surplus. At a time when all indications argued that country's involvement in war conflict the forthcoming days would be inevitable, increased funds for a substantial strengthening of the armed forces could be allocated.

Venizelos, who gave special importance to the role of the Navy, followed an ambitious program of orders. In September 1911 sailed to Piraeus the Battleship "Georgios Averof". Until the completion of the program in the summer of 1912, he launched the construction of two cruisers, six destroyers and another battleship.

Upon the completion of the work of the Second Revisionary Parliament elections were proclaimed on March 11th of 1912. The Liberal Party won again the vast majority of seats (151 seats out of a total of 181).