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Greek parliament elects country's first female president

MPs overwhelmingly back Katerina Sakellaropoulou's appointment with PM hailing it as 'a window to the future.'

By Helena Smith

The Guardian (22.01.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2RAr7Ue> - A high court judge and ardent human rights advocate has been elected Greece's first female president in a historic vote by parliament.

Inaugurating a new era for one of Europe's more traditional nations, MPs overwhelmingly endorsed the nomination of Katerina Sakellaropoulou as head of state. No woman has held the post in the nearly 200 years since Greece proclaimed independence. "Today a window to the future has opened," said the prime minister, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, after 261 deputies in the 300-seat House voted in favour of the French-educated jurist assuming the role. "Our country enters the third decade of the 21st century with more optimism."

The election – less than a week after the centre-right leader proposed Sakellaropoulou – not only breaks with tradition in an EU state where few women hold political positions but has taken many in Mitsotakis' own New Democracy party aback.

The 63-year-old, who first made history fifteen months ago when she was elevated to the helm of the highest court in the land by the leftist administration then in power, holds liberal views with an emphasis on environmental protection. But with no known party allegiance she is a political outsider.

The diminutive Sakellaropoulou cut a defiantly modernist figure as she officially accepted her appointment by a cross-party group of mostly male MPs headed by the president of the parliament in her office on Wednesday. Signalling her determination to act as a moral compass in a society often riven by political division, and singling out the climate emergency among the global challenges facing the country, she told the delegation: "I look forward to a society which respects rights ... heals the wounds of the past and looks with optimism at the future."

Her election was immediately applauded by the EU commission chief, Ursula von der Leyen, in a tweet praising Greece for "moving ahead into a new era of equality".

An expert in environmental and constitutional law, Sakellaropoulou will take the oath of office on 13 March, when she will formally succeed Prokopis Pavlopoulos, a former conservative minister who has held the largely ceremonial position for the past five years.

Raised in Thessaloniki, Greece's northern metropolis, she is the daughter of a supreme court judge and lives in a part of central Athens eschewed by most politicians.

Worldly and well read, her career has been defined at the vanguard of a minority of jurists unafraid to clash with prevailing sentiment in pursuit of the rule of law. Despite nationalist frenzy two decades ago she stood her ground as a leading proponent of removing religious affiliation from civilian identity cards, a reform demanded by the EU but vigorously opposed at the time by conservatives and the country's powerful Orthodox church. In a nation on the forefront of the refugee crisis, Sakellaropoulou has also supported citizenship being granted to migrant children.

As Greece enters 2020 after a decade of battling its worst economic crisis in modern times, the appointment of a woman to the country's highest office has raised hopes that a new page is finally being turned.

Greek female MPs voiced optimism that the president-elect could serve as a role model to younger generations in a nation still getting to grips with the idea of gender equality.

A mere five women currently hold cabinet positions – a scarcity that earned Mitsotakis wide criticism when his government assumed power in July.

Despite protests from some in the opposition that Sakellaropoulou lacked political clout, the rare consensus with which MPs supported her nomination in the first round of what could have been a five-round vote buttressed optimism on Wednesday.

In the past the failure of parliament to elect a president had frequently fuelled dissent, triggering early elections that have spurred further political tumult.

Why are women banned from Mount Athos?

Russian President Vladimir Putin is visiting Mount Athos in Greece to mark the 1,000-year presence of Russian Orthodox monks there. The Mount - actually a 335 sq km (130 sq mile) peninsula - may be the largest area in the world from which women, and female animals, are banned. Andy Walker asks why the ban exists.

BBC Magazine (27.05.2016) - <http://bbc.in/1TSbP8e> - If you want to visit Mount Athos the first step is to submit a copy of your passport to the Mount Athos Pilgrims' Bureau. Each day, 100 Orthodox and 10 non-Orthodox male pilgrims are admitted for a three-night stay in one of the peninsula's 20 monasteries.

Women will not be granted a permit and must stay behind as their male friends board the ferry at one of the two closest ports.

Mount Athos has barred women for more than 1,000 years - they are not allowed within 500m of the coast.

According to Dr Graham Speake, author of Mount Athos: Renewal in Paradise, a 10th Century charter states that female animals are excluded but says nothing about women because "everyone knew that women were not allowed in men's monasteries".

This was the simplest way, he says, to ensure celibacy. The thing that makes Athos different from other monasteries, he says, is that the whole peninsula "is regarded as one huge monastery".

But there is also another reason for banning women, connected with Orthodox tradition.

"One of the traditions is that the Virgin Mary was blown off course when she was trying to sail to Cyprus and landed on Mount Athos. And she liked it so much that she prayed to her son that she should be given it as her own and he agreed," says Speake. "It's still called 'the garden of the mother of God', dedicated to her glory, and she alone represents her sex on Mount Athos."

This applies to both humans and domestic animals, except for cats.

"There are a lot of cats around and it's probably a quite a good thing that there are because they are good mousers. They turn a blind eye, as it were, to the fact that there are female cats," says Speake.

This means that dairy products and eggs have to be brought in from outside.

"They eat very little dairy. There is a bit of cheese... they do quite like cheese in salads," says Speake.

"They have eggs at Easter - hens' eggs which they paint red. That is absolutely standard. Again they have to import them as there are no chickens on the mountain."

An exception has to be made for wild animals, which would be near-impossible to control.

With boys, the policy has become more flexible over the years.

"The rule is and always has been that men should be capable of growing a beard if they were going to go to Athos, and there was a prohibition against eunuchs and boys in the Byzantine period," says Speake. The fear was that a woman could pretend to be a boy or a eunuch in order to sneak in.

"What happens nowadays is that boys frequently come if they're accompanied by an adult - usually their father - and I've seen boys as young as ten. And the monks are very indulgent towards them. They actually like having boys around.

"So the answer is that yes, boys do come occasionally, but invariably when accompanied by an adult."

Women have visited the peninsula, however, despite the ban.

During the Greek Civil War, between 1946 and 1949, Mount Athos granted sanctuary to peasants' flocks, and women and girls were part of a raiding party which entered Athos in pursuit of the animals.

And in 1953, the three-day visit of a Greek woman, Maria Poimenidou - who dressed as a man - caused Greece to pass a law which prohibits women from entering Athos, with a maximum penalty of 12 months' imprisonment for those who break it.

More recently, in May 2008, four Moldovan women were dropped there by Ukrainian people smugglers. Police briefly detained them, but one officer said "they were forgiven" by the monks.

This is President Putin's second visit to the Russian Orthodox monastery of Saint Panteleimon on Mount Athos.

When he first visited in 2005 the majority of pilgrims were Greek. Now, Speake says, as many as half of the 40,000 yearly visitors are Russian, and the Russian monastery has room for 500 guests.