

# *Greek Prime Minister Says Athens Cannot Accept Harsh Austerity Strings*

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Athens, February 16 (RHC)-- Greece said on Sunday it was confident of reaching agreement in negotiations with its euro zone partners but reiterated it would not accept harsh austerity strings in any debt pact.

A day before a euro zone finance ministers' meeting in Brussels to shore up with Greece's dwindling finances and help keep it in the euro zone, Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras told Germany's Stern magazine Athens needed time to implement its reform program and shake off the mismanagement of the past. "I expect difficult negotiations; nevertheless I am full of confidence," he said. "I promise you: Greece will then, in six months' time, be a completely different country."

The Eurogroup of finance ministers meets in Brussels on Monday to try to find common ground with Tsipras' new leftist government, elected on a pledge to scrap the austerity strictures of Greece's international bailouts, on issues such as debt management, financing, privatization and labor reform.

If the meeting produces no results, there is a concern that Greece will be headed for a credit crunch that would force it out of the euro zone. Progress, however, could mean further negotiations, perhaps later in

the week.

European Central Bank President Mario Draghi refused to discuss the possibility of Greece leaving the euro zone if an agreement with European Union/International Monetary Fund lenders fell apart as a result of Greece's demands to alleviate its debt burden. He simply reiterated the euro zone's founding position that membership is "irreversible".

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