Greece in a changing Europe

Between European integration and Balkan disintegration?

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2

Greek political culture and foreign policy

In terms of the dominant element in the political culture of the Greek elite and population as a whole, commitment to Europe is central. In a recent public opinion poll, Greece recorded the highest percentage of popular support for European integration and the Maastricht Treaty processes of all European countries.[1] But it is also an unquestionable fact that among the leadership of the European countries that are members of the EU, Greece is seen as the most difficult and problematic member, a nation that in 1994 had been taken to court by the European Commission over its blockade of the FYROM, and has been subject to regular criticism in the most influential quality press organs in Germany, France, the United Kingdom and elsewhere.[2] There appears, to most independent observers, to be an irreconcilable gap between the perceived enthusiasm of the Greek people and the Greek political elite for the EU, and the incapacity of Greek Governments to behave in a *communitaire* fashion.

Key to the Greek government's current behaviour are the uncertainties concomitant with the development of the Balkan crisis and with increasing Greek economic dependence on the EU. Although Greece has a number of independent foreign policy positions on general world problems, and an influential lobby in Washington, in practice the most important work takes place on issues connected with the Mediterranean and Balkan neighbours, and within an EU framework. Within this framework, very traditional problems, such as the relationship with Turkey, have in general terms been absorbed for many years within the national security framework inherited from the Cold War in institutions such as NATO.

It may appear presumptious, in some senses, for non-Greeks to comment on the relationship between popular political culture and foreign policy, as many Greeks quite rightly see misunderstanding of the nature of the Greek cultural and political identity as one of the main problems affecting Greek-EU relations at present. When Greece joined the EU, after the end of the dictator-

ship 1974, there was a substantial element of Philhellenist affirmation in the minds of important European leaders of the time, such as the French President, Mr Valery Giscard d'Estaing, coupled with monumental ignorance of actual Greek social and economic conditions by lower ranking officials and northern European populations generally.[3] Greece was seen by these committed Philhellenists as the source of most civilisation in Europe at an intellectual level, and deserving privileged treatment within the Union in its drive to re-establish democracy. But this perspective was never shared by the northern European countries, where the 'Roman' vision of the EU, that excluded the more nationalist concerns of the Greek people, always predominated. Put in schematic terms, the Roman vision was universalist and federalist, striving for a Europe without frontiers and for ultimate political and economic unity. But at the very time that the 'Roman' view received its fullest articulation so far, under the Maastricht Treaty, the reality dawned that Greece has no shared land frontier with other members of the EU and actually has great instability on its doorstep: the war in ex-Yugoslavia, the conflict with Skopje and the increasingly bad relations with Albania.

A feature of Greek political culture that is often misunderstood by outsiders is the diversity and heterogeneity of the sources of the modern Greek identity. There is often a polar opposition - as can be seen in much recent and generally hostile foreign press comment on Greece - between the idealised Philhellenism of the elite and the confused and economically backward modern Greek reality. The elite perception depended to a large extent on the tradition of a classical education involving study of the ancient Greek language and culture that fewer and fewer members of the northern political caste now enjoy. The *technocratic* modernism of the 1980s has bred its own elite, but one personified in the values of media empires such as that of Rupert Murdoch. This new elite sees the inherited classical political culture as not only irrelevant and antiquated, but sometimes giving rise to left-leaning criticism of existing societies through its *embodiment of* traditional humanist values. According to this outlook, Plato's Guardians have little place in the world of the computer and Star Wars. The Greeks are seen as thinking of themselves as heirs to Alexander the Great or Pericles, yet being unable to conduct properly many of the basic functions of a modern state.

Apart from the patronising and inaccurate perceptions of at least some aspects of modern Greece which this psychology reflects, it also is blind to many of the most powerful forces in Greek society and culture. These forces determine *political* attitudes at a popular level and also affect foreign policy formulation in the case of the governing party. The major determinants to which the northern European critics of the Greek policy-makers are very often effectively blind include, most importantly, the influence of the Orthodox Church, the influence of legitimate nationalist feeling in such matters as relations with Turkey and Cyprus and the frustration wrought by outside manipulation of Greek foreign and security policy in the recent past. Furthermore northern

Europeans often seem wholly ignorant of the trauma of internal upheaval such as the Civil War (1944-1949) and the Colonels' dictatorship and the fact that whole segments of the Hellenic population come from families who were refugees from hostile surrounding countries well within living memory. For all these reasons, many Greeks are exceptionally sensitive to any prospect of a repeat of such bitter *and* humiliating experiences. The sum effect of recent history has been to cloak Greeks in a conservative and defensive frame of mind, resistant to the modernism of the period of capitalist triumph, or the different, but equally modernistic, integrationist agenda in the EU.

The character of this conservatism and resistance to *modernist* technocratic ideology has not been very well understood outside Greece, nor by some sections of the Greek elite itself. The generally heterogeneous ethnic composition of most of Greece has led to an assumption of complete homogeneity, aided by the dominant role of the Greek Orthodox Church in national religious life. This has run counter to not only the dominant right wing cultural agenda of the American oriented international media - exemplified by the poor image of Greece portrayed by the Murdoch press and CNN—but also the liberal agenda of multiculturalism exemplified by the attitudes of most fellow EU members. Sometimes the two meet, as in the way *The Times* of London has taken up the cause of the Slav-speakers of northern Greece and has used the issue as a symbol of Greek social and cultural intolerance. The fact that the Church is seen domestically as a normal part of the Greek identity, thanks mostly to its positive role in the struggle for national independence going back to the early nineteenth century and before, is irrelevant to these foreign commentators.

There is, therefore, a very large constituency within Greek public opinion who, at one level, may well share the general aspiration for a successful internationalist integration of Greece within EU processes and foreign policy. Nevertheless they may also have an inherited political culture with a very strong nationalist content, derived from civil and national conflicts in the recent past, which, in practice, has a far stronger emotional and practical force than anything emanating from Brussels or Strasbourg. As the ideology of federalism has become more pervasive among the Greek policy-making elite - particularly in the diplomatic service - this contradiction has grown in importance.

In practice, however, the theorists and practitioners of Greek foreign policy have generally had no option but to recognise this conservative and nationalist reality over the post-war years. It is worth remembering that although the generally hostile media image of Greece over the problem of Macedonian recognition *(see* Ch. 8), has centred on a foreign policy issue, this is by no means the first time since the Second World War that major differences between Greece and its most important allies have arisen in this way. The disputes with the West over Cyprus in the 1950s and 1960s have many common characteristics with the divergence of opinion over FYROM, where legitimately held views of an elected Government in Athens, overwhelmingly backed by Greek public opinion, seemed to be treated with the weight of a mere client state rather than an inde-

pendent country. The cultural *assumptions made in* much of northern Europe are that Greece should change its policy over Macedonia because it is indebted to the EU for financial support and for attaining a much higher standard of living than would otherwise have been achieved. The political leaders of the previous generation no doubt felt the same way when they argued with Athens Governments over thirty years ago that conformity to Western and NATO policy over Cyprus was required in exchange for the NATO security umbrella or, prior to that, military support for the Right in the Greek Civil War. If Greece was able to resist these pressures for policy change over Cyprus during the height of the Cold War, when major international security issues were at stake, it must be extremely unlikely that the EU leaders in the 1990s will be any more successful in inhibiting traditional Greek nationalist concerns over Macedonia when the Cold War is over and financial constraints are the only means of pressure open to the EU.

A traditional nationalist outlook may, however, carry a high cost in terms of Greek foreign policy and international influence generally. In a sense this is already the case in respect of the international image of Greece and the perception of Greek interests in the minds of opinion formers in the West. A major, and critical, international public relations battle was lost when Yugoslavia began to break up and FYROM first emerged. Greek Government public relations were extraordinarily inept in this period, allowing the small group of ex-communists around President Kiro Gligorov in Skopje to capture the international media agenda and dictate the context in which the Macedonia problem was discussed. Greek government organs almost totally failed between 1992 and 1994 to point out to the world the increasingly undemocratic and repressive nature of the Skopje regime, its undemocratic electoral system and its poor treatment of national minorities, including, in particular, the Albanians.[4] Critically, the Skopje Government was able to gain recognition and sympathy for its preferred choice of name for the new republic. Additionally, it accrued other forms of international support, particularly in key international financial institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as the Greek case went almost by default in the international media. The legitimate Greek national interest was never clearly or effectively articulated in this period. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that part of the reason for this was the uncritical assumption by Athens policy-makers that the European integration process embodied in Maastricht would evolve rapidly, leading automatically to an effective common foreign policy and hence avoid the need for Greek leaders to defend their own national interests. Ironically in the diaspora, the situation was slightly different. In the US the Greek lobby was very successful in the publicity war against the FYROM protagonists in marked contrast to Europe, where the 'Europeanist' ideology was paramount.

In contrast to the lack of impact in Europe, at home the reverse process took hold of the political culture, in an essentially populist way. To a significant extent it appeared as if whole sections of the Greek elite did not clearly realise

that, in the metaphorical sense, letting the nationalist genie out of the bottle might be more difficult than corking it back up again. The passions released by domestic publicity campaigns were profound and often irrational, based on partial readings of Greek history, some going back to the ancient world and others to the Civil War period with the characterisation of all the Slav-speaking minority in northern Greece as entirely pro-communist. The incapacity of all the elite to understand the growth of new and legitimate Balkan nationalism in the aftermath of the end of communism in Eastern Europe in 1989 was equally remarkable, as was the adherence to a concept of 'Yugoslavia', long after the word had ceased to carry any real meaning.[5] Thus the federalist thinking of the dominant element in Athens in these years was, in many ways, the worst of both worlds for the country: a negative perception of Greek national interests within Europe, and a burgeoning sense of nationalism within Greece, particularly over the Balkan issues.

The war and associated conflicts in the Balkans have, therefore, begun to change Greek political culture in fundamental ways, particularly at a populist level. One of the main causes for the disintegration of the ND Government in 1992—93 was the breakaway movement of Politiki Anoiksi, 'Political Spring', a faction founded by the ex-ND Foreign Minister Antonio Samaras, which campaigned on a strongly nationalist platform. Although the party gained very limited support in the Autumn 1993 general election, and has not appeared to flourish since, the seeds which it planted may well grow. Even if they do not grow in terms of 'Political Spring' becoming a major party, the effect on the political culture has been profound. It has been an axiom of the present PASOK Government that the circumstances for a similar internal split over national issues will not be allowed to exist and, although the traditionalist nationalist element in PASOK is smaller than in ND, it has been assuaged, in policy terms, by the blockade of the Skopje border and the assurance that policy concessions to northern European EU pressures are extremely unlikely. It seems that Andreas Papandreou watched the Mitsotakis Government disintegrate over this issue and had no wish to see a similar fate overtake his own. The victory for Greece in the European court case over this issue in the summer of 1994 makes concessions even more unlikely. Nationalism has entered the political culture, via the Samaras breakaway, in a manner which has fractured the solidarity of the elite discourse on modernisation and identity within Europe, making resistance to populist pressures by the federalists in the Greek diplomatic service and foreign ministry very difficult.

Another fundamental change in the political culture engendered by instability in the Balkans is the extension of the political influence of the Church. Given the increasing importance of religion in almost all Balkan countries, this phenomenon may well have far reaching effects in Greece. In the past, the Church has generally seen PASOK Governments as an object of cultural opposition; a secularist party with only a weak, if any, commitment to the position of the Church in national life and an enemy likely to champion changes in social

legislation of which the Church disapproves. But in the current conflict with both Tirana and Skopje, the PASOK Government enjoys very warm relations with the Church. This relationship appeared to be endorsed by the joint secular-clerical organisation of the huge Macedonia demonstration in Thessaloniki in February 1994, one of the largest political demonstrations ever held in Greek history. The blockade of the border and the generally firm stands taken over Balkan issues in the last six months have found favour with the traditionally irredentist-influenced northern bishops and, as a result, PASOK enjoys unusual support in these quarters. Given the difficulties which the previous PASOK Government had over relations with the Church, it is very unlikely that this change in the political culture will be resisted by the current Government. It gives Andreas Papandreou a priceless asset in his ambition to leave his party as the natural government of Greece.

In this context a key indicator in future politics is likely to be the degree to which the government begins to involve itself in the fate of the Greek minorities in the surrounding countries.[6] The unsatisfactory treatment of the Greek minority in Turkey, for instance, has not generally been taken up as an issue by Athens Governments in recent years, at least in terms of international media projection. The 'ethnic cleansing' of Turkish-governed islands like Imbros has not been highlighted, despite the severe human rights violations suffered by resident Greeks. Until recently, the struggle for human rights for the Greek minority in Albania was largely confined to Vorio Epirot organisations and the Church. It therefore remains to be seen how far the present Government will actually go to defend the minority if the current worsening trend of violations continues.[7]

It also remains to be seen how these tensions and contradictions can be contained by the Greek political elite who are responsible for evolution and implementation of foreign policy. Many outside factors are clearly involved. If, for instance, the Maastricht process falters and the Inter-Governmental Conference that is to be held in 1996 fails to reach agreement on a viable federalist agenda, many problems will be solved for Greek policy-makers. The key issue is likely to be how far the growth of nationalism elsewhere in Europe destroys the ambitions of the integrationalists. If it does so, the strong policy stands taken by recent Greek Governments on nationalist issues will not be out of keeping with what is happening elsewhere in Europe, and Greek-EU differences can probably be contained within manageable limits. But not withstanding this possibility, given the rapid growth of nationalist feeling in most European countries, it is likely that a debate at popular level on the merits of the EU itself will begin in Greece.[8]

In this debate the degree of commitment to the European ideal will be measured not simply in economic terms, but also in terms of cultural identity. An important factor will be the capacity of the Greek Government to overcome the communications and public relations disasters of the past and project internationally, and in a competent way, the legitimate national interests of the Greek

people. It remains to be seen how far the evolution of a new nationalist cultural identity and more active involvements in the Balkan conflicts will prevent effective Greek participation in an integrationalist Europe.

Notes

1 *Athens News,* 30 September 1993.
2 *See,* for example, *The Times* London, Response to the Helsinki Watch report on the Slav—Macedonian issue, 20 August 1994.
3 J. Pettifer, *The Greeks — Land and People since the War,* (London, Viking/Penguin, 1993/94), p. 231 ff.
4 Minority Rights Group Report, *The Southern Balkans,* (London, 1994).
5 The term is still used widely by the Greek media, even in 1994, and on road signs and in public announcements.
6 As far as I am aware, the only recent reportage of this issue has taken place outside Greece. *See,* for instance, *East European Newsletter,* (London, throughout 1993-94).
7 The recent deterioration of Athens-Tirana relations bears this out (November 1994).
8 In terms of the settlement with the Skopje government over the flag and the so-called 'small package' issues in 1995, it is noticeable how irrelevant the EU was to the whole process. The United States' backing of the Greek position led to a major setback for the ambitions of the Gligorov government. In addition, the deal was a particularly serious defeat of German diplomacy.