



The Threat to Greek Democracy

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Everyone knows Europe faces the potential for Greek financial collapse, with serious ramifications for the euro zone and its financial institutions. Less discussed is the Greek impact on another key European institution, the less restrictive border regime instituted under the Schengen Treaty, and the danger of failure of constitutional democracy in an EU member state.

Perhaps the smartest thing modern Greece ever did was join the European Community (now the European Union) in 1981. The Greeks' dumbest move was to join the euro twenty years later. The EU gave their Third World economy a First World lifestyle. This miracle was achieved through massive financial transfers from richer EU members into the modest scale of the Greek economy and by pervasive Greek violations of EU rules and standards. Governments in Athens (of Left and Right) used EU money to buy domestic support through welfare programs worthy of a Persian Gulf emirate. For a generation, this worked just fine. Other European governments saw Greece as an annoyance but not worth the trouble to straighten out.

The easy living was doomed with Greek entry into the Schengen regime at the start of 2000 and into the euro zone the following year. Schengen and the euro are not freebies but serious obligations on their member states. In these European institutions, Greece needed to perform and to contribute, not just to take, and it failed spectacularly at both—with dire consequences for the country itself and for the viability of the European project.

Schengen is a broad program of joint law enforcement with emphasis on protecting Europe's external border from uncontrolled migration and organized crime. At the time, most interior ministries of EU member states opposed Greek admission to Schengen, seeing the country as both unable and unwilling to fulfill the regime's requirements. The political decision in Brussels, however, gave Athens this sop to its pride. Within less than a month, the Italian government publicly demanded an emergency summit to address Greek noncompliance.

Despite some improvements, the basic hole-below-the-waterline of Europe's external frontier has never been repaired. A very senior Greek security official told me privately that Greece would have to close its borders altogether to be compliant with Schengen. Greece is the favored route for myriad economic migrants and, worse, for organized-crime groups from the Balkans, former Soviet states and beyond seeking easy entry into Europe. Today, if the peril of the euro were not so dire, the crisis of the EU would be Schengen, with Greece at the center.

Joining the euro through massive falsification of its public finances was a vanity project for Greece, not a rational economic choice. Given its inherent lack of competitiveness, the last thing Greece needed was to be tied to the monetary policies of advanced European states. Joining Schengen and the euro zone were acts of national pride based on lies, which ultimately exposed how far Greece remained from a genuine European identity. Today, the lifestyle gains of three decades are effectively wiped out, leaving unrelievedly grim prospects for a new generation. Although Greeks abroad prosper, Greece itself is a narrow, provincial and highly protected economy that stifles initiative and encourages young people either to seek public-sector jobs or to go abroad. The economy produces little and exports less. The educational system is a national disgrace, leaving most younger Greeks without decent prospects at home or among the diaspora.

Outsiders accustomed to thinking of Greece as the "birthplace of democracy" need to recognize that constitutional democracy there is barely thirty-five years old and very fragile. Since independence in 1828, Greece has seen a litany of failed attempts at democracy interspersed with various forms of authoritarian rule. Even the infamous military junta of 1967–74 did not initially encounter widespread popular opposition; only the economic incompetence of the colonels destroyed public tolerance for a blatantly undemocratic regime.

The Cost of Democracy

After military control ended, prime minister and later president Constantine Karamanlis orchestrated a triple play: restoration of constitutional democracy, the end of the monarchy and entry into Europe. He achieved EU admission long before Greek institutions met European standards by persuading his European counterparts that only Europe could guarantee the survival of democracy in his country. So it has proven. The only stable constitutional democracy modern Greece has ever known has been its decades within Europe, but it was the prosperity funded by Europe that made it work.

On closer examination, Greek democracy is marked by extraordinary levels of partisanship, by pervasive political patronage and corruption, by political extremes unknown in most EU states and by broad popular alienation from the rule of law (reflected in endemic tax evasion and widespread tolerance of domestic terrorism). The system needed only an economic crisis to expose the shallowness of its democratic integrity.

The recent election was anything but reassuring. First, the participation rate at 62 percent was a postwar low, in a country with legally mandatory voting and turnout usually in the mid-seventies or low eighties. Many citizens did something very un-Greek: they opted out of direct participation in the political process.

Second, a multiparty coalition government was possible only because of a new electoral proviso giving the plurality party a bonus of fifty seats in the three hundred-seat parliament (a measure denounced by many Greeks as disproportional and inherently undemocratic). If the normal seat-distribution system had been in use, even a grand coalition would have lacked a parliamentary majority.

Third, the coalition leadership is same old, same old with a vengeance. The new Center-Right prime minister, Antonis Samaras, is well remembered in Greece as the New Democracy double crosser who brought down his own government in 1992, giving Andreas Papandreou a last turn in power. Samaras's coalition partner, social-democratic PASOK leader Evangelos Venizelos, is the lawyer who got Papandreou acquitted in a corruption case back in 1989. Both are old-style, inbred, clan politicians widely viewed as incapable of rising above narrow partisanship. Their "program" is to attempt to con Europe yet again. The only senior figure in Athens really respected in Brussels, former finance minister George Papaconstantinou, has no role in the new administration.

A History of Radicalism

The alternatives to the present coalition are even worse, with the supposedly new generation of Greek politics represented by Alexis Tsipras of the SYRIZA party, who got his start in the Stalinist Communist Party but then smartly moved on to the Trotskyite Synaspismos. His combination of economic populism, political xenophobia and contempt for democratic values is reminiscent of Andreas Papandreou in his early years but without the latter's advanced education, international exposure and willingness to make deals. The radical Left has moved rapidly to near-majority status in a political culture bereft of the talents for accepting responsibility or making compromises.

Greek politics shift easily from the ballot box to the streets. The society is broadly accommodating of violence in political causes and shows little support for the forces of public order. The Greek police have much better professional skills than even ten years ago but are a very thin screen between constitutional government and anarchy. Tsipras pledged to eliminate the country's overworked riot police altogether, while many of the police reportedly voted for the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn party. The political violence of recent years has gone largely unreported outside of Greece but, if past is prologue, it will increase in scale and lethality.

The threat to democracy in Greece today comes from the Left rather than the Right. The opprobrium which the military still carries from the junta should be sufficient to discourage a uniformed intrusion into politics. However, the youthful anarchism growing on the Left is hardly discouraged at all—quite the contrary. As prospects for a better life have disappeared, as resort to the ballot box yields ever less in terms of national leadership and as Europe turns its back on its prodigal protégé, the Balkan/Levantine quality of Greek political culture is coming to the fore.

The gap in political culture between Greece and Europe is now a chasm. As an Athens commentator recently pointed out, a subsidiary definition in every major European language for the word "Greek" is "cheat." While European distrust of the "birthplace of democracy" is old, it is now deeply reinforced by the litany of Greek lies of the past decade. Nobody in Europe believes anything coming out of Athens, as European policy makers focus on saving their own financial institutions. Nobody in Athens will commit political suicide by accepting anything coming from Brussels. Thus, there is an impasse.

In most of continental Europe, democracy enjoys popular support for what it delivers—peace, prosperity, security, welfare—rather than for its own sake. In hard times, democratic norms are sorely tested; Hungary, for example, is a very worrisome case. But Greece remains the most extreme and fragile case. Constitutional democracy there could fail, something which in the long view of history might be much more costly to the European project than bond defaults and devaluations. As the Russian experience after 1998 showed, money can be recreated relatively rapidly—but democracy does not return so easily.