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The key argument of this paper is that Greece's crisis (and Europe's) has been mainly – *but certainly not exclusively* – economic in nature, but that its geopolitical dimensions should not have been underestimated, as was the case inside the EU. Had Greece being forced to leave the eurozone (it may still be forced to in the future, though the risk is much lower today it is still on the radar screen), the economic and political impact for the euro and the EU would have been, according to many experts, substantial. In addition, it will be argued, there would have been severe repercussions for regional stability in southeastern Europe and the eastern Mediterranean, as well as the ability of the EU and NATO to play meaningful roles in those regions.

It can also be argued that almost completely ignoring the geopolitical consequences of the Greek and Cypriot crises has been yet another symptom of the European foreign policy malaise and that Europe's management of the Ukraine crisis also revealed some fundamental weaknesses and a certain lack of geopolitical reflexes. Europe faces the risk of sliding into strategic insignificance, losing much of its global role and influence as it is becoming more and more introverted as a result of its own economic and political crisis, as well as because of the lack of leadership and the inefficient decision-making system.

The greek crisis and Greece's geopolitical importance for the EU

In the maelstrom of the European economic crisis, the geopolitical consequences of Greece's weakening and (at least theoretically) possible collapse have been largely ignored by decision-makers and analysts. The Greek economic, political and social crisis was caused by incompetent and/or corrupt political leadership, lack of fiscal frugality and the low productivity and competitiveness of its economy in combination with insufficient reforms and limited success of modernisation efforts, as well as a consumerist mentality of significant segments of its population. Of course, the situation deteriorated significantly also because of extremely poor management of the crisis at European Union level, which failed to convince the international

markets that it was capable of solving the problem. Furthermore, the imposed austerity programmes designed by “apprentice sorcerers” that proved to be either ideologically inflexible or simply too stubborn to recognise their initial miscalculations, led to a deeper recession that pushed Greece closer to the edge of the abyss, with potentially extremely negative consequences for the rest of the eurozone. Limited experience in saving a member state of the eurozone may be part of the explanation; on the other hand, the inability to bail out a country of Greece’s economic size is not very flattering for the world’s largest economic area. Indeed, “it takes two to tango”, but a minimal knowledge of the steps and a degree of synchronisation between the partners is essential. In the management of the eurozone crisis, the rules of the game were not very clear, and neither was the synchronisation of the players anywhere near the required level. The Greek crisis will probably be taught at academic institutions as a case study of extremely amateurish crisis management by both Greek and European authorities.

In this context, no effort is being made in this paper to absolve Greece of its substantial responsibility. The question, however, is increasingly being asked in various circles of whether the policy of “punishment” and of “making an example” of Greece is a wise choice for the EU. Indeed, it can be argued quite convincingly that this approach is proving to be counter-productive for the EU as a whole, and for its individual members, including Germany, as it has contributed to the weakening of other eurozone members, such as Portugal, Spain and Italy, and has fuelled scenarios about the collapse of the eurozone itself. Furthermore, such one-dimensional austerity programmes and “country demonisation” approaches ignore the wider issue of the eurozone’s structural and institutional weaknesses, which lie at the core of this crisis.

Given the extremely unstable and fluid situation on Europe’s periphery, including the Arab uprisings, the tension with Iran, the uncertainties regarding EU-Turkish relations and the direction of Russian foreign policy in the new Putin era, can Europe afford the creation of a security vacuum and a “black hole” in this critical region? Even if the EU could live with Greece’s economic collapse (although even that hypothesis is challenged by experts, not because of the size of the Greek economy but due to the highly symbolic, but very tangible damage to the eurozone’s credibility and the possibility of contagion), one should ask whether a country with Greece’s geopolitical location and its “privileged relationship” with countries such as Russia, Israel, much of the Arab world, and even Iran, would constitute an acceptable loss for an EU with any ambitions to play a meaningful global and regional role.¹

Allowing Greece to become a weak or even a semi-failed state would have an impact well beyond its immediate borders. Under current circumstances, Greece could be defined as a pivotal state.² On the other hand, Greece is – or has the potential to become once more – quite a useful player in a number of foreign and security policy areas, including the management of migration/refugee flows, EU relations with Turkey, the Cyprus problem, EU enlargement in the western Balkans, EU and NATO policies in the eastern Mediterranean, and European energy security. On all these issues, the ability of Greece to make a positive contribution should no longer be taken for granted. It might be useful at this point to look briefly at the basic premises and priorities as well as the impact of the crisis on Greek foreign policy.

1. For a more detailed discussion, see Thanos Dokos, “Who Lost Greece: the Geopolitical Consequences of the Greek Crisis”, *ELIAMEP Policy Papers*, no. 18, February 2012 (<http://www.eliamep.gr/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/dokos.pdf>).

2. A pivotal state is defined as a state whose fate is critical for regional and international stability, which is geostrategically important for the US and its allies, that has an uncertain future, and that has the potential to have a significant beneficial or harmful effect on its region (Robert Chase, Emily Hill, Paul Kennedy [eds], *The Pivotal States*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 1999, pp. 6-7).

Even before the current crisis, Greece has consistently punched below its weight on most foreign and security policy issues, allowing itself to lose some of its regional role in southeastern Europe and letting its active role inside the European Union atrophy. An inward-looking and passive foreign policy mentality has led to very few foreign policy initiatives and no exploitation of opportunities for multilateral initiatives or the establishment of tactical and strategic alliances. Concerns about economic survival overshadowed the importance of foreign policy issues during the past five years. Now Greek foreign policy needs to readjust to a changing regional and global security and economic environment and make a contribution to the national effort to rebuild the economy, and it has to achieve that goal with limited resources and under time pressure.

A preliminary assessment of the impact of the crisis on Greek foreign policy would conclude that the country's image, prestige and credibility have been dealt a serious blow and its influence both inside the EU but also in its neighbourhood has been negatively affected. The economic means available for conducting foreign policy have been substantially curtailed. The decision has been taken to significantly reduce defence expenditure and, in this context, Greece's participation in international peacekeeping and other operations (ISAF/Afghanistan, KFOR/Kosovo, Active Endeavour and Operation Ocean Shield (the naval operation to combat piracy in the Red Sea) has already been trimmed down. However, Greek facilities are still being offered for use in NATO (and US) operations in the eastern Mediterranean, although the benefits of Greek membership are suboptimal for both the country and the alliance. Perhaps the only positive foreign policy development in the last few years has been the cultivation of strategic ties with Israel and the realistic prospects of a more visible footprint for Greece on the regional energy map.

Greece's – temporarily – limited foreign policy capabilities and regional role should not be confused with the country's geostrategic value. On the contrary, it can be argued that Greece remains important to the West's (and especially Europe's) geopolitical interests for four main reasons:

Stability in the western Balkans

Either as a party to a dispute, or as balancing actor between Albanian and Slavic populations in the western Balkans, Greece can still play an important stabilising role in the region. Key issues include Greece's dispute with the FYROM about the issue of its name, the recognition of Kosovo and the future role of the so-called Albanian factor in southeastern Europe. Because of its "special" – but also often complicated – relations with several candidate countries, including Serbia, Albania and FYROM (and to some extent Kosovo), Greece can also be instrumental in facilitating EU enlargement in the western Balkans. Greece's long history of bilateral political and economic relations with those countries, its familiarity with their way of thinking and its own experience of the challenges and difficulties of integration into the EU could significantly facilitate negotiation and integration processes for the countries of the western Balkans.

As mentioned in another part of the paper, the refugee/migration issue is becoming a central concern for a number of Balkan countries because of the key role played by the “western Balkan corridor” most refugees/migrants use to reach their intended final destinations in central and western Europe. The closing of the borders would cause considerable tensions between those countries (with Greece in the most disadvantageous position) and cooperation would be necessary for the successful management of the problem. Radicalisation problems and the return of jihadist fighters in countries like Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo and Albania and the threat of terrorism in the region is another challenge for the EU and Greece could and should spearhead an effort for the coordination of law enforcement and intelligence agencies in the Balkans.

European energy security

The question of European energy security has brought attention to the strategic significance of southeastern Europe and the eastern Mediterranean as a transport hub for natural gas and a key region for that security. To meet increasing natural gas demand and reduce high levels of energy dependency on Russia, European authorities need to promote the implementation of projects contributing to the diversification of natural gas supply. In this context, the Southern Gas Corridor can play an important role. As the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) – which will be crossing Greece and Albania on its way to Italy – was selected for the transportation of natural gas from Azerbaijan, it will provide a boost for Greece’s economy and regional role, as well as for regional cooperation in the Balkans (through vertical interconnectors) and European energy security.

In addition, Greece should be expected to try to enlarge its footprint on the energy map through the exploitation of potential hydrocarbon deposits in various parts of the country, notably western Greece and the maritime areas south of Crete, as well as increasing participation in energy cooperation schemes in the eastern Mediterranean involving Cyprus and Israel. The East Med Gas Corridor, involving Greece, Cyprus, Israel and, perhaps, Lebanon, is another interesting idea if additional deposits are discovered. Even Turkey could be included in the future, if it were to adopt a more constructive approach to the Cyprus problem. Although current discoveries (even if Egypt’s Zohr field is included) would not constitute a game changer, they could certainly make a welcome contribution to Europe’s energy security at a time when the EU is trying to diversify its energy suppliers (especially those of natural gas).

c) The eastern Mediterranean conundrum

The eastern Mediterranean and its adjoining regions remain an extremely turbulent and unstable neighbourhood. In addition to the brutal civil war in Syria with potentially destructive consequences for the whole region, there is considerable uncertainty about future developments regarding, among others, the emergence of Daesh (ISIS), the conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen, the political situation in Egypt, the Palestinian problem, the regional implications of a change in the relationship between Iran and the West, the Cyprus problem, Turkey’s often unpredictable foreign

policy and the discovery of potentially substantial hydrocarbon deposits in the eastern Mediterranean.

Successive Greek governments have also invested in building a strategic relationship with Israel, motivated by Athens' urgent need to reacquire a role in its southern neighbourhood, boost Greece's strategic value and seek a range of potential benefits (bilateral cooperation in the energy, economic, defence/security and tourism sectors, as well as support from the Jewish lobby, which is perceived as fairly influential not only in the US Congress but also on Wall Street). At the same time, Greece has maintained its very good relations with the Palestinians and could offer its services in the context of future Palestinian-Israeli peace negotiations.

The understandable reluctance of the US and EU to participate in a military intervention in Syria and the more general trend for an increased US presence ("pivot") in the Asia-Pacific region make the need for active regional partners and allies in the eastern Mediterranean even more crucial. In view of the inherent limitations of Turkish-Israeli rapprochement (also as a result of Turkey's own regional ambitions), the US needs additional partners that would also be interlocutors acceptable to the parties involved in various regional conflicts. In addition to its geostrategic location and the facilities offered (especially Souda Bay, arguably the most important – and reliable – Allied military facility in the eastern Mediterranean), Greece, a traditional US ally, has what could be described as a privileged relationship (to varying degrees) with Israel, the Arab world, Iran and, as already mentioned, Russia and China, and could play, under specific circumstances, the role of a complementary bridge, in addition to being a reliable regional partner for the West. In this context, triangular cooperation schemes in the security, energy and economic sectors between Greece, Cyprus and Israel, and Greece, Cyprus and Egypt may be helpful in boosting sub-regional cooperation in the eastern Mediterranean and bringing those countries closer to the EU. But, of course, all this presupposes that Greece would be willing and able to successfully implement a more active and effective foreign policy.

The issue of refugee and migration flows

Already touched upon in the Balkan context, this will be discussed in greater detail below.

Relations between Greece and Russia in the context of the Greek crisis

The Syriza government, like its predecessors, appeared intent on trying to improve bilateral relations with Russia. Its contacts with Moscow have been a source of concern in some European capitals and in Washington, but have also provoked lively public debate in Athens. Had relations between Russia and the EU not deteriorated so much over the two years, the prime minister Alexis Tsipras' trip to Moscow in early April 2015 would have been a mere footnote to EU developments.

It should be mentioned that the Tsipras government was (and largely still is) strongly ideological, inexperienced and lacks a sound understanding of

how the EU functions. Frustration was strong as a result of several years of austerity that failed to lead the country back to the road of economic growth. At some point there was a public debate about the possibility of a shift in Greece's geostrategic orientation towards Russia and although few people meant it seriously, there was an effort to use the threat of such a geostrategic repositioning to put pressure on Greece's partners to get a more balanced agreement.

The effort was poorly planned, insufficiently credible and ultimately unsuccessful. It quickly became clear that such an improvement in relations with Russia (or China) could not and would not take place at the expense of Greece's other commitments vis-à-vis its Western partners and allies. Speculation that Russia might become an alternative source of funding proved groundless as Russia was both unwilling and incapable of providing financial assistance on the necessary scale. Nor should the idea of Greece's participation in the BRICS bank be taken seriously. As long as Greece remains a full member of European and transatlantic institutions, the likelihood of Greece falling into Russia's orbit, or any other fundamental shift in its strategic orientation is nil, despite Greece's widespread (justified or not) feelings of bitterness.

It was also rather unlikely from the very beginning that Athens alone would break the common European front on Russia, although it joined other like-minded countries such as Germany, Italy and France in opposing additional sanctions. Greece believes that though Russia may be a difficult neighbour for Europe, it is nevertheless an essential element of the European security architecture. Athens perceives sanctions as having a high cost for several European countries, Greece included, and as being ineffective in bringing about a change in Russian policies. Unless Russia escalates the situation in Ukraine, Greece and several other EU member states will continue to be opposed to additional sanctions. The Greek position is that it is of vital importance that Europe should avoid unnecessary confrontation and rivalry with Russia as that could well consume a significant amount of the EU's very finite foreign policy and security resources. Athens sees a combined policy of deterrence and engagement, with much emphasis on the latter, as the central element of EU policy towards Moscow.

Despite an obvious degree of hyperbole regarding Greece's relationship with Russia, it would have been difficult for any Greek government to ignore the historical ties, and most importantly, the contemporary links between the two countries. Russia supplies 57% of Greece's natural gas, is an important trade partner and potential investor and provides political support to Cyprus in the UN Security Council. Ukraine is also significant partner, and there is a Greek minority in the country. A diplomatic solution to the Ukraine crisis remains a Greek priority, and there is a remote but unavoidable similarity between the situation in Crimea and the Turkish occupation of northern Cyprus.

Energy is a field of potential cooperation between Athens and Moscow. Greece is not, in principle, opposed to the idea of the Russian-proposed "Turkish-Greek Stream", which will replace existing pipelines through Ukraine to bring Russian gas to central Europe via Greece and the Balkans. Theoretically, such a pipeline would have a neutral impact on European energy security and obvious economic and political benefits for

Greece. There are, however, serious obstacles, such as the legal dispute between the European Commission and Gazprom and, more importantly, the current state of EU-Russia relations.

Lastly, the hope in Athens has been that a balanced development of Greek-Russian relations might allow Greece to become a complementary “bridge” between the West and Russia, contributing quietly to the normalisation of relations and the development of a functional strategic and security partnership between Europe and Russia. With the passage of time, the Syriza government is becoming more pragmatic, especially regarding its foreign policy. Russia is still part of the foreign policy picture but no longer at the centre of it. Interestingly, Greece has lately been playing the American card and although the effort started with earlier governments, the emphasis and priority given to the US by the current Greek government is not something one would have expected from Syriza.

The refugee/migration crisis and the growing lack of trust in European processes and institutions

The management of migration and refugee flows from the Middle East, Asia and Africa remains an issue with important external and internal dimensions for several EU countries. However much one tries to desecuritize the migration question, relations between Europe and the Middle East or the West and Islam will also affect domestic stability in European countries with a substantial Muslim community. Greece is located at the EU's most sensitive external border (in fact, playing the role of a “buffer country” or “first line of defence” for Europe) in the context of immigration. A substantial percentage of illegal immigrants entering the EU area each year do so through Greece and were, until recently, forced to remain there, according to the provisions of the clearly outdated Dublin II Agreement. Greece has been trying to deal with the problem through a package of measures including a more efficient asylum mechanism, more reception and detention facilities, employment of FRONTEX assets in the Aegean and its land border with Turkey, as well as the construction of a security fence in a 12.5km-long section of that border. EU support for securing the cooperation of Turkey, as well as the main countries of origin to increase the numbers of migrants repatriated would be instrumental for the management of migration flows.

Although as yet there is no concrete proof of any links between refugee/migration flows and jihadist terrorism (even after the terrorists attacks in Paris in November 2015, as the majority of attackers were not refugees/immigrants but “homegrown terrorists”), the radicalisation of societies in the Muslim world and similar developments in Muslim communities residing in European countries may constitute reasons for future concern. Additionally, the fact that 55 out of 58 attackers in Cologne were not refugees but immigrants living in Germany for some time illustrates the limited success of integration policies.

The evolving refugee/migration crisis is another example of the growing lack of trust in European institutions and processes on the Greek side. In this case, Greece is not too far from adopting a siege mentality. Chancellor Merkel's decision to open Germany's doors to refugees was commendable but extremely hard to implement because of the sheer

numbers involved. In combination with the terrorists attacks in Paris in November 2015 and with pre-existing sentiments of islamophobia in European societies reinforced by the Cologne sexual attacks, this policy gradually began to cause strongly negative reactions to Europe's response to the migration crisis. Disagreements were especially pronounced in some of the eastern European countries who challenged the decisions of the European Council to bring in burden-sharing in the reallocation of refugees arriving in Italy and Greece. Leaders in some of those countries conveniently forgot that western Europe did not close its borders in 1956 or 1968.

Because of negative reactions inside Germany, even from Mrs Merkel's own party, and in some of the key countries of choice for the refugees, the mood inside the EU in the past few weeks has shifted from trying to find a European solution to the problem to one of seeking a scapegoat. The convenient target under the circumstances has been Greece, the country where the great majority of refugees/migrants has been arriving. After a number of countries closed their borders, a few days ago the European Commission sent a warning to Greece to address a number of problems in its refugee registration system or face the risk of temporary (?) exclusion from the Schengen Agreement.

There is no doubt that there have been delays and omissions on the Greek side, caused by the large number of arrivals, the lack of sufficient personnel and equipment, as well as the economic crisis and the weakness of Greek public administration. But there is also a significant lack of trust on the side of Greece due to the fact that despite a pledge to relocate 160,000 refugees in other EU countries only a few hundred have actually been transferred, which is a major source of concern.

Furthermore, it can be rather convincingly argued that it wasn't Greek policies that caused the conflicts in Syria, Libya or a number of other regional hotspots. Instead, in many cases the policy choices of a number of countries, including some EU member states, contributed to the deterioration of the security situation and led to an increase in the flow of refugees from those countries. Nor does Greece have a colonial past and related grievances against it. But the blame game leads nowhere. The priority should be to dissipate dangerous myths and present realistic policy recommendations for resolving problems.

Greece argues that European policies should be based on the following assumptions: (a) the preservation of Schengen, without unjustifiably and unfairly sacrificing any of its members, is very important; (b) we need to deal with jihadist terrorism and radicalisation in our societies; and (c) Europe has a moral duty to offer asylum to a substantial number of refugees. Unlimited access, however, is not an option, as the EU's absorption capacity is finite.

Greece should fulfil its commitments regarding hotspots and the full registration of all incoming refugees and migrants – with the provision of European economic support as well as manpower and equipment. At the same time, it should be crystal clear to all that maritime borders cannot be fully protected without cooperation from neighbours or without the use of force. "Push back" policies applied to small rubber boats filled well beyond capacity will only result in substantially

increasing the number of people – mostly women and children – drowning in the Aegean. Such policies would be both inhumane and illegal under international law. Greece cannot become a prison for several hundred thousands of irregular migrants, as recently suggested by a senior official from a founding member of the EU. The political, economic, security and, last but not least, human and moral costs involved would be enormous.

The challenges and the possible “tools” for Greek foreign policy

Greece’s economic survival has for more than six years overshadowed its foreign policy interests. Public debate is still haunted by the remote but not fictional prospect of a “Grexit”, in the context of either the economic or the refugee/migration crisis. But, on paper at least, Greek foreign policy appears much more ambitious. Greek foreign policy makers will function for the foreseeable future under the sword of Damocles of the country’s economic crisis, which is imposing a number of constraints and limitations.

As key organisations such as the EU and NATO are changing in an effort to adapt to new global and regional trends, Greece needs to find its own niche in the distribution of regional roles and influence and convince its partners and allies of its own added value in managing common security challenges. A difficult task indeed for a country with limited resources, but the alternative is strategic irrelevance and inability to protect its vital national interests. Out of necessity, the key concept for Greek foreign and security policy in the foreseeable future will be the smart use of its resources with a focus on becoming more active inside the EU and NATO, enlarging its footprint on the energy map, strengthening relations with emerging non-Western powers, enhancing regional partnerships, and regaining its role and influence in southeastern Europe and the eastern Mediterranean.

The best option – as it could have a multiplier effect – would be Greece’s active participation in shaping the new EU and transatlantic regional policies, without, however, ignoring the need for national initiatives and the further multilateralisation of Greece’s foreign policy. Furthermore, to facilitate the achievement of those priority tasks, a number of structural reforms of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the wider foreign policy mechanism will be necessary (with a greater emphasis on economic/energy diplomacy); in addition, a number of important changes in the sphere of national security policy (security sector reform and “smart defence” to maintain its deterrent capability at lower levels of defence expenditures) will be required.

Greece and the EU today: some concluding remarks

In the maelstrom of the European economic crisis, the geopolitical consequences of Greece’s weakening and – at least theoretical – possible collapse have been largely ignored for too long by analysts and decision-makers both at the EU level and in various European capitals. But it was also, quite interestingly, in Greece itself, where the issue

was not raised at the early stages of the crisis and Greek governments failed to convey the message to their European counterparts.

The contagion effect of the Greek crisis for other southern European economies which was quite high at the peak of the Greek crisis was one of the factors that prevented a Grexit. The contagion effect has now been significantly reduced – although not yet eliminated. However, Europe has to manage another major crisis, as the Schengen Agreement – one of Europe’s most tangible and widely recognisable achievements – is now faced with considerable, even existential, challenges. The limited enthusiasm of most EU states, with the notable exceptions of Germany and Sweden (although the former already finds itself under tremendous pressure because of the large numbers of asylum seekers), to undertake any meaningful commitments in the context of a burden-sharing agreement promoted by the European Commission, is once more testing the concept of a border-free Europe, the limits of European solidarity and the idea of common European policies.

In conclusion, the European Union is currently being faced with substantial internal and external challenges at a time of rapid and profound global changes. If it wishes to remain an important regional and global actor, it urgently needs to realistically define its strategic ambitions and reform some of the relevant institutions along the lines described above. It also needs to acquire a critical mass of decision-makers with crisis management experience and long-term strategic vision.

Europe faces the risk of sliding into strategic insignificance, losing its global role and influence as it becomes more and more introverted as a result of its own economic and political crisis, its lack of leadership and inefficient decision-making system. Almost completely ignoring the geopolitical consequences of the Greek, but also the Cypriot, crises has been yet another symptom of the European foreign policy malaise. It can be argued that Europe’s management of the Ukraine crisis also revealed some fundamental weaknesses and a certain lack of geopolitical reflexes. When dealing at EU level with various crises with an obvious geopolitical dimension, a change of mentality is needed from accounting and “bean-counting” to a more comprehensive and multi-dimensional approach (it should also be mentioned that the economic and social dimensions may also be ignored or underestimated in other cases with a strong geopolitical dimension).

Regarding its policies vis-à-vis Greece, the EU should be looking for a highly pragmatic policy which would be reasonably effective in achieving Europe’s geopolitical and geo-economic objectives and promoting its interests. What is needed is a policy that goes beyond “bean-counting” and tackles the Greek problem in the context of the EU’s regional and global role, not merely its economic policies (however important these may be). In this context, a “new Greece” could certainly be a useful partner for the EU, but also for the US and NATO, in regions of critical importance for European and transatlantic security and interests. Of course, Greece’s political leadership should step up to the challenge and take advantage of opportunities through a foreign policy whose key features will be credibility and reliability at the strategic level and flexibility at the tactical level. It should be noted, however, that a European failure to agree on common policies on the refugee/migration

crisis risks causing a humanitarian crisis in Greece, a new wave of isolationism in that country, and substantial damage to the idea of common European policies.

References

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