

# **Representing Greece in Brussels: explaining issues of national fragmentation and malfunctioning**

**Vasilis Margaras**

**Loughborough University**

## **Abstract**

In the past the author has worked with British MEPs (European Parliamentary Labour Party) and has been in touch with UKREP representatives. The clash between the different countries-Greece and the UK in particular, were the first stimulus in writing this paper. The paper deals with the issue of Greek national representation at the EU level. It is argued that although Greece has been an EU member since 1981 it still has not managed to set up a cohesive network of representation. Much of the failure is inherent in the weaknesses of civil service bureaucracy at the national level. Problems emerge from the very nature of the Greek state as well as from the failure of the political elites to address new challenges in an imaginative way.

---

Vasilis Margaras  
Dept of Politics, International Relations  
and European Studies (PIRES)  
Loughborough University  
Leicestershire  
LE11 3TU  
Email: [V.Margaras@lboro.ac.uk](mailto:V.Margaras@lboro.ac.uk)

## Introduction

National representation in Brussels is based on a national pattern of administration that one needs to study in order to understand the main issues and problems. Therefore, the paper begins with a short introduction of the Greek administrative system. Examples are provided from the main agents which are in charge of representing Greece in Brussels such as the COREPER, mission, the Greek MEPs at the European Parliament, the representation in the Committee of the Regions and the Greek Presidencies of the EU. The aim of the paper is not to give a long account of each body's weaknesses and strengths but rather to summarise some common issues and problems that emerge from representing Greece in the EU.

One has to go back to history in order to understand the problematic process of Greek 'Europeanisation'. Greek accession to the EC was decided without a broad consensus as there was a strong divergence on the issue between the two main political parties- New Democracy (Conservatives) and PASOK (Socialists). Greece became an EC member in 1981 and got its first socialist government at the same year. The Socialists got into power with an ambivalent position on the EC. On the other hand, the decision to allow Greece to enter the EC was a highly political decision without a long accession period as it was the case of the next Mediterranean enlargement. Greece therefore had entered the club of the rich western nations but there was very little it could get out of it in terms of benefits. One might argue that neither Greece was ready for EC membership at that time but nor was the EC ready for Greece. The absence of a detailed transition process left the Greek administration intact and ill equipped to deal with the outcomes of EC accession.

A good description of the problematic nature of the Greek administration is provided by Spanou who suggests that: 'the Greek administrative system is characterised by a set of parameters: sectorization and fragmentation, low co-ordination, centralization and hierarchical structure, importance of informal networks and personal strategies, as well as weak institutionalisation of horizontal and staff functions.'<sup>1</sup> Problems of dealing with the fragmented nature of the system are evident when decisions need to be taken at a quicker pace. A lack of real priorities as well as the lack of clear plan of modernising administration have lead to many problems of functioning which have a direct impact on dealing with Europe and representing Greece at the EU level.

Therefore, the Greek administration remained very much an observer of the Greek-EU ambivalent relationship in the 1980s. However, the 1990s can be characterised by a process of slow administrative Europeanisation and modernisation. Part of the Europeanisation process can be attributed to pressures from the EU and new policy challenges. In the 1990s the majority of the Greek political elites supported the process of administrative modernisation but did not push it far enough. Changes took

---

<sup>1</sup> Spanou, C., 2001. Permanent Challenges? Representing Greece in Brussels in *The National coordination of EU Policy*, H. Kassim & A. Menon, Oxford University Press and also Spanou C., 1998, "European integration in administrative terms: a framework for analysis and the Greek case", *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol.3, no.3, pp 467-484

place at a slow pace and the administrative mechanism remained entrapped in anachronistic practises. This influences the way Greece is represented in Brussels.

### **Representing Greece: main agents of representation**

One of the most important agents of representation is the Permanent Representation in the Council. In order to function successfully the Greek representation needs to be a well organised and powerful institution in order to promote the national interest. However, by examining the structure of representing Greek interests in Brussels one can tell a very different story.

The Greek Representation in the Council lacks the so-needed institutional autonomy. Political networks of influence still play a vital role in the process of promoting employees and policies. Therefore the role of the Representation as an independent agent which provides impartial advice is undermined by the growing level of politicisation and partitocracy. Although diplomats are regarded as permanent employees they cannot promote a party-independent policy neither can they challenge the political leadership when they think that issues are not dealt with successfully.

Unfortunately, in order to deal with the growing needs of representation in Brussels the Greek administration has dealt with its usual way: expanding by increasing the numbers of bureaucrats. The large number of people working in the permanent representation has not render it into a successful one. Expansion is ideal when it deals with the real needs and challenges. However, the increase in the number of employees has not led to a qualitative increase in expertise. Kassim and Peters mention the quality of the staff of permanent missions by suggesting that: ‘incumbents are typically high-fliers with distinguished records of service – Greece, apparently, is an exception – or exceptional negotiating skills.’<sup>2</sup> In addition, the apparatus is slow in dealing with issues and slow when it needs to get mobilised. Due to internal weaknesses, the Greek Representation in Brussels misses the chance of influencing the process from the very beginning. This is also the case in the Committee of the Regions and the European Parliament. Mobilising at a late stage is not a successful strategy as many issues are considered as a ‘fait accompli’ and even when other countries recognize that Greeks are right in wanting a new compromise they do not want to start the process from the very beginning as they consider it a waste of time.

Experience and specialization are usually required by some of the most successful missions in Brussels such as UKREP. However, contrary to the practises of other nation states experience is not ranked highly and there is a lack of linking staff experience to the real needs of Greece. As Spanou comments: ‘no previous experience or familiarity with the EU decision-making is required for secondment by sectoral ministries. Moreover, it is far from guaranteed that the expertise they have acquired will be used upon return. On the contrary, they may receive any position or even be intentionally marginalized in the service since their appointment to Brussels

---

<sup>2</sup> Kassim, H. and Guy Peters, B., 2001. Co-ordinating National Action in Brussels – a Comparative Perspective in H. Kassim and A. Menon (eds), *The National Co-ordination of EU policy*, Oxford University Press

is seen as an envied privilege<sup>3</sup>. In addition, Spanou suggests that the permanent representation does not receive the necessary support from the centre; there is a wide scope for personal interpretation and handling of the situation, but also the possibility for mistakes or miscalculations.<sup>4</sup> The consequences of the lack of technical expertise and lack of national support lead to weak representation at the Council.

UKREP has a very dense network of personal and institutional contacts. Contacts are a vital tool of policy influence for UK MEPs and for the Representatives of the Committee of the Regions. Contacts with Greek nationals working in the Commission, COREPER and the Parliament are usually good but rather patchy. There is a Greek community of Brussels elites that is based on mutual help and there is a lot of understanding between different departments. However, the relationship is not institutionalised and is based on the good will of the employees. The relationship between Greek COREPER Representatives and the Parliament was a problematic one but it is improving as the Parliament is becoming more of an important policy-making actor. However, there is still not a strong network of communication with the Greek civil society, no strong links with NGOs and very limited help and consultation with local government. Other national missions are boastful when it comes to the network of connections they have with their national demos. A good connection with the public can be used in order to legitimise a policy and promote it further. In addition, it puts pressure on national policy makers to adopt more up to date realistic policies and less visionary ones. The Greek Permanent Representation occupies a leading position in shaping the national stance and sometimes even deciding what the national interest is. The Greek MEPs have also a wide margin of manoeuvre when it comes to voting. However, this can lead to outcomes that cannot be implemented nationally thus leading to a Europeanisation in paper. As Hibou suggests: 'the tiny government elite that negotiates in Brussels is considerably out of touch with the population as well as the huge body of civil servants in charge of putting guidelines into practice within the administration'.<sup>5</sup>

The current system of representation is also characterized by the weakness to construct efficient networks with other important internal and external players. The network of country allies is mostly limited to grouping with the southern European countries. However due to the process of enlargement, a 'Club Med' alliance will not be as powerful as it was before and Greece has to make steps in order to find allies amongst the new Eastern nations. Even as part of the Mediterranean bloc Greece has not promoted the high level of elite interaction that other alliances have (e.g. the Northern dimension).

There are limited contacts between the national ministries and the Representation in Brussels and information sharing between the Permanent Representation and the national ministries is not the best possible. In the case of the Greek MEPS relations

---

<sup>3</sup> Spanou, C., 2001. Permanent Challenges? Representing Greece in Brussels in *The National coordination of EU Policy*, H. Kassim & A. Menon, Oxford University Press

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Hibou, B., 2005. Greece and Portugal: Convergent or Divergent Europeanization? In Simon Bulmer and Christian Lequesne (eds), *the Member States of the European Union*, Oxford University Press, pp. 229-253

are even more problematic. The Greeks working for the Commission have a more updated view of Greek Ministry workings due to the very nature of their every day work. However, the issue of connecting Europe with the public is a problem in many cases. For instance, in the case of the Commission the interaction between the Commission and civic society is restricted and not helped by the neither the Commission/ European Parliament representation in Athens. In the case of the European Parliament there is no link between the MEPs and the Greek constituencies. The UK selects its MEPs in nine big constituencies. Therefore, UK MEPs have to be accountable to their electoral communities. This is not the case in Greece where parties impose name lists for the whole Greek entity. There is no real contact between Brussels and the periphery and most of political communication takes place between Athens and Brussels. At the European Parliament there is a good presence and involvement of Greek MEPs but there is very little continuity-as most of the MEPs are replaced with the new ones which are 'EU inexperienced'. The Greek MEPs have not yet managed to have the national interest approach of the French MEPs where a government position constitutes automatically a national interest. On the contrary there is still a high amount of rivalry with MEPs of the Conservative opposition trying to score good points by undermining the former national socialist government.

When it comes to representation the centralized nature of the Greek state makes things even more difficult. A new decentralisation plan divided Greece into 13 administrative regions. In addition a new local government plan (the Kapodistrias plan) has dealt with the issue of forming larger municipalities which will be able to deal with wider issues including European issues such as Community directives. All the above have been all positive steps towards a stronger local society and a regionalisation of Greek politics. However, they are not sufficient to deal with the new European challenges. Local governments and prefectures are weak when it comes to financial support and real powers. Greek regions lack the strong powers of German or even Spanish Regions. A new framework that will connect the local demos with the European polity is therefore necessary. The weaknesses of the Greek regions are evident when it comes to representing Greek regions in the Committee of the Regions. Greek Regions seem to be the poor relative, lacking financial and other instrumental tools which are necessary in order to influence decisions. Many European Regions have permanent offices in Brussels that are used as constant information gatherers and policy promoters as well as promoters of the Region in touristic and development terms. This is not the case with the Greek Regions.

Decentralisation has been part of the Socialist modernisation agenda. However, although important steps were made the modernisation did not lead to radical changes of institutional practises. One can suggest that there is a gap of discourse on change and real practises. In addition the modernisation agenda was of a limited nature. As Kazakos suggests: 'stabilisation and structural reform were therefore confined to the margins of domestic power balances, core-political practises and politico-administrative structures.'<sup>6</sup> Indeed it seemed that the progressive forces in Greek politics managed to unite the Greek people under a common scope: monetary unification. The path to European unification, gave a common vision to the majority

---

<sup>6</sup> Kazakos Panos, 2004. Europeanisation, Public goals and Group interests: convergence Policy in Greece, 1990-2003, West European Politics, vol.27, No.5, pp.901-918

of Greek people. Modernisation and Europeanisation become part of the everyday political discourse and filled a vacuum in the search of a new identity for the nation. However, too much emphasis was put on the EMU and the economy with less energy and effort directed towards the social and administrative field. As a result of the complete dedication to the Maastricht criteria and the question of Monetary Union the detailed debate on how administration should function in the future was sidelined. Europeanisation therefore can be seen as a limited process that took place at a technocratic and elitist level and not diffused at the bottom of society. The process of partial renewal and partial restructuring that took place in the 1990s is successfully described by Hibou as a process of pseudo-restructuring. Unfortunately since monetary unification was achieved the discourse of modernisation seems to have lost its former impetus.

However, it is not all gloom and doom. Both the third and the fourth Greek Presidencies have proved very successful thus demonstrating that Greece can project a different image and be a constructive player at difficult times for the EU. The Ioannina compromise can be seen as a careful treatment of an issue that has caused a Community deadlock. The fourth Greek Presidency has been successful in promoting a Balkan agenda as well as making sure that the developments in ESDP and the accession process will not be undermined by disagreements over the war in Iraq. However, successes can be attributed to personal commitments and loose epistemic communities that press for change and maintain a busy agenda. The image of the ambitious, busy, active and 'multidimensional' bureaucrat slowly penetrates the minds of Greek bureaucrats.

Institutional independence is a major step to success. The role of the Greeks in the Commission was more successful as the Commission is a supranational institution with its own rules and permanent staff. Greek National saw the Commission as an independent path of influencing European decision-making as they were not so constrained by political elites and vested interests. Therefore, Greek COREPER staff saw the Commission as the natural haven after realizing that the National Representation had not much to offer them. Greeks have managed to climb up the Commission ladder with many of them occupying posts of strength and prestige. However, the two major Greek political parties have been always trying to find ways to promote their own devotees to certain jobs and to penetrate the Community system. (source: interviews with Greek Nationals)

The emergence of a new Europeanised executive has added more pressures on administration to deal with issues effectively. In addition, successful Commissioners such as Vaso Papandreou and Anna Diamandopoulou have demonstrated that personalities do count when it comes to altering the image of a country. The socialisation with others tends to promote a new model of negotiating and dealing with European issues. This leads us to the next point which deals with issues of socialisation and policy learning.

## **Representing Greece in Brussels: policy learning, socialisation and sociological institutionalism**

Representing Greece in Brussels is a process of learning for policy-makers and the administration. Kavakas suggests that EU membership has changed the way Greece is forming its policies and pursuing its interests in many ways. For instance: 'first, there is an increasing level of pre-consultation between the Greek and other ministers. This has been developed gradually and was totally absent during the first few years after Greece's accession.[...] A second aspect is that of compromise. Greek foreign policy makers appear more familiarised with the process of compromises in one area in exchange for benefits in another. [...]. The third aspect is that of building a common position of common positions, socialisation of foreign policy makers has brought the tendency to reach agreements in the council. Greece has gradually left behind its strategy of blocking the common positions and started to develop an attitude of trying to influence them'.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the Greek Representatives have become more pragmatic, less ideological and dogmatic. Of course this does not imply that policy elites have lost their former vision of Europe (or that they do not hold any reservation on the process of European unification) but they are working on those issues more systematically by having accepted that the process of European integration is one of trade offs and backlashes. Therefore, the image of Greece has been transformed from that of a country that blocks decision to one of a constructive partner.

An interesting example of policy transformation is the battle over the name of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. For reasons of internal electoral consumption the Greek Conservative government tried to mobilise the Greek electorate by using nationalistic rhetoric and organising rallies against the use of the word Macedonia by the neighbouring state. This had a repercussion of the image of Greece in Brussels. The economic embargo on FYROM in 1994 was seen as an unnecessary irredentist move. The country was seen as another hot blooded Balkan nation that acted according to its feelings and not according to its long term interests and logic. The Greeks failed to convince the Europeans about the danger of the naming of FYROM thus losing a good opportunity to Europeanise a national issue. The form of rejection that Greek policy-makers received in Brussels gradually led to a reconsideration of the national position and the slowing down of rhetoric. Due to the non acceptance of irredentist forms of action on behalf of the EU Greece managed to escape the most important trap of all - getting involved in the Yugoslavian conflict. Although a great deal of nationalism and a partial rewriting of history took place<sup>8</sup>, the European link remained strong and kept Greece out of any possible war adventures. This demonstrates that the normative power of the EU has pushed Greece towards a certain direction and has led to the rejection of the Balkan nationalist image. Although the newly elected government of PASOK kept part of the rhetoric after 1993, there was a bilateral dialogue and implementation of a common agenda on behalf of Greek diplomats that led to the creation of a new bilateral agenda between the two countries. Exchange of opinions and implementation of common policies (which were kept secret from the public eye) demonstrate that Europe pushed the administration of the

---

<sup>7</sup> Kavakas, Dimitrios, 2000. Greece in Manners I. and Whitman R. G.(eds), *The Foreign Policies of European Union Member States*, Manchester University Press

<sup>8</sup> For more information on the Macedonian issue and the question of identity see Triantaphyllidou, A., 1998. National Identity and the 'other' *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Volume 21, Number 4,

Ministry of foreign Affairs towards a more pragmatist and reconciliatory policy. It is interesting to notice that from a policy of 'rhetoric fighting' the Greek stance turned into a policy of Balkan inclusion by promoting the issue of EU membership for the Western Balkans which was a vital priority of the fourth Greek Presidency. Due to the special relationship with the Balkans image of Greece has been transformed from that of an awkward partner to a stability promoter. Greece became part of the solution not part of the problem. Europe brought the rediscovery of the Balkans as a means of external influence as Greece became the intermediary between Europe and the Balkans<sup>9</sup>.

### **Challenges of representation**

This part of the paper deals with the number of challenges that the external representation of Greece is facing. Challenges can be divided into internal and external ones.

Issues of populism, the neo-Orthodox agenda the neo-Stalinist revival in parts of the 'small' Left go against the main modernisation trend and pose an alternative vision of representing Greece abroad. The Orthodox slogan 'Greece, Europe, Orthodoxy' used by the Greek Orthodox Church in demonstrations against the new ID Greek cards demonstrates that Europeanisation is open to many different interpretations and even not accepted as a value by all. As Hibou suggests: 'Europeanness is, to some degree, devoid of meaning, in that European integration cannot be boiled down to a project, that the evolutions that have occurred cannot be assessed normatively and that Europe cannot determine social practices on its own and give an overall meaning to the events underway'<sup>10</sup>.

The rising wave of populism and the social instability of the weak Greek economy leaves a space for extreme political formations to challenge the current status quo. A challenge might arise from the Neo-Orthodox, nationalist and chauvinistic party of LAOS. Its power is very small in order to pose a danger now<sup>11</sup>. However, the fates of Austria, Italy, Belgium and France demonstrate that politics is a gamble. Politicians and diplomatic elites need to balance carefully between the fears of their electorates and their cosmopolitan views of the future of Greece in Europe.

Political rivalries between the two main political parties can be seen as another challenge to representing Greece successfully. The current party of government, the Conservatives has not proved mature enough in opposition. Attempts of Conservative MEPs to expose Greece as a bad European have led to a counter productive internal fights that have undermined the image of Greece in Brussels. The declarations of some MPs on the issue of whether Greece would be ready for the 2004 Olympics were detrimental not only to a national cause but to the image of Greece in general. In addition, the failed attempt of the Conservatives to organise a Counter Presidency against the Greek Presidency of 2004 bewildered many external viewers. Another

---

<sup>9</sup> for more details see HIBOU, BEATRICE, 2005. Greece and Portugal: Convergent or Divergent Europeanization? In Simon Bulmer and Christian Lequesne (eds), *The Member States of the European Union*, Oxford University Press, pp. 229-253

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> In the last European elections LAOS secured 4,12% of the vote. Source Ministry of the Interior: [http://www.ypes.gr/ekloges/content/gr/europ\\_fr.htm](http://www.ypes.gr/ekloges/content/gr/europ_fr.htm)

Conservative imprudence- that of exposing the former government's budget the Portuguese way has exposed the country as a corrupt and inefficient southern partner in times where neither France nor Germany can satisfy the Maastricht criteria.

However, challenges do not only arise internally but also externally. Apart from being a positive influence on Greece, Europe can also be seen part of the problem. The complex nature of EU decision-making makes things even more difficult for the Greek Representation. Interrelated issues of the three different EU pillars tend to overlap thus creating a great amount of confusion on which actor is responsible for which issue.

In addition, although the issue of subsidiarity is part of the EU discourse the intergovernmental nature of high politics continues to empower the Prime Minister, the cabinet and the highly ranked policy elites. Therefore, it is the case that the EU way of reaching decision also acts in a centralised manner that goes against the so needed process of decentralisation.

Furthermore, there is also the issue of the problematic link between the representation of the EU in Athens which fails to empower the relationship between the national and the European capital. Both the Representation of the Commission in Athens and the Office of the European Parliament find difficulties in spreading the message. The actions of the two institutions take part in Athens and there is limited information in other parts of Greece. Although the interest of the public is high there is not a strong plan that will lead to a Europeanization of the political discourse and consequently ignite the popular flame of getting closer to the EU. Therefore, although there is a strong EU normative presence (EU exercising influence by its status and presence) the results are limited in substance, practice and adopted policies.

### **Conclusion: towards a new institutional dynamism?**

Greece is not the only country with a fragmented and somehow problematic national image. Each EU country has to reconsider its past and come to terms with parts of its identity. There is a process of synthesis which sometimes includes and excludes different parts of what is considered as 'national'. The sooner the state comes to terms with different parts of its multiple identities the stronger it becomes. Power therefore lies in the cultural diversity of the national image.

Although Greece has been an EU member since 1981, the process of Europeanisation and modernisation of its European Representation and image has been a slow one. Many of the inherent problems of representation are inextricably linked to the internal problem of national administration. In terms of theory, one has to look at patterns of sociological institutionalism in order to understand the chances in policy, negotiation style and discourse. In this paper I have argued that the process of modernisation led by the former socialist governments was more of a normative rather than an institutional/administrative nature. The current government has to demonstrate that the process of modernisation will continue by the adoption of practical reforms. However, until now very little has been done. Some ideas that have to be implemented are the construction of efficient co-ordination mechanisms, the depoliticisation of administration, the search for continuity of interests, decentralisation, respect of administration, effective control as well as constructing a new network of

strong national alliances. Therefore, a major revision on the way the Greek administrative system is representing Greece in Brussels is necessary. The Greek administration needs to adopt a more entrepreneurial style. Issues of benchmarking, setting targets, dealing with Constituencies and the Greek demos, having a promotion plan of interests and an expansion plan for national alliances are necessary priorities. The next generation of Greek representatives has to understand that the job of representation is not like that of any other administrative post. On the other hand, the rest of the Greek administration has to find ways of dealing successfully with EU issues and supporting the Greek representatives in Brussels in the most efficient way.

## **Bibliography**

- CLOGG, RICHARD, 1995. A Concise History of Greece, Cambridge University Press,
- DIMITRAKOPOULOS, D., G. AND PASSAS, G. A., 2004. The Greek Presidency: in the Shadow of War, *Journal of Common Market studies*, volume 42. Annual Review, pp.43-6
- HIBOU, BEATRICE, 2005. Greece and Portugal: Convergent or Divergent Europeanization? In Simon Bulmer and Christian Lequesne (eds), *the Member States of the European Union*, Oxford University Press, pp. 229-253
- KASSIM, H. and GUY PETERS, B., 2001. Co-ordinating National Action in Brussels – a Comparative Perspective in H. Kassim and A. Menon (eds), *The National Co-ordination of EU policy*, Oxford University Press
- KAVAKAS, DIMITRIOS, 2000. Greece in Manners I. and Whitman R. G.(eds), *The Foreign Policies of European Union Member States*, Manchester University Press
- KAZAKOS PANOS, 2004. Europeanisation, Public goals and Group interests: convergence Policy in Greece, 1990-2003, *West European Politics*, vol.27, No.5, pp.901-918
- KOLIOPOULOS, S. J. AND VEREMIS. M. T, 2002. *Greece the Modern Sequel*, C. Hurst & Co. Ltd
- MOSCHONAS, GERASSIMOS, 2001. The path of modernization: PASOK and European integration, *Journal of southern Europe and the Balkans*, volume 3, Number 1, pp11-24
- SOTIROPOULOS, DIMITRIS, 2004. The EU's impact on the Greek Welfare State: Europeanisation on paper?, *Journal of European Social Policy*, vol.14, No.3, August, pp. 267-284
- SPANOU, C., 2001. Permanent Challenges? Representing Greece in Brussels in *The National coordination of EU Policy*, H. KASSIM & A. Menon, Oxford University Press
- SPANOU C., 1998, "European integration in administrative terms: a framework for analysis and the Greek case", *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol.3, no.3, pp 467-484
- TRIANDAFYLLIDOU, A., 1998. National Identity and the 'other' Ethnic and Racial Studies, Volume 21, Number 4,
- WRIGHT, V., 1996. The National Co-ordination of European Policy making in J.Richardson (ed.) *European Union. Power and Policy-making* (London, Routledge)

**Useful Internet Sources:**

Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs  
<http://www.mfa.gr>

Greek Ministry of the Interior  
<http://www.ypes.gr>