

'A setback for Athens' from Die Zeit (6 February 1976)

Caption: On 6 February 1976, German weekly Die Zeit describes the concern felt by the Commission of the European Communities with regard to Greece's economic underdevelopment and the financial cost of Greek accession to the Communities.

Source: Die Zeit. Wochenzeitung für Politik-Wirtschaft-Handel und Kultur. 06.02.1976. Hamburg: Gruner GmbH. "Dämpfer für Athen", auteur:Bremer, Hans-Hagen.

Copyright: (c) Translation CVCE.EU by UNI.LU

All rights of reproduction, of public communication, of adaptation, of distribution or of dissemination via Internet, internal network or any other means are strictly reserved in all countries.

Consult the legal notice and the terms and conditions of use regarding this site.

URL:

http://www.cvce.eu/obj/a_setback_for_athens_from_die_zeit_6_february_1976-en-38d33ed3-14dc-4c0e-9b9d-76bf46598ccf.html



Last updated: 06/07/2016

A setback for Athens

By Hans-Hagen Bremer

The Commission considered the economic difficulties to be more important than the political aspects

The EC Commission in Brussels has put a damper on the hopes of Greece for a rapid entry into the European Community (EC) as the tenth Member State. In its statement on the Greek application for membership submitted in June 1975, it has admittedly now recommended to the EC Council of Ministers that the Greeks should be given a clear and positive answer. However, their proposal to have Greek accession preceded by a preparatory phase, the length of which was not more precisely defined, meant that their report resulted in public disappointment in Greece.

In the Commission itself, long and very controversial debates had been held about whether the Greek application for a seat at the table in the Council of the Community should be granted as soon as possible for political reasons, or whether a longer waiting period would be advisable in view of the economic and structural problems faced by that country. There were such violent clashes of opinion on this subject that one of the Commissioners, who had been outnumbered in the vote, the Italian Altiero Spinelli, subsequently dissociated himself from the resolution — an extremely unusual breach of the discipline imposed by this body on itself.

The question of whether or not Greece should join the EC was no longer at issue at all — the discussion was only about the when and the how. The Greeks had already been given the prospect of accession in the Treaty of Athens in 1961. However, negotiations on the subject were not supposed to commence until 1984, when the establishment of the customs union between Greece and the Community will be completed.

The Greek Government narrowed down this timescale by submitting an application for membership last year. It was able to feel encouraged in its aspirations for a foreign-policy success in the form of rapid admission to full membership by the statements of some EC governments. In the Europe of the Nine, whether out of satisfaction at the collapse of the regime of the Colonels or out of concern about the already crumbling southeastern flank of NATO, extensive approval had been given to the return of democrats to power in Athens.

The vote by the EC Commission has now given a lower priority to the political aspects of the Greek application for membership than to the economic and technical problems. In the opinion of the Commission, the Greek economy in its present state of development displays a series of difficulties, which restrict the possibilities of homogeneous dovetailing with the economies of the other Member States.

Greek per capita income amounts to approximately half of the EC average, the growth rate of the economy is lower and the inflation rate higher than that of the Community. With regard to trade with the Nine, Athens is heavily in the red. A further disadvantage noted in the report is the rather weak degree of industrialisation of the country and the still very high proportion contributed by agriculture to the gross domestic product in comparison with the Community. The structure of Greek agriculture also indicates, beyond this, that the productivity level is rather poor. The average production of a person employed in agriculture, for example, is around 40 % lower than the average production for the Community.

As a result of this gap in the level of development, which, in comparison with the back-markers of the EC, Ireland, Italy and Great Britain, is admittedly of hardly any consequence, Greece would be prevented, in the opinion of the Commission, from meeting its obligations as a member of the EC. As the Commission points out, the Community would, above all, have to find money for Greece. What is more, there would be a detrimental effect on the functioning of the Common Market. For example, if Greece were already a member now, it would mean an additional cost to the EC budget for 1976 of around 1 000 million marks.

Since Greece would not be able to participate in the common trade policy, with its numerous customs preferences for developing countries and for the Mediterranean states competing over lemons and olives, special derogations would be necessary. Such derogations, however, would lead to distortions in the Common Market and create undesirable precedents for other countries that wished to apply for accession to the EC from a similar economic situation.

Finally, the Commissioners, who are still somewhat paralysed from shock after the experience of the accession of Great Britain, Ireland and Denmark, are shying away from the prospect of a further enlargement of the Community. Their demand is that, before any repetition of such an operation, there must first be efforts towards making progress in the internal development of the EC.

There is no dispute about the fact that the problems enumerated by the Commission do exist, either from the outvoted minority of its Members, or from the capital cities of the EC, or indeed Athens, where these problems are not being overlooked. The conclusion that the Commission has drawn from this in its recommendation of a preparatory period does not, of course, suit the European aspirations of the Greeks at all, who, unlike Great Britain or Denmark at that time, are seeking to be members of the EC not only for economic reasons but also for political ones. It is also not at all in line with the assurances from Federal Chancellor Schmidt that there would be 'unreserved support' for the Greek application for accession.

The Commission, which makes the claim that it is a political organ, has shown rather little evidence of an instinct for politics in regard to the highly sensitive Greeks with its proposal for a preparatory phase to precede membership. Admittedly, the accession negotiations could begin during this period, when the Community was to help out the Greeks with massive financial support. The completion of the period, however, would be dependent upon the extent of the success in coaxing the economy of Greece up to the level of Western Europe.

However, it would be equally possible to attain this objective during the kind of transitional period that was granted to the British and the Irish following their accession. The reference to the cost to the budget of the Community and the objection that the operation of the Common Market could be impaired are both rather less than convincing. If the Community wants to bring the Greeks up to its level of development, it will have to dig deep into its pockets to pay for it one way or another.

By 1984, with the completion of the customs union, which is now already two thirds towards being implemented, Greece must also adopt the common commercial policy. If we allow for negotiations lasting two years, and then one year for ratification, there would be a transitional period of six years, which Greece could equally well serve out inside the EC — with the advantage that Athens would attain its political goal much earlier.

There then remain the reservations based on the institutional difficulties. They are not at all negligible. However, to make the accession of Greece dependent on their solution is tantamount to putting off the application from Athens indefinitely. We have not yet heard the last of this. The controversy will continue in the EC Council of Ministers and at the April meeting of the Heads of Government. The Community will then have to decide whether or not it really wants Greece as a full member.