

‘The abduction of Europe’ from L’Express (26 May 1979)


Caption: On 26 May 1979, the French weekly newspaper L’Express analyses the efforts undertaken by Konstantinos Karamanlis, Greek Prime Minister, to prepare his country for accession to the European Community.

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The abduction of Europe

Konstantinos Karamanlis, the Greek Prime Minister, is nearing his goal after 20 years of endeavour: his country is joining the Common Market.

Standing in the very heart of Athens amid the shady bowers of the Ethnikos Kipos (the National Garden), the Zappeion, a neoclassical structure, will shortly be taking its place in history.

This is where, at 6.30 p.m. on 28 May, in the presence of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and 450 guests packed into the Atrium, Konstantinos Karamanlis, the Greek Prime Minister, will be signing the Treaty which will make Greece the 10th Member State of the European Community, as from 1 January 1981. Later that evening, when the official dinner is over and the former lawyer from Serres in Macedonia returns to his modern three-room flat on Herodou Attikou, he will be free to savour his victory.

For the advocate of 'Greece in Europe' was always Karamanlis. The year is 1959 and, as Head of the Greek Government, he is already taking a close interest in the Treaty of Rome, signed two years before, and more particularly in Article 238, which empowers the Community to 'conclude with a third State [...] agreements establishing an association involving reciprocal rights and obligations, common action and special procedures'. On 9 July 1961, in the impressive Greek Parliament building, under the absent gaze of the evzones dressed in fustanella and wearing pompomed clogs, the Greece of Karamanlis became the first 'associate' member of the EEC. This was a start.

Six years later, however, the whole project was called into question. Europe was unanimous in cutting off funds to the military junta. The provisions of the 1961 Agreement — customs union, harmonisation of policies, development aid — were frozen until the restoration of democracy in Athens. The 'freeze' was to last seven years.

From his Paris exile, Karamanlis never gave up the fight. He was the alternative, and he knew it. On 12 June 1975, less than one year after his triumphant return aboard Giscard d'Estaing's personal aeroplane (his party took 54 % of the vote and 215 out of 300 seats in the November 1974 elections), he applied this time for accession. The Nine were in favour, but the negotiations were quick to stall. This prompted some remarkable powerplay tactics: Karamanlis visited one European capital after the other, pressuring the most reticent and the most hostile without any concern for diplomatic niceties. Whether in Paris, Rome or Bonn, the message was always the same: Greece's political, economic and cultural destiny lay in Europe. Everything separating it from Europe was simply an accident of history.

The crusade paid off. And the logistics caught up in the end. On 21 December 1978, in Brussels (at dawn, naturally), the Nine and the Greek representatives — George Kontogeorgis, the Minister, Viron Theodoropoulos, the expert — completed the 'substantive' negotiations. On 4 April in Luxembourg (during the night, this time round), the definitive go-ahead was given for signature. It had taken the 'Premier of all the Greeks' ... 20 years to achieve his aims.

For there had been more than a few reservations to overcome on the way, those of an economic order above all. In 1976, the per capita gross domestic product in the EEC was, on average, twice as high as that of Greece (22 000 francs as against less than 11 000 francs). There were a quarter fewer farmers as a proportion of the working population (8.4 % as against 34.4 %). So some misgivings were in order, and misgivings there were among the Nine. Surely the effort to integrate a country which was only on the way to industrialisation would place an unnecessary 'burden' on the periphery of an ultra-developed Community? Was there not a risk that the Portuguese and, above all, the Spanish, more threatening candidates in every way, would subsequently lay claim to exactly the same advantages as might be secured by Greece? And, lastly, would the 'Mediterranean approach', laboriously established by means of economic agreements with the Maghreb (Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria) and the Mashrek (the remainder of the Arab world), survive an enlargement of the EEC to include countries specialising in exactly the same agricultural products (citrus fruits, oils)?

Not to mention the precautions to be taken to ensure that the shock of accession does not leave Greece out for the count as well. The five-year transitional period, budgetary aid (450 million francs as from year one) and support from various Community funds will all be essential. For not everyone in Greece stands to gain from the EEC.

In Koropi, 30 kilometres north of Athens, in the heart of a prosperous wine-producing region famous in particular for its retsina, the regulars at the Café comment favourably on the event between two games of tavli (backgammon). Nikolaos Papamilahis, director of the local cooperative, his cap pushed back proudly over flowing locks, speaks with a leader's confidence. He promises 'price security' and 'unrestricted access to a market of 250 million people'. Much further north, on the other hand, in Macedonia, where the holdings rarely exceed 1 or 2 hectares, farmers fear that they may learn the meaning of the word 'restructuring' to their own cost.

In Kalamaki, on the Gulf of Athens, Dimitri Marinopoulos, one-time employers' leader and himself a prosperous businessman (pharmaceutical products and ... Prisunic network), has no qualms about taking on the competition. His enterprise is modern, and its 650 employees and managers know their jobs. There is no shortage of American capital. Realistically, however, he recognises that, with Greek industry overprotected by the state and deeply in debt to the banks, with 90 % of firms in the manufacturing sector employing fewer than 10 workers, 'some will, no doubt, go to the wall'.

'Higher political interests won out in the end', according to Konstantinos Kalligas, leader writer on the liberal paper 'Kathimerini' (a kind of Greek *Le Monde*). For it is clear that, in allowing Greece into the Community, the Nine will be killing two political birds with one stone: they will be locking into the West, once for all, a country occupying an enviable strategic position in the Mediterranean; and they will be helping stabilise a still fragile democracy. As for Greece, always with one eye on Turkey, its neighbour, but also its rival in Cyprus and in the Aegean, it has the very pleasant impression, as Kalligas points out, of 'breaking with an uncomfortable diplomatic isolation'.

All the same, the future of Greece in Europe is not without its uncertainties. Having turned in some respectable results in 1978 (inflation at 11.5 %, compared with 12.8 % in 1977, a growth rate of 5.9 %, well above the Community average), the economic machinery is today looking decidedly shaky. Over the first four months of the year, inflation reached 9.5 % and will probably exceed 15 % by 1980. The current account balance is running a deficit (707 million dollars in the first quarter), despite the contribution from 'invisibles' (ocean freight, tourism, remittances from Greeks living abroad) which traditionally makes up the difference. Productive investment has been virtually non-existent for three years. In the role of prophet of doom, Xenophon Zolotas, the Governor of the Bank of Greece, has been issuing dire warnings, waving the threat of a ... Turkish scenario! Konstantinos Mitsotakis, a do-or-die character from Crete and Minister for Economic Coordination — a possible successor to Karamanlis, a status he denies with no great conviction — remains, for his part, calm in the storm. 'In the fight against inflation, the number one problem, our policy of steadfastness is beginning to pay off,' he explains reassuringly.

Steadfastness? The most recent price freeze early in the year ... prompted another surge of inflation! Such is the tradition in Greece: the glaring weaknesses of the administration hinder efforts to set up any kind of control machinery. The net result has been 20 % on the domestic food bill between the 1978 and 1979 Orthodox Easters.

The ban on driving one weekend in two, on the 'Californian' model — one weekend the even numbers, one weekend the odd numbers — is proving quite an irritant for Athenians, deprived of their seaside outing every fortnight. Does the ban really slash the oil bill? The man in the street remains doubtful, preferring to detect a ploy by the authorities to restrain the merrily anarchic traffic in the capital (600 000 private cars).

Not everyone stands to lose from this ill-humour. When Monday comes round, Andreas Papandreou, the charismatic leader of the Panhellenic Socialist Party (Pasok, 26 % of the vote and 93 MPs at the last parliamentary elections), and Charilaos Florakis, Leader of the orthodox Communist Party (KKE, 10 % and 11 MPs), will be boycotting the ceremonies at the Zappeion.

Each night brings a fresh flowering of 'Oxi Eok' ('No to the Common Market') on the walls of the town. Papandreou's impassioned speeches denounce, in no particular order, 'capitalist Europe', which condemns Greece to the 'domination of the multinationals', and the rural exodus which, according to him, will necessarily follow accession. 'The answer', explains Konstantinos Similis, his spokesman on European affairs, 'is to define a special relationship with the EEC which will allow Greece to maintain control over external trade and foreign investment.'

What this fiery campaign is really about is gathering together discontent of all kinds under the anti-Community banner. It is about making a date with the future: after all, the next elections are only two years away (in autumn 1981), one year on from accession. In the meantime, it is very likely that the Europe of hope will become Europe the catch-all excuse.

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