

ROUNDTABLE ARTICLE

## Brexit from Greek Vantage Points: Changing Histories in the United Kingdom and Greece

Nikolaos Papadogiannis

The ramifications of the UK referendum on EU membership, and its outcome, Brexit, are not confined to the United Kingdom. Greece, a country with many historical connections to the UK, has also witnessed rancorous debates around it. In fact, Brexit has served as a canvas onto which various social and political groups in Greece have projected their own perceptions of the history of the United Kingdom. In this contribution I will discuss how Greek representations of the UK government and British society have developed in Greece throughout the post-war period. Brexit has altered these representations, highlighting the rise of the trope of the UK as ‘victim’, the questioning of the UK’s openness to Greek professionals and students and the pervasiveness of anti-German rhetoric. At the same time Brexit has also functioned as a mirror for self-reflection in Greece, and debates around the similarities between the EU membership referendum in 2016 and the Greek bailout referendum in 2015 have raised important questions about referenda as tools of democracy.

The UK has a long history of intervening in Greek political affairs. During the Greek War of Independence (1821–32), the UK supported the creation of an independent Greek state and subsequently meddled in Greek politics until the late 1940s. During the First World War and in the interwar years the UK supported the liberal political camp led by Eleftherios Venizelos. Towards the end of the Second World War British troops fought alongside Greek anti-communist forces against the military arm of the left-wing National Liberation Front in Athens in December 1944, roundly defeating the left-wing forces. From 1947, and especially in the context of the Truman Doctrine, the UK became less involved in Greek domestic affairs, as US influence grew. Nevertheless, Cyprus was administered by the UK from 1878 and became a British crown colony in 1925. During the 1950s a proportion of Greek Cypriots launched a campaign in favour of the unification of the island with Greece. This was matched with armed resistance against the British authorities.

Those developments left their imprint on how the UK has been viewed in Greece as a political actor. The communist left, but also moderate left-wingers, were already critical of British imperialism during the interwar years. Their anti-British stance endured after 1945, when it was combined with a new anti-Americanism. Against the backdrop of tensions in Cyprus in the 1950s Greek right-wing and centrist forces also became increasingly sceptical of any UK involvement, but they were torn in their views. On the one hand, they approached the UK as a key ally of Greece inside the Western political and military institutions. On the other, they found it difficult to maintain their status as ‘genuine patriots’ while they appeared to be linked to Britain, which ruled Cyprus. Right-wing and centrist policy makers were careful, on the whole, and aimed to sustain amicable diplomatic relations between Greece and the United Kingdom.

The Cypriot issue and other foreign policy matters did not cause any substantial rifts between the two countries. The Turkish military intervention in Cyprus in 1974 resulted in the spread of anti-American rather than anti-British sentiments in Greece, and critiques of the UK became less scathing than they had been in the 1950s. Nevertheless, the memory of what is often coined as the ‘British aggression’ in Cyprus never disappeared completely, and some main streets in

Greek cities were named after people killed by the British authorities in the 1950s. More recently Greeks voiced concerns over UK foreign policy even outside Greece. During the first stage of the Iraq War in 2003 Greece witnessed massive protests against the American and British intervention in Iraq. The protests were organised by various left-wing groups but attracted people from all ideological backgrounds. However, they did not crystallise into a persistent anti-British stance, and Greek governments of all ideological persuasions have continued to willingly work with the UK government on a number of subjects. Moreover, the anti-imperialist (and explicitly anti-British) language in which the terrorist group 'Revolutionary Organisation 17 November' (17N) couched its assassination of the British defence attaché Stephen Saunders in Athens in 2000 failed to get much support in Greece. As John Brady Kiesling argues in his monograph *Greek Urban Warriors*, the Greek public did not sympathise with 17N, but, rather, it turned against them.

Throughout this history Greeks were often ambivalent about what they knew about British society and culture. The UK frequently appeared in a very positive light, not least because it was long considered to be a global hub for study and innovation, as an environment where Greeks could develop their professional skills and would be respected regardless of their origins. Many Greek students have gone to study in the UK; they initially came from the upper-middle classes but apparently from the 1990s on increasingly also from lower-middle class origins. Greek professionals from all socio-economic backgrounds settled in the UK, especially in the wake of the financial crisis in Greece, to work in the restaurant industry, or in medicine, IT or in the UK university sector more widely. Meanwhile, British popular culture and music had a strong impact in Greece, as it has in other parts of the continent, and this often overrode any historical perceptions of animosities. British bands like the Beatles have excited significant proportions of the Greek youth since the 1960s and, alongside American bands, shaped diverse youth sub-cultures. Not everybody in Greece welcomed such a development; the Greek Orthodox Church and, initially, the left would have preferred the Greek youth to support what they depicted as specifically Greek cultural contributions. Nevertheless, Anglo-American popular culture has been making inroads in the leisure pursuits ever since the early 1970s and until today. However, these positive attitudes have long co-existed with more negative impressions. British tourists, especially young ones, are often considered rowdy; British women, like women from northern and central Europe more generally, are widely seen as too sexually permissive.

Since the beginning of the current debt crisis in Greece and the Greek bailout referendum, however, anti-German feelings have become more widespread and overtaken any negative impressions of the United Kingdom. When the Greek government asked the electorate to accept or reject the bailout conditions proposed by the European Commission, the International Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank, 'No' prevailed with 61.31 per cent of the vote. This 'No' was accompanied by vocal criticism of the current German government, and equations of Germans today with those who supported the Third Reich in the 1930s – and representations of Germans as Nazis by nature. These representations were not uncontested and have caused furious debates within both the left and the right. General anti-German sentiment remains widespread, even if it has been toned down since late 2015, after members of SYRIZA (Coalition of the Radical Left, the senior coalition partner in the Greek government), who had initially endorsed this rhetoric at the beginning of the crisis, moderated their tone.

However, critiques of Germany continued to feature in various forms in Greek discussions of the UK EU referendum. Much of the popular Greek press did not refer to internal UK developments to explain the result, but rather, focused on the ways in which EU and German policies may have estranged the British from the EU. *Efimerida ton Syntakton*, one of the most popular Greek newspapers, which hosts views from the centre-left to the radical left, largely focused on economics: various pro- and anti-Brexit contributors argued that the results should be attributed to the neoliberal, pro-austerity policies of the EU. Some of them added that these policies were sponsored by Germany. In this newspaper, analyses of Brexit usually revolved around whether

and how the EU can be reshaped. The right-wing press similarly focused on the EU and Germany when reflecting on Brexit. Articles in the ultra-conservative *Dimokratia*, whose website readership reaches approximately 700,000 users, maintained that Brexit may help build an alliance of sovereign nation states in Europe to counter the 'German-occupied' EU. By contrast, most articles in the liberal-conservative newspaper *Kathimerini*, whose online version attracts more than 1,650,000 users, have spoken out against Brexit as the victory of 'populist' Brexiteers over the 'rational' Remainers. However, once again, these analyses largely focused on Brexit as a product of EU policies, and not on British developments.

At the same time representations of the UK among Greeks were also directly shaped by the prospect of Brexit. Greeks living in the UK have voiced their concern over whether the UK will continue to be a global hub for education, innovation and their professional aspirations. More importantly, the trope of the British nation as a victim of a German-dominated EU has featured in a number of discussions, particularly by conservative analysts. In his pro-Brexit account in *Dimokratia*, the ultra-right-wing politician Failos Kranidiotis argued that Britons faced the prospect of being humiliated by the Germans, as had happened, in his opinion, in Greek history. This language stands in stark contrast with earlier representations of the UK in Greece: regardless of whether the British were portrayed as a positive pillar of Western values or as negative 'aggressors' (particularly in Cyprus), the UK was considered to be a crucial power in global politics. In their analyses of Brexit, ultra-conservative voices have written out memories of a history of conflict between British elites and subordinate social groups in Britain and foregrounded an alternative history of shared threat by 'Fritz', the Germans. Nonetheless, although it is a popular view, this victimisation trope has been challenged by both right-wing and left-wing voices. The Communist Party of Greece, which in the legislative election of September 2015 garnered 5.6 per cent of the vote, argued that Brexit was favoured by a substantial segment of British monopolies. Brexit, in this perspective, serves as a means of facilitating the interests of these powerful monopolies in the global markets; here, the British elites are not potential victims of the Germans but active agents pursuing their interests beyond the framework of the European Union. Importantly, historical reference points continue to be important for voices on all sides of the debate, but Brexit has shifted how they are being used.

The EU membership referendum has also served as a means of self reflection in Greece, as Giorgos Katsambekis and George Souvlis have recently shown. People across the political spectrum have viewed it in conjunction with the Greek bailout referendum, triggering heated debates about whether the referendum could ever be a legitimate tool for the electorate to express its will. Newspapers such as *Kathimerini* argued that the 'populists' would likely begin to manipulate referenda across the EU. By contrast, *Dimokratia* and *Efimerida ton Syntakton* took a different stance: although they substantially differ in terms of political orientation, both portrayed referenda as an important means for the majority to express its views and shape political decisions. In this vein they welcomed the referendum also a tool that can help to rectify the democratic deficit of EU institutions and procedures. In fact, a circular set of reference points is visible here: Greek right-wing analysts have sided with ultra-conservative pro-Brexit factions in the UK to challenge any anti-democratic attitudes, in their opinion, within the EU, at the same time as British Brexiteers have used the economic adjustment programme in Greece as evidence for their arguments on the deep flaws of the EU. Anti-bailout and pro-Brexit factions suddenly shared a common enemy. A case in point was the speech made by Nigel Farage, then leader of the UKIP, in the European Parliament on 14 September 2011, in which he accused the EU of 'killing democracy' in Greece.

Overall, the British EU membership referendum and its outcome, Brexit, has provoked extensive reflection in Greece. Discussions have mostly focused on EU policies, and as such have been coloured by widespread critiques of Germany. However, Brexit has also served as a canvas onto which Greek perceptions of British politics and culture have been projected. These representations have, on the one hand, orbited around ambivalent attitudes towards British culture

and a lingering scepticism of the UK, not least concerning British foreign policy, and, on the other, an acceptance (if not support) of historically close ties between Greece and the United Kingdom. Fundamentally these analyses are not new. However, after the Brexit vote, one set of historical narratives – of British connections with Greece – were pushed to the background, as another – of German oppression of Greece – came to the fore, boosted by the Greek bailout referendum. In this context, the trope of the UK as ‘victim’ gained popularity among segments of Greek society. Moreover, there is a growing concern in Greece that the UK will cease to be a hub for innovation after Brexit. Discussion of both referenda has becoming increasingly intermingled, and historical reference points have shifted.