

Grexit and Brexit, past and future: Intertwined tales?

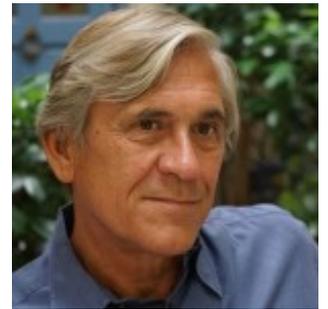
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Only one letter separates Grexit from Brexit. Against expectations Grexit (from the Eurozone) did *not* materialise in 2015. A year later, expectations were also confounded as Brexit (from the EU) inexorably unfolds. The two processes, one contingent and the other all too real, have intertwined in the past: the Greek crisis provided a potent image of what leaving the EU could avoid. Grexit was instrumental in bringing forth Brexit. In the future, the causality will be reversed: Brexit will change the background and the rules where the decisive acts of the Greek crisis will be played out.



Looking back, Greece shaped British attitudes in the two critical areas for Brexit, the economy and immigration. The travails of the Greek crisis were emblematic of the failure of the EU to deliver results. A British voter worried by globalization saw the 25 per cent Greek unemployment rate as a health warning against European integration. The retort that the EU could be worth it, but only *after* major reforms, sounded like a lot of hard work for very uncertain payback. Greece also played a role in the other key referendum concern, immigration. Though not directly linked with British issues, attitudes were, nevertheless, shaped by images of the surge of refugees since 2015.

So, Greece combined economic failure with an inability to handle and control immigration. In this way, it provided a powerful image of something well worth avoiding. Brexiters could rally to prevent concrete Greek-shaped problems that they would be leaving behind – even if they could not agree on what Brexit would look like. Even if Brexit could not tap into many pull factors, a dramatic image to motivate push could still be conjured.

But what of the post-Brexit future? What will it hold for Greece and Grexit?

Finding a new *modus operandi* to handle Brexit will dominate European politics. In this sense, issues connected with Greece must compete for attention with others which will be seen as more vital and as more pressing. The Brexit narrative will dominate the EU; the rest of the queue will be judged according to whether it aids or hinders that narrative. If something detracts from the central preoccupation, its chances will be reduced. Conversely, it helps in the Brexit response; it is more likely to succeed.

What happens to Greece and the chances of Grexit will not depart from this general rule.

Greece in the past framed its problems as exceptional, requiring political negotiations to set aside general rules. Even if such a strategy was successful in the 1980s, it will meet a wall of impatience after Brexit. In a nutshell, if Europe chooses to demonstrate effectiveness and solidarity, being the block preventing it will be counterproductive. Sooner or later, persistent exceptionalists will be treated as ballast to be jettisoned, an acceptable cost to meet larger objectives. That would not mean immediate Grexit, but it would prepare for it down the line. Given Greece's continued dependence on outside help, such a loss of support could be critical.

However, a positive scenario is also conceivable. The visibility of Greece as a problem in the pre-Brexit world would make any solution of the Greek problem seem a major achievement for the EU. Such an achievement could serve to base a positive narrative to convince EU citizens that "*there is life in the old Union yet*". If Greek failure illustrated to Britons why *leaving* was a good idea, Greek success could convince the rest why battling on is worth it. If a post-Brexit Greek government could deliver a success story, that story will be eagerly snapped up by all its European partners and institutions.

From exit pariah, to poster girl? Hollywood films have succeeded with less.

Is such a transformation too much to hope for?

It would certainly mean a major shift in strategy, as well as unfamiliar governance flexibility. If the EU were a primary school, the petulant laggard complaining that homework is too difficult, the time allowed is insufficient, and that teacher's attention is turned elsewhere, must, somehow, turn into a model pupil. In schools the world over, teachers are motivated by such scholastic transformations. Examples from governance, though not unknown, are harder to come by.

A journey of a thousand miles begins but with a single step. That first step is the realization that a post-Brexit world will be very different, for Greece as for everyone else. What worked before may not work after. Beyond that, grasping the opportunities created by change means to look ahead – to go beyond redress for past wrongs and to think constructively about the uncertain future.

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