

The Ocalan Trial: Greece, Ocalan And The Shadow State

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The Ocalan fiasco confirmed the continuing power of the ultra-nationalist "parastate" in Greece, and threatens the continuation of the government's modernising, pro-European policies.

Thirty-five years ago Greek Prime Minister George Papandreou was forced to ask of his own nation: 'Who governs this land?' But since the collapse of the dictatorship in 1974, or at least after the accession to power of the 'progressive' socialist PASOK in 1981, Greece has presented itself as a real democracy. But its handling of the Ocalan affair has shattered such illusions and made Papandreou's question as relevant as ever.

Papandreou had realised that a very powerful 'shadow' or parallel state - *parakratos* in Greek - was dictating its choices against the will of the democratically elected government. Structured around the country's security and intelligence communities, with its own 'para-police' if not paramilitary forces, and backed by the palace, that powerful machinery was the guarantor of the country's 'straightjacket democracy.'

When the latter was threatened by the chronic instability of the political governments of the mid-1960s, the parallel state came out of the shadows and took over the reins of power. For seven years, Greece became a dictatorship.

Elements of the straightjacket apparently remain. In a state of law, government orders on sensitive national issues should be executed smoothly, swiftly and efficiently by the administration, especially when the matter involves its supposedly most disciplined elements, the security and intelligence agencies.

Last autumn, when Kurdish rebel leader Abdullah Ocalan fled Syria in search of a new refuge in Europe, Greek Prime Minister Costas Simitis made it clear that under no circumstances would Greece be involved in this matter, let alone allow him to land on Greek soil. Simitis believed that Greek involvement would not help the Kurds, while it would ignite another serious crisis in Greek-Turkish relations.

Simitis discovered only after the fact that, in late January, Ocalan, the leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), did indeed land in Athens as the guest of some friends. But he should not have been baffled. Those involved in the visit were deputies and political appointees from his own party belonging to what is usually called PASOK's 'patriotic wing'.

They radically disagree with the modernising, Europeanist policies of their party's government and have repeatedly criticised it and attempted to undermine it. In close cooperation with 'patriots' of other parties of the right and the left, as well as with many intellectuals and businessmen 'sensitive to national issues,' they have shown little respect for democratic procedures and frequently carried out their own plans. They feel that they represent Greece's conscience and that the impunity for their actions thus far has offered them legitimacy.

The most recent illustration is the postponement of the annual meeting of Greek and Turkish journalists for peace and friendship that was to be held, in early February, in Komotini, home of the Turkish minority in Greece. The Greek government is generally favourable to such initiatives. The 'shadow state' is not, and it ensured that the local state university revoked the permit for their meeting in its premises.

Then, to show 'popular support' for their views, the 'patriots' had scores of associations signing a public petition against such meeting, which then a score of 'patriotic' deputies introduced in parliament. Bombs exploded in front of the home of the meeting's organiser and the publisher of a local paper in

Alexandroupolis, as well as of the Turkish Consulate in Komotini. Since the latter was being guarded by uniformed policemen and very closely monitored by state security and intelligence, legitimate questions arose about possible complicity.

Hundreds of such examples could be listed. Policemen indicted by the courts for serious crimes - such as conspiracy to commit murder and torture - against Roma and migrants, or publicly demonstrating their undemocratic, near-fascist views, are not only not subjected to the disciplinary actions prescribed by law, but sometimes they even get promoted to senior management posts. Ambassadors and border policemen can ignore ministers' instructions to grant visas to ethnic Macedonians (and former Greek citizens) who want to visit their birthplace after 50 years.

Others, with equal impunity, ignore the Greek law compelling them to issue UN-mandated identity documents to stateless ethnic Turks. Local Ministry of Education officials seem to listen more to their notorious 'cultural affairs' colleagues (formally Foreign Ministry employees but known to be operating like security and intelligence officers) than to their own minister. In this case, the minister, who in the past had publicly denounced this 'shadow state,' was again forced to make a special trip to Thrace to help implement at least some of his reforms of minority education.

In late January 1996, before even being confirmed by Parliament as prime minister, Simitis was challenged by the same 'patriotic forces' over an irrational Greek-Turkish conflict concerning the notorious uninhabited and, from the point of security, unimportant rock islet of Imia (Kardak in Turkish). A month before, while the ailing Andreas Papandreou was still in power, Turkey challenged Greek sovereignty over the islet, an act that was routinely filed. It was subsequently leaked to the press to test Simitis' conciliatory approach.

With his national pride supposedly hurt, PASOK's 'patriotic' mayor of the adjacent island of Kalymnos planted, for the first time ever, a Greek flag on Imia. A couple of days later, like-minded Turkish journalists replaced it with a Turkish flag before live television. Greek electronic media ran the footage ten times over to assure Greeks felt humiliated enough to ask for revenge. This crisis was avoided through an American-negotiated compromise under which there are no flags on the island.

But the Greeks' feeling of humiliation and betrayal remained. Simitis and his modernist colleagues easily carried both PASOK's congress and the ensuing general elections in 1996. But they never dared rid their party and the country's mainstream politics of these authoritarian and xenophobic nationalist elements. The Kalymnos mayor, alongside tens of other racist Roma-bashing mayors, was nominated by PASOK again, with most sweeping the 1998 elections.

Encouraged by the opposition's populist and nationalist rhetoric, more than one-third of Greek deputies set to offer their motherland another 'service' by seeking to obtain refuge for Ocalan, Turkey's enemy number one. Disregarding the government's direct orders, and in cooperation with Greece's intelligence community, they engineered Ocalan's arrival in Greece in late January 1999. Then, having got him on Greek soil, they pressured the government to grant him asylum.

The government refused and tried to find refuge for the PKK leader somewhere in Africa. The first grave mistake it made was not to follow the tactic of the Italian government, which handled the matter after Ocalan's arrival in Italy openly. Shadow mechanisms thrive in secret dealings.

An open approach by Greece would likely have minimised the ability of the 'parastate' to put pressure on it or defy its orders. Indeed, ten days after Ocalan's arrest, Greece successfully managed to get three remaining associates of Ocalan safely out of the Nairobi embassy to Greece.

But while the government was sheltering Ocalan in the embassy, Greek diplomats and intelligence agents there, in disagreement with official policy, did not follow orders. Instead, according to many reports, they seemed to encourage Ocalan's intransigent rejection of many alternatives offered to him and in this way

enhanced his pressure on the reluctant Greek government to either grant him asylum or find him a European refuge.

These negotiations prolonged Ocalan's stay in the Greek embassy, and gave ample time to various secret services to locate him and prepare their, ultimately successful, effort to abduct him. They also added to the confusion that reigned in the embassy, contributing to the poor handling of his transfer to the airport that facilitated the work of his Turkish pursuers in capturing him.

Whatever the exact details turn out to be, clearly it is the parastate that put Greece into an untenable position with Ocalan, and now sparked a government crisis highly damaging to Greece, Greek-Turkish relations, and Simitis' modernising and Europeanising approach. Three ministers - Foreign Minister Theodore Pangalos, Interior Minister Tasos Papadopoulos and Public Order Minister Nikos Petsalnikos - were forced to resign, and the Prime Minister and his party face a party congress in March likely to bring more internal bloodletting.

Already under strain because of its firm fiscal policy aiming to join European monetary union, the government also faces the critical test of European parliamentary elections in June. All of these factors threaten the government and with it Greece's current European approach.

The Prime Minister finally pledged to cleanse his party of the 'hot headed ultra-nationalists' who, according to Pangalos, have an extreme right ideology. Challenged from all sides, including his own party and the powerful media that have traditionally backed him but not his modernist approach, such steps may be too little too late for both Simitis and Greece's profound and long-overdue democratisation.

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