



BRIDGING THE CREDIBILITY GAP IN GREECE

Is Greece an Actor or a Victim?

BY CLEOPATRA KITTI

BRUSSELS — Much like President Obama, Greek Prime Minister George Papandreou took office last year with a mandate for change. Domestic civil unrest had dampened the spirits of Greek citizens and undermined the country's commercial and political success. The consequences of the country's failing economy, felt throughout Europe, were causing widespread unease.

Papandreou's change mandate required confronting the domestic challenges of scandal, corruption and economic weakness to quickly repair Greece's weakened international and European reputation.

Papandreou, whose grandfather and father served as Greek prime ministers, is ready to lead Greece out of its current crisis. Born in St. Paul, Minn., he received an undergraduate degree from Massachusetts' Amherst College before earning a master's degree from the London School of Economics in 1977.

Greece has long played an important political and cultural role in Europe — not only throughout ancient history, but certainly in the 20th and 21st centuries as well.

Following its adoption of a democratic constitution in 1975, the country cemented its position in the region. It rejoined NATO in 1980, became a member of what is now the European Union in 1981, adopted the Euro in 2001 and hosted the 2004 Olympic Games.

But in recent years, Greece's reputation in the European community has been failing, due to woeful economic and fiscal discipline and a lack of constructive participation in broader European affairs. The 58-year-old Papandreou has taken swift action to repair his country's credibility.

So far, that action is paying off. Papandreou's recent conversations in European capitals and in the United States — with political leaders, policy analysts and the media — have opened the door for understanding and respect, proving that responsible leadership and accountability in governance can have a swift and dramatic reputational impact.

But a strong leader is only one part of the effort. The rest of the country and its citizens also need to recommit themselves to a set of values that speak to ancient Greece's tenets of democracy and fairness while holding them accountable for contemporary principles of justice, fairness, opportunity and the common good.

Greece's nearly 11 million citizens appear to be ready. Recent public opinion polls show not only that Greeks have confidence in their government, but also that the majority denounces violent and obstructionist tactics as a means to resist change or voice disagreement.

This marks a tremendous societal shift and a compelling indicator of the recognition that change is necessary. Greeks are proud of their quality of life, their history, their country – and they appear open to finding new ways to preserve their culture in an increasingly connected, ever-evolving world.

The challenge for Papandreou now lies in seeing through the implementation of economic reform measures while also mobilizing government resources, businesses and civil society to shape the actions and policies required for Greece's green economic model and development.

Greece's revival hopefully will mark the end of a series of economic failures by EU nations. European leaders need to remind themselves of the founding value of European integration – solidarity, in times of hardship as well as prosperity. Too often, domestic agendas have prevailed.

It is time for Greece and Europe to overcome past mistakes and shift their policies to protect the spirit of the European project and make it a reality. They must work with Europe's transatlantic partners to promote legislation that protects open and fair markets around the world. They must fend off speculative actions that benefit the few to ensure the welfare of the many.

Greece has made its pledges and has taken action on the requirements set by its European partners. It's now Europe's turn to meet its obligations as a union of positive leadership that benefits European citizens who are willing and able to make the tough choices and move forward – much as Greece, under the leadership of Papandreou, is doing right now.

Greece can play a role in shaping the global economic and political agenda if it perseveres on its present course.

Its new prime minister has a very clear vision for his country and people. He has already shifted the needle of Greece's reputation to neutral. Moving it to positive will require systematic and consistent policy and political will across the board.

It will also require open-minded and constructive leadership across European capitals. It is an endeavor that must succeed, not just for Greece, but for all its European partners and for our common future.

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