

The Greek Dance Lesson

Conversation with John Helmer and Alexander Mercouris, June 13th, 2023. Slobodan Despot.

Thoughts and preambles

John Helmer

My feeling is that Greece is not unique amongst small countries in having to defend itself from friends and enemies. And let's not forget that the man who came to Greece after creating the putsch in Ukraine in 2014 was [Jeffrey Pyatt](#). So you had one of the principal American putsch plotters who becomes ambassador when Tsipras is Prime Minister. Can Greece resist that sort of stuff? Well, we're breaking new ground if we try to talk about this in English. And, from my point of view, Russians have always suspected that Greece was just an American aircraft carrier. And most of the time they were right.

Alexander Mercouris

Yes.

John Helmer

Now they're right, but they were wrong before.

Slobodan Despot

There are obviously two things. What Greece means in the Western plan and what the imperial relationships Russia has with the other big empire there. I think they understand each other; the Russians and the Turks, because they are empires.

John Helmer

I don't agree there, but go ahead, Alexander.

Alexander Mercouris

Well, they do, they, they have had periods. This current period of good relations between them is not the first one. During the time of Kemal Atatürk, they were also good friends. The thing to understand about that period is, of course, that Kemal was setting out to repudiate imperialism. So, it's a complex way of things, but

certainly Russia is a great power. Turkey is an aspiring *greatish* power. Greece, of course, is not. And Turkey has a strategic significance for Russia at the moment, which, you know, one can't overlook. But I also have to say, I do think we have made some of these problems with Russian relations ourselves in Greece because whether, because of American pressure or for whatever other reason, we have not acted in recent years to develop this relationship.

Now, whether that would've made any difference in the end, I don't know. But our present government, Mitsotakis's government, is extremely pro-American. Like the kind of people I used to mix with in Greece who are from the opposite side. This is the strange thing because my family had its feet on both sides. I mean, my father, my aunt were very Pasok, a lot of other people I knew. Most of the social people I knew, by the way, were very much anti Pasok. And those people were always furtherly pro-American. And they were always the people who of course ultimately have the power in Greece, or at least who have, I mean, there've been periods when they have not, but at the moment, they're back there in their po. So we can talk about that, maybe.

Is the Mayor of Athens an idiot?

Slobodan Despot

Well, first of all, thank you very much, both of you for taking your time to discuss a topic that is not at the top of the list. Now, for many people, they don't think about Greece and whatever happens in Southeast Europe, they don't understand. So thank you very much. And then my first impulsion to do this talk was actually a prank. It was the prank on the mayor of Athens. And I thought, how could the elite of a country – well, not only Greece, of course, they're all the same everywhere – , but how could they come to such a level of irresponsibility and stupidity?

How to even describe this? Well, you have Mr. Bakoyannis, the mayor of Athens, answering a call that is very bizarre. I cannot imagine that somebody just picks up the phone and calls the mayor of Athens and says, look, I am the president of the United States, and I want to talk with you. And the other one says, okay. But they have a secretary. The secretary was supposed to say: 'Well, leave us your phone number, we'll call you back.' And then she should have checked the number. So how can such things happen? Such treason? It's a family treason, because obviously he heard it from his uncle, the Prime Minister.

John Helmer

Hang on just a minute. What we don't know is who helps Vovan and Lexus, but I think we can be sure KGB does. They've got telephone numbers first, so when people come in on that line they think it's a private line, they think there are only people in the know. I remember when I had to come in on a line like that actually was from Moscow, we used codewords to clear it. So we were more careful back in whenever that was, 1980s or something. But this guy, first of all, he is only a mayor, and he thinks he's talking to one of his allies, the mayor

of Warsaw. Then there's a particular fondness that some Greeks have for the Poles. It's normal. Some of them are related. Some of their mother, Andreas Papandreou's mother, for example, was, Polish.

But, second, I'm told he's stupid. Now he's got an Oxford degree and a Harvard degree, so he's invested his stupidity in degrees. But I'm told he's a moron. I don't know, Alexander, if you've heard the same thing, his mother is the clever one, his mother is making him Prime Minister. The idea is that [Dora Bakoyannis](#) is going to turn her son [Kostas](#) into a replacement for Mitsotakis. It is what happens now: mama boys like that. I don't know. The interesting thing is that they somehow convinced him. And he's not the stupidest person. Ben Wallace, the defence secretary of the UK, the President Duda of Poland, they've all fallen for it. So the Russians know how to do this. They're never going to tell us how they do it, but they do.

And to be fair to Bakoyannis, and I think we should say it, he's not the only one who's betrayed Greece. The story to tell about these S-300s is that Simitis, the Pasok Prime Minister – the true little coward of Greece in the nineties – forced this after setting up the Cyprus government to buy this stuff on Athens Ministry of Defence Specs, it was all developed that Cyprus would use them. Then the Turks blustered and they prevailed and Simitis backed down. So those particular S-300 s, which is an old model, were moved to Western Crete, where they couldn't threaten the Turks. Now, that was a Simitis betrayal profoundly so, and he caved in to the Americans and the Turks, then betrayed them again when he allowed the Israelis to train against them in 2015. Bakoyannis is simply saying, we're going to screw the Russians and give them to the Poles so that they can hide them. As if the Russians don't know how it's done. But Bakoyannis is just the last of the people using the S-300 like this. And I think we should say it.

Alexander Mercouris

I have nothing to add to anything that John has said. I would absolutely agree. By the way Bakoyannis is not as, I like to say, the sharpest knife in the drawer. He's not a particularly competent or capable or clever person. He is where he is because he's related. His mother is a political force in Greece and that's the only reason, to be quite clear about that. But of course, in Greece, it unfortunately still counts an awful lot, you know, be connected in that kind of way.

And in fairness to Bakoyannis, he's not the only person, as John has correctly said, to be caught in this way. It's an extremely skilful, extremely clever, very effective, very embarrassing intelligence operation that the Russians are running. I have no doubt that this has something to do with the intelligence agencies there. And it's worked incredibly well. And it's a testament, I think, to the fact that the Russians are able to keep one step ahead in terms of all of these private lines; and also to the fundamental lack of competence, generally amongst the European political class, that they continuously fall for this trick. You would've thought that by now there would be precautions, you know: send around people telling them, be very, very careful what you say. Make sure that you know who you are speaking to, if you think you're speaking to someone, make sure it really is the person you're speaking to.

John Helmer

There should be a codeword. But the one thing he says which struck me is incredibly dumb, was that last thing about firewood. Now, that was brilliant! I don't know if you've got the text in front of you, and I made a tweet about it specifically. At the very end (I'm sorry, I can't remember the Polish guy's name to pronounce) he says, we want some firewood from you. Wait a minute! Poland's got trees and water and rain. It's winter there. Athens, Greece does not have abundance supply of firewood. That was a ridiculous thing to say. On the other hand, any bullshit deal like that is a bullshit deal. Now I would interpret it from a Greek point of view and, and a Polish point of view, as an offer for a bribe.

Alexander Mercouris

Completely right, John. That is exactly what it was.

Slobodan Despot

That was the codeword. I'm sure.

Alexander Mercouris

Absolutely.

John Helmer

You'd have to be incredibly dumb to say that on the telephone . And he looked dumb.

Slobodan Despot

Something very similar happened with the François Hollande prank, because he also alluded to some bribing. If you remember, Hollande said (believing he was speaking with Poroshenko), well, there would be deals to do. I don't remember exactly.

John Helmer

Yes, he did. And he looked to the side, like, oh, well, we'll have to deal with that. I mean, yes.

Slobodan Despot

Obviously.

John Helmer

That really, you could almost see him, the hand and the fingers doing 'yes' Yes.

Slobodan Despot

So it looks like these corruption hints are completely normal in the common talks. I mean, maybe it's the essential contents of whatever they have to tell to each other, the firewood, the deals, these things.

Alexander Mercouris

Well, if we're talking about Greece, I have to say this is not completely unusual or unprecedented. There have been times in modern Greece when there's been a lot less of this than there is today. But I think today there is an awful lot of this. In Andreas's time, I don't think it would've been as straightforward as that. It was certainly the impression I got at the time that that was not a government where there was a huge amount of corruption. But there was some.

John Helmer

There certainly was some: the defence minister.

Alexander Mercouris

Exactly, I was going to say the defence Minister. One can't say it didn't happen. But today, it's much more visible and much more open in Greece than it has been for a long time, of course, all after a supposed campaign by the European Union to make it less. But it's ended up, and I think unsurprisingly, making it more. And again, I don't want to bang on about this, but the people who are in charge, who are running Greece today, you would expect coming from them that they would be more inclined to this sort of thing. Now, to what extent this is true of wider Europe? I get the sense that in Britain, corruption has become more, much more prevalent than it was. That was from a very low level previously. But whether this is true in other countries in Europe I have less familiarity with it, but I suspect it is.

S-300, an awkward shield

Slobodan Despot

Let's come to the bottom of the affair. Is it real? Did he just brag or is his uncle Mitsotakis actually ready to hand over the S300s and get some Patriots instead?

John Helmer

Well, I think that it's unclear to all of us, and it's been made public in Greek parliament. It's not been made public in press whether the deal has been done. But then there's a great deal of what is in the nature of the Greek American, NATO and Ukrainian war relationship, which remains secret. There's a defence relationship between the United States and Greece, which remains secret. It wasn't in the 1980s, it was exposed to include nuclear weapons. My guess is that the secret part of the secret agreement now includes nuclear weapons. But we don't know. With this thing Bakoyannis implied that it's a deal.

On the other hand, when, to be fair to him and to Greece, a lot of the stuff – the announcements of the F-16, the announcements of the British tanks, the announcements of the Abrams tank... – go into the press, they're made to look as if they're coming, but they may not in fact be coming for a while. And Ukraine on the battlefield doesn't have a while. So announcements made to look as if X countries – Greece, Britain, France, you name it – are doing everything necessary for as long as it takes are PR. So we are not quite sure that they're deployed until they are deployed, and then we'll know they've been deployed because the Russians will come in and destroy the radar set and hit. Now, these particular systems, the S-300, have something like more than a hundred missiles, more than a hundred of them. So if, if they send the whole set (there are four systems, 32 launchers, 175 missiles), will anything be left in Crete? Well, I doubt it. That's a lot of stuff. The Russian war reports indicate they've been hitting all sorts of missile guidance, and certainly they've destroyed the Patriot. So to get the Patriot now is the most remarkably stupid thing to have done. And Greece is going to have to pay for it. It's not an American gift.

Slobodan Despot

So what, then, about the Turkish threat?

Alexander Mercouris

Can I, first of all, say before we start, I absolutely have no doubt that those S-300s are going to end up in Ukraine. I think the deal has been done, I'm quite convinced of this. And this had to be massaged because we had elections and it wouldn't have been popular. So you do the classic thing, you put off publicizing the decision until after the election period is over. But once the election period is over, one way or another, those S-300s, all of those missiles, are going to end up in Ukraine. And I think this is as night follows day. And John is absolutely right. He says a hundred missiles may sound like a lot of missiles, but the Patriot system in Ukraine launched 32 missiles in the space of two minutes.

So I don't think this is actually going to make any difference at all to the course of the war.

But it's not one of the reasons why this is being done. It's also, from the American side, a test of loyalty. It's an attempt to tell the Greeks: look, you have to give those missiles, and we insist that you give those missiles. And

the government of Greece gives the missiles because they want to show to the United States that yes, they're a fully loyal ally. Any idea that they might backslide, because Greek public opinion is not so sympathetic to Ukraine anymore, is not to be countenance. So it's a way of affirming loyalty, and it's a way for the United States to obtain that affirmation of loyalty.

And again, that's perhaps not hugely important in the scheme of things, but it's something that both sides are aware of Turkish threat. The Turkish threat, I think is a real one, but I don't think it is the current government's priority to anything like the same extent. Much more important for them is to stay on side with the United States. And there's this belief that many people in Greece have, that at the end of the day, we don't need to worry too much about what Turkey does, because provided we are friends with the Americans, they will look after us .

Greece, Russia, Turkey

Slobodan Despot

It means that they believe that the Americans still have a hand over Turkey, which might not be the case.

John Helmer

Definitely not the case. now, you know, it might have been the case if Mr. Erdoğan didn't win reelection or if Mr. Erdoğan has a fatal disease and dies soon. But the fact is that there is no American control of Erdoğan. On the other hand, let's not be fooled by the American press. The Russians don't control him either. And there's always been a very serious difference of assessment of the Turks on the part of the Russian military and the diplomatic establishment. Let's not forget, the Turks [murdered Ambassador Karlov](#). Murdered him, and then shot the guy who shot him. But the prosecution and the way the Turks behaved to investigate the assassination of Ambassador Karlov is disgusting. And all Russians involved in that case, whether they're in foreign ministry or Kremlin, or in the defence ministry or general staff, know it.

And the general staff have a long concern about the behaviour of the Turks. Remember when they ambushed the Sukhoi-24 using F-16s and they murdered one of the bailout pilots on the ground and let the guy who did it get off. In the old days, Soviet Union would've hunted those guys down and taken their parts apart and sent them to the president of Turkey in the old-fashioned way that the Sultan used to get a decapitated head of an enemy.

What has happened is a political affair in Russia. So on the one hand, you have a very effective Turkish lobbying operation, much more effective than the Greeks have ever attempted on the Kremlin. And it works. On the other hand, the diplomatic establishment and the military establishment don't trust them. And as Alexander said, you have this traditional view from Lenin's time that the Kemalists are potentially loyal. So you've got a lot of domestic difference about how to behave. Nobody loves Erdoğan in Moscow, and everyone

understands they're at odds in Libya, they're at odds in Alexandretta, the northern part of Syria and they're at odds in lots of places. But the fact is that there's a need for strategic relationship on gas. There's a need for strategic relationship to bust sanctions, et cetera. And on this basis, I think Putin has come to temper his enthusiasm for a Turkish relationship with realities that Erdoğan presents him with. And it's definitely a case of the devil they know.

So what has not happened, and regrettably, is not for want of trying or understanding: it is because the Greeks never put up anything comparable. Oh, yes, Greece cannot export to Russia. While Turkey can export agricultural goods, fruits, vegetables, Greece has got peaches, but not much more for export. But, on the other hand, Turkey was some years back competing with Greece for the delivery of oil by pipelines to Alexandroupoli. That didn't work. But Greece didn't effectively lobby and Sechin, the boss of Rosneft, opted for the Turkish relationship, not the oil relationship with Greece. There are no oligarchs who are Greek except Savvidis, who is a tobacco merchant, and who's more interested in Greek football than playing a role in Russia. If you want to influence our government, you just take a leaf out of Washington. You, you have to do the same in Moscow. But Russian oligarchs have more at stake in Turkey. Therefore, there's a reciprocal, and there are huge amounts of money involved. Greece never put that up effectively. So...

Alexander Mercouris

Again, I would agree with everything that John has said, except that I would say that Greece not only failed to lobby, but it failed to use the tools that they could use if they did really want to conduct a proper lobbying effort in Russia. And you could put aside for the moment any sentimental considerations. So I think a lot of Russians are sentimental views about Greece, but I don't think that's ultimately going to affect any decision-making in the Kremlin.

But, for example, Greece has one of the largest merchant navies in the world. It's a very powerful merchant navy. We've had good relations. I know about this, I used to be involved in this kind of thing. Ship owners in Greece had contacts with the shipping people in Russia, including in Soviet times. At this particular period of time that we are in, you have to find all kinds of ship owners who are prepared to transport oil and shadow fleets and that sort of thing. It's the kind of thing that Greeks once upon a time excelled in. I suspect they're still doing it quite a lot. In fact, I know for a fact that they are, but we've never leveraged any of that. We've never come along to the Russians and said, look, we're able to help you in ways that the Turks can't, and perhaps you should try and maintain a more balanced relationship between them and us that than you are doing at the moment. We've never really made an effort because governments in Athens have never really believed this. They've always seen the Russians as people we can talk with, but we can't ultimately work seriously with them.

Our focus instead has always been overwhelmingly Washington and increasingly, of course, Brussels.

Whereas the Turks, whatever you may think of them, they've always had a different view. They have never had any doubts at all about the importance of Russia in their relations, either when it's periods of extreme hostility, which I have known, or times like this, when it's become a very hardheaded business relationship, which again, to stress, is not based on any sentimental considerations. Putin and Erdoğan have probably developed a kind of relationship, but I think Putin himself actually admitted at one point that he finds it very difficult to deal with Erdoğan, and he finds him a difficult man.

John Helmer

I think that I can underline what you've just said, Alexander. In prepping for this, I found a series of tables by some American guy who has gone to a lot of trouble to document the way in which the Greek shipping, the oil tanker shipping has entered the breach for sanctions busting. It's a uniquely paradoxical situation in which Greek capital is really helping the Russians bust the sanctions. There's no doubt about it. There's a long history of Greeks doing that. Onassis famously tried to break the American monopoly in Saudi Arabia, and he did, until the Americans struck at him and struck at King Saud at the time, in the mid fifties. The fact is, however – and you know the Greek ship owners better than I did, but one of my jobs used to be to watch them in New York and try to meet them in their clubs and be nice to them – they hate the left in Greece. They're obsessed about communism. They hate Russians too, but they love the money. The opportunity is sitting on a plate, and they'll do it.

Now, there's a way to handle that mentality, but the Soviets never knew it. And the Russians don't know how to do it. You can't bribe that sort of guy. You're right, there is an opportunity there. The ship owners paradoxically don't like Russians, never did, hated them before. No reason to support them now, but they'll happily take the commissions, the 30%, the 40%, the margins are huge, and there's no loyalty to the Americans in this situation. However, the Russians haven't picked up on the opportunity. But the Turks know how to handle this better at the human level, the money level, the commercial level, they simply know how to handle it. The Greeks wouldn't, and the Americans understand the Greek shipowners like the Greek churchmen, which was another asset that hasn't been mobilized properly. The Greek churchmen in New York and the Greek shipowners in New York are always going to be anti Moscow unless Moscow does something about it.

Does Orthodoxy mean anything in geopolitics?

Slobodan Despot

This brings us to the next point. If there still is some emotional part to the current Russian or Greek diplomacy, what's the matter with orthodoxy? Is there any geopolitical factor such as orthodoxy?

Alexander Mercouris

I think that this has existed in the past, but the extent to which it exists today as a bond can be overstated. It is probably true to say that a lot of Greeks who are orthodox Christians, they have a sentimental feeling about the fellow Orthodox, the Great Orthodox nation, which is Russia. But to the extent that Greeks tend to like Russia, my own view is: it has probably less to do with orthodoxy, more to do with history. You know, the fact that the Russians played an absolutely key role in Greek independence. The fact also that if you're on the left the Soviet Union was your course, and, you know, that is not to be underestimated. There are a lot of Greeks who still have that kind of background.

But if you're talking about the churches, the Russian church and the Greek church, I think the thing to say straight away is that they've never really got on. The patriarch of Constantinople, who is essentially a Greek cleric, a part of the Greek church system, even though there's not always a direct connection, has always been rivalrous to the patriarch in Moscow. In my experience, when I've gone to Russian churches, there are growing divergences in the way the liturgy is conducted. And when you speak with Greek priests (I've never spoken with Russian priests), there is a sense of: who are these people, the Russians, they're coming along, they're interfering with orthodoxy? We are all orthodox, but, you know, *we* started this thing. And at the same time, there is the concern that the Orthodox Christian community there is hundreds of millions, and we are just a small place. And you know, we feel nervous about them.

So I've never felt that they really get on very well, not like, say perhaps the Serbian Church, which has a much stronger connection, I sense, with Russia than the Greek one has. I'd say that's rivalry with a certain degree of hostility. And of course, if you're talking about the Greek Orthodox world, which isn't just confined to Greece – remember that there are lots of Greeks in the United States, lots of Greek clerics from the United States – , they tend to have American perspectives. This is my own experience.

John Helmer

I remember a dinner when I was still *persona grata* in the Greek embassy in Moscow, and the dinner was to celebrate something. I don't know, I don't recall who was the Russian visitor, but the ambassador put me at the table with the patriarch, who was then Alexis II, and he had a couple of his priests around him. And I had my female Russian interpreter who was Orthodox. I'm not. Alexis II struck me at the time as a nincompoop. He really didn't understand a great deal about anything much, so that the rhetoric of the multi-thousand-year relationship between the orthodoxies, he was indifferent to it. He seemed quite indifferent to questions of strategy, security, and the relationship.

It's all very well to talk about the sentimental relationship, but Greeks remember when the Russians promised, and they didn't show up. They betrayed the Cretan rebellion against the Turks in the 18th century. So there are ups and downs. And again, while the patriarch's priests were busy trying to peer down my assistant, the front of her dress, and suggesting they meet off the side, and that sort of shit, which is

unacceptable behaviour in front of a patriarch. if you're Greek and you want to take advantage, you want to manipulate, you want to have relationships, you've got to understand how the Russian churchmen were functioning. And to his credit, Putin later attempted the humble attitude. He went to Mount Athos. He showed a level of respect for the Greek church, which is a very good basis on which to negotiate. But then you negotiate and negotiations mean quid pro quo. And again, I think after Alexis, the Patriarch Kyrill is a very clever, competent chap, and he's got surrounded by much cleverer bishops. And I don't think they spend too much time looking down the dresses of young women. On the other side, the United States, the State Department, the New York diocese did a very good job in encouraging schism. And I don't know the ins and outs, Alexander knows much more about this than me, but the Americans funded the schism. schismaticism costs money, in all religions. These priests have to get paid to do what they do, and the Americans did a good job on it.

The Ukraine Schism

Slobodan Despot

Now we have another schism in the Russian church, in Ukraine. And again, it has been funded and helped by the State Department, of course, but by the Patriarchate of Constantinople as well. And the Russians are very bitter about that.

Alexander Mercouris

I think they are, and I think that you are absolutely correct in saying that it's funded by the State Department. But again, I have to say this: I also get the sense that they understood very well that there was this constant tension between the two churches, between on one hand the Greek church and the patriarch in Constantinople, and, on the other hand, the patriarch in Moscow.

So I'm not saying that this would've happened by itself anywhere. Obviously, it needed the Americans to engineer it. But I did actually speak to somebody who was one of the officials who works with the patriarch in Constantinople. And my impression was that they weren't particularly sorry to cause trouble to the patriarch of Moscow. And, from their point of view, bringing Moscow down a peg – given that it is by far the biggest patriarchate, immeasurably bigger flock than any other Orthodox cleric, there's just no comparison, but the patriarch of Constantinople senses that, eventually, other people in time might start to talk to Moscow rather than him – so bringing Moscow down a peg was not unhelpful to him. And of course, money played a role.

John Helmer

Well, I agree with that. And the other religious schism was between the communist parties. The mishandling between the Greek Communist Party leadership and the Russian Communist Party leadership has its parallels with a mishandling of the church relationship. Maybe we think, sitting on our armchairs years later or

offshore, that we could have done better, but the level of personal arrogance that triggers these sorts of splits went lubricated with lots of money, and then turned into fights over real estate in Jerusalem and elsewhere. Because I'm not religious, I look at the church's business in Russia, and I'm not the only one who's investigated that. But the way in which they've grabbed real estate, churches, national monuments in St. Petersburg, I've documented it, the way in which they function and think, needs to be understood.

I don't think there's anything unusual in Christian history about that, or Jewish history or Islamic history. The cathedrals, the real estate, the treasures, the gold on the domes, all that stuff, and the priests and the seminaries, and the reproduction of the church, all those things are vital. Now, Kirill is a very ambitious and grasping and effective businessman, and, to answer your question, Slobodan, I don't think he has understood how to make the geopolitical contest work to his advantage compared to the State Department, the Patriarch of Constantinople, the Cyprus Archbishop, and the Greek one. This is a lost opportunity, but once we're at war, it's all military...

Alexander Mercouris

Just to endorse what you just said, John: ultimately, this is now going to be decided on the battlefield. It was a massive play. It will only really succeed if Ukraine prevails. If Ukraine loses, then the schism will collapse on itself. This whole operation of the State Department engaged in will be an embarrassing thing that everybody will want to forget. And at some point the two patriarchs will reconcile and start doing business with each other. And, by the way, about the patriarch of Moscow being incredibly acquisitive, he's just managed to get himself one of the most valuable paintings by Andrey Rublev. It's now been transferred to him from the Tretyakov Gallery. And I have to say, I am extremely annoyed about that indeed, and I'm sure a lot of Russians are.

John Helmer

Just remember how Napoleon handled the Pope. At one stage he kidnapped him and stuck him in prison. And in the end, the Concordate that Napoleon signed was not bad for secular France, and not bad for Napoleon as an emperor, and not bad for the church. How come we don't think about how to handle the church in Napoleonic terms? There's a time for force, there's a time for negotiation, there's a time for subtlety, there's a time for crudity, none of that's been employed. But we're at war in Europe, it should have been, I'm sure. I don't know how many people in the Kremlin know about the Napoleon's Concord and how he got it.

Slobodan Despot

In my view, John, I think this would be impossible because the mission of Russian Empire is closely related to their theological mission since the prophecy about Moscow being the third Rome. And this was an imperial statement as well as a theological statement.

Alexander Mercouris

I've got to push back on that because unlike most people who refer to that particular quotation, I've read it, and I've actually studied it a little bit. This is based on a fundamental misunderstanding. The author is a monk, I can't remember his name, it was written in the early 16th century, very shortly after the fall of Constantinople. And the thing one has to understand is that before Constantinople fell, the Byzantine Emperor was trying to find allies in Europe. And he started embracing unification with the Catholic church and accepting the Pope's primacy. Of course, this created conflict within orthodoxy and was seen by many people as essentially an act of apostasy, or least heresy. And it was completely rejected by the Russian church at that time.

So what this monk was telling to the ruler of Moscow (who wasn't yet formally czar, he was still the Grand Prince) is this: two Romes have fallen because they've embraced heresy. The first one became Catholic, the second, Constantinople, did so as well. One is left, which is Russia. It's the only one that continues to adhere to orthodoxy. If you do the same as the Byzantine Emperor and the Roman Pope did, and embrace heresy and leave behind you the true defence of orthodoxy, that will be the end of Christianity in the world. It will be the moment when the Antichrist comes, because those two Romes have fallen. There's only a third left standing, and there won't be a fourth. You are our last hope. You are the last hope of orthodoxy. So it is not an imperialistic statement. It is, on the contrary, a statement of extreme concern about the defence and protection of orthodoxy. It's been completely turned around and misunderstood.

John Helmer

And I can only reinforce that from a political and strategic point of view. I do not consider that there is a Russian imperialist ambition here. I think the KKE, the Greek Communist Party, was fundamentally wrong in taking the position that the Russian special military operation or Russian strategy in Ukraine is imperialist. I don't believe it is. I believe that it was, and still is, and will be, defensive in character. And it's to defend the survival of Russia against a campaign that started in the thirties, didn't end with Hitler's demise, didn't end with the end of that Reich, was picked up by the British and the Americans, and I see this as a continuing war to destroy Russia.

Why? Well, for all the good European geopolitical reasons. And there was a time, and there was a phase when Russia, with Germany and the recovering France and the recovering Italy, could have established a significant alliance that fundamentally challenges the US empire, and that's the imperial threat to Russia.

I don't think that the Russian defensive doctrine, neither the military one nor the strategic one, is Christian. There are plenty of religious believers who will carry icons into battle and who believe things. Well, that's fine. That's their belief, but it's not motivating the president. And he's not by any shadow of imagination the only decision maker here. He was the most reluctant of decision makers here in most respects. So whether one sees this in military terms or in political security terms or strategic ones, and you throw in nuclear weapons

atop all of that, I don't see orthodoxy as a factor motivating an imperial ambition. I'm sorry that Ukraine will not exist at the end of this campaign, but that wasn't Russia's doing. Russia's come to it very reluctantly.

Slobodan Despot

I agree. I would just like to give you my testimony as a Serb Orthodox caught in the middle of this crisis within Orthodoxy. The Serbian Church is theologically related much more to the Greek church, its bishops and theologians go to study in Greece, we have our main monastery on the Mount Athos and St. Sava, founder of the Serbian Church, was on Mount Athos. He never went to Russia, obviously. On the other hand, the Russian church has the Serbian Church in very high consideration, unlike the Greek church. From our point of view, we see the Greeks saying: we are old and legitimate, and we see the Russians saying: but we are big. And in a psychological dimension this is, in our view, a confrontation of two, I would say tacit imperialism. We are legitimate and you are not, and we are big and you are not. There is something like that. There is a rivalry.

Alexander Mercouris

Oh, there is. The question is: who's driving it, at least, between the Greeks and the Russians? To be entirely honest, I don't think the Russians have ever really particularly shown much interest in promoting their position as an orthodox church in Greece. I've never seen much evidence. I have more contacts perhaps of the Orthodox world in Greece than John does, but I've never seen much evidence of it, for example, Russian bishops or Russian prelates coming to Greece, talking to people, trying to push their ideas on Greece at all. But of course, from the Greek side, there has always been a push to try to assert oneself, if you like, against this giant that sits there, and it's unsurprising.

Church and the Russian state

John Helmer

And the Greek church was a resistance church. The Russian church didn't resist, it doesn't have a history of resistance. To be sure, the Greek church resisted the Turks, the Russian church was destroyed and did not effectively resist communism. I grew up with a Protestant education, so I've had to pick up a Protestant or, worse, a Presbyterian, not even Church of England, identity in my exposure in Greece and in Russia. But the notion that Greek churchmen were patriotic in a way that Russians were not: this was sentimental. I felt it. People would say it in Greece. They can't say it in Russia, not during the Soviet time. And I don't know about it now. So there is a history of Greek priests doing patriotic things recently. I'm not so sure that there's such a history. But who's the audience for this? A very small number. The real religion, the faithfuls, are much tinier than the Russian church claims. It's tiny and it's elderly, and it's not young. It's not young soldiers. And yet you can see what the Russian president and the defence minister have done. The defence minister comes on the parade and crosses himself. And that's shocking to me.

Alexander Mercouris

I completely agree with John here. You know, I don't have John's depth of knowledge of Russia, but I've been to the country many times. I've spent time with Russians. This is a very superficial Christianity that exists there. And I think that the extent to which the Orthodox Church has swayed in Russia is hugely exaggerated in the West. I think this is not the tremendous force in Russian life that some people think it is. Certainly, it's not in any way comparable to what perhaps it was in the 19th century. I think the idea that there's been some great Orthodox revival is greatly overstated. It suits the government and the people who are in power at the present time to sort of emphasize this connection with orthodoxy, because they got political reasons to do this. They want to have something that defines them as Russians. They are probably trying to rebuild the pieces after the Soviet Union went. They want an alternative to what the Soviet Union was. But in terms of the broader population, this is a very, very superficial thing. And I actually saw somewhere that, if you talk about church attendance in Russia, it's pretty low.

Slobodan Despot

Well, I would just compliment one thing that John said, the history of the submission of the Russian church is much older. It stems from the time of Peter the Great. He broke the church, he submitted it to the state. And since then, the patriarch is a clerk of the Russian state, actually. Whereas before it was not the case. There was equality.

Alexander Mercouris

Well, I don't think there was ever full equality in the sense that I think that if you follow Russian history, the czar always had the strongest position. I'm not a great expert on this, but I think fundamentally you are right. Peter, as I understand it, abolished the Patriarchate, he established instead the holy Synod with a Procurator General, who was appointed by the czar, who was an official, who basically administered the church on his behalf. Most famous of these is a man called [Konstantin Pobiedonostsev](#), who I think John probably knows a lot about more than me. I think this is true. I do think that one can underestimate the extent to which, especially in the later 19th century, there was the beginning of a pushback within czarist Russia from within the Orthodox community, if you like, against this. There was already talk about setting up the patriarchy. There were a lot of theologians active at that time. There were a lot of Christian thinkers. And I do get the sense that at least in the intellectual life of the country, in the late 19th century, early 20th century Russia, orthodoxy was important. And it was not always as subservient to the czar and to the authorities as perhaps it had been, certainly in Peter's time and perhaps later. But what exists today is a shadow of all of this. The reason Peter had to take over the Church and run it in the way that he did was because in those days it was the organizing, intellectual, spiritual force within Russian society. At least that's my impression.

John Helmer

All Kings do that to the churchmen, whether it's Richelieu, whether it's Mazarin in France, kings don't stay kings if the Church is preeminent. That's the way. You're a dumb king if you didn't figure that out. And Europe hasn't had too many dumb kings. Maybe Nikolai II was pretty dumb, but it was all over by then for him.

We mustn't exaggerate the role of the church because that's exactly what the churchmen want. I'm sorry, I'm secular. And I think that the use of the symbols in such a thing as the military parade, the granting of the right to the church to build a cathedral on a military parade ground, all of this stuff is nation forming patriotism, it's motivational, but it's got nothing to do with the predicament of defending the country against its extinction. But the Church is happy and very well rewarded for coming on board. And so it was in England, and so it was in France, and so it was in Spain, et cetera, et cetera.

Slobodan Despot

So to sum it up, we just determined that orthodoxy is not a geopolitical factor. That was the initial question.

Alexander Mercouris

I would say not actually, in the overarching things. I don't think it is.

John Helmer

Yes.

Slobodan Despot

So let's go back to Greece.

John Helmer

that's a relief.

Greece in the EU, an unavoidable error

Slobodan Despot

What happened to Greece in the European Union?

John Helmer

I was with [Andreas Papandreou](#) in his private office from 82 to 89, and then until he died. But I was already in Moscow and I didn't really have a role any longer. And anyway, he was ailing, and he'd been taken over by his then wife, and she got rid of all of us who'd had a relationship with him in the earlier years. I think that the terrible damage that the Troika, the European Union, the IMF, the Germans and so forth, did in the debt negotiations, is as bad as anything the Germans did. The Germans murdered people. They stole from the Central Bank and so forth. But *that* has impoverished Greece for longer than we're going to be alive.

And why did they do it? Why did Tsipras do it? Why was it done by the left? Why did the vote, the referendum saying NO, get overridden? There's a story that [Yannis Varoufákis](#) tells to his own, let's say, self-celebration: I was a long way away and I wasn't involved.

The second form of damage was the haircut that was inflicted on Cyprus. Let's not leave Cyprus out of this story, because Cyprus is still occupied. Cyprus is a Hellenic republic. Cyprus has been seriously damaged by both the Turks and by the haircut in which [Anastasiades](#), the President, was culpable and profited, et cetera, et cetera. So the economic damage inflicted on Greece and the readiness on the part of the prime ministry to accept it still astonishes me. I, myself, in retrospect – and I've talked to bankers, Swiss bankers who were involved in the Argentine debt relief – Greece should have defaulted and worked out an Argentinian solution. But that's easy to say in retrospect.

Your question was why did they accede, why did they collapse? Why did they do that? I don't know the answer.

Alexander Mercouris

Greece joined what was then still the European economic community under the Karamanlis government that preceded Andreas Papandreou's and one always has to understand that there are stages in this development. The EEC that Greece joined was a different creature from the one that it eventually evolved into. Now, there were already warnings in Greece, and I remember them. I knew some of the people who were giving these warnings, or at least my father did at the time. Greece by joining the EEC was going to level Greek domestic industries. In the fifties, sixties, seventies its economy was going quite fast, and we were undertaking a kind of early industrialization. Andreas was aware of that, and he was by no means happy about joining the EEC at that time.

But anyway, we joined. Industry could not compete: it disappeared. Agriculture benefited very well. Funds came in, and Andreas became prime minister. Actually, during the time he was Prime Minister, he was able to use the system that existed then, which allowed a government to operate independently to a great extent. He was able to use it extremely effectively.

Now, for all sorts of personal reasons, I stayed away from Greece between 1978 and 1986, and I remember arriving in Greece in 1986 and travelling around the country. And I was astonished at the difference that Andreas had achieved that in this time. There was a degree of prosperity that I had never imagined could be achieved in Greece. And it was partly because Andreas knew how to work the system very well. He was able to distribute funds that he was getting from the EEC. Agriculture was benefiting, and he built a very impressive welfare state, and he started to invest properly in education. For the first time, secondary education started to be taken seriously in Greece.

And there was even some talk at that time of trying to approach the enormous problems that the university system has in Greece, which have never been resolved. What then happened in the 1990s is that the EU started on a path of integration and the political class in Greece (John mentioned Simitis before, particularly Simitis), the political class in Greece, very, very much wanted to be members of this particular club. So Greece participated fully in this integration process. Simitis insisted against a lot of warnings and advice on bringing Greece into the Eurozone. And in doing all of this, they had very strong backing from some of the very powerful oligarchical systems that exist in Greece. The ship owning community, for example, whose influence, by the way, cannot be understated. It is an enormously powerful force in Greece, even though in many respects it is a parasitic one.

So Greece found itself in the Euro system. And it then discovered that being in the system, it couldn't leave. And a lot of the structures, the welfare systems that Andreas created, were systematically dismantled. The economy first grew and then basically collapsed because it encouraged debt creation. And what you also saw, and this I think has been true not just in Greece but in many other countries, is you saw power steadily drain away from Athens, migrate to Brussels and Frankfurt. And, if we have to be frank, to Berlin as well. And of course, you also started to see Greek politicians start to reorient themselves. Whereas Andrea was functioning in a sort of independent system, his concern was always Greek voters. He had to win over Greek voters. Today, a political leader in Greece, a prime minister, is arguably more interested and concerned about what his standing is in Brussels than it is in a place like Missolonghi or Ermioni, in Greece, anymore.

So it has completely changed the political climate in Greece. And unfortunately, it's drained away a lot of the vitality from our politics. So that once upon a time, you know, if there'd been any suggestion that we send S300s to Ukraine, you'd have had thousands of people protesting. It's interesting to see how over time, after a spike that has curved down, because people have come to realize that whether they protest, whether they vote, the system in Athens is no longer responsive to them.

The genius of Papandreou

John Helmer

I feel a bit awkward with that. I've been out so long and somewhere else for so long. My job with Andreas in the private office was security and military stuff, but we talked a lot about everything, and I sum it up by

saying that Andreas's policy was socialism in the morning and capitalism in the afternoon. And you can pull that off if you know who your enemies really are. And Brussels was an enemy. The United States was an enemy because it attempted to topple him multiple times. Turkey was an enemy. And you have to lie, cheat, steal. Socialism in the morning: all the great things that were achieved, gynaecology in hospitals, the secondary education, all of these things were paid for out of the European Union, the roads, everything. The idea was to strip them as much as we could, as much as Greece could, and not tax the Greek public, because in the afternoon they could avoid tax and accumulate money and do whatever they wanted. But they had to return their vote to Andreas. And you have an unusual prime minister.

This programme, Slobodan, I'm asking myself who was like that, who understood exactly who his enemies were, who understood exactly how weak he was, and understood how to lie, cheat charm and keep the voters at home and screw your enemies by getting them to screw each other.

The only one I can think of was [António Salazar](#) in Portugal during World War II. You think about that: Portugal and Greece were poor miserably, poor agricultural countries going into that war. Portugal managed to keep the Germans out, managed to sell them tungsten, essential for an arms industry without the Germans using the Spaniards in invading Portugal, keeping the British from doing the same and ultimately joining NATO. Salazar doesn't have a very nice reputation, certainly not amongst the Portuguese, but he had the perception of what you must do if you are weak because you're surrounded by enemies and how you balance them. He knew how to do that in Portugal.

Andreas knew how to do that in Greece, and he was popular in a way people trusted him when he opened his mouth. It was extraordinary to listen to a speech. It was charismatic. The family didn't have it. By the way, Nick, the youngest son, had it, but his mother refused to let him run in politics. And now he's a European deputy.

Once that individual goes with the level of conviction, you get little people like Simitis, little people like George Papandreou, little people like [Alexis Tsipras](#) and little people like [Samarás](#), [Mitsotakis Sr](#), [Mitsotakis Jr](#), you get people who essentially want to make an alliance with one of the enemies. Once you do that, they extract their price. Then Greece's debt can't be hidden. You can't cheat your creditor. That's what you do if you're a country, you cheat your creditor if your life depends on it, if your votes depend on it. But without a powerful Salazar type – I don't mean the dictator. I mean a man who earns trust and Salazar had that trust in Portugal – and if you port a boot and you're surrounded by enemies who can squash you like the Germans, the Americans, the Turks, and so on, if you don't have it, you collapse. Just like Alexander said.

Alexander Mercouris

The thing to say about Andreas was that he was an exceptionally gifted politician. And I just wanted to add something on top of all of the very, very real and beneficial changes he made to the material conditions of people in Greece. And by the way, I should say that I didn't particularly like him at the time, and my father was

on bad terms with him. So, although always acknowledging, you know, what had been achieved, I came to understand and respect and in some ways admire him as a critic. I was never close to him in any way, so I just wanted to mention the other thing he did, something that I noticed very strongly when I went back in 1986.

John has done a good article about how tormented our history has been. And it's difficult to convey the atmosphere in pre-Andreas Greece and the atmosphere of post-Andreas Greece. pre-Andreas Greece was not a democracy by any conceivable stretch of the imagination. You want to get a sense of the atmosphere. And I lived through it. I was a child in Greece, before the dictatorship of 1967–74. And I was there through some of that time. You want to get a sense of what it was like. There's that very good French film, *Z*, which actually is surprisingly accurate about the sort of atmosphere. If you read the wrong newspaper in a cafe, you could be targeted.

I remember going out as a child and, you know, I was in a very privileged neighbourhood in Philothei in Greece. I remember (this is before the dictatorship) going with my family to a place. And we'd find that people had been killed there. You'd see the bullet marks and the blood. And there was fear, and there was tension. And even after the dictatorship fell (I was there in 1978, four years after the dictatorship fell), there was still that fear. But when I came back in 1986, Andreas had done away with it completely. It had lifted, like, you know, a fog. And I have to say, that is, for me, his enduring achievement because, despite everything that has happened since, that kind of fear has never returned to Greece.

John Helmer

I can tell you we were afraid of being overthrown by the Americans. And I can tell you also, it wasn't the Soviets we trusted to our rescue. You know the alliances that Andreas thought of: Polish, because his mother had been Polish, because he could deal with [Jaruzelski](#). It was very important to him. [Todor Zhivkov](#), the president of Bulgaria, also. And when the shit really hit the fan, and the Turks were planning an operation on the Greek side (and Andreas was convinced, we were convinced that the Americans were provoking the Turks to damage Andreas and topple him, by showing his weakness), that's when he showed all the brilliance, the flexibility and the confidence: he got Zhivkov to move tanks at the Turkish border. He cut the electricity off the American bases in March of 1987. In that office, there was fear of the enemy. There was never relaxation about it. And that meant good relations with the Palestinians. It meant good relations with unpleasant chaps like Saddam, our pleasant chaps like Gaddafi. It meant a level of confidence for the first time anyone could remember Greeks were behaving like Levantines in that world. Confidently, but with fear: fear of the big enemy. And knowing the Soviets would never come to Greek rescue. The Soviets thought Andreas was just another American pawn. And I had a mission to convince them that they were wrong. I told that story in one of my books. Doesn't matter anymore. Russians now think they're right. And they, unfortunately, are.

A lesson in low-profile ruling

Slobodan Despot

This stresses a very important rule in history. It is that leaders of small countries have to be much smarter than the leaders of big countries.

Alexander Mercouris

Oh, absolutely. Especially in Greece, almost by definition. Greece's neighbourhood is a very tough one. The two great personalities in Greek politics and Greek history in the 20th century were [Eleftherios Venizélos](#) and Andreas Papandreou. By the way, one of the reasons Mitsotakis is the prime minister of Greece today is because his family is related to Venizelos. They, to great extent, trade on this, even though his politics are diametrically the opposite of Venizelos's. But anyway. Venizelos carried out enormous reforms in Greece. He transformed the internal situation in Greece. He also, of course, greatly expanded Greece. But his internal changes were huge. He was also a supreme diplomat. He knew exactly how to do the things that John is talking about: the ability to get on with Kemal, establish relations with the other Balkan states, keep the French and the British on the side, play this constant game of keeping the balls in the air and doing it with immense skill. And Greece achieved significant progress in his time. Not at all different ultimately from what Andreas achieved in Greece.

The problem is: exceptionally clever people, people of that ability, that quality, are rare. And in politics, the moment Venizelos was forced out (because he eventually was pushed out), when he departed the scene, everything began to go wrong. By the late 1930s, Greece was in a very brutal dictatorship. And of course, in terms of modern Greek history, the moment Andreas started to leave the scene again, you began to see things also again start to go wrong. And Greece has ended up in the position that it is in today.

Slobodan Despot

What to add? This is very important. I am here with two people who are really in the game and almost nobody knows about that in my domain in France; they generally don't really understand what's going on in the world. But especially in our part of Europe: here they don't understand anything.

John Helmer

Well, you see, we're Europeans now, and I don't think it's a mistake for Greece to be in Europe. It is a mistake, but it's an understandable one, that the central Europeans, especially the Germans, think Greece is little and you can push it around like you can push Portugal around. The Greek lessons that we're talking about, while they're particular, the Venizelos, the Papandreou, these are names, but the lessons applied to all small countries of Europe, especially if you face an enemy like the Germans or the French for that matter. Or the

British. Those are the three seriously unpleasant enemies that you've got to deal with. And there are a million ways in which the Greek lessons can be applied in other European countries. But just remember that Greece had a civil war brought on by the British and funded by the Americans. A civil war! And the French did a lot of pain too. This is what Europeans do to one another. We have to learn, but the Greek lessons apply to us all in Europe.

Wishing for better, they get the worst: the Serbia case

Slobodan Despot

You know, people don't learn. I see this with the current situation in Serbia. They have a leader there who's not a beacon, I mean, he is very smart, but he is not brilliant, not shiny. He's trying to balance all the time. But people in Serbia, people with the nationalistic take and even clever people, they say he's a traitor because, you know, he's not openly aligned with Russia... But he can't! you're in a situation where you have to do one thing in the morning and another thing in the afternoon, just like you said. But people don't understand that, they're not smart enough. They are trying to topple him. The Serbian Patriots are trying to topple Vucic because he's not patriotic enough, but they don't think what's going to happen if he steps down. If he stumbles, they will get a full-collaborationist regime.

John Helmer

Well, as Serbians go, I don't think anybody's cleverer than Novak Djokovic. Djokovic has managed to face the enemies while playing tennis. The way he handled the Australians, the way he's handled the ban, the way he's handled things, the guy shows a combination of public appeal and subtlety. One shouldn't believe that leaders of companies, leaders of countries make a huge difference. But in small countries faced with this particular combination of inimical forces, the charisma generates trust. And people want to believe, because the risks are huge with enemies like that. I was very impressed at the way Djokovic handled himself and continues to win his game. I'm not interested in tennis really anymore. But as Serbians go, on the international stage, he really knows how to open his mouth. Never mind the tennis.

Alexander Mercouris

The pressures on Serbia are enormous. And of course, they're different from the ones that you have in Greece – and, of course, in Greece, again, I don't think there was ever a patriotic opposition to Andreas. It's a completely different political geopolitical environment. So it's difficult for me to make those sorts of parallels. But I understand your point. It's a case of you have to know how you now have to play. It's the Thucydidean phrase: 'The strong do as they will and the weak do as they must.'

Slobodan Despot

That's it. I would just add this: Papandreou had an international configuration that was similar to the one Tito was faced with, and not the one that Vucic is faced with.

The Viceroys of Athens

Alexander Mercouris

Of course, there's some truth to this. It was still the Cold War. That did give him a certain degree of manoeuvre. But remember, the Cold War was also a prison. Greece's experience overall during the Cold War was a very troubled one. John talked about the Civil War. And the Civil War was a horrible business, a shocking affair, to an extent that people don't understand. And, of course, its legacy, the shadow it cast afterwards, was very deep and very strong. It did provide us with an overpowerful patron, which is the United States, a dominant embassy in Athens (designed by Walter Gropius by the way), which, if you see it today, looks like a fortress. And for a very long time, the most powerful man in Greece in the fifties was the American ambassador, a man called [Peurifoy](#), who basically ran the place like he was the viceroy.

So we are not quite, I think, at such extreme position today, however bad the situation is. In some ways it was worse then in terms of sovereignty and fear and all of those things. But certainly, towards the end of the Cold War, there was a diplomatic and political space which Andreas knew how to use, and which he used with tremendous skill – a skill that no one subsequent to him has ever found. I'm a bit suspicious about charisma as a concept, but the charisma flows from the confidence and the ability and the skill of the leader, which eventually communicates itself to the people so that they at some level understand what he's doing.

Certainly, there may have been all these fears that John was talking about, that the Americans would go to overthrow him. There may have been all these security challenges, all of these risks, but beyond the office, beyond Andreas's office, and the small group of people around him who included John, the contrast in the sense of confidence and security and freedom that existed in his time with that which had existed before was remarkable. It was the reason, by the way, why after 1986, I had been able to return to Greece regularly. And why before I was very reluctant to go.

John Helmer

It's a very interesting point that you made, Alexander, about the viceroy. It is a fortress, the US embassy there, and let's not forget that Jeffrey Pyatt was the previous ambassador. Jeffrey Pyatt was, as we know, the plotter in chief, with Washington, of the coup in Kiev. But look who's the ambassador now! It's a nobody from the Greek American business community sponsored by the New Jersey Senator. The current ambassador is the first, let's call it lightweight, to occupy the fortress. [George Tsunis](#) is his name, he attempted to be nominated by Senator Menendez. [Bob Menendez](#) is one of the really serious Russia hating members of the United States

Senate from New Jersey, he promoted Tsunis to be ambassador to Norway as a reward for fundraising in New Jersey and fundraising for the Obama campaign. But Tsunis couldn't get the ambassadorship to Norway because he proved to be an idiot on the stand. Now, that requires a certain achievement, to be an idiot in your nomination, and he was. He didn't know anything about Norway. He confessed to not knowing anything about Norway, and then Obama dropped him. He's now the US Ambassador to Athens. What does that mean? It means that the United States is utterly confident now that it controls the country. And it was never so confident before. And this makes me very sad. I look back because I'm gone from Greece. I'm sorry to say but it's sadness to see the viceroy is a rabbit. Oh!

Not even apparatchiks...

Slobodan Despot

So this brings me to my last question, which is a provocative one. Why are the current European elites so dumb?

Alexander Mercouris

I've thought about this a lot because it's not, of course, a unique problem to Greece at all: we have a major deterioration. I get to say what I think here, which is that it is very connected, and I'm sorry to say this because for most of my life, I was a huge admirer and supporter and enthusiast for the European project. But I think it is partly a product of how it has evolved in the sense that it has become very integrated, very centralized. Power has drained upwards, to Brussels and Berlin. And instead of having people who consider themselves to be connected to the society that they are part of, who therefore have to go out, vote, win elections campaign on real issues, participate in the proper cut and thrust of democracies and democratic politics, what you now have increasingly is a political system across Europe, in which, because power is centralized in Brussels, political leaders of every conceivable description, be they supposedly on the left or on the right, always focus on keeping in step with what Brussels and Berlin and ultimately Washington wants. That means that these people lose political skills, and they are more conformist, more careful to follow the line, if you like, that comes from the top than they are about being responsive to what goes on in their own societies. And that drains away political energy, and it drains away political acuity. So we get a situation where, if you, like, everywhere across Europe, you have these mediocre apparatchiks, they're not really apparatchiks, not even, but that is effectively what they have become.

John Helmer

I was going to use exactly the same word. The political culture has turned into an apparatchik culture because we don't have political parties exposed to people. Whether one agrees with certain politicians or not, there's an immense skill in developing relations, reflecting multiple points of view, establishing trust. Just as the skill in business consists in accumulating money, investing it, and earning rates of return. There's really great skill

in doing the same with votes instead of money. But if you have an apparatchik culture, it's like a university. The guy at the top appoints a couple of people underneath who slave for him or her, and they don't represent anybody except the boss, the professor. It's a tree structure in which people are promoted for conformity.

Alexander said it: it's conformism inside an institution in which any display of dissent gets destroyed because it's not necessary. There's no competition in the system. It's a promoting system that's conformist. And they believe in the technology of winning elections. They are supported by military and secret service systems, the so-called deep state systems, where there are certainly intelligent people. But where doctrinal conformism is the rule. And we don't have democratic exposure of any of this because the media have fallen in line. And so we end up with essentially fascist rule: force, fraud, and propaganda. And this as it continues rewards mediocrity. People can be clever in a nasty way. People can be clever in a calculating way. But to save a small country from big enemies, that cleverness is gone. Regrettably, it's gone. It's sad to say it.

You put to a last question, Slobodan: 'What's there left of the Greek spirit?' And you mentioned Theodorakis, maybe Alexander will answer that one. , I've got a few thoughts, but the Greek spirit... We shouldn't end this so sadly.

An ancient, resilient, people

Alexander Mercouris

Oh, it is very demoralized at the moment, but you know, we are an ancient people. We've been around for a very, very long time. We come back. I don't want to sound glib now because obviously I don't want to understate, you know, what's going on, but we will bounce back in some way and in some form. For one thing, the system that we have today is not a sustainable one. First, it has created a political stagnation. We also see that it's creating a socioeconomic stagnation as well, and indeed a decline. And when declines begin, that eventually does lead to openings and changes. So we will come through. Greeks will come through. They're incredibly resilient.

I can't stand these people myself, but John was talking about how tough-minded and clever the shipowners are in doing every conceivable deal that they can. And it's absolutely right. You know, their ability to do this is remarkable. So we have that tenacity, we have that strength. We have the support of the diaspora, which is huge. I don't mean political support or economic support, but it is there. It provides the sort of backstop, if you like, to Greece. We will come through, we will surf the storm as we always have, and we'll be back and we'll be making our contributions again. Greece has made many contributions, even as a small country. We made huge contributions in culture, in literature, in poetry, in music. Xenakis, I know is a composer in France, for example. So we always punch above our weight and we will come back.

Just study the footwork!

John Helmer

Well, I'm the unusual one in the sense that it's a very rare thing in a culture to have somebody called a philhellenico, somebody who loves the country, as a foreigner. Because I have no blood relationship to Greece at all, and I came to Greece for various political reasons through Cyprus, when Andreas was still in exile. It is something for a culture and a polity to accept a foreigner like me – and I got to be modest about it, I remain a foreigner, my Greek was very poor and remained poor. But I got to understand what I needed to understand. And so I will always emphasize the way in which the lessons that I learned apply all over Europe to Europeans, as well as to France, or at least in some of the French regions that want to be free of Paris and some of the British regions, the Cornwall and other places that I am fond of, Wales and Cornwall and Scotland that wanna be free of the centre too.

Greece has a lesson in all of those places. But as for Theodorakis and Zorba, I lived many years in Hania in Western Crete, and the place I used to go near Hania for swimming was Stavros Beach. It is a very simple beach, it's very shallow, but it's the beach where we got some of the film scenes that everybody remembers: Zorbas dance. When Zorba speaks to Alan Bates and they're standing on the beach, that is Stavros Beach. It's being kept exactly the way it was filmed with the little Zorba's hut still there. At least it was when I was last there, which was quite a while ago. And you watch that dance, and you listen to what Anthony Quinn says to the Englishman, to the school teacher (I just wrote it down): 'You need a little madness.' You must dare to cut the rope and be free. That's what he says.

And then they dance. And then this music, which is obviously famous, comes on. You don't actually see the footwork, because Bates couldn't dance properly. And actually, it's rather hard to dance on the sand. But that was the place, and it was kept that way. God knows what's happened to that part of Crete now. But then you go flash forward, and I recently saw the Munich concert – Munich, by the way, in Germany, where Theo is conducting, and Anthony Quinn then 80 years of age, comes on the stage and they play it again. And it's remarkable this time you see Quinn's footwork and he can dance! And remember that Anthony Quinn was a Mexican American, not a Greek, and what he did for that character! I've struggled my way through the book. I don't know if you struggled, Alexander. (Alexander: Oh, yes, absolutely.) What a book! I find it easier to read Cavafy's poetry of Alexandria than I find it so easy to read Zorba.

Alexander Mercouris

Kazantzakis is extremely difficult. In Greek it is considered to be very difficult and very complex and strange.

Slobodan Despot

Though there's one very clear book by him. It's the *Report to Greco*, the autobiography. It makes clear to everybody what freedom means. So obviously!

John Helmer

So it's essential to remember, in my opinion, I never danced. The great thing about dancing in Greece is you can dance for yourself. You can dance by yourself, and you can dance out of misery, not just sexually or erotically. And you dance on death, many things. In my opinion, this was what Anthony Quinn could do. Of course, there was a Greek director and a Greek musician who, who played. And you could see the 80-year-old man on stage showing a group that must have been at least half German that there is a Greek spirit. There is a sense of the freedom. There's something you can learn, but you've got to watch the footwork very carefully. And I despair of thinking that Greece will be free in spirit in what's left of my lifetime. But, as Alexander said, one day, if Greeks care enough about it to break free and cut the rope, cut the rope to Washington, cut the rope to Brussels, cut the ropes to Moscow too, then they'll be free.

Slobodan Despot

John, we must never despair. I will tell you my own story. I was educated in, in the west, in Switzerland, and in those late eighties, when I would come back to Yugoslavia, I thought Serbia is no more, it was a dead country, a dead people. They were more or less Yugoslavs. They had no hope in anything. And then the enemy came and revealed them to themselves. And you wouldn't have Djokovic you if you wouldn't have had the bombing in 99. They did us a great service by bombing us. And you know, it's a miracle. History is made of miracles. You wake up. You go to sleep, you wake up again.

Alexander Mercouris

Absolutely. And as I've heard said, and as I also say many times, despair is a very bad counsellor. You should never give way to it.

Slobodan Despot

. Yes, exactly. That's the right conclusion to all this.

John Helmer

Well, it's my time of the night when I can drink some of this and whether that makes a good counsellor or not, I leave to you gentlemen to decide, but it's... That plus dancing can drive despair away.

Alexander Mercouris

Yes, absolutely.

Slobodan Despot

Yes. Thank you.

Alexander Mercouris

Thank you very much.