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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 ATHENS 001692

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TAGS: PREL, SOCI, ASEC, PHUM, ECON, TU, MK, GR
SUBJECT: GREEK RIOTS - WHAT HAPPENED AND HOW THEY IMPACT U.S. INTERESTS

Classified By: Ambassador Daniel V. Speckhard for 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

1. (C) The riots that began in Greece following the December 6 police shooting of a teenager have shocked even the most cynical of Greeks, and have resulted in hundreds of millions of Euros in economic damage. The unrest has deeply polarized society, with youth of all socio-economic backgrounds generally supporting the demonstrations, and most people over thirty condemning the violence. Although it is difficult to



pinpoint the exact causes of the riots, major contributing factors included:

- the insular, hothouse atmosphere of Greece's few hundred ultra-radical "anarchists;"
- popular frustration with corruption and political leaders;
- the disillusionment of the youth, who see fewer economic opportunities than previous generations did;
- irresponsible and inflammatory media coverage branding the shooting as cold-blooded murder;
- demoralized Greek security forces, weakened by post-junta limits and public distrust; and
- popular sympathy (and in some cases nostalgia) for the radical left and public tolerance of expressions of opposition through violent means.

2. (C) The government response was characterized by PM Karamanlis' absence, and most government announcements were left to Minister of Interior Pavlopoulos. The government apparently instructed the police to respond solely with a defensive posture. We believe the Prime Minister wanted to avoid any additional deaths or any platform for grievances and negotiations with the authorities (such as an occupied government building). Many Greeks believe the Karamanlis government mishandled the situation -- both by not taking a tougher stance against the violence but also by having allowed socioeconomic conditions to deteriorate. Thus, most Greeks, including those who would normally be Karamanlis supporters, now believe it is only a matter of time before the PM has to call new elections, although Karamanlis appears resolutely opposed to doing so. We expect the opposition to continue to press hard to bring down the government, and we expect the government to take steps to show leadership and action, including likely Cabinet changes.

3. (S) U.S. interests will be affected. Constrained by the unrest, the Greek government will be even more inwardly-focused than usual. Greece will likely be unwilling or unable to take bold actions on regional foreign policy issues, including the Macedonia name issue, relations with Turkey, or pressing the Greek Cypriots on negotiations in Cyprus. The government bureaucracy, ever cautious, will become even more wary in the face of political uncertainty, making it harder to address other issues on our agenda, including commercial, educational, security, and human rights issues. Finally, there are precedents in Greece for domestic terrorist groups to strike in the wake of major civil unrest, taking advantage of exhausted and demoralized security forces. We will need to continue to monitor aggressively a potentially growing domestic terrorist threat. End Summary.

What Caused It?

4. (C) Although Greece is no stranger to demonstrations that



include destruction of property, Molotov cocktails, and rioting, the riots that began on December 6 were qualitatively different. Estimates are still pending, but the total bill is expected to amount to hundreds of millions of Euros in damage. The rioting and demonstrations were not limited to Athens and Thessaloniki but took place throughout the country, including in normally quiet provincial centers. Also, although the violent demonstrations were initially the work of anarchists, thousands of university and high school students of both sexes eventually joined in. Televised footage showed youths as young as 13 throwing rocks at police.

5. (C) Reports by major foreign news organizations highlighted problems in the Greek economy as a cause of the rioting, and these problems certainly played a role. Like other smaller European economies, Greece is being affected by the global downturn. Its two leading industries -) shipping and tourism -) already are feeling the impact of the credit

ATHENS 00001692 002 OF 004

contraction and weakening consumer demand. GDP growth, relatively strong in recent years (4 percent in 2007), has slowed in 2008 (the government projection is for 3.2 percent), and is expected to decelerate further in 2009 (the government projection is for 2.7 percent, but private analysts, including the IMF, project a lower 2.0 percent growth rate). Unemployment, especially amongst the young, is rising, and about a fifth of the population now lives below the official poverty line. Unemployment numbers are likely to spike as the economic slowdown hits Greece's real economy in the new year. But even before the current global downturn, the Greek economy suffered from structural problems including a rigid labor market and a large public share of the economy that limited its flexibility, discouraged innovation, and stymied expansion. Greece, indeed, has many of the elements of a corporatist system, in which a relatively small group of well-known families control economic and political centers of power. Corruption and connections, rather than entrepreneurship and innovation, are seen as the keys to getting ahead. Greece is considered an unattractive place to work and invest, ranking 96th -) the lowest in the EU -) in the World Bank's "doing business" ranking.

6. (C) The Karamanlis government came to power in 2004 with a reformist agenda, but has met with resistance from entrenched interests and members of the public -- all for reform as long as it does not reduce their own individual perks. Moreover, the Karamanlis government has been plagued by its own corruption scandals, including the current Vatopedion monastery affair, which brought down some of the Prime Minister's closest advisors.



7. (C) Problems in the economy and governance have led to widespread social dissatisfaction and a sense that economic opportunities, for the first time in a generation, are contracting. These frustrations contributed to the recent rioting and fostered an attitude of tolerance amongst much of the general public for the youthful "victims" of a government and society unresponsive to their needs. At the same time, (!QQQ%Q\$ Q% Q(!Q\$\$ "!"Q overestimate the role Q\$!Q\$\$ "QQQQ%Q"!%Q "!" SysQ%! R! Qarch(QQQQ "QQQ\$Q) Q%Q(!Qp several hundred and th! Q !"QQeeks are wary of the QQQ !! !" QQ!QQQQQ QQQQ!aes because of their abQQ!Q!"QQQ!QQ!Q and entitlement. The "!!QQQQ QQQQQQQQQQ!Q Q)QQ(" Q\$ proscribed period du! Q! Q!"QQ! Q) Q%Qpuptions. University "asylum" policies prohibit state security forces from entering campuses without permission from university administrators (granted very rarely), adding to the ideologically charged atmosphere of "anything goes."

9. (C) The anarchists, headquartered at the Athens Polytechnic, have escalated their violence in recent years. Many observers believe that this trend was a concerted attempt to provoke the police into a disproportionate response, in turn sparking an even broader "uprising." The anarchists appeared to get what they wanted in the December 6

ATHENS 00001692 003 OF 004

shooting of Grigoropoulos, and they used blogs and SMSes to spread the news and mobilize their forces. As anarchist violence escalated, other university and eventually high school and even middle school students, some disgruntled, others attracted by the radical chic, joined in.

Dinosaurs of the Hard Left

10. (C) Exacerbating the unrest was the opportunism of the leftist political parties. Unlike their counterparts in many other European countries, the leftist parties of Greece have not evolved with the fall of the Berlin Wall, further EU integration, and economic globalization. The ideology, tactics, and goals of the Greek "hard left" remain much as they were during the Cold War, and these parties have served as a retiring ground for many aging anarchists. Reflecting the ideological divisions of an earlier era, the left remains divided between the orthodox Marxist-Leninist, Soviet-style Communist Party of Greece (KKE) and the new left SYRIZA party, which has taken up the slogans and mindset of anti-globalization while retaining a loyalty to Marxism. Both the KKE and SYRIZA supported the recent demonstrations in an effort to further discredit the government. While the KKE publicly supported only peaceful, disciplined demonstrations, however, SYRIZA more openly egged anarchists



and students on to violent action.

Irresponsible Press

11. (C) Finally, the Greek press had a role in aggravating the riots. Most Greek media carried breathless reports seemingly aimed at inflaming and not calming the situation. Media hyperbole helped trample the principle of "innocent until proven guilty" in the court of public opinion, with many journalists reporting that the accused police officer had fired on Grigoropoulos in cold blood, although government officials made similar statements. Police explanations that the shooting may have been accidental were derisively dismissed.

What Did the Government Do About It?

12. (C) One of the most striking aspects of the events was the Prime Minister's absence; Karamanlis stayed largely out of the public eye, leaving public statements to his Minister of Interior, Prokopis Pavlopoulos. At the height of the violence, Karamanlis made just two short television appearances -- calling for calm in the one and laying out a technocratic, detailed plan for government assistance to affected businesses in the other.

13. (C) The police generally did not respond assertively to the violence and instead assumed a defensive posture. We assess that there are two explanations:

-- Initial Indecision: Initially taken by surprise, the government took the populist road, not wanting to be seen as "fascists," and thus did not direct the police to clamp down.

-- Avoid Any Additional Deaths and Deny Anarchists a Platform: As the riots worsened, however, we assess that Karamanlis and his advisors calculated that he must first and foremost avoid the possibility of any additional deaths that could fuel greater unrest. At the same time, greater force was apparently authorized to allow police to ensure that the protestors did not occupy government buildings or significant landmarks that could be used as a basis for a prolonged public platform for grievances and negotiations with the authorities. The police were clearly operating under different rules of engagement when defending the Parliament or the Foreign Ministry, than the commercial establishments next door.

What Does It Mean?



14. (C) Weaker Government: While the long-term implications for Karamanlis are unclear, for now many Greeks believe the PM and his government severely mishandled the situation.

ATHENS 00001692 004 OF 004

Most, including those who would normally be Karamanlis supporters, are openly stating that it is only a matter of time before the PM has to call new elections. Conventional wisdom holds that these events are a final "mortal blow" that comes on the heels of other political crises, scandals, and the global economic crisis. The opposition, criticizing the government's response, called for the government to step down, and we expect these calls to grow louder, particularly if the unrest continues. The opposition is smelling blood. That said, it is impossible to predict exactly when this shoe might drop. If/when the government does fall will depend less on the opposition and more on dissent within the government's own ranks. We expect the government to take steps to show leadership and action, including likely Cabinet changes.

15. (C) Our Interests: In short, the Karamanlis government will be even more inward-looking than before, and it will be either unwilling or unable to take bold actions or be out of sync with popular sentiments on key regional foreign policy issues. This means that the Greek government will likely take defensive positions on the Macedonia name issue and relations with Turkey. It will also likely eschew any troop deployments that could open it up to criticism -- such as sending significantly increased numbers to Afghanistan. Greek politicians will also be unwilling to be out of sync with the Greek Cypriot leadership, and therefore loathe to press them on any aspect of the current negotiations. The ever-cautious Greek bureaucracy will, in the face of political uncertainty, become even more risk adverse, making it harder to address other issues on our agenda, such as commercial, educational, security, and human rights issues. Finally, should rumors of a cabinet reshuffle or early elections grow stronger, FM Bakoyannis may be seen by her interlocutors as a potential "lame duck" as she takes on the role of OSCE Chairman-in-Office in January.

16. (S) Terrorism: Most importantly, we will need to monitor aggressively the growing domestic terrorist threat. Following the public outrage that resulted from the 1985 killing of a youth by police, the November 17 terrorist group entered a renewed operational phase and carried out additional attacks against Greek, U.S., and other targets. We will need to sharpen our vigilance to defend ourselves and to encourage a robust Greek response to terrorism in the face of exhausted and demoralized security services, popular dissatisfaction and angst, and a government that will

undoubtedly have its attention focused elsewhere.
SPECKHARD





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To: Greece Athens, Secretary of State
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TAGS: Greece; Crete [GR]
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C O N F I D E N T I A L ATHENS 001725

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 2019/12/23
TAGS: PGOV, OEXC, SOC, GR
SUBJECT: University Asylum in Greece: When Democracy Goes Awry

CLASSIFIED BY: Daniel V. Speckhard, Ambassador, State, EXEC; REASON:

1.4(B), (D)

1. (C) Summary: A series of violent attacks against Greek academics in both Athens and Thessaloniki during the past month has fueled public debate over whether the university asylum law should be repealed to allow police officers to enter university grounds absent a formal request from university authorities. Both sides of the debate are vocal: leftist-leaning politicians and students oppose any change to the present law, which they claim is a beacon of free speech. Proponents of abolishing the law argue it is an outdated holdover from the early post-dictatorship years, irrelevant to today's Greek reality and nothing more than a legal cover for hoodlums to wreak destruction with impunity. The government appears unwilling to touch this political hot potato, tossing it instead to university rectors who are forced to choose between their own safety (when calling in authorities to intervene) and that of their students, faculty and premises (when they refrain from doing so). As debate continues over what to do with asylum, the broader cost of maintaining this policy (the only one of its kind in Europe) in terms of disrupted classes, missed semesters,



delayed graduations, damage to university property, and psychological impact on administrators, faculty and the well-meaning student majority, is inestimable. End summary.

An Education in Violence

2. (C) In the year following the death of Alexis Grigoropoulos, the teen who was accidentally shot by a police officer, leading to some of the worst rioting that Greece has ever seen, violence on Greek campuses continues. The respected and influential long-time rector of the University of Athens and Embassy contact, Christos Kittas, was recently severely beaten by assailants on university grounds. He resigned his post after suffering a heart attack following the assault. In his widely-publicized resignation letter, Kittas admonished Greece's youth that it is high time for them to find non-violent means to express themselves. Kittas is not the only victim of violence on university grounds. Also recently, a professor at the Athens University of Economics and Business, Gerasimos Sapountzoglou, was targeted by hoodlums who beat and choked him when he refused to stop a lecture. Anastassios Manthos, rector of Thessaloniki's Aristotle University, was knocked unconscious by students last year. Several other academics have suffered similar attacks in Athens and Thessaloniki over the past year, yet most avoided publicly condemning the assaults, fearing reprisals.

The Asylum Law: How Did We Get Here?

3. (C) The university asylum law was introduced in 1982 to protect freedom of thought and expression on university campuses, in the aftermath of the military dictatorship. The law stipulates that only university rectors and/or leadership have the right to invite police onto a campus. In reality, university administrators are extremely reluctant to do so, first and foremost because they fear for their own safety and second because doing so could instigate further violence on campus. To our knowledge, there have only been three instances when permission for the police to enter university grounds was requested: a) in 1985 at the sit-in at the Chemical Laboratory in Athens; b) in 1995 during a destructive sit-in at the Athens Polytechnic School; and c) in 2002 during the informal EU Defense Ministerial in Crete, when a police helicopter spotted marijuana plants in a field owned by the University of Crete and police officers were given permission to uproot 620 six-foot high marijuana plants.

Sacred Cow or Red Herring?

4. (C) In contrast, during the violent protests of December 2008 in which university grounds were targeted by hoodlums, university officials did not call in the police for fear that violence would escalate. Police remained well outside university walls as they were taunted by Molotov cocktail-throwing vandals from within. Since then, the topic of university asylum has been the subject of heated public and political debate. Leftist political parties and student groups in Greece support the current law, to protect free



speech. Those in favor of repealing the law argue that it was enacted during a time when universities were the sole venues of tolerance and freedom. However, in today's stable Greek democracy, freedom of speech and thought are well protected already. As practiced today, they say, the law is supporting a system that encourages violent action without repercussions, allows lawlessness on campuses, provides a sanctuary for criminals, and threatens the academic and student communities.

Rectors Unite, Government Punts

5. (C) During an annual Rectors' Assembly in mid-December, the law was at the top of the agenda. Rectors agreed that the law should be seen as protecting freedom of speech in the classroom and

research. The rectors stressed that the law has been misinterpreted to such an extent that it no longer protects these rights, but has become a facade for committing crimes and a tool for the violent imposition of opinions by the few. In the days following the assembly, there was significant public debate on how universities can protect themselves from acts of violence on campus. The Athens Law School took a bold step toward restricting access to its campus, proposing introducing a student ID system similar to that used by the Sorbonne and posting guards at its gates - an idea supported in principle by the opposition. Minister of Education Anna Diamantopoulou responded on behalf of the government, condemning the attack on Rector Kittas but stating that the current legislation regarding university asylum is sufficient as written, since it provides for universities to choose how best to protect their premises and allows for police involvement on campus at the invitation of rectors. Diamantopoulou also recommended the establishment of a duty rector on a daily basis in order to coordinate better with authorities in case of a sit-in or violence on campus.

6. (C) Diamantopoulou's claims may be aimed at appeasing leftist elements within the PASOK party and outside, but are opposed by others. University of Piraeus professor Aris Tziampiris, educated in both the U.S. and the Greek systems, told us that university rectors and professors are cowed by the demonstrators and fear for their lives when they stand up to them, adding "they (hoodlums) know where they (administrators) live, and are not afraid to use this threat ." Panteion University professor and IV Nikolaos Bakounakis agreed that the troublemakers are adept at using intimidation tactics, including posting the names of targeted professors on a Greek anarchist website (hosted, incredibly, on the official Panteion University server) and disrupting classes. Bakounakis has resorted to hosting visiting lecturers off campus to avoid yogurt-throwing attacks, or worse, by hooligans and in a recent international conference he paid 6,000 Euros for an off campus site rather than risk the disruption or even forced cancellation of the event if held on campus.

What About the Students?



7. (C) Although Greece's overwhelming majority of law-abiding, well-meaning students are those most directly affected by the violence on campus, for the most part they remain quietly resigned. Bakounakis estimates that the problems are created by approximately 2,000 hooligans - not all of them students - who are known to police but are never arrested or detained. In Greece, students elect student union representatives, who are affiliated with political parties. Because the vast majority of students abstain from the elections, in many cases leftist groups prevail in some departments - these are the most vocally supportive of university asylum as it is currently practiced. Student union representatives also hold the keys to the appointments of rectors and other administrative officials, representing 30 percent of the vote. As a result, according to both Tziampiris and Bakounakis, a client relationship between university administration and student groups has been established that makes it difficult for administrators to take a hard line on asylum. Tziampiris added that even political parties sometimes cannot control their own student unions, as when the New Democracy-affiliated student union at the Athens Law School was reprimanded by newly-elected ND party leader Antonis Samaras for opposing a proposal put forward by the university administration for the creation of student IDs. Even parents of students appear resigned to the phenomena of missed semesters and delayed graduations.

The Social and Financial Costs are Staggering

8. (C) The extent to which a small number of troublemakers has succeeded in confusing the concepts of freedom of speech and freedom of movement is troubling, as are the social and financial costs involved. Campuses have become havens for criminals, most of which are involved in crimes such as drug trafficking, assault, theft, counterfeiting of DVDs and CDs, looting and vandalism. Greece's universities, instead of providing a stable learning environment for Greece's future professionals and leaders, have become a war zone where police are afraid to show up, administrators are afraid to stand up and students are afraid to speak up. Due in large part to constant disruptions to classes, the average Greek student takes six years to complete a four-year degree. Greek universities spend a whopping 12 percent of their budgets each year to repair damage to university premises and equipment caused by violence on campuses.

What Next?

9. (C) The fact that changes to the university asylum law are even being discussed is a big step forward for Greek society, an indication that, for many, this formerly sacred legislation may be past its prime and no longer applicable to today's reality. The

Polytechnic revolution generation has become parents now, and their children are reaping the not-so-generous benefits of a concept for which they fought, which has now been distorted by common criminals. Public debate notwithstanding, however, at this time there does not appear to be the political will by the current

government to repeal the law. Traditionally, PASOK has been viewed as a champion of all that the asylum law - in its intended form - has represented. Insiders fear that repealing the asylum law would cause a serious rift within the party, particularly within its student and youth ranks. Tossing the ball back to university rectors rather than initiating a more forceful approach to violence on university campuses appears to be the preferred path of least resistance , for now, for this government. In discussions with Embassy officers, faculty and university administrators describe a prevailing sense of fear and intimidation on many campuses. The irony is that, due to the asylum law and the inability to protect students and professors who dissent from hard line views, the only place in Greece where freedom of thought is severely restricted is on university campuses themselves.

Speckhard





Canonical ID: 06ATHENS1507_a
Subject: STUDENTS PROTEST PROPOSED UNIVERSITY REFORMS, SHUT
DOWN ATHENS CENTER
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To: Group Destinations European Political Collective, Secretary
of State
Original Classification: UNCLASSIFIED, FOR OFFICIAL USE ONLY
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Concepts: -- Not Assigned --
TAGS: Greece; Crete [GR]
Political Affairs--External Political Relations [PREL]
Political Affairs--Government; Internal Governmental Affairs [PGOV]
Social Affairs--Cultural Affairs [SCUL]
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ATHENS 001507

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

FOR EUR/SE

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: PGOV, SCUL, PREL, GR
SUBJECT: STUDENTS PROTEST PROPOSED UNIVERSITY REFORMS, SHUT

DOWN ATHENS CENTER

ATHENS 00001507 001.2 OF 002

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED -- PLEASE HANDLE ACCORDINGLY.

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Following over a month of sit-ins, strikes, and protest rallies opposing GoG plans to reform the Greek university system -- especially allowing private, non-profit universities to operate -- left-wing and communist student groups and some university professors on June 8 organized a 10,000-strong demonstration. The central Athens march all but stopped transportation in the city. When the



march turned violent, police responded with tear gas and detained forty persons, 4-5 of whom remain under arrest. The GoG has stood firm (thus far) in its plans to go ahead with the reforms, despite calls for Education Minister Yiannakou's resignation from a representative of the left-oriented professors' union, which claims she did not adequately consult with them, students or parents. Opposition PASOK leader Papandreou was less resolute, initially supporting the education reforms, then backpedaling in the face of protests from PASOK's own student organization. He is now calling for the reforms to be delayed. END SUMMARY.

2. (SBU) University students and university teaching staff held a 10,000-strong demonstration in central Athens June 8 to express opposition to government's intention to pass comprehensive university education reforms. Anarchists and various leftists groups used the opportunity to attack banks, stores, cars, and a major hotel. Police, well accustomed to large Athens demonstrations, used tear gas and detained 40 persons - Greek police told us that four to five demonstrators would be prosecuted. Ten policemen and four civilians were injured. The demonstrations nearly paralyzed public transportation and vehicular traffic through the center of Athens. A smaller, follow-on student demonstration took place on June 9 and another is planned for June 15.

3. (U) The education reforms, the text of which has not yet been released or officially presented to Parliament, are said to touch upon such important issues as: university asylum (which prevents police from entering university campuses without permission and therefore creates havens for criminals); eliminating "lifelong students" by capping years of study; re-evaluating professors' teaching obligations and promotion to tenured faculty positions; and deregulating university education to allow and recognize private, non-profit universities in Greece. Currently, Greece only recognizes degrees from free, public Greek universities where placement is based on a nationwide entrance exam. While many of the proposed reforms would take immediate effect, the establishment and recognition of non-profit, private universities would require a Constitutional amendment that would not be ratified until the next Parliament meets. Many who oppose the amendments have focused on what they call the "commercialization" of the public university education or "surrender of public universities to private interests." They argue that introducing non-profit institutions would remove the egalitarianism of the Greek university system, higher salaries at private schools would attract professors and administrators away from the public university system, and unqualified, rich students would be able to "buy" their way in to private schools.

4. (U) In actuality, such reforms are desperately needed. The asylum policy, a holdover from post-junta leftist ideology, forbids police from entering campuses for any



reason. In effect, anarchists, not students, regularly use university campuses to launch Molotov cocktails from or to hide in after attacks in the city. Facilities are poorly maintained; one Athens professor told poloff he finally paid a student from his pocket to repair long-broken light fixtures in his dark lecture hall. If there were competition for students, he hoped that the state might take more seriously maintaining and protecting its facilities.

5. (U) The current recognition in Greece of only public university degrees means that public university graduates have a monopoly on seats in graduate programs and highly sought-after civil service jobs. Faced with a revolution in the failing university system, students have predictably responded in a reactionary way, seeking to preserve a privileged position from the risks of competition. Moreover, Greek students fear that non-profit private schools, after attracting the best professors, would quickly be seen as having higher quality than state schools; that the students' public school degrees will be seen as "useless;" and that private sector companies would then prefer to hire graduates of private institutions. What seemed to have started as a leftist movement that was holding other students' academic progress hostage appears to have gained traction among a wider grouping of students, as witnessed by the massive

ATHENS 00001507 002.2 OF 002

10,000-strong demonstration in Athens on June 8.

6. (SBU) Most universities and technological institutes have been closed since mid-May by sit-ins and indefinite student and academic staff strikes over these proposed reforms. A professor told us that the lockdown has been so complete that lab animals at the Aristotelian University are dying--staff are sneaking on campus at 3 AM to feed those that remain alive. Education Minister Marietta Yiannakou has been criticized for not averting this reaction with better planning, and a representative of the professors' union has called for her resignation. Opposition PASOK leader George Papandreou, who supported these reforms in the past, has wavered in the face of PASOK's student organization and his own poor public opinion ratings, and is now against the reforms.

7. (SBU) COMMENT: Many Greeks, especially professors, recognize that reforms to the university system are long overdue and sorely needed. We have long pushed for the GoG to recognize degrees from private institutions, which would, among other things, benefit private U.S. higher learning institutions already here. There are no signs that the government will back down, but now that Papandreou is questioning these reforms, their eventual passage in Parliament is less certain. And while protests of all

varieties are frequent occurrences in Athens, the public is aggravated that student demonstrations keep turning the city center into a traffic quagmire. The fact that primarily left-wing and not politically mainstream students organized this protest suggests the issue has not yet reached a critical point. But as nearly all university students feel "threatened" by the introduction of the non-profit universities, the situation could turn more explosive.
COUNTRYMAN





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Subject: GREEK EDUCATION REFORM EXPERT WANTS U.S. HELP
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To: Greece Athens, Secretary of State
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TAGS: Greece; Crete [GR]
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C O N F I D E N T I A L ATHENS 000407

FOR EUR/SE, EUR/PPD AND ECA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 2019/03/31
TAGS: PGOV, OPRC, OEXC, SCUL, GR
SUBJECT: Greek Education Reform Expert Wants U.S. Help

REF: ATHENS 260

CLASSIFIED BY: Daniel V. Speckhard, Ambassador, State, Executive;
REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

1. (C) Summary: In a March 26 meeting with PAO and CAO, Greek education reform expert Babiniotis shared GoG plans and timelines, and enthusiastically welcomed U.S. assistance on implementing a national university entrance exam system based on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). End summary.
2. (C) Prominent linguist, scholar, former rector of Athens University (2000-2006) and GoG expert responsible for reforming the Greek university entrance exam system, Professor George Babiniotis, met with PAO and CAO on March 26. Babiniotis was candid about the failings of the educational system in Greece, and the challenges to implementing reforms.
3. (C) The current university admittance system is untenable, Babiniotis said. Most parents and students view a university



degree as the ticket to advancement, which is the reason that more than 100,000 students apply each year for the 40,000 university slots. To be competitive, high school students concentrate on private institution (frontistiria)-provided university preparatory classes rather than their regular school classes. As a result secondary students memorize material to pass the examinations rather than really mastering subject matter. "We are graduating aspiring university students rather than well-educated kids," he lamented.

U.S. Assistance on University Testing Needed

4. (C) Babiniotis wants to change the current university entrance system to one similar to that in the U.S., based on a combination of high school grades and performance on a standardized exam similar to the SAT, which students can take whenever they feel ready to do so, thereby minimizing the pressure on students and the reliance on frontistiria. At present the future of each student depends on the performance on the day of the entrance examination. Greece needs to develop a data bank of questions and computer based testing allowing students the freedom to take the examinations at a date of their convenience and to take the examination more than once. (Tests derived from data banks select by random a limited number of questions for a particular examination out of the tens of thousands of possible questions.) With a large data bank of questions, each examination would be unique for each test taker, making it almost impossible to cheat or memorize test questions in advance. Babiniotis enthusiastically accepted PAO's offer to provide U.S. expertise on computerized testing as the GoG moves down this path.

Prospects for Reform are Good

5. (C) According to Babiniotis, political prospects for educational reform are improving. New Democracy and the opposition PASOK parties are working together on a solution; Babiniotis has seen PASOK's proposals (reftel) and thinks they are "logical," but added that it is easier to push such reforms when in the opposition. Babiniotis agreed that the elections for leadership of the university teachers union (POSDEP), which ousted the radicals supported by SYRIZA, was an indication that the university community was eager for a change. Up to now the union had supported all calls for strikes and disruptions of instruction at the university. There is even support to reduce the percentage from 40% of student representation in university decisions. There is mounting pressure on both major parties from the public for substantive reform, and soon.

6. (C) Primary school reform will be easiest, Babiniotis predicted, while high school and university reform will be bigger challenges due to political posturing and the politicization of students. There needs to be a change in the mindset of the public, which views university education as the only vehicle to



advancement. At the university level, Greece needs to scale back on the number of institutions of higher learning - currently 23 universities and 15 technical schools (TEI) country-wide, according to Babinotis, while the remaining TEIs need to be strengthened to meet the needs of the marketplace. A number of TEI need to be incorporated into the departments of universities, Babinotis said; those universities, in turn, need more autonomy on decisions related to budget, curriculum, enrollment and faculty.

University Problems: Politicization of Students and Abuse of Asylum

7. (C) University students have become too politicized, Babinotis lamented, a holdover from the days of the military dictatorship in Greece. This excessive politicization has caused serious disruptions in university operations. Asylum is being abused to the point where well-meaning students - the majority - suffer in their pursuit of a higher education. While some students turn to private education, their degrees are still not recognized by the Greek state and, Babinotis believes, will not be unless there is broad political agreement to amend the Greek Constitution to formally allow private education. While opposition PASOK leader George Papandreou originally supported amending the constitution, according to Babinotis, he later backtracked and the issue of private education remains unresolved.

8. (C) Comment: Babinotis is a knowledgeable, respected academic who knows the Greek educational system well and appears to have support from both New Democracy and PASOK. Our meeting with him, and his enthusiastic acceptance of our offer of U.S. help on university entrance testing, has opened the door to U.S. input and expertise on one of the most important reforms in recent Greek history. In the coming months, Post will consult with the Department on best ways to provide U.S. advice and assistance.

SPECKHARD



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TAGS: PGOV, KAPO, OPRC, OEXC, SCUL, GR
SUBJECT: THE SORRY STATE OF THE GREEK EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM:
A CHALLENGE FOR U.S. PUBLIC DIPLOMACY PART I

Classified By: Ambassador Daniel V. Speckhard for reasons 1.4 (b) (d)

1. (C) Summary: This is the first of two cables on the challenges created by the Greek educational system for U.S. public diplomacy in Greece. This cable will describe the state of the sector and current attempts to reform it. The second cable will describe how we are reaching out to Greek youth despite these obstacles.

2. (C) The Greek public educational system is in disarray, the victim of years of fiscal neglect, political wrangling, and a sad evolution to a lowest common denominator approach, where the rights of students to demonstrate and disrupt classes trump the rights of all to a quality education. Politically-affiliated student groups wield increasing power, including in decisions which in other countries are normally left to school administrators. Those students who are serious about trying to do well in school and gain admittance



to a good university are forced to enroll in costly after-hours private lessons to succeed. Private schools and universities face their own problems, as government after government has bowed to political pressure to keep them -- and their degrees -- on the periphery, so as not to undermine further the weak public educational system. Teachers are underpaid, rectors and administrators are cowed, parents are frustrated, and students are growing increasingly hostile and defiant. These elements, we believe, played a role in the violent youth demonstrations of last December.

3. (C) New Minister of Education Spiliotopoulos has pledged to try and defuse this ticking time bomb with a series of "clean slate" talks meant to smooth the relations between the government, student groups and educators in the hopes of finding solutions, but it remains to be seen whether the New Democracy party has the mettle, means and muscle to implement badly-needed reforms. End summary.

The Greek Public Educational System: Just How Bad Is It?

4. (C) The Greek public school system has been on a downward trajectory for some time now. Years of financial neglect have taken their toll on structures, faculty and curricula. Many public schools are old, and suffer from vandalism and neglect. It is not unheard of to see a public school with broken windows, insufficient heating, or substandard plumbing. Special needs classes or facilities are nonexistent, as are college advisors. Most public schools do not offer extracurricular activities such as sports or music as a positive outlet for youthful energy. While the average EU country spends 5 percent of its total budget on education each year, in 2008 Greece spent only 3 percent, down from 3.61 percent in 2004.

5. (C) Teachers are underpaid but heavily unionized. The Greek Union of Secondary School Teachers -- OLME -- does not hesitate to protest or to close schools via strike. Primary and secondary school teachers take national exams to qualify, but once they are hired, there is no mechanism by which the state can evaluate their performance (the same holds true for university professors). A typical starting salary for a secondary school teacher is 1200 euro per month (approximately 1600 dollars), while an average salary for a high school teacher with ten years of experience is 1500 euro per month (approximately 2000 dollars). Because of their low salaries, teachers often go on strike to demand pay raises. A large majority also resort to offering after-hours tutoring, either on a one-on-one basis or through private institutes ("frontistiria") to supplement their incomes.

Frontistiria and Parallel Education



6. (C) Frontistiria were first introduced in the 1970s as a way to help underachieving students keep up with their classmates. Today, an estimated 90 percent of Greek high school students attend a frontistirio for at least one course (particularly foreign languages and university exam preparation). The Ministry of Education reports that country-wide there are 2,642 frontistiria for university exam preparation, and 7,360 foreign language frontistiria. Yearly frontistiria fees, depending on student need, can run up to more than 5000 euro (6600 dollars), making it extremely lucrative for teachers and owners of frontistiria. Rates vary according to subject, level, and location of the frontistirio; university entrance exam classes can range between 40-70 euro (53-93 dollars) per hour. According to the Ministry of Education, in 2007 Greek families paid 569 million euro (approximately 757 million dollars) to frontistiria to prepare their children for university entrance exams, and 437 million euro (approximately 595 million dollars) for foreign language instruction at frontistiria.

7. (C) The frontistirio phenomenon today is a self-perpetuating black market. Underpaid public school teachers have few incentives to work hard in the classroom when they can make more money teaching in the frontistiria. The level of instruction in the regular classroom decreases and students pay less attention, and their performance suffers. Parents, concerned that their children will not be competitive, enroll them in frontistiria, where the level of instruction (by the same teachers) and the level of learning (by the same students) are higher. Unfortunately, despite this parallel education, Greek students are not keeping up with their European counterparts. A 2006 OECD study found that, out of 27 EU countries surveyed, 15-year-old Greek students came in 25th, 26th, and 27th in reading, science and math, respectively.

8. (C) The place that the frontistiria have come to occupy in Greek life -- employer, moneymaker and education provider -- makes it exceedingly difficult for any government to raise the issue of serious educational reform. Improving the educational system would mean reducing the need for frontistiria, with significant political cost to the government and financial cost to the state.

Greek Universities: Powerful Student Unions and Asylum

9. (C) The situation at universities is also troublesome, but for different reasons. The biggest challenge for Greek universities is the overly powerful, politically-affiliated student unions. Greece's university student movement has steadily grown in power and influence since 1973, when Athens Polytechnic University students became the symbol of popular resistance to, and a catalyst for the downfall of, the



despised military dictatorship ruling Greece at the time. The 1973 Polytechnic uprising, in which a number of students were crushed by junta tanks on the Polytechnic grounds, gave birth to the concept of university "asylum" still in effect and used as political capital today. Incredibly, police and other law enforcement officials are barred from entering any public school or university premises, for any reason, unless the district attorney's office requests and is given approval for such action by the university's council (which includes a student representative, so approval is never granted.) As a result, abuse of asylum by criminals, anarchists and other such groups has grown over the years. During the extended, violent youth demonstrations in Athens and Thessaloniki in December 2008, anarchists attacked police, destroyed and looted businesses, set fire to vehicles, and then hid out behind the safety of university walls, where they proceeded to destroy libraries, vandalize classrooms and steal computers. University contacts tell us that, during one particularly violent night, a university rector and friendly faculty formed a human chain around the university's library to protect its rare books collection. The extent of the destruction in December was so disturbing that public calls for abolishment of asylum began. Even the PASOK party, a traditionally staunch supporter of asylum, appears to recognize that the situation cannot continue. Louka Katseli, PASOK shadow Minister of Economy, recently told the PAO that universities should begin employing campus police to stop the looting and violence on campuses. More leftist parties, including SYRIZA and the communist (KKE) parties, however, have vowed to protect asylum at all costs.

10. (C) University student unions decide everything from sit-ins (frequent) to faculty appointments (highly politicized). Faculty, including rectors, are chosen by a board where student union reps have equal say and veto power. Different departments and schools are controlled by different political groups, and university leadership is often reluctant to take them on. In many cases, faculty themselves belong to political parties and actively support student unions, often depending on them for their promotions.

No Welcome Mat for the Embassy

11. (C) Anti-Americanism is still quite high in Greek universities, and student demonstrations often lead past the Embassy. The highly-politicized and often leftist nature of many universities in Greece makes it dangerous for Embassy staff to visit campuses and impossible for the Embassy to be identified in joint programs. In the few instances where friendly professors can be convinced to take advantage of Embassy programs and assistance, we must keep a low profile or risk disruption, or worse, of the program by the student left. Even GoG officials have difficulty in entering



universities. Former PASOK Minister of Education Venizelos tried two years ago, when he was simply a member of parliament, to visit the Athens Polytechnic and meet with students. He was rebuffed, and his bodyguards' vehicles were vandalized.

Is Private Education the Answer to a Failing System? -----

12. (C) Article 16 of the Greek Constitution stipulates that the Greek state is responsible for providing free higher education, for all. This has been interpreted to mean that only degrees from public institutions can be recognized by the Greek state. Private colleges and universities in Greece, including U.S.-affiliated schools, operate as "learning centers," and their degrees are neither recognized nor valid for employment in the public sector. The end result is that graduates of private institutions are effectively barred from seeking a license for certain professions and cannot qualify at all for public sector employment. EU Directive 2005/66 requires recognition of professional qualifications of university graduates who earn their degrees at local, private EU schools. Despite an EU court-ordered decision that Greece must comply by October 2007, so far Greece has not acceded to the EU directive. If Greece eventually complies with the EU directive but does not also include American-affiliated institutions, those institutions will be greatly disadvantaged -- something the Embassy is working hard to avoid.

13. (C) The Embassy spends a considerable amount of time advocating on behalf of U.S. institutions operating in Greece. It is noteworthy that children of many Greek officials from across the political spectrum attend private secondary school and/or private university in Greece. The GoG appears to recognize the value of the U.S.-style education these institutions provide and has demonstrated willingness to work with us to regularize the status of these institutions and implement a transparent accreditation system for recognition of degrees. The GoG prefers to keep these discussions low-profile, however, given the expected negative reaction from the left and from student groups about perceived erosion of the "free and for all" educational promise.

What About Reform? -----

14. (C) Educational reform has been a hot topic in Greece for years. In January 2006, Prime Minister Karamanlis announced a plan to reform higher education; the ensuing mass student protests and occupation of university buildings closed schools for weeks at a time. Former Minister of Education Marietta Yannakou lost her parliamentary seat in the 2007 elections after pushing an unpopular university



overhaul. However, PM Karamanlis reiterated on January 25 of this year that education reform remains a top priority for his government. In an effort to boost the GoG's image on the educational front after the December 2008 events, PM Karamanlis replaced Minister of Education Stylianides with Aris Spiliotopoulos. A young ND member who has served on student unions and as ND press spokesman, Spiliotopoulos is supposed to embody ND outreach to youth. Privately we have been told by politicians on both sides of the spectrum that Spiliotopoulos is considered a political lightweight. Nevertheless, there appears to be broad agreement that the situation cannot remain as it is. An MRB poll released on February 9th showed that 85 percent of Greek respondents believe there must be changes to the secondary education system, and another 75.9 percent supported changes in the university entrance exam system.

"Clean Slate Dialogue"

15. (C) Spiliotopoulos' first announcement as Minister of Education was that the government is launching a new dialogue with a "clean slate." The dialogue starts from square one for the restructuring of secondary education and the university entry system. Since his entry on the job, Spiliotopoulos has created a high-level cross-party parliamentary Council on Primary and Secondary Education. This council, which is charged with improving the university entrance system, is chaired by well-respected, former University of Athens rector Professor George Babiniotis. However, its function overlaps with the portfolio of the National Council of Education, created by the former Minister of Education and headed by the equally-respected Thanos Veremis. Already there has been conflict between the chairmen of the two councils over who takes the lead in the education reform dialogue.

16. (C) Veremis recently threatened he will leave his post if the government is not serious about reforms, adding "they may be playing for time." Veremis has proposed incorporating public (free) frontistiria into high school and reducing the number of classes taught from 12 to 6, so they can be covered in more depth. Proposals by Babiniotis, with which Veremis disagrees, would be to eliminate university exams altogether and allow students to enter university based on their grades in the final year of high school. Universities would then evaluate a student after the first year in university. Critics of both argue that this "top-down" approach to reform is backward; that the educational system is fundamentally flawed and requires a serious revamping from the bottom up, starting with primary school. The president of OLME, Kostas Maniatis, insists that the main problem with the Greek secondary school system is not structural, but financial and that the state should provide more funds instead of reopening dialogue on reform. And as far as U.S.-affiliated



institutions are concerned, for the time being, Spiliotopoulos has put the issue of accreditation of private institutions on hold.

Comment

17. (C) Whatever steps the new Minister of Education takes in the coming months, ND is still trying to recover from the aftermath of the December demonstrations and a resulting drop in the polls that has put opposition PASOK ahead by at least three percentage points. While Spiliotopoulos may be charismatic, his relative lack of experience may be a hindrance. There is a widespread impression that the selection of Spiliotopoulos as Minister of Education is an indication that Karamanlis is not interested in real educational reform but rather in keeping up appearances until general elections. Spiliotopoulos' education reform gurus are already feuding, and the teachers' union doesn't want to talk about reform. The fact that the focus of discussions so far is on entrance to universities rather than on the real overhaul needed in secondary education and on a move at all levels from rote learning to critical thinking indicates that the government may miss yet another opportunity for real educational reform.

SPECKHARD

