



THE EVOLUTION OF THE GREEK NARRATIVES ON THE ‘BIG BANG ENLARGEMENT’ FROM 2004 UNTIL TODAY: THE VIEWS OF THE POLITICAL ACTORS AND THE MEDIA

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About REWEU

The project (Re)uniting the East and West: Reflections on the 2004 EU enlargement (REWEU) The project is focused on the commemoration of the 2004 “big bang” EU enlargement on the occasion of its 20th anniversary in May 2024. Through the combination of local, national and international public events, collection of historical memories and narratives, studies on impacts of 2004 enlargement, costs of non-enlargement and role of women in the process, as well as exhibitions and media articles, the project contributes to wider contemporary efforts of EU memory politics. The project focuses on eight selected EU countries, four from the older EU Member States which were part of the Union’s decision-making processes leading up to the big enlargement (Belgium, Finland, Greece and Italy) and four newly acceding countries (Cyprus, Czech Republic, Latvia and Poland). The project is funded by the European Union through the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme (CERV) under the European Remembrance strand.

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Introduction¹

There are certain types of events that transcend the political, social, economic and cultural boundaries both at the national and the international level. These include periodical occurrences (i.e. elections) with a lasting impact or unforeseen developments with equally meaningful and profound implications (i.e. crises). Undoubtedly, the 2004 EU enlargement, with ten new member states becoming part of the EU, falls in this category. The elements that differentiate these events from those of a more localized character are the multiplicity of the points of view, the variability of their thematic correlations and the important diversification of the interpretations regarding their significance as well as their implications. Particularly with regard to international events of this order, it is impossible to claim that there are only a few interpretations or narratives. On the contrary, one may find numerous coherent representations that facilitate communication, sense-making and the sharing of experiences and interpretations.² Indeed, there are many types of narratives according to distinct criteria. For instance, on the basis of the content and the objective, one could distinguish between fictional and nonfictional narratives. Another key type with relevance to the temporal horizon of the occurrence – particularly when it comes to past events – is the historical narrative. This can be defined as the presentation and interpretation of past events on the basis of a combination of objective elements and more subjective understandings.³ Bearing in mind the significance of the 2004 EU enlargement and the necessity to reveal the corresponding historical narratives respecting their specificities (i.e. in different countries, from different actors), this chapter explores

¹ This study was made possible with the substantial contribution of ELIAMEP researchers Nikos Tsapas and Nikos Bakirtzis who provided their valuable assistance in the process of data collection and the organization of the interviews.

² Bruner J. 1991. "The Narrative Construction of Reality". *Critical Inquiry*, 18 (10, 1-21

³ White, H. 1973. *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. John Hopkins University

the historical narratives that emerged and evolved in Greece from 2004 until today.

The 2004 enlargement as a “global iconic event”

The 2004 EU enlargement can be described as a “global iconic event”, a notion proposed by Julia Sonnevend.⁴ These events (i.e. the Fall of the Berlin Wall, the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki) differ from many others – of national and international order – in the sense that they become reference points in several countries and regions.⁵ It is noteworthy that many iconic events pertain to the national context but without ever obtaining an international focus. Inversely, one may find global events that fail to have a lasting impact.⁶ In contrast, global iconic events have a lasting effect at all levels, local/ national and international. Furthermore, a key trait of this type of events is also the limitations regarding the universality and homogeneity of the relevant narratives. Arguably, a global iconic event may not be portrayed on the basis of unanimously endorsed narratives and interpretations. In fact, in many cases, one notes a fragmentation or even the existence of counter-narratives. This is particularly the case with events that are part of lasting and intense conflicts opposing different societies and countries.

There is yet another aspect that relates to the variability of the narratives regarding the iconic events. This regards the differences attributed to the specificities of the actors producing a narrative as well as their participation in or connection with the event. From this standpoint, the narrative seems closer to the notion of discourse. Thus, it may refer to the generic conventions and the logic, in other words, a particular way of describing things, making sense and interpreting

⁴ Sonnevend, J. 2016. *Stories without borders: The Berlin Wall and the making of a global iconic event*. Oxford University Press

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

reality, that defines an actor or organization. Accordingly, in examining different narratives, one should be aware of the differences between the political narratives (i.e. governments, political parties and the objective of persuasion and accountability at the national level), the media narratives (i.e. traditional and new media and the objective of information and opinion making) and even the institutional ones (i.e. agencies of the EU and the objective of persuasion and accountability at the EU level). Such delimitations should not hamper the need and the convenience to approach narrative in a more summarizing fashion, as befits the category of the *national narrative*. For instance, the Greek political and media narratives on the 2004 EU enlargement can be definitely grouped together as manifestations of the *Greek narrative*. These distinctions add to the capacity to reveal particular variations linked to more contextual elements (i.e. ideological, social and cultural considerations). This chapter will, therefore, aim at providing an elaborate understanding of the Greek narrative(s) on the iconic event that was the 2004 EU enlargement by focusing on the political and media actors.

Rationale and methodology

The objectives of this study are ambitious, given that the *Greek narrative(s)* is in itself a very broad category and that the period of interest is rather wide. Thus, several clarifications need to be put forth. The first one regards the delimitation of the very notion of the 'Greek narrative'. By no means does this study suggest that the political and the media narratives are sufficient in terms of obtaining the full scope. On the other hand, it is certain that in the framework of political communication, politics and the media have been the decisive factors from the angle of shaping, promoting and recalibrating many narratives for specific political ends. In effect, the notion of historical narrative is very useful to several scientific fields (history, political science, communication and in particular political

communication).⁷ Narratives serve to foster legitimacy, authority, mobilization and consensus among other ends.⁸ Therefore, the interest to consider the dimensions of politics and media in a joint fashion safeguards the effort to grasp the narratives that were developed and supported, at the time and onwards, vis-a-vis the public opinion.

Greece also had its concrete objectives, primarily its support for the accession of Cyprus without the resolution of the 'Cypriot issue' being a precondition in that respect.

There is yet another justification for the emphasis on the political and media narratives. It is well known that the 2004 EU enlargement was the conclusion of a strenuous process consisting of longstanding negotiations between the 15 EU member states and other EU institutions and the candidate countries.

The same is valid regarding the 15 EU member states themselves. For instance, countries like France and Germany engaged in intense negotiations on a variety of topics including the EU budget and the Cohesion Funds, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), the free movement of workers and the future of European Integration among others.⁹ Greece also had its concrete objectives, primarily its support for the accession of Cyprus without the resolution of the 'Cypriot issue' being a precondition in that respect.¹⁰ Therefore, the focus on the political and media narrative provides the opportunity to link many different levels

⁷ Ryfe, D.M. 2001. History and Political Communication: An Introduction. *Political Communication*, 18 (4), 407-420.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Davies, E. 2004. Enlargement: Ten Countries Join the European Union, May 2004. ProQuest Information and Learning

¹⁰ In effect, the EU accession of Cyprus without the resolution of the 'Cypriot Problem' was heralded in Greece as a major success of Greek foreign and EU policies. It is also important to note the perception that the EU accession would speed up the resolution. For more see Kyris, G. 2012. The European Union and the Cyprus Problem: a story of limited impetus, *Eastern Journal of European Studies*, 3 (1), 87-99.

of the narrative (i.e. arguments, symbolisms, doubts and comparisons) to concrete political aspects.

The second clarification regards the very notion of 'narrative'. It is noteworthy that narratives are part of a family of concepts with strong conceptual similarities. Apart from discourse, one could also include that of 'frames', commonly understood as the "selection of some aspects of a perceived reality (...) in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation."¹¹ Beyond the definitional dilemmas, it is clear that all these concepts help to elucidate, among other parameters, the pragmatic aspects of communication. Without a claim of classificatory and epistemological value, our study opts for a highly inclusive conceptualization of narrative which corresponds to the standards of a global iconic event such as the 2004 EU enlargement. In other words, it facilitates the detection of variations (i.e. political actors, media) within the boundaries of a coherent interpretative unity. The third clarification, partially resulting from the second one, regards the exploratory character of the study. In particular, we approach the topic from a deductive angle and without having selected specific interpretative patterns. For instance, it is well known that many different catchphrases and slogans were – and still are – used to refer to the 2004 EU enlargement. To name a few, we may refer to the following: 'Big bang enlargement', 'Reunification/ unification of Europe', 'Return to Europe', 'European family', 'Eastern enlargement' and also 'EU's expansion towards the East'. An examination of such widely used interpretative patterns in the Greek context would fit the paradigm of an inductive approach. Our study serves the interest of comprehending the general and yet specific and intrinsic characteristics and the angles of the Greek narrative. In particular, our objective is to look deeper than

¹¹ Entman, E.R. 1993. Framing: Toward Clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, 43 (2), 51-58.

interpretations that may have been recurrent and common in many different contexts and identify the Greek perspective and connection. This will be a concise contribution with regard to a topic that has remained rather insufficiently researched in the Greek context.

When it comes to the methodological specifications of our study, we apply a qualitative discourse analysis on two types of data: firstly, the articles of Greek newspapers and news blogs that relate thematically to the 2004 EU enlargement and secondly, a series of semi-structured interviews with politicians and journalists¹² that have obtained a systematic understanding of the 2004 enlargement in the context of EU affairs and policies and their impact on Greece. The emphasis of our qualitative analysis is on the parts of the data that relate more explicitly to various points of view and interpretations of the enlargement's impact on Greece. When it comes to the media, we collected 50 articles from different newspapers of distinct political orientations covering the period between 2004 and 2024.¹³ With regard to the political dimension, our analysis was founded upon the data from the semi-structured interviews as well as several statements and press releases from Greek political parties always within the confines of the period of interest. The topics covered in the interviews were the following:

1. The significance of the 2004 enlargement for Greece (i.e. Cyprus issue, regional interests, relations with Central and Eastern European countries);
2. The evolution and the perceptions regarding the enlargement in Greece (i.e. political parties, media reactions, public opinion);

¹² Six interviews were conducted in total: three with politicians and three with journalists.

¹³ In particular we are referring to the following newspapers: *Eleutherotypia* (left wing, centre-left), *Efimerida ton Syntakton* (left wing, centre left), *Avgi* (left wing), *Rizospastis* (left wing), *Ta Nea* (centre-left), *To Vima* (centre- left), *Kathimerini* (centre-right), *ProtoThema* (right wing), *Estia* (right wing and *Dimokratia* (right wing).

3. The lessons that Greece and the EU should consider in light of the ongoing negotiations with countries of the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership;
4. The impact of the 2004 enlargement on EU governance and cooperation in different policy areas (economy, solidarity, social cohesion, security and migration);
5. The counterproductive effects of populism and the rise of the far right on the enlargement process.

The presentation of our findings will begin with the analysis of the media content and then it will refer to findings stemming from the interviews.

Findings and discussion

In order to consider the findings to a fuller extent, it is useful to observe that at least in the first decade of the 21st century there was a different context for political communication not only in Greece but throughout the EU. The arrival of social media platforms occurred in the mid-2000s, yet the political implications would become much more palpable in the

next decade. In this configuration, the political actors and the media seemed to be in a stronger position when it came to shaping and framing the key aspects of important processes and decisions such as

the 2004 enlargement. This remark does not suggest that the public opinion dispositions were disregarded. On the contrary, it merely indicates that, for better or for worse, the public opinion depended less on social media for information on the pros and the cons of the enlargement. This meant that there was less space for fake news, misinformation, disinformation and populism. It also meant that the public would have to rely more decisively on traditional channels such as the

In Greece, the public support was among the highest and the most positive among EU member states.

media and political actors. Given that in many EU countries there was a negative public sentiment towards the 2004 enlargement, there were intense debates and arguments aimed at persuading the public of the benefits. In Greece, the public support was among the highest and the most positive among EU member states. This was true not only at the time of the enlargement but also since the late 1990s and early 2000s.¹⁴ This is an element worth considering since it explains the reasons why the public discussions, as it will be shown, were not necessarily dominated by debates and arguments in favor or against the enlargement. Greece, like all EU countries, applied its own specific filters to assess this historic development.

The Greek media

The presentation of our findings unfolds according to the following order. We begin with the Greek media component which is founded upon the study of the 50 articles from several sources, mainly online newspapers and news blogs. Subsequently, we continue with the findings stemming from the study of the transcribed interviews with journalists and politicians. Beginning with the media aspect, our analysis leads us to remark that, indeed, the Greek media narrative(s) seem to have drastically evolved from 2004 until today. The element that defines this evolution is the progressive domination of more neutral and at times skeptical approaches. In effect, this leads us to explore the potential impact of precise periods on the modification of the narratives. As it is known, Greece's recent history (from the 2000s onwards) was marked by a grave economic crisis which dominated the country's political, economic and societal affairs for nearly a decade (2010-2018). On the contrary, the 2000s was a period, for its largest part, of

¹⁴ European Parliament. 1999. Public opinion on enlargement in the EU Member States and applicant countries. Briefing No 41.
https://www.europarl.europa.eu/enlargement/briefings/41a2_en.htm?utm_source=chatgpt.com?textMode=on (last access on 10 December 2024)

important economic growth. Lastly, the period that commenced after the conclusion of the third and final economic programme in support of the Greek economy (2018-today), can be described as a period of economic recovery, normalization and stabilization. On the basis of the collected media articles, our study formulates the hypothesis that the narratives were affected by this framework. Evidently, the evolution of the interpretative patterns cannot coincide and match perfectly the domestic political and economic developments. Rather, our data suggests that the specific Greek angle when interpreting the 2004 enlargement seems to bear traces of the wider political and economic tensions.

Greece's recent history (from the 2000s onwards) was marked by a grave economic crisis which dominated the country's political, economic and societal affairs for nearly a decade (2010-2018).

The first narrative can be detected within the first decade of the 2000s until the beginning of the economic and financial crisis of Greece and the Eurozone (from early 2000s to early 2010s). Undoubtedly, this narrative is predominantly positive and optimistic. There seems to be an alignment between political actors (i.e. the

government and most political parties), the media and the public opinion. The 2004 enlargement is presented in a convincingly favorable manner, given that Cyprus was a part of it. As it was already mentioned, the EU accession of Cyprus without a prior resolution of its conflict (the division between a Southern and a Northern part) was constantly evoked as a fundamental achievement of Greek and Cypriot policies. However, one notes additional arguments in favor of the enlargement. Greece at the time experienced considerable economic growth and had already- since the late 1990s intensified its political, economic and commercial relations with the countries of South-Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans. Thus, the enlargement was commonly presented as an opportunity to further expand these relations and ties. In effect, the Greek support for the 2004 EU

enlargement was ultimately correlated with Greece's objective to facilitate the EU accession of South-Eastern Europe as a whole, including the Western Balkans. From this perspective, and beyond the question of Cyprus, Greece's narrative also included the future of the Balkans in the EU. More broadly, one could also detect other parameters in the Greek narrative, such as a certain insecurity and doubt. In effect, as Greece's economic growth was stalling and elements of crisis began to appear towards the end of the 2000s, one could find recurring patterns such as the presentation of the new member states as competitors and the slowing down of the EU integration process along with its potentially negative impact for Greece. Nonetheless, in this first period, the narrative was clearly more positive than anything else. In fact, although the enlargement was concluded in 2004, the Greek narrative had also the characteristics of an ongoing and ever-evolving framework due to the continuous support for the accession of the Western Balkans. In other terms, it was not *closed*, since many references to 2004 included the observation that the process must continue with the inclusion of the Western Balkans. The following quotes¹⁵ are indicative of the main traits of the narrative:

Greek narrative had also the characteristics of an ongoing and ever-evolving framework due to the continuous support for the accession of the Western Balkans.

“The most important enlargement in the history of the EU is concluded today in Athens, during the Greek Presidency, with the ratification of the accession of 10 new member states. This occasion has special significance for Greece since it will welcome Cyprus, as the 10th new member of the EU, despite the unresolved political problem. The unified space of the 25 has

¹⁵ All the quotes regarding the media content and the interviews were originally in the Greek language. In the text we propose the English translation.

thus transformed the EU into the most populated area of democracy, security and prosperity.”¹⁶

“Many analysts believe that the current economic growth in the EU can be largely attributed to the rise in the demand for products and services originating in the developing economies of South-Eastern Europe and the new members of the EU. This is an important element because it shows that the enlargement seems to be succeeding. It is beneficial to both old and new members.”¹⁷

“Studies indicate that many sectors in the Greek economy are unprepared to operate in the new big market (...) In 10 years from now, Greece will be receiving 7 times less when it comes to EU funding. This will be the biggest loss of funds in the EU and it can be linked with the growth of income as well as the enlargement. (...)The biggest benefit of the enlargement for Greece could be the rise in its exports towards the 10 new markets. But it won't be easy because the new member states are competitors and also much cheaper markets.”¹⁸

The second period, and subsequently the relevant narrative, coincides with the Greek crisis (2010-2018). The narrative regarding the enlargement is modified not necessarily in its essence – the big success of the accession of Cyprus – but in light of the negative implications of the crisis. The economic presence of Greek enterprises in South-Eastern Europe and the Balkans is in rapid decline.¹⁹ Added

¹⁶ *Eleutherotypia*. 2003. “The biggest area of democracy and prosperity”, 16 April

¹⁷ *Eleutherotypia*. 2007. “The old and new Europe”, 26 August

¹⁸ *Eleutherotypia*. 2004. “An enlargement of problems but also opportunities”. 2 may

¹⁹ Panagiotou, R., and A. Valvis. 2014. How is the sovereign debt crisis affecting Greece's relations with the Balkan countries and Greece's standing in the region? An initial impact assessment. Athens: Eliamep Research Report

to this, the EU integration process of the Western Balkans is not marking any significant progress. Thus, one notes a noticeable discontinuity with the previous narrative. Both in political and media discourse the 2004 enlargement is presented as an important event that belongs to history and not as a cornerstone of an ongoing and ever developing programme. It is difficult to detect elements of continuity from the previous period. With regard to the new member states, there are many indications in the analyzed articles that the Greek point of view has become more political with the economy (i.e. cooperation, competition) passing into the background. In effect, during this period Greece saw the new member states playing the role of determined negotiators in the context of numerous discussions regarding the Greek crisis as well as the migrant crisis. Greece also became more aware of the fact that the new member states have been marking better scores in many of the EU indices on various policy areas. Thus, in this context we note an increase in skeptical and at times negative disposition towards the 2004 enlargement and particular dimensions such as Germany's important influence on most new member states, the problems regarding democracy and the rule of law in the new member states, the lack of solidarity and also the concerns regarding the role of Russia and China. The following passages are indicative of some of the above interpretative elements

“In reality, the progressive plan for the unification of Europe started to disintegrate right after our own integration in the EEC. The mutation was concluded in 2004, when the European family became bigger in order to integrate many Eastern countries with weak workers' rights, minimal salaries and political systems with authoritarian tendencies.”²⁰

²⁰ *Efimerida ton Syntakton*. 2015. “The ashes of the European dream”, 27 April

“Poland, Hungary and other countries of the former Eastern bloc joined the EU in 2004 with the promise and the dream for democratic reforms and economic development. But today, after the economic and the migrant crisis, the relation between Western liberal democracy and security or prosperity is not so obvious for Budapest and Warsaw.”²¹

“The EU accession of Cyprus has been the single most important success in the last decades, since it safeguarded the security of the Republic of Cyprus and in many regards formulated the framework for a peaceful resolution of the Cypriot question.”²²

The third period is the one that began with the end of the bailout programmes for the Greek economy (2018- today). During this period the narratives can be described as more distanced. In effect, it seems that it was the commemoration of the 20 years that provided the opportunity for a more intense discussion.

It seems that it was the commemoration of the 20 years that provided the opportunity for a more intense discussion.

Similarly to the previous period, the element of skepticism is very present. Also, it is obvious that the Greek angle and correlation with the 2004 enlargement are not so strong. This remark applies both with regard to the references to Greek strategies and policies for the future as

well as the stagnant process of the Western Balkans' EU accession. Subsequently, one notes a much more standardized narrative and more precisely a narrative that lacks the *national* connections and filters found in the previous periods. The topics evoked, such as integration, democracy, nationalism and far- right, seem to be

²¹ *To Vima*.2018. “The Eastern Bloc returns to Europe”. 30 July 2018

²² *To Vima*.2021. “The Mitsotakis strategy for Greek- Turkish relations”. 17 April

among the recurrent preoccupations in most if not all EU countries. The following passages are indicative of such dispositions:

“The rather hasty enlargement of the EU in 2004 and the progressive rise of nationalist populism brought a halt to the institutional drive for political unification. Thus, the EU remained until today a particular political project in the making which remains far from the traditional form of confederation as well as from that of federation.”²³

“The policies of Hungary demonstrate the permanent difficulty of the EU to form a common foreign policy and also the irregularities of the European system for decision making, accentuated by the big enlargement of 2004.”²⁴

The interviews with journalists and politicians

In broad terms, the analysis of the transcribed interviews with politicians and journalists does seem to corroborate to an important extent the findings regarding the media. There are two main aspects in this regard. The first one relates to the periodization of the evolution of the Greek narrative(s). In effect, the majority of the interviewees confirmed the assessment that the Greek crisis did affect the substance of the narrative in terms of arguments and valence. Thus, it seems that the narrative(s) moved from arguments, perceptions and ideas that were more positive and relevant to the process of the enlargement itself (impact for Greece and the EU) to interpretative patterns that were more skeptical, neutral and frequently centered around the country's economic crisis. The second aspect is the confirmation of the progressive evolution of the narrative from more political to rather historical and detached patterns, particularly in the most recent

²³ *Proto Thema*.2020. “European guarantees for the borders are vital for the survival of the Union”. 1 October

²⁴ *Ta Nea*. 2022. “The big challenges ahead for Europe”. 7 June

period (early 2020s). Notwithstanding the importance of the correspondence of the findings, it is also noteworthy that the interviews were all conducted in the present and on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the enlargement. In other words, contrary to the media articles we cannot compare them with similar interviews conducted in earlier periods and serving as reference points.

Regardless of such delimitations, the interviews gave more in-depth insights and understandings of all the major arguments and interpretative patterns than which were identified in the media content. Furthermore, the interviews provided us with the opportunity to assess two distinct frameworks of the historical narrative: namely, the journalistic and the political. Before delving into the details and the different angles of such views and frames, it is equally critical to refer to their general orientation. On the one hand, the journalists seem to adopt a more critical standpoint, not necessarily to the enlargement itself but to its political exploitation by the Greek governments and even the superficial and short-term communication strategies that were promoted by Greek politicians in relation to domestic politics. This critical standpoint, which is also directed towards the journalists themselves and the media as institutions, can be linked with a strong perception that journalists' role is one of a bridge connecting the general public and the citizens with politics. On the other hand, the political narrative is much more concerned with strategic and geopolitical considerations. The logic of discussing and presenting the enlargement seems to revolve around assessments of costs and benefits.

The political narrative is much more concerned with strategic and geopolitical considerations.

In summing up the Greek journalists' rendition of the narrative(s) regarding the 2004 EU enlargement, we can outline the following thematic elements and plot: In the 2000s, the enlargement was mainly a priority of the governments. The public was not particularly moved or preoccupied

with its impact and implications for Greece, either in the short or long term. As the journalists argued, the Cyprus parameter did indeed appeal to the citizens' minds and hearts but not necessarily on the basis of an extensive and in-depth analysis and discussion in the media. As regards the period of the crisis, the journalists confirm the evolution of the narrative towards more skeptical patterns. However, they downsize the extent of neutrality or negativity. In effect, they confirmed that in the 2010s the views were affected by Greece's hardships. However, they stressed that the narrative on the enlargement was more mixed than anything else. It contained negative or skeptical elements (i.e. the view of new member states as antagonists, as fragile and immature democracies and at times as unsympathetic evaluators in the memoranda). On the other hand, it also contained positive elements (economic progress, social and political development). Lastly, in a self-critical tone, the Greek journalists highlighted the longstanding deficit when it comes to the coverage of the new member states, the existing connections and the positive potential for improving and strengthening the relations with Greece. The following quotes are indicative of the above-mentioned themes:

"The 2004 enlargement was always, particularly in the 2000s, a matter promoted by the Greek governments. Despite many emotionally charged political statements and declarations, the citizens were not concerned. This is not only their fault. There is, traditionally, a long-standing deficit when it comes to media coverage of EU affairs. (...) In the 2000s, the Greek political narrative was euphoric because there was prosperity and optimism in the economy. Greek governments were always in favor of enlargement. In 2004, in particular, Greece felt reassured because smaller countries were entering the EU and thus, for the first time perhaps, we could be players and behave like players, impose our terms and so on... We, as journalists, sounded the

alarm for the economy and the increased competition coming from other countries as early as the late 1990s, but in the climate of euphoria of the 2000s it was downplayed.”²⁵

“It is difficult to sum up the narrative of the crisis. On the one hand, it was clear that we did not have close relations with many of the new member states. The enlargement was history and it was never really a priority for the Greek media. Yes, at times you could find a negative article about an Eastern country or a politician who was saying that “Greeks should learn to obey the rules in the economy”. But this was not the dominant view. In my opinion, there was no dominant view... You could find positive views about Estonia or Poland and Tusk and negative about Hungary. And Malta... nothing about Malta.”²⁶

From the standpoint of politicians, one notes elements of convergence and also of divergence in relation to those expressed by journalists. There are, also, differentiations among the views expressed by the politicians. A defining trait of the political discourse, as expressed in the interviews, was the mostly indirect references to the Greek narrative and understanding of the enlargement. The same is valid for the impact of the Greek crisis and the bailout programmes. The

We also noted the view that the new member states found it difficult – as was the case with Greece in the 1980s – to adjust more efficiently to EU policies.

most recurrent patterns put forth in the context of the political narrative were the following: The 2004 EU enlargement was a necessity in the context of the continuous process of European integration. Greece was very right to support it, not only

²⁵ Interview with a Greek journalist, Athens, 9 December 2024.

²⁶ Interview with a Greek journalist, Athens 10 December 2024.

because of the issue of Cyprus but also due to the benefits for the EU as a whole as well as for Greece (political and economic cooperation, social cohesion, redistribution of wealth). When it comes to the evaluation and the impact of the 2004 enlargement the views were more divergent. In most cases, the Greek politicians acknowledged that the difficulties in EU governance (the lack of coordination, the domination of bureaucracy) are the result of the absence of leadership and the hesitant reforms. However, we also noted the view that the new member states found it difficult – as was the case with Greece in the 1980s – to adjust more efficiently to EU policies. With regard to the evolution of the Greek narrative and understanding of the enlargement, one notes differentiations mostly in relation to the nature of Greece’s relations with the new member states. All politicians acknowledged that, traditionally, Greece did not have close relations with the new member states, except for Cyprus. In this regard, the period of the economic crisis did hamper the strengthening of connections. As some noted, this may explain the somewhat mixed disposition towards the enlargement (more neutral and skeptical than positive) in the 2010s.

Lastly, it is important to note that all three politicians did associate the progressive fading of the Greek narrative with the disruptive effects of the economic crisis on Greece's regional role in South-Eastern Europe and also the stalemate regarding the EU accession of the Western Balkans. The following quotes indicate the key themes in the political discourse:

“The 2004 enlargement was beneficial to all. Many mistakes and omissions did obstruct the course of European integration. The economic prosperity and the optimism of the 2000s enhanced the conviction the EU was strong enough to absorb the shock. In any case, all this was not the fault of the new member states.”²⁷

²⁷ Interview with a Greek politician. Athens. 9 December 2024

“In the 2010s, the Greek narrative became more neutral and at times negative. Some regarded the new member states as responsible for the dysfunction and the delays in reforming of EU policies. It is important to state it clearly: the enlargement had nothing to do with the Greek crisis and the bailout programmes. Indeed, members such as the Baltic states were among the strictest and demanding towards Greece. But it is disproportionate to blame them and even more problematic to blame the enlargement!”²⁸

“Partially, the few references regarding the 2004 enlargement and the weak discussion over the years could be also attributed to the rather few connections with Eastern countries. Traditionally, Greece had more historical ties with countries such as France or the Balkans. We did not have many cultural ties with Eastern Europe. I don’t believe that we saw them as competitors in the bad sense. They have closer ties with other countries like Germany.”²⁹

In summing up the findings of our study, we can advance the following overview. Firstly, it is clear that the analysis of the media articles throughout the period of interest (2004- today) facilitated the proposition of periods with distinct characteristics. They illustrate the evolution of the Greek narrative(s) from more positive to more neutral and skeptical dispositions. The interviews with journalists and politicians were important in revealing the key interpretative patterns that elucidate and weigh the extent of several frames and themes. For instance, in the media content, the connections with Cyprus and the Western Balkans were very

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Interview with a Greek politician. Athens, 10 December 2024

present in the 2000s. Similarly, there were also more frequently skeptical overtones in reference to the enlargement in the context of the economic crisis. In effect, this could be attributed to the fact that the interviews took place at the present and they lack the contextual influences that frequently set the tone of a viewpoint. Regardless of this variation, it is important that in all cases, it was established that the Greek narrative(s) progressively faded and that this was not merely the effect of the economic crisis. In this regard, the interviews indicated that this detached and distanced disposition could be attributed to the loose connections that Greece had with most of the new member states. More importantly, the views expressed in the interviews helped in neutralizing and negating the negative connotations that developed during the economic crisis vis-a-vis new member states.

Concluding remarks

Our study leads us to conclude that the parameters of Cyprus, and to a lesser extent, of the Western Balkans, were important factors that contributed to the formulation of that particular and specific Greek angle regarding the 2004 EU enlargement, particularly in the decade of the 2000s. It was not necessarily enthusiastic but it was certainly optimistic and indicative of the confidence and the positive disposition with which Greece approached its foreign and domestic policies prior to the economic downfall. Nonetheless, this interpretative pattern and the relevant themes were of a rather short duration.

In the context of the economic crisis (the 2010s), the narrative became more neutral and skeptical. In appearance, it was not centered around Greek connections such as Cyprus and the Balkans. However, a great deal of its negativity could be linked with the difficulties that Greece experienced. In the media, in particular, one notes excessive views that linked the country's hardships with the antagonistic relations with the new member states. The interviews that we

conducted downplayed the appeal of such views. The period of the economic crisis did confirm a certain lack of interest in Greek public discussions to analyze and assess the impact of the enlargement. But this seems to be linked with more structural than incidental factors. We refer to the difficulty in Greece to incorporate European affairs, including Greece's relations with the new member states, higher on the agenda. This may be the consequence of the emphasis given on the questions closer to national interest. However, it also indicates the tendency to overlook and even underestimate the real and dense connections that Greece developed with the new member states since 2004. These include societal, cultural, political and economic connections that have grown only stronger with the passing of time. It is very indicative that at the level of perception our data suggests that the media and the political actors still have the tendency to overlook them.

The Greek narrative on the 2004 EU enlargement may receive yet another reframing in light of developments already in the making. The question of whether it will obtain a more engaged Greek standpoint will not only depend on Greece's situation. It will also depend on the extent to which key actors, such as political figures and the media, will revisit and assess Greece's relations with the countries which joined in 2004. Undoubtedly, such a development will not be the outcome of random configurations. Historical narratives seem to have a dual destiny. They can either fade and lose several layers of interpretation or regain their significance in light of important developments and renewed political considerations. This is another way of concluding that historical narratives will either become cold commemorations of iconic events or vivid reformulations in light of a pressing political purpose. In an EU, more interconnected and interdependent despite the difficulties that it endures, such motivations and opportunities to rethink bilateral ties and multilateral relations will become stronger.

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