



# GREEK-BRITISH SYMPOSIUM

*Greece, Britain and Global Challenges*

23 October 2020, hybrid event

Hotel Grande Bretagne Athens and online platform

Summary Paper



British Embassy  
Athens



## GREEK-BRITISH SYMPOSIUM

20 October 2020, hybrid event

*Greece, Britain and Global Challenges*

## Summary Paper

Opening Plenary

The United Kingdom and Greece are bound by historic ties of friendship and alliance dating back to Greece's Revolution in 1821 - Britain played a key role in the rise of the Philhellenic movement, as well as in the military success and European liberal modernity of the Greek Struggle.

These historic ties have centred on the core values of freedom, democracy and the rule of law, on the common commercial and maritime tradition, and on the shared interests of promoting growth and prosperity.

The UK and Greece have the challenge and great opportunity to redefine their multi-faceted relationship post EU-Exit. Cooperation can still be rooted in the historic European values of democracy, openness, and the maintenance of international security and legal order. At the same time, new solutions will have to be crafted based on these shared values, to address both new global challenges - irregular migration flows, climate change, biodiversity, sustainable development and the recent health crisis – and old ones, which threaten the individual, regional and collective security.

There is much scope for strengthening and expanding the bilateral relationship through inward investment to Greece and cooperation in the strategic sectors of energy, IT, tourism, shipping, education and logistics. And the thriving Greek community in the UK can play an important role in reinforcing those ties.

Session 1: Climate and Energy

Climate and COVID-19 are converging to create a perfect storm if action is not taken: world energy demand will drop by 5% in 2021; the impact of the pandemic on fuel mix will see a drop in gas/LNG/wholesale electricity prices; and the collapse of demand in the world oil market is applying pressure on energy companies, leading to RES project delays and cancellations. We therefore need to lay the foundations to meet ambitions.

Great strides have been made in RES generation, which is now cheaper than conventional energy production. To accelerate the process, governments should remove policy barriers and provide support for technologies that have high upfront investment costs. The global

stimulus package amounts to USD 12 trillion; if even a small portion of this is directed to investment in new technologies, we will be able to meet the Paris Agreement goals.

Energy needs to be affordable, sustainable, and available without interruption. Hence, while the long-term goal should be zero emissions by 2050, it is being argued that over the next few years it might be necessary to continue to invest in carbon-based energy sources such as natural gas.

The pandemic provides an opportunity. The EU's Green Deal represents 4% of EU GDP. In 2021 Greece will receive the equivalent of 2.5% of its GDP from the EU's Recovery Fund to invest in green transition and digital transformation. Greece can become a green energy producer and a leader in carbon capture and storage; what the private sector wants from the government is policy continuity, rule of law, and less red tape. To avoid delays the country will also need to protect affected communities and apply good governance principles. Efforts are being made to initiate a dialogue between NGOs and central and local authorities in order to bring local communities on board.

There is great scope for UK-Greece cooperation on green transition and adaptation – which needs to go beyond electricity to include all types of transport - through their institutions, experts, and private sector companies.

### Session 2: The Future of Work

COVID-19 has led to a wide-ranging reassessment of work practices and to the further consolidation of trends that had already started to become prevalent in the areas of government operation, service provision and corporate governance prior to the pandemic.

Remote working suggests that value can be delivered without commuting to work on a daily basis and casts a shadow over commercial property in city centres and elsewhere hosting offices. The 'digital revolution' and increased restrictions have also impacted consumer responses, while firms have undergone major restructuring and many outlets have shut down permanently, leading to job losses and affecting high streets and city life. Recent spikes in coronavirus cases could also mean that demand in numerous sectors might not return to previous levels and that changes in work practices become permanent, such as less use of public transport and air travel, and less overall movement across borders. In addition, with personal contact reduced considerably, automation and AI could take over, rendering many jobs obsolete.

The pandemic has also exposed inequalities in both countries and across the world, hurting large sections of the population and the public purse.

The young have been affected by the disruption to their education. In addition, parts of the labour market often populated by junior staff, have suffered disproportionately. It will be necessary to steer the new generation towards emerging careers in line with the types of skills required in a post-pandemic environment. In addition, there are several initiatives supporting youth in setting up new innovative enterprises but it is likely that, unless additional measures are taken, the young will be impacted throughout their lives.

COVID-19 could also derail gender parity gains in the workplace as women have borne the brunt of the coronavirus impact. During the peak of the health crisis, women have assumed the main caring role from which they will find it hard to escape unless growth resumes in a faster way than before. Women's jobs are also considerably more vulnerable to this crisis than men's occupations.

New flexible working practices combined with training and continued education could in fact encourage productivity, and increase employee wellbeing and happiness, leading to reduced labour churn and lower costs of running a business. The commitment on investment ahead in productive sectors should also help. Support packages in Greece and the UK focusing on transition support and longer term digital and green growth offers are foreseen. And policy should also ensure that losers are compensated or supported in adapting. A further challenge is the growing number of people engaged in the 'gig economy' which has increased workers' insecurity due to their largely uncertain status in terms of their rights.

### Session 3: Mobility, Migration and Travel

It is technically possible to establish protocols for COVID-safe travel. Much will depend on the willingness of countries to work together to accept common standards. The demand for travel will certainly bounce back, but in an uneven way: there will be pent-up demand to make up for missed opportunities, while continuing health concerns are also likely to be felt. Greece has emerged in 2020 as a relatively safe destination which could make it even more attractive not only for tourism but also for foreigners looking for somewhere safe and agreeable to live and work.

Migration flows have also been disrupted by the pandemic. Public health restrictions have played a significant part in limiting cross-border movement. In some cases health measures have doubtless been exploited by governments keen to use the opportunity to make both immigration and transit harder. Longer-term, however, migration trends are likely to resume. Both the push from developing countries and regions of conflict and political pressures in developed countries stand to be exacerbated by recession and increased unemployment.

Both Greece and the UK have long histories of welcoming refugees. Greece has continued to shoulder more than its fair share of the burden. A European solution, replacing the existing unsatisfactory arrangements with a new European Pact on Migration and Asylum, seems to be problematic when it comes to agreeing specific commitments. The UK has taken an important initiative to accept some asylum seekers from Greece. An offer to accept an agreed number each year once it fully leaves the EU as a gesture of solidarity with Greece would be welcomed, but current experience suggests this might be difficult to negotiate.

After Brexit, the UK would have the chance to define its own refugee policy and could choose to play a leadership role. A sustainable long-term solution would reconcile the rights of refugees, provide opportunities for them to stay at or nearer home, as well as maintain support for asylum in recipient countries. Such an approach would involve a combination of organised settlement alongside development programmes in the countries of origin and transit, recognising that there are multiple drivers for migration. Self-development

opportunities in the form of education and work could provide enough hope to persuade refugees not to undertake long and perilous journeys. On the other hand, increased wealth often opened the eyes of economic migrants to the gap between their aspirations and the potential at home, thereby encouraging them to seek opportunities farther afield.

In both cases – effective and humane management of migration and facilitating travel – solutions are most likely to be found through greater international coordination.

#### Session 4: China's Growing Global Footprint

China's growing influence and assertiveness is open to different interpretations and could be viewed both as a threat and as an opportunity.

Are China's interests purely commercial or does the country pursue the Communist Party's interests, seeking to secure global compliance and establish spheres of influence by controlling the cyberspace and international communications?

Many focus on what they perceive as Beijing's growing authoritarianism and aggressiveness, exemplified by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and by the country's ambivalent stance vis-à-vis the rules-based global order. China may not wish to scrap the order as such but to bend the rules to serve its own interests. The BRI, in particular, an integral part of China's Internationalisation strategy linking Europe with Eurasia, and the way it is being implemented across the world, are largely seen as incompatible with the UN Declaration of Human Rights.

The importance to national economies of Beijing's outward, 'dragon-head' investments in Europe should not be underrated though. The Port of Piraeus stands out as a focal point of this strategy. Greece's EU membership could appease fears regarding China's growing impact on the country, since the acquis creates a framework for relations with Beijing. What's more, how much the local community and the national economy stand to gain from COSCO operating Pier II at the Port of Piraeus will affect the Greek-Chinese partnership; internal reactions to China's increasing commercial penetration of the Greek market could be strong.

There seems to be an emerging consensus around the necessity to work with China in a rules-based framework in which each side knows the rules and follows them. This may mean that, if current rules principally serve the interests of the West they could be replaced by a more "ecumenical system."

"East meets West and West meets East, but we have to learn how to play the game," one speaker said.

#### Closing keynote speech

In the UK, at least in the mid-term, the political impact of COVID-19 on politics will be strong, increasing the sense of disillusionment in politics expressed initially with Brexit. At the same time, uncertainty over Brexit continues and appears to be more radical than uncertainty induced by COVID-19. People expect the current health crisis to end after vaccines are

introduced, with things returning to normal, more or less. Uncertainty over Brexit, however, pertains to the fact that no one knows how Brexit will be implemented.

Greece's handling of the first wave of the pandemic has engendered considerable amounts of trust in public opinion in a country notorious for lack of trust in institutions. Nevertheless, given the country's dependence on tourism, the economic shock was strong. That impact is somehow mitigated by two factors: Greece's ability to relax fiscal rules in order to provide short-term assistance to the people most affected by the pandemic; and the mid- to longer-term prospect of massive economic assistance that is likely to come through the EU Recovery Fund. It remains to be seen whether the economic shock will overturn the psychological shift towards optimism after a decade of pessimism. The sovereign debt crisis seems to have made society more resilient. There is greater certainty that the current health crisis will end, whereas there was no such certainty in the previous crisis.

Regarding UK-Greek relations, two areas are worth reflecting on and working towards improving.

First, the rapid deterioration of the Greece-Turkey relationship. Therein lies an opportunity to think more creatively about ways to strengthen UK-Greek relations *vis-a-vis* the situation in Turkey.

Second, the cultural capital, channeled primarily through higher education. Thousands of Greeks have studied in the UK and remain there. Many went back to find work in Britain during the height of the Greek crisis. Cultural ties are not easily replicated, even with countries that have longer-standing relations with Greece, in terms of the skills and the human capital of that population. This unique cultural capital is likely to be affected in a potentially negative way by Brexit developments in at least two ways: through the end of free movement, and the impending end of the preferential tuition regime for EU citizens in UK universities. From a policy perspective a lot of creative thinking is necessary to mitigate the impact and to help preserve, nurture and grow the cultural capital which exists between the two countries.

### Closing remarks

Bring together great minds from Britain and Greece to think creatively about developments of bilateral and global importance. This is what the Symposium was set to do this year – a different kind of event in 2020 with all the uncertainties involved, but hugely successful nonetheless.

The exchanges this year created once more much food for thought:

Clean technologies are providing answers and green solutions become more affordable. However, the economic downturn means there is less readiness to invest in the former and there is less demand for energy, hence less ability to pay for the investments. The discussion around the new normal in the workplace is fascinating and will preoccupy us for many years to come, as COVID-19 has accelerated broad trends that may reshape work after the pandemic recedes. What's more, no exploration of the future of work could ever be definitive.

On the migration front, it will be interesting to see how push and pull forces will shape geopolitics: when you move into an economic downturn, the push factor towards more migration increases but the readiness in reception countries becomes more resistant. This puts a burden on political leaders to lead opinion and suppress their populist instincts and self-interest. China's relationship with the world will be a recurring theme. Everyone should have a vested interest in the rules-based order, and it is important that the biggest powers with the biggest economies lead the way in this direction.

2021 will be a very important year, a year in which Greece celebrates 200 years of its independence – in the 1820's Britain and Greece's histories deeply intertwined. The fifth iteration of the Symposium will be emotional and important, bringing the two countries' interlinked histories and the deep and broad personal links between the two nations to the fore. As Britain finally makes its final exit from the European Union - but emphatically not from Europe - these bilateral relationships, friendliness, cooperation and collaboration, are going to become more important, not less so.