Navigating the European Project: A Comparative Analysis of Greece and Portugal's Journey within the EU

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Abstract
This comparative analysis explores and compares Portugal and Greece's relationship with the European Union (EU), tracking this through history to today's contemporary context. The essay compares each nation's path to EU accession, their responses to the Eurozone crisis (Euro crisis), and current relations with Brussels. It is demonstrated that, despite their shared position as southern European nations with comparable economies and policy interests, core differences in EU relations have existed throughout each nation's history. This piece demonstrates that, at the core of these differences, is the divergent economic experiences between Greece and Portugal following accession, with Portugal enjoying steadier growth and geographical advantages compared to Greece. Moreover, in the Euro crisis context, this analysis considers the implications of seeking non-EU partnerships on greater relations with the EU, an issue particularly pertinent for both Greece and Portugal, given their shared economic relationship with China. In closing, the piece puts forth a comparison of each nation's relationship and influence within EU institutions today, in which it demonstrates that Portugal continues to 'punch above its weight' compared to Greece. Overall, in an analysis of these complicated relations dynamics, this essay provides key insights into both the opportunities and challenges facing these often-overlooked Southern European economies.

Introduction

The historical and contemporary engagement of southern European Union (EU) member states within the European project provides a rich narrative marked by post-dictatorial consolidations of democracy, and responses to economic crises. This essay specifically seeks to present and compare the experiences of Portugal and Greece within the EU, including both their historical paths to joining and their current-day relationship with Brussels. This comparison between the two states, despite being rarely made within contemporary academia, produces a useful and relevant conclusion. Indeed, Portugal and Greece are small EU member states, both in terms of population, at around 10 million, and their economic fluctuation, each suffering greatly from the 2008 Eurozone crisis (Euro crisis). Furthermore, both their accessions to the EU represented powerful escapes from dictatorship.

This essay sets out to compare both the historical and the current relationship of Greece and Portugal with the EU's institutions, differentiating their individual experiences as southern member states, a group historically clustered together. To do so, the essay is separated into three core sections. In Section 1, we compare the historical experiences of Greece and Portugal both prior to and in the period following accession to the EU. This includes both an analysis of the immediate results on political stability and democracy, and also on each state's economy. Following this, Section 2 covers both a historical and highly current factor explicitly relevant to Greece and Portugal, the financial and Euro crisis of 2008 and beyond. In the wake of this crisis, this essay compares the approaches taken by Greece and Portugal as highly affected member states in their search for non-EU partnerships to consolidate their economies, and the ramifications this had on EU relations. In the final section, this essay compares the current dynamics between the EU and the states of interest, from a wide array of indicators including their engagement with trade and movement of persons, their influence in directing EU policy, and finally the EU's reputation within each country.

Section 1 - Background to EU Accession

For Portugal, international cooperation began following World War II (WWII), with memberships in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). However, a period of dictatorship spanning from 1926 until the 'Revolução dos Cravos' Revolution in 1974, which kickstarted the Portuguese transition toward democracy, largely prevented any significant political arrangements with the European Economic Community (EEC). In the wake of its revolution, Portugal applied for EEC membership in March 1977, aiming to consolidate and legitimize its newfound democratic regime.[1] Nine years later in January 1986, Portugal officially became a member of the EEC.[2] This nine-year gap between applying and joining has since been blamed on the grouping together of Portugal with their Iberian neighbor Spain.[3] For Spain, the process of economic integration and consensus with the EEC brought much more complicated questions than Portugal's relatively straightforward blending in with the EU, including concerns from France and Italy around Spain's potential impact on the communities' existing agricultural and fishing arrangements.[4]

[1] European Union, "Portugal – EU Member Country Profile"
[2] Ibid.
[3] Cunha, "Portugal, Spain, and Europe: From Parallelism to Capitalisation", p25–41
[4] Ibid.

Greece's accession to the EU spanned significantly further back than Portugal's, being that Greece initially applied to join the EEC in June 1959, but this was 'frozen' following the country's takeover by a military junta in 1967.[1] The fall of this military leadership, and thus re-consolidation of democracy, occurred in 1974, the same year as the Portuguese revolution. Following this, Greece reopened its EEC application in June 1975, and, in January 1981, the country formally became a member state.[2]

Just as with Portugal, democratic consolidation was a key focus of this alliance. Outside of democratic consolidation, for both countries, the assimilation into the EEC represented key opportunities for economic development. This occurred not only through new access to trade through the single market but also with crucial access to the cohesion fund. It is commonly believed that the EU at this time was a more "benevolent" project with its few, yet mostly rich, member states, and thus that the cohesion fund was a more plentiful and charitable source of investment for new and poorer members like Greece and Portugal.[3] Thus, for the EU, this period of expansion represented both a key push to maintain democratization across Europe, and also a moment which expanded it beyond a "west European club of democracies" and towards younger political and economic systems.[4]

Immediate Relations following Accession

Following EEC accession in 1981, Greece was in a very unique position. For one, their geographical position in the southeastern part of Europe was a first for the EU, and Greece didn't share any common border with other member states. Similarly, their economy was uniquely small compared to the rest of the community, at 50% below the average.[5] Thus, while the symbolism of their membership was undeniable, both in terms of democratic consolidation and EU regional expansion, it has nonetheless been argued since that Greece "failed systematically to adjust" to the EU.[6]In terms of Greece's economic growth, the compound GDP growth rate in the period following accession from 1979-1990 was under 0.3%, and by 1987 Greece's GDP was almost identical to that of eight years prior in 1979.[7] In the same period, other EU member states – and even other southern European states like Portugal and Spain – saw compound growth well above 2%.[8]

Portugal's location in south-western Europe and border with Spain rendered it comparatively less isolated from the rest of the union. Moreover, while Portugal's economy, like Greece's, was substantially lower than the EU average when it joined the EEC, the country's economic experience in the years following this accession was comparatively less troublesome. It has been argued that the Portuguese economy became "steadier" following accession.[9] Indeed, average compound GDP growth continued firmly from the year of accession in 1986 up until 2000 at a similar level of above 2%. From this economic perspective, it would appear that the Portuguese experience in the years following their EU accession was steadier than that of their Greek counterparts. In both cases, the economic experiences of Greece and Portugal following accession

[1] European Union, "Greece – EU Member Country Profile"
[2] Ibid.
[3] Magone, "Portugal Is Not Greece", pp.346–360
[4] Ibid.
[5] Vamvakidis, "The Convergence Experience of the Greek Economy in the EU"
[6] Tsoukalis, "Greece and the EU: a Turbulent Love affair, Now More mature?" pp.155–162
[7] World Bank Open Data, "GDP (Current US$) – Greece"
[8] World Bank Open Data, "GDP (Current US$) - Portugal"
[9] Bação, Cerdeira, and Duarte, "Portugal in the Eurozone: Evolution and Expectations", pp.1–20

cannot be fully attributed to their new membership of the EU, but are still an important indicator, particularly in understanding the background to their EU relations.

Section 2 - The Euro Crisis

The 2008 global financial crisis and the ensuing so-called 'Eurozone Crisis' continue to be remembered for their significant effects on southern European member states. It is thus a highly relevant point of comparison between Portugal and Greece, for whom the Eurozone crisis can be seen as central to their 'historical' relationship with the EU, yet also as a defining event of their contemporary one. Labelled the 'PIGS,' Portugal, Italy, Greece and Spain, shared mounting debt-to-GDP ratios, banking systems in catastrophe, and required significant financial assistance from the EU to protect their economies. Indeed, this PIGS label, intended to signify states which live beyond their means and rely on EU assistance to survive, has remained a damning label for both Portugal and Greece even 15 years on from the beginning of the crisis.

From 2008 to 2015, Greece's GDP fell from US$355 billion to US$195 billion.[1] In comparison, Portugal's GDP fell from US$263 billion to approximately US$199 billion, a significant drop of 24%, but much less so when put side-by-side with the Greek's 45% drop.[2] Nonetheless, both Greece and Portugal alike were forced to turn to the EU to seek a bailout. In Portugal's case, for example, the years of 'Troika' from 2011-2014, in which the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the EU joined together to offer it a 78-billion-euro bailout, had an immense effect on its economy.[3] In the years that followed their respective bailouts, both countries implemented an "unprecedented wave of cuts, tax rises and labour market reforms," to try to steady their economies.[4]

International Trade Partners

This crisis and the resulting bailout recoveries undeniably affected the relationship these countries had with the EU, and a great illustration of this can be seen in the ensuing desire for Greece and Portugal to look beyond their EU partners to find trading alliances. Within recent scholarly work detailing the de-Europeanization process, it has been argued that, due to the limited interest of Western investors, Greece and Portugal followed similar patterns as one another, both looking to form agreements with investors from developing countries.[5] In Greece's case, this was predominantly Chinese investors, while in Portugal's case, this was both their Lusophone partners in Angola and Brazil in addition to Chinese investors. In either case, the pursuit of these foreign investors was seen as an important method in alleviating the economic suffering brought about by the crisis. Notably, in the Portuguese example, the pursuit of improved trade relations with South America and Africa was not in and of itself a threat to the EU. On the contrary, during previous council presidencies such as that in 2007, Portugal has worked to upgrade Brussels' economic relations with Africa and Brazil as a whole.[6]

The same may not however be said for China, and a strong bond with China has been argued to risk incentivizing "Athens and Lisbon to contest common EU positions."[7] For Portugal, a unique bond to China was formed through a centuries-long ownership of Macao and a

[1] World Bank Open Data, "GDP (Current US$) – Greece"
[2] World Bank Open Data, "GDP (Current US$) - Portugal"
[3] Goncalves, Sergio, and Khalip, "Portugal faces tough road under 78 billion Euro bailout"
[4] Zartaloudis, "The financial crisis has badly damaged the Greek and Portuguese welfare states"
[5] Raimundo, Stavridis, and Tsardanidis, "The Eurozone crisis' impact", pp.535–550
[6] Robinson, "Painting the CFSP in national colours", pp.235–255
[7] Raimundo, Stavridis, and Tsardanidis, "The Eurozone crisis' impact", pp.535–550

comparatively straightforward handover back to China. One of the most staggering examples of this relationship in action occurred during the height of the economic crisis, when, in 2012, Portugal sold a 21% stake in its dominant electricity supplier to Chinese state-owned enterprise (SOE), Three Gorges, for US$3.4 billion.[1] Greece also proved to be very reliant on Chinese investment during this period, making a number of different major investments in Greece across real estate and energy. A significant instance of this was the 2016 selling of Greece's most major port, Piraeus, to Chinese SOE Cosco at a 66% stake.[2]

Crucially, despite both countries taking advantage of major non-EU investment opportunities during a time of economic crisis, it can further be argued that Greece's relationship with China may have brought about more issues to their EU relations when compared with the Portuguese. For example, in 2017, Greece blocked an EU statement at the United Nations (UN) which criticised China's human rights record.[3] Furthermore, it has been argued since that Greece has continued to use the 'China Connection' as a bargaining tool during bailout negotiations with the EU, pitting one side against the other.[4] Indeed, as of 2023, Portugal has carefully followed the EU position regarding China, and has threatened to pull out of the Belt and Road Initiative should China support the Russian effort against Ukraine, while Greece has yet to follow suit.

Section 3 – Contemporary EU Relations

Trade and Persons

We now move to compare the current relationship which Greece and Portugal as member states have with the institutions in Brussels including in trade, influence, and public plus political relations. According to the EU's own figures, Portugal's intra-EU trade accounts for 71% of exports and 75% of imports, with their strongest EU trade partner by a huge margin being Spain.[5] Greece's trade structure differs from this quite heavily, being that only 57% of exports and 57% of imports are intra-EU, and they have no standout trade partner within the EU in the same way as Portugal.[6] Portugal is thus arguably a more significant trade partner to the EU, likely helped by its location, while Greece, in comparison, possesses more significant trade partnerships with non-EU nations like China and Turkey.

As for the movement of persons, Portugal and Greece both have high levels of EU emigration. According to the UN Emigration Stock, as of 2020, 2 million Portuguese nationals live outside of Portugal, who have the highest rate of emigration in the EU (20% of the population) while for Greece this number is around 1 million.[7] In both cases, the overwhelming majority of these emigrants reside in the EU. Similar to the country's influence with trade, Portugal's foothold in the EU appears stronger in terms of the raw number of its citizens who reside across it.

Influence across the EU

Due to their relatively small economies and populations in comparison to EU heavyweights like Germany or France, the potential sphere of influence for Portugal and Greece is limited in the EU. Both nations have previously been heavily involved in discussions surrounding issues of

[1] Bugge, "China Three Gorges buys EDP stake for 2.7 billion euros"
[2] Bali, "In Greece's Largest Port of Piraeus, China Is the Boss"
[3] Smith, "Greece Blocks EU's Criticism at UN of China's Human Rights Record"
[4] Raimundo, Stavridis, and Tsardanidis, "The Eurozone crisis' impact", pp.535–550
[5] European Union, "Portugal – EU Member Country Profile"
[6] European Union, "Greece – EU Member Country Profile"
[7] Perista and Carrilho, "Portugal: High and Rising Emigration"

migration and climate change, and for which both have called for a united EU approach. In terms of migration, Portugal and Greece are situated on the "soft underbelly" of the EU, which places them at the crossroads of heavily used Mediterranean migration pathways from the global south and east.[1] Indeed, issues of migration have been particularly problematic for Greece, whose islands have, in the past, become home to many thousands of temporarily placed migrants and refugee camps. Greece and Brussels have collaborated in seeking to quell the issues brought about by this, including a 700-million-euro package pledged by the EU in 2020 to assist in Greece's border management and infrastructure.[2] Moreover, with respect to climate change, both Greece and Portugal have been historically affected by wildfires, having damaging effects on their wildlife and tourism-centered economies. The EU has frequently been at the forefront of assisting such instances, with both relief funds and also equipment such as firefighting aircraft.[3]

Nonetheless, while their key EU policy interests have often aligned, it can be argued that out of the two, Portugal has more so been the one to "punch above its weight" in influencing direction.[4] The largest example of such is likely to be the Lisbon Treaty, which was argued to have been "rescued" under the Portuguese EU presidency in 2007, and which served to heavily strengthen the EU's institutional framework and legal powers.[5] Moreover, crucial names in the EU apparatus have come from Portugal, including head of the Commission from 2004-2014, Jose Manuel Barroso. In comparison, Greece has very few notable examples of pioneering policy or contributing significant leaders, though this dynamic may well change as Greece, like Portugal, continues to recover and grow economically.

Overall EU Relationship

We lastly shift to compare the stability of current relations between Greece and Portugal with the EU, including both their political and citizen-led perceptions of EU institutions. As has been widely documented, the 2008 recession and subsequent Eurozone crisis resulted in large swathes of political realignment and upswings in Euroscepticism and/or populism.[6] In Greece, while Euroscepticism can be said to "remain soft in character," it has nonetheless been a prominent aspect of Greek politics in recent years.[7] The Syriza-ANEL coalition, a cooperative political party between radical left and populist right wing members, was elected in 2015 and ran on a platform of continued Euroscepticism, which frequently hit out at Brussels for the terms of their bailout agreement. In contrast however, the current Greek leader, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, has maintained a positive relationship with the EU, going as far as to earn him the title 'Brussels' darling.'[8] In the Portuguese context, despite public discontent with the EU during the height of the euro crisis, relations have remained largely stable and positive. Portugal today seems to have been the 'exception to the rule' of southern Europe, with no populist Eurosceptic party emerging and finding success in the years following their bailout.

It is also evident that the Portuguese citizenry share the current government's approval of the EU. Indeed, when contrasted with Greece and even the EU average, public perception today of Brussels remains remarkably high in Portugal. According to a Spring 2023 Eurobarometer

[1] Triandafyllidou, "Migration Policy in Southern Europe"
[2] European Commission, "Commission Presents Action Plan for Immediate Measures to Support Greece"
[3] European Commission, "EU Mobilises Its Firefighting Fleet to Help Portugal"
[4] Möller, "Portugal: A good European in search of friends"
[5] Ibid.
[6] Saoulidou and Sarantidis, "Populist Euroscepticism in time of economic crisis"
[7] Katsanidou and Lefkofridi, "A Decade of Crisis in the European Union: Lessons from Greece"
[8] The Economist, "Greece Is a European Success Story"

report, 67% of Portuguese Citizens are "satisfied with the way democracy works in the EU," which can be compared to a lower EU average of 54%.[1] Moreover, when quizzed on specific policies, in all but one policy program (economic and social recovery), Portuguese citizens have expressed well above the EU-average approval rate. As for Greek citizens, answers showed high disapproval compared to the Portuguese position, with only 34% of citizens expressing satisfaction with democracy in the EU.[2] Furthermore, they expressed average to well below-average satisfaction with every policy area mentioned.[3] Of course, it should be noted that these statistics do not necessarily reflect these member states political relationships with Brussels, though they may influence them. Nonetheless, in comparing the two, satisfaction with the EU is evidently higher amongst the Portuguese citizenry than the Greek one.

Conclusion

In exploring the historical and contemporary narratives of Portugal and Greece, this comparative essay has revealed the similarities and discrepancies that have defined and continue to define their respective relationships with the EU. We firstly have demonstrated how both states came to join the EU in very similar contexts of democratic consolidation. However, almost immediately following accession, Greece's stagnant economic situation more so than created significant questions for the EU more so than for Portugal. Furthermore, while Portugal experienced heavy blows in the Euro crisis and had to look abroad for investment, it nonetheless maintained an overall deference to the EU's foreign policy. In contrast, Greece, having faced more formidable challenges from the crisis, both sought out and potentially leveraged their China relationship, creating potential problems in their relationship with Brussels to this day. Continuing this direction, while both member states have a powerful trade and social interest in the EU, we showed this relationship to be stronger between Portugal and the EU, as is the influence of Portugal on the EU as a whole. Finally, we conveyed that while Euroscepticism on a governmental level is at bay in both countries, the Portuguese citizenry today show a much higher approval of the EU compared to Greece, of whom the citizenry currently express significant disapproval.

To note, while these findings cannot necessarily be wholly generalized to all other states, they nonetheless can serve as indicators for the experiences of the EU's southern, peripheral and/or smaller economies. Some areas of discussion within this essay invite further research. These could include a larger comparative study on the effects of the Euro crisis on member states' relationships with the EU today, and equally issues such as the ramifications of EU member states continuing to have strong relations with China.

[1] Europa.eu, "2023 Spring Eurobarometer"
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid.

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