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## Europe and Greece: Playing Different Games?

By James Athanassiou  
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*Athens.*

If you have seen a cheap backgammon board on sale in Greece, you'll see that the oblong box, when opened, can be used to play chess on one side and backgammon on the other. Both the Europeans and Greeks have been using a board like this and playing games for high stakes for quite a few years now. But they have each been using different sides of the board.

I am in Athens right now, so a week ago, I took up the opportunity to see what happens behind the closed doors when both sides meet. A friend and a good contact here could get me in to see a live videoconference between the Europeans and the Greeks. I took up her offer. Usually, apart from seeing everyone arriving and departing Brussels and the odd twenty-word TV interview, we don't really get to see what goes on in these meetings.

Before today's live videoconference started, my friend explained to me that I should try to be open-minded. While everyone assumed the negotiations were highly intricate involving complex diplomacy and game theories and such, the negotiations were conducted, in fact, using real games with real game boards. 'It's a sort of European Union thing, but kept secret,' she winked. 'Imagine if the public found out.' As I took my seat I felt very confused about the whole thing.

Things kicked off with the Brussels bureaucrats playing highlights of some big face-to-face meetings (games?) from 2015. Looking at the monitors around the room, I saw that the Europeans were playing chess. After they made their move, it was the Greeks' turn. Whoever won the match got to decide how things would be for the next few months. The bureaucrats played the game the same way you and I would play chess but with one big difference. There were about twenty-seven of them in the room sitting around a table and each one got a say on which piece should be moved next. One seat at the table was empty and my contact explained 'that's the Brits, but they're busy right now'. After a few minutes, the group at the table made a decision. One stood up and moved to smaller table and sat in front of a chessboard. He picked up a pawn, but hesitated. I noticed that he was talking to someone on a cell phone. A few minutes later, he nodded and made the move. Who had actually decided how the piece should be moved, I can't say. But, it was likely someone not in the room.

The highlights of the older meetings always showed the various European players concentrating deeply. They moved their pieces slowly, but with venom, to tell from their narrowed eyes, until eventually the Greeks would either call for a break or resign. It all appeared very rehearsed and very spaghetti western. I saw endlessly looped slow motions of Jeroen Dijsselbloem's brilliant Sicilian a few months ago when he had taken on Yanis Varoufakis, the then Greek Finance Minister. The Dutchman had been shot from various heroic angles, but it annoyed me that the clip was cut at the moment the two men seemed to be getting ready to settle it with fists. And also, for some reason, I never did get to see the Greeks using the chessboard.

Today's match, when it finally started, seemed to be just repeating what I had seen in the highlights, but via videoconference. Interminable consultations in Brussels and various men, cell phone in hand, making the moves.

Back here in Athens, I saw that the Greeks were playing the game in an entirely different way. For a start, and this is weird, they were using the other side of the board – the backgammon side. Seems like they've been playing backgammon all along, but that, according to my contact, the Brussels people edit it out. I could see in front of me, various Greek ministers, taking turns to throw the backgammon dice. They did so with some élan, yelling for a double number, or this or that combination. Every throw was accompanied seconds later by the slamming of the chequer on the board and loud shouts of 'gotcha, you \*\*—\*\*.' Yet, I noticed, that when Euclid Tsakalotos, the current Greek Finance Minister, threw the dice, he had a quieter style as befits, I suppose, someone with an English public school education. His version of shouting was 'Oh come on you sixes – get a move on'. And often, they did.

I asked my friend how the two sides could manage to play a game let alone negotiate serious matters when they were doing two entirely different things. 'That's Europe for you' she laughed. 'It's always like this. That's the way the whole thing was designed. They have to translate each other's moves – chess moves into backgammon moves and the other way round. I asked her why? 'The Euros believe chess solves all known problems and keeps thing steady, the Greeks that backgammon does. It can get very vicious.' I asked her why they didn't just play the same game and she leaned in 'they asked the Americans to suggest a game, but they refused. I think they think we're all a bit crazy over here.'

Back with the game, after the Greeks had made their move we shifted back to the scene in Brussels. And the process repeated.

Trouble is though, from what I saw in the game today and in the highlights earlier on, after the moves have been translated, Greeks lose – whatever the game. Whether the stakes are finances, migrants or refugees – they lose. It's only the noise they make slamming their pieces down on their board that appears to give them hope that they may win. That and, of course, their cheering whenever they get a double.

Later on, during a lull, I noticed for the first time that we had another audience with us today. Uninvited I'm sure. Over the players' heads, I could see anxious faces outside pressed up against the windows. Some were showing two fingers in a victory sign and others, holding German flags covered in Arabic script. They were cheering every time the Greeks made a move, willing them to win for some reason. I think, and I checked with my friend on this, that they were refugees from Victoria Square – nearby. They must have been Syrians. Or Afghans. Or Iraqis. Maybe North Africans. I don't know. There are tens of thousands refugees all over Athens right now. That's why today's game was so tense.

Meanwhile, voices had been raised. The Greeks were complaining about something and pointing. Looking at the screens, I could see that there was some sort of commotion over in Brussels. The cameras panned in and it looked like some very aggressive people had gotten into the negotiations over there. Some East Europeans – they could be nothing else – to judge from their ill-fitting Soviet era suits. For sure, they were shouting. Some were waving chairs and others, Hungarian and Slovenian flags. They were high-fiving each other as they knocked over Nespresso machines and kicked bits of furniture round the shocked Eurocrats.

The Greeks were conferring and smiles were now breaking out. My friend had to shout to me over the hubbub. It seems the Greeks had just decided that today's negotiations were invalid. The sudden appearance of the rowdy East Europeans in Brussels meant that all bets were off for them. As she spoke to me, they were briefing the press that what only could be right-wing hooligans were just a rent-a-mob put up to it by the Europeans to disrupt the game because they had been about to lose for once.

In the middle of this chaos, I started getting those meaningful looks from my friend saying 'time to go now.' I took my time. The Greeks were now talking about the backgammon tournament needing to be restarted from scratch – that all the three tournaments up to now have been fixed. At this moment, I could have done, but I didn't think it was my place to point out to them that if the tournaments are always fixed, they should not be taking part in them. It seems such a waste of time.

Still, I don't know. Maybe things can move on and problems be resolved if both sides decide to shut up the game board for good. Or, if they don't and they insist on playing games, they should be playing the same game. So that everybody knows what they playing, what it means and what the real stakes are. Right now, from what I see around me in Greece, it seems to be more urgent then ever.

This would be the logical thing to do but we're in Europe.