Core Executive Politics in Greece: the paradox of absent centralisation

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Abstract

International attention has focussed recently on the reform ‘failures’ of Greece in the context of its European Union membership. Systemic constraints are increasingly recognised. The present paper argues that attention ought also to be given to the inner workings of government at the centre and their undermining of reform capacity. It explores the nature of the Greek core executive across five premierships and argues the supposed supremacy of the PM is something of a fallacy. In reality, the structure is one of a ‘solitary centre’ amidst a ‘segmented government’. As such, the closest parallels are with central, rather than southern, Europe. In developing its empirical analysis, the paper makes a methodological contribution to the examination of core executive relations and resources.

Introduction

The sovereign debt crisis in Greece has highlighted deep-rooted problems of the reform capacity of the domestic polity, raising questions as to its position within the euro-zone. Prior to the crisis, the repeated reform failures at home could be attributed to constraints and distortions of a systemic nature (Featherstone and Papadimitriou, 2008; Mitsopoulos and Pelagidis, 2011). But in a political culture that has long emphasised the importance
of the ‘leader’, successive prime ministers have been castigated for their failure to do more. To what extent might these failures be attributable, in part, to the very inner workings of the Greek government at the centre? This is a subject that has received barely any academic attention: contrasting the relevance of leadership personality and the structural location of the PM’s position to questions of direction, planning and coordination.

The present paper explores the nature of the Greek core executive\(^1\). It neither fits the thesis of the ‘presidentialisation’ of politics nor really that of a ‘hollowness’ resulting from a complex fragmentation of governmental processes (Poguntke and Webb, 2005; Rhodes, 1994). Instead, it is shown that it is akin to the ‘solitary centres’ identified in Central Europe (Goetz and Magretts, 1999). Like them, it has resisted the ‘imperative towards coordination’ within the contemporary core executive (Davis, 1997: 144) and has struggled with the demands of adaptation to European Union (EU) membership. Unlike them, it is a solitary centre that has lasted for almost four decades. The paper asserts that the supposed supremacy of the PM in the Greek system is something of a fallacy and as such it has contributed to an incomplete understanding of the problem of reform capacity. The paper follows Elgie’s call for research to examine core executives in depth and to assess their degree of change over time (1997: 231): locating the Greek case within a wider European spectrum and then examining its evolution across five major premierships of the recent period – the ‘metapolitefsi’ since the restoration of democracy in 1974.

In doing so, the paper seeks to make three contributions. Methodologically – and of potential general relevance - it develops a matrix of indicators by which to evaluate the relations between actors within a core executive, facilitating both the location of cases within conventional typologies and international comparison, with special reference to the position of the Prime Minister. Conceptually, it extends our understanding of the PM domain as a ‘solitary centre’ by its application to a different setting. Finally, empirically, it deepens the characterisation of the Greek case as being one of ‘segmented government’ (Elgie, 2011) with shifts between sub-types. The Conclusion draws out the wider conceptual and empirical implications. To our knowledge, this is the first systematic study of the evolution of the core executive in Greece in any language.

**‘Solitary Centres’: the Greek Core Executive in Context**

There are certain features of the Greek core executive that have remained relatively stable. The Prime Minister is widely seen as ‘primus solus’ in a setting of ‘prime minister centrism’ (Koutsoukis, 1994: 280). In constitutional terms, he (there has never been a female PM) may be more powerful than any of his counterparts in the West (Dagtoglou,

\(^1\) The usage here follows the classic definition of Dunleavy and Rhodes (1990:4) that it includes ‘all those organizations and structures which primarily serve to pull together and integrate central government policies, or act as final arbiters within the executive of conflicts between different elements of the government machine’. We refer, in particular, to the offices and networks around the PM. We prefer this to the Goetz and Magretts (1999) formulation of ‘centre of government’, for consistency.
The Constitution of 1975 had established a parliamentary system, but with an indirectly-elected president possessing some De Gaulle-type powers as the guardian. Andreas Papandreou swept these away in 1986, greatly strengthening the constitutional position of the PM. Though the Constitution was further revised in 2001, it did not significantly alter the position of the PM. Moreover, the wider constitutional system offers few checks and balances on the power of the PM (with a unicameral Parliament; weak judicial oversight; and, strong party discipline). There is a record since 1974 of relatively long periods of tenure for prime ministers, with four of the eight incumbents to 2009 each serving between five and ten years (see Table 2).

This position contrasts, however, with the reality of limited resources to support the PM’s role. In 2005, for example, the Greek PM’s Office had just under 90 staff and the vast majority of these appear to have been inactive, presumably fulfilling roles elsewhere outside the PM’s Office. Other, comparable, states have much larger offices around the PM: the Austrian Federal Chancellery was nearly ten times larger, the Dutch Ministry of General Affairs four times; and the Irish Department of Taioseach was twice as big.

Two further features have endured. One is the considerable degree of operational independence enjoyed by individual ministers in the context of an administrative system with tightly defined competences, built on the imperative of the ‘Minister’s signature’ (Flogaitis, 1987). In effect, Ministers exercise authority in their own right, rather than by delegation from the Cabinet (Davis, 1997: 137). The other long-term feature is the passivity of the bureaucracy: ‘Permanent civil servants are transformed into mere observers of the policy process without a direct stake in it’ (Dimitrakopoulos, 2001: 607). Ministries are politicised: the upper echelons are political appointees that normally move post with the minister and a dependency circle is thus created (Sotiropoulos, 1999: 15). Alongside these long-term features, the ‘Cabinet’ system – as the later empirical investigation will illustrate – has, historically, often been weak in its status and operation.

Against this background, placing the Greek case in the prevailing typologies on the core executive is problematic. Dunleavy and Rhodes (1990), for example, outlined six such variants and none fit well the Greek case. It comes closer to what Andeweg refers to as ‘monocratic-segmented’ core executive, with a powerful PM and groups of ministers (1997: 62). Similar is Elgie’s depiction of ‘segmented government’ (Elgie, 1997:225) in which a sectoral division of labour exists amongst core executive actors, with little cross-over. We argue that Greece has reflected his sub-category of ‘monocratic-ministerial’ – where the PM focuses on certain priority areas and ministerial colleagues are left with decision-making responsibilities in their domains with ‘the cabinet simply being a residual organization and bureaucrats merely implementing decisions’ (Elgie, 1997:225).

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2 ‘Cabinet’ is used here to refer to a constitutional form that generically may comprise various committees as well as a ‘cabinet’ of ministers responsible to parliament. In the Greek case, the formal nomenclature differs. The ‘full’ cabinet is known as the ‘Ministerial Council’ (Υπουργικό Συμβούλιο) and this is the term used here. In addition, a ‘mini-’or ‘inner-Cabinet’ operates, termed initially the ‘Government Commission’ (Κυβερνητική Επιτροπή); then renamed Government Council (Κυβερνητικό Συμβούλιο - ΚΥΣΥΜ) under Andreas Papandreou. Here ‘Government Commission’ and ‘Government Council’ are used in their relevant historical context. The ‘cabinet system’ is used as an umbrella term.
Over the five cases examined here there are variations in the PM’s role, but the general structural characterisation remains. Two premierships represented modest deviations to another sub-category – ‘Cabinet-ministerial’ – in which the Cabinet as a collectivity was more central.

The segmented system also reflects a lack of coordination, monitoring and planning. For example, there is no tradition of ‘a vast network of inter-departmental committees which are a characteristic and important feature of the decision-making structure of Western governments’ (Mackie and Hogwood, 1985: 27) and something of a starting-point for the complexity inherent in the ‘hollowness’ transition depicted in Whitehall. Intragovernmental coordination is a deep-rooted problem in Greece (Dimitrakopoulos, 2001); indeed, it is often personalized and ‘anarchical’ at both the political and administrative levels (Passas and Makridimitris, 1994: 73–4). Coordination must be contextualised within a state tradition (Davis, 1997) and that of Greece has juxtaposed a German legal order and a Napoleonic centralism, with the subordination of the state to political interests and one fragmented with endemic clientelistic practices and networks (Papakostas, 2001; Pollis, 1992;). Against this background, organisational development by stealth has led to overlapping responsibilities that are often little understood or expected even by those directly involved in its operation. The overlaps sustain internal blockages and clientelistic interests.

At the centre is a detachment. In their conception of ‘solitary centres’ in central and eastern Europe Goetz and Magretts (1999) draw on Hood (1983) and define the type as lacking: nodality (centrality of PM’s Office in information networks); effective authority (legal power and legitimacy to act quickly); organizational capacity; and treasure (resources). Thus, the very centre of government in the nine systems they examined were ‘largely unable to perform the coordinative tasks that are commonly associated with Prime Minister’s Offices and Cabinet Offices in the literature on consolidated Western democracies’ (Goetz and Margetts, 1999:426). Indeed, in important respects, the solitary centres ‘operate in isolation’ from their political and institutional environment (Goetz and Margetts, 1999:427) As the later empirical examination will illustrate, the Greek case displays similar problems of nodality, organizational capacity, resources, and confused authority that they identify in post-Communist Europe. In an earlier work, Goetz drew parallels between the ‘pathologies’ of the central state administrations of central and southern Europe which included inter alia institutional fragmentation and insufficient mechanisms for policy co-ordination and coherence (2001: 1043). He saw the parallel pathologies as ‘typical of democratizing settings in comparatively poor countries’ (2001: 1043). Goetz and Magretts (1999) had also seen the occurrence of a ‘solitary centre’ in central Europe as a phase in the post-Communist transition. It is significant that the ‘solitary centre’ identified in Greece also grew out of the conditions of a return to democracy in 1974, but equally, as the later cases will show, its basic parameters have proved durable over almost four decades. This suggests that, beyond the democratic transition, its endurance is a result of both institutional inertia and a culture of elite political attitudes to sustain it. This is not to deny change can and does occur within a solitary centre. In their studies of EU transposition processes, for example, Zubek (2010)
portrays a contingency in central Europe and Dimitrakopoulos (2001) a case of EU intervention supporting innovators within the Greek bureaucracy on public procurement.

But Goetz’ parallel of central and southern Europe appears more circumscribed. The traditional description of Italian government as ‘direzione plurima dissociata’ – lacking centralised coordination – is evocative of Athens and, to some degree, central Europe (Criscitiello, 1993: 581). Again, ministers have regarded their departments as ‘personal fiefdoms’ and the PM’s Office suffered from poor quality staff and high turnover (Hine and Finocchi, 1991). Yet, Italy has changed: PMs have ‘gained a stronger hold over the executive branch of the state through the growing autonomy of the Prime Minister’s office and the exercise of an increasingly monocratic form of rule’ (Calise, 2005). Unlike in Greece, the political class overcame institutional inertia and shifted the model. By contrast, both before and after the return to democracy, the Spanish system has long-been centralised: “the president [PM] stands at the centre of Spain’s political system, backed by an extensive staff of advisers and afforded considerable security of tenure” (Heywood, 1991: 111). Thus, the occurrence of ‘solitary centres’ does not extend across the south. Elsewhere, it is not unusual, of course, to read of constrained PMs - Muller-Rommel, 1994, for example, depicts such for the German Chancellor, but these derive from different factors (coalition politics, federalism) the ‘Bundeskanzleramt’ is a large and powerful office in its own right, with a strong institutionalisation.

**Methodology and data collection**

Much of the literature accepts that power within a core executive is fluid (without an a priori hierarchy) and relational (based on a ‘resource dependency’) between four sets of actors: the PM; the Cabinet and its committees; individual ministers; and, the senior bureaucracy (Elgie 2001; Rhodes, 2007). While Elgie (1997) provides a typology to contrast various models of executive politics, he says much less on how these might be operationalized. Existing literature provides a plethora of variables: ranging from the imprecise to the all-encompassing and applied to comparisons both across (King, 1975; Norton, 1988; Jones, 1991) and within different types (Weller, 1985; Helms 1996) of executive constellations (i.e. Parliamentary, Presidential and semi-Presidential). Here, the focus is limited to parliamentary systems, providing a matrix of indicators, drawn both from quantitative and qualitative datasets. The latter are placed on a simple, three-part ordinal scale to facilitate historical (or international) comparison (see Table 2).

The general matrix is outlined in Table 1. Under the ‘Prime Minister’ category we cover the formal constitutional powers bestowed on the PM; the personal leadership style (i.e. PM activism); and the strength of the PM within his/her own party. The entry on the PM’s Office highlights the significance of institutional resources at the direct disposal of the post holder. Quantitative data on the number and seniority of relevant staff indicates the resource and a qualitative judgement on the activism reflects the PM Office’s prominence in decision making. Under ‘Cabinet’, data is provided on both its stability and the frequency of its meetings. The former dataset reveals the frequency of major Cabinet reshuffles, whereas the former provides information on the average number of
meetings of the ‘full’ Cabinet each year. The entries on ‘nodality’ suggest its significance (in whole or in its key formations) in decision-making, reflecting the different management styles of PMs. The ‘Core Executive bureaucracy’ comprises one quantitative and two qualitative values. The former looks at the number of staff employed in institutions performing the tasks of a Cabinet Office or a Government Secretariat, but not including senior civil servants in individual ministries. The first qualitative value relates to the independence of this senior bureaucracy as demonstrated by the mode of appointment of its staff and the ‘administrative culture’ underpinning the relationship between political personnel and the civil service. The second value relates to its activism, as this may be empowered/constrained by the management style of different PMs in the context of specific party political or functional needs. Finally, the category on Ministers includes some qualitative values already used for Prime Ministers. In this case, ‘constitutional power’ denotes the centrality of individual ministers in the decision making process. On the other hand, ‘activism’ refers to ministerial understandings of their role and the assertiveness with which individual ministerial ‘turf’ are protected. ‘Party strength’ highlights the position of individual ministers as potential challengers to the PM’s authority or as alternative centres of power within the Cabinet. Finally, ‘longevity’ may be interpreted as the length of service of individual ministers, reflecting the level of ‘ministerial entrenchment’ as a counterweight to PM power.

Table 1 is relevant to the exploration of the power of each of the actors within the core executive, though for the present analysis the specific concern is with the position of the Greek PM and the coverage has been pared down accordingly. In a longitudinal study of this type (covering 1974-2004), the countervailing but variable power of a plethora of ministers at any given time across different policy areas cannot be properly accounted for. For this reason, we focus only on the more ‘structural’ aspects of ministerial counterweights to PM power, such as longevity (in aggregate terms, focusing on senior ministers) and constitutional power. Table 2 allows us to assess our key dependent variable - variations in the power of the Greek PM within the core executive - by reference to the properties of the columns in Table 1. The configuration of the latter is seen as determining gradations on the dependent variable: that is, not only the ‘scores’ across the Cabinet, ministers and bureaucracy, but also the entries under the Prime Minister (what the constitution provides in formal powers; the resources offered by the PM’s Office; the support of the party; and the PM’s own activism in the role). The configuration is the relational power within the core executive; though not necessarily the PM’s power in the wider domestic system.

The data for Table 2 derives from a variety of sources. Several obstacles exist: the incomplete nature of the Cabinet archives; the severe restrictions on access; and, the absence of a single legal framework on the operation of the government until 2005. Here, the examination of over 300 different legislative acts has been undertaken to build a retrospective picture of its evolution (see Table 2). Further empirical evidence is based on 75 personal interviews with all four surviving Greek prime ministers, heads of the PM’s Office and the Government Secretariat, as well as a large number of senior ministers and
PM aides. Many of the interviews were conducted on a confidential basis and references to them have been anonymised in the text.

[INSERT TABLE 2 HERE]

**Prime Ministerial Leadership and the Greek ‘Core Executive’**


During the early stages of Greece’s transition to democracy (the *Metapolitefsi*), the constitutional position of the Greek executive, and more especially of the Prime Minister within it, was heavily shaped by the dominant personality of Konstantinos Karamanlis. During his earlier period as Prime Minister (1955-1963), he had been seen as the arch-modernizer of Greece’s antiquated economy, but he was eventually forced into self-exile following an increasingly dysfunctional relationship with the Palace. Living in Paris throughout the Junta, he returned as the saviour in 1974 to steer Greece to democracy. Strong leadership was needed – and was very much his own instinct – to manage not only the military, but also defeat in Cyprus and a threat of war with Turkey.

Karamanlis was to mould a constitution (1975) that showed distinctly Gaullist traits. By engineering the abolition of the monarchy - an institution that had frequently sought to manipulate parliamentary politics - he removed a major counter-weight to the position of the PM. But in the new Constitution he ensured that the powers of the new indirectly-elected President of the Republic would be extensive giving him/her the right to unilaterally dismiss Parliament, veto legislation and declare the country to be in a state of siege. Karamanlis was offered the option to ‘move up’ to the Presidency at a time of his own choosing and through that to exercise significant influence over the direction of Greece’s democratic transition well after his departure from the premiership.

*Resource deployment:* Despite his apparent commitment to strong leadership, Karamanlis found himself at the centre of a major paradox: a dominant political figure who surrounded himself with very few resources to help him deliver his challenging mission. The task of setting up his PM Office was delegated to Petros Molyviatis. A career diplomat, Molyviatis had little experience in organising government business and no intimate links with Karamanlis’ New Democracy party. Upon Karamanlis’ instruction, Molyviatis’ blueprint provided for a PM’s office with a minimal structure (Interview #1). Just six advisers were appointed to cover broad policy areas such as the economy, defence, foreign affairs relations, public works and legal matters, supported by a team of four secretaries. To all intents and purposes, this was a personal support team to the PM and not an institutionalised service for coordination or monitoring.

Despite their good personal chemistry and close working relationship, Karamanlis’ closest associates never really developed into a cohesive unit, with a regular pattern of meetings and a clear job description (Interview #2). Indeed the team lacked a single
office space and their access to the Prime Minister varied considerably. Of the five key advisers, only Molyviatis shared an intimate working environment with Karamanlis, who exercised his duties from a rather small office in the Parliament building. Yet for all the considerable ‘gate-keeping’ powers, Molyviatis did not exercise significant influence over government policy (Interview #3). Although he was the only member of the PM Office to feature regularly in senior ministerial meetings, his role was largely confined to that of a ‘gentle’ government enforcer and a communicator of the PM’s wishes to his ministers.

*Management of Cabinet:* Indeed, Karamanlis’ commitment to ‘govern via his ministers’ was a key feature of his post-1974 premierships. He relied on a small group of senior ministers with whom he had developed a close working relationship since the mid-1950s. Although the group was by no means ideologically coherent or politically harmonious, its members shared a strong personal commitment to Karamanlis (Interview #4). The group lacked neither experience nor talent, including figures such as Evangellos Averoff, Panagis Papaligouras, Konstantinos Papakonstantinou and George Rallis, all of whom retained key posts in Karamanlis’ governments between 1974 and 1980. Karamanlis reciprocated by maintaining a small and stable ministerial setup (see Table 2).

Yet, Karamanlis’ dominance over his government colleagues was almost absolute. His austere lifestyle and legendary self-discipline inspired fear and admiration in equal measure, with not even his most senior associates daring to address him by his first name (Interview #2). Karamanlis had courtiers, rather than ‘friends’. The Ministerial Council (i.e. the ‘full’ Cabinet) met infrequently (see Table 2) and was very rarely utilised as the government’s decision making body or planning forum. Dissenting voices were strongly discouraged and its largely ceremonial proceedings were completed swiftly, normally after a short ‘headmasterly’ speech by Karamanlis. With little or no discussion, formal provisions for voting became a dead letter, their activation to be seen as an insult to the PM (Interview #1). The marginalisation of the Ministerial Council was also reflected in the arrangements for its administrative support. A small Secretariat of the Ministerial Council, housed within the Ministry of the Presidency of the Government, offered minimal secretarial support, but no means of coordinating government activities. Indeed, the meetings of the Ministerial Council were neither fully transcribed nor properly minuted, containing little more than a list of participants, a summary of decisions and the opening or closing remarks of the PM. As a matter of practice, these minutes were never distributed to the ministers attending the meetings.

Karamanlis’ apparent reluctance to utilise the Ministerial Council according to the letter of the 1975 Constitution, reflected his preference for ‘lighter’ and more flexible fora for conducting government business (Interview #5). Indeed, ever since his early ministerial days, Karamanlis had developed a reputation as a meticulous and hands-on administrator, who personally oversaw in detail the implementation of the government’s agenda. Pappas estimates that during the course of his Metapolitesi premierships, Karamanlis personally chaired over 259 ministerial meetings (2007: 443). The bulk of these sessions were of the Government Commission (Κυβερνητική Επιτροπή), a ‘mini-Cabinet’ of senior ministers meeting on a weekly basis under the chairmanship of the PM. Indeed, this was the
‘engine’ of Karamanlis’ government, with important responsibilities over policy development and preparation of the government’s legislative agenda. Alongside it, the Economic and Monetary Committees under the chairmanship of the Minister of Coordination (i.e. of Economy) were also central in the conduct of the government’s day-to-day business (Interview #2). Tellingly, the administrative support for the various government committees was not placed under the responsibility of the Secretariat of the Ministerial Council, but instead remained the prerogative of the Prime Minister.\(^3\)

This pattern of light institutionalisation within the core executive was to be one of Karamanlis’ most puzzling and enduring legacies. Eschewing a strong office of personal aides or a regularised pattern of Cabinet coordination, the government operated under the personal authority and intervention of the PM with a privileged circle of senior ministers lacking systematisation. Karamanlis’ PM’s Office - though professionally run - was minimal by contemporary international standards, offering inadequate central resources for government coordination. In this sense, it is arguable that Karamanlis had presided over a ‘segmented’ government (of a ‘monocratic/ministerial’ nature) whose sense of discipline and direction was underwritten by the PM’s own personal standing and work ethic, rather than institutional counterweights to ministerial autonomy.

The mould had, therefore, been set by the uniqueness of Karamanlis as the political hero, within a prevailing culture that placed a high premium on small networks built on trust. His frugal and hermetic lifestyle was matched in its pre-modern character by the structures he established at the centre of government. Ironically, Karamanlis greatest personal achievement – securing Greece’s accession to the then European Community – accelerated the pressures for better coordination and planning. Such pressures were to be experienced first by Andreas Papandreou, whose own style of leadership had been shaped by a very different set of personal and party-political circumstances.


The electoral victory of PASOK in October 1981 marked the first democratic handover of power since the Metapolitefsi. The arrival of Andreas Papandreou as PM brought with it promises not only of socialist-inspired ‘Change’ (Allaghi), but also of a new style of government. ‘Andreas’ was a charismatic leader in his own right, but of a very different type from the austere Karamanlis or the restrained George Rallis who had been his immediate and short-term successor. An earthy, volatile character, he had returned to Greece as highly regarded academic from the US and later became a leader of the anti-Junta movement. Papandreou was at the head of a generation of cadres steeped in the politics of anti-Junta protest, affecting their sense of ‘us’ and ‘them’ and also animated by grand political struggle. As the leader of his ‘movement’, Papandreou had a totemic dominance, his personal credibility helping to off-set the under-development of his party and the diversity of its political base (Spourdalakis, 1988).

\(^3\) In practice, this became the responsibility of Petros Molyviatis.
By the late 1970s, Papandreou had turned much of his attention towards steering PASOK’s electoral campaign and fleshing out the party’s government programme. During the same period, however, he gave scant attention to organisational matters of governance, maintaining an attitude of improvisation (Interview #6). A feud with his long-standing confidante, Antonis Livanis, in 1976, had deprived Papandreou of a loyal ‘fixer’ and a ‘natural’ candidate for the top job in the PM’s Office. After the election victory, this role was assigned to Grigoris Kassimatis who, nevertheless, failed to establish an effective working relationship with Papandreou and was removed after a few months in the job (Interview #7).

Resource Deployment: The strong centrifugal tendencies within his government during its first year in office, convinced Papandreou that a radical overhaul of its core operations was needed. This realisation brought with it both institutional reform and changes in personnel. In autumn 1982, Papandreou’s legal adviser, George Kassimatis, was entrusted with drafting a blueprint, though symptomatically he was given little time to do so (Interview #8). Kassimatis’ proposals sought to bring together all services responsible for the coordination of the government (including its legislative initiative) with a corresponding strengthening of the PM Office as an independent hub of advice and monitoring at the disposal of the PM. Within this context both the Secretariat of the Ministerial Council and the Central Law-Preparation Committee were subordinated directly under the PM.4

Papandreou, who had provided almost no personal input into the design of the new setup, happily accepted the proposals of his adviser (Interview #8). As a result a new law (1299/82) ‘on the re-organisation of the PM services’ was passed through Parliament in November 1982. The law designated a total of 113 posts in the PM’s office alone, including fifty senior advisers spread over six main offices (Director’s Office, Legal, Economic, Diplomatic, Military and Technical Office) or deployed on specific tasks assigned to them directly by the PM. Significantly, the arrival of Antonis Livanis as the General Director of the PM Office (as well as Director of PASOK’s Parliamentary Group) in 1983 brought a major heavyweight to the centre of the government’s operations.

However, the new setup achieved little of its original promise. Less than half of designated posts were filled (see Table 2) and many of the junior staff of the PM’s Office appeared to have contributed very little, evidently securing their appointments through clientelistic networks (Interview #9). Although senior advisers within the PM Office retained a significant degree of influence in their respective policy domains, the office was physically split between different premises in the Parliament and the Maximou Mansion (the official PM’s headquarters since 1983) and never acquired a great deal of coherence or collective ethos (Interview #10). For Livanis – a man immersed in PASOK’s internal party machinations - the oversight of the Parliamentary Group became

4 The Central Law-Preparation Committee was an advisory service aimed at improving the standards of draft bills brought to the Parliament. It was previously housed in the Ministry of the Presidency of the Government.
a major preoccupation, restricting his ability to engage with the more technical side of policy elaboration or the day-to-day management of the PM Office (Interview #7). This allowed other ‘big beasts’ in Papandreou’s inner circle to develop their own direct channels of communication with the PM (Interview #11). To all intents and purposes, this was also the spirit of Law 1299/82 which had deliberately provided for a ‘hub-and-spoke’ pattern of interaction between the PM and his senior advisers without placing them under a robust chain of command or a regular pattern of meetings. This *modus operandi* might have suited Papandreou’s style (and his aversion to institutionalised decision making), but it severely undermined the efficient operation of his PM Office.

*Management of Cabinet:* The same sense of fluidity underlined Papandreou’s approach to the Cabinet system. Unlike Karamanlis, Papandreou led a team of totally inexperienced ministers. The sense of improvisation was matched by Papandreou engaging in frequent government reshuffles (see Table 2) and experimenting widely both with the size and shape of his government. To Papandreou’s supporters, the frequent reshuffles were an effective means of keeping the party together and creating a ‘critical mass’ of cadres with ministerial experience (Interview #12). His opponents, however, accused Papandreou of an excessively volatile temperament which undermined the coherence of the government and destabilised the implementation of its policy agenda (Interview #1).

Papandreou shared with his predecessors (particularly Karamanlis) an aversion towards the Ministerial Council which he regarded as too unwieldy to provide strategic direction. As a result its functions were reduced to a mainly ceremonial platform for the PM to address his ministers. Although the precise number of meetings of the Ministerial Council under Papandreou is not known, Loverdos (1991: 243) has suggested that this might not have exceeded 16 in PASOK’s eight years in office. Moreover, the marginalisation of the Ministerial Council was not counter-balanced by the operation of a robust system of Cabinet committees. Although in 1982 Papandreou had restructured the Cabinet committee system it had inherited, the new setup (modelled around the operation of a Government Council in the role of a ‘mini-Cabinet’) was never properly embedded in the government’s mode of operation (Interview #9).

In the event, in 1985 Papandreou himself acknowledged major shortcomings in the coordination of his government and he promised a new system of regular meetings. The new law introduced for this purpose in 1985 (1558/85) sought to delegate even further powers of coordination to the PM Office by appointing senior advisers in charge of servicing government committees. Papandreou’s own commitment to chair more government meetings, however, was soon forgotten (Interview #9). In addition, the further strengthening of the PM Office raised criticisms that a ‘parallel government’ was now operating from within Maximou (Interview #12). By that time, the Secretariat of the Ministerial Council had become an empty shell, paralysed by a high turnover of political appointments and without a functioning Ministerial Council to serve.

By the end of the 1980s, Papandreou’s failing health only served to exacerbate the segmented nature of his government, so vividly manifested in the outbreak of the

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Koskotas scandal which signalled the end for PASOK’s reign on power. Papandreou was temporarily wounded, but eventually able to restore his authority within the party, supported by Livanis as his arch-confidante, and his new protective wife-to-be. All this seemed a long way from the early plans to strengthen the strategic capabilities at the very centre of government. In this sense, Kassimatis’ plan might have offered a window of opportunity for the modernisation of the Greek core executive, but the mould of fragmentation not only remained, but was indeed further entrenched by Papandreou’s own volatility and high premium on loyalty and trust. The net effect was a pattern of governance akin to a galaxy, in which Papandreou stood at the centre of a ‘monocratic/ministerial’ government in which competing ministerial agendas undermined a well-organised, linear decision-making operation. In this context, the strengthening of the PM Office resulted in the creation of yet another power-base with a claim to speak on behalf of an elusive leader who, ultimately, remained far more interested in the grand narratives of Greece’s democratisation process, rather than the grinding business of managing government.


In the election of April 1990, New Democracy, under the leadership of Konstantinos Mitsotakis, was able to secure a wafer-thin parliamentary majority (of just one seat) and formed the first centre-right government in nearly a decade. The new resident at Maximou had a long career – having first been a minister in 1951 – often mixed with controversy, as he had transgressed some of the dividing lines of Greek politics. The new PM identified himself with a broadly neo-liberal stance, against what he attacked as PASOK’s populism.

Resource Deployment: Despite his own projection as an experienced and managerially competent leader – very much defined in contrast to Papandreou’s diffused governing style – Mitsotakis made no effort to reform the structure of the PM Office he had inherited (see Table 2). The assassination of his closest associate, Pavlos Bakogiannis, in September 1989 had certainly deprived Mitsotakis of a potential heavyweight as Director his PM’s Office. The appointment of his relatively inexperienced daughter, Dora Bakogianni (Pavlos’ widow), to this post in April 1990 reflected his preoccupation with trust above managerial experience. Despite its considerable size, however, the PM’s Office under Bakogianni had rather limited influence over policy (Interview #13). A partial exception to this pattern was the Head of the PM’s Economic Office, Miranta Xafa, whose influence increased substantially when fellow neo-liberal Stefanos Manos became Minister of Economy (Interview #2).

The relative weakness of Mitsotakis’ PM’s Office came as no surprise to those familiar with his personality and management style. A supremely confident man who lived and breathed politics, Mitsotakis had placed himself at the epicentre of a huge web of informal contacts and advisers whom he micro-managed with ruthless efficiency (Interview #3). This unmistakable feature of an ‘old style’ politician co-existed alongside

6 Bakogianni remained the de facto head of the office even after she entered government as a minister.
his apparent openness to new ideas and fondness of modern campaign techniques. During the electoral campaigns of 1989/1990, for example, Mitsotakis had assembled a young team of experts (nicknamed the ‘kindergarten’) to lead the party’s communication strategy. Many of them later followed Mitsotakis to Maximou, only to feel that the PM’s tendency to micro-manage on the immediate, obscured the larger priorities and strategy, disrupting the decision-making processes (Interview #14).

Management of Cabinet: Mitsotakis’ timidity in reforming his own PM Office stood in sharp contrast to his significant activism in revitalising the operation of the Cabinet system. This was the result of both conviction and circumstance. Despite his electoral victory in 1990, Mitsotakis’s position within his own party was never dominant, suspected by both Karamanlis’ supporters and the more traditionalist/populist wing of the party (Interview #15). Mitsotakis was experienced enough to realise that the dominant management style of his predecessors (Karamanlis and Papandreou) over their ministerial colleagues would not be an option available to him.

As a result, his prime ministerial tenure was the first of the Metapolitefsi to institutionalise a pattern of regular meetings for both the Government Commission (which he, informally, reinstated in 1990) and the full Ministerial Council, which was now to meet every second week in lengthy sessions. One of his most significant innovations was the introduction of a new Code of Operation of the Ministerial Council replacing the one adopted by Karamanlis nearly fifteen years earlier. The new Code stipulated, for the first time since 1974, the frequency of the Ministerial Council’s meetings and introduced a range of measures that clarified its modus operandi. These included rules on drafting and distributing its agenda, the recording and transcribing of its proceedings, as well as clauses on the confidentiality of its archives.7 Much of the impetus behind these reforms was provided by then Secretary of the Ministerial Council, Evangelos Voloudakis, a Professor of Constitutional Law at the University of Athens. When first appointed to his post in July 1989, Voloudakis had reportedly found the Secretariat in complete disarray, with just two junior secretarial staff (Loverdos 1991: 247f). Reflecting on the resources available to the Greek Ministerial Council, Voloudakis later wrote that they were ‘comparable to those of a small rural council’ (Kathimerini, 2.6.1996).

Despite the significant improvement in the formal modus operandi of his government, Mitsotakis’s own interfering governing style soon became a source of conflict with many of his senior ministers (Dimas, Kefalogiannis, Evert, Kanellopoulos) who left the government after a series of damaging public rows. Hence, despite the earlier promise to lead a leaner and more stable government than his PASOK predecessor, Mitsotakis was unable to deliver on either front. The ministerial turnover in his government was, indeed, the second highest of the Metapolitefsi period (see Table 2), reflecting the difficult landscape in which the PM had to operate before the loss of his parliamentary majority in September 1993.

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By the end of his three years in office, Mitsotakis’s legacy on the Greek core executive was a mixed one. The institutionalisation of the meetings of the Ministerial Council had certainly restored a sense of normality, shifting the paradigm of his government to that of a ‘Cabinet/Ministerial’ type. Yet, the overall pattern of ‘segmented government’ remained. At the level of Cabinet committees, for example, much informality remained, with the operation of the Government Commission never having been assigned clear competences or a legal personality and few other collective bodies functioning on a regular basis. The important work undertaken by Voloudakis in the Secretariat of the Ministerial Council had modernised its legal framework, but these improvements did not cover the operation of the Cabinet committees which essentially remained outside its remit. Against this background, much of the follow-up to the government’s decisions was diffused between a workaholic (but micro-managing) PM and his PM’s Office, which lacked clout and was rarely listened to. Under these conditions significant ministerial autonomy remained. As a result, Mitsotakis’s ambitions of replicating the managerial brilliance of Konstantinos Karamanlis and combining it with the collective government ethos of his former patron, George Papandreou, were fatally compromised amidst his precarious parliamentary position and the eternal in-fighting of a government that eventually imploded.


Of all the premierships of the Metapolitefsi period, the arrival of Kostas Simitis at Maximou was perhaps the most unlikely. Simitis was, in many respects, an ‘accidental’ Prime Minister, having narrowly and unexpectedly defeated the candidates of the traditionalist fraction of PASOK to replace, the seriously-ill, Andreas Papandreou as Prime Minister in January 1996.\(^8\) Simitis had cultivated patiently his leadership credentials since the early 1990s, but at no point until then had his ‘modernisation’ agenda become a dominant discourse within PASOK. His rise to power was more a reflection of the inability of his party rivals to unite under a single candidate and of Simitis’ broader electoral appeal.

Resource Deployment: This latter period of PASOK’s history had been formative for Kostas Simitis, whose own retiring manner and managerialism stood in sharp contrast to the extravagance and fluidity of Papandreou’s twilight years. Now at Maximou, Simitis was keen to emphasise a break from the past (Interview #16). Less than four weeks into his post, the new PM proceeded to restructure the PM Office in an apparent attempt to reduce its overall size, improve the quality of its staff and professionalize its operation. This task was assigned to one of the PM’s closest allies, Nikos Themelis, a former EU official who had followed Simitis in all his ministerial appointments since the mid-1980s. Although never officially appointed as Director of the PM Office (keen not to be seen as the ‘new Livanis’), Themelis was, indeed, a hugely influential figure in shaping the outlook and role of the new office (Interview #17). The brief from his political master was indeed a delicate one: to raise the level of expertise available to the PM without antagonising Simitis’ senior ministerial colleagues.

\(^8\) PASOK had returned to power in October 1993.
Themelis’ own profile suited the brief very well. Similar to Livanis, he had no political ambitions of his own and his loyalty to the PM was total. Unlike his predecessor, however, Themelis was able to reach ‘beyond the party’ (in which he had little interest) in selecting a relatively small, but highly qualified, group of close associates around him (Interview #17). His Office of Strategic Planning (with seven staff) might have been the ‘hub’ of Simitis’ inner circle, but other ‘big beasts’ within the PM’s Office also yielded significant power. Although most of the PM’s close associates retained their direct channels of reporting to him, the PM Office did, indeed, develop a strong collegial ethos, allowing it to exercise a significant degree of activism both in terms of shaping policy and monitoring the implementation of the government’s agenda. This power shift was not without its critics amongst Simitis’ senior ministerial colleagues (Interview #18).

If Themelis provided the intellectual fire-power at the core of Simitis’ inner-circle, much of the grinding work of coordinating the government’s activity fell to Socrates Kosmidis, a lawyer by trade, who was appointed Secretary of the Ministerial Council in September 1996. For much of the Metapolitefsi period, the Secretariat had been assigned a rather minor role, with few of Kosmidis’s predecessors (except Voloudakis) making their presence felt (Interview #19). Simitis, however, attributed great importance to the strengthening of the office, which was upgraded to a General Secretariat in 1996, before it was renamed ‘General Secretariat of the Government’ (GSoG) in 2004. During that period, the GSoG’s staff and role expanded significantly (see Table 2), bringing under its authority all available resources for the exercise of the government’s legislative initiative as well as extending its remit across the entire range of Cabinet committees, rather than simply the Ministerial Council. Under Kosmidis’s energetic and combative style, the GSoG became a major point of reference in Simitis’s governments, often exercising significant activism in resolving conflicts over shared ministerial competences; a problem so vividly exposed during Greece’s preparation for the 2004 Olympic Games (Interview #20).

Management of Cabinet: Simitis’ governing style reflected both his background, but also his position within the party. As a German-educated Professor of Law who had spent many of his formative years abroad, Simitis was renowned for his institutionally-driven mindset which had often conflicted sharply with Papandreou’s management style in both party and government (Interview #21). Now at the helm, Simitis had a point to prove. Within a week of assuming power the Governing Commission (a ‘mini Cabinet’ comprising 10 senior Ministers) was re-activated and the system of Cabinet committees that had been dormant during the latter Papandreou years was reformed and their competences clarified. By the end of his tenure Simitis could point to the operation of five senior Cabinet committees, supported by 12 inter-ministerial committees addressing

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10 Including the Central Law-Preparation Committee (since 1998) and the Central Commission for Legal Codification (since 2004).
11 See Prime Ministerial Decision (Πρωθυπουργική Απόφαση) 208/1996, Official Gazette, Vol. B, No. 72. The Government Commission was formally reinstated by Papandreou in July 1994, but during the later stages of his Premiership it had ceased to operate.
specific policy issues. Although many of these structures never became fully operationalized (their outlook shaped, by and large, by the will and skill of the presiding minister), the degree of institutionalisation within Simitis’ government was unprecedented by the standards of the Metapolitefsi. Both the Ministerial Council and the Government Commission met – at fixed days and times – every two weeks and all senior Cabinet committees met at regular intervals.

This strongly institutionalised pattern of governance provided the inclusiveness that Simitis needed. His weakness within the party obliged him to accommodate a number of high profile members of the party’s ‘traditional’ wing (like Akis Tsochatzopoulos and Gerasimos Arsenis) who commanded considerable support both among PASOK’s rank-and-file and its parliamentary group. Simitis also owed a great deal to some of the party’s ‘modernizers’ (like Theodore Pangalos and Vasso Papandreou) who had supported his leadership bid. This put the PM in charge of a diverse and fragile ‘coalition’ of ministers, and its institutionalisation offered the best chance for the realisation of Simitis’s ‘modernisation’ project. The hugely destabilising effect of Pangalos’s exit from the government in November 2000 was a poignant reminder of Simitis’ fragility. This, alongside the PM’s known antipathy to Papandreou’s frequent reshuffles, may also help to explain the relative stability of Simitis’ governments between 1996 and 2004 (see Table 2).

By the end of his two terms in office, Simitis had brought widespread change to the operation of the Greek core executive. This encompassed both institutional reform and a more collective (and stable) pattern of decision making. Despite his considerable achievements, however, deeply-entrenched systemic constraints bounded the extent and effectiveness of this institutionalisation process. Although the operation of the government’s key collective bodies functioned with unprecedented regularity, Simitis’ earlier vision of establishing a working ‘Cabinet system’ fell short of materialising. The mould of ‘segmented government’ had been shaken (shifting firmly to a ‘Cabinet/ministerial’ type), but not broken. Especially in his second term, Simitis was regarded as having accepted the limits of his position within the party and was governing despite the internal opposition, not with it. Moreover, the fact that the PM himself had to chair the Olympic Games Inter-Ministerial Committee in order to ensure the timely delivery of targets also indicated the on-going problems of bureaucratic coordination. Further, his PM’s Office included some considerable talent, but its size and resources were well below comparable European examples, reflecting at least in part a strong preference towards small networks operating on trust. Ultimately, however, this denied him both the resources and the linkages to overcome the wider, lethargic bureaucratic machine.

**Conclusion**

The present paper has argued that the constitutional notion of the supremacy of the Greek PM is a partial fallacy. At one level the Greek core executive is something of a conundrum: a case of prime ministerial power that is near ‘presidential’, yet without the
centralisation of resources; one without the dominance of a Cabinet structure, but with
the independence of ministries. The present study went further: by developing a general
matrix by which to assess the structure of core executive relations and to contextualise
Prime-Ministerial power within it. This served to test the relevance of conventional
typologies for the Greek case. It also helped to give further substantiation to the notion of
a ‘solitary centre’ – indicating the parallels with central Europe - and of a ‘segmented
government’.

Whilst recognising certain long-term features of the Greek core executive, the detailed
empirical investigation pitted the impact of different leadership styles and party strength
against the extent of PM resources (for control from the centre) and the utilisation of the
Cabinet system (for intra-governmental coordination). As Table 2 indicated, there was no
consistent pattern: Simitis was the only PM to combine a high activism for himself, his
office and his Cabinet (‘full’ and ‘mini’); Karamanlis had a strong ‘mini’ Cabinet (not
‘full’), but a tiny PM’s Office. Papandreou was the extreme case in neglecting the
Cabinet. Mitsotakis privileged the Cabinet, but not his Office. Overall, the permutations
showed the underlying limited institutionalisation of the PM’s office and of the Cabinet.
The individual case histories explained the variation in more detail. With such instability,
core executive politics *a la Grecque* have sustained a centre that has lacked nodality,
organisational capacity, and resources.

The implications of these conditions for the efficiency of the governmental policy process
– indeed, for Greece’s reform capacity – are significant. The system has endured
dysfunctionalities that limit the flow and input of knowledge and expertise at the centre;
weaken the ability of the latter to control and coordinate the individual ministries; and,
sustain many gaps (e.g. the scope for policy evaluation and impact assessment is
minimal) and conflicts. Many parts have seemed barely ‘fit for purpose’. The financial
crisis of 2010 challenged the operation of the Greek state and brought close international
scrutiny of its mores. The George Papandreou government had endeavoured to
implement some modernising reforms of its own operation, but their implementation
proved problematic. In November 2011 Papandreou had to resign to make way for an
administration led by Lucas Papademos, a technocratic figure. The change was wrought
by the scale of public protest against the austerity measures and by the seeming inability
to achieve greater reform more quickly. The argument presented here on the problems of
coordination and control from the centre of government will likely remain very germane
to Greece satisfying its international inspectors and its exit from the crisis.
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Karamanlis, Konstantinos. Various years. ‘Events and Documents.’ *Archives* 8-10.


**List of Interviews:**

2. Minister in Karamanlis’ government, Athens, 13/2/2009
3. Deputy Minister in Karamanlis’ government, Athens, 11/2/2009
6. Minister in Papandreou’s government, Athens, 7/7/2010
8. Senior Official in Papandreou’s PM Office, Athens, 12/1/2010 and 2/7/2010
15. Minister in Mitsotakis’ government, Athens, 24/3/2010
17. Senior Official in Simitis’ PM Office, Athens, 5/7/2010
18. Senior Official in Simitis’ PM Office, Athens, 6/7/2010
19. Minister in Simitis’ government, Athens, 10.2.2009
Table 1. A Matrix for the Comparative Study of the Core Executive

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prime Minister</th>
<th>Cabinet</th>
<th>Core Executive Bureaucracy</th>
<th>Ministers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constitutional Power</td>
<td>Stability</td>
<td>Size</td>
<td>Constitutional Power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activism</td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>Independence</td>
<td>Activism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party Strength</td>
<td>Nodality</td>
<td>Activism</td>
<td>Party Strength</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(of key formations)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PM Office</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Longevity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(size and activism)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prime Minister</td>
<td>Constitutional Powers</td>
<td>Activism (Agency)</td>
<td>Party Strength</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Size</td>
<td>Stability (Reshuffles/year)</td>
<td>Frequency (Meetings of full Cabinet/year)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Posts Filled</td>
<td>Senior Staff</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Konstantinos Karamanlis</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andreas Papandreou</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Konstantinos Mitsotakis</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andreas Papandreou</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kostas Karamanlis</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Karamanlis' national unity government (24.7.74 to 21.11.74) falls outside the scope of this analysis.

Figures by Sotiropoulos (2000:187). Sotiropoulos provides no figures for the second Papandreou Premiership (1985-89) and does not clarify whether the total number of staff in the PM Office includes manual and security staff. The figure for the Premiership of Kostas Karamanlis is based on To Vima 26 June 2005.

Including those holding the posts of General Director (Γενικός Διευθυντής), the Head of Office (Προϊστάμενος Γραφείου); Special Adviser (Ειδικός Σύμβουλος) and Special Associate (Ειδικός Συνεργάτης). Calculations based on the author’s own data.

d Refers to the replacement/appointment of at least 3 government Ministers. All data available from the website of the General Secretariat of the Government (http://www.ggk.gov.gr/ggk_old/governments-47191.php.html)

e Refers to the Government Commission (Κυβερνητική Επιτροπή) or the Government Council (Κυβερνητικό Συμβούλιο), bringing together a senior government Ministers.

f Does not include members of the Central Law-Preparation Commission (Κεντρική Νομοπαρασκευαστική Επιτροπή) or the Central Commission for Legal Codification (Κεντρική Επιτροπή Κωδικοποίησης).

g The order of ministerial seniority has changed over the years. We have based our calculations on the order of ministerial seniority as it stood at the end of each PM tenure. For more details see website of the General Secretariat of the Government (http://www.ggk.gov.gr/ggk_old/governments-47191.php.html).

h Konstantinos Karamanlis Archives: Events and Documents, Vols. 8-10.


j Figure by Xiros (1999: 239).

k Figure by Xiros (1999: 240-1). One meeting of the CoM was chaired by Akis Tsohatzopoulos.

l Figure by Simitsis (2005: 458).


