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MODERNIZING THE GREEK INTELLIGENCE SERVICE (NIS-EYP)

An uphill battle

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One of the oldest Greek political sagas is the “modernization” of the National Intelligence Service (NIS - *Ethniki Ypiresia Plirophorion*). Established in 1953, in the wake of the catastrophic communist insurgency of 1946-49, NIS’s original name was “Hellenic Central Intelligence Service,” a creature under close American supervision and financing.

From the outset, the new agency was dominated by the military. The fierce anti-communism that dominated Greek politics in the immediate postwar years led the new agency to focus on continuing to pursue and suppress “anti-state activities” by the Left. It was not until after the fall of a military junta, which ruled Greece between 1967 and 1974, that NIS was gradually “civilianized” and was re-established as a nominal foreign intelligence agency theoretically focused on the international environment and its threats to Greek security.

Despite the various legislative steps to make NIS a true externally focused “CIA,” NIS’s old reputation as a tool for the suppression of domestic political “threats” has persisted. NIS’s reputation is further tarnished by in-house bureaucratic problems, labor unionist issues, and ever-present political clientelism.

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The tenacity of old habits is also highlighted by the fact that NIS did not get a civilian director until 1999, when a retired ambassador assumed the NIS directorship following an unbroken succession of active or retired military officers. This change, although emerging from laudable political motives, helped little in changing negative public attitudes toward the organization.

Today, according to recent Greek media reports, NIS is again at the point of “thorough modernization” and “rebuilding from the ground up.” Reputedly, PM Mitsotakis is “determined” to do so, yet, as the same media reports point out, existing tendencies and legacy practices won’t be swept aside easily. Practically speaking, any attempt to modernize the agency will require confronting, and solving, the following issues:

- **Personnel requirements:** Today’s intelligence skills far surpass anything believed “advanced” even in the recent past. Intelligence gathering, analysis, and interpretation are now based on sophisticated technical means. Top-to-bottom computerization requires advanced data handling skills and systems dexterities. NIS must radically **overhaul its human resources requirements** and begin hiring according to up-to-date personnel guidelines, while simultaneously fast-tracking the (early) retirement of legacy personnel.
- **Organization:** One of the deepest traumas of the Greek public sector is clientelism. NIS is no exception to the rule. While clientelism statistics are non-existent (who dares ask the critical questions?) it is necessary for any reformer to locate and quickly terminate those who won appointments as “intelligence analysts” thanks to party cronyism. *Without “a night of the long knives” to dismiss the detritus of political party interference the NIS shall remain the “little shop” it is often accused of being—and shall never progress to its necessary reincarnation.*
- **Interoperability and intel distribution:** No intelligence agency worth its salt operates in a functional vacuum without maintaining close interaction with government departments. Governments depend on regular, timely, and trusted intelligence feeds if they are to successfully pursue the national interest. Greece faces multiple outside threats that have recently expanded exponentially (Turkey,

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illegal migration, regional irredentism, jihadism, etc.) NIS must completely overhaul its intel distribution and early warning systems.

- **Continuing education and training:** Today's world does not forgive those who allow themselves to become stale and fall behind rapidly changing circumstances. While technical means can be updated with relatively simpler "tooling" solutions human resources require complex "brain" processes of *constant education*. NIS should be paired with an intelligence academy manned by experts and tasked to develop and implement constantly updated education personnel programs.
- **Decentralization and foreign intelligence:** Concentrating the bulk of NIS resources and personnel at HQ, and a small number of regional sections, must be replaced by *true decentralization*. Illegal immigration, jihadism, terrorist transit routes, and the multiplication of "irregular" threats require intelligence "boots on the ground" throughout the sensitive regions of the country. Given the constantly growing Turkish threat, true, capable, and ready "eyes to the East" must be a top priority.
- **Political control:** Last but not least is the question of NIS political control. Past experiments with the subject struggled with the usual obstacles of increased cronyism and party politicking. The question unfortunately hinges on the *broader inability of the Greek political system to combat corruption and ensure procedural stability*. Parliament oversight is often mentioned as the "cure" yet anyone who has even a cursory idea of how the Greek parliament operates would distance himself from this option. A tighter formula could be the creation of a small intelligence committee (3-4 members) comprising "non-political" personnel and attached directly to the PM's office. The committee's primary tasks would be formulating intelligence policy directives, ensuring proper budgeting, supervising the technical development of the agency, and promoting *stringent human resources standards*.

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Restarting NIS as a completely overhauled agency will require herculean efforts. Above all, the reformers must possess the political will to break barriers that have been developing for decades with the wholehearted support of political party influence peddlers, “go-betweens,” and “office surfers.”

There is still a long road ahead for the would-be NIS reformers, who should expect mighty opposition to their tasks. *Yet, this is going to be the true test of whether Greece will progress to 21st century standards -- or remain shackled to the miserly and dangerous petty politicking, which still exerts excessive influence upon the Greek government system.*

Reference:

John M Nomikos, “The Internal Modernization of the Greek Intelligence Service (NIS-EYP)”, International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence, vol.17, no.3, Fall 2004.