

Why we must save the European Union

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The first German word I ever learned was Siemens. It was emblazoned on our sturdy 1950s fridge, our washing machine, the vacuum cleaner – on almost every appliance in my family’s home in Athens. The reason for my parents’ peculiar loyalty to the German brand was my uncle Panayiotis, who was Siemens’ general manager in [Greece](#) from the mid-1950s to the late 1970s.

A Germanophile electrical engineer and a fluent speaker of Goethe’s language, Panayiotis had convinced his younger sister – my mother – to take up the study of German; she even planned to spend a year in Hamburg to take up a Goethe Institute scholarship in the summer of 1967.

Alas, on 21 April 1967, my mother’s plans were laid in ruins, along with our imperfect Greek democracy. For in the early hours of that morning, at the command of four army colonels, tanks rolled on to the streets of Athens and other major cities, and our country was soon enveloped in a thick cloud of neo-fascist gloom. It was also the day when Uncle Panayiotis’s world fell apart.

Unlike my dad, who in the late 1940s had paid for his leftist politics with several years in concentration camps, Panayiotis was what today would be referred to as a neoliberal. Fiercely anti-communist, and suspicious of social democracy, he supported the American intervention in the Greek civil war in 1946 (on the side of my father’s jailers). He backed the German Free Democratic party and the Greek Progressive party, which purveyed a blend of free-market economics with unconditional support for Greece’s oppressive US-led state security machine.

His political views, and his position as the head of Siemens’ operations in Greece, made Panayiotis a typical member of Greece’s postwar ruling class. When state security forces or their stooges roughed up leftwing protesters, or even killed a brilliant member of parliament, [Grigoris Lambrakis](#), in 1963, Panayiotis would grudgingly approve, convinced that these were unpleasant but necessary actions. My ears are still ringing with the rowdy exchanges he often had with Dad, over what he considered “reasonable measures to defend democracy from its sworn enemies” – reasonable measures that my father had experienced first-hand, and from which he would never fully recover.

The heavy footprint of US agencies in Greek politics, even going so far as to engineer the dismissal of a popular centrist prime minister, [Georgios Papandreou](#), in 1965, seemed to Panayiotis an acceptable trade-off: Greece had given up some sovereignty to western powers in exchange for freedom from a menacing eastern bloc lurking a short driving distance north of Athens. However, on that bleak April day in 1967, Panayiotis’s life was turned upside down.

He simply could not tolerate that “his” people (as he referred to the rightist army officers who had staged the coup and, more importantly, their American handlers) should dissolve parliament, suspend the constitution, and intern potential dissidents (including right wing democrats) in football stadia, police stations and concentration camps. He had no great sympathy with the deposed centrist prime minister that the putschists and their US puppeteers were trying to keep out of government – but his worldview was torn asunder, leading him to a sudden spurt of almost comical radicalisation.

A few months after the military regime took power, Panayiotis joined an underground group called Democratic Defence, which consisted largely of other establishment liberals like himself – university professors, lawyers, and even a future prime minister. They planted a series of bombs around Athens, taking care to ensure there were no injuries, in order to demonstrate that the military regime was not in full control, despite its clampdown.

For a few years after the coup, Panayiotis appeared – even to his own mother – as yet another professional keeping his head down, minding his own business. No one had an inkling of his double

life: corporate man during the day, subversive bomber by night. We were mostly relieved, meanwhile, that Dad had not disappeared again into some concentration camp.

My enduring memory of those years, in fact, is the crackling sound of a radio hidden under a red blanket in the middle of the living room in our Athens home. Every night at around nine, mum and dad would huddle together under the blanket – and upon hearing the muffled jingle announcing the beginning of the programme, followed by the voice of a German announcer, my own six-year-old imagination would travel from Athens to central [Europe](#), a mythical place I had not visited yet except for the tantalising glimpses offered by an illustrated Brothers Grimm book I had in my bedroom.

Deutsche Welle, the German international radio station that my parents were listening to, became their most precious ally against the crushing power of state propaganda at home: a window looking out to faraway democratic Europe. At the end of each of its hour-long special broadcasts on Greece, my parents and I would sit around the dining table while they mulled over the latest news.

I didn't fully understand what they were discussing, but this neither bored nor upset me. For I was gripped by a sense of excitement at the strangeness of our predicament: that, to find out what was happening in our very own Athens, we had to travel, through the airwaves, and veiled by a red blanket, to a place called Germany.

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The reason for the red blanket was a grumpy old neighbour called Gregoris. Gregoris was known for his connections with the secret police and his penchant for spying on my parents; in particular my Dad, whose leftwing past made him an excellent target for an ambitious snitch. Strange as it may sound today, tuning in to Deutsche Welle broadcasts became one of a long list of activities punishable by anything from harassment to torture. So, having noticed Gregoris snooping around inside our backyard, my parents took no risks. Thus the red blanket became our defence from Gregoris's prying ears.

A few years later, it was from Deutsche Welle that we learned what Panayiotis and his colleagues had been up to – when the radio announced that they had all been arrested. Dad would joke for years to come about the pathetic inability of these bourgeois liberals to organise an underground resistance group: only a few hours after one of the Democratic Defence members was accidentally caught, the rest were also rounded up. All the police had to do was read the first man's diary – where he had meticulously listed his comrades' names and addresses, in some cases including a description of each subversive "assignment". Torture, court martial and long prison sentences – in some cases the death sentence – followed.

A year after Panayiotis's capture, the military police guarding him decided to relax his isolation regime by allowing me, a harmless 10-year-old, to visit him once a week. Our already close bond grew stronger with boy-talk that allowed him a degree of escapism. He told me about machines I had never seen (computers, he called them), asked about the latest movies, described his favourite cars.

In anticipation of my visits, he would use matchsticks and other materials that prison guards would let him keep to build model planes for me. Often, he would hide inside his elegant artefacts a message for my aunt, my mother, on occasion even for his colleagues at Siemens. For my part, I was proud of my new skill of disassembling his models with minimal damage, retrieving the message, and putting them back together.

Long after Panayiotis's death, I discovered the last of these: a matchstick model of a Stuka dive-bomber in my old family home's attic. Torn between leaving it intact and looking inside, I decided to take it apart. And there it was. His last missive was not addressed to anyone in particular.

It was a single word: "*kyriarchia*". Sovereignty.