

The role of the government spokesperson in Greece

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Introduction

Communication is central to all aspects of government across the world, at all levels: the international, the national and the local. Governing involves the constant exchange of information concerning policies, ideas and decision-making, between those who govern and the citizens of a country. As [Sanders and Camel \(2013\)](#) argue, the quality of government communication thus matters for the quality of democracy. This equation is thus of great relevance to the issue of how an informed citizenry can make informed decisions and how appropriate government communications can provide a mechanism for the accountability of public agencies – and has been the focus of a range of studies ([Graher 2003](#); [Lin et al. 2011](#); [Horsley et al. 2010](#)). This chapter focuses on the role of one of the most important actors within such communication practices, the government spokesperson.

In a continuously changing, media-reliant world, governments, in a similar manner to large corporations, have a constant need to build and sustain relationships with their desired audiences, manage their reputation and respond to crises, as well as provide necessary information about the workings of public policy. The government spokesperson is usually the person responsible for managing such communication activities. While the specific title or

exact job description may vary from country to country, the need for a close relationship with the Prime Minister or President of the country and a direct rapport with the media are always requirements of the role. Among the most widely recognised of such positions is the White House Press Secretary (WHPS), with President Abraham Lincoln's administration being the first where Congress formally used funds to appoint a White House staff, which at first consisted simply of a secretary to manage communications (Gale, 1998). The contemporary WHPS is a senior White House official whose primary responsibility is to act as the spokesperson for the executive branch of the US federal government. They are responsible for collating information about actions and events within the president's administration and then communicating the government's views with respect to such developments (Gale, 1998). The WHPS interacts with the media on a daily basis, usually by way of a daily press briefing (Ponder, 2001). They are appointed by the President of the United States. The equivalent role in the United Kingdom is performed by either a senior civil servant or someone with experience in public relations (PR), media and communication, such as was the case with Alastair Campbell, an experienced journalist who served as spokesperson for Tony Blair when he was Prime Minister. The Prime Minister's official spokesperson is located in the Prime Minister's Office in 10 Downing Street (Gregory, 2014).

It has been especially during the COVID-19 pandemic that the role of the government spokesperson has been extensively discussed as well as criticised. For example, both what and how the UK government communicated with the public, played a central role in determining how the UK population have come to view their government and how they have behaved during the pandemic (Garland and Lilliker, 2022; Newton, 2020). Some of the most important information broadcast by the British government, as well as the behaviours of a range of senior government politicians, proved to be confusing and contradictory (Garland and Lilliker, 2022; Newton and Lilliker, 2022). Recent perpetual crises (the refugee crisis, the health crisis, financial and environmental crises, and the rise of populism and fake news, among others) have foregrounded how, now more than ever, the provisions of accurate and good quality information and appropriate communication between those who govern and the population of a country are of vital importance.

In this chapter, we focus on the role of the government spokesperson in Greece. We look briefly at its origins and its development in the period from the end of the military junta in 1974 until today. Thereupon, this study combines a descriptive, historiological approach, as complemented by one drawing on empirical data from in-depth interviews with actors who have held senior positions in government communication roles in Greece. The findings contribute to existing research on both political PR (Theofilou and Watson 2014) and governmental and political communication in Greece (Papadimitriou and Tsalkaridou 2013; Demerutis 2003; Papathanasopoulos 2007; Kallastanis 2021) and offer insights that can contribute to making comparisons between Greece and the dominant paradigms in other nations with respect to the broader literature in the field of government communication (such as Garland 2013; Powder 2008; Gregory 2013).

Political communication in Greece

Greece is a parliamentary republic, a representative democracy with a multi-party system. The Greek political culture has been characterised by a deep-rooted clientelism that permeates the media sector, as is made evident by the shared, vested interests of politicians, media and business (Karadimitriou 2021; Venet and Karadimitriou 2013). The creation of communication channels with the public, as a recognition of the significance of organised communication, was gradually introduced into Greek politics following the extremely turbulent political years of the seven years of military dictatorship (1967–1974). The period immediately after 1974 marked the beginning of a new era and the reinstatement of democracy. Prior to this period, communication was primarily undertaken and understood as a form of junta propaganda and as a means of communicating externally. The term ‘Public Relations’ was officially used for the first time in 1951, by the Greek National Tourism Organisation (EOT), when the US-owned advertising agency Foote, Cone and Belding was appointed to develop an international tourism campaign for Greece (Theofilou and Watson 2014).

Since the 1980s, Greek politicians, especially those from the two main political parties, the conservative New Democracy and the socialist PASOK, have become increasingly eager to gain visibility and manage their public image internally. As a result, television acquired a pivotal role in Greek politics and in political campaigning (Demerouti 2012). Such developments highlighted a growing need for communication professionals, thus signalling a major shift in political communication practices in Greece (Venetis et al. 2012). Despite the existence of a rather turbulent relationship between professional communicators, international experts and party members, the period from the 1990s witnessed the development of a more modernised and professional political communication landscape (Kollias 2021; Deligiannis 2021; Venetis et al. 2012). Politicians started collaborating with communication professionals of all kinds, such as pollsters, strategists and journalists, not only during their election campaigns but also when in office – doing so in order to improve both the communication strategy and the news management of their administration (Kollias 2021). Within this new landscape, the role of the government spokesperson gradually gained greater significance. The roles of those involved in communication procedures that focused on the interpretation of complex policy and other political developments in order to create government announcements or news, required a particular expertise and knowledge.

Drawing on the above literature and taking into consideration the word limitations of this chapter, we focus on two main research questions as follows:

RQ1: How has the title and role of the government spokesperson in Greece evolved over time?

RQ2: What has been the impact of the relationship with the PM on the workings of the role of government spokesperson?

Method

This chapter constitutes part of a much larger project on governmental communication in Greece. For the purpose of this project, a mixed-methods approach has been employed, utilising semi-structured in-depth interviews, archival research and secondary data. Some of the material garnered through these methods is presented in this chapter in addressing our research questions.

Between May and July 2021, seven interviews were conducted with four government spokespersons from the three biggest Greek political parties (i.e. the conservative New Democracy party, the socialist PASOK-KINAL, and the left-wing party SYRIZA), one General Secretary of Communication, one special adviser to a former PM, and one external Communications Consultant to a former PM (see Table 6.1). All of the interviewees have been involved in governmental communication planning. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to identify initial participants, with subsequent interviewees recruited through snowballing sampling. Interviewees were chosen from across a substantial time period (1981–2022).

Table 6.1 List of Interviewees

Table clarifying point	
Identifier	Occupation
GS 1	Government spokesperson
GS 2	Government spokesperson
GS 3	Government spokesperson
GS 4	Government spokesperson
General Secretary	General Secretary of Communication
Consultant	Communication consultant (external)
Special Adviser	Special Adviser

Interviews were selected as the ideal method to achieve our research objective of gaining insights as to participants' views on and experiences of government communication through exploration of their beliefs, feelings, attitudes and reactions.

Given the different roles held by the research participants, the principal investigator of this project deliberately created a relatively loose, yet structured, framework in order to explore the views of the interviewees, all of whom were senior and knowledgeable. Although

the discussions covered a wide range of issues and matters relevant to governmental communication, due to the word limitations of this chapter, here we primarily focus on the everyday practice of government spokespersons, changes to the role across both time and changes of government, and the relationship of those in the role with the respective PMs. Three interviews were conducted face-to-face and four were conducted online, via Zoom. The interviews typically lasted between one and two hours. Critical thematic analysis was used to examine the interview transcripts, as this is a well-established method for deriving insights, from qualitative data, based on patterns of meaning (Coller and Atkinson, 1994).

Given the sensitive nature of the roles that the interviewees held, and the importance of adhering to institutional research ethics requirements, all names, genders and the specific dates when each held their post have been removed, so as to secure the anonymity of the participants in this study. Table 6.1 displays the acronyms and related titles used to identify our interviewees in this text. To address our research aims, this primary research has been complemented by secondary research, using online desk research and relevant academic literature.

The development of the role of government spokesperson

In Greece, the government maintains that the government spokesperson is responsible for providing objective information to both the media and the Greek people regarding the workings of the government. The tactics that each government spokesperson follows, in terms of his or her relationship with journalists and the image he or she desires to convey, change depending on the person holding the position. The government spokesperson is appointed and dismissed by the Prime Minister of the Hellenic Republic. According to the latest issue of the Government Gazette (FEK-ΦΕΚ B 3008–23.07.2019), the following are outlined as that which falls under the responsibilities and the supervision of the government spokesperson:

- the General Secretariat for Information and Communication and the Special Secretariat for Crisis Communication Management,
- Public Service Broadcasting (ERT) and the Athens-Macedonian News Agency,
- public information on the progress of the work of the government and its agencies,
- assisting the prime minister in the planning and implementation of the government's communication strategy.

To better understand the changes that have occurred with respect to government communication from 1974 to 2023 and to address RQ1, it is important to examine the structure of government, specifically with regard to the appointment of staff in charge of communication activities and information management. Table 6.2 shows all appointees to the role of government spokesperson from 1974 to May 2023. What is of interest here is that the actual title of the post has not been consistent across the different governments, as indicative of different priorities given to the role, the differing philosophies that have underpinned it, and the changing nature of the job description. As we already know from existing research (Papathanasiopoulos 2001; Kollintzas 2023), it was not until the 1980s, and the first premiership of the Socialist Party leader Andreas Papandreou, that media management and communication acquired a clear and specific role in governmental organisation, with the first deputy minister of press being appointed in 1985. It took ten years, until the second governing period of the Socialist Party, in 1995, for the role to be upgraded to Minister. Papandreou, having recognised the importance of communication, appointed journalists as managing directors of the ministerial press offices (Kollintzas 2023). The growing role of professional communication in Greek politics was aptly described by Papathanasiopoulos (2001, 129) 'professional advertising, polls, and political consulting that were scarcely used before have become an indispensable means, not only for carrying out pre-electoral campaigns, but also concerning the ongoing communication strategy adopted by the government and opposition parties'.

Table 6.2 Greek Governments' spokespeople 1974–2023.

Table clarifying point

PM Konstantinos Karamanlis and Georgios Rallis (New Democracy) 1974–1981		
Panagiotis Labrias	1974–1977	Deputy Minister to the PM and GS
Athanasios Tsaldaris	1977–1981	Deputy Minister of Premiership
PM Andreas Papandreou (PASOK) 1981–1989		
Dimitris Maroudas	1981–1985	Deputy Minister of Premiership and GS
Kostas Laliotis	1985–1985	Deputy Minister of Press and GS
Miltiadis Papaioannou	1985–Oct 1986	Deputy Minister of Premiership
Antonis Kourtis	1986–March 1987	GS
Yannis Roubatis	1987–June 1988	GS
Dimitris Maroudas	1988–July 1989	GS
PM Konstantinos Mitsotakis (New Democracy) 1990–1993		
Vyron Polydoras	1990–Aug. 1992	Deputy Minister of Premiership and GS
Andreas	1992–May 1993	Minister of State
Andrianopoulos	1993–Sept 1993	GS
Vasilis Maginas		
PM Andreas Papandreou (PASOK), 1993–1996		
Evangelos Venizelos	1993–1995	GS
Tilemachos Chytiris	1995–1996	Deputy Minister of Premiership, Minister of Press and Mass Media, and GS
PM Costas Simitis (PASOK) 1996–2004		
Dimitris Reppas	1996–2001	Minister of Press and Mass Media, and GS
Christos Protopapas	2001–2004	Minister of Press and Mass Media
PM Kostas Karamanlis (New Democracy) 2004–2009		
Theodoros	2004–2008	Minister of State, and GS
Rousopoulos	2008–2009	GS
Evangelos Antonaros		
PM George Andreas Papandreou (PASOK) 2009–2011		
Giorgos Petalotis	2009–2011	Deputy Minister to the PM, and GS
Elias Mossialos	June 2011–Nov. 2011	Minister of State and GS
PM Antonis Samaras [Coalition government: New Democracy, PASOK and Democratic Left (DIMAR)] 2012–2015		
Simos Kedikoglou	2012–2014	Deputy Minister to the PM, and GS
Sofia Voultepsi	2014–2015	Deputy Minister to the PM, and GS
PM Alexis Tsipras (Coalition: SYRIZA and Independent Greeks) 2015–2019		
Gabriel Sakellariadis	Jan. 2015–July 2015	GS
Olga Gerovasili	2015–2016	Deputy Minister to the PM, and GS
Dimitris Tzanakopoulos	2016–2019	Minister of State, and GS
Lefteris Kretsos	June–July 2019	Interim GS

PM Kyriakos Mitsotakis (New Democracy) 2019–2023		
Stelios Petsas	2019–2021	Deputy Minister to the PM, and GS
Christos Tarantilis	Jan-Feb 2021	GS
Aristotelia Pelsoni	March–Aug. 2021	Deputy Minister to the PM, and GS
Giannis Oikonomou	2021–2023	GS
Akis Skertsos	April-May 2023	Interim GS
		Deputy Minister to the PM, and GS
		GS
		GS

Source: Caretaker governments have not been included in this table hence the gaps in dates.

Note: *GS stands for Government Spokesperson ©A. Veneti

The socialist leader who followed Papandreou, Costas Simitis, further enhanced the government's communication organisation. Further to the Ministry of Press and Mass Media, he created two new communication units within the Prime Minister's Office: the Press Office and the position of the Deputy Minister to the Prime Minister (Kollias 2021, 241). The Press Office's objectives were to promote the desired prime ministerial image, manage relations with the media and monitor and handle critical announcements made by the opposition and the media. The Deputy Minister to the Prime Minister was in charge of communications between the cabinet and the party's parliamentary group (Kollias 2021).

The subsequent conservative government of New Democracy and its premier, Kostas Karamanlis, 'retained the prime ministerial Press Office while [reorganising] the communications machinery, aiming to impose centralized control and coordination across the different ministries' (Kollias 2021, 242). Like his predecessors, Karamanlis appointed an experienced journalist, Theodoros Rousopoulos, as the government spokesperson. He dissolved the Ministry of Press and Media and made Rousopoulos a minister of state. As Kollias (2021, 242) argues,

[T]he Minister of State acted not only as governmental spokesperson but also as prime ministerial spokesperson, also taking responsibilities of the Press Office. Furthermore, Karamanlis strengthened the prime ministerial communication apparatus by creating the position of deputy minister of state, who would act as government spokesman toward the foreign press and media, mainly on European policy issues.

The next Prime Minister, George Papandreou, initially appointed George Petalotis as Deputy Minister to the PM and government spokesperson, with the role later being upgraded and enhanced as that of combined government spokesperson and minister of state with the appointment of Elias Mossialos. As minister of state, Elias Mossialos promoted legislative regulation for the purpose of an immediate abolition of the ‘Secret Funds Decree’, referring to Expense Code 0896, ‘Confidential Expenditure’ of the General Secretariats of Communication – Information and Mass Media (Pantelakis 2014; Tsoukias 2014). At a press conference, Mossialos also announced the intention of the government to restructure ERT, the state-owned public service broadcaster. He explained that the restructuring was aimed at creating a public, non-partisan, independent public broadcaster that would operate without state, government or party interference. However, the government fell from power before this plan was realised.

A significant difference in this respect between the two governments that followed is that the New Democracy coalition government’s (2012–15) PM appointed as government spokespeople party members who had previously worked for many years as journalists, while the subsequent left government (SYRIZA coalition government) appointed political party members. The most recent conservative government (2019–2023) retained the dual role of Deputy Minister to the PM and government spokesperson. The present Greek PM, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, has kept the General Secretariat of the Prime Minister, which was established in 2011 and is a transformation and upgrade of the former Prime Minister’s Political Office. The General Secretariat of the Prime Minister is an autonomous public service that is directly subordinate to the Prime Minister, constitutes his personal staff and supports him in the exercise of his duties and responsibilities. The Press Office is one of the many units of this Secretariat, and it is responsible for monitoring current affairs and informing the Prime Minister, communicating with national and international media, as well as informing journalists about the Prime Minister’s initiatives.

In the court of the prime minister

It is quite common for the government spokesperson to be someone who is very close to the PM. (Mason & 2015, 2019) insightful studies on UK government communication delve deeply into the relationship between British PMs and their communications specialists and the mechanics of their working together. In a similar manner, Greek PMs have developed a very close relationship with their government spokespeople. In most cases, the offices of the spokesperson were in the same building as that of the PM, the Maximus Mansion, which is the official seat of the Greek PM. This proximity has facilitated both communication between the two and the more effective running of government business, as discussed by the interviewees:

As I was in such close proximity to the PM, I was going down to his office fifteen times a day to discuss a series of matters.

GS 2

I was based at the Maximus Mansion and not at the General Secretariat of Communication, as others had been previously. That gave me the opportunity to attend all the meetings during a very turbulent time, to maintain a closer relationship with the PM, and to have full knowledge of government policies.

GS 1

However, the setting up of the GS office has not always been an easy task.

The prime minister's office has no continuity; it does not function institutionally. When we went to our offices there was no one there to greet us. Institutionally there was no employee of the Greek state belonging to the prime minister's office, so basically no one to tell us – here is your office, here is your secretariat. I was searching in the Maximus Mansion to find out which office I would settle in. I was on my own and when I found two ladies there, I said 'finally someone to guide me', but they replied 'sorry we cannot help, we are secretaries of [name removed] who was the former government's Minister of State and was also residing here and we are also looking to find where to

base ourselves'. There were no computers, no archives, no one to brief us. I had to set up an office from scratch.

GS3

The pivotal work of [Tsadiras and Featherstone \(2014\)](#) on Greek Prime Ministers offers valuable insights as to their differing leadership styles and the ramifications of these for their respective governments. Their study examines the office holders' work habits, how they relate to their colleagues, and the ways by which they collect information and make decisions. Their research reveals considerable variations across time with respect to leadership styles, organisational management and administration, and decision-making. These discontinuities with regard to organisational management and the choice and implementation of mechanisms of government management are also reflected in the role of the government spokesperson by the constant change of titles for the role and the differing responsibilities assumed by those holding the post (see [Table 6.2](#)). As the following interviewee argues, titles and responsibilities have always been a matter of negotiation and are destined to serve personal and political objectives. Obviously, these constant changes could easily prove to be dysfunctional.

It basically provided what each appointee wanted to have as a title; very, very important, believe me. Sometimes it also served a particular political purpose. The problem is that there is no continuity. Each government comes up with its own plans, so you don't have a specific structure. They think that with one administrative order they can solve everything, without taking into account that underneath there are people, procedures, logistics. It's a mess.

General Secretary of Communication

Despite the government spokesperson most commonly being located close to the PM, that is not always the case; this was similarly the case for those working in other roles within government communication. As the interview data reveal, the personality of the PMs and

their style of working define, to a great extent, the relationship between these actors as well as the dominant philosophy and the mechanisms underpinning government communication with respect to each successive government. The following interviewees discuss their close relationship with their PMs and how that helped them in coordinating and planning the government's communication strategy. In the following quotes, one is made aware of the different governing styles, varying from those PMs who attended the so called 'morning coffees' (an overview and briefing of daily affairs), to those who would not so attend, but would give and receive such information on a very regular basis, to those who were more distant and loose with respect to their organisational style.

[In the morning coffee] I participated, along with the chief of the PM office, sometimes the PM, some other colleagues depending on their schedules, the Minister of State, and in the case of foreign policy issues, the diplomatic office's senior staff also participated. In this way, we would decide the agenda of the day and which issues we would deal with and how.

GS1

Every morning at 8am I was holding a meeting at my office which we called "morning coffee". It began with a briefing by my team and then we were briefed regarding the workings of the Ministries. In this way I could gather all the information I needed. By 9am I went to the PM's office to fully brief him. Sometimes, I visited him multiple times a day to keep him up to date.

GS2

As GS2's statement above reveals, they had a very close and trusting relationship with the PM, one which permitted them considerable initiative in their actions. The consultant who was interviewed confirms this close relationship between the two. Discussing this particular PM, he suggests that the PM had very carefully chosen his close collaborators from a pool of individuals that he deemed trustworthy. This consultant also explained that the PM had

different channels of communication and thus a range of information sources in order to garner an abundance of information, and that not all of those working on communication issues had contact with each other. He describes a rather complex, but well-organised, system for gathering information and forming communication plans.

As the years went by, the PM intervened less. But generally, he was not the type of person that interferes. He would provide a general message, a general tone, and leave the rest to you. And he also had complete trust in his colleagues. However, he would provide us with the fundamental basis of the message. . . . It was a very ‘communist system’; with the kind of rigidity you find in other types of organizations, which I find very much more functional than [name remove]’s chaos. He established a team of a few independent communication consultants that he trusted and relied on their guidance.

Consultant

Having a combination of external consultants and internal political staff advise the PM on matters of communication has a long tradition in Greek politics (Colias *et al.* 2012). Nonetheless, the relationships between paid professionals and party members, as well as between the PM and external consultants, have not always been easy – as studies on political professionalisation reveal (Vrettos *et al.* 2011; Meeks 2014).

The following government spokesperson describes a job with unlimited and growing responsibilities that was becoming ever more difficult due to mistakes in structuring and organising the PM’s office and the offices related to that.

People who worked for the PM were not located in the same place as us. They were scattered across other offices in Athens, so we had no physical contact. The PM’s office at the Maximus Mansion was essentially inaccessible, impregnable; that is, there were no visits, there was no interaction even by way of just seeing a consultant in the corridor and saying ‘what’s up, come and have a coffee’, just for a friendly chat about one-two things. Not having a structured PM’s office, in the sense of a stable, serious institution, had been a big problem.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have examined the role of the government spokesperson in Greece in seeking to explore two issues of interest: the development of the role since the fall of the military junta in 1974 and the effect that the relationship with the PM has on the workings of the role. It has been interesting to observe that, although the role of the GS has always been occupied by someone close to the PM and deemed worthy of their trust, the nature of the everyday relationship between them has varied depending on the leadership style and the personality of the respective PM. Moreover, the actual role of GS has undergone a series of changes, both with respect to the spokesperson's official title and with regard to the responsibilities attached to the role, in the period following the restoration of democracy in Greece. Such changes have occurred in order to serve both personal and political aims.

Due to the chapter's word limitations, this work offers some initial insights with respect to a most fruitful terrain for further examination. Much of the current literature focuses on Western Europe and the United States, leaving a lacuna as to the mechanisms that underpin governmental communication in Southern Europe. There is much more needing to be explored that takes into consideration the peculiarities of the South. This includes the relationships between party members, paid professionals and the media in government communication practices (Kessell et al. 2012; Moxon 2012). Future research could also productively explore how those in charge of government communication utilise modern communication channels, methods and techniques. Given that those occupying such posts play a vital role in serving the public interest, it is important to develop better understandings of the mechanisms that underpin their practices in order to secure effective governance.

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