

Max van der Stoel — a tireless defender of Greek democracy

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Many have paid tribute to Max van der Stoel's personality, life and achievements, and rightly so. One facet was not, or not sufficiently, referred to in the numerous obituaries: his leading role in Europe's fight against the military dictatorship in Greece. It is in this context that I had the privilege of getting to know him and working with him. Back in the 1960s, Max van der Stoel was a member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. He was appointed Rapporteur for what was to become the 'Greek case' of which I was in charge in the Secretariat of the Assembly.

When a military junta overthrew the democratic regime in Greece in April 1967, Europe was shocked and stunned. For the first time since the foundation of the Council of Europe in 1949, the solidity of the 'collective guarantee' of pluralistic democracy, the rule of law and human rights for which it had been set up was to be put to the test. Max van der Stoel was fully aware of the profound significance of the 'Greek case' for Europe and the Council of Europe, often referred to as its 'democratic conscience'. He took his task of Rapporteur very seriously. We worked closely together and I accompanied him on all his missions, mostly to Greece until the regime declared both of us *persona non grata*.

The new military rulers of Greece claimed that they had seized power to prevent a communist takeover, an assertion that was never supported by evidence. They promised to build a better and 'pure' democracy. Papadopoulos, the head of the junta, who was fond of medical metaphors, stated that Greece needed a cast and he would decide when it could be taken off.

As it became increasingly clear that the promises of the junta lacked credibility, Max van der Stoel's regular reports to the Parliamentary Assembly became more and more critical. Debates in the Assembly were lively and at times acrimonious. On the right wing of the political spectrum, many showed a surprisingly high degree of patience and understanding with regard to the dictatorship. The US Government tried to dissuade the Council of Europe from taking firm action against a 'faithful and reliable ally' in NATO.

Max van der Stoel's reports to the Assembly were well documented. He

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was the first one to bring back from Greece clear and convincing evidence of the practice of torture by the regime. Amalia Fleming, the widow of Alexander Fleming, the discoverer of penicillin, was a courageous opponent of the military regime; she organised in the middle of the night, at her apartment in Athens, a meeting with victims who showed us the marks of torture on their bodies. The 'administrative practice of torture' by the regime was later to be confirmed by the European Commission of Human Rights.

After heated debates, the Parliamentary Assembly finally recommended to the Committee of Ministers the suspension of Greece from the Council of Europe. At a dramatic session of the Ministers, on 12 December 1969, the Greek Minister of Foreign Affairs, noting that there was the two-thirds majority required for suspension, pre-empted it before the formal vote was taken, by declaring the withdrawal of Greece from the Council. The Committee of Ministers characterised the situation thus created as a 'de facto suspension of Greece from the Council of Europe'. This had far-reaching negative political, diplomatic and economic consequences for the regime. The firm and principled action taken by the Council of Europe, under the leadership of Max van der Stoel, made a decisive contribution to the isolation and, finally, to the fall of the dictatorship in 1974. Greece was then readmitted to the Council of Europe.

In Greece, Max van der Stoel is still remembered with admiration and gratitude. A street in Athens is named after him.

Throughout his years as Rapporteur for Greece, Max van der Stoel demonstrated his outstanding professional, intellectual and human qualities. He had excellent judgment, was lucid in his analysis of the situation and firm and uncompromising in his discussions with the representatives of the dictatorship; at the same time, he showed a high degree of sympathy and understanding for its victims. Max was committed, a man of strong principles. Contrary to other politicians, he was not a showman. He was a serious and hard worker, discrete and modest. Behind a façade of strictness, one discovered a warm personality, with a subtle sense of humour.

Although Max van der Stoel's work as Rapporteur was extremely serious, I remember some quite amusing episodes. For example, I will never forget how the rather shy Max was visibly overwhelmed and embarrassed when Melina Mercouri, the famous actress and opponent of the dictatorship, passionately embraced and kissed him in an extraordinary effusion of gratitude. I also remember a Greek politician who opposed the regime and was so afraid of listening devices that he felt the only safe place to talk politics was in the sea. We therefore had a long interview with him, swimming in the sea. Luckily enough, in addition to his many other qualities, Max had that of a tenacious swimmer. In this case, I was obviously unable to take notes during the interview.

I may say that during the years we worked together on Greece, Max and I became close friends. Our close connection continued in subsequent years, when Max served as Minister for Foreign Affairs, Ambassador to the UN and the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities. In particular, we cooperated in

organising the 1994 OSCE-Council of Europe conference on the Roma in Warsaw. This was an important turning point in Europe's dealing with the Roma issue in that Roma organisations were closely involved in the preparation and conduct of the conference. The idea was, rather than talking about the Roma, to discuss with the Roma an idea that has since prevailed, especially within the Council of Europe.

After a rich and eventful life with many great achievements, Max has passed away. I am mourning the death of a dear and close friend who has left an indelible mark on my life. I will never forget him.