



## **Weekly Briefing**

**Greece social briefing:**  
**An effort to clean up Greek football**  
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## **An effort to clean up Greek football**

*A significant social challenge Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis is encountered with is how to upgrade Greek football. Following a recommendation of the Professional Sports Committee that PAOK FC and Xanthi FC should be relegated because of their alleged common ownership, a serious dispute between PAOK FC and Olympiacos FC erupted. Demonstrations organized in Northern Greece against this proposal led Mitsotakis to introduce a controversial new law with milder penalties. The ambition of the Prime Minister is to upgrade Greek football. But it remains questionable whether he possesses the political will to proceed. Corruption is nothing new in Greek football and no catharsis has been achieved despite promises. Big football clubs are owned by powerful businessmen who arguably enjoy good relations with political parties.*

Controversy has been a recurrent feature in Greek football. Since the 1990s corruption practices have posed a serious threat to the integrity of the sport without necessarily leading to a catharsis. Three Athenian teams, AEK FC, Panathinaikos FC and Olympiacos FC were disagreeing for years. Olympiacos FC won 18 out of 20 championships in a period of twenty years, from 1997 until 2017. It was thus largely criticized by Panathinaikos FC and AEK FC for enjoying a favorable treatment by Greek referees. The outbreak of the economic crisis in 2010 caused serious problems to Panathinaikos FC and AEK FC. The first was not able to financially compete with other teams in the transfer market and as a result saw its performance in standings dramatically drop while the latter was relegated to the third division in 2013 and returned to the first one two years later. By contrast, Olympiacos FC – owned by ship-owner Evangelos Marinakis since 2010 following his agreement with the previous owner Socrates Kokkalis – escaped from financial problems and managed to continue its domination in Greek football.

Olympiacos FC was not the only team which financially survived during the economic crisis. After its return to the Greek Super league AEK FC received critical financing by ship-owner Dimitrios Mellisanidis who took control of the club. AEK FC won the Greek championship in 2018 ending the domination of Olympiacos FC. More importantly, PAOK FC – based in Thessaloniki – saw light in the end of the tunnel after years of economic misery. In 2012 businessman Ivan Savvidis became the president of the club and gradually paid previous

debts. Savvidis made impressive investments, spent high amounts in the transfer market and led the effort of PAOK FC to return to titles. The club won the Greek cup in 2017, 2018 and 2019 and the Greek championship in 2019.

Some observers believe the success of both AEK FC and PAOK FC should be attributed to new norms introduced to Greek football during the administration of SYRIZA and Independent Greeks. Former Deputy Minister of Sports, Stavros Kontonis, for example, cooperated with both UEFA and FIFA to solve problems surrounding Greek football. Among other things, FIFA ordered the Hellenic Football Federation (EPO) to annul its decision to replace the judges of its so-called ethics committee. Also, referees from foreign countries were invited to referee some important football games to guarantee impartiality. But Olympiacos FC completely strongly disagrees. Alternatively, the team was continuously blaming SYRIZA for forging close ties with Ivan Savvidis. The Greek government, for instance, made an amendment in 2017 that wrote off a fine imposed on tobacco firm SEKAP in which Savvidis owned a majority stake. According to Kathimerini newspaper the owner of PAOK FC said that the then Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras reminded him of Russian President Vladimir Putin. In response, Tsipras started to accuse the leader of New Democracy Kyriakos Mitsotakis for arguably enjoying a close friendship with Evangelos Marinakis.

Over the last years public disagreements between Olympiacos FC and PAOK FC have been nothing but rare. Fanaticism has been deliberately or not incited. Serious violent incidents thus occurred. In December 2018 referee Thanassis Tzilos suffered an attack by four assailants and was brought to hospital with injuries to his head and legs. Tzilos had officiated the game between Xanthi and Olympiacos FC that finished 1-1. After the end of the game Olympiacos FC spokesman Costas Karapapas said that there was ‘no point in playing with marked cards’ and asked ‘who has Tzilos spoken with during the last 48 hours’. While the suspects of the incidents were identified, judges have not yet come to any conclusion at the time of writing.

After the victory of New Democracy in the national election of July 2019, Olympiacos FC has attempted to benefit by the governmental change and serve its interests in the Greek Super League. For its part, PAOK FC illustrated the new Deputy Minister Sports Lefteris Avgenakis a politician who allegedly acted in line with instructions given to him by owner of Olympiacos FC. That is because Avgenakis decided in December 2019 to suddenly replace two members of the Professional Sports Committee. But a few weeks after this decision this Commission recommended that PAOK FC and Xanthi FC had to be relegated as it found that the two clubs shared common ownership. The recommendation will be assessed by the Super League and this assessment is still pending. It sparked hot debate in Greece though. PAOK FC

issued a statement mentioning that the proposal of the Professional Sports Committee ‘was a monument of shame’ and blamed Avgenakis ‘who has proved to be a representative of the Olympiacos FC press office’. PAOK FC supporters started subsequently to demonstrate in the streets of Thessaloniki and some slogans about Northern and Southern Greece were chanted.

Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis decided to intervene and manage the crisis. Specifically, the Greek government introduced a new legislation debilitating penalties in the end of January 2020. In the relevant debate, where the new law was voted in parliament, Mitsotakis warned that if the ‘sick climate’ in Greek football persisted, he would be forced to suspend the Super League. He also said it was imperative that a football disagreement would not turn into a social dispute. He therefore defended his government’s amendment that spared PAOK FC and Xanthi FC from relegation. The intervention of the Greek government, however, demonstrated its lack of political will to see the law applied and its indifference to start a thorough research on the decision of Avgenakis to replace two members of the Professional Sports Committee. Former Greek football player and New Democracy Member of the European Parliament decided Thodoris Zagorakis decided to leave the party following the announcement of the proposal of this committee.

In his effort to clean up Greek football Mitsotakis decided to cooperate with UEFA in order to upgrade Greek football. On 24 February 2020 its President Aleksander Ceferin visited Greece for talks with the Greek government and EPO indeed. Mr Ceferin was received by Mitsotakis and Avgenakis. They signed a declaration of intent underlining their common commitment to the healthy development of football as well as to safeguard sporting values in Greece and emphasizing their common will to work in order to launch rational and sustainable solutions to existing problems. Further to this, after his meeting with the President of EPO Evangelos Grammenos, Ceferin urged for swift action from all stakeholders to win fight against match-fixing. Nonetheless, these meetings were rather vague in substance as the responsibly to solve the problem lies with relevant committees of Greek football committees and associations themselves

Problems in Greek football are being covered by international media tarnishing the image of Greece. A story published by Politico discusses ‘frequent allegations of match-fixing and bribery of referees and players’ as well as violence orchestrated by organized groups. It also mentions that Greece was in need of a memorandum of understanding to fix its football as it had done with the national economy. In the view of State Minister George Gerapetritis the Greek government sought to send a message of shock by using the word ‘memorandum’. This practically means that if clubs do not comply, they will face the risk of being expelled from

international competitions. This ‘Grexit’ fear is not new. Similar threats had been heard in 2010 and 2016 but were not implemented.

### **Conclusion**

Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis appears determined to fix problems of Greek football. In February 2020 he received the President of UEFA Aleksander Ceferin while he has said a memorandum of understanding might facilitate the process. Current disagreements between Olympiacos FC and PAOK FC are at the epicenter of attention. But to clean up Greek football political will is required. The current government allegedly possesses this will. Only if strict measures following the British paradigm are applied, will the landscape look better. The ownership of football clubs along with the bonds between their presidents and political parties further complicate the situation. The stance of the Greek government to change the law and prevent the relegation of PAOK FC instead of investigating why members of the relevant committee had been replaced before the critical recommendation outline the limits of its ambition to clean up football.