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Democracy Under Pressure: Political Trajectories and Regime Transformation in Contemporary Greece¹

Vaia Papanikolaou² & Panagiotis Tzionas³

Abstract

The proposed research analyzes the trajectory of democracy and rights in Greece from 1950 to 2023, emphasizing on the post-1974 period of democratic consolidation and the recent challenges of backsliding. Drawing on an internationally approved and validated multidimensional data set and extensive theoretical insights, it examines how economic crises, executive aggrandizement, and a varied degree of institutional erosion have affected electoral integrity, civil liberties, and social cohesion. Greece's democratic institutions remain formally intact but face rising pressures due to what is perceived as declining trust, politicized governance, and socio-economic inequality. The aim of this paper is to offer evidence-based analysis and policy recommendations to strengthen liberal-democratic safeguards and reinvigorate civic participation, aiming to ensure democratic resilience in the face of increasing internal and external pressures.

Keywords: Democratic fragility; Rights Regression; Civic Disengagement.

Introduction

Democracy is not a static achievement but a dynamic process requiring constant renewal. Key elements such as: trust in the institutions (Fukuyama, 1989), the participation of all “citizens” in public and electoral processes, the protection of the secrecy of the vote, the protection of freedom of expression and personal freedoms, the clear distinction between legislative, judiciary and executive bodies, and the efficiency of public administration (Coppedge et al., 2020; Skaaning, 2018) are important characteristics that contribute to the objective determination of what is meant by a democratic constitution of a society, something that is independent of the varying social practices. In Greece, the promise of liberal democracy, marked by free elections, civil liberties, and responsive governance, has faced both historic disruptions and contemporary stressors. The 20th century was marked by war, dictatorship, and democratic reconstitution, culminating in the fall of the military junta in 1974 and the establishment of the *Third Hellenic Republic*. Since then, Greece has undergone cycles of democratic expansion, institutional reform, and socio-economic turbulence.

The global trend of democratic backsliding has not spared Greece (Nord et al., 2025). Although the

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country remains classified as an electoral democracy, recent declines in freedom of expression, judicial independence, and institutional accountability suggest democratic erosion, at least to some degree. Coupled with enduring economic vulnerabilities and widespread public disillusionment, these developments raise concerns about the long-term resilience of Greek democracy.

This policy brief offers a historically grounded and empirically supported analysis of democratic developments in Greece. Methodologically we use the V-Dem Country Dataset (2025) and the Episodes of Regime Transformation (ERT) dataset (V-Dem Dataset, 2023) to trace regime shifts and patterns of democratic decline, from 1950 to 2024. It focuses in particular on civil, human, and social rights as the cornerstones of democratic life, and argues that safeguarding these rights is essential not only for political legitimacy but also for social stability and resilience. Through a combination of historical narrative, data analysis, and theoretical insights from Acemoglu & Robinson (2001), Maerz et al. (2023), Miljkovic & Rimal (2008), and Ramesh (2021), this paper aims to contribute to the discussion of policy responses capable of renewing democratic integrity and civic trust.

For more clarity, the discussion focused in the fundamental areas of democracy, and the paper is structured into three parts: (1) Political Evolution and Institutional Erosion; (2) Rights and Freedoms; and (3) Civil Society and Participation. Each section draws from validated empirical data (Maerz et al., 2023; V-Dem Dataset, 2025) and theoretical frameworks to interrogate the structural and normative dimensions of democratic backsliding in Greece, and to contribute to the discourse on democratic quality by outlining evidence-based pathways grounded in indicators of institutional reform and democratic consolidation.

1. Political Evolution and Institutional Erosion

Greece's democratic evolution is characterized by abrupt transitions and persistent institutional fragility. From the post-World War II monarchy to the 1967–1974 military dictatorship and the establishment of the *Third Hellenic Republic*, regime change has been a defining feature of the nation's political development. The Episodes of Regime Transformation (ERT) dataset of Varieties of Democracy marks Greece's democratic breakdown in 1967 where all indicators collapse and its recovery in 1974 as critical episodes in its regime history.

Following the return to democracy in 1974, Greece adopted a new constitution emphasizing parliamentary sovereignty, civil liberties, and political pluralism. The early decades of the *Third Hellenic Republic* were marked by democratic expansion, economic modernization, and integration into the European Community. However, varied degrees of endurance of clientelist politics, a

politicized public sector, and weak regulatory institutions seem to gradually erode democratic quality, at least to certain degree.

The 2009 sovereign debt crisis revealed deep-seated institutional weaknesses. Under the pressure of international lenders, Greece implemented austerity measures that strained public services and diminished social protections (Eurobarometer, 2023). The crisis also catalyzed political fragmentation, leading to the collapse of traditional parties and the rise of anti-establishment forces. While the electoral process remained formally intact, democratic norms were challenged by different levels of polarization, populist rhetoric, and a growing distrust in representative institutions (European Social Survey, 2022).

V-Dem indicators show that since 2010, liberal democratic components—including executive constraints, rule of law, and media freedom—have experienced consistent decline. The data from 2020, brought renewed concerns about growing executive overreach, surveillance incidents, and a limited degree of parliamentary scrutiny. These developments reflect a possible trend of democratic erosion that operates not through abrupt collapse but through the gradual weakening of institutional checks and balances.

The ERT dataset confirms that while Greece has not entered a new autocratic episode, it is experiencing what Maerz et al. (2023) define as a "backsliding episode" – an extended period where core democratic principles seem to be weakening without full regime change. This subtle erosion, often masked by electoral legitimacy, is particularly dangerous as it could undermine the foundations of democracy without triggering alarm bells. Institutions could hollow out from within, resulting in a democracy that is formally present but substantively diminished. Acemoglu and Robinson (2001)'s theory suggests that such transitions are usually shaped by elite interests and institutional bargaining under pressure.

Addressing possible institutional erosion in Greece requires more than technocratic adjustments. It demands a reinvigoration of the democratic ethos through structural reforms that promote transparency, accountability, and citizen engagement.

2. Rights and Freedoms

The strength of a democracy lies not only in its electoral mechanisms but in the protection of civil, human, and social rights. For Greece, the evolution of these rights since 1950 illustrates a complex and uneven trajectory. Using the latest V-Dem dataset (2025), we trace the performance of four core indicators: *civil liberties*, *freedom of association*, *freedom of expression*, and *electoral democracy*.

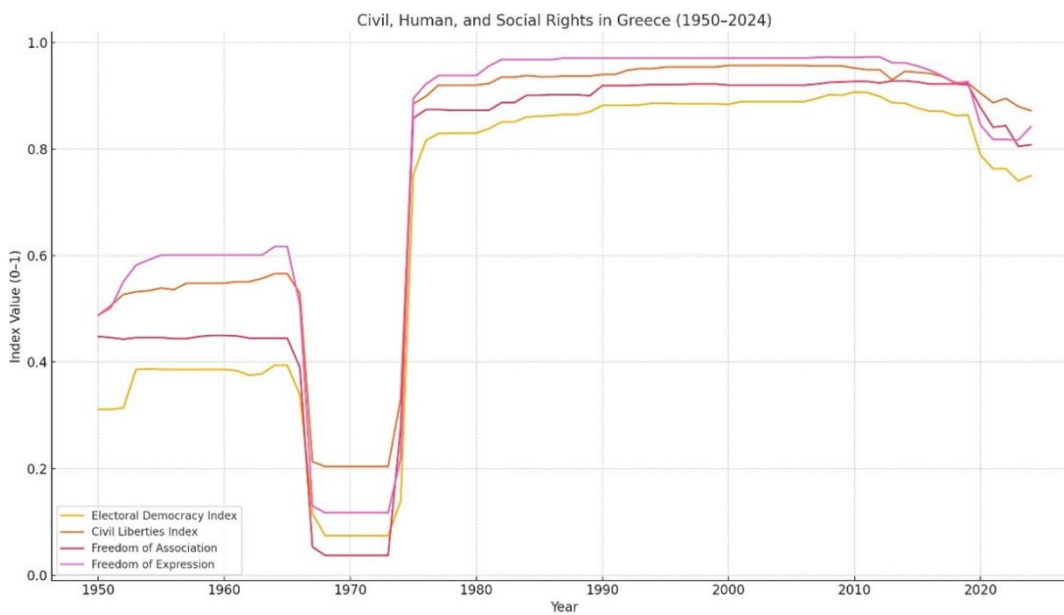
The most dramatic collapse occurred during the 1967–1974 military dictatorship, when all rights sharply declined. The restoration of democracy post-1974 marked a strong rebound in civil liberties and electoral integrity. This period, especially through the 1980s and early 1990s, saw the consolidation of a rights-respecting constitutional framework and Greece's integration into the European Union, further reinforcing normative and institutional standards.

However, the economic crisis that erupted in 2009 initiated a new period of stress. V-Dem data indicates a steady deterioration in civil liberties from 2010 onwards. The index for *freedom of expression* shows a noticeable decline, coinciding with what was reported as an increased government interference in media regulation. The 2022 surveillance incidents, where journalists and opposition figures were allegedly monitored by state authorities, sparked domestic and international outcry and highlighted the fragile state of press freedom.

Social rights, particularly the right to healthcare, education, and adequate housing, have also suffered under austerity regimes. Cuts to welfare programs, pension reductions, and labor market deregulation disproportionately affected low-income and vulnerable groups. This could undermine the democratic promise of equality and inclusion. According to Ramesh (2021), drawing from Sen's capabilities approach, a democracy that fails to enable substantive freedom through basic social provisions could become vulnerable to disaffection and instability.

Most concerning are the data from 2020 to 2024, which show declines in both freedom of expression and freedom of association. These coincide with incidents involving alleged attempts of press control and suspicions expressed by the opposition about them, highlighting the importance of preserving media transparency and pluralism. Despite a still-functioning electoral system, the liberal-democratic quality of Greek governance came into question. The V-Dem indicators underscore the possible risk of *autocratization by erosion*—a process where democratic rights can be incrementally undermined rather than explicitly revoked.

In Figure 1, data from the V-Dem 2025 dataset displays trends in *Electoral Democracy*, *Civil Liberties*, *Freedom of Expression*, and *Freedom of Association*. While electoral democracy has remained relatively high, civil rights indicators have declined significantly since the early 2010s, with a sharper deterioration from 2020 onward.

Figure 1: Civil, Human, and Social Rights in Greece (1950–2024) according to V-Dem.

The perceived weakening of rights in Greece is not merely a byproduct of economic hardship. It could reflect political choices about whose rights are prioritized and protected. A resilient democracy requires not just formal guarantees, but active investment in the institutions and policies that make those rights meaningful in practice. As such, revitalizing civil, human, and social rights must be central to any democratic renewal strategy.

3. Civil Society and Participation

Civil society is a critical intermediary between the state and citizens. It plays a vital role in democratic consolidation by promoting accountability, civic education, and collective advocacy. In Greece, civil society has historically been shaped by a gradation of political polarization, patronage networks, and a weak tradition of autonomous civic organization. Despite these challenges, recent decades have seen a growth in grassroots activism, volunteerism, and NGO engagement.

During the financial crisis, civil society responded to state retrenchment with solidarity movements, food distribution networks, and healthcare initiatives. These efforts illustrated the capacity of civic actors to fill governance gaps and sustain social cohesion. However, they also revealed the limits of informal organization when faced with systemic policy failures. The crisis period marked a dual trend: an expansion in civic energy alongside a decline in institutional trust.

V-Dem data on civil society participation indicates moderate levels of engagement but persistent limitations in terms of influence and autonomy. While formal participation through elections remains high, more substantive forms of engagement, such as petitioning, protesting, and deliberative forums,

are less institutionalized. Civil society organizations often lack stable funding, professionalization, and legal protections, which constrains their impact on policy-making.

Furthermore, the increasing degree of securitization of public space, especially in relation to illegal migration and mass-protest policing, has narrowed the scope for civic expression. Strict laws passed to overregulate demonstrations and overexpand surveillance powers have raised concerns about the shrinking space for -at least some moderate degree- dissent. These developments echo with broader European trends (Freedom House, 2023) of restricting civic freedoms under what is perceived (at least by opposition parties) as a guise of security and public order.

To reverse democratic backsliding, Greece must invest in civic infrastructure that empowers citizens beyond the ballot box. This includes transparent policy dialogue mechanisms, participatory budgeting, and the decentralization of decision-making to local communities. A vibrant civil society is not a luxury but a necessity for a resilient democracy. It provides pluralism, innovation, and accountability that bureaucratic institutions alone cannot sustain.

4. Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

Greece's post-authoritarian democratic experience is often celebrated for its institutional recovery and integration into the European Union. Yet as this analysis shows, democratic resilience cannot be taken for granted. The most recent V-Dem data through 2025 confirms a possibly worrisome trend: while electoral institutions remain intact, the core liberal components of democracy, such as civil liberties, freedom of expression, and freedom of association, seem to be eroding, at least to certain extent.

This pattern of “democracy without rights” (Maertz et al., 2023) places Greece in the company of other European states experiencing possible democratic backsliding by erosion, where formal elections coexist with informal constraints on dissent, civic space, and media independence. The perceived decline in rights protections since 2020, including press surveillance incidents and increased protest restrictions, marks a critical inflection point.

While Greece is not facing regime collapse, the cumulative weakening of liberal norms, checks and balances, and civic empowerment requires urgent redress. Democratic renewal cannot rely solely on elections or economic stabilization. It must be rooted in an active political commitment to rights, institutional independence, and citizen participation.

A foundational step lies in reinforcing institutional independence and strengthening the rule of law (Fukuyama, 1989). Protecting the autonomy of the judiciary and oversight agencies requires robust

constitutional safeguards, alongside transparent and merit-based appointment procedures. Complementing these reforms, the establishment of independent watchdog bodies, particularly those tasked with overseeing media freedom and safeguarding privacy rights, must be prioritized. Such bodies should possess both investigative powers and meaningful enforcement capacity to serve as effective checks within the democratic system.

Building upon this institutional framework, the protection of civil and political liberties remains essential. Legal provisions that may disproportionately restrict freedoms of expression, assembly, and association – particularly protest and surveillance laws – should be carefully reviewed and reformed. At the same time, all state surveillance practices must be brought under transparent oversight, including judicial review mechanisms and firm guarantees for data protection. These safeguards are necessary to preserve the foundational rights that underpin a democratic polity.

Closely related to civil liberties is the imperative to strengthen media pluralism and freedom of expression. Democratic resilience depends on an informed public, which in turn relies on a diverse and independent media landscape. Policy measures must enforce further transparency in media ownership and counter any possible excessive concentration of control. Public funding mechanisms and legal protections should further support investigative journalism and the sustainability of independent outlets. Moreover, the creation of an autonomous media regulatory authority, equipped with enforceable standards and mechanisms for public accountability, can further protect media integrity from political and economic pressures.

In tandem with media reform, it is vital to support civil society and expand the civic space in which democratic participation occurs. A stable and transparent funding environment for non-governmental organizations and grassroots initiatives should be developed, particularly through competitive public grant systems. Legal protection must be broadened to safeguard the work of civic actors – including whistleblowers, human rights defenders, and protest organizers – who often operate under conditions of vulnerability. To deepen democratic legitimacy, institutionalized channels for civil society consultation should be established, fostering structured dialogue between civic groups and the state at both local and national levels.

Advancing democratic participation further requires a deliberate effort to cultivate political inclusion. Civic education initiatives should be expanded to further promote democratic values, legal awareness, and political literacy, especially among younger populations. Mechanisms such as participatory budgeting and citizens' assemblies can empower citizens to contribute directly to policy deliberations, thereby revitalizing democratic engagement. At the same time, any possible administrative and legal

barriers that impede the participation of youth, ethnic minorities, and migrants must be addressed to ensure equitable access to political life.

Finally, these domestic reforms should be reinforced through active engagement with European and international democratic safeguards. Aligning national legal frameworks with instruments such as the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and the European Democracy Action Plan can provide both normative guidance and institutional support. Participation in international peer-review mechanisms, such as those coordinated by the *Group of States against Corruption* (GRECO), of Council of Europe and the *European Commission for Democracy through Law* (Venice Commission), offers a means to enhance transparency, encourage compliance with democratic standards, and invite constructive external scrutiny.

Democracy in Greece is not collapsing, but it seems to be hollowing. Without coordinated reforms to further enhance civil liberties, strengthen institutions, and revitalize civic life to a higher degree, what may be perceived as a possible slow erosion of liberal democracy could become entrenched. The V-Dem data leaves no ambiguity: Greece stands at a crossroad. Through rights-based reforms, democratic renewal, and a genuine commitment to pluralism, it can once again become a leading case of democratic resilience in Europe.

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