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Holding the Line: Civil Society and Democratic Decline in Greece

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Since coming to power in 2019, Kyriakos Mitsotakis's conservative government has overseen an illiberal turn, largely unchallenged by a divided opposition and a compliant mainstream media. Civil society organisations have stepped up to fill that gap – but at considerable cost. Whether they can sustain that role will depend on stronger public participation and structural support.

For many Europeans, democratic backsliding is no longer something that happens elsewhere. In V-Dem's Democracy Report 2026, five European countries – Croatia, Italy, Slovakia, Slovenia, and the UK – have been added to the list of autocratisers. Greece, on the other hand, has been on this list for several years: its episode of democratic decline, ranking seventh globally in terms of the magnitude of democratic deterioration, began in 2020. The country remains an electoral democracy, but it has lost its status as a liberal democracy, and its trajectory has been consistently downward.

While Greece's democratic decline is clearly part of a larger wave, what makes it distinctive is the speed and the method with which it's unfolding. The fact that it's happening inside the European Union, in a country that had, within living memory, emerged from a military dictatorship, makes it particularly concerning.

Democratically unravelling a democracy

In July 2019, Kyriakos Mitsotakis and his centre-right party *Nea Dimokratia* ("New Democracy") won a strong parliamentary majority and unseated left-wing Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, who had been in power since 2015. Among the first pieces of legislation the new government passed was the so-called Executive State ("*Epiteliko Kratos*"), which placed the National Intelligence Service, the EYP, under the direct control of the Prime Minister's Office. Political oversight of the EYP was handed to the PM's Secretary General and nephew, Grigoris Dimitriadis. At the same time, the government quietly amended the qualification requirements for the head of the EYP, removing the prerequisite of holding a university degree – a change widely seen as tailor-made to allow the appointment of Panagiotis Kontoleon.

Meanwhile, the public broadcaster ERT, along with the national press agency AMNA, was also brought under tighter government control, while independent auditing bodies, such as the General Inspector of Public Administration, were disbanded.

None of this was hidden. It was done through legislation, in plain sight, with an outright parliamentary majority that made institutional opposition powerless. The mainstream media, owned by a handful of oligarchs with conspicuous ties to the ruling party, looked the other way.

The Covid-19 pandemic handed the government another opportunity to centralise power. The distribution of public health state advertising funds to media outlets through a scheme that became known as the "Petsas list" made visible a system of government influence over the media that had until then been less openly discussed. Public money was flowing to outlets that were sympathetic to the

government; outlets that were critical received disproportionately smaller amounts and in some cases nothing at all. No law was broken, but the effect on a media landscape, already strained by the economic crisis, was significant.

Then came a spying scandal. In 2022, it emerged that a powerful spyware called Predator had been used to monitor opposition politicians, journalists, senior military figures, and even government ministers. The Hellenic Data Protection Authority (DPA) eventually confirmed that at least 87 individuals had been illegally targeted with this spyware, and 27 of them had also been simultaneously monitored by the EYP through legal channels. Dimitriadis resigned, and so did the head of the EYP, but Mitsotakis denied knowledge. Two prosecutors who had been tasked with investigating the case were removed from it after submitting a second formal request for information to the DPA. In February 2026, four executives involved in supplying Predator were convicted in connection with the scandal. No government official has been charged to this day.

The Predator affair was not simply a surveillance scandal, but a stress test that revealed the full architecture of a system in construction since 2019: an intelligence service with no meaningful independence from the executive, a media landscape too compromised to perform serious scrutiny, a parliamentary majority capable of rewriting inconvenient rules on short notice, and a justice system whose handling of these and other landmark cases left open questions that remain, to date, publicly unanswered.

In February 2024, the European Parliament adopted its first-ever resolution on Greece, citing grave concerns about threats to democracy, the rule of law, and fundamental rights. That it took EU institutions five years and a major spying scandal to react tells its own story about the limits of European oversight.

By then, the question was no longer whether Greek democracy was under pressure – that much was settled – but who, if anyone, was actually doing the work of accountability that formal institutions had either abandoned or been stripped of the capacity to perform.

The state pushes back

History has taught that governments that capture institutions rarely stop there. Once the formal mechanisms of oversight have been hollowed out, the next target is whoever has taken up the slack. Greece has been no exception: as a small ecosystem of civil society organisations (CSOs) and independent journalists grew more visible and more effective at holding power to account, the state responded by exerting pressure to make their work as difficult as possible.

Some of that pressure has worn the face of bureaucratic procedure. The NGO registry created in 2020 by the Ministry of Migration and Asylum, presented as a transparency measure, became in practice an instrument of selective exclusion. Refugee Support Aegean, one of the most established legal aid organisations working with refugees and asylum seekers in the country, was denied registration despite meeting all legal requirements, on the stated grounds that providing support to persons facing deportation orders contradicted Greek law. Even though the right to legal representation for persons facing deportation is enshrined in Greek, EU, and international law, the rejection stood. It was overturned before the Council of State. Whether intended or not, the message to other organisations operating in the same space was clear.

In early 2026 the Migration Ministry pushed further still, passing amendments to the Migration Code that elevated routine humanitarian work – such as providing food, shelter, or assistance to migrants – to a

serious criminal offence. Membership of a registered NGO is now considered an aggravating circumstance. The proposals were introduced days after 24 humanitarian workers in Mytilene, on the island of Lesbos, had been acquitted of charges they had spent eight years fighting. Five years of formal recommendations from the EU, the Council of Europe, and the UN, all calling on Greece to lift arbitrary restrictions on civil society in the migration field, had apparently registered as a reason to accelerate, not reverse, the squeeze.

Legal intimidation has reached well beyond the migration sector. When journalists at *Reporters United* and *Efimerida ton Syntakton* ("The Editors' Journal") published their investigations into the Predator scandal, and specifically the role played by Grigoris Dimitriadis as the one who held political oversight of the EYP, the response came on the same day as Dimitriadis's resignation: a lawsuit demanding close to one million euros in damages from the journalists and their outlets. International press freedom bodies were unambiguous in their characterisation of the action as a Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation (SLAPP), aimed not at winning in court but at putting economic strain, stress, and uncertainty on independent media. In 2025, after years of proceedings, an Athens court dismissed the case entirely, ruling the reporting accurate and finding nothing defamatory in any of the articles.

The more insidious form of pressure has been reputational. In early 2026, Vouliwatch (a democracy watchdog organisation I co-founded) and the investigative outlet *Solomon* published the "Consultocracy Report", a systematic study of the Greek public administration's use of private consultancy services, built entirely from official public procurement data. The findings were concerning: a dramatic rise in contracts, the majority of which were awarded without competitive tendering, and documented cases of private consultancy firms involved in drafting legislation. The government chose not to engage with the report. Instead, at an official press briefing, government spokesperson Pavlos Marinakis made false claims about the report's methodology and insinuated, also falsely, that Vouliwatch was politically motivated and funded by the European Left.

Publicly discrediting CSOs and journalists that challenge the dominant narrative, question policies, and shed light on political scandals has been a recurrent tactic of the Mitsotakis government over the past years. The prime minister himself has publicly attacked journalists during speeches in parliament and press briefings, while ministers have repeatedly questioned the integrity of well-established international organisations such as Reporters Without Borders and Amnesty International.

Taken individually, each of these tactics – registry exclusions, criminal law amendments, SLAPP litigation, public smear campaigns – might be dismissed as isolated incidents of overreach. Taken together, they point to something more deliberate: an environment in which accountability work is made increasingly costly, legally fraught, professionally risky, and personally draining. The goal of all this is not necessarily to destroy the organisations in question, but to ensure that the cost of scrutiny is high enough to deter the next investigation, the next campaign, the next report that asks uncomfortable questions.

Civil society on the front line

Against this backdrop of chronic underfunding, legal harassment, and coordinated public delegitimisation, something unexpected has happened: the civil society ecosystem has held and, in some respects, even grown.

This is not a given, Greek civil society as we know it today is young. Much of it emerged directly from the

wreckage of the financial crisis, built by people who watched the formal political system fail catastrophically and decided, for various reasons, to try a different approach. These organisations were never well-resourced. They have always been viewed with suspicion rather than respect: in Greece, the concept of an independent, non-partisan civic sector sits uncomfortably against a political culture in which virtually every collective endeavour has traditionally been understood through a partisan lens.

State funding is either unavailable or comes with obvious strings attached. Domestic philanthropy remains thin, while international foundations rarely take notice of Greece. The EU project funding that sustains much of the sector is a lifeline but comes at a heavy cost: it requires staff to spend significant proportions of their time on compliance bureaucracy and deliverables that, more often than not, have little to do with the purpose that brought them into the sector in the first place.

What Greek CSOs have achieved despite these constraints is worth taking seriously. In the years since democratic backsliding accelerated, together with independent journalism outlets , CSOs have fulfilled a role that formal democratic institutions have been either unwilling or unable to perform. They have monitored government practices, pursued freedom of information requests that ministries ignored, and taken legal action when they were ignored. They produced investigative work on the Predator scandal, on the Petsas list, on the concentration of media ownership, on procurement irregularities, on pushbacks at sea – work that was subsequently picked up by European institutions, informing resolutions, rule of law reports, and parliamentary inquiries.

They have reported Greece's situation to EU bodies not because they expected immediate countermeasures, but because building a documented, evidenced record of what is happening counts as accountability work in a context where domestic channels are blocked. The personal cost of this work has been real and is not discussed enough. Staff in these organisations are, with very few exceptions, overworked and underpaid. They have been targets of coordinated social media harassment. Some have faced SLAPP litigation that drags on for years even when it ultimately fails. Many have been named in government press briefings, dismissed by ministers, characterised as foreign agents or partisan operatives in oligarch-owned media. Operating under these conditions requires a particular kind of stubbornness that should not be romanticised. Burnout is endemic, and the sector is bound to lose good people and repel new entries as these adverse conditions persist.

Unfinished business

What has changed – and this may be the most significant development of recent years – is that these organisations have started to work together. In the Greek context, such collaboration is harder than it sounds: fragmentation and competitive individualism are deeply rooted cultural tendencies that civil society has reproduced faithfully. The reflex to guard organisational territory, to duplicate rather than collaborate, to approach partnership with wariness: while these barriers are not unique to Greece, they have been particularly pronounced here.

But something has shifted. Joint investigations, shared advocacy campaigns, coordinated submissions to European institutions, and co-signed public statements have become the norm. Through this cooperation, a closely knit community has formed, held together not by formal structure but by a shared understanding of what is at stake and, frankly, by the practical recognition that no single organisation is large enough to do this work alone.

Importantly, this collaboration has not remained entirely confined to the civic sector. The work of CSOs has resonated with broader segments of society, particularly younger people who have grown up amid

overlapping crises and whose trust in political institutions is often fragile or absent altogether. For many, these initiatives increasingly function less as traditional civil society and more as visible demonstrations that public participation, democratic accountability, and the defence of rights are not abstract ideals delegated to institutions, but collective responsibilities that citizens themselves can exercise.

That may ultimately prove to be the decisive terrain. Authoritarian tendencies do not consolidate only by weakening organisations; they consolidate when societies become convinced that collective action is futile. In that sense, it could be argued that the state's various harassment strategies are aimed not only at exhausting individual organisations, but at fracturing the fragile sense of civic possibility that has begun to emerge around them. So far, they have not succeeded.

Greece's civic sector has demonstrated, under pressure, that it is capable of doing things that matter. What is still lacking is the structural backing that would allow it to do those things sustainably, without relying indefinitely on individuals' willingness to absorb costs that institutions should not be asking them to bear.

That is the unfinished business. And it's a European question as much as a Greek one.

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