

Political Studies Association

Greek Politics

Political Lessons From Greece

A Case of Unlikely Democratic Resilience

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Executive Summary

Greece's experience demonstrates that democratic systems can endure even the most severe and prolonged crises. Drawing on discussions from the symposium *Political Lessons from Greece: A Case of Unlikely Democratic Resilience*, this policy brief presents core findings on how democracies adapt under constraint and what supports long-term institutional resilience.

Core findings

- Democratic continuity was maintained despite deep austerity, political polarisation, and social dislocation. Greece avoided democratic breakdown even under unprecedented external constraint.
- Economic and welfare reforms were extensive and stabilising, particularly in fiscal governance and pensions, but were largely implemented through top-down and externally driven processes with limited domestic ownership.
- Recovery has been real but uneven. Macroeconomic stability and credibility have improved, yet structural weaknesses persist, including low productivity, labour-market precarity, housing pressures, and enduring inequalities.
- State capacity increased, particularly through stronger executive coordination, but in ways that raise concerns about democratic oversight, accountability, and trust.
- European crisis governance evolved over time. Early punitive and austerity-focused responses imposed high social and legitimacy costs, while later solidarity-based approaches (e.g. during COVID-19) proved more politically sustainable.
- Institutional and legal progress often outpaced social change, notably in gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights, creating tensions between formal reform and societal attitudes.

Policy Lessons FOR Greece

- Resilience should be assessed substantially, not symbolically. Democratic endurance must be evaluated in terms of inclusion, trust, and long-term capacity, not only institutional survival.
- Austerity is a political project, not merely a technical tool. Its design and sequencing shape democratic legitimacy, social cohesion, and future reform capacity.
- Crises accumulate rather than occur in isolation. Democratic systems must be prepared for overlapping economic, social, security, and environmental shocks.
- State capacity and democratic accountability must advance together, strengthening executive coordination without robust oversight risks eroding democratic quality.
- External actors can catalyse reform, but cannot substitute for domestic political leadership. Sustainable change requires societal ownership and credible long-term vision.

Policy Lessons FROM Greece

For national governments, EU institutions, and democracy practitioners managing prolonged and overlapping crises, the following policy recommendations arise from the Greek case:

- Combine fiscal adjustment with social investment, labour market activation, and institutional trust-building.
- Design crisis responses that prioritise fair burden-sharing and transparency to sustain democratic legitimacy.
- Pair state capacity reforms with strengthened parliamentary oversight and independent accountability mechanisms.
- Treat democratic resilience as an ongoing process, not an endpoint, requiring continuous monitoring and adaptation.
- Create institutional space for learning between crises, rather than moving rapidly from one emergency to the next.

Intro

This policy brief presents key insights and policy-relevant lessons from the symposium *Political Lessons from Greece: A Case of Unlikely Democratic Resilience*, organised by the Peaceful, Secure and Empowered Societies (PSES) Interdisciplinary Research Theme at the University of Glasgow in collaboration with the Greek Politics Specialist Group (GPSG) of the Political Studies Association (PSA), and held at the University of Glasgow on 19 January 2026. The symposium featured a keynote address by George A. Papandreou and brought together scholars and practitioners to examine how Greece's democratic system has endured prolonged crisis and what this experience reveals about democratic resilience more broadly. This brief is intended for policymakers, scholars, and practitioners interested in democratic resilience, crisis governance, and political reform, and is structured around four thematic sections reflecting the symposium's guiding questions: conditions at the onset of Greece's crisis; patterns of resilience, learning, and adaptation; remaining challenges and missed opportunities; and comparative lessons for other countries. The event was co-sponsored by the Political Studies Association (PSA), via the Excellence and Impact Fund, and the University of Glasgow.

Keynote Speech by George A. Papandreou

(Member of the Hellenic Parliament, Former Prime Minister of Greece [2009–2011], Rapporteur for Democracy at the Council of Europe)

Papandreou emphasised that financial crises are ultimately crises of trust between citizens and the state, among social groups, and between countries. Transparency, accountability, and good governance are not optional; they are core to economic stability and democratic resilience. Fair burden-sharing, social dialogue, and inclusive reform processes strengthen legitimacy, reduce polarisation, and enhance resilience. At the European level, the key challenge is collective action. Europe has the tools, but often lacks the decisiveness to deploy them effectively.

Policy Implications:

- Crisis communication must rebuild dignity and trust, not only explain economic measures.
- EU conditionality should balance fiscal requirements with inclusive, transparent reform processes to maintain legitimacy.
- Social compensation mechanisms are essential to mitigate the human and social costs of austerity.

Papandreou reflected on the Greek crisis as more than a financial shock—it was a profound crisis of dignity, trust, and democratic governance. Economic collapse undermined citizens' sense of agency, belonging, and pride. Democratic resilience, he argued, depends as much on restoring fairness and social cohesion as on fiscal stability. He highlighted Greece's recovery: restored macroeconomic stability, renewed investor confidence, growth exceeding the euro area average, reduced unemployment, improved public finances, and repaired banking. Politically, successive governments have recognised that reforms require long-term commitment. At the same time, he critically assessed crisis management: inherited structural weaknesses (weak administrative capacity, corruption, entrenched clientelism) made restoring trust harder than restoring fiscal balances. Early European responses often prioritised moralising and punishment over problem-solving, which deepened social and economic costs. Papandreou also noted ongoing structural challenges: low productivity, limited innovation, dependence on consumption, tourism, and real estate, rising living costs, and uneven access to public services. Without stronger investment in skills, innovation, and high-value sectors, Greece risks returning to low-wage, low-productivity growth.

Panel 1: Crisis Management and Economic Governance: Greece in Comparative Perspective

Panel 1 examined Greece's crisis in comparative perspective, focusing on how fiscal and welfare reforms reshaped the state and how the welfare system adapted under prolonged pressure. Greece's adjustment was not only economic but a profound institutional and political transformation. Lessons for future crises include combining urgent fiscal adjustment with long-term social investment, ensuring reforms are inclusive, transparent, and locally owned, and prioritising trust, communication, and labour market support. Policies imposed externally or without societal ownership should be avoided, as they risk shallow, reversible reforms. Preparing proactively for overlapping economic, demographic, and environmental shocks strengthens resilience and safeguards long-term social cohesion and democratic legitimacy.

Overall Panel Takeaways

What Greece did well

- Implemented large-scale fiscal and social reforms under extreme vulnerability, stabilising the welfare state and pensions.
- Corrected key distortions in social policy and distributed austerity costs progressively.
- Maintained democratic continuity and demonstrated institutional adaptation under intense external constraints.

What Greece did less well

- Having entered the crisis with high debt and twin deficits, translated into limited flexibility.
- Reforms were top-down, externally driven, and focused on repairing existing institutions rather than building future-oriented systems.
- Labour market activation policies remain underdeveloped, leaving reforms vulnerable to backtracking.
- Prolonged austerity intensified emigration, inequality, and political apathy.

Lessons for other countries

- National context and policy choices shape crisis outcomes; austerity is both economic and political.
- Combine fiscal adjustment with social investment, labour market activation, and inclusive, locally owned reforms.
- Pension and welfare reform should form part of coherent, long-term social strategies.
- Prepare for overlapping shocks (economic, demographic, environmental, security) to maintain democratic resilience, trust, and legitimacy.

Key Takeaways from Individual Speakers

Dr Maha Rafi Atal and Dr Franziska Paul (PEFF, University of Glasgow) highlighted that Greece entered the crisis in a uniquely vulnerable position, with debt rising from 120% of GDP in 2000 to roughly 180% by 2013, and faced the deepest and most prolonged austerity among the "PIIGS" countries. They emphasised that similar European-level frameworks produced divergent national outcomes, showing that austerity is not only an economic strategy but also a political project reshaping governance, welfare institutions, and democratic life. Professor Panayiotis Tsakloglou (Athens University of Economics and Business) noted that Greece implemented extensive social and fiscal reforms, particularly pension restructuring, which stabilised the welfare state and distributed austerity costs progressively, though labour market activation policies for younger generations remain underdeveloped. Professor Platon Tinios (University of Piraeus) argued that reforms were largely top-down, externally driven, and focused on repairing existing institutions rather than creating future-oriented systems, leaving them vulnerable to backtracking. Together, their analyses suggest that while crises are costly, they can create opportunities for necessary reform if political will is sustained and populist pressures are resisted.

Panel 2: Greece in Europe and the World: Security, Identity, and Collective Action

Panel 2 examined how Greece's economic crisis intersected with European integration, security policy, and external alignments, reshaping its position within the EU and the international system. Speakers explored EU crisis governance, the evolution of Greek security and foreign policy, and long-term shifts in societal and party attitudes toward the United States. The discussions highlighted a key tension: while Europeanisation and external support strengthened Greece's security resilience and capacity to manage crises, they also limited domestic autonomy and, in some cases, generated perceptions of coercion, constraining democratic legitimacy. Overall, the contributions showed that effective crisis management requires balancing external assistance with national ownership to maintain both security and citizen trust.

Overall Panel Takeaways

What Greece did well

- Maintained geopolitical reliability despite severe domestic strain.
- Gradually modernised and broadened its understanding of national security.
- Adapted foreign policy toward pragmatic engagement with the EU, NATO, and the US.
- Demonstrated societal capacity to recalibrate external orientations over time.

What Greece did less well

- Crisis-era Europeanisation was often perceived as coercive, undermining domestic legitimacy.
- Security-sector reforms remain uneven and require deeper institutional consolidation.
- Long-term strategic planning in foreign and security policy remains underdeveloped.

Lessons for other countries

- Geopolitical relevance can create protective incentives for international support during crises.
- Austerity-focused crisis management carries lasting social and legitimacy costs.
- Solidarity-based, collective EU responses are more politically sustainable than punitive approaches.
- Broadening security thinking beyond military threats strengthens resilience.

Key Takeaways from Individual Speakers

Professor Othon Anastasakis (University of Oxford) highlighted the EU's unified handling of Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic, showing that collective European action can enhance resilience but often at the cost of long-term strategic planning and domestic legitimacy. Professor Panayotis Tsakonas (National and Kapodistrian University of Athens) emphasised Greece's enduring geopolitical importance, noting that the crisis accelerated the Europeanisation of Greek foreign and security policy, which was sometimes perceived domestically as externally imposed, and stressed the need for ongoing security capacity-building. Dr. Lamprini Rori (National and Kapodistrian University of Athens) and Dr. Eirini Karamouzi (University of Sheffield) traced the decline of anti-Americanism in party politics and public opinion, showing that criticism during the crisis focused more on the EU and IMF, indicating that Greek society has gradually developed the capacity to reassess and recalibrate external alignments over time.

Panel 3: Democracy under Strain: Rights, Trust, and Institutional Change

Panel 3 discussed how Greek democracy has expanded rights and state capacity while simultaneously narrowing trust and oversight. The panel examined how long-term social change, rights-based reforms, and transformations in executive governance have reshaped post-crisis Greek democracy. Drawing on political economy, family and constitutional law, and legislative studies, speakers explored gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights, and the evolving architecture of executive power. Collectively, the contributions highlighted a central paradox: institutional advances in equality and capacity have often outpaced social attitudes, generating tensions around legitimacy, implementation, and democratic oversight.

Overall Panel Takeaways

What Greece did well

- Introduced advanced legal frameworks on gender equality and expanded women's participation in education and the labour market, even though from a historically low starting point.
- Enacted landmark family law reforms, including legal recognition of same-sex marriage and strengthened rights for LGBTQ+ couples.
- Improved coordination and capacity at the centre of government, enabling more effective crisis management (e.g. during COVID-19 and EU monitoring).

What Greece did less well

- Failed to ensure that legal and institutional reforms were matched by deep societal change, particularly regarding gender roles and equality norms.
- Persistent gender pay gaps, unequal care burdens, and fragile progress in attitudes toward equality.
- Centralisation of executive power has weakened democratic checks and balances.
- Ongoing concerns over surveillance, limited parliamentary oversight, and pressures on independent authorities and the judiciary.

Lessons for other countries

- Legal reform must be accompanied by long-term cultural and social change to produce lasting equality.
- Strengthening state capacity should always be paired with robust accountability and oversight mechanisms.
- External actors (e.g. courts, international organisations) can catalyse reform, but domestic political leadership is essential.
- Democratic resilience requires constant balancing between efficiency and pluralism.
- Crises can be opportunities for progressive change, but they also create risks of power concentration and democratic backsliding.

Key Takeaways from Individual Speakers

Professor Antigone Lyberaki (Panteion University) showed that Greece advanced gender equality legally and in women's labour-market participation, yet cultural norms lagged, highlighting the need for sustained investment in education, care infrastructure, and social change. Professor Dimitris A. Sotiropoulos (National and Kapodistrian University of Athens) emphasised that the economic crisis sharply eroded trust in political institutions, revealing that procedural resilience alone does not guarantee high-quality democracy; rebuilding trust requires transparency, accountability, and effective public services. Professor Katerina Fountedaki (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki) traced the path to marriage equality for same-sex couples, demonstrating how judicial pressure, political will, and sustained advocacy enabled landmark reforms even in a conservative context. Professor Dimitris Papadimitriou (University of Manchester) highlighted the expansion of executive capacity through the "executive state," improving coordination and crisis management, but warned that strengthened state power without robust checks risks undermining democratic oversight.

Conclusion: Cross-cutting Policy Lessons from Greece

Greece's experience shows that democracies can endure very high pressure, but resilience is fragile without trust, inclusion, and long-term capacity-building. Lessons from the crisis decade include: crisis governance without trust is unsustainable; state capacity gains must be constitutionally anchored; and, social investment matters as much as fiscal discipline. For policymakers, this means balancing urgent reforms with building institutions that are inclusive, accountable, and sustainable. Greece offers a unique perspective on how democratic systems can adapt and survive under prolonged stress.

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