**Greek elections: Three fundamental contradictions in the country’s path towards political “normalcy”**

For a country long inured to hardship and crisis management, the upcoming election taking place in Greece on May 21st feels like a transition back to “normal”. Gone are the extraordinary conditions of supervision and oversight by the troika of international lenders that followed the country’s devastating sovereign debt and financial crisis that began in 2009–2010. Equally gone is the constant bombardment of negative headlines and features in international media that dominated Greek politics for the better part of the last decade.

Instead, this electoral cycle is so far marked by a return to more familiar, with the gradual reappearance of traditional policy cleavages between the left and the right and an electorate eager to move past the kind of crisis-stricken politics that defined the country’s political life for the last ten years.

So, what to make of May 21st?

The overall impression is that the election finds the country in a more “mundane”, less existential moment than in previous election cycles, having come a long way from its crisis days. But these steps towards political “normalcy” cannot hide the inherent contradictions Greece still suffers from, with deeply embedded pathologies posing risks for its long-term stability and progress.

*The economy*

The economy exemplifies these contradictions in the clearest way; it is the central campaign issue between the governing, center-right New Democracy, which won by a landslide in the last legislative elections in 2019, and the left-wing Syriza, the leading opposition party, which steered the country’s fortunes for four-and-a-half years before that.

Triumphalist articles in the international [press](https://www.economist.com/finance-and-economics/2022/12/18/2022s-unlikely-economic-winners) that deem the country the economic winner of 2022 have aligned with the government’s narrative that the Greek economy is doing much better than in 2019 and is propelled forward by tailwinds; the country is faring relatively well in terms of gross domestic product (GDP) growth as well as public debt as a percentage of GDP, the budget returned to a [primary surplus](https://www.naftemporiki.gr/english/1463277/greek-budget-records-primary-surplus-in-2022/) last year, and there is wide [expectation](https://www.ft.com/content/1a568ff6-41ef-4dfe-8bcf-2137eeeb405b) that Athens will achieve investment grade status soon if the current framework of fiscal policies persists. This does present an impressive turnaround for a nation that spent years essentially as Europe’s pariah of economic and fiscal irresponsibility.

Marring this perspective, though, more sober analyses point to several negative trends. A part of the statistical picture refutes the government's message of accomplishment; inflation remains [high](https://www.ekathimerini.com/economy/1210697/food-still-costly-but-prise-rises-easing/), and in terms of the of GDP per capita, Greece [ranks](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Purchasing_power_parities_and_GDP_per_capita_-_flash_estimate#Overview) third to last among the 27 EU member states, only ahead of Bulgaria and Slovakia. Furthermore, Greece remains a land of cheap labor, with low wages but comparatively high prices. The resulting web of inequalities has been a central point in the opposition’s [criticism](https://www.amna.gr/en/article/694596/Generalised-feeling-of-injustice-and-widening-inequalities--Tsipras-says) of the government’s actions and policy philosophy. It has also been a cause of the widespread frustration, especially among the middle classes, whose electoral support Syriza and the other parties in the opposition are hoping for.

Whether voters will be swayed by the more positive or negative readings on the economy remains to be seen, but this inherent contradiction between optimistic signs and lingering risks will need to be urgently resolved by the next government—whomever they may be.

*Democracy*

A second, perhaps even more contradictory, domain is the domestic political situation relating to rule of law matters. According to the Economist Intelligence Unit's [2022 Democracy Index](https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2022)*,* Greece, the “birthplace of democracy”, is still listed in the “flawed democracy” category; however, it has shown remarkable resilience and climbed nine places in the rankings, from 34th place to 25th among the 167 countries analyzed. At the same time, the report authors argue that democracy in Greece is backsliding, especially in relation to freedom of press, pointing to evidence that suggests “that journalists are not free to investigate uncomfortable truths”. This perception was seconded by the 2023 World Press Freedom Index report of Reporters Without Borders which, once again, [positioned](https://www.politico.eu/article/greece-worst-eu-country-press-freedom-report/) Greece as the lowest-ranking country in the EU.

What is more, a scandal that erupted in August 2022, when it was [revealed](file:///C:\Users\VassilisNtousas\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\INetCache\Content.Outlook\M4NKORY0\In%20August%202022,%20for%20example,%20reporting%20revealed%20that%20the%20Greek%20intelligence%20services%20had%20%20tapped%20the%20mobile%20phone%20of%20a%20top%20opposition%20politician,) that the Greek intelligence services had tapped the mobile phone of a top opposition politician fuelled further any concerns that existed over rule of law issues. The scandal expectedly [enraged](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/27/kyriakos-mitsotakis-greek-pm-survives-confidence-vote-but-phone-tapping-scandal-rumbles-on) the opposition and led to accusations of serious erosion of democratic standards, but the government tried to defend its record and rectify the situation by introducing new legislative safeguards that would underpin the secret service’s work.

And while several senior officials lost their jobs in its aftermath, this convoluted affair was neither sufficiently explained nor legally resolved, casting a long shadow on Greece’s (self-) perception of democratic performance. Here too, then, the country’s mixed record in the last few years is another domain that elevates the importance of what is at stake in this election, and it serves as one more reason why this election matters in addressing the adverse dynamics currently in place.

*State modernization*

In the same vein, a third contradictory factor ahead of the May 21st election concerns the country’s efforts to modernize the state. Take the digital domain for example. The current government has rightfully garnered positive coverage [internationally](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-greece-modernisation-idUSKBN2AP204) and genuine approval domestically for the leaps forward taken when it comes to the state’s digital transformation. Yet, as a stunning juxtaposition to these positive steps, the country experienced in February 2023 its worst ever [train crash](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/mar/08/greece-has-derailed-tens-of-thousands-of-protesters-rage-over-train-disaster), claiming the lives of 57 mostly young travelers, when a [combination](https://www.brusselstimes.com/473158/investigation-blames-greek-train-crash-on-human-factor-and-negligence-in-using-eu-funding) of human errors and a lack of basic technological equipment led two trains travelling in opposite directions to tragically end up on the same track. This became a rallying cry for the opposition in terms of exposing governmental inefficiencies, and Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis [reacted](https://www.ot.gr/2023/03/09/english-edition/mitsotakis-we-are-all-to-blame-but-the-tragedy-happened-with-us-at-the-helm-of-the-country/) with a partial admission of guilt: “We are all to blame” he said, accepting the ruling party’s share of responsibility, while also apportioning some blame to previous governments, given that problems relating to the country’s railways spanned decades.

While the damning impact of the tragedy on the government’s polling has largely receded, the fact that this happened does stand out as a symbol of the systemic failure of the Greek state. Further, it revealed a network of nepotism, incompetence, and lack of accountability that reflects in stark, unforgiving terms the distance that remains to be covered for the country and therefore for the next government to fix its many ills.

*The difficult road forward*

The magnitude of the three key contradictions analyzed here reveals deeper problems in how the Greek economy, democracy, and state function that go far past the narrative clash between governing and opposition forces that is to be expected and welcomed in every competitive democratic election. Whichever government is ultimately formed following the May 21st election will need to urgently tackle these problems. Otherwise, they risk jeopardizing the country’s slow but steady path towards greater political “normalcy”.

*Dr Ronald Meinardus, Senior Research Fellow; Head of the Mediterranean Program, ELIAMEP*

*Vassilis Ntousas, Head of European Operations, Alliance for Securing Democracy at GMF*