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The abandoned agora

Greek democracy has been in decline since long before the economic crisis

When the economic crisis hit Greece, the country's elected government and parliament were forced to adapt to economic constraints, while the Greek people watched in surprise. Through three economic adjustment programmes, agreed between Greece and its creditors in 2010, 2012 and 2015, the Greek government would receive tranches of financial aid, provided that it would implement reforms in the fiscal management of the state, pensions, incomes, labour relations, market competition, and public administration. Policies were taken away from the hands of elected government and passed on to the 'Troika', namely the representatives of the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

The consequences of grave economic crisis and rather dizzying crisis management were manifold, including a sharp decline in voter turnout (from 74 per cent in the elections of September 2007 to 56 per cent in the elections of September 2015), political instability (five general parliamentary elections in 6 years, 2009-2015) and the rise of political radicalism on all sides of the political spectrum.

These developments may have given the impression that democracy in Greece was attacked by the economic crisis and the way in which the European Union (EU) handled the crisis. But in fact, democracy in Greece was ailing long before the crisis erupted. Long-term legacies of political clientelism, populism and corruption have negatively impacted democracy and, astonishingly enough, continue to do so to this day.

The populists vs the media

While we know that populists thrive on pitting the people against an oligarchy or establishment, we rarely talk about the behaviour of populists after their ascent to power. Once in government populists employ the same inflammatory political discourse against institutions, such as the judiciary, civic associations and mass media. The latter in particular is a favourable populist target. But in Greece, the media were

targeted regardless of whether populists were in power or not.

Until the late 1980s, only state-owned, i.e. government-controlled, TV and radio stations were officially allowed in Greece. The opening up of the media system had been delayed by successive governments of ND and Pasok. Both parties, albeit protagonists in the consolidation of Greek democracy, exhibited disquieting intolerance towards pluralism in the media. After the state monopoly over TV and radio stations was finally cancelled, privately-owned TV and radio stations mushroomed, but the ND and Pasok governments neglected to regulate the media sector. Later on populists found an opportunity to intervene.

While they justifiably set out to regulate the mass media sector, they ended up trying to restrict freedom of the press: in 2016 the radical left/nationalist right coalition government of Syriza/Anel made an ill-conceived attempt to control the media. The government passed a law to restrict the number of private TV channels to just four. The attempt was soon aborted by a decision of Greece's highest administrative court, but the damage to the democratic credentials of the government was obvious.

Political clientelism has wrecked Greece's democracy

Greece's image has been tarnished for a long time, as it's perceived to be more corrupt than other countries. But with regard to controlling corruption in 2007 Greece fared better than 61 per cent of all countries ranked by the World Bank. In 2016 however, that number shrank to only 56 per cent.

A more useful indicator for corruption is the extent to which people themselves perceive corruption as an acceptable element in their interaction with the public administration. In an EU-wide survey conducted in 2013, sampled citizens of EU Member-States were asked whether it is acceptable to a) to give a gift and b) to give money, if they wanted to get something from the public administration. Among Greek respondents, 42 per cent replied that it is acceptable to give a gift (the EU-27 average was 23 percent) and 24 per cent replied that it is acceptable to give money (the EU-27 average was 16 percent). This can be best understood through the way clientelism works in Greece. It typically involves 'mutual accommodation': voters support a candidate instead of another one and, in exchange, receive preferential treatment by public services which the patron, if elected in office, can influence. Examples of preferential treatment in Greece include obtaining quicker or better treatment in public hospitals, and transfers to convenient

military posts, during one's term in military service – which is compulsory for all Greek men. Of course, the most common example is preferential treatment of a political client if he or she applies for a public-sector job.

Clientelism has always been a pervasive phenomenon in modern Greek political history. Before the crisis hit, it was routinely practiced by the centre-right party of New Democracy (ND) and the centre-left Panhellenic Socialist Movement (Pasok) which alternated in power, forming successive single-majority party governments for almost four decades (1974-2011).

While the economic crisis negatively affected democracy in Greece after 2010, the crisis of democracy should, in the broader picture, be linked with long-standing patterns, namely political clientelism, populism and corruption.

In Greece's over-politicised public administration, clientelism flourished as government ministries appointed party cadres at managerial or advisory posts. ND and Pasok took turns to appoint their own people at posts of general and special secretaries of ministries, heads of state agencies, advisors to ministers and deputy ministers. Appointments were made on the basis of party loyalty instead of job experience or skill.

This trend continued under the crisis. There were a total of 1764 political appointees in April 2013. Their number fell down to 1233 in April 2015, only to rise again to 2501 in April 2018, a 30 per cent difference between 2013 and 2018.Clientelism was also pervasive in hiring temporary personnel, as employees were hand-picked by ministers or mayors, but also by politically appointed managers of state agencies. Employees were hired on fixed-term labour contracts or on a project-basis, while successive governments periodically granted civil service status to masses of employees initially hired on such contracts.

In April 2013 there were 58,390 temporary employees, by April 2018 their number increased to 83,636 employees. In other words, the practice of recruiting temporary personnel, without any entrance examinations or evaluation, has continued unabated, even after the derailment of Greece public finances in 2010. Young people have noticed and have voted with their feet: almost half a million, primarily young, mostly highly skilled Greeks left the country since the crisis erupted.

Where to go from here

While the economic crisis negatively affected democracy in Greece after 2010, the crisis of democracy should, in the broader picture, be linked with long-standing patterns, namely political clientelism, populism and corruption.

Political clientelism is a crude violation of political equality and equality before the law, as individuals have unequal and unpredictable access to state resources. Meanwhile false promises are given in pre-electoral periods by populists aspiring to govern, only to be reversed after their rise to power. Populism is also associated with attacks on democratic institutions, such as the mass media. All this contributes to large-scale disaffection from democracy. Corruption undermines two cornerstones of contemporary democracy, transparency and accountability.

It's difficult to battle such long-standing patterns. Multiple and parallel interventions are necessary in installing new control mechanisms in the government and public administration; to implement watertight processes in the interaction among parties, businesses and the mass media; and to upgrade the political education of Greek citizens, including politicians, businessmen, teachers, and journalists.

While the Greek economy may gradually recover, as the country exited the third economic adjustment programme in August 2018, the Greek democracy needs to travel a long way to counter the effects of long-term clientelism, populism and corruption. Reformers will have their hands full for decades to come.



Dimitri A. Sotiropoulos
Athens

Dimitri A. Sotiropoulos is Professor of Political Science at the University of Athens.