

Democratic Resilience Under Strain: Threats and Public Trust in Greece

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This study analyzes the threats to democracy in Greece and public trust in its defenders, based on data from Flash Eurobarometer 522. The threats are examined by their origin (internal and external), democratic dimensions, vulnerability approaches, and response capacity. The results indicate that disinformation (41.4%) and the lack of media freedom (35.0%) are the main challenges, while foreign interference (29.5%) and institutional distrust (23.7%) pose additional risks. Likewise, the study assesses trust in the actors protecting democracy, highlighting the high credibility of citizens (51.9%) and civil society organizations (46.3%), which evidences a preference for collective action over state institutions. Trust in EU institutions (45.3%) exceeds that placed in national governments, reflecting skepticism toward domestic political leadership. The study emphasizes the importance of strengthening information integrity, promoting institutional reforms, and fostering citizen participation to counteract threats and ensure democratic stability in a context of cultural and structural vulnerabilities. These findings provide valuable insights for designing public policies that enhance democratic resilience in times of crisis and promote inclusion.

Keywords: Democracy, disinformation, institutional trust, civil society, Greece

Introduction

Democracy, despite being a widely consolidated political system in many regions of the world, faces multiple threats that can weaken its institutions and fundamental principles. In recent years, a growing body of literature has examined these threats from both theoretical and empirical perspectives. This review explores the main theories and empirical studies that have identified and analyzed these challenges, including populism, institutional erosion, disinformation, and the retrenchment of civil rights. Populism has been identified as one of the major threats to democracy in the 21st century. According to Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017), populism is a thin-centered ideology that divides society into two antagonistic groups: the “pure people” and the “corrupt elite.” Populist leaders often undermine democratic institutions by adopting a plebiscitary vision of power, weakening checks and balances, and eroding judicial and legislative autonomy (Levitsky & Ziblatt 2018). Greece provides a particularly illustrative case of this phenomenon, as the economic crisis beginning in 2009 and the ensuing austerity measures created fertile ground for populist movements. The rise of SYRIZA, a radical leftist party, was largely driven by its anti-establishment rhetoric, positioning itself as the defender of “ordinary citizens” against externally imposed economic policies (Menegatti et al. 2023, Font et al. 2019). Emphasizing national sovereignty and social justice, SYRIZA capitalized on

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widespread public frustration with established elites, a trend also observed in Spain with Podemos and in Italy with the Five Star Movement (Andreadis & Stavrakakis 2017, Pappas 2020, Davidson & Enos 2024).

Cultural factors have further reinforced populist rhetoric in Greece, as anxieties about national identity and sovereignty played a crucial role in shaping public sentiment (Chryssogelos 2017, Capelos & Demertzis 2018). The Indignados protests and other grassroots movements exposed growing disillusionment with the political establishment and fueled SYRIZA's rise (Aslanidis 2016, Σιαπέρα & Theodosiadis 2017). However, once in power, SYRIZA had to reconcile its populist promises with EU demands, leading to a policy shift that disappointed many of its supporters (Maurer et al. 2019, Pappas 2020). This case underscores a broader European trend in which populist parties moderate their positions when transitioning from opposition to governance (Font et al. 2019). Ultimately, Greece exemplifies how populism exploits social and economic grievances, challenges democratic norms through anti-elite narratives, and fundamentally reshapes political landscapes (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, Fruncillo 2017, Levitsky & Ziblatt 2018). Another critical threat to democracy is institutional erosion, a process in which democratically elected governments gradually dismantle institutions that guarantee the separation of powers and the rule of law. The literature on competitive authoritarianism—such as the work of Levitsky and Way (2010)—suggests that democratic regimes can evolve into hybrid systems where elections remain formal but lack real competitiveness due to the manipulation of electoral rules and democratic norms. In Greece, institutional erosion has been a multifaceted phenomenon, shaped by the sovereign debt crisis that began in 2009. Domestic mismanagement combined with external pressures precipitated a spiraling debt crisis (Featherstone 2011, Akram et al. 2011), prompting the imposition of harsh austerity measures by the EU and IMF. These measures led to severe public spending cuts and weakened local governance capacities (Chardas 2014, Souliotis & Afouxenidis 2018).

The privatization of public services has been emblematic of Greece's neoliberal shift, justified as a response to the economic crisis. The waste management crisis in Athens, for example, was leveraged to legitimize the privatization of essential public services (Kallianos 2017). This shift not only signaled a departure from Greece's traditional welfare state but also exacerbated social inequalities and eroded public trust in government institutions. Furthermore, the crisis catalyzed democratic backsliding by concentrating power within the executive branch and undermining institutional checks and balances (Canes-Wrone et al. 2023). Endemic corruption and clientelism further diminished trust in political institutions, exacerbating democratic disillusionment (Vasilopoulou et al. 2013, Halikiopoulou & Vasilopoulou 2016, Papanikos 2022). Structural reforms under EU-imposed conditions also deepened regional inequalities, further eroding institutional legitimacy (Anastasiou & Theodosiou 2020, Mavridis 2018). The Greek case illustrates how external fiscal pressures, governance failures, and economic crises accelerate institutional erosion, weakening democratic norms and state integrity. The proliferation of fake news and disinformation on social media platforms has emerged as a significant threat to democracy, impacting public trust in institutions and exacerbating social polarization. Studies such as Tucker et al. (2018) highlight how digital platforms facilitate the rapid

spread of misinformation, distorting political discourse and electoral processes. In Greece, the unique socio-political landscape, combined with the rapid adoption of social media, has intensified this issue. Lamprou et al. (2021) note that the rise of crowdsourcing-based journalistic fact-checking models reflects a need for innovative communication strategies to counter misinformation, particularly in an environment where traditional media has faced criticism for shaping public perceptions (Patrona, 2018).

Health-related misinformation, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, further underscores the dangers of disinformation. Pulido et al. (2020) report that fabricated health information contributed to public anxiety and vaccine hesitancy, while Chou et al. (2018) argue that social media has facilitated the rapid spread of disinformation, undermining public health responses. Additionally, Karyotakis (2023) explains that fake news is weaponized to promote ideological narratives, reinforcing in-group/out-group dynamics and deepening societal divisions. Research by Grinberg et al. (2019) shows that fake news propagates differently from verified news, often spreading faster due to algorithms that prioritize engagement over accuracy (Kefalaki & Karanicolas 2023, Shu et al. 2020). Platform-level interventions, such as content flags and account restrictions, have been suggested as potential solutions (Ng et al. 2020), but their effectiveness remains limited without complementary media literacy initiatives (Barreto et al. 2021). Collectively, these findings highlight the urgent need for comprehensive strategies—combining technological, educational, and regulatory measures—to mitigate the impact of fake news and safeguard democratic discourse.

The retrenchment of civil rights and democratic freedoms in Greece has been a significant concern, particularly in the context of the financial crisis. This crisis not only imposed economic hardship but also contributed to a decline in democratic accountability and civil liberties. The influence of external creditors such as the EU, ECB, and IMF led to the establishment of a temporary technocratic government, sidelining elected officials and prioritizing creditor demands over public welfare (Cheliotis & Xenakis 2016). This phenomenon aligns with Diamond's (2019) concept of "democratic recession," where economic crises accelerate the erosion of political rights and civil liberties.

Austerity policies in Greece have been linked to increasing state repression, particularly targeting marginalized groups, political dissidents, and immigrants. The rise in policing, surveillance, and the criminalization of social protest has fostered a climate of fear, mirroring Diamond's (2019) observations on global democratic backsliding. Additionally, Greece's pushback policies at its borders exemplify this trend, as migrants are forcibly returned without due process, violating international human rights protections (Reißig 2022). The December 2008 protests following the police killing of a teenager further highlight the state's repressive tendencies. The mass arrests and excessive force used against demonstrators set a precedent for future crackdowns on dissent (Sakellaropoulos 2012). The ongoing struggle for civil rights in Greece underscores the challenges posed by economic crises and authoritarian governance in maintaining democratic freedoms.

Data and Design

The research explores the challenges that democracies face according to public opinion, as well as the actors in whom people trust to defend them. The analysis is based on data from the Flash Eurobarometer 522 (Democracy), a study commissioned by the European Commission through the Directorate-General for Communication (Media Monitoring and Eurobarometer) and administered by GESIS in Cologne (ZA7982, version 1.1.0). This barometer is part of a series of surveys aimed at examining European citizens' attitudes and perceptions regarding various dimensions of democracy, the media, and trust in political institutions. Data collection took place between March 22 and March 31, 2023, using a cross-sectional design that captures a snapshot of public opinion at a given point in time. The study's target population included citizens of EU member states and other EU residents aged 15 and older, ensuring a representative coverage of different age and national groups. In the specific case of Greece, a non-probabilistic sampling procedure based on gender and age quotas was applied—a common approach in public opinion research to reflect the sociodemographic distribution of the population based on key variables.

The study collected a total of 25,586 interviews across Europe, with a subset of 1004 interviews in Greece. The unit of analysis was the individual, and data were collected through a self-administered online questionnaire (CAWI - Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing). The fieldwork was conducted by Ipsos European Public Affairs. This methodological design provides a robust empirical basis for analyzing citizens' trust in democratic institutions and actors and their role in defending democracy. However, as with any study based on non-probabilistic sampling—especially using self-administered online questionnaires—it is important to consider potential selection biases associated with participant recruitment methods (Alaminos 2025). Sample size plays a crucial role in the robustness and validity of statistical analyses, particularly when aiming to disaggregate data or control for sociodemographic variables such as gender or age. In this study, the use of a 1,004-case sample presents methodological limitations that must be considered to ensure the stability and reliability of the results. One of the main challenges is the reduction in the effective number of observations when introducing subgroup segmentation. For instance, stratification reduces the number of cases in each analytical category, which can lead to high variance issues and lower precision in estimates. This fragmentation can result in difficulties in obtaining reliable confidence intervals and identifying statistically significant differences between groups. To mitigate these effects, it is methodologically preferable to preserve variables as analytical units rather than fragmenting them into multiple underrepresented subpopulations. Therefore, while subgroup segmentation can provide valuable insights, in small samples like the one used in this study, its implementation must be carefully evaluated to avoid biases stemming from insufficient case representation in each category.

Survey-based studies are among the most widely used tools in empirical social research. However, their applicability and analytical scope are determined by the questions included in the questionnaire, which impose fundamental methodological limitations. Unlike theoretical analysis, which allows for speculation on underlying causes and mechanisms, the empirical survey-based approach can only investigate

what has been specifically measured. This restricts the ability to explore emerging phenomena or unforeseen aspects in the original research formulation.

One of the key challenges of surveys is their dependence on questionnaire design, which introduces the risk of omitting key variables or biases stemming from question wording (Schuman & Presser 1996). In this sense, the measurement of complex social phenomena is constrained by the instrument's ability to accurately capture respondents' reality. This is particularly relevant in topics such as institutional trust or perceptions of democracy, where language nuances and ambiguities can influence responses (Tourangeau et al. 2000). Moreover, the use of secondary data—i.e., surveys designed and conducted by third parties—accentuates this fragmentation of knowledge. In these cases, researchers must work with the available information, leading to less flexibility in formulating hypotheses and a dependency on prior methodological decisions (Bryman 2012). This limitation can generate interpretative biases, as certain factors relevant to the analysis may not have been considered in the original data collection process. As Becker (1996) states, "*data never speak for themselves*," meaning that their analysis must consider the conditions under which they were generated.

Another inherent limitation of the survey-based empirical approach is its static and synchronic nature. Unlike theoretical approaches, which can explore historical processes and long-term dynamics, surveys capture perceptions and opinions at a specific moment. Although longitudinal studies are possible, they require specific designs and rarely allow for strong causal inferences due to the difficulty of controlling all relevant variables (Menard 2002). In contrast, theoretical analysis offers a greater speculative capacity and a more holistic approach to social phenomena. While empirical research faces the fragmentation of knowledge due to data availability, theory can construct broader explanatory frameworks, even in the absence of direct evidence (Bourdieu et al. 1991).

Threats and Defenders

The threats that have been posed to the assessment of public opinion have been: (1) "False and/or misleading information in general circulating online and offline", (2) "Propaganda and false/misleading information from a non-democratic foreign source", (3) "Destabilisation of electoral infrastructure or processes, such as cyber-attacks", (4) "Covert foreign interference in the politics and economy of Greece, including through financing of domestic actors", (5) "Lack of engagement and interest in politics and elections among regular citizens", (6) "Lack of opportunities for citizens to voice their opinions", (7) "Lack of integrity of the electoral system", (8) "Lack of media freedom and media diversity", (9) "Growing distrust and scepticism towards democratic institutions", (10) "Lack of knowledge among voters about the functioning of democratic processes" and "Other".

To structure the analysis of the threats and deepen their meanings, several classificatory approaches have been specified.

Classification by Origin of the Threat: External vs. Internal (Darem et al. 2023, Ding et al. 2014, Liu et al. 2022, Meduri et al. 2024). This classification is based on studies on foreign intervention and democratic backsliding, which distinguish

between external influences (such as cyber-attacks and foreign propaganda) and internal vulnerabilities (such as citizen participation and institutional trust). The categories included in each threat are, for External Threats (2), (3) and (4); for Internal Threats (1), (5), (6), (7), (8), (9) and (10).

A second approach is considering the Classification by Dimensions of Democracy: Informational, Institutional, and Participatory (Amoretti et al. 2007, Bour et al. 2019, Butterworth and Booth 2023, Caragiannis and Micha 2019, Eckerdal 2017, Gerring et al. 2012, Grönlund 2020, Gupta and Biswas 2021, Jerabek 2021, Kahng et al. 2018, Khan 2019, Kim and Holzer 2006, Vatter 2009). This approach is based on democratic capital models and democratic governance theories (e.g., Dahl and Putnam), which assess democratic health through its informational (flow and quality of information), institutional (functioning of political structures), and participatory (degree of citizen involvement) dimensions. Informational Dimension includes (1), (2) and (8); Institutional Dimension includes (3), (4) and (7); Participatory and Civic Dimension includes (5), (6), (9) and (10).

Another approach focuses on the Vulnerability Approach: Structural vs. Cultural (Ford et al. 2018, Hamidi et al. 2022, Kuhlicke et al. 2011, Mazzorana et al. 2014, Ndanusa et al. 2022, Schneiderbauer et al. 2020). Based on analyses such as those by Levitsky and Ziblatt on democratic decline, which differentiate between structural problems (affecting institutions and processes) and cultural challenges (affecting democratic values, participation, and citizen trust), Structural Threats are (3), (4), (7) and (8), while Cultural Threats include (1), (2), (5), (6), (9) and (10).

Finally, the fourth analytical approach is inspired by studies on democratic resilience and social capital, which evaluate how certain challenges weaken a society's ability to engage in public debate, participate in political life, and sustain a legitimate political system. Classification based on the Impact on Democratic Responsiveness considers Threats to Information Processing Capacity and Public Debate (Fischer et al. 2011, Kراسiuk 2023, Mavroeidis and Jøsang 2018, Salemink et al. 2013, Vafaeva et al. 2023, Voet and Lems 2022) include (1), (2) and (8); Threats to the Functionality and Legitimacy of the Political System (Aagaard 2022, Bolleyer and Reh 2012, Eriksson and Grief 2023, Jungherr et al. 2019, Mostofa and Subedi 2020, Popplewell 2018, Yang et al. 2016) consider (3), (4) and (7); and Threats to Civic Participation and Social Cohesion (Alscher et al. 2022, Berson et al. 2013, Hadjar and Beck 2010, Jiang et al. 2024, Martins et al. 2022, Merwe and Morelli 2022, Muhtar et al. 2022, Reichert 2016, Zahra et al. 2024, Zhang et al. 2023) are (5), (6), (9) and (10). These classifications will be used to analyse the public opinions about democracy threats.

Table 1. *Classifications Criteria of the Threats*

Threat	Threat Origin Classification	Democratic Dimension Classification	Vulnerability Approach Classification	Democratic Response Capacity Classification
False and/or misleading information in general	Internal	Informative	Cultural	Processing Information and Public Debate
Propaganda and false/misleading information from a non-democratic foreign source	External	Informative	Cultural	Processing Information and Public Debate
Destabilisation of electoral infrastructure or processes, such as cyber-attacks	External	Institutional	Structural	Political System Functionality and Legitimacy
Covert foreign interference in the politics and economy of Greece	External	Institutional	Structural	Political System Functionality and Legitimacy
Lack of engagement and interest in politics and elections	Internal	Participatory	Cultural	Participation and Civic Cohesion
Lack of opportunities for citizens to voice their opinions	Internal	Participatory	Cultural	Participation and Civic Cohesion
Lack of integrity of the electoral system	Internal	Institutional	Structural	Political System Functionality and Legitimacy
Lack of media freedom and media diversity	Internal	Informative	Structural	Processing Information and Public Debate
Growing distrust and scepticism towards democratic institutions	Internal	Participatory	Cultural	Participation and Civic Cohesion
Lack of knowledge among voters about democratic processes	Internal	Participatory	Cultural	Participation and Civic Cohesion

Source: the authors

The defenders considered are “The media”, “National courts”, “National [and local] government”, “National [and local] parliament”, “Political parties and politicians”, “Public administration”, “Electoral authorities”, “Civil society organisations”, “Citizens and EU institutions, including the European Court of Justice”.

Table 2. *Classifications of the defender depending on threats*

Defender	Classification by Threat Origin	Classification by Democratic Dimension	Classification by Vulnerability Approach	Classification by Democratic Response Capacity
The media	Internal	Informative	Structural	Processing Information and Public Debate
National courts	Internal	Institutional	Structural	Political System Functionality and Legitimacy
National [and local] government	Internal	Institutional	Structural	Political System Functionality and Legitimacy
National [and local] parliament	Internal	Institutional	Structural	Political System Functionality and Legitimacy
Political parties and politicians	Internal	Institutional	Cultural	Participation and Civic Cohesion
Public administration	Internal	Institutional	Structural	Political System Functionality and Legitimacy
Electoral authorities	Internal	Institutional	Structural	Political System Functionality and Legitimacy
Civil society organisations	Internal	Participatory	Cultural	Participation and Civic Cohesion
Citizens	Internal	Participatory	Cultural	Participation and Civic Cohesion
EU institutions including the European Court of Justice	External	Institutional	Structural	Political System Functionality and Legitimacy

Source: the authors

The data on the perception of threats to democracy in Greece and trust in its defenders are as follows.

Table 3. *The Most Serious Threats to Democracy in Greece*

	Respuestas		Porcentaje de casos
	N	Porcentaje	
False and/or misleading information in general circulating online and offline	418	17,3%	41,4%
Propaganda and false/misleading information from a non-democratic foreign source	206	8,5%	20,5%
Destabilisation of electoral infrastructure or processes, such as cyber-attacks	42	1,7%	4,2%
Covert foreign interference in the politics and economy of [COUNTRY], including through financing of domestic actors	297	12,3%	29,5%

Lack of engagement and interest in politics and elections among regular citizens	232	9,6%	23,0%
Lack of opportunities for citizens to voice their opinions	218	9,0%	21,7%
Lack of integrity of the electoral system	201	8,3%	20,0%
Lack of media freedom and media diversity	353	14,6%	35,0%
Growing distrust and scepticism towards democratic institutions	239	9,9%	23,7%
Lack of knowledge among voters about the functioning of democratic processes	167	6,9%	16,5%
Other	16	0,7%	1,6%
None of the above	14	0,6%	1,4%
Don't know	10	0,4%	1,0%
Total	2414	100,0%	239,5%

a. Grupo de dicotomía tabulado en el valor 1.

Source: the authors

Table 4. *Confident in the following when it comes to defending Democracy in Greece*

	Very confident	Somewhat confident	Not very confident	Not at all confident	Don't know	Total
	% del N de fila	% del N de fila	% del N de fila	% del N de fila	% del N de fila	% del N de fila
The media	2,0%	12,9%	29,5%	55,0%	0,5%	100%
National courts	9,2%	29,8%	28,3%	31,7%	1,0%	100%
National [and local] government	5,1%	21,5%	25,7%	47,1%	0,6%	100%
National [and local] parliament	5,5%	22,7%	28,8%	42,6%	0,5%	100%
Political parties and politicians	2,3%	15,9%	29,2%	52,0%	0,6%	100%
Public administration	4,1%	20,5%	35,6%	38,4%	1,4%	100%
Electoral authorities	9,9%	25,7%	33,0%	29,9%	1,5%	100%
Civil society organisations	8,5%	37,8%	34,0%	17,8%	1,9%	100%
Citizens	12,4%	39,5%	32,7%	14,5%	0,9%	100%
EU institutions, including the European Court of Justice	13,5%	31,8%	29,7%	24,6%	0,5%	100%

Source: data from ZA7982, version 1.1.0

Analysis

The analysis of threats to democracy is carried out based on the type of threat according to the classifications considered above. The same approach has been taken to assess confidence in their potential advocates.

Table 5.

Threat	Percentage of Cases	Threat Origin Classification	Democratic Dimension Classification	Vulnerability Approach Classification	Democratic Response Capacity Classification
False and/or misleading information in general	41.4%	Internal	Informative	Cultural	Processing Information and Public Debate
Propaganda and false/misleading information from a non-democratic foreign source	20.5%	External	Informative	Cultural	Processing Information and Public Debate
Destabilisation of electoral infrastructure or processes, such as cyber-attacks	4.2%	External	Institutional	Structural	Political System Functionality and Legitimacy
Covert foreign interference in the politics and economy of [COUNTRY]	29.5%	External	Institutional	Structural	Political System Functionality and Legitimacy
Lack of engagement and interest in politics and elections	23.0%	Internal	Participatory	Cultural	Participation and Civic Cohesion
Lack of opportunities for citizens to voice their opinions	21.7%	Internal	Participatory	Cultural	Participation and Civic Cohesion
Lack of integrity of the electoral system	20.0%	Internal	Institutional	Structural	Political System Functionality and Legitimacy
Lack of media freedom and media diversity	35.0%	Internal	Informative	Structural	Processing Information and Public Debate
Growing distrust and scepticism towards democratic institutions	23.7%	Internal	Participatory	Cultural	Participation and Civic Cohesion
Lack of knowledge among voters about democratic processes	16.5%	Internal	Participatory	Cultural	Participation and Civic Cohesion

Source: the authors

The data on perceived threats to democracy in Greece highlights a strong concern over disinformation, media freedom, and external interference, alongside persistent issues of political disengagement and institutional distrust. The most significant threat identified is false and misleading information (41.4%), followed closely by lack of media freedom and diversity (35.0%), and covert foreign interference in politics and the economy (29.5%). These findings suggest that Greece's democratic vulnerabilities are closely tied to the integrity of its information ecosystem and the perceived influence of external actors. The classification of misinformation as an internal and cultural threat underscores the extent to which public discourse and trust in democratic processes are shaped by the spread of unreliable information, political bias, and media control.

Concerns over media freedom and diversity (35.0%) rank exceptionally high, signaling widespread skepticism regarding the independence and pluralism of Greece's media landscape. This aligns with broader international assessments that have raised concerns over media ownership concentration, political influence on journalism, and restrictions on press freedoms. The fact that media-related threats rank nearly as high as disinformation itself suggests that citizens view the media not only as failing to counter misinformation but also as an active contributor to the problem. The classification of media freedom as a structural and institutional issue reinforces the perception that the media is not functioning as a neutral democratic safeguard but rather as an institution susceptible to manipulation, bias, or external influence.

Beyond informational threats, foreign interference ranks as a significant concern (29.5%), indicating heightened awareness of geopolitical risks, economic dependencies, and the role of external actors in shaping domestic political and economic conditions. Although cyber-attacks on electoral infrastructure (4.2%) rank much lower, the presence of concerns over electoral integrity (20.0%) suggests that citizens remain wary of the fairness of electoral processes and their ability to reflect the true will of the people. This classification as a structural and institutional issue implies that doubts about electoral integrity are not limited to concerns over cybersecurity but extend to broader worries about transparency, voter suppression, or manipulation in electoral administration.

Political disengagement is another key theme in the data, with lack of engagement in politics (23.0%), growing distrust in democratic institutions (23.7%), and limited opportunities for public expression (21.7%) all ranking as notable concerns. These issues, classified as cultural and participatory threats, suggest that a portion of the population feels disconnected from political processes, either due to disillusionment, lack of representation, or barriers to participation. The presence of concerns over voter knowledge (16.5%) reinforces this trend, pointing to the need for improved civic education and political literacy to ensure an informed electorate.

Overall, the findings suggest that Greece's democracy is perceived as being undermined more by internal crises in information integrity, institutional trust, and political disengagement than by direct external manipulation or electoral fraud. While covert foreign interference remains a concern, it is overshadowed by domestic challenges related to media credibility, public participation, and democratic accountability. The predominance of cultural over structural threats highlights the

urgent need to restore confidence in democratic institutions, strengthen media independence, and improve public engagement with political processes. Addressing these issues will require enhanced transparency in media ownership, efforts to counter disinformation, increased civic education, and institutional reforms aimed at reinforcing electoral integrity and political participation. Without these measures, Greece's democratic stability may continue to be tested by declining trust in governance, deepening polarization, and a weakened information landscape that fails to support an informed and engaged electorate.

Table 6.

Defender	Classification by Threat Origin	Classification by Democratic Dimension	Classification by Vulnerability Approach	Classification by Democratic Response Capacity	Very Confident	Somewhat Confident	Confidence Total
Citizens	Internal	Participatory	Cultural	Participation and Civic Cohesion	12.4	39.5	51.9
Civil society organisations	Internal	Participatory	Cultural	Participation and Civic Cohesion	8.5	37.8	46.3
EU institutions, including the European Court of Justice	External	Institutional	Structural	Political System Functionality and Legitimacy	13.5	31.8	45.3
National courts	Internal	Institutional	Structural	Political System Functionality and Legitimacy	9.2	29.8	39.0
Electoral authorities	Internal	Institutional	Structural	Political System Functionality and Legitimacy	9.9	25.7	35.6
National [and local] parliament	Internal	Institutional	Structural	Political System Functionality and Legitimacy	5.5	22.7	28.2
National [and local] government	Internal	Institutional	Structural	Political System Functionality and Legitimacy	5.1	21.5	26.6
Public administration	Internal	Institutional	Structural	Political System Functionality and Legitimacy	4.1	20.5	24.6
Political parties and politicians	Internal	Institutional	Cultural	Participation and Civic Cohesion	2.3	15.9	18.2
The media	Internal	Informative	Structural	Processing Information and Public Debate	2.0	12.9	14.9

Source: the authors

The data on democratic defenders in Greece reveals a profound crisis of institutional trust, with no actor commanding overwhelming confidence among the public. The highest-ranked defenders—citizens (51.9%) and civil society organizations (46.3%)—suggest that public engagement and grassroots activism are viewed as the most reliable safeguards of democracy, even above formal institutions. The classification of these actors as participatory and cultural defenders reinforces the

idea that Greeks place more faith in collective civic action than in governmental or judicial structures to uphold democratic stability. This pattern indicates a deep disillusionment with traditional political institutions and a preference for bottom-up democratic resilience.

Among institutional defenders, EU institutions (45.3%) receive the highest confidence level, suggesting that a portion of the public sees external oversight as a necessary counterbalance to domestic governance issues. The classification of the EU as an external and structural defender underscores its role in maintaining democratic norms and providing institutional checks beyond the national level. However, the fact that trust in EU institutions ranks below that of participatory defenders suggests that while external oversight is recognized as important, it is not viewed as a primary safeguard of Greek democracy.

Trust in core democratic institutions such as national courts (39.0%) and electoral authorities (35.6%) remains moderate but not particularly strong, reflecting skepticism toward procedural democracy. The relatively low confidence in electoral authorities suggests that concerns over electoral integrity, fairness, or transparency persist. This aligns with broader democratic concerns in Greece, where electoral integrity is often questioned in relation to political influence, economic instability, and governance inefficiencies. The classification of courts and electoral authorities as structural defenders suggests that, while they are crucial for upholding democratic governance, they struggle to maintain full public legitimacy.

The severe lack of confidence in national political institutions is particularly striking. Parliament (28.2%), government (26.6%), and public administration (24.6%) receive some of the lowest rankings among institutional defenders, suggesting widespread disillusionment with elected officials, governance structures, and bureaucratic efficiency. The fact that political parties and politicians (18.2%) rank even lower reinforces the idea that the political establishment is seen as detached from public concerns and ineffective in addressing democratic challenges. The classification of political parties as cultural rather than structural defenders highlights that their weakness as democratic safeguards stems from public perception and trust deficits rather than from procedural or institutional limitations alone.

The media (14.9%) ranks at the bottom of the confidence scale, reinforcing public skepticism toward journalism and information sources. Given that false and misleading information was identified as the greatest democratic threat (41.4%), the low confidence in media institutions suggests that citizens do not fully trust them to counteract disinformation or maintain journalistic integrity. This aligns with concerns about media ownership concentration, political bias, and restricted press freedoms in Greece, further amplifying the crisis of trust in information ecosystems.

Overall, the findings suggest that Greece's democracy is perceived as fragile, with deep public mistrust in political institutions and a growing reliance on civic engagement as the main safeguard against democratic erosion. The strong confidence in participatory mechanisms compared to governance institutions highlights a disconnect between the public and formal democratic structures, reinforcing the need for greater transparency, political accountability, and institutional reform. The relatively high trust in EU institutions indicates that some citizens see external oversight as a necessary counterbalance to domestic governance challenges, yet

without stronger democratic legitimacy at the national level, this reliance on external actors could further weaken trust in domestic institutions. Addressing these challenges requires a renewed focus on rebuilding institutional credibility, ensuring electoral transparency, fostering independent media, and encouraging meaningful political participation. Without such efforts, Greece's democracy may continue to struggle with declining legitimacy, deepening polarization, and a weakened ability to respond to public concerns effectively.

Conclusion

The analysis of democratic threats and defenders in Greece highlights a fragile democratic environment marked by deep mistrust in political institutions, concerns over disinformation, and reliance on civic engagement as the primary safeguard of democracy. The most pressing threats identified by the public include false and misleading information (41.4%), lack of media freedom and diversity (35.0%), and covert foreign interference in domestic affairs (29.5%). These findings suggest that Greece's democracy is perceived as being undermined more by internal challenges—such as information manipulation, media control, and political disengagement—than by direct external threats or institutional failures. While foreign interference ranks as a notable concern, it is secondary to the broader crisis of democratic legitimacy and trust in governance.

Despite these concerns, no single democratic defender commands overwhelming confidence, reflecting a widespread legitimacy deficit across governance institutions, the media, and political actors. The highest confidence levels are found in citizens (51.9%) and civil society organizations (46.3%), indicating that public engagement and grassroots activism are seen as more reliable democratic safeguards than formal institutions. This suggests a bottom-up approach to democratic resilience, where people trust their own collective action more than the effectiveness of elected officials or governance structures. The moderate confidence in EU institutions (45.3%) compared to domestic institutions further suggests that some citizens see external oversight as necessary to uphold democratic norms, likely due to concerns about national governance transparency or inefficiency.

The lack of trust in core political institutions is one of the most striking findings. Parliament (28.2%), government (26.6%), and public administration (24.6%) rank among the least trusted defenders, reinforcing the idea that democratic institutions are widely seen as ineffective in addressing governance challenges and maintaining public trust. The fact that political parties and politicians (18.2%) rank even lower suggests a severe crisis of political representation, where the electorate does not feel adequately represented by political leadership. This disconnect between citizens and formal governance structures presents a significant vulnerability, as democratic stability relies not only on institutional strength but also on public confidence in political representation and decision-making.

The media (14.9%) ranks at the bottom of the confidence scale, despite false and misleading information being the highest-ranked democratic threat. This suggests that citizens do not fully trust media institutions to counter disinformation or maintain

journalistic independence, reinforcing concerns about media bias, ownership concentration, and political influence over the press. The low confidence in the media further exacerbates the risk posed by misinformation, as citizens who do not trust the media may turn to alternative, often unverified, sources of information, further contributing to polarization and democratic instability.

Overall, the findings suggest that Greece's democracy is facing a profound crisis of trust, where formal institutions are not perceived as effective, the media is viewed with skepticism, and citizens increasingly see themselves as the last line of defense for democratic stability. While legal and electoral institutions retain moderate confidence levels, political representation remains a critical weakness, and the media is seen as failing to uphold democratic discourse. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach: restoring institutional credibility through transparency and accountability, strengthening media independence and journalistic integrity, and promoting civic education to counteract misinformation and political disengagement. Without these efforts, the gap between governance structures and public trust will continue to widen, leaving Greek democracy increasingly vulnerable to disillusionment, polarization, and external influence.

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