

Greek civil society has a crucial role to play in maintaining social cohesion during the country's crisis

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*Greece is facing a period of political uncertainty after the process of appointing the country's next president was moved forward to December. Despite currently lacking the required number of parliamentary votes to appoint a new president, the Greek government must elect its preferred candidate by 29 December or new parliamentary elections will have to be called in early 2015. **Vasileios Stathopoulos** writes on the strains within Greek society which have occurred since the start of the country's economic crisis. He argues that with excessive unemployment and falling living standards, Greek civil society has a key role to play in ensuring social cohesion is maintained.*

The German playwright and poet Bertolt Brecht once [wondered](#) whether a government, having lost confidence in its people, might not find it easier to simply dissolve the people and elect another. And there is indeed a hidden loophole in democracy for 'dissolving' your own people. It consists of depriving them of hope: by transforming them through unpopular reforms, deemed 'essential' for economic recovery, into a collection of uninspired individuals, struggling to make ends meet. In this way governments may 'elect' a new body of citizens – one more fearful and amenable than before, but which will nevertheless, in the long run, dissolve itself.

Since the beginning of the Eurozone crisis, Europe has lost its confidence in the Greek people. The politicians in power have been replaced and society has been given the chance to win this confidence back by working twice as hard for half as much. This was precisely the alternative solution to the people's dissolution in Brecht's poem. Yet do the people of Greece deserve this motion of no confidence from Europe? An examination of life in the country since the end of the military junta in 1974 sheds light on the many excesses and policy failures of the past, but is the collective punishment proportionate to the crime? And is there 'life after debt'?

Greece since 1974

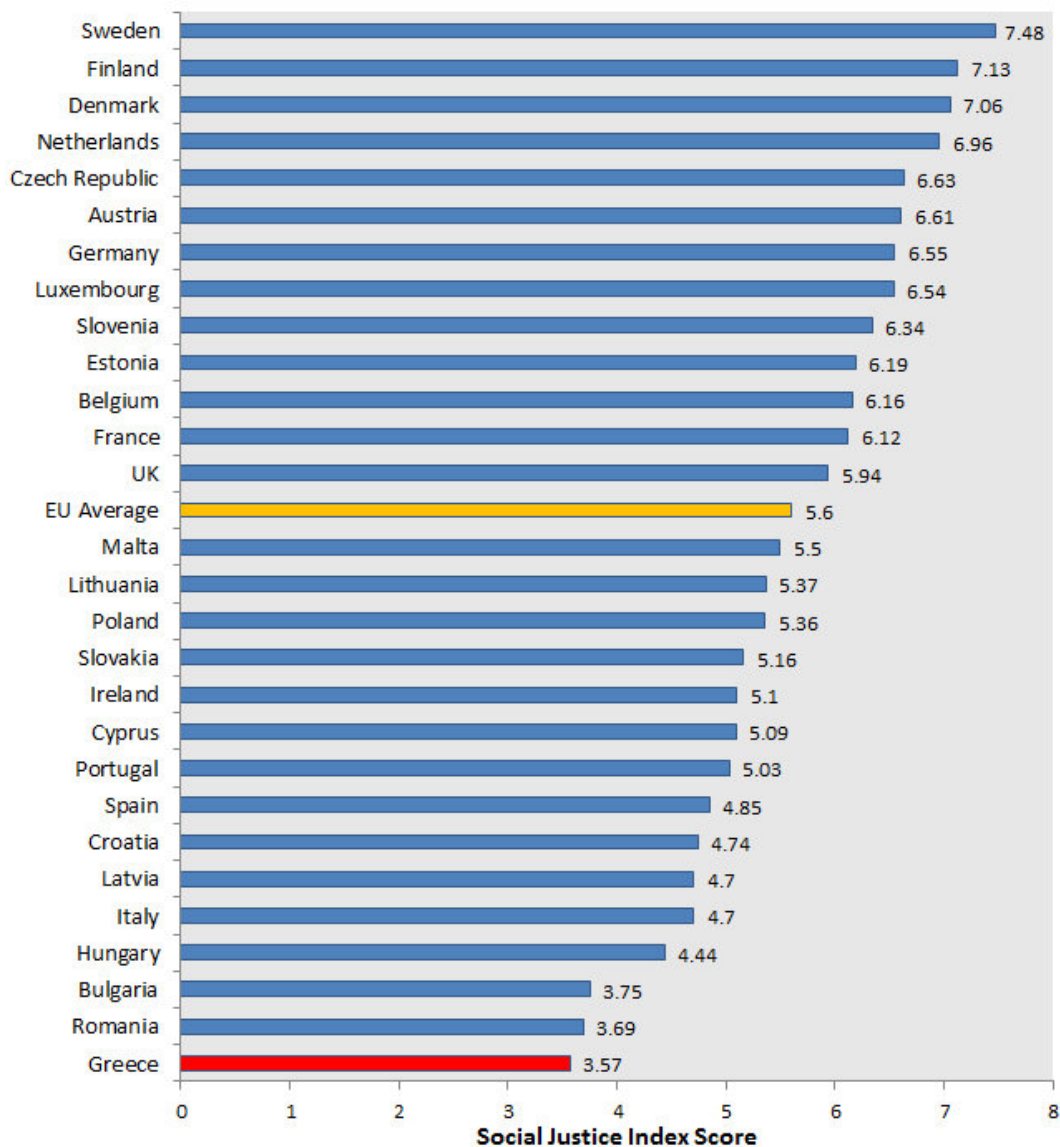
In the post-junta era, Greek citizens developed an uneasy relationship with politicians, characterised by mutual suspicion and a lack of trust. Despite the gradual return to political morality after 1974, the state failed to become a vehicle for a healthy civil society, leaving behind a fragmented society where individualism and the exchange of favours prevailed.

While politicians were unwilling or unable to take on the burden of formulating a positive political plan of reforms, the all-powerful pressure groups (trade unions, lobbies, businesses) consistently held on to political influence, simultaneously entrenching their own privileges. And since political leaders lacked the strength to take these groups on, they gave in to the pressure, while also ensuring they exploited the situation to increase their electoral support base. Greek politics therefore came to resemble an elitist pursuit for powerful families and an arena for political conflict with the various lobbying groups.

On an individual level, this period exhibited a general decline in ethics and social responsibility, with society becoming tolerant of various forms of corruption and lawlessness. If one citizen did not pay their taxes, they prayed that at least their neighbour would pay in order for the state and social welfare to continue to exist. Meanwhile voters devoted themselves to armchair political discussions and dogmatic declarations of party identity. During elections, support was frequently given not to political leaders, but rather party 'accommodators', who had an obvious lack of political stature and ideological consistency. Above all, the illusory prosperity of the post-junta period instilled in the average Greek citizen an unprecedented individualism, to the point where genuine social engagement became exhausted.

When the crisis hit, this society suddenly came to the realisation that the days of prosperity were over and that difficult days lay ahead. However the medicine of austerity which has been prescribed is socially unsustainable. The simultaneous dismantling of the health care, pension and education systems has simply added more fuel to an explosive society, as shown by the fact that Greece now ranks last of all EU member states on relative measures of social justice (see Chart 1 below).

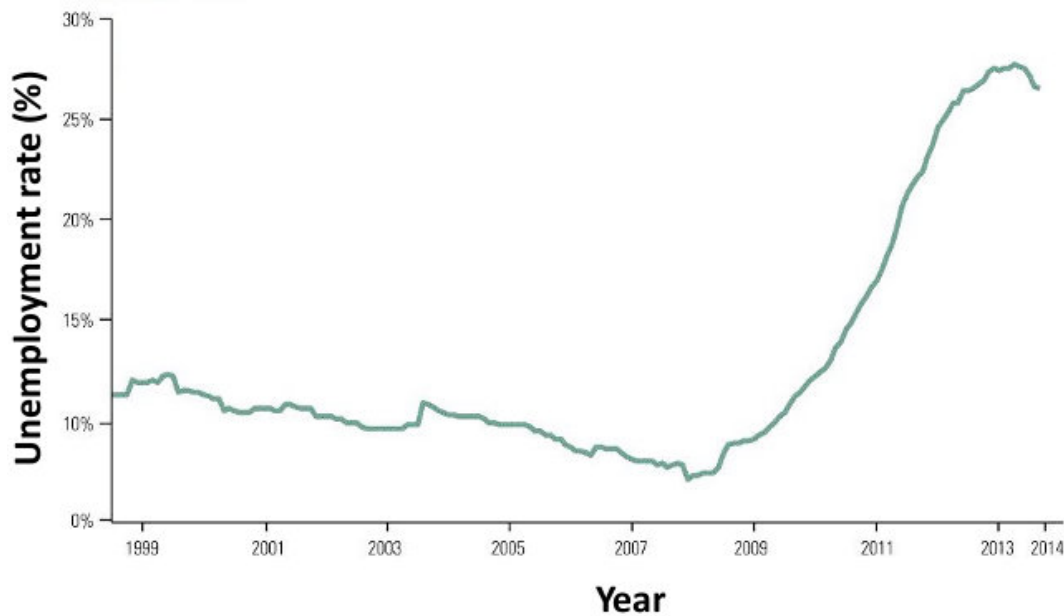
Chart 1: Social Justice Index of EU member states (2011-13)



Note: The chart shows EU member states' 'Social Justice Index' score, which is a measure of several elements of social justice within a society, including labour market inclusion, poverty prevention, health, equitable education and inter-generational justice. The higher the score the better social justice is deemed to be within that state. **Source:** Bertelsmann Foundation

The decline in standards of living throughout the crisis – the basic element of a society's prosperity and longevity – has potentially dire consequences for social cohesion and the functioning of Greek democracy. Similarly, a society with pockets of poverty and large numbers of unemployed, retired or uneducated citizens, will not only be unable to get back on its feet, but will almost inevitably head toward disintegration. It is difficult to see how the rise in unemployment during the crisis, shown in Chart 2 below, is sustainable.

Chart 2: Unemployment rate in Greece before and after the crisis (1999-2014)



Source: Eurostat, Haver Analytics, Deutsche Bank, U.S. Global Investors

However, all Greek tragedies employ a *deus ex machina* in their resolution. The more deeply the crisis has affected Greece, the stronger the response of those healthy elements of civil society has become. This response, while hesitant at first, has grown with time and civil society actors have begun to intervene in the social dialogue, while thinking creatively about the future. If given support and co-ordination, these grassroots initiatives might emerge as a collective attempt at social and political revival. Politics is too serious a matter to be left to politicians and a democracy cannot by definition be formed in a social vacuum – it presupposes active citizens who participate in the public sphere.

The duty of Greek society, therefore, is to redefine itself as a responsible political entity: a bastion of democratic values befitting the cradle of a prestigious civilisation. If citizens fail to become involved in such a social transformation, the Greek experience will become more akin to the aimless torment of Sisyphus than the committed self-sacrifice of Prometheus. And if the Greek electorate does not succeed in bringing worthy political leaders to power – who undoubtedly do exist – then the punishment will be that which Plato feared most in a democracy: that the people of Greece will end up being governed by their inferiors.

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