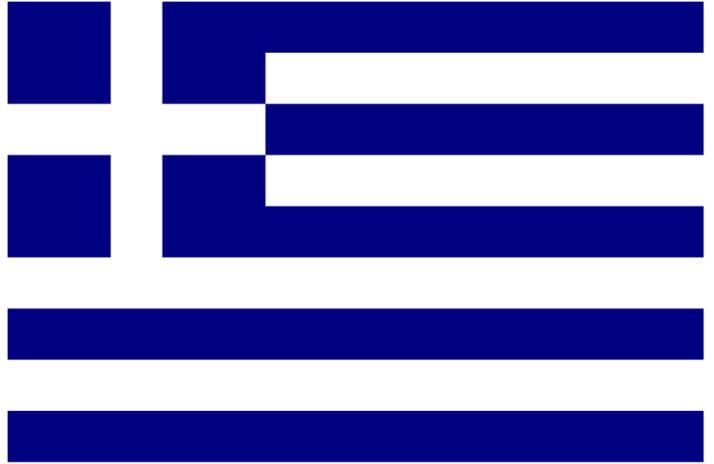


Greece: Will of the people?

The birthplace of democracy has not, in recent years, had the best record of living up to it. Increasingly, corruption scandals and political malpractice are becoming legitimised and institutionalised by the government – which, while remaining a democracy, seems content to allow the financial elite and organised criminal gangs to have their way so long as the government can benefit too. This is a worrying state of affairs, by anyone’s philosophy.



The corruption scandals are epitomised by the fact that Eleni Touloupaki, the former chief anti-graft prosecutor of Greece who did so much to expose the Novartis scandal (whereby the drugs company paid millions in bribes for preferential treatment and in doing so helped fix pharmaceutical prices across the entire EU), is herself being prosecuted for graft in what is widely considered to be a politically-driven abuse of power by the current government at the behest of political and financial elites. Notably those members of the Greek parliament under investigation themselves were able to directly participate in enforcing Touloupaki’s prosecution, and indeed the government itself abolished the Corruption Prosecution Office entirely.

While this case may exist at the extreme edges of the corruption landscape, it serves as an uncomfortably close reminder of just what can be done: not only facilitating such bribery and corruption in the first place, but actively shutting down bodies that would look to hold someone accountable and abusing political powers to go after the very individuals tackling the corruption. The confidence levels one can take from this are minimal at best.

But Greece does not stop there. The country has a growing reputation for suppressing journalistic coverage of subjects it deems uncomfortable – not only unquestioned corruption scandals, but politically difficult issues such as the migrant crisis, and indeed investigative journalists have been killed with the enquiries into these deaths being less than expedient. Reporters Without Borders have independently awarded Greece the lowest ranking of any European nation in terms of press freedom, 108 out of 180 (albeit that Russia was not considered as ‘European’) with multiple violations (including the aforesaid murders) covering restrictions on reporting and freedom of information, increased repression and harassment of investigative journalists.

While successive governments have claimed that critical publications are permitted and encouraged, the reality is that most major media is owned by business magnates who have deep links both ways to the political elite, giving both sides a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. Most egregious of all is the rule which allows for five years imprisonment for anyone knowingly spreading fake news – but which allows the government to decide on the definition of what that is. The upshot is that anything, and anyone, is now at risk if they go against what the elite want, and the pliant judiciary and law enforcement authorities cannot be counted upon.

At ground-level too, the practice of *fakelaki* ('little envelope') is still prevalent, referring to small-scale but pervasive bribery and other graft that is the hallmark of much business in Greece and which is given as little genuine attention by the powers-that-be as the big cases. Both are highly damaging to corporates in-country and, such is the nature of the government and the systems in place, that neither look set to diminish.

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