

**MAPPING** of

**CIVIC SPACE**

Greece







Empowering civil society organisations and activists  
championing human rights and democratic values in the EU

Mapping of Civic Space **Greece**

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Project’s Partners



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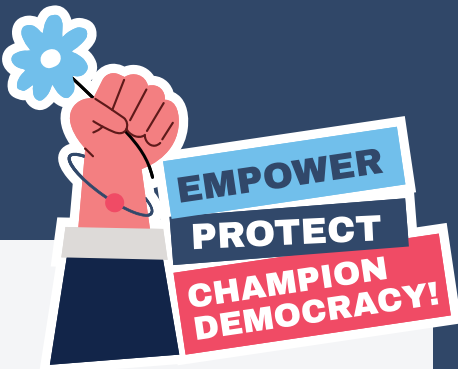
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# Introduction

## Overview of the report’s objectives and scope

The desk research draws on national (laws, reports) and international sources (research, policy, advocacy) to offer an overview of the legal, political and social environment in relation to the structure and functioning of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and of the current state of affairs of civic space more broadly in the Greek context. As such, it discusses the recent legislative steps taken for the promotion and protection of Greek civic space, while also shedding light on the key financial, legal and political barriers imposed on civil society efforts and objectives. Subsequently, the participatory consultations provide direct experiences and perceptions of CSO professionals and activists working in Greece.



## Description of the civic space in the country

As a crucial starting point, no separate definition of “civic space” is provided in the Greek legal context. In essence, while the EU does recognise the structural and constitutive role of CSOs, the proper governance and its legislative work, at national level the specific role of civic space has not been enshrined in legislation in a similar way, despite the relevant collective initiatives by organisations – perhaps most notably the efforts to include a reference in the constitution (previous attempts in 2001 and 2008). As the [2024 Strategic Action Plan for Civil Society published by the Bodossaki Foundation observes](#), significant progress has been made at legislative level with Law 4873/2021 which defines the forms of organised civil society and its manifestations.

The main objective of Law [4873/2021](#) is the creation of a single framework for the regulation of CSOs, by replacing the previous legislative framework, in which the regulation of the activities of civic space is carried out by a multitude of scattered laws, registers and departments of various ministries.

According to Article 4, of law 4873 of 2021, CSOs are voluntary organizations of persons established and operating in Greece as an association or civil non-profit companies, with a public benefit purpose, independent of states or governments, local government, public organizations under public or private law, commercial, trade union and professional organizations and associations, political organizations and political parties. The law stipulates that this independence shall be determined by the non-participation of any legal person belonging to the public sector as defined in point (a) of paragraph (a). 1 of Article 14 of Law no. 4270/2014 (A’ 143), with the exception of the legal persons of subpar. 3 of par. 1 of Article 68 of Law No. 4235/2014 (A’ 32), in the composition of their governing bodies and general assemblies.



The exact number of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) operating in Greece has not been precisely determined. However, according to the [Bodossaki Strategic Action plan](#), and using a broad definition of CSOs, it is estimated that there are over 6,200 such organizations, excluding parent associations, which are not counted in the total number of primary and secondary school pupils. The majority of these organizations are small, with few members, and are primarily focused on local-level action, managing limited financial resources. When adopting a more specific definition that includes only organizations with a purely public benefit purpose (such as civil non-profit corporations, foundations, and associations), the THALES II program (University of Peloponnese) identifies 750 active Greek and international organizations across the country. The number of organizations that are defined as NGOs is even smaller. The number of organisations is also low in the registers kept by public services.



# Legal and political Environment

## Summary of national legislation and regulatory environment

As mentioned above, the national legislation regulating CSOs in Greece is enshrined in Law 4873/2021. Greece's post-dictatorship development since 1974 has seen significant progress in democratization, civil rights, and modernization. Yet, these advancements have not created conditions conducive to weakening state control and fostering a stronger civil society (Huliaras 2015). Though there are many informal, less visible aspects of civil society—such as loosely organized groups and spontaneous networks of collective actors without formal legal status—the situation at the formal level is quite different, shaped by specific national characteristics. Compared to many Western European countries, Greece has a relatively underdeveloped tradition of civil society for several interrelated reasons, which fall beyond the scope of this report. Yes, as Makrides (2022) explains, this is not the result of the rise of illiberal or authoritarian regimes, but it is rather due to structural factors within Greek society. For example, Greece has low levels of associational membership, volunteering, and social trust—key indicators of a robust civil society. Additionally, the country's nonprofit sector is comparatively limited, with a less institutionalized landscape for civil society groups, including NGOs, which are often categorized broadly as CSOs. A brief analysis of the social perceptions of civil society, as one of the several possible explanations of the latter's underdeveloped nature, are discussed in the relevant section.

It is important to mention that, in spite of the overall weakness of the Greek civic sector, there has been a rise in grassroots, free, and informal solidarity initiatives that exist outside of neo-liberal frameworks, aiming to reshape social life (Rozakou 2016). These initiatives, as noticed by Makrides, reveal an unexpected potential for civil society in Greece. Indeed, within the last two-three decades there is an increase in civic engagement initiatives and activities. However, this increase does not reflect significant changes in social norms, but is linked to European Union funding for NGOs and to different mobilization tactics of political parties of the left. The impact of the economic crisis on organized civil society in Greece is mixed: new initiatives are born but older ones are undermined – due to a change of priorities and a reduction of state support (Huliaras 2014).



In light of recent developments discussed below, commentators tend to describe the situation of civil society in the country as one 'under attack'<sup>1</sup>. Indicatively, in terms of national legislation, and based on the [Civics Lens 2023 report](#), one of the main areas which explains such a critical situation of CSOs in Greece is the one of migration and asylum.

In February 2020, Greece changed its law on the registration of CSOs that work on migration, asylum and social integration. Law [4664/2020](#) created a registry containing information not only about CSOs but also their members, employees and associates. The government declared that this would control the activities of CSOs helping asylum seekers, accusing them of operating in a 'faulty and parasitic manner'.

A further law change in May 2020 added additional details on the legal requirements for the registration of CSOs and emphasised that only registered CSOs could undertake asylum, migration and social integration activities. In September of that year, the government introduced even stricter and more intrusive registration requirements. Council of Europe experts concluded that the changes could lead to 'a worrying humanitarian situation' and recommended substantial revisions to bring new laws into line with European standards.

Such changes mean that CSOs working on migration, asylum and social integration must register with the Ministry of Migration and Asylum, which has complete discretion to accept or reject applications without providing any justification for its decision. The list of registration requirements is long and obligation to register extends to staff, members and volunteers of CSOs. For instance, if the Ministry of Migration and Asylum assesses one person to be non-compliant, both them and their CSO can be prevented from registering. Based on the same 2020 law, unregistered CSOs are not authorised to operate.

According to the same Civics report, deliberately opaque registration processes are used as a political tool to punish some and reward others active in the civic space. This, according to the report, became clear as early as October 2020, when a former political group affiliated with the ruling party (New Democracy) legally reorganised as a CSO working in the field of asylum and was quickly registered and awarded a large grant to build housing for refugees.

Act now for a stronger community

<sup>1</sup> <https://lens.civics.org/greece-humanitarian-action-under-attack/>



In comparison, [Refugee Support Aegean \(RSA\)](#), a well-known rights-based CSO that takes legal action to support refugees, had to wait a year and a half to find out that its registration application had in fact been rejected. The reason provided by the Ministry was that it was unlawful to support people facing deportation. Following an intervention by the Greek Ombudsman’s office, RSA’s application was only approved in May 2022.

In September 2021, a new Deportations and Returns Law imposed financial and criminal sanctions on CSOs involved in search-and-rescue operations at sea conducted without permission of the Hellenic Coast Guard. International CSOs are only allowed to participate in search-and-rescue operations if they and their members, associates and employees are registered with Greek authorities, and only when Coast Guard action isn’t possible. Violations could entail fines of up to €6,000 for organisations and €1,000 for individuals, who could also be prosecuted and sentenced to a year in prison, with even longer sentences if found responsible for an accident. Repeated violations could bring higher fines and lead to cancellation of registration.

New laws have provided legal cover for tactics being used to criminalise solidarity. The government falsely accuses activists of serious crimes that carry long prison terms, subjects them to long criminal procedures and detains them, while harassing their organisations with all the recently introduced regulatory burdens.

Criminalisation is accompanied by acts of intimidation, threats and physical attacks by right-wing groups, along with media smear campaigns instigated by politicians and police that involve the leaking of activists’ personal information. Further attacks can be expected ahead of the May elections as the ruling party attempts to strengthen its faltering poll lead.

According to the 2024 Civic Space Report<sup>2</sup>, following pressure, the Ministry of Migration and Asylum in Greece privately communicated to CSOs that the registration requirements for CSOs and individuals working on migration-related issues would be reviewed and amended, but no such actions have been taken to date.

<sup>2</sup> [https://civic-forum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Civic-Space-Report-2024\\_ECF.pdf](https://civic-forum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Civic-Space-Report-2024_ECF.pdf)

All the above restrictions are reflected in the overall ratings of the country.

For instance, in the 2023 Rule of Law Index the country ranks 29th out of 31 countries in the EU, European Free Trade Association and North America<sup>3</sup>. Greece also had the lowest score for press freedom in 2023 in the EU according to the Reporters without Borders (RSF) Index<sup>4</sup>. Following a visit to Greece in March 2023, during which officials refused to meet the delegation<sup>5</sup>, the European Parliament’s Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE Committee) mission concluded that the rule of law situation in Greece is on the edge as it faces very serious threats<sup>6</sup>.

For more than 18 months,

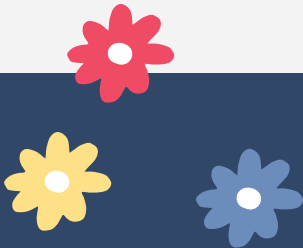
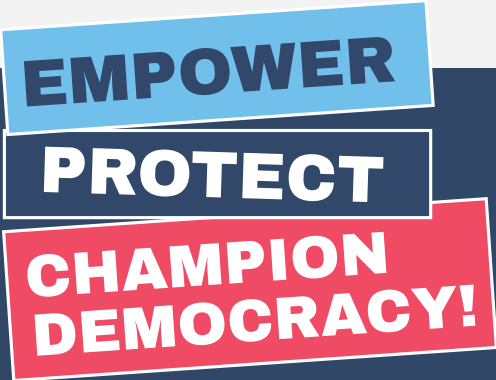
investigations regarding use of surveillance spyware by Greek authorities against at least 40 targets, including journalists (known as the ‘PredatorGate’ scandal) have been slow and obstructed. This raises concerns about the functioning of the justice system and the independence of independent authorities involved in the investigations. Furthermore, the Governor of the National Transparency Authority (NAT), who investigated the wiretapping case in 2022 and found no breaches of Greek or EU legislation, resigned in July 2022. No new Governor has been selected to date, disregarding legislation that governs the watchdog. As raised in the previous submission of the Civicus Monitor, NAT’s competency and independence have been questioned on several occasions including in 2022 when it investigated pushbacks of migrants and refugees and found no misconduct.

<sup>3</sup> <https://govwatch.gr/en/reports/world-justice-project-rule-of-law-index-2023/#:%7E:text=This%20year%20alone%2C%20the%20rule,including%20Greece>

<sup>4</sup> <https://rsf.org/en/country/greece>

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/745609/IPOL\\_STU\(2023\)745609\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/745609/IPOL_STU(2023)745609_EN.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/eu-parliament-mission-rule-of-law-in-greece-faces-very-serious-threats/>





## Analysis of protection measures for civil society organisations

A review of the national and international reports on the state of civil society in Greece demonstrates the ways in which protection measures implemented for CSOs serve to in fact limit their potential, freedom of expression and assembly, including their funding capacity.

In the first place, the introduction of Law 4703/2020, which regulates public outdoor assemblies, along with the new National Plan for the Management of Public Outdoor Assemblies in January 2021, seem to have had a negative impact on the right to peaceful assembly. These measures grant authorities discretionary power to disperse or ban assemblies, potentially using police force. This is especially troubling given the lack of investigation into numerous cases of excessive force and arbitrary actions by the police ([European Civic Forum 2022](#)).

According to the latest report of the [Civicus monitor](#), Greece’s civic space has been downgraded from “narrowed” to “obstructed”. This change was outlined in the “People Power Under Attack 2022” report, which cites several key factors contributing to the downgrade: repeated targeting of civil society and activists working with refugees and asylum seekers, excessive responses to protests, and ongoing legal harassment and surveillance of journalists. These developments have led to growing concerns about the erosion of civic freedoms in Greece.

The [Civicus monitor](#) report explains that the Greek government has continued its crackdown on civil society organizations and activists advocating for the rights of refugees and asylum seekers. For instance, in December 2022, activist Panayote Dimitras was accused of “setting up a criminal organisation” to facilitate the illegal entry of third-country nationals into Greece, which resulted in a travel ban and a prohibition on his involvement with the Greek Helsinki Monitor, the organization he helped lead.

Moreover, the Ministry of Migration and Asylum has failed to amend the 2020 law on NGO registration, which governs organizations working with refugees and migrants, leaving it out of alignment with international human rights standards. A 2021 law has further criminalized rescue operations, particularly those at sea, forcing many civil society organizations to cease operations due to fear of prosecution.

### Strict requirements for CSOs working on migration remain




While no new laws were passed on freedom of association in 2022, a Joint Ministerial Decision, which in 2020 introduced strict requirements for the operation of CSOs working on migration in Greece is still in place. The law, according to the civic space reports consulted, makes it difficult for these organisations to register, consequently hindering their operations. Various domestic and international bodies, including the European Commission, have raised concerns about the compatibility of the legislation with the country’s legal obligations, nevertheless, Greece insists on implementing it.

Greece, meanwhile, has put hostility towards migrants and refugees – and the civil society that works to help them – at the centre of its politics. It has put humanitarian workers on trial on serious charges, including espionage, people smuggling, membership of criminal organisations, fraud and money laundering – crimes that can bring jail sentences of up to 25 years. Many have been held in pretrial detention and others have been slapped with travel bans. The state has also put activists under surveillance. The government has criminalised operations to rescue migrants at sea, forcing several organisations to end their efforts.

Greece has also been accused of illegal pushbacks. These restrictions on the rights of civil society working to help migrants and refugees were a key reason Greece’s civic space rating was downgraded from narrowed to obstructed by the CIVICUS Monitor in March 2023. The challenge for civil society is that these actions bring governments a level of public support, which is why parties offer anti-migrant rhetoric ahead of elections.

Drawing partly on the above, three overarching barriers to the protection and functioning of civic space and civil society have been reported in Greece<sup>7</sup>:



-  Criminalisation of solidarity against those working with refugees and asylum seekers remains a concern.
-  Strict registration rules and the existence of multiple registries for CSOs continue to hinder their work.
-  Surveillance and arbitrary lawsuits against independent journalists are a major concern as press freedom is ranked worst in the EU.



<sup>7</sup> [https://civic-forum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Civic-Space-Report-2024\\_ECF.pdf](https://civic-forum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Civic-Space-Report-2024_ECF.pdf)



Restrictive peaceful assembly law

New concerning legislation that regulates public outdoor assemblies was introduced in January 2021. The law (4703/2020), among other issues, gives authorities the discretionary power to disperse or prohibit assemblies. In July 2022, the mayor of Athens requested from the Ministers of Interior and Citizens Protection the right to license -and therefore limit- assemblies in the country's capital<sup>8</sup>.

Freedom of association

Since 2020 a series of legislative measures have hampered the exercise of freedom of association in Greece, especially for CSOs and individuals working on migration-related issues. According to the Civic Space Report<sup>9</sup>, National, European, and international human rights bodies have raised concerns about the Registries of the Ministry of Migration and Asylum. NGOs have either been able to register after the competent authorities have intervened or have been refused registration altogether, forcing them to cease their activities.

Following pressure, in 2023 the Ministry of Migration and Asylum unofficially communicated that the registration requirements would be reviewed and amended, but no such actions have been taken to date. Public information regarding how many CSOs were accepted or rejected in 2023 is not available and the selection criteria remain unclear. According to the EU Commission's 2023 Rule of Law report, there are nine registries in the country and their parallel existence remains an issue. In October, the Ministry of Interior launched two more digital databases, a Public Database and a Special Registry that will collect information about CSOs, their operations and the state funding they receive (Joint Ministerial Decision 6216/2023). While the registries are important to ensure transparency and NGO regulations, over 300 NGOs expressed concerns about the legislation when it was proposed in 2021, in particular over the databases which introduce many registration requirements. This could weaken and hinder CSOs' work and create bureaucratic burdens for smaller organisations.

Furthermore, the same Civic Space Report<sup>10</sup> notes that the databases do not replace other registries and organisations registered in one of the other mentioned registries will not be automatically registered in the new one. CSOs will have to follow all registration procedures and resubmit an electronic application every year to remain registered, which is necessary to access national funding. In private communication, the Ministry of Civil Protection and Climate Crisis mentioned that it is in the process of creating its own registry which will increase the number of registries in the country and the administrative burden for CSOs.

Funding for civil society

According to the [2022 European Civic Forum response](#) to the European Commission Stakeholder consultation on the rule of law in the EU, following the new legislation that introduced strict requirements for the registration of NGOs, NGOs unable to register will not be able to access government funding. Funds from the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework and the new EU Recovery and Resilience Facility, which could have supported the sector during the pandemic's challenging times, were not allocated for such purposes. The country's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) does not include civil society as a beneficiary, while the government has yet to take adequate measures to include CSOs in the planning, monitoring and implementation of EU Funds, as per the EC's guidelines.

Funding challenges remain exacerbated for CSOs working with marginalised and excluded groups. For example, in Greece, the government has delayed the continuation of some CSO work programmes and the renewals of contracts and payments, which resulted in Metadrasi, an organisation providing interpretation services for migrants and refugees, reducing its interpretation services by 80 per cent<sup>11</sup>.

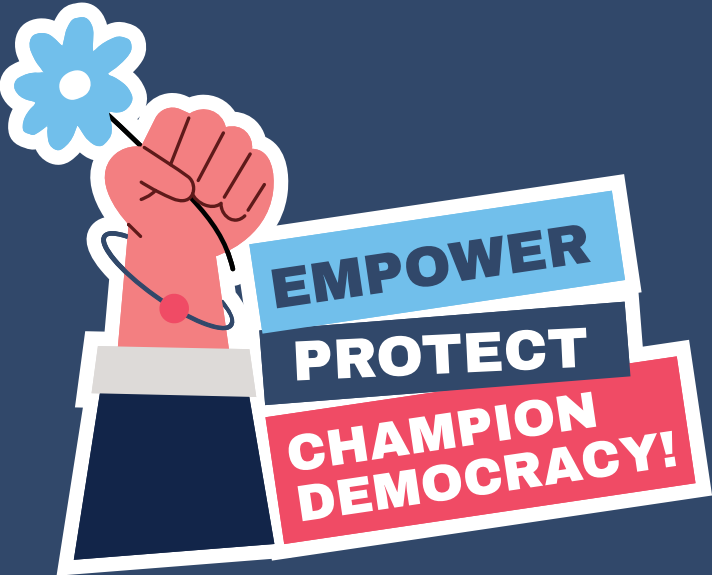
Limited measures were taken to include CSOs in the planning, monitoring and implementation of funds, especially of EU funds, disregarding the European Commission's guidelines. As a result, access to state funding opportunities is limited and information is fragmented. Delays in the continuation of programmes, in the renewals of contracts and the payment from the government's side is common, leaving organisations and people in need in limbo for months.

8 [https://www.civicus.org/documents/reports-and-publications/SOCS/2024/state-of-civil-society-report-2024\\_en.pdf](https://www.civicus.org/documents/reports-and-publications/SOCS/2024/state-of-civil-society-report-2024_en.pdf)  
9 [https://civic-forum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Civic-Space-Report-2024\\_ECF.pdf](https://civic-forum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Civic-Space-Report-2024_ECF.pdf)

10 *ibid*  
11 [https://civic-forum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Civic-Space-Report-2024\\_ECF.pdf](https://civic-forum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Civic-Space-Report-2024_ECF.pdf)







# Public discourse and societal challenges

## Trends in public discourse and societal attitudes on CSOs

As mentioned above, Greece has an overall underdeveloped civil society. Several factors have been proposed to explain why this is the case ([Huliaras 2020](#)). One key reason is the dominance and influence of political parties, which maintain organized representations in labor and student unions, while many NGOs rely heavily on state or ministry funding (often supplemented by EU funds). Additionally, there is a long-standing tradition of a narrow, communitarian sense of trust—often confined to extended family members—without much emphasis on the common good, non-family members, the welfare state, or civil society as a whole. This situation is further rooted in the legacy of clientelism and patronage dating back to the long period of Ottoman rule (1453–1830). Social attitudes and concepts of the self, shaped by religious and cultural factors, have also played a role. For example, the dominant Orthodox Christian tradition, with its mystical, otherworldly focus and weak emphasis on individuality, is thought to have influenced societal attitudes towards civil society ([Marangoudakis, Rontos, and Xenitidou 2013](#)).

Yet, the overall public distrust towards civil society appears to have changed to an important degree.

For instance, according to the European Social Survey, in 2008 and to the question...

*“Can we trust or should we be cautious of other people?”*

**59.8%** of Greeks responded that “we should be cautious” (in comparison to a 38.8% average in Europe).

Similar responses were also obtained to the question

*“Do you believe that most people would try to take advantage of you if they had the opportunity or would they be fair to you”, where*

**62.1%** of the respondents answered that most people would try to take advantage of them (in comparison to 28.4% in Europe).

Finally, in the question

*“Do you believe that people often help each other or they care mostly about themselves”,*

**58.3%** of the respondents answered that “people care more about themselves” (in comparison to 31.3% in Europe).

More recently, drawing on the 2024 survey conducted by Dianeosis<sup>12</sup>, though public benefit foundations and Civil Society NGOs - with a wide range of activities - play a vital role in the effort to improve the living conditions of citizens and specialised communities in greatest need, the degree of awareness regarding their actions is recorded at low levels, with a minority of the public (38.1% vs. 36.1% in 2018) stating that they have sufficient knowledge about the work of public benefit institutions (i.e. they are very and fairly aware of their activities). The same survey found that, regardless of the degree of familiarity with their actions, 2 out of 3 Greeks (68.7%) have a positive evaluation of charitable foundations. For those who know about the latter’s actions, the percentage of positive evaluation increases to 82.7%, and for those who trust their actions, to 84.5%.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.dianeosis.org/2024/11/koinonia-twn-politwn-kai-filanthropia-2024/>



## Examples of smearing campaigns and digital threats

The following two developments are indicative of the challenges posed to civil society:

### Criminalisation and trial proceedings by Greek authorities against CSOs working in solidarity with refugees and asylum seekers:

In January 2023, a trial began for activists Sarah Mardini, Seán Binder, Nassos Karakitsos, and 21 other aid workers who had been involved in search-and-rescue efforts on the Greek island of Lesbos in 2018. They face charges of espionage and forgery. However, after the trial began, the Greek appeals court annulled the summons for foreign defendants, citing issues with translation and lack of clarity in the espionage charges. Despite this, the Prosecutor of the Supreme Court filed an annulment application against the court’s decision. Further investigations into Mardini and other humanitarian workers are ongoing, with potential sentences of up to 20 years.

*“Criminalisation of solidarity is a serious concern in Greece and increasingly throughout the EU. EU institutions should use all available rule-of-law mechanisms to ensure that Greek authorities stop targeting civil society and activists defending refugee rights,”*

said Aarti Narsee, Policy and Advocacy Officer at the European Civic Forum.



### Challenges to media freedom:

The CIVICUS Monitor and the European Civic Forum (ECF) express concern about the escalating targeting of journalists. This includes surveillance, the use of Strategic Litigation against Public Participation (SLAPPs), and restrictive laws that undermine media freedom.

Under the pretext of national security, the National Intelligence Service (EYP) has systematically ordered surveillance against investigative journalists, people working with refugees and others increasingly in recent years and especially after a law on the confidentiality of communications was amended in 2021. At least 33 people, including Greek journalist Thanasis Koukakis and several others, including opposition politicians were targeted with illegal spyware Predator on their devices. Investigative journalist Tasos Teloglou who covered the ongoing spyware scandal was placed under surveillance by Greek secret services for “unspecified national security reasons”. The government and most recently the chief prosecutor tried to block efforts to investigate surveillance carried out by the Greek secret services by the Hellenic Authority for Communication Security and Privacy (ADAE), an independent body.

In December 2022, the parliament passed a new controversial regulation which creates a special committee to monitor compliance of online media to journalistic ethics, and gives it power to exclude online media from government financial support and state advertisements, for as long as two years. Press freedom groups have raised concerns that the law may be misused to exclude critical media from receiving state advertising revenue.

In its 2023 Rule of Law report on Greece, the European Commission recommended that the government take forward the process of adopting non-legislative safeguards and start the legislative process to protect journalists. No progress has been made in this regard as attacks, weak legal protection, surveillance, abusive strategic lawsuits against journalists and civic actors and government interference in the media landscape continued. While an investigation for the use of Pegasus spyware against journalists, activists and opposition politicians has been initiated by the National Intelligence Service (EYP), progress has been slow, and no charges have been brought. Instead, the government hindered investigations.

According to Human Rights Watch (Greek Surveillance Lawsuit Aims to Silence Journalism – Reform Needed to Tackle Threat to Media Freedom), by Eva Cossé, on December 5, a court in Athens will hear a defamation lawsuit against journalists who exposed state surveillance by Greek authorities. The case, brought by Grigoris Dimitriadis, nephew of Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, fits into the category of cases referred to as “strategic lawsuits against public participation” (SLAPPs), whose primary purpose is to deter critical reporting.

Dimitriadis filed the lawsuit against the newspaper Efimerida ton Syntakton (Editor’s Journal, EfSyn), three of its executives, and journalists Nikolas Leontopoulos, Thodoris Chondrogiannos, and Christoforos Kasdaglis from investigative outlet Reporters United. He had previously brought a lawsuit against EfSyn, Reporters United, and Leontopoulos and Chondrogiannos, as well as journalist Thanasis Koukakis. The court dismissed that case in October, citing the public interest value and veracity of the journalists’ reporting.

Both cases stem from the journalists’ investigations into the “Predatorgate” surveillance scandal involving the use of spyware to hack the devices of political figures, prominent businesspeople, and journalists, allegedly by Greek intelligence services and on direct orders from the prime minister’s office. In the fallout from the scandal, Dimitriadis resigned as general secretary in the prime minister’s office and from his role overseeing the National Intelligence Service (Ethnikí Ypiresía Pliroforión, EYP). Now, despite the earlier case’s dismissal, Dimitriadis is back in court seeking €3.3 million in damages and the removal of articles implicating him in the surveillance scheme.

Dimitriadis’ legal actions against those who uncovered the scandal come amidst growing concerns around impunity in Greece for those responsible for illegal surveillance of citizens. Last July, the Supreme Court prosecutor cleared all Greek state agencies and officials of responsibility for the use of Predator spyware, despite documented evidence of their involvement, including findings from a European Parliament investigation. This raises serious concerns that Greek authorities prioritize protecting those in power over accountability.

According to HRW, Dimitriadis’ cases highlight the urgent need for the Greek government to take concrete steps to protect journalists from legal intimidation, including by enacting robust anti-SLAPP legislation. Such legislation has been agreed on at the EU level in November 2023. The government should also ensure transparency and accountability regarding the surveillance scandals.



# Participatory Consultations

## Direct experiences and perceptions of CSO professionals and activists

### Questions for interviews:

- 1. Can you describe the current legal and political environment affecting CSOs in your country?
- 2. Have you encountered specific incidents of threats or attacks against your organization? Please describe.
- 3. What are the main challenges your organization faces in sustaining civic space?
- 4. What strategies and practices have been effective in overcoming these challenges?
- 5. How does the state and the national legal framework influence your organization's activities and operations?



### Questions for Focus Groups:



- 1. Can you share a personal experience where you faced a significant challenge while working in the civic space?
- 2. How safe and empowered do you feel in your civic activities?
- 3. What types of legal and financial support have you received, and how effective have they been?
- 4. Have you ever felt that your freedom of expression has been compromised? How did you deal with it?
- 5. What digital tools do you use for your activism, and what challenges have you faced?

## Key findings from interviews and focus groups

Breakdown of respondents' profile (number of respondents by gender identity, role/profession, field of work)

Respondent	Gender identity	Role	Field of work
No1	Male	Founder and director of an NGO	Human rights
No2	Female	In charge of child protection	Child protection
No3	Female	Trainer, Management and Development	Gender Equality
No4	Female	Project Management	Youth association that strives for universal human values, peace, progress, prosperity and environmental protection.
No5	Female	Project Management	Youth protection and gender equality
No6	Male	Founder, Project Manager and Development	Monitoring Parliament and Enhancing Democracy
No7	Female	Project Manager/ Researcher	Human Rights
No8	Male	Project Manager	Child Protection
No9	Male	First-line worker	Crisis management and social support
No10	Male	Project Management and Development	Gender Equality
No11	Female	Project Management/ Advisor	Child Protection
No12	Male	Social Worker	Child and Refugee Protection
No13	Female	Project Manager/ Researcher	Youth and Racism
No14	Male	Project Manager/ Researcher	Youth and Racism
No15	Male	Project Manager/ Researcher	Refugee Protection





Has the Greek civic space changed over the last decade? If so, in what ways?

A significant degree of consensus amongst participants emerged over the fact that, in spite of the several difficulties at a social, economic and political level (as described below), Greek civil society has blossomed over the last decade. A professional with one of the longest experiences in the civil society field in the country shared his memory from 2002 with the chairman of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child who noted, during his visit in Athens: “I think there is no culture of human rights in your country”. Indeed, according to another interviewee, “when we first started our CSO (in 2013) we were the only ones, and suddenly two or three years later many more organizations started to spring up”.

An interesting interpretation of this phenomenon is that it constitutes a sort of “big bang”, which happened as a result of the two big crises the country underwent, namely the financial and then the refugee crisis. The pressure and dire consequences of these developments, according to an interviewee, led to a very big rise of organisations (based, of course, on a simultaneous increase in funding).

In addition to their increasing number, CSOs have also become much more diversified. Another interviewee observed that not so long ago civil society in Greece was mainly concerned with animals, the homeless and with saving the environment. But, over the last few years, there has been a resurgence of organizations that deal with broader issues, such as feminism and gender rights, LGBTQi+ issues, migration and asylum, human and fundamental rights, etc.

This “big bang” subsequently led to a context wherein NGOs would emerge frequently, employing additional individuals as part of their endeavours. While, in itself, the employment of individuals is certainly not a bad thing, an interviewee observed the following implication:



*It became possible for a great many people to work in this space, which, of course, by definition is not [bad]... I mean, it is positive that this opportunity was given, but there were too many people found working in this space without necessarily having the knowledge or the experience.*

Experience of specific incidents of threats or attacks against your organization.

Most interviewees have experienced threats or negative comments and hate speech against their activism on social media. As an interviewee specified:



*The truth is that a lot of times, especially on social media we get comments that are generally, not threatening exactly, but are rather aggressive in general, but not threatening. I don't know what has happened in the past. I think some people have come into the office but there are safety protocols here as well, for this specific reason.*

Other participants had much more intense experiences. For instance, an interviewee described how in 2019-2020 they experienced a parade of threats and attacks on their staff members on the islands of Samos and Lesvos, including the beating of a colleague, and the destruction of vehicles. The same NGO, which had been active around the protection of minor refugees, had been targeted by a right-wing extremist group and they were receiving threats on the phone and even in their headquarters - the reason for which they had to enhance security measures. Similarly, an NGO professional working on gender rights, described how in 2022, one of their events which entailed the narration of Christmas stories by Drag Queens (“The Drag Queen who saved Christmas”) at a kindergarten in Thessaloniki was targeted by far-right, homophobic individuals who demonstrated in front of the school and on social media.


Lastly, an activist with a long experience in the Greek civic space - in the human rights field - observed that, though they have not endured actual physical violence, they have been victims of SLAPPs, which is also a form of violence, several times - while some of these cases are still pending.





Aspects in which the narrowing of civic space is most pronounced

The narrowing of civic space in Greece is more pronounced in specific areas, which seem to be touching upon controversial and divisive issues. As such, and drawing on the testimonies of the actors consulted, the professionals and activists that face the greatest challenges are those involved with broadly three issues:

- (i) refugee protection;
  - (ii) gender equality-related issues and
  - (iii) the monitoring of democratic procedures.
- 

The civic actors involved in these have experienced a narrowing of their space and limiting of their impact through:

- actual state intervention to attack their work and reputation (SLAPPs),
- overall expression of state suspicion and hesitance to engage with civil society more broadly;
- civil/societal reactions (in the form of hate speech, demonstrations, attacks, etc), primarily stemming from the extreme right of the political spectrum.

Extent of the legal and judicial sphere impact on the respondents' activities

The views of the respondents were different around the question of the impact of the legal sphere on their activities, based on the extent to which the latter have initiated actual legal proceedings against them. As mentioned above, it seems that the activists and professionals whose work has been most significantly hampered by the legal sphere are those who are active in refugee rights, and who have reported and exposed certain practices of the Greek state that violate international law and human rights (most notably, pushbacks, as well as the shipwrecks carrying migrants/refugees within the Greek sea borders).

The civil society actors active in other fields have not faced actual attacks by the judicial system. Instead, they have chosen to take certain cases, themselves, before national and international courts, around a number of issues (slander, freedom of expression, GDPR and child protection, etc).

Finally, it is important to mention that none of the respondents or their organisations receive legal support. In most cases, they rely on lawyers who either work in their organisation or friends/acquaintances who are willing (often pro bono) to help carry out legal work and represent them (either in national or international courts, such as the European Court of Human Rights).

Ways that respondents are affected by governmental or local policies and how do these affect society

In general, and drawing on the comments of one interviewee, "it is common knowledge that people working in NGOs [in Greece and beyond] are generally overworked and underpaid". Specifically, the governmental policies, legislation and state attitudes more broadly that seem to hinder the activities of civil society organisations can be narrowed down to:

- confusing legislation around the rules underlying their financial and legal status
- bureaucratic obstacles
- lack of a coherent national action plan and definitions of the role and purpose of civil society organisations
- lack of funding, and in general a consistent challenge of finding sources of funding (either private or public).  
*An interviewee explained that, especially if one is not active in the field of migration and asylum, securing funding may be very challenging and time consuming. In addition, many NGOs cannot accept funding from certain foundations that belong to traditionally well-off families, which play a significant part in Greek affairs. The same applies to receiving funding from political parties or from the government, as many interviewees stressed that they do not wish to receive such financial support and prefer to instead act as independent CSOs.*
- suspicion expressed both by state actors and the public (see below) around the objectives and status of CSOs in the country.



Public perceptions of CSOs

In the light of the recent and ongoing legislative and policy developments, a further issue discussed by all interviewees as one of the key factors affecting the functioning of CSOs concerns the changes in the public perceptions around civil society in Greece. Some participants expressed the view that, though there seemed to have been a tendency to “embrace” civil society actors in the country around 2014-2016, the refugee crisis acted as a catalyst for a shift in public opinion. This, combined with the coronavirus pandemic, had a significant impact on the ways in which the public saw NGOs. As one interviewee active in the field explains: “The events just before the coronavirus, especially at the entry points, certainly showed us a big, terrible shift in society against NGOs”.

Indeed, most participants seemed to agree that, in spite of the proliferation of NGOs over the last decade, the majority of the population still sees the latter with suspicion:



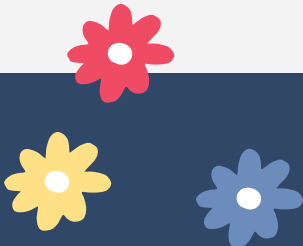
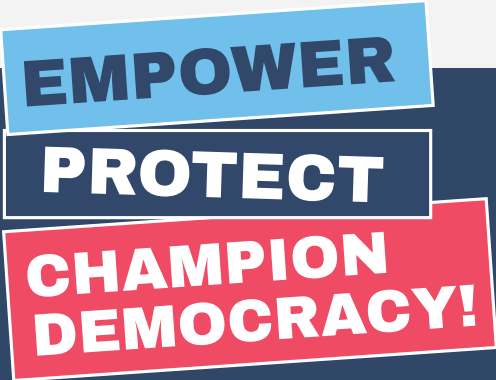
*The general public thinks that we don't do any work, that we use up the money, I still see that. That is the reality. Most people are possibly stuck in a more superficial view, that some directors of big organizations have used up the money.*

According to another interviewee, this suspicion is largely due to the fact that the general public is in fact unaware of the actual work and objectives of NGOs:



*They cannot know. Okay, the truth is that even a person, if you don't explain it to them, even our parents. I mean I see it with my mother: if I didn't explain what I did and how many people work on these projects, how many structures there are, they would still think that we mismanage fundings and use up the money.*

Another reason for such suspicion, as mentioned by an interviewee, stems from the past cases of corruption linked to certain civil society actors. As he explained: “When you have these examples of corruption with NGOs that were then supported by crooks and political figures who misappropriated public money, then it makes sense that trust levels towards NGOs are so low”. Thus, the low levels of public trust are due to the perceived idea of the predominance of a “culture of corruption and of suspicious funding that supports the work of CSOs”. As another participant argued, such tendencies can only be influenced by spreading knowledge about the role and functioning of NGOs - with real-life examples - and by seeking to build a “culture of giving and understanding”.







## Conclusions and recommendations

### Summary of key findings

Over the past decade, Greece's civil society has experienced significant growth and transformation, evolving into a more dynamic and diversified space, despite facing substantial challenges. Key developments include the increase in the number and variety of CSOs, spurred by crises such as the financial and refugee ones. These events acted as a "big bang" that expanded the scope of activism, with new organizations addressing a wider range of issues, including gender rights, LGBTQi+ issues, migration, and human rights. The professionalization of the sector has created employment opportunities, though the rapid expansion has led to concerns about the adequacy of experience and knowledge among newcomers.

However, this flourishing of civil society has not come without significant setbacks. The space in which civil society operates in Greece remains challenging. The European Commission has expressed concerns regarding the situation of civil society in last year's Rule of Law report. Both verbal and physical attacks against CSOs and human rights defenders, especially those working on migration, have continued in recent years. Many organizations have faced threats, hate speech, and, in some cases, physical violence, especially those involved in sensitive areas such as refugee protection, gender equality, and democratic oversight. While state intervention in some cases has directly targeted organizations, civil society actors also face challenges from the broader societal and political climate, particularly from far-right factions. Moreover, public perceptions of CSOs remain mixed, with widespread suspicion about corruption and mismanagement, particularly due to past scandals involving some NGOs.

Governmental policies and legislation have created barriers for CSOs, with issues such as confusing legal frameworks, bureaucratic hurdles, limited funding, and an overall lack of a clear national strategy for supporting civil society. These challenges are compounded by a public that often remains unaware of the positive work undertaken by CSOs and tends to view their activities with skepticism.



## Recommendations for improving civic space and protecting CSOs

Some recommendations according to the participatory consultations and desk research include:

### Enhancing Public Awareness and Trust:

To combat public skepticism, CSOs must focus on educating the public about their role, the work they do, and the positive impact they have. Transparency in financial management, clearer communication of their goals, and showcasing successful projects could help dispel misconceptions and build trust. In addition, efforts should be made to highlight the value of NGOs in tackling critical social issues and supporting vulnerable populations.

**Strengthening Legal and Policy Frameworks:** The Greek government should work toward creating clearer and more coherent legal and financial frameworks for CSOs. Simplifying bureaucratic processes, providing consistent guidelines, and ensuring access to public funding would significantly enhance the ability of civil society organizations to operate effectively. A national action plan outlining the role of CSOs in Greek society would provide the clarity needed for both CSOs and the public. This will subsequently also lead to a clearer, common understanding of the very definition and concept of "civil society organisations" that is currently missing.

### Addressing Threats and Attacks on Activists:

There seems to be a pressing need for stronger legal protections for civil society actors, especially those in sensitive fields such as refugee protection and gender equality. Governments and local authorities should implement measures to ensure the safety of activists and provide legal recourse for those who face threats or physical violence. Moreover, clear protocols for responding to hate speech and attacks on social media should be established.

### Encouraging Independent Funding and Reducing Dependency on Political Sources:

CSOs should be encouraged to diversify their funding sources to avoid dependency on political or corporate entities that could compromise their independence. Exploring innovative funding mechanisms, including crowdfunding and partnerships with international organizations, could help reduce financial pressures. Additionally, creating a more supportive environment for small and medium-sized organizations to secure funding would ensure a diverse and vibrant civil society landscape.

### Promoting Inclusivity and Professional Development:

As civil society in the country grows, there should be a focus on the professionalization and capacity building of CSOs. Training programs, mentoring, and networking opportunities for new activists and organizations can help ensure that the growth of the sector is sustainable and that staff have the expertise needed to address complex social issues effectively.



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