

Youth policy in Greece



Council of Europe
international review

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COUNCIL OF EUROPE



CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

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Preface

Greece, officially the Hellenic Republic and known since ancient times as Hellas, is strategically located at the crossroads of Europe, western Asia and Africa. It forms the southern extremity of the Balkan peninsula in South-Eastern Europe, and shares land borders with Albania to the north-west, “the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” and Bulgaria to the north, and Turkey to the north-east. The geopolitical position of Greece largely conditions the dynamics of its internal and external economic, political, cultural, and social processes.



Ancient Greece is credited with great advances in philosophy, medicine, mathematics and astronomy. Moreover, Greek city-states were pioneers in developing democratic forms of government. Greece is often called the birthplace of western civilisation, and it is reasonable to say that “[t]he historical and cultural heritage of Greece continues to resonate throughout the modern world – in literature, art, philosophy and politics.”¹ The culture of Greece, however, has evolved over thousands of years, being influenced by other cultures and nations to the present day. The international review team notes that while the signs of Greek history and culture are very visible, those indicating crisis and recession, however, are not immediately obvious. The dominant patterns of both traditional culture and contemporary youth culture appear to be especially resilient to the economic crisis, as seen for instance in the cafés full of young people in the central areas of Athens and Thessaloníki. On the other hand, the available data and the statements of many of our respondents reveal rather different circumstances and perspectives.

The modern Greek state, which comprises much of the historical core of Ancient Greece, was established in 1830 following a war to liberate itself from the Ottoman Empire. In 1974, after a seven-year period of dictatorship, a referendum was held and the constitutional monarchy was discarded in favour of a presidential parliamentary democracy. Modern Greece has a republican structure based on the constitution of 1975. The country became a member of the Council of Europe on 9 August 1949, and acceded to the European Union (EU) on 1 January 1981, joining the eurozone in 2001. It is also a founding member of the United Nations, and a member of many other international institutions, including the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and the World Trade Organization (WTO).

According to the 2011 census, the population of Greece is around 11 million. The country consists of nine geographic regions. Athens is the capital and the largest city, and more than half of Greek industry is located there. The main economic sectors are agriculture, tourism, construction, and shipping. While Greece’s economy is the largest in the Balkans, lately it has been in the headlines for its high public debt levels. According to an OECD report (2010), the economic difficulties that contemporary Greek society and economy face go deeper than the direct effects of the recent economic crisis. Besides the severity of its fiscal problems, Greece has gradually but consistently undergone a loss of international cost competitiveness, resulting in widening current account deficits and a deteriorating international investment position, followed by a poor record of inward foreign direct investment. Resolving these problems, the OECD asserts, requires policy action on a broader front.

Accordingly, the member states of the EU have sent a clear political message of solidarity, and demonstrated their willingness to take co-ordinated action. Increased pressure on the euro and a still-deteriorating financial situation has led to several bailout packages agreed on by the “Troika” – the EU, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund – to address the country’s financial woes.

1. See <http://europa.eu/about-eu/countries/member-countries/greece>, accessed 18 December 2014.

While attempts by the Greek Parliament to reduce the deficit and secure another round of aid were reflected in the introduction of additional austerity measures, including wage and job reductions, these initiatives were resoundingly criticised by the political opposition and the general public, and met with mass protests. The international review team received the impression that many in Greece worry that several years of recession, austerity measures and soaring unemployment risk sending the country into a violent tailspin.

Recent OECD data² show that Greece, which has been under an internationally co-ordinated adjustment programme since 2010, has made impressive headway in cutting its fiscal deficit and implementing structural reforms to raise labour-market flexibility and improve labour competitiveness. Despite fiscal measures which cushioned the impact on inequality, the recession and fiscal consolidation have worsened income distribution and poverty as unemployment has risen and real incomes have declined. The reports stress that economic recovery, even once firmly established, should not be expected to quickly put an end to the social and labour-market crisis. To prevent economic difficulties from becoming entrenched, Greece now needs to invest in better and more cost-effective social support measures.

Although major structural reforms have been introduced in several domains, the governance of the social programme remains a challenge. The sharp rise in the unemployment rate, especially for young people, has not been adequately matched by activation policies. Various current analyses, however, stress that the crisis has opened a window of opportunity for Greece to engage in deep fiscal structural reforms and address its structural weaknesses. Special attention should be given to developmental opportunities in alternative areas such as the green economy, as well as resources embedded in human capital, especially Greek youth.

2. OECD economic Surveys 2013: www.oecd.org/eco/surveys/GRC_Overview_Eng_2013.pdf; "Society at a Glance 2014 – The crisis and its aftermath", © OECD March 2014, www.oecd.org/social/societyataglance.htm. Websites accessed 14 January 2015.

Introduction

THE 20TH INTERNATIONAL REVIEW AND THE REVIEW PROCESS

Greece was the context for the 20th Council of Europe international review of national youth policy, at the invitation of the (former) Secretary General of the Greek General Secretariat for Youth (GSY), Mr Giannos Livanos. Given the time lapse between the preparation and execution of such an international review, and the fast-changing social condition of young people in Greece, it was entirely reasonable for the Secretary General of GSY Mr Panagiotis Kannelopoulos to ask: “What impact do these reviews have on young people, now that circumstances for the young are so radically changed?”

To address this question, it is important to convey that the Council of Europe international reviews of national youth policies are a two-way process of exchange, dialogue, and learning, wherein the value of the final outcome is highly contingent on mutual understanding of complementary needs, subsequent collaboration, and the collation of relevant information. Bearing in mind the complexity of the crisis and its impact on youth in Greece, the fulfilment of these distinct objectives becomes even more important. These objectives are to reflect and advise on national youth policy, identifying elements that may provide useful ideas and lessons for national youth policies elsewhere, and to identify components of national youth policy that assist in the elaboration of a framework for thinking about youth policy across Europe (Williamson 2002). The international reviews are thus designed to contribute to a learning process about the broad development and implementation of youth policy in Europe.

The members of the 20th international review team in Greece were: Mr Alexis Ridde (nominee of the CDEJ, the European Steering Committee on Youth, and chair of the review), Ms Aušrinė Armonaitė (nominee of the Advisory Council on Youth, representing youth organisations), Ms Anna Trigona (Secretariat, from the Youth Department of the Council of Europe), Ms Sladjana Petkovic (researcher/rapporteur), Prof. Dr Maurice Devlin (expert/researcher), and Prof. Dr Howard Williamson (researcher/co-ordinator). The team, comprising members from France, Lithuania, France/Malta, Montenegro/Serbia, Ireland, and Wales respectively, brought diverse experience and expertise to the review.