Mannheim social scientists: Greece lacks many things - above all trust

The country with the biggest deficit of trust in Europe not only needs more money but also a new civil society. A study by Prof. Dr. Jan W. van Deth and Dr. Yannis Theocharis

The deeper reasons for Greece’s decline are social and political, rather than economic or financial. This is the conclusion reached by social scientists Prof. Dr. Jan W. van Deth and Dr. Yannis Theocharis of the Mannheim Centre for European Social Research (MZES) at the University of Mannheim. According to the two researchers, the long-term cross-national “European Social Survey” (ESS) confirms that Greece is suffering from a lack of social and political trust that is unique in Europe. In many respects, they conclude, this is fatal for any society.

Is the cause of the “Greek Tragedy” not so much a question of money as one of social interaction? The answer, according to Jan van Deth, Professor of Political Science and International Comparative Social Research, is “yes”. In his view, Greece's financial malaise and economic decline are only the most obvious symptoms of a long-term crisis of trust that has paralysed the country’s social institutions and people’s social interaction. “No democracy can function without a minimum of inter-personal trust and confidence in the country's political institutions – or at least it cannot function properly in the long-term.” According to van Deth this is not just theoretically the case but also empirically demonstrable.

Little trust in political institutions – but not just since the crisis

Dr. Yannis Theocharis, a Greek national who studied and wrote his Ph.D in London and is now a Research Fellow and Project Director at the Mannheim Centre states: “Our investigations indicate that even in the years before the economic and financial crisis, the Greeks had very low levels of confidence in most relevant social institutions, compared with other European countries. All that has happened during the crisis is that this loss of confidence has been exacerbated.” Greece consistently ranks last in terms of confidence in parliament, politicians and parties amongst 18 countries investigated in Europe.

Greece also at the bottom of the table in Europe for interpersonal trust

Nor is the lack of confidence in the Greek state, its organs and its representatives balanced by any greater degree of interpersonal trust amongst the country’s citizens. While the European average on a scale from zero (no trust in other people) to ten (complete trust) is always between five and six, a long-term comparison reveals that Greece never achieves a figure
higher than three to four. With a few exceptions in the past, when Portuguese, Cypriots and Slovenians for a while had less trust in each other, the personal mistrust of their fellow citizens by Greeks has been the strongest of all countries for many years. “Even in terms of interpersonal relations, Greek society emerges as having Europe’s highest levels of mistrust, and this impacts negatively on all forms of social cooperation,” sums up Yannis Theocharis.

The main reason, according to the authors, is the long history of systematic patronage exercised by the two main political parties in the past, which has cemented inequality of opportunity and – amongst other problems – has resulted in an inflated and inefficient public sector. Public life, according to van Deth and Theocharis, is almost completely in the hands of networks dominated by the political parties. This poisons the social climate and stifles all other forms of social involvement which in properly functioning democracies would give rise to a high degree of social relationships, social control – and economic value added.

**Unique opportunity for civil society to make a new start**

The authors reach the conclusion that it is important not only to adopt economic measures but also to initiate a new start for society as a whole. It will be a Sisyphean task, but is not entirely impossible, according to van Deth and Theocharis: the loss of power on the part of the old elites and the urgent need for reform offer a unique opportunity to bring about a change in the predominant social and political culture. The Mannheim social scientists recommend, amongst other things, that Athens should promote independent social initiatives instead of party political old-boy networks. There is also a need to intervene in the education system – in Sweden, for example, civic education is taught at pre-school level; in Greece, the subject does not even feature in teacher training.

In order to reform public administration, the Mannheim researchers recommend that the government, in its dealings with the country’s citizens, should adhere strictly to the principles of fairness, equality before the law and transparency. This applies in particular to street-level bureaucrats who actually have direct contact with citizens when it comes to implementing and enforcing regulations and pursuing infringements. At this level, according to Theocharis, corruption is particularly rife. Possible measures have already been drawn up by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and these should now be implemented in full.

By contrast, Theocharis describes as counter-productive the idea under consideration in Athens of deploying ordinary citizens as undercover amateur tax investigators, as such an approach could, in his opinion, further weaken social cohesion.

**Further information and contact:**

Yannis Theocharis and Jan van Deth have published their study, together with further policy recommendations, in the English-language journal “Representation”. The structure of their paper is based on that of a classic Greek tragedy and is already available online: Theocharis, Yannis, and Jan W. van Deth (in press): A Modern Tragedy? Institutional Causes and Democratic Consequences of the Greek Crisis. Representation. ISSN: 0034-4893 (print); 1749-4001 (online); DOI: 10.1080/00344893.2015.1011464.
The data used is based mainly on the “European Social Survey” (ESS), which since 2001 has collected information about attitudes, beliefs and behaviour patterns of diverse populations in more than thirty European nations. The MZES and the University of Mannheim have been involved in the German part of the survey ever since the ESS was first launched, cf. http://www.mzes.uni-mannheim.de/d7/de/projects/gesellschaft-und-demokratie-in-europa-deutsche-teilstudie-im-projekt-european-social-survey-ess.

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