

Hellenic Observatory Research Calls Programme

The Paradoxes and Mixed Record of Culture Wars in Contemporary Greece

Policy Brief

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Key Points

- Culture wars in Greece have included, among other issues, disputes over responses to vaccination in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, challenges posed to Greek national identity by migrants and refugees, the emergence of modern forms of gender identity and partnerships, and fears about national identity in the context of Greece's relations with neighbouring countries and the European Union.
- Participants in Greek culture wars have been not so much identity groups, but political and administrative institutions, including ministries, independent public authorities, the courts, and official church authorities.
- In Greece rarely have culture wars been waged outside the arena of political party competition, with political parties taking sides depending on their status as government vs. opposition and/or on political ideology. It is war-like conflict among political parties rather than cultural wars that have dominated the Greek public sphere.
- Opinion surveys confirm that Greeks trust only a small circle of their relatives or friends, and that they hold xenophobic attitudes towards migrants and refugees and intolerant attitudes towards non-traditional gender identities and same-sex couples.
- Focus group research points in a different direction. In practice, Greeks, holding pragmatic views, do not reject inflows of migrants and refugees as jobseekers in the labour market, wherever there is labour demand. Greeks may not consider these inflows as a threat to their national identity; nor do

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they think that Greece's opening to the EU and reconciliation with North Macedonia is a challenge to Greek national identity. Finally, Greeks are pragmatists with regard to cohabitation and single-parent families, but are concerned about same-sex marriages and the raising of children by homosexual couples.

- In view of the above, in Greece it is more accurate to speak of cultural tensions rather than typical culture wars.

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POLICY BRIEF

Executive Summary

While in other Western societies the major participants of culture wars are social groups engaging in identity politics, in Greece participants in such wars have been not so much identity groups, but political and administrative institutions, including ministries, independent public authorities, the courts and official church authorities. Moreover, in post-1974 Greece's party democracy, culture wars have been interwoven with on-going political party conflict. Parties have used culture wars as arenas in which to expand the usual conflict between government and opposition and/or ideological conflict.

In this context, our research has focused on four different wars, namely, wars over personal freedom from compulsory vaccination (particularly Covid-19 vaccines), over the challenges posed to national identity by migrants and refugees, over traditional family vs. modern forms of gender identity and family, and over the Greek national identity in opposition to the European one.

We have explored the four wars through the study of opinion surveys and official documents (parliamentary minutes, press articles) and through conducting four focus groups, one per culture war.

Opinion surveys show that Greeks hold a mix of materialist and post-materialist values, in which, in the wake of the economic crisis, materialist concerns are still preponderant. Surveys confirm that Greeks mistrust the "Other", including anyone beyond a small circle of relatives and friends. They are xenophobic towards migrants and refugees and intolerant of modern, unconventional family forms and gender identities.

Yet, focus groups, conducted in the context of this research, suggest otherwise. Greeks may be more pragmatic in their behaviour than what is usually thought. They do not feel that Greek identity is challenged by migrants and refugees, as they may meet specific demands of the Greek labour market. The further integration of Greece into the European Union and reconciliation with neighbouring countries such as North Macedonia, are also accepted in the same pragmatic spirit. Greek national identity is not threatened by such foreign policy developments. Finally, unconventional family forms, such as cohabitation or single-parent families, are accepted in the same spirit, while there are strong reservations for same-sex marriage and the raising of children by homosexuals.

In brief, regarding culture wars Greeks may be less traditional and more pragmatic than usually thought. Further on, cultural conflicts in contemporary Greece have not grown into all-consuming culture wars. They are probably characterized better as cultural tensions.

Introduction

The objective of this research project was to map and explore the more traditional cultural views, i.e., views more typical of mainstream contemporary Greek culture, on four contested issues. The first was challenges by the anti-vaccination movement to the responses of government authorities and the scientific community since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. The second was challenges to Greek national identity posed to the same identity by the inflow and settlement of Asian and African refugees and migrants in Greek territory. The third was challenges to the traditional Greek family model and gender roles through the rising visibility of atypical family models (e.g., single-parent families, same-sex marriages). And the fourth was challenges to the same identity by the evolution of the country's foreign affairs (e.g., Greece's integration into the European Union and the Eurozone, the Prespes Agreement of 2018 on the dispute with North Macedonia).

1. Methodology

The methodology of the project included the use of primary and secondary sources. The researchers accessed parliamentary minutes of sessions in the Greek Parliament devoted to draft legislation on the above contested issues. They also conducted four different focus groups, one for each contested issue, in the spring and summer of 2022 in Athens.

The composition of the four focus groups varied a lot but also had a common trait. The researchers approached prospective focus group participants, men and women of different age-groups and professional profiles, who however held conventional or traditional worldviews. In other words, focus group participants mostly included anti-vaccinationists or people reluctant to obtain the Covid-19 vaccine (first group); conservatives regarding migration and refugee issues (second group); traditionalists regarding family and gender roles (third group); and ethnocentric citizens regarding national identity (fourth group).

The purpose of this selection bias was to discuss challenges to the cultural identities of focus group participants. The composition of focus groups was on purpose more or less homogeneous, in order to allow researchers to discern variations on the identities of Greeks who feel challenged by contemporary developments in medical health care, population movements, gender issues and Greece's foreign relations.

The researchers also studied the available literature and interpreted results of comparative public opinion surveys. (All primary and secondary sources used for this research are listed in the "References" of the research paper accompanying this Policy Brief.)

2. Outline of the policy brief

In this policy brief we first discuss general findings pertaining to all four issues under study. We also discuss specific findings, separately for each issue. We then proceed with general policy recommendations regarding the management of culture wars in today's Greece. We conclude with specific recommendations, in the form of concrete policy ideas.

3. Key findings

a. General findings

Culture wars are not a thing of the past, when religion and tradition constituted the prevalent conceptual frameworks of society. They are continued in secular, economically and technologically advanced societies today. For instance, there are recurring disputes on the cultural impact of inflows of migrants and refugees and their integration into European societies. Such and other instances show that culture wars take place even though, compared to previous centuries, today people do not tend to adhere to warring moral communities. Western societies have become "atomized", i.e., more individualistic. However, culture wars may erupt when a segment of society feels that its cultural and particularly national identity is severely challenged.

In contemporary Greece secularization and democratization may have somewhat curbed the long-term influence of the Christian Orthodox Church. Meanwhile, democratization after the transition from authoritarian rule (1974) led to the spread of civil, political, and social rights. Traditional identities still exist, but new tight moral communities have not been formed.

Despite the existence of cultural divisions on various issues, such as those on which we have done research, there are no culture wars worth their name. Supporters of different sides in cultural conflicts do not tend to be fanatic in everyday behaviour, even though at the level of attitudes they may voice very strong opinions (e.g., against homosexuality, against Muslims, etc.) A first finding of our research is that while Greeks take sides on cultural issues, they do not necessarily engage in conflict among corresponding identity groups. Regarding culture wars, they use the lens of a pragmatist.

While there are identity-based associations, Greeks on the main do not tend to partake in cultural disputes in an organized manner. Instead, they tend to subscribe to multiple cultural identities which do not overlap. This second general finding is associated with the fact that Greeks may be "progressives" on one count, for instance, on same-sex marriage, but "conservatives" or "traditionalists" on another count, for instance, on the dispute over the name and symbols of Macedonia.

In Greece political party competition is ubiquitous. Thus, cultural disputes become part of the political arena. This is our third general finding. The particular stance which a political party may adopt sometime depends on a party's ideological profile, but it often depends on the party's position in government or in opposition. Thus, if the government submits legislation to parliament that theoretically could serve as a convergence point for all political parties, opposition parties will tend to reject it. They will seize the opportunity to oppose the government on one more occasion. Of course, depending on the party in question, waging a cultural war may be part and parcel of its political ideology. The most obvious example here is that of the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn (GD) party and its stance on numerous cultural issues in 2012-2019.

Our last general finding is that to the extent that culture wars take place in Greece, they are often started or waged not so much by identity groups, as by institutions (the Church, the government, the courts, etc.). The wars evolve over a new government policy or reactions of the Church to it.

To sum up our general findings, we argue that while there may be recognizable factions in culture disputes, there are few, if any, "true" culture wars in today's Greece. Moreover, the behaviour of involved people in cultural disputes is that of pragmatists who may hold on to their views, but in practice do not join clearly delimited cultural camps. Nor do they act with fanaticism, excluding some intellectuals or other opinion makers who may take up roles of cultural crusaders.

It is then debatable whether in Greece today there are any consolidated cultural camps engaging in culture wars, although there are discernible sides, as our specific findings below indicate.

b. Specific findings

i. Conflict over compulsory vaccination

In Greece in 2020-2022 reactions to vaccination appeared in websites, new social media and radio and TV programmes. The discourse of reactions pertained to personal freedom, interpreted as defending one's body from any unwanted medical acts, even at the risk of creating health problems for other people (e.g., through the spread of the Covid-19 virus).

Participants in our focus group on Covid-19 vaccinations claimed that what troubled them about the vaccines were either a) political considerations or b) scientific doubts. Regarding the former, a typical claim was "science serves political and economic interests" or "the media misinforms us".

Regarding the latter, some participants said that "the side effects of vaccines are not known", "the vaccines were produced too fast", and "vaccine control mechanisms were by-passed" during the production stage.

However, when prompted to explain how they personally reacted to preventive measures and restrictions imposed by the government, focus group participants revealed a pragmatic stance. They gave a more or less uniform answer: “Lockdowns are not necessary”, but “I wear a mask”. Regarding vaccination, two participants admitted having gotten the vaccine for financial reasons. The requirement by the government and employers for regular rapid tests, performed in diagnostic centers or pharmacies, if someone was not vaccinated, proved costly for anti-vaccinationists.

There was little else that united the anti-vaccinationists. They did not form a discernible group, set apart from the rest of society. As our interlocutors remarked, “everyone has a different approach” and “people attach annoying labels; I respect equally vaccinated and non-vaccinated people”.

It turns out that anti-vaccinationists may have been more moderate in their views and behaviour than originally thought. They subscribe to the view that there are almost no limits to a citizen’s rights. They also think that – on the issue at hand – the view of official authorities and the medical profession are of value equal to the views of laypersons or alternative sources. Yet in practice anti-vaccinationists realized that there were risks for themselves and the people close to them. They tended to wear masks when required and even to get the vaccine, if keeping their job was at stake.

ii. Conflict over challenges to national identity by migrants and refugees

In the 2010s the inflows of migrants and refugees into Greece coincided with the economic crisis to create an explosive situation, that the Golden Dawn party exploited to win votes. An anti-immigration discourse flourished in Greece. It included racist themes and xenophobic opinion and sentiments, as shown in the attitudinal surveys discussed in our research paper on culture wars.

However, migrants have been working in the Greek agricultural and construction sectors to the benefit of Greek employers and consumers. Children born to migrant families residing in the country attend school side-by-side with Greek native children. The reality of coexistence, mostly peaceful coexistence, between Greeks and refugees and migrants cannot be denied.

In our research, focus group participants voiced similar pragmatic views. In their understanding, Greece unavoidably is an entry point for migrants and refugees heading to Western Europe. Migrants are acceptable to the extent that they contribute to economic growth. Obviously, highly skilled migrants are most welcome.

Regarding the migrant and refugee issue, focus group participants expressed variations of the following view: the issue is a “real situation and as such cannot be treated ideologically”. Another participant added “realism is the only way to

approach” the issue, while another one noted that “the issue should be addressed by looking only at its practical side”.

Nevertheless, when asked to differentiate, if possible, among types of migrants and refugees, focus group participants claimed that migrants coming from backgrounds more akin to European values are more acceptable. By contrast, those who are culturally more diverse, particularly Muslims, are considered difficult to adapt and accordingly not particularly welcome.

The expression of such reservations did not lead focus group participants to become less pragmatic regarding the contribution of migrants and refugees to the labour market. They acknowledged that migrants tend to occupy the low echelons of the labour market, performing work tasks that indigenous workers are not willing to perform.

Nevertheless, focus group participants did not advocate uncontrollable flows of migrants and refugees into Greece. They mentioned the need for some form of controlling inflows. But they recognized that the control effort was too complex and that is superseded the state capacities of EU Member-States. A solution should be sought at the EU level. A “more active EU role” was anticipated.

The focus group members discussed if there is a cultural impact of the inflow of migrants and refugees on national identity. They did not think that such inflows posed a challenge to that identity. For instance, one person remarked that “the large waves of immigration do not pose a threat to our national identity”. Another one said that “national identity is not affected by any amount of immigration, if it is well-founded and stable”. There was a convergence of focus group participants towards that view.

iii. Conflict over challenges to traditional family and gender roles

In Greece the traditional two parent-family is the typical family form and in fact it is usually embedded in a larger network of close relatives. However, new family forms have emerged with the passage of time. They include single-parent families, heterosexual couples who cohabit and same-sex couples.

Regarding these unconventional family forms and gender identities, our focus group research has revealed an array of opinions that differed by topic. On the topic of cohabitation of heterosexual couples and also same-sex couples, participants recognized that it constitutes a reality in contemporary Greece. Cohabitation of people with different gender identities is not an unusual situation and it merits to be regulated, as explained by a focus group member: “Today there are same-sex couples who live together, and their rights must be secured”.

There were more reservations regarding another unconventional family form, the single-parent family. Focus group participants claimed that the presence of two

parents is essential for a child's upbringing. For instance, pondering on single-parent families, one person remarked: "I have the feeling that the symbolic and ancient element that every human being comes from two parents disappears from the child's horizon". Another one added "In terms of parenting and how children grow up..., if one of the two parents is gone, there is a piece that is missing". However, all focus group participants accepted that single-parent families will anyhow continue to exist. No one advocated that they should be banned.

On the issue of a same-sex couple's adopting or "creating" children (through means available to geneticists today) the focus group was divided. A focus group member was adamant that "in a couple, the function that the woman has and the function that the man has are different from their very creation. We just cannot nullify nature". By contrast, another one claimed that "children who have both heterosexual parents are better raised, but this does not at all rule out that same-sex parents can raise their children well". In other words, on this topic too, our research indicates the prevalence of pragmatism over fanaticism (or war-like mentality).

iv. Conflict over national and European identity

Our focus group on Greek national vs. European identity concentrated on the impact of the Prespes Agreement (2018) and on challenges to national identity posed by EU integration. There was consensus among focus group members that the Agreement was necessary, as it resolved a long-term dispute. According to the focus group, neither this Agreement nor the integration of Greece into the EU have threatened the Greek national identity, primarily composed of a common language, traditions, and customs. However, a focus group member underlined that "we underestimated the Greek elements and overestimated the European ones". All agreed that nationalism is still very strong in Greece today. To sum up, a measured pragmatism dominated this focus groups discussion too.

If there is a common thread linking the four focus groups discussions summarized above, that may be that Greeks remain distrustful of authority and of other people. Yet, Greeks today adopt a down-to-earth stance; they do not participate in fierce cultural battles.

The following recommendations, based on our research paper on culture wars, are linked to the general and specific findings summarized above.

4. Policy recommendations

a. General recommendations

The most general recommendation is that it is important to decrease the high level of mistrust in Greek society and politics. Such mistrust exists towards political and

administrative institutions, towards the scientific community, and towards minority groups. There is also generalized mistrust of all against all, except for close relatives and friends. Diffused mistrust does not directly cause, but may fuel cultural wars.

A combination of interventions in the policy sectors of culture, education, mass media and citizen-administration relations would be required to curb widely spread mistrust.

To start with, a reform of the current cultural policy model is necessary. It is a model that still emphasizes, if it does not exclusively serve, the traditional Greek identity that relies on the ancient Greek heritage and the Greek Orthodox Christian tradition.

Such a reform may aim to strike a better balance between preserving the Greek national identity, particularly now, in a period during which Greece faces heightened aggression in its Eastern borders, and promoting tolerance, respect and diversity for the “Other”. By that term, we mean the identities of religious or ethnic minorities (e.g., the Muslims, the Jews, the Roma) and the identities of refugees from Asia and Africa and EU citizens (tourists, old-age pensioners and private company employees coming from other EU Member-States) who pass through or settle down in Greece.

In the mass media and education systems, in order to curb incipient culture wars, it is advisable to disentangle disagreements over gender, family, race, and public health issues from the main ideological cleavage within Greek politics and society, i.e., the Right vs. Left dividing line. While this line of division is still dominant, collective actors and organizations, including the state and local government, political parties, trade unions and social movements, need not transfer disagreements over cultural issues over the arena of political party competition. Political party cleavages do not necessarily coincide with clearly marked divisions on cultural issues.

For this reason, it would be helpful to approach divisive cultural issues on an issue-by-issue basis rather than adopt the usual blanket-like stance of full politicization of all issues. Naturally, such a change would require that not every single cultural issue is automatically translated into a battlefield between government and opposition. It would require a shift in the competition strategies of political parties.

With respect to citizen-administration relations: there is a respected institution that may help tone down culture conflicts. This is the Greek Ombudsman (“Synigoros tou Politi”, that was established in 1997 by Law 2477/1997 and endowed in 2001 with the guarantees of art. 101A and 103 of the Greek Constitution). It is an independent public authority that has a general jurisdiction over relations between citizens and the state. Among the Ombudsman’s tasks is the fight against different kinds of discrimination. Today, the Ombudsman’s two divisions which are involved in anti-discrimination activities are the Human Rights Division and the Gender Equality Division, each headed by a Deputy Ombudsman. The two divisions may be further endowed with legal competences, resources, and staff necessary to manage current and future cultural tensions.

b. Specific recommendations (in the form of concrete policy ideas)

Design and implement positive discrimination programmes to enlarge the access of native and other minorities to education, public health, and social welfare structures, from which members of such minorities may currently be excluded.

Design and implement training programmes for street-level bureaucrats in public bodies and the local government who most frequently come in contact with members of minorities. The aims of the programmes would be to change the “climate” of encounters and relations between low-ranking civil servants and citizens belonging to minority groups. Programmes would focus on non-discriminatory practices and civic ethos.

Recruit members of religious or ethnic minorities into public services which frequently come to contact with minorities. Examples are police departments and social services. Such a change in recruitment patterns would contribute to the social visibility of minorities and show that minority citizens are entitled to and capable of serving the economy and society. The suggested change would also be a constructive step in the relations between public authorities and minorities in residential areas where there is a concentration of minorities, e.g., in areas where there are Roma settlements such as in Western Athens and in Northwestern Achaia in the Peloponnese.

Expand the current restoration and preservation projects of the Ministry of Culture to include more mosques and synagogues all around the country, in addition to ancient Greek and Roman sites and Byzantine churches and monasteries.

Fund the translation and publication of literary works or the production of drama plays, and films created by members of the aforementioned religious and other minorities, in order to enrich the content of contemporary Greek culture.

Engage public services and NGOs in campaigning for the cultural visibility and acceptance of the identities which are not mainstream, for instance, religious, gender and racial identities, as well as non-mainstream choices regarding family and lifestyles.

Reform school curricula and textbooks of history and geography by striking a better balance between the narrative of modern Greek state-building and nation-making on the one hand and narratives of minority groups in order to battle negative stereotypes of minorities on the other. Admittedly, this shift in primary and secondary education would be particularly difficult to effect because of the very contentious nature of such an exercise.

Reform school curricula and textbooks of civic education (“social and political education” in the Greek primary and secondary schools, the so-called “koinoniki kai politiki agogi”). The reform’s aim would be to produce a more balanced mix between concepts and information on the Greek political system on the one hand and analysis

of the negative impact of intolerance, hate speech and negative discrimination towards other nations and minorities on the other.

Develop and diffuse popular science courses, press clips, presentations, and films, with the help of medical doctors and biologists, in order to transmit findings of scientific research to the population, correct misunderstandings and constrain the spread of fake news and misinformation on health issues, including vaccinations.

Train journalists of the printed and electronic media in fact-finding, scientific - or at least non-partisan - analysis of contested issues, and ethics with regard to reporting and analyzing news items that touch upon cultural identity issues.

Establish an academic observatory on culture wars in Greece. This may be a new institution or simply a network, co-founded and staffed by academics and researchers of universities and research centers in the country, in the rest of Europe, North America and Australia. To that effect, public benefit institutions in Greece and similar initiatives located abroad (e.g., in New York and London) may coordinate with units of foreign universities dedicated to the study of Greece and Hellenism, such as the Hellenic Observatory of the LSE.