

Country Profile

Greece

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This Country Profile provides a brief overview of religious diversity and its governance in the above-named state. It is one of 23 such profiles produced by GREASE, an EU-funded research project investigating religious diversity, state-religion relations and religiously inspired radicalisation on four continents. More detailed assessments are available in our multi-part Country Reports and Country Cases.

Countries covered in this series:

Albania, Australia, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Egypt, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Lebanon, Lithuania, Malaysia, Morocco, Russia, Slovakia, Spain, Tunisia, Turkey and the United Kingdom.

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Total population: 10.7 million

Religious affiliation (percent)

Orthodox Christianity	90
Other (non-Catholic) Christians	3
Islam	2
Catholics	1
Unaffiliated	4

Source: Pew Research Center, 2017. Retrieved from:

<https://www.pewforum.org/2017/05/10/religious-affiliation/>

Role of religion in state and government

In Greece there is no separation between the State and the Church, and religion has played a fundamental role in defining the national identity. National ideology and Orthodoxy have historically shaped membership status in the Greek nation. The attachment to Orthodoxy as the core element of national identity formation makes difficult to separate ethnicity from religiosity. Such historical and political contingencies have forged a genuine model of religious governance whereby Orthodoxy has an especially prominent place in the public sphere under the rubric of the “prevailing religion” (Article 3 of Greek Constitution).

It is acknowledged that the historical legacy related to the nature of state formation in the Balkans and the dominant nationalistic discourse - and the extremely strained relations with neighbouring countries while co-existing with ethnic minorities on either sides of the borders - have diachronically shaped the Greek approach to the governance of religious differences and otherness. Indeed, the Greek national identity has been historically constructed in opposition to the religious “Other” and Muslim identity in particular. Hence, Muslim populations belonging either to “Old Islam” or “New Islam”¹ have been historically identified with Turks and Turkey.

The privileged position of the Orthodox Church as a national institution is clearly embedded in the legal order, whereas the legal acts and policies on religious matters take into consideration above all the political interest of the Greek Church. Consequently, the Church of Greece enjoys the right to have a say to the activities of all “known religions” and other state affairs as well, such as the curriculum and textbooks for religious education and the Morning Prayer ritual in Greek schools. In addition, the government provides direct support to the Greek Orthodox Church, including funding for religious leaders’ salaries, religious and vocational training of clergy, and religious instruction in schools. Similarly, the government-appointed muftis and imams in Thrace are paid directly from the state budget as are those of all civil servants. Meanwhile, the Jewish community and the Roman Catholic Church receive certain government benefits not available to other religious communities.

¹“Old Islam” refers to the Muslim minority living in Thrace as to distinguish them from those (mostly immigrants) who have recently settled in Greece and compose the “New Islam”.

Freedom of religion

The Greek Constitution recognizes freedom of religious conscience as inviolable and provides for the enjoyment of civil rights and liberties that do not depend on the individual's religious beliefs (Article 13). It also provides for the freedom of worship that shall be performed “unhindered and under the protection of the law”. It prohibits proselytizing and allows for the prosecution of publications that offend Christianity or other “known religions” (Article 14). Furthermore, no rite of worship is allowed to “offend public order or the good usages” (Article 13). According to Article 13 of the Constitution, “the ministers of all known religions being subject to the same supervision by the State and to the same obligations toward it as those of the Greek Orthodox religion”. In addition, it states that individuals shall not be exempted from their obligations to the state or from compliance with the law because of their religious convictions. Finally, according to the Article 59 of Constitution, all MPs (and other civil servants as well) should take an oath before entering office, with individuals being free to take a religious or secular oath in accordance with their beliefs.

L.4301/2014 provides the legal opportunity for religious groups to become recognized as “religious legal entities” under civil law, under the supervision of the Ministry of Education. This in turn allows them to establish and operate houses of prayer and perform religious rituals (such as marriage) without the permission of the local ecclesiastical authority (see Greek church).

L.4356/2015 prohibits discrimination and criminalizes hate speech on the grounds of religion. Individuals or legal entities convicted of incitement to violence, discrimination, or hatred based on religion may be sentenced to prison (from 3 months to 2 years) and fined (from 5,000 to 20,000 euros) accordingly. L.4609/2019 provides for alternative forms of mandatory service for religious conscientious objectors in lieu of the nine-month mandatory military service.

Students may be exempted from Greek Orthodox religious classes in primary and secondary school, upon request of their parents. The law provides for optional Islamic religious instruction in public schools in Thrace for the recognized Muslim minority and optional Catholic religious instruction in public schools on the islands of Tinos and Syros.

Religiously inspired radicalisation

There was a gradual increase in racist violence in the country after 2010, which peaked in 2015 in the aftermath of refugee crisis. The largest increase was observed between 2011 and 2012, a period during which the far-right extremist party Golden Dawn gradually established itself in the Greek political arena. This increase is attributed to the rise of incidents of racist violence motivated by biases against the ethnic origin and religious background of the victims. Since 2015, the characteristics of racist violence in Greece gradually started to become “milder” (i.e. verbal abuse instead of physical violence), a development which might be related to the prosecution of Golden Dawn’s MPs and leadership, its defeat in 2019 national elections, and the closure of its offices in Athens and Piraeus by the authorities (in September 2019). Nevertheless, there have been recorded incidents of attacks on mosques and synagogues, vandalism of monuments and desecration of cemeteries, which reflect rising intolerance, anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim sentiments. The perpetrators were never arrested but they were usually associated with extreme right-wing organizations.

Another group targeted by xenophobic attacks are Pakistanis. Attacks and vandalism against their properties have intensified since 2004, when the numbers of arrivals of migrants from Pakistan to Greece increased rapidly. Islamophobia and anti-Muslim stances can be seen as motives for attacks against believers, and assaults on them often take place during their visits to unofficial places of worship.

In public discourse, the most radical rhetoric has been traditionally articulated by several high-ranking Orthodox Church ecclesiastical leaders, with some of them describing Muhammad as a “false prophet”, while others supporting the notion that the presence of Muslim migrants poses a great danger for Greece because “the city will be full of minarets and mosques”. Apart from Golden Dawn, conservative right-wing political forces – as well as moderate leaders of the social democratic centre - are equally responsible for the rise of islamophobia. In the wake of the economic and refugee crisis, they have publicly expressed their “agony” about the Islamization of Europe and Greece, in particular.

Impressively, there are neither recorded cases nor signs of religion radicalization in Greece. Moreover, Islamist radicalisation does not seem to constitute a serious threat for the country. Although, there are less well-documented factors that can potentially shed light on the matter, the absence of religious radicalisation in Greece could be explained by multiple reasons including the level of self-organisation and control that Muslim leaders exercise over their co-believers and the fact that Greece was not a central player in the “War on Terror”.

Religious diversity governance assessment

The majority of Greeks see national identity and religion as inextricably linked, which in turn has diachronically shaped the “imagined” Greek ethnos and its national project. Until 30 years ago, Greece was considered largely a mono-ethnic, mono-cultural and mono-religious country, thus fitting the paradigm of a hard-core “nation-state”.

During the last three decades, however, Greece has had to familiarize itself with and make space for the cultural, ethnic and religious diversity which has been extended in three demographic units: native population, “Old Islam” (historic minorities) and “New Islam” (immigrants). Apart from the historical context related to the governance of “Old Islam”, the management of religious diversity attached to “New Islam” remains one of the most important challenges for Greek society and its polity. While evidence affirms religious diversity in relation to “New Islam”, enduring thorny issues between Greece and Turkey concerning “Old Islam” appear to have been met with strong opposition by public opinion. Apparently, this is partly related to geopolitics and national identity, hence linking the religious aspects of Islam with the question of national security and the relationship between Turkey and Greece.

It should be acknowledged that Greece’s overall policies and legal framework towards religious minorities have been substantially reformed on the basis of liberal principals and international standards, recognising as such the equality of individuals before the law regardless of their religious and ethnic affiliation. However, existing tolerance towards religious and cultural diversity is still perceived as minimal liberal tolerance, meaning that there is no pro-active accommodation of the de facto cultural, religious, ethnic and linguistic diversity.

There are three main domains that have played a crucial role in emerging trends of radicalisation and reproduction of Islamophobia: the political domain (i.e. political parties of the right and the far right); the religious domain (i.e. Orthodox Church high-ranking clerics); and the media (i.e. the internet and social media). Having said this, radicalisation and islamophobia manifest themselves primarily on the discursive level (hate speech) and to a lesser extent expresses itself through physical violence. As far as governance of religious diversity is concerned, despite the recent reforms put forward mostly by left governments, central state policy appears fragmented, and so far we have just had bits and pieces of policies.

In conclusion, recent developments have marked a highly conservative shift which is not reflected in laws, but rather in non-application of laws. While the legal context has been modernized, the general mentality and public point of view have not been modernized in the same way.

About the GREASE project

Radicalisation, Secularism and the Governance of Religion: Bringing together European and Asian Perspectives (GREASE)

Involving researchers from Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Oceania, GREASE is investigating how religious diversity is governed in over 20 countries. Our work focuses on comparing norms, laws and practices that may (or may not) prove useful in preventing religious radicalisation. Our research also sheds light on how different societies cope with the challenge of integrating religious minorities and migrants. The aim is to deepen our understanding of how religious diversity can be governed successfully, with an emphasis on countering radicalisation trends.

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