

Key Conclusions

Scientific Conference: “*Democracy in the Face of Contemporary Challenges*”

Athens, 25 November 2025 – Goethe Institute

Organised by: Marangopoulos Foundation for Human Rights (MFHR) and Konstantinos & Artemis Kyriazis Foundation

In view of the multifaceted challenges currently testing the resilience and effective functioning of democratic institutions, the Marangopoulos Foundation for Human Rights (MFHR) and the Konstantinos & Artemis Kyriazis Foundation, organised a conference entitled “*Democracy in the Face of Contemporary Challenges*”.

The conference took place on Tuesday, 25 November 2025, at the Goethe Institute Auditorium in Athens and brought together members of the academic community and the judiciary, representatives of civil society, and students. This text presents a concise overview of the key issues and reflections that emerged during the conference.

The event was opened by Mr **L.-A. Sicilianos**, Professor at the School of Law of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (NKUA), former President of the European Court of Human Rights, and President of the MFHR, who delivered brief introductory remarks on behalf of the organisers. He expressed his warm appreciation to the speakers, the participants, and the Goethe Institute for its hospitality and its contribution to the success of the event. Greetings were subsequently delivered by Ms **M. Ruotanen**, Director General of Democracy and Human Dignity of the Council of Europe, who highlighted the vital importance of defending democratic values, human rights and the rule of law, particularly in times of polarisation and uncertainty. She referred to the Council of Europe’s *New Democratic Pact for Europe*, aimed at strengthening social trust and citizen participation in contemporary democracies, and stressed the need to promote gender equality and combat violence against women, which undermines their democratic participation.

SESSION 1: Political Parties and Political Pluralism

The first session, entitled “*Political Parties and Political Pluralism*”, was moderated by Mr **P. Pikrammenos**, former Acting Prime Minister, former Deputy Prime Minister, and Honorary President of the Council of State. Through his timely interventions, he facilitated a constructive dialogue on the role of political parties in contemporary democracy and the importance of political pluralism, emphasising that understanding current challenges is a fundamental prerequisite for safeguarding democracy.

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Mr **N. Alivizatos**, Emeritus Professor at the School of Law of NKUA and Member of the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe, examined how to address subversive or violent political parties without undermining or leading to the “self-dissolution” of democracy. He noted that post-war European constitutions introduced mechanisms to restrict parties that promote violence or criminal activity, citing indicative examples from Germany and France. With regard to Greece, he stressed that banning parties by statute entails serious risks and that such phenomena should primarily be addressed through Article 29 of the Constitution, ensuring both an open democratic system and the protection of the constitutional order from violent practices.

Mr **Y. Drosos**, Emeritus Professor at the School of Law of NKUA, highlighted the pivotal role of political parties in democratic governance and pluralism, particularly in a national and international environment where power often prevails over the rule of law. Pointing to inconsistencies in Greek legislation and the insufficient use of criminal law tools, he emphasised the need for responsible institutional action to effectively protect the democratic order. He also referred to increased voter mobility and citizen participation in parties, which can enhance democratic vitality but also entails risks of demagoguery, making adherence to stable principles and consistency in the rule of law essential.

Mr **S. Vlachopoulos**, Professor at the School of Law of NKUA and Member of the NKUA Administration Council, stressed the importance of political parties for democracy, noting that despite intense criticism, their absence would lead to political anarchy. He observed that contemporary politics has undergone profound transformation: parties no longer constitute the core of political life, political organisations have weakened, and political power is increasingly concentrated around the Prime Minister. Traditional ideological divisions (left/right, conservative/progressive) are gradually losing significance, while new classifications, such as systemic and anti-systemic parties, are emerging. Citizen participation has also declined, even in leadership selection processes.

Ms **V. Christou**, Assistant Professor at the School of Law of NKUA, analysed open leadership selection processes in political parties, as applied in the United States and various European countries. While such procedures enhance participation, she noted the risks they entail, including increased demagoguery and the undermining of intra-party democracy. In the Greek context, she explained that the choice between open and closed procedures depends on the political culture of the parties, as no formal legal framework exists. Open processes may nevertheless reconnect citizens with parties through different levels of participation (members, supporters, delegates) provided appropriate safeguards are in place.

The discussion following the audience’s remarks highlighted key issues concerning party functioning and democracy, including inward-looking party structures, the

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dominance of money, and the lack of a culture of political *consensus*, factors rooted both in historical traditions and the electoral system. The potential use of existing constitutional provisions to encourage cross-party cooperation was discussed, while it was stressed that the primary challenge lies in political culture and the proper exercise of powers. Finally, the need for parties to adapt to digital forms of participation while preserving deliberative traditions was underscored.

SESSION 2: Rule of Law and Checks and Balances

The second session, “*Rule of Law and Checks and Balances*”, was moderated by Mr **E. Venizelos**, former Deputy Prime Minister and Emeritus Professor at the School of Law of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTH). Through his incisive remarks, he set out the general framework for understanding the speakers’ interventions. He highlighted the contemporary challenges facing democracy, the role and limits of institutional checks and balances, as well as the close and fundamental link between democracy and the rule of law, thereby bringing to the fore the historical and institutional dimensions of the issues under discussion.

Mr **I. Sarmas**, former Acting Prime Minister and Honorary President of the Court of Audit, emphasised the importance of the rule of law and institutional checks and balances in Greece, pointing to independent authorities and the judiciary as crucial controls on political power. He referred to examples such as the Hellenic Authority for Communication Security and Privacy (ADAE) and the Greek Ombudsman, which played a decisive role in uncovering abuses, including in the Surveillance Case and the Pylos shipwreck. He placed particular emphasis on preventive oversight and on the criminal liability of the government as necessary means of safeguarding legality and maintaining the balance between the branches of government.

Mr **L.-A. Sicilianos** analysed the manner in which the Strasbourg Court addresses illiberal regimes, noting that the rule of law permeates the European Convention on Human Rights as a whole and that democracy constitutes a prerequisite for its application. He also focused on the role of “watchdogs” (judges, opposition politicians, journalists and human rights defenders) as institutional checks and balances safeguarding democracy and human rights. He further referred to relevant judgments against Hungary, Poland, Turkey and Russia, as well as to the importance of Article 18 of the Convention on the abuse of power, and stressed the need to establish effective mechanisms in Greece to ensure the executive’s compliance with judicial decisions.

Mr **V. Skouris**, Emeritus Professor at the School of Law of AUTH, former President of the Court of Justice of the European Union, and President of the Centre of International & European Economic Law, highlighted the importance of institutional

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“checks and balances” as organised mechanisms that limit the over-concentration of power, particularly in the hands of the Prime Minister. As he explained, this concentration of authority was significantly reinforced following the 1986 constitutional revision, making the role of independent and regulatory authorities essential to its control. He emphasised that the effectiveness of these mechanisms depends on the independence of their members and is further strengthened through European institutions. He concluded by noting that the full and effective utilisation of these institutional counterbalances remains a major challenge for the country.

Ms **M. Telalian**, Director of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, described the role and activities of the Office as an institutional counterbalance supporting the implementation of democratic principles and the protection of human rights. As she explained, the Office provides, *inter alia*, technical assistance and legal opinions, and monitors judicial independence, elections and the promotion of political freedoms. She further noted that, despite a range of challenges, such as the rise of authoritarianism in certain states and reduced funding, it continues to strengthen national institutions and foster dialogue on democracy and security.

Subsequently, the audience raised questions concerning the work of democratic institutions, the functioning of institutional checks and balances, and the protection of human rights. Some of the issues discussed included the use of Article 18 by the European Court of Human Rights as a means of addressing systemic failures, direct democracy and the value of referendums as institutional counterbalances, the importance of accountability, as well as the need for clear implementing legislation for constitutional provisions in order to ensure their effective application.

SESSION 3: Economic, Financial and International Perspectives

In the third session, entitled “**Economic, Financial and International Perspectives**”, the role of moderator was assumed by Mr **N. Kyriazis**, Emeritus Professor in the Department of Economics at the University of Thessaly and President of the K. & A. Kyriazi Foundation. He coordinated the discussion on contemporary economic and geopolitical issues, highlighting the interconnection between the economy, international security and democracy.

Mr **M. Wendt**, Head of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation’s Office for Greece and Cyprus and former Member of the German *Bundestag*, underlined that Europe stands at new crossroads due to the war in Ukraine, geopolitical instability and migration pressures. He stressed that these developments, combined with economic challenges, fuel populism and erode trust in institutions. He further pointed out that the defence of democracy requires not only strong security, but also the safeguarding of democratic

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values and public trust. In conclusion, he highlighted the importance of European unity and democratic dialogue.

Mr G. Hodgson, Emeritus Professor at Loughborough University of London, analysed how the rise of populism is linked to a series of crises, such as the 2008 financial crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic and armed conflicts, which constrain the ability of democratic governments to make sound decisions. He highlighted the role of information overload and the growing complexity of contemporary societies, which facilitate oversimplified populist responses, and underscored the importance of science, markets, representative democracy and law as “supervisory systems” for managing information. He concluded by stressing that trust in institutions, education, and an acknowledgement of this inherent complexity are essential to the resilience of democracy.

Mr Ch. Kollias, Professor in the Department of Economics at the University of Thessaly, analysed the economic challenges facing Europe in the aftermath of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022. He emphasised the need for a substantial increase in defence expenditure and the preparedness of European states, while noting that financing such spending (whether through taxation, public borrowing or the reallocation of other public funds) entails significant social and political consequences. At the same time, he pointed to the historical continuity of the issue by referring to Demosthenes’ speeches on the financing of military forces in ancient Athens.

Ms L. Katseli, Professor Emerita in the Department of Economics at the NKUA and former Minister, examined the challenges facing democracy in the new global economic order. She stressed that digital participation has given rise to a “hybrid democracy”, characterised by a concentration of power in large multinational corporations that influence citizens, markets and policy-making, while the lack of effective oversight at the global level amplifies social, economic and political risks. In order to safeguard democracy, she proposed a range of reforms in global governance, the development of public digital infrastructure, greater transparency in algorithms, the taxation of major platforms, and the strengthening of national strategy, social cohesion and institutions.

SESSION 4: Round Table Discussion

The fourth session, which took the form of a Round Table Discussion, was moderated by **Ms K. Sakellaropoulou**, former President of the Hellenic Republic and Honorary President of the Council of State. Ms Sakellaropoulou set out the framework of the contemporary threats facing democracy, from the rise of populism and geopolitical turbulence to the erosion of social cohesion and the toxicity of public discourse. She placed particular emphasis on the targeting of women and the link between online violence and real-life attacks. Through pointed interventions and questions addressed

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to the speakers, she steered the discussion towards the role of institutions, the judiciary and European integration, thereby contributing to a substantive exchange on the resilience of democracy today.

Mr **L. Tsoukalis**, Professor at the Paris School of International Affairs, Sciences Po, and President of the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP) and Professor Emeritus at the NKUA, noted that we are living in an era of profound, transformative change. Technological revolutions, economic concentration, the climate crisis and geopolitical instability, he argued, increasingly constrain democratic decision-making at the national level. He stressed that citizens, particularly in small and medium-sized countries, often feel powerless in the face of global transformations, rendering them more susceptible to populist narratives. He further underlined the crisis of ethical values and norms in contemporary societies, which exacerbates the challenges facing democracy and undermines citizens' trust.

Mr **G. Karavokyris**, Associate Professor at the School of Law of the AUTH, presented a comprehensive overview of the institutional and constitutional challenges confronting contemporary Greek democracy. While Greece does not fall within the model of an illiberal democracy, he argued that its democratic quality is weakened by a historically entrenched, personalised political culture and the absence of stable institutional consensus. He emphasised that successive crises do not threaten democracy from the outside, but rather test it from within, giving rise to a democracy lacking collective visions and trapped in a public discourse strongly oriented towards moral claims and mutual accusations. In conclusion, he noted that the solutions are not primarily constitutional in nature, but relate instead to deeper social and political transformations.

Mr **M. Pikramenos**, President of the Council of State and Professor at the School of Law of the AUTH, focused on the functioning of the judiciary as a pillar of the rule of law and on strengthening citizens' trust in it. He stressed the need to improve court organisation, ensure compliance with ethical standards, promote institutional openness, enhance judicial evaluation and make effective use of procedural tools, with the aim of reducing case-processing times and improving the quality of judicial work. At the same time, he highlighted the importance of the responsible presentation of judicial decisions by the academic community and the media, with particular emphasis on ethical responsibility. He concluded by noting that judges operate as organs of checks and balances without substituting the legislator.

Finally, Mr **A. Papahelas**, Executive Editor of *Kathimerini*, observed that contemporary journalism is facing a “perfect storm”, as declining trust in the media, the toxicity of public discourse and widening inequalities weaken democracy. He stressed the profound impact of social media and artificial intelligence, which are radically reshaping citizens' relationship with information and placing increasing pressure on traditional media. He emphasised the need for journalists to listen attentively to society

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and to adapt to these changes in order to preserve their credibility and strengthen public debate. The core problem, he argued, lies in the absence of reliable reference points and trusted role models, which complicates both understanding and responding effectively to emerging challenges.

Overall, the conference clearly demonstrated that democracy cannot be taken for granted. It requires continuous reinforcement, critical vigilance and institutional resilience. The speakers' contributions underscored that the protection of the rule of law, effective checks and balances, social cohesion, an informed public sphere and adaptability to economic and geopolitical change are fundamental prerequisites for democratic quality. In an era of uncertainty and rapid transformation, the conference highlighted the need for collective responsibility, renewed trust in institutions and the revitalisation of democratic dialogue, in order for democracies to remain vibrant, inclusive and resilient in the face of future challenges.