This chapter traces the institutional trajectory of Greek trade unions during the period 2000–2020. The broader socio-political horizon of this period has been increasingly shaped by the dominance of what might be termed ‘Europeanized neoliberalization’. This term captures the close entanglement of a process of neoliberal restructuring (Karamessini 2009; Kennedy 2016) with the discursive hegemony of European Union (EU)/Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) membership obligations. While EMU entry was initially presented in the late 1990 and early 2000s as conditioned upon wage moderation and structural reforms, after 2010 its retention was more dramatically conditioned upon extreme austerity and the deconstruction of the protective character of Greek labour law (Katsaroumpas 2018; Koukiadaki and Kokkinou 2016a). This highly volatile conjuncture, juxtaposing periods of ‘thickened history’ (Beissinger 2002: chapter 4) – in the form of episodic bursts of legislative, political and social-movement activity (May 2010–2014) – and periods of relative stability (2000–May 2010 and 2015–2020) presented a challenging environment for unions. But despite the epoch-shifting 2010 crisis, which led to a new social and labour model characterized by political insecurity, instability and extensive social insecurity (Manitakis 2014), the following puzzle appeared: a pattern of structural continuity with regard to the trade union movement combined with an uneven effect in some functional areas, such as collective bargaining and union density, over others that experienced virtually no major changes (union structure and democracy, funding, action repertoire). Table 13.1 presents the principal characteristics of trade unions in Greece, as they have evolved in recent decades, covering the pre-crisis period and during the crisis. It is
important to clarify here that there is no publicly available data on trade union membership since 2016.

Table 13.1 Principal characteristics of trade unionism in Greece

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total trade union membership (GSEE)</td>
<td>662,000</td>
<td>666,000</td>
<td>490,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total trade union membership (ADEDY)</td>
<td>241,000</td>
<td>311,200</td>
<td>253,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women as a proportion of total</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>33.8 % (2008)</td>
<td>32.4 % (2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>membership</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Union density</td>
<td>27.5 %</td>
<td>22.6 %</td>
<td>20.2 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of confederations</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of affiliated unions (GSEE</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>62 (2005)</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>federations)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of affiliated unions (ADEDY</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>45 (2005)</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>federations)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collective bargaining coverage</td>
<td>100 %</td>
<td>100 %</td>
<td>26 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal level of collective</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bargaining</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>action per 1.000 workers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Visser (2019a).

This chapter seeks to complement the extensive literature on trade unions in Greece from the perspective of ‘Hyman’s triangle’ (Bithymitis and Kotsonopoulos 2018; Hyman 2001), the power resource approach (Vogiatzoglou 2018), social-movement theory (see Malamidis 2021) and grassroots unionism (Kretsos and Vogiatzoglou 2015). There is also an extensive labour-law literature documenting the far-reaching post-2010 deconstruction of the protective character of Greek collective labour law and the associated use of law to restrict unions’ functional space (Katsaroumpas 2018; Koukiadaki and Kokkinou 2016a; Papadimitriou 2013; Yannakourou and Tsimpoukis 2014).

Approaching unions as unitary actors in the Greek context is difficult. Unions are better regarded as ‘open institutional fields of contestation’ (Gallas 2018; Taylor et al. 2011); not only ‘organizations of struggle, but also fields of struggle between competing forces of labour with different strategies’ (Gallas 2018: 351). This conception is better suited for capturing the contradictory trends towards institutionalization, politicization and radicalization (Papadopoulos 2004) in Greece, as well as avoiding the risk of an automatic equation of union actions
with the promotion of workers’ interests (Gallas 2018). Furthermore, the following periodization is useful in the Greek context. The signing of the first Memorandum of Understanding with the International Monetary Fund (IMF)/EU in May 2010 can be used as a boundary between the pre-crisis period of relative stability (2000–May 2010) and the subsequent crisis period (May 2010–2020). The second period is in turn divided into three sub-periods: (1) the first, ‘deconstruction’ period (May 2010–2014), associated with successive waves of IMF/EU-imposed legal changes adopted by governments formed by the traditional political parties in various formations, the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK, Πανελλήνιο Σοσιαλιστικό Κίνημα) and New Democracy (ND, Νέα Δημοκρατία); (2) the second, ‘stasis’ period (2015–June 2019) in which the pace of labour-law reforms slowed down, partly because of the tensions between the Syriza-led (Coalition of the Radical Left, Συνασπισμός Ριζοσπαστικής Αριστεράς) government’s commitment to unions/labour rights and lenders’ demands; (3) a third period also characterized by deconstruction, beginning with the election of the right-wing New Democracy government in July 2019 that exhibits some early signs of a new round of neoliberalization.

**Historical background and principal features of the industrial relations system**

The history of the Greek labour movement has been broken down into five periods (Ioannou 2000). The first (1879–1918) begins with the outbreak of the first strikes on the island of Syros in 1879 and ends with the founding of the General Confederation of Greek Workers (GSEE, Γενική Συνομοσπονδία Εργατών Ελλάδας) in 1918, as the culmination of the struggles for organizational unity. As the beginnings of the labour union movement in Greece coincided with the economic crisis of the 1920s, during which the bourgeoisie hardened its attitude towards the labour movement, this deprived the union movement of democratic, political and trade union freedoms found in other European countries at that time (Katsoridas 2020: 127). The second period (1919–1940) ends with the establishment of state-controlled trade unionism during the Metaxas dictatorship (1936–1940). While social policy measures, involving the establishment of social security funds, the regulation of wages by collective agreements and a minimum wage, were adopted, unionism came under direct state control and state intervention in the regulation
of industrial relations widened (Ioannou 2000). In this context, the third period (1940–1949) – which includes the years of the Second World War, the Occupation, Liberation, and the ensuing Civil War – was characterized by the increasing politicization of the labour movement, without leading to a formal division of the trade union movement. During the fourth period (1950–1974), however, which covers the course of the labour movement until the collapse of the military dictatorship in 1974, the state unionism system was accompanied by the expulsion from the unions of left-wing unions or unions influenced by the Communist Left and continuing divisions concerning union hierarchies. It was only during its fifth period – the era of parliamentary democracy from the fall of the dictatorship in 1974 until today – that the main parameters for union democratization were established (see section below on political relations).

Broadly speaking, union power has not traditionally derived from their membership levels and presence at the workplace, but from the existence, hitherto, of a wider political context that was favourable to unions and reflected the links between unions and political parties. Starting in the 1980s and consolidated in the 1990s, this was accompanied in turn by a to some extent favourable regulatory framework. The latter was structured on the basis of an inter-sectoral agreement responsible for determining the national minimum wage and the operation of a multi-level system of bargaining centred around the extension of higher-level agreements to a large number of employees. This ensured very high bargaining coverage despite low union density rates and a low incidence of company-level bargaining. In this sense, one of the most important elements of the Greek system was the way the notion of collective autonomy had evolved over the years and the way this related to the promotional role that the state had to develop early on to facilitate the settlement of industrial conflicts and to regularize patterns of industrial relations (Katsaroumpas and Koukiadaki 2019). At the same time, Greek industrial relations seemed to confirm some of the assumptions behind the ‘Mediterranean varieties of capitalism’ approach (Amable 2003), namely that ‘a history of heavy state regulation may weaken the capacity of local actors to autonomously coordinate their activities’ (Molina and Rhodes 2007). This was facilitated by the regulatory framework itself, in respect of the restrictive rules regarding the establishment of unions at the workplace, further encouraging recourse to political mobilization and general strikes (Kretsos and Vogiatzoglou 2015).
Greek trade unions during the period 2000–2020

Political relations

Greek trade unions have traditionally been linked to the political process more through the operation of internal party-based factions that transform ‘all unions to small replicas of the Parliament’ (Mavrogordatos 1998: 56) rather than through social dialogue institutions. Consequently, the unitary structure of the union movement conceals an intense fragmentation due to the existence of well-organized factions around political party lines. The landmark Law 1264/1982 on the democratization of trade unions facilitates this fragmentation by requiring a proportional system of election of the members of executive bodies among lists and candidates. Since the 1990s, elements have been emerging of more ‘consensual’ structures in relations between the unions and the state (Kouzis 2007; Voulgaris 2012). The conclusion of the 2000 Confidence Pact between the government and social partners in an environment of wage moderation, which was needed for entry to Eurozone, was a notable innovation but it ultimately failed and was abandoned (Tsarouhas 2008; Yannakourou and Soumeli 2004: 9; Zambarloukou 2006).

The pre-crisis period witnessed a stable internal balance of power within both GSEE and the Civil Servants’ Confederation (ADEDY, Ανώτατη Διοίκηση Ενώσεων Δημοσίων Υπαλλήλων), both dominated by the pro-PASOK faction Greek National Trade Union Movement for Workers’ Defence (PASKE, Πανελλήνια Αγωνιστική Συνδικαλιστική Κίνηση Εργαζομένων). In the early 2000s, it was common practice for ex-GSEE leaders to become Ministers and MPs upon their retirement (Kretsos and Vogiatzoglou 2015: 225), thereby offering a personal ‘governmental’ link between unions and the government. In 1999, the Communist Party of Greece (KKE, Κομμουνιστικό Κόμμα Ελλάδας) established its own militant confederation, the All-Workers Militant Front (PAME, Πανεργατικό Αγωνιστικό Μέτωπο), while remaining within GSEE structures. In another example of internal division, however, PAME generally chooses to organize separate protests from GSEE (Kapsalis 2012: 23). During this period, continuing a trend whose origins can be traced back to the 1990s, the factions started operating less as ‘transmission belts’ of their political parties and more autonomously as pressure points for the government, including by capturing key policymaking areas, such as labour and pensions (Iordanoglou 2013; Sotiropoulos 2019: 643).

From 2010, the traditional PASOK and right-wing New Democracy two-party system collapsed after the two parties signed the increasingly
unpopular austerity-driven Memoranda. This caused rifts in both main union factions, PASKE and the Democratic Independent Movement of Workers (DAKE, Δημοκρατική Ανεξάρτητη Κίνηση Εργαζομένων) with their parties (PASOK and ND, respectively) (Kousis and Karakioulafi 2013: 6–7). The rifts were more acute for PASOK. Despite PASOK’s electoral annihilation and Syriza’s victory in 2015 PASKE dominance and Syriza’s marginal presence in GSEE continues, with Syriza failing to ‘build a strong hold in interest groups’ (Sotiropoulos 2019: 616). Potential explanations for this phenomenon can be found in Syriza’s historical social-movement orientation, perceiving unions as bureaucratic and dominated by traditional political parties (Tsakatika and Eleftheriou 2013); Syriza’s ‘weak social base’ among workers; and the collapse of clientelistic state–party–citizen relations during the crisis (Vogiatzoglou 2018: 125 ft 2). From 2016, the pro-ND DAKE emerged as the largest faction in ADEDY.

But the bitter divisions inside the union movement reached a dramatic climax in the violent interventions of PAME activists, twice leading to the abandonment of the 2019 GSEE conference. These interventions were made amid disputed allegations of the improper involvement of management in the elections of conference members by affiliated organizations. Eventually, a judicial decision was needed to allow GSEE administration to resume on a provisional basis until the 2020 conference. Another critical function that some militant unions played during the crisis was that of preventing the fascist Golden Dawn (Χρυσή Αυγή) – a pro-Nazi organization and political party recently declared a criminal organization by the Greek courts – from penetrating Greek unions. Bithymitris and Spyridakis (2020) provide an excellent account of how the militant PAME-leading Trade Union of Metal Workers of Attica and the Shipbuilding Industry of Greece succeeded in preventing the rise of a union created by Golden Dawn.

Turning to the issue of social dialogue, in the crisis period the unions’ role in the design, adoption and implementation of the radical measures was marginal (Kapsalis 2012; Patra 2012). While for the first Memorandum in May 2010 (European Commission 2010) there was no social dialogue, for the second (March 2012) there were discussions among social partners, although their outcomes were considered by the lenders, in a somewhat paternalistic manner, as ‘[falling] short of expectations’, with the result that the Troika suggested a unilateral imposition of reforms (European Commission 2012: 147). The general picture during
the crisis period is that unions were not properly consulted (Koukiadaki and Kokkinou 2016a) as ‘crisis negotiations were monopolized by the state, which further entrenched its dominant role in industrial relations’ (Rigby and Calavia 2018: 137).

The persistence of party-based factions within unions illustrates the unclear boundaries between factionalism and politicization. Viewed positively, the presence of union factions in all major political parties reflects a cross-party legitimacy of the role of unions. But the PAME/GSEE tensions based on accusations of class betrayal and business unionism undermine unions’ public image. Despite these rivalries, GSEE still maintains its hegemonic status at the top of the unions and hosts, in an inclusive manner, all relevant factions, including those supported by PAME and KKE. The unions’ political relations have been characterized during the 2000s by continuity, displaying less volatility than the political party system.

**Structure of trade unions and union democracy**

Union structure and union democracy constitute elements of all trade union functions (Ewing 2005). One of the primary characteristics of the Greek union movement is its dual structure at confederal level: different confederations exist for the private (GSEE) and public sectors (ADEDY). In the private and the wider public sector, including state-owned enterprises, the representation of employees in unions within GSEE is structured at three levels. The first is the primary unions. Many are company-based groups, but they can also be branches of larger national or regional bodies or occupational unions. In addition, a ‘new’ form of workers’ organization emerged with the implementation of the Memoranda, namely the ‘Associations of Persons’ (Law 4024/2011).¹ Then come secondary unions, namely federations (on the basis of industry or occupation) and the so-called ‘labour centres’ (on the basis of geographical area), both of which are formed by two or more primary unions. The third category, the confederal level, comprises GSEE. Workers’ representation at the GSEE Congress takes place through the federations and the labour centres. At

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¹ Note that ‘associations of persons’ are not new institutions, strictly speaking. They were established through Law 1264/1982 but had no collective agreement powers as such (see Katsaroumpas and Koukiadaki 2019).
present there are eighty-one labour centres and seventy-three sectoral federations within GSEE. The biggest federations are the Greek Federation of Bank Employee Unions (OTOE, Ομοσπονδία Τραπεζούπαλληλικών Οργανώσεων Ελλάδας), the Federation of Private Employees (OIYE, Ομοσπονδία Ιδιωτικών Υπαλλήλων Ελλάδας), the Federation of Personnel of the Public Power Corporation SA (GENOP/DEI, Γενική Ομοσπονδία ΔΕΗ Κλάδου Ηλεκτρικής Ενέργειας) and the Federation of Greek Builders and Associated Professions (OMOIKEL, Ομοσπονδία Οικοδόμων και Συναφών Επαγγελμάτων Ελλάδας). Traditionally, industrial or occupational unions dominate, although there is a significant presence of company unions, both at primary level and the level of the federations and labour centres. Although there is no publicly available data on changes in the union membership structure and distribution across different levels of organization within the private sector, Table 13.2 shows that the number of labour centres and federations has steadily increased, while there has been a significant decline in the number of primary-level unions. In addition, the number of members actively participating in their unions has progressively declined.

Table 13.2 Changes in the membership of GSEE, 1989–2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GSEE Congress</th>
<th>Number of primary-level union members (natural persons)</th>
<th>Number of primary-level unions</th>
<th>Number of labour centres</th>
<th>Number of federations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Members who voted</td>
<td>Registered members</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>564,477</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>3,020</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>482,337</td>
<td>798,689</td>
<td>2,676</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>430,581</td>
<td>775,115</td>
<td>2,318</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>413,843</td>
<td>754,142</td>
<td>2,295</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>420,610</td>
<td>768,484</td>
<td>2,264</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>448,754</td>
<td>839,383</td>
<td>2,373</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>472,304</td>
<td>870,415</td>
<td>2,245</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>1,875</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


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OTOE: total number of ‘voting’ members: 36,562 (data 2016); OIYE: total number of ‘voting’ members: 22,709 (data 2016); GENOP-DEI: total number of ‘voting’ members: 12,121 (data 2016); OMOIKEL: total number of ‘voting’ members: 12,139 (data 2016).
Similar to the private sector, the organization of workers in the public sector is structured at three levels: primary staff associations, which may be of a local, co-occupational or sectoral nature; secondary organizations, which are formed by the primary associations of employees and have an exclusively ‘sectoral’ dimension based on the formation and operation of federations; and the tertiary union organization, ADEDY, which is formed by the secondary organizations of civil servants. In 2020 there were a total of forty-six federations belonging to ADEDY. Out of all the federations under ADEDY, four – namely the Greek Primary Teachers’ Federations (DOE, Διδασκαλική Ομοσπονδία Ελλάδας), the Secondary Education Teachers (OLME, Ομοσπονδία Λειτουργών Μέσης Εκπαίδευσης), the Public Hospital Employees (POEDIN, Πανελλήνια Ομοσπονδία Εργαζομένων Δημόσιων Νοσοκομείων) and the Employees in Local Government (POE-OTA, Πανελλήνια Ομοσπονδία Προσωπικού Οργανισμών Τοπικής Αυτοδιοίκησης) – represent over 65 per cent of the total strength of ADEDY, while the remaining 35 per cent is distributed over the other forty-two federations (Katsoridas 2020: 255).

In the context of fragmentation at cross-sectoral level, there were attempts by ADEDY and GSEE in the early 2000s, with the creation of a consolidated bipartite National Coordinating Trade Union Council (or ‘trade union congress’), to investigate and take decisions jointly on strategic options, priorities and far-reaching tactical options for the union movement. Despite cooperation in, among others, research activities, there has been no progress towards a merger between the two confederations. Union fragmentation at the confederal level is complemented by similar levels of fragmentation at secondary and primary levels as well. Despite plans for organizational simplification of the unions in the early 2000s (e.g. at the 31st Congress in 2002) no progress has been made on these objectives. Reasons for the continuing fragmentation include the existence of a great number of occupational unions and the loose interpretation of the notion of the ‘branch’, which allows space for more than one federation (Kouzis 2007). Furthermore, unlike other countries, where financial pressures have led to union mergers, such pressures have

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3 DOE: total number of ‘voting’ members: about 59,625; OLME: total number of ‘voting’ members: about 37,500; POEDIN: total number of ‘voting’ members: about 37,500; POE-OTA: total number of ‘voting’ members: about 37,500. All data are from 2016.
been less noticeable in Greece, as unions have traditionally not depended so much on direct income from the membership base.

More importantly, the function of the unions is not confined to a simple struggle of ideological approaches, while political parties essentially function as organized forces within the unions (Kouzis 2007), the outcome being the intensification of factionalization and partisanship of the union movement (Katsoridas 2020). At the level of the confederations, during the 2000s and early 2010s, both GSEE and ADEDY boards had small majorities in favour of PASOK, which to some extent allowed closer cooperation between the two confederations (Ioannou 2005: 158). Recent evidence suggests, however, that changes in the composition of the confederations’ boards have led to greater union antagonism at confederal level. The decision by ADEDY’s executive board to declare a work stoppage and call on public sector employees to take part in a rally, organized by PAME,⁴ so that the 37th GSEE Conference could not take place, illustrates these divisions well. Unions’ political linkages had been extensively used in the past at other levels of union organization as well. This has been the case especially in respect of public sector unions and state-owned enterprises, where paradoxically unions have a significant membership base, indicating the long shadow of the close relationship between the political system and union leaderships.

From a regulatory perspective, Law 1264/1982 on the ‘democratization of the trade-union movement and enshrinement of the trade-union freedoms of workers’ remained largely unchanged during both the stability and crisis periods (2009–2018). Other changes (see section below on bargaining) seem to have intensified the antagonism between different segments of the union movement, however. Proposed changes, put forward recently by the New Democracy government (2019–present), may soon affect the internal organization of unions directly. This is because they include measures that can be seen as targeting the operations of unions per se, such as the requirement for registration of unions in a single register in order to be able to conclude collective agreements, the reduction of paid leave and the liberalization of dismissal protection for union officials.⁵

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⁴ At PAME’s 2016 national conference, 536 trade unions participated: 12 federations, 15 labour centres, 457 trade unions and 52 ‘struggle committees’. A conference is also held in 2017 but there is no publicly available data on the participant organisations.

⁵ Law 4635/2019. This possibility applies to all other types of decisions of the General Assemblies and of other unions’ administrative bodies. The law stipulates that the
Unionization

The issue of unionization is directly related to trade unions’ service and representation functions (Ewing 2005). There are no official figures on the number of union members in Greece. Instead, the data for calculating union density has traditionally been based on the unions’ own figures on voting members in union elections for the administration boards (and not those registered as members or those that have paid their dues). This is on the basis that the number of members voting indicates more active participation in union activities (Katsoridas 2020: 265). At the same time, concerns have been expressed that the union estimates may be inaccurate or distorted, inflating the actual number of their members in order to increase their legitimacy, enhance their chances in elections or receive funding, as these are often distributed according to the number of voting members (Koukoules 1994).

Historical data on union density in Greece suggests increasing erosion during the period 2000–2020. Before the 2000s, unions were already experiencing challenges, as density had already been reduced from 48 per cent in 1977 to 24.9 per cent in 2001. During 2000–2016, the decline continued and intensified further during the economic crisis. According to the latest data, GSEE and ADEDY had 612,000 voting members in total in 2016: GSEE had 358,761 voting members eligible at its congress in March 2016 and ADEDY reported 253,564 voting members at its congress in November 2016. Based on the total number of employees – namely 237,192 in the first quarter of 2016 – this produces a union density figure of 25.8 per cent (Georgiadou 2021). The ICTWSS database, however, calculates union density in 2016 at 20.2 per cent (see Figure 13.1). The figures also mask a marked difference between the public and private sectors. In the private sector, density does not exceed 15 per cent, while in the public sector it exceeds 90 per cent in some cases (for an analysis, see Katsoridas, 2020).

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6 No data are publicly available on the actual number of people registered as union members or on those of them who have paid their dues.

7 The calculation excluded union members that are unemployed or retired and are not employees (Visser 2019a). See also Katsoridas (2020: 274) who calculated that union density stood in 2016 at 20.3 per cent.
Low union density rates can be interpreted as the outcome of a number of interrelated elements of the labour market and industrial relations framework. First of all, the make-up of the workforce: the presence of a large number of irregular and undocumented workers in combination with a large percentage of bogus self-employed and atypical workers, has meant that in practice a large section of workers has not been unionized (Zambarloukou 2006). It is noteworthy that within the private sector, the largest sectors in terms of workforce size – commerce, services and food – have the lowest union density rates. The high percentage of small and micro companies in these industries, in combination with the characteristics described above, dissuade workers from organizing in primary industrial unions and company unions (Katsoridas 2020: 267). What is more, these groups of workers, who are often precarious, exhibit some of the elements identified by Standing (2011) regarding the ‘modern precariat’, including their lack of affiliation to unions or political parties. Recent analysis by Zisimopoulos et al. (2019) also suggests that the social classes that suffer most from exploitation – defined as belonging to different groups identified as working class – show a lower density rate than the union density of total workers in waged employment. In contrast, the highest level of union density was reported in lower level managers and supervisors in the private sector and to a larger extent civil servants (Zisimopoulos et al. 2019: 5).

As for the trade unions, there is evidence to suggest a reluctance on their part to accept various categories of precarious workers as members.
In the private sector, this involves, for example, excluding from union membership people employed through so-called voucher schemes and outsourcing in banking. The rationale is that they should avoid legitimizing such practices. Based on similar arguments about marginalizing such business practices, union federations in the public sector have in the past not accepted as members people on fixed-term contracts in local government (Koukiadaki and Kokkinou 2016b). Kapsalis (2012: 24) suggests that during the crisis there was growth of a new form of grassroots unionism that was more class-conscious and tried to operate on the basis of direct democratic principles without bureaucrats and professional leadership. These attempts were more prevalent in specific contexts, such as the service sector, where unionization has historically not been high (Koukiadaki and Kokkinou 2016b), or where there is a large number of atypical employees, or higher rates of labour-law violations. Part of this grassroots unionism contested the ‘institutionalized official’ unions (Karakioulakis and Kanellopoulos 2018) on the basis of the latter’s closeness to political parties and inability to represent a growing number of precarious workers. Even in this case, however, grassroots unions have tended to focus in some respects on developing forms of political mobilization rather than mobilization at the workplace level (Kretsos 2011).

Unions’ appeal to other categories of employees, for example young workers and women, is also not without its challenges. A 2015 nationwide survey reported that 82 per cent of union members are 40 years old or above. Even though workers aged between 25 and 29 years’ old constitute 20 per cent of total employees, only 1 per cent are union members (Zisimopoulos 2018: 379–381). This compares badly with data from 1999, when 25 per cent of young workers were union members. Reasons cited include unions’ relations with political parties and their inability to engage with the problems facing this category of workers (Katsoridas 2020). In a similar vein, unions have largely been unable to capitalize on the relative growth – from 39 per cent in 2000 to 45 per cent in 2018 – of female employment in recent decades. In 2015, men were represented in the union movement at a level almost 13 percentage points higher than women (Zisimopoulos 2018). A survey conducted by GSEE reported that the most important deterrent for becoming a union member among women was the lack of time to engage in union activities because of family obligations (85.8 per cent of respondents). The predominance of men in unions and in union leadership, pressure and discouragement on the part of their partners or their families, and
devaluation by their colleagues, were also reported as factors preventing women from participating in unions (51 per cent, 49 and 38.3 per cent, respectively) (Varhalama et al. 2015).

**Union resources and expenditures**

Trade union funding is a major ‘infrastructural’ power resource (Schmalz et al. 2018: 119), essential for internal union capacities and financial autonomy. During 2000–2020, the comparatively ‘exceptional’ Greek tradition of extensive state-mediated union funding (Kouzis 2007)\(^8\) proved resilient despite experiencing certain changes in its institutional form.

Union funding originated in the Greek authoritarian past, more specifically during the fascist Metaxas dictatorship in the late 1930s, when it was used as a class instrument for pro-government unions at the expense of dissident militant communist ones (Kouzis 2007; Lavdas 2005). This institution survived the post-1974 democratic transition and in its 2000 form it operated according to a complex system administered by the Ministry of Labour, which drew on employers’ and workers’ social security contributions (0.25 per cent for each party) on behalf of an organization called the Workers’ Welfare Organization (OEE, Οργανισμός Εργατικής Εστίας). Besides union funding, OEE performed a ‘service function’ (Ewing 2005) by offering a range of services to workers, such as vouchers for recreational, tourist and cultural activities. The scope of eligible expenses for union funding was restricted to basic operational costs, payroll costs for a limited number of staff, conference or election expenses and other overheads, such as rent, cleaning and heating costs.

The availability of this funding contributed to – or at least reinforced – a resource dualism among unions, depending on their willingness to participate in the funding systems, eligibility and funding received. On one hand, GSEE and, to a lesser extent, secondary-level private sector associations (federations) drew heavily on OEE funding as their major sources of income, with voluntary membership subscriptions performing a secondary or symbolic role (Kritsantonis 1998). On the other hand, primary-level unions in the public sector derived most of their income

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\(^8\) The term ‘state-mediated funding’ is used instead of ‘state funding’ because it better captures the fact that these funds are drawn from employer and/or employee contributions.
from voluntary membership subscriptions. Most of these unions were formally excluded as they failed to satisfy the required threshold of 500 voting members. And even if they did, they received minimal funding. Public unions at all levels and the banking unions in the private sector, however, did not receive OEE funding and rely significantly on membership subscriptions.9

This system experienced virtually no changes in the pre-crisis period (2000–2010). The only exception was a 0.05 rise in OEE contributions agreed by the 2002–2003 National General Collective Agreement. It is illustrative that during 2007–2009 GSEE sourced more than 95 per cent of its income from OEE compared with the miniscule 1 per cent that came from the subscriptions of affiliated members (Table 13.3).

Table 13.3 Total GSEE income from 1 April 2007 to 31 December 2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income source</th>
<th>Absolute number in euros</th>
<th>Total income (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Funding from Ergatiki Estia</td>
<td>20,250,000</td>
<td>95.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding from other sources</td>
<td>180,000</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bank interest</td>
<td>612,000</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subscriptions of affiliated organizations</td>
<td>231,000</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total income</td>
<td>21,273,000</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Rounded data.


This regime was subjected to an external challenge by the ‘capture’ of the Greek state IMF/EU-imposed conditionality established during the Greek debt crisis (Katsaroumpas 2018; Koukiadaki and Kretsos 2012). Memorandum II identified OEE as a ‘non-priority social expenditure’ and demanded its termination (European Commission 2012: 110). All duties, liabilities and resources were transferred to the Manpower Organization (OAED, Οργανισμός Απασχόλησης Εργατικού Δυναμικού). Employer contributions were abolished as part of the overall aim of reducing non-wage costs for employers (European Commission 2012). The ex-OEE contributions are now held under a special earmarked OAED account from which union funding is drawn. Despite this institutional

9 ADEDY collects a 0.3 euro subscription per person from affiliated secondary organisations.
reform, however, successive ministers have renewed this funding on a triannual basis (2013, 2016 and 2019). Law 4491/2017 also clarified that these funds do not constitute state aid or funding but a ‘withholding of a resource’, implying that the state here acts in a mediating capacity (Article 16).

In 2016, Syriza-led government minister George Katrougalos described this system as an ‘unhealthy solution’ and stated ‘that trade unions should be self-funded, as to gain autonomy from the state’ (Petropoulos 2016). This comment provoked a fierce response by GSEE, accusing him of ‘blackmailing with economic asphyxiation the trade union movement, reminiscent of other eras and other “democracies” without “independent” or “autonomous trade unions”’ (GSEE 2016).

The legal provision for union leave is another important institutional source for union activities. This is significant as unions tend to rely on their members’ services for their operation rather than on full-time employees. In 2018 GSEE employed around fifty persons (Kostakos 2018), a figure not unrelated to the fact that state-mediated funding covers only a limited number of staff. Union leaders at secondary or tertiary levels are entitled to a full union leave with pay for their tenure subject to more generous provisions in collective agreements. In addition, with regard to the collection of membership subscriptions, Law 1264/1982 provided for an employer’s duty to maintain check-off arrangements subject to more specific provisions by National General Collective Agreements. On the question of expenditures, Kouzis draws a link between the dominant status of state-mediated union funding covering only basic expenses and the relative absence of strike funds in unions along with the almost inexistent service provision to their members (Kouzis 2007: 187).

There is a striking absence of academic literature on union expenditure and other union resources, although some observations can be made. First, the state-mediated union funding exhibits a peculiar ‘stickiness’ despite its abolition in various historical periods and the recognition of its provisional nature by Law 1264/1982 (Kouzis 2007). This model can be seen as an instance of statization of union resources threatening their financial autonomy (Kouzis 2007; Stergiou 2002). Its origins are linked to an active class state supporting friendly unions against the communist threat. In its modern form, this institution typifies the close connection between state, law and administrative discretion. Secondly, it established various channels of state influence on unions. To begin with, this model helps the preservation of upper-level unions in that it shields them from
membership changes. In this sense, it represents a peculiar institutional arrangement contributing to ‘institutional embeddedness’ that partially uncouples the organizational fortunes of unions from labour market strength (Baccaro et al. 2003: 120–121). The state also enjoys the ability to use the threat of economic asphyxiation as a leverage tool for pressuring unions as well as influencing their ‘organizational flexibility’ by controlling the expenses eligible for funding (Kouzis 2007).

Thirdly, union funding operates in the complex and opaque intersection between welfare law, this is social security contributions, and administrative law via Ministerial decisions. Even if one accepts in principle the thesis that a system of funding of unions by compulsory contributions is justified vis-à-vis their public role as vital democratic institutions, the current model seems to be far from this principle. It is dominated by the state’s expanded discretionary role. The government controls the flow of contributions from employees to the social security provider and then to OAED from which only a part is channelled to unions based on administrative decisions. Hence, it is not managed by unions based on a direct and transparent reciprocal link between contributions and funding. And these contributions appear to employees in a bureaucratic guise as another state-imposed salary reduction with an obscure name. It should also not be ignored that the state enjoys an additional financial source to be used as needed for other budgetary purposes. In addition, unions are vulnerable to the charge that they are parasitic to the state which could be rhetorically mobilized by a future government embracing a Thatcherite-type assault on unions. Finally, a critique from freedom and authority would see this system as incompatible with the autonomous will of workers to choose their funding for their union representatives and their active and conscious participation in the union processes (Stergiou 2002).

Collective bargaining and unions at the workplace

The case of collective bargaining constitutes one of the prime areas where the role of the state, through primarily statutory intervention, has traditionally played a critical role in the framing of collective bargaining, including at workplace level. In the first period (2000–2010) the regulatory framework for collective bargaining was shaped by Law 1876/1990 that intended to promote collective autonomy and contain the dominant, until then, role of the state in the industrial relations system. In practice, the bargaining system was relatively stable in terms of its
structure, coverage and operation. Bargaining coverage stood at around 80 per cent in contrast to union density that was estimated at around 24 per cent (Visser 2019a). But there was growing dissonance between legal stability and neoliberal economic change (Katsaroumpas and Koukiadaki 2019). From the perspective of union organization, there were considerable challenges in respect of their formation and operation, given that 96 per cent of firms employed fewer than twenty employees, which has been the minimum union membership demanded for a union to be established in a company (Kouzis 2000). Further, the provision of three levels of union organization, with a very large number of primary-level unions traditionally organized around occupations, contributed to organizational fragmentation (Yannakourou 2004). These in conjunction with the politically driven divisions within GSEE and ADEDY meant that the involvement of local union officers and shop stewards in the administration of collective agreements at workplace level was not extensive. In addition, the long-term secondment of union officials from the workplaces, their participation in various committees and councils and their political ambitions, among others, created an image among the workforce of senior trade unionists with significant benefits and privileges (Katsoridas 2020: 292–293). On the other hand, while legislation introduced in 1988 (Law 1767/1988) made for the first time provision for the establishment and operation of works councils, the take-up of these was minimal. This was attributed to the satisfaction of some unions with the informal joint consultation arrangements and the concern by the leadership of unions that the elected members of the works’ council would not be under their control and could thus become their competitors (Jecchinis 1994).

The crisis period saw several changes in the regulatory framework for collective bargaining, indirectly challenging the role of unions at the workplace level. In the first ‘deconstruction’ period, crisis-related changes included a temporary suspension of the extension of industrial and occupational agreements and the principle of favourability,10 and the provision of scope for all firms, including those employing fewer than fifty persons,11 to conclude firm-level collective agreements through

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10 Law 4024/2011.

11 In the previous system, there was no right to company-level bargaining in companies below 50 employees and only sectoral and occupational collective agreements could apply.
the so-called ‘association of persons’. The Committee on Freedom of Association of the International Labour Organization expressed particular concerns about the granting of collective bargaining rights to such associations, as it was deemed that it could ‘seriously undermine the position of trade unions as the representative voice of the workers in the collective bargaining process’ (ILO 2012). While firm-level bargaining predominantly through associations of persons was initially taken up, the number of company-level agreements plummeted again as a result of further reforms that again reduced the incentive for employers to proceed to the conclusion of company-level agreements, even with associations of persons (Koukiadaki and Grimshaw 2016). What is more, the contraction of higher-level bargaining, and thus of bargaining coverage (see Table 13.1 above), had significant influence on the unions’ associational capacity. It essentially reduced the incentive for certain unions at primary level to be part of the overall structure of GSEE, constraining even further the institutional power of the third-level federation and precipitating a crisis of credibility from the workers’ point of view (Kapsalis 2012: 9). At the same time, this was combined with the intensification of grassroots movements at company level, with mixed results (Kretsos and Vogiatzoglou 2015).

In the ‘stasis’ phase, initial attempts by the Syriza-led government to implement a range of measures to promote collective bargaining were thwarted by continuing pressure from Greece’s creditors in 2015. According to the 2017 agreement entered into by the then Greek government with its creditors, however, Law 4472/2017 reserved the right to reintroduce the favourability principle and extension of collective agreements at the end of the period of validity of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). These changes were duly introduced into law from August 2018. But given the wide-ranging effects of the previous reforms on unions’ associational capacity and the fact that any extension decision has to follow strict legal conditions, very few agreements were extended, thus negatively impacting upon workers’ protection at workplace level. These changes were short-lived, however. The new government led by New Democracy introduced legislation in 2019 that was again designed to remove the incentives for collective bargaining and to weaken further unions’ regulatory function (Law 4635/2019). The legislative changes included the introduction of an exception to the favourability principle by local (occupational or industrial) collective agreements, a special extension regime in respect of companies in financial difficulty
and non-profit organizations, and further restrictions on the unilateral right to arbitration. Evidence from 2020 confirms the irrelevance of collective bargaining as a method for determining terms and conditions of employment, including at company level.

**Industrial conflict**

Greek trade unions have traditionally deployed industrial action as a political rather than an industrial-economic tool (Kritsantonis 1998: 525). Such a preference may also reflect the perceived feasibility of state intervention for worker interests compared with their generally weaker industrial power (Katsaroumpas and Koukiadaki 2019: 274–278). The frequent use of 24-hour general strikes, often with symbolic effect, is a prominent manifestation of this (Vogiatzoglou 2018: 130). According to Hamann et al. (2013: 1032), thirty-three out of seventy-two general strikes in Western Europe between 1980 and 2006 took place in Greece. The comparatively high rate of general strikes is also enabled by the permissive legal framework, which requires only a decision of the GSEE or ADEDY administrative council. There are generally no reliable data on the level of strike participation overall and within specific industries and sectors to allow an in-depth and systematic analysis.

No alterations were made to the legal framework during the pre-crisis period. Reliable assessments of strike activity are impossible because the Ministry of Labour ceased to record strikes in 2000. But the successful mass strikes in 2000 against the proposed deregulatory pension reform proposed by PASOK minister Tasos Giannitsis are notable. The combined effects of union mobilization, plummeting government popularity and internal cabinet divisions led to the withdrawal of the reforms and caused the departure of Giannitsis (Tsarouhas 2012: 166–168). While for some scholars this event evidences privileged workers’ aversion to reforms in Greece (Featherstone and Papadimitriou 2008; Giannitsis 2007; Matsaganis 2008), for unions it proved their ability to veto deregulatory reforms through a complementary use of industrial action and political pressure. These strikes appeared to be rather the exception than the rule in the pre-crisis period, however.

The post-2010 crisis period witnessed a radical transformation of the legal context. Successive waves of EU/IMF-imposed reforms that interfered directly in collective bargaining and its preconditions (Koukiadaki
and Kokkinou 2016a; Katsaroumpas 2018) meant that unions’ institutional security was eroded significantly. This was particularly the case with GSEE, following the attacks on the National General Collective Agreements as a universal minimum wage-setting system. Unions thus faced a dual exclusion. On one hand, their collective bargaining capacities were reduced by the destabilization of the collective bargaining system. On the other hand, the government became unresponsive to internal pressures owing to the IMF/EU bailout conditionality regime and the threat of Eurozone expulsion. In this context, industrial action appeared to the unions to be the last resort.

During 2010–2012, there was intense strike activity through general strikes (Kretsos and Vogiatzoglou 2015) and more conflictual actions (Papanikolopoulos et al. 2018), coinciding with the various rounds of proposed legislative reforms. This surge in strike activity was integrated into a wider mobilization strategy of resistance to austerity, along with ‘demonstrations, clashes with the police and protests in the majority of Greek cities’, to be followed by the Indignados movement, labour mobilization and civil disobedience (Psimitis 2011; Sergi and Vogiatzoglou 2013: 224). According to the GSEE press releases, the strikes on 19 October 2011 and 18 October 2012 had 100 per cent participation in the oil refinery, shipbuilding, maritime transport and port sectors, and 90 per cent in the steel, construction and retail sectors (GSEE 2011, 2012).

Within this period, the 272-day strike at Hellenic Steel in Aspropirgos by a ‘militant’ union against proposed wage cuts (by cutting working hours) and dismissals was characterized as an example of ‘militant unionism’ (Bithymitris 2016). Despite its failure, the strike became emblematic in the struggle against the injustice of austerity, gathering celebrity support and solidarity contributions from a variety of national and international actors, such as student unions and solidarity associations (Bithymitris 2016: 381). The period 2012–2015 witnessed a reduction in strikes and mobilization (Papanikolopoulos et al. 2018), however, which continued under the Syriza-led governments (2015–2019).

In their analysis, Papanikolopoulos et al. (2018: 66–70) attribute the retreat of mobilization to a combination of challenges of the Greek union movement. The identify among others the drastic impact of measures on employees’ resources (which, along with the fear of unemployment, made them less likely to continue strike participation), the routinization of strikes, state suppression and the transfer of hopes from protests to the electoral arena with the election of the Syriza-led government.
While strike activity went on the decline after 2012, the legal framework for industrial action, which was curiously left untouched in 2010–2015 (see Katsaroumpas and Koukiadaki 2019: 274–278), became increasingly a Memorandum target after 2015. Potentially reflecting compromises between lenders and the Syriza government, committed to the existing framework, Memorandum II focused on procedural delaying tactics by requiring consultations, which should ‘tak[e] into account best practices internationally and in Europe’ (European Commission 2015: 21). Even though an Expert Consultation fell short of recommending any changes (Expert Group 2016), the 2018 Supplemental Memorandum called for adoption of ‘legislation to increase the quorum for first-degree unions to vote on a strike to 50 per cent’ (European Commission 2018: 23). The previous threshold was one-third and in some cases one-fifth (Zisimopoulos 2019: 99). Here it should be clarified that these thresholds apply to first-level unions, because a decision by the administrative council is sufficient for the peak confederations (GSEE and ADEDY). Union leaders warned that these steps may be the first in an overall deconstruction of the strike framework (Iefimerida 2018).

The right-wing New Democracy government, elected in 2019, is clearly intent on making a more substantial intervention in the industrial action framework. In 2020, the government presented a proposal for a substantial overhaul of the system. It called for a union obligation to provide remote balloting for strike decisions and imposed a requirement to justify industrial action. There were also proposals for a minimum of 40 per cent safety personnel in businesses whose function is critical for society and in the public sector, which will arguably reduce the effect of strikes. The law also proposes the general illegality of occupation of premises, which was used in the crisis, or any exertion of psychological or physical force (Enikos 2020). Union resistance to this law, along with health and safety complaints about inadequate protection from Covid-19, led to some notable strikes in 2020. Besides ADEDY strikes calling for the recruitment of additional personnel (doctors, teachers, cleaners and transport personnel), along with the requisition of private facilities (News247 2020a), there were teachers’ strikes about the lack of sufficient Covid-19 measures at school and student safety (News247 2020b) and a doctors’ strike complaining about poor medical facilities (CnnGreece 2020).
An overall assessment of the period 2000–2020 cannot but be struck by the resilience of the political use of industrial action as a political tool, but also note its failure to register its impact after the 2010 crisis. The Greek case offers an example of the utilization of industrial action as part of the ‘governmental’ function (Ewing 2005). The recent proposals for industrial action reform depart from the pre-existing consensus in this area, however, and may prefigure a more radical step-by-step attack on the right to industrial action.

**Societal power**

The prevailing academic narrative in Greece posits a ‘colonization’ of civic, non-governmental associations by political parties, shaped by the power of a strong state against a weak society (Diamandouros 1991; Makridimitris 2002; Mouzelis and Pagoulats 2002: 8), including trade unions. Unions generally suffer from low public trust. While Malamidis’ observation that unions ‘have been identified as representatives of state interests and have often been associated with corruption and patronage’ (Malamidis 2021: 70) should be treated as a generalization, a 2010 public survey found that only 25 per cent of respondents trusted unions. This figure is even lower for GSEE and ADEDY, at 23 per cent (VPRC 2010). NGOs were even less trusted because of scandals and accusations that they have benefited from non-transparent state funding (Loukidou 2014: 2; Sotiropoulos and Bourikos 2014).

With the exception of the anti-pension reform movement in 2010, the most important movements between 2000–2010 – namely those against globalization (between 1999–2003; see Malamidis 2021), against privatization of universities, by university students (2005–2006), and against police brutality, led by young people in 2008 (Vogiatzoglou 2018: 125) – were not led by unions. On the left, however, there was a sort of ‘civil society turn’ by both KKE and Syriza – both marginal parties at that time gathering around 3–6 per cent of the vote – which include ‘a visible effort to reconfirm existing links and forge new links to trade unions and social movements’ (Tsakatika and Eleftheriou 2013: 82). For KKE, this turn has taken the form of the PAME confederation’s efforts to reach unorganized workers, while for Syriza, it takes the form of an alliance of environmental, anti-capitalist, feminist and other social movements.
The 2010 crisis is considered to be a turning point, prompting a revitalization of Greek society in the form of denser civil society network, with more state autonomy (Loukidou 2014; Simiti 2017). The union movement has taken a dual position in this revitalization: (i) a ‘social movement turn’ by GSEE and ADEDY ‘from the top’; and (ii) the emergence of ‘grassroot’ unions and labour organizations ‘from below’.

ADEDY/GSEE strikes between 2010 and 2012 became integrated into the ‘anti-austerity social movement’. Kanellopoulos and Kostopoulos (2013: 10) identify three main clusters in their analysis of protest participation: unions, organized political forces (Syriza, Antarsya, KKE) and ‘indignados’ (Aganaktismenoi). They observe the complementary use GSEE/ADEDY made of calling the strike and the superior mobilization capacity of other organizations to bring participants to the demonstrations (Kanellopoulos and Kostopoulos 2013: 11). Here the permissive legal regime for general strikes was exploited to provide resources for social protest. But the GSEE decision to back ‘yes’ in the 2015 referendum called by Syriza brought it into conflict with most sections of Greek social movements.

Regarding activities ‘from below’, various unions of teachers, workers and pharmacists have engaged in coalition-building by providing volunteer services to the rising solidarity network, offering services to those in need (Kantzara 2014: 270). These networks cover both formal organizations – voluntary associations and NGOs – and informal networks seeking to remedy the ‘social protection gap’ created by the dramatic decline of the already weak welfare state (Sotiropoulos and Bourikos 2014: 34). There are militant, grassroots union organizations, informal workers’ collectives and experimental cooperatives and self-management projects, including local-based Workers’ Clubs (Εργατικές Λέσχες), which are able to get the message out to the hard-to-reach small-enterprise employees and the unemployed (Kretsos and Vogiatzoglou 2015: 226–230). The various unions of precarious workers maintain no links with traditional parties, operate in areas with low unionization and enjoy a contentious relationship with the GSEE, in which they participate reluctantly (Kretsos and Vogiatozlou 2015: 228). They have forged alliances with other organizations, however, such as smaller left-wing parties, student unions and NGOs through a union assembly and calls to its members for demonstrations during the general strike (ibid.: 229).

Moving to environmental issues, the 2004–2005 National General Collective Agreement (NGCA, Εθνική Γενική Συλλογική Σύμβαση
Eργασίας) established a clear duty of the parties to ‘accept the need for compatibility of productive activities with environmental protection and sustainable development’, while providing for permanent institutional structures with the government and local authorities. More recently, the 2018 NGCA explicitly referred to climate change, stating that ‘the parties … agree to jointly request their participation in the National Council for Adaptation to Climate Change’ through one employer representative and one GSEE representative. The NGCA stated that both parties accept the ‘just transition of workers to an economy of low carbon emissions, which will ensure the necessary support for them when there is a need for redeployment, reskilling and redistribution’. These references appear to have a more declaratory/symbolic value than anything more substantial, however.

While there has been an overall trajectory of structural continuity during this period, it is notable that for a time there was closer alignment between GSEE/ADEDY and the emerging social movement. While this may be attributed to the loss of institutional security, the Greek case illustrates an interesting complementarity between GSEE/ADEDY – which possess ‘legal-institutional resources’ in the form of general strikes – and social movements, enabling a high level of mobilization. This alignment appears to have a short-term episodic nature, however, devoid of permanent links. As we move through the 2020s, it is an open and critical question, how the tensions will evolve between an emergent grassroots social-movement unionism and the more institutionalized union leadership.

**Europeanization and trade unions**

In the past 20 years, the EU question has largely come to define the industrial relations framework in Greece, including trade unions. The pre-crisis period (2000–2010) was characterized by an ‘intended’ Europeanization, understood as ‘modernization’, in which domestic actors simply responded to challenges emanating from the top (Gemenis and Lefkofridi 2013; Ioakimidis 2000). This was in the context of the formation at that time of attitudes towards European integration that understood it as a struggle between pro-EU modernizers and adherents of the ‘underdog culture’ (Diamandouros 1993), who lamented the ‘loss of sovereignty’ to the EU. The impetus towards modernization was transmitted to the industrial relations system in a top-down manner,
through a variety of mechanisms. Their main characteristics were their soft- rather than hard-law nature; that they were informed by ideas of adaptability and social partnership; and that their focus was primarily on promoting unions’ governmental and public administration function. The main example here would be the European Employment Strategy (EES), which aimed at strengthening social partners’ participation in the process of policy reform. The incorporation of the EES in Greece had limited success, as unions and employers played only a marginal role in the formulation and implementation of National Action Plans. This was because of the presence of historical and institutional factors blocking the re-articulation of policy preferences along conciliatory lines (Tsarouhas 2008).

From the trade union perspective, these developments could be interpreted as supporting the transition of the union movement from ‘disjointed corporatism’ (Lavdas 1997), as the main form of interest representation, to emancipation from state and political structures. At the same time, the support for a greater government and public administration function for unions had the potential to nurture contradictions, which, if not addressed adequately, could undermine their role and position in the industrial relations systems and in society more broadly (Papavlasopoulos and Spourdalakis 2008). Given how the relationship between unions and the political realm had evolved in previous years, it is easy to understand why the Europeanization of policy initiatives limited the unions’ ability to engage and represent new categories of workers. The focus on entering a process of political exchange (albeit not always successful, see Zambaoulougou 2006) in turn affected union density, which has decreased in recent years, while strengthening union bureaucracy and generating complications in terms of leadership renewal. All of the above seem to have led the unions into a crisis of representativeness that was dangerous for their future in light of the low levels of participation, limited mobilization and – especially – their inability to integrate dynamic categories, such as young people, women and immigrants (Papavlasopoulos and Spourdalakis 2008).

It is against this context that the economic crisis in the late 2000s had wide-ranging and radical implications for the union movement. This

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12 This does not take into account the role of EU Directives, as these did not primarily address the role of trade unions as such.
period can be distinguished from the period of stability in two ways. First of all, the role of the legal framework becomes pivotal in altering the institutional configurations in the industrial relations system and the role of the unions. Secondly, rather than witnessing a substitution in terms of trade union functions in the industrial relations system, what was promoted indirectly at first and later directly was the marginalization of unions as actors in the industrial relations system altogether. In relation to the former, this was brought about through the legal framework: it was almost exclusively state regulation, articulated in line with Greece’s commitments in the MoU, that challenged the institutional arrangements for unions.

In relation to union marginalization, this came about firstly as a result of the absence of any union involvement in the discussions leading up to the drafting of the ‘structural market reforms’ that accompanied the loan agreements, thus limiting their governmental and public administration functions. Later on, legislative measures were implemented to constrain those functions even further, primarily through the removal of the regulatory function of cross-sectoral agreements and extended beyond them to target unions’ regulatory function through a combination of measures affecting their role in bargaining. While mobilization attempts were developed by the unions in response to these developments, the ‘consensual hegemony’ of the trade union movement (Bithymitris and Kotsonopoulos 2018) was emphatically highlighted in the run-up to the 2015 referendum organized by the then Syriza-led government. Whereas GSEE condemned the EU’s austerity policies in Greece, its official position was that the referendum was misguided and divisive, in direct contrast to the Greek public, who rejected the bailout agreement. While the post-crisis period is no longer ostensibly subject to the conditionality requirements applicable during the crisis, the current domestic agenda of labour reforms – which includes limiting even further unions’ workplace representation – seems to be consistent with the priorities expressed in the context of the enhanced surveillance procedure, assessing Greece’s progress with the policy commitments made at the Eurogroup meeting in June 2018 (see, for instance, European Commission 2020).

Overall, the trajectory of Greek trade unions during the years of Europeanization was marked by a set of contradictions that have had significant implications for the movement, once the country emerged from the crisis. The emphasis on the unions’ governmental and public administration function, as part of Europeanization, without making an
effort to organize more effectively a growing number of underrepresented workers, as well as the pre-existing co-dependence with political parties, amplified the unions’ exposure to the drastic EU-mandated ‘labour market reforms’ during the crisis and subsequently.

Conclusions

Considering the density of events in the period under examination here, it is surprising that the architecture of Greek trade unions in 2020 would be strikingly familiar to an observer from the year 2000. While Greece struggled with the ‘European question’ in different guises in this period, historical contradictions persist. The contradictions between a unitary structure and intense political party factionalism; between a suspicion towards and dependence on the state; between the absence of social dialogue structures and politics as the privileged form of action; between the legitimacy of collective bargaining in public discourse and low union density rates; and between the ‘upper’ and ‘lower’ parts of the union movement are only some examples. The Greek case could be perceived as providing a warning of the perils of the routinization of class politics within the labour movement, which has the potential to act as a source of division and fragmentation. It also exposes the precarious boundaries between politicization, radicalization and factionalism. But equally it provides an ideal example of unions as institutional fields of contestation (Gallas 2018; Taylor et al. 2011).

Visser (2019b) has identified four possible scenarios or possible futures for trade unions: marginalization, dualization, substitution, or revitalization. The pattern of union development in Greece seems to suggest that the most likely scenarios there are marginalization or dualization, or both. Whereas the persistently high level in Greece of forms of unstable and non-standard employment (e.g. bogus self-employment) could open up opportunities to experiment with new forms of worker voice and representation, this does not seem to be the case in Greece (with limited exceptions, such as outsourced workers in the banking sector). This, in combination with the paternalistic ethos in the small and medium-sized enterprises, which account for 86 per cent of jobs in Greece (OECD 2017, cited in Visser 2019b) suggests that substitution is unlikely. Equally importantly, revitalization seems at best to be elusive at present, although the emergence of some promising elements of grassroots trade unionism should not be ignored.
The trade union movement has been performing comparatively badly across all areas, for example membership diversity, women and youth participation in union decision-making and innovative and effective organizing campaigns. This could act as springboard for a union renewal. Instead, there has been a gradual dualization and, more recently, marginalization of trade unions in recent decades. Dualization – unions promoting the job security of their ‘insider’ members potentially at the expense of ‘outsiders’ – has come about as a result of various interlocking internal and external factors and has become institutionalized through the now excessively decentralized bargaining system. In this context, the recently proposed changes to the trade union regulatory framework by the present government, in conjunction with developments during the crisis, have the potential to force unions into playing a marginal role or into managing ever smaller fringes of the public and administrative sector, and even losing their relevance for regulation altogether.

As Greece enters the 2020s, one may speculate that in future people may view this period as one in which the accumulated contradictions of the union movement merged with the disruptive legacy of the EU’s neoliberal intervention in Greek collective labour law. It is an open question whether these contradictions will be resolved in a destructive or a transformative manner, or both, for the unions. Either way, it will be critical for Greek society and democracy.

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Abbreviations

ADEDY  Ανώτατη Διοίκηση Ενώσεων Δημοσίων Υπαλλήλων (Civil Servants’ Confederation)

DAKE  Δημοκρατική Ανεξάρτητη Κίνηση Εργαζομένων (Democratic Independent Movement of Workers)

DOE  Διδασκαλική Ομοσπονδία Ελλάδας (Greek Primary Teachers’ Federation)

EMU  Economic and Monetary Union

GENOP-DEI  Γενική Ομοσπονδία ΔΕΗ Κλάδου Ηλεκτρικής Ενέργειας (Federation of Personnel of the Public Power Corporation SA)

GSEE  Γενική Συνομοσπονδία Εργατών Ελλάδος (General Confederation of Greek Workers)

KKE  Κομμουνιστικό Κόμμα Ελλάδας (Communist Party of Greece)

ND  Νέα Δημοκρατία (New Democracy)

OAED  Οργανισμός Απασχόλησης Εργατικού Δυναμικού (Manpower Organisation)

OEE  Οργανισμός Εργατικής Εστίας (Workers’ Welfare Organization)

OIYE  Ομοσπονδία Ιδιωτικών Υπαλλήλων Ελλάδας (Federation of Private Employees)

OLME  Ομοσπονδία Λειτουργών Μέσης Εκπαίδευσης (Secondary Education Teachers federation)

OMOIKEL  Ομοσπονδία Οικοδόμων και Συναφών Επαγγελμάτων Ελλάδας (Federation of Greek Builders and associated professions)

OTOE  Ομοσπονδία Τραπεζούπαλληλικών Οργανώσεων Ελλάδας (Greek Federation of Bank Employee Unions)

PAME  Πανεργατικό Αγωνιστικό Μέτωπο (All-Workers Militant Front)

PASOK  Πανελλήνιο Σοσιαλιστικό Κίνημα (Panhellenic Socialist Movement)
Greek trade unions during the period 2000–2020

**POEDIN**  Πανελλήνια Ομοσπονδία Εργαζομένων Δημόσιων Νοσοκομείων (Public Hospital Employees Federation)

**POE-OTA**  Πανελλήνια Ομοσπονδία Προσωπικού Οργανισμών Τοπικής Αυτοδιοίκησης (Employees in Local Government Federation)