

## GPSG Working Paper #25

### ***Economic Crisis and Parliamentary Autonomy: Evidence from the Greek Parliament***

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#### **Abstract**

*Conventional wisdom holds that parliaments are in decline, because they are supposedly dominated by the executive, which in turn is dominated by the party. However, no empirical proof of that has ever been provided. The Greek crisis after 2008 offers a rare opportunity to test empirically if fractures in party and executive cohesion result to a more autonomous parliament. Drawing on parliamentary output indicators and on interviews with former presidents of the parliament, I trace the development of the Hellenic Parliament's legislative and control performance over time. I show that the real as opposed to formal powers of the Greek parliament weakened as a result of the economic crisis. In other words, the formation of weaker party governments did not lead to a more autonomous parliament. Hence, the theoretical relationship between party and executive strength and parliamentary independence is either ill-founded or conditional at best.*

**Keywords:** *economic crisis, executive dominance, Greece, Hellenic Parliament, parliamentary autonomy, parliamentary decline*

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Of all the Eurozone countries, Greece suffered most from the repercussions of the 2008 global economic crisis. In 2014, four years after the Greek parliament (Hellenic Parliament) had ratified the first round of austerity measures in a memorandum with the troika (European Commission, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund), overall unemployment was 27.2% and youth unemployment was as high as 56.4%. Ten years earlier, when Greece was hosting the Athens Olympics, the same rates were 10.5% and 26.3%, respectively. After six years of continuous economic recession, Greece had by 2014 the same GDP per capita as in 2003!<sup>2</sup>

Inevitably, the severe and sustained economic shock triggered a series of political developments in Greece, some of which have been already examined by scholars. Greece's old party system imploded (Teperoglou and Tsatsanis 2014, Vasilopoulou and Halikiopoulou 2013, Dinas and Rori 2013), populism became a prominent feature of Greek politics (Vasilopoulou et al 2014, Pappas 2013), the neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn entered the Hellenic Parliament (Ellinas 2013, Ellinas 2014) and Syriza, until recently a minor leftist party, came into power (Spourdalakis 2014).

Despite all this, Greece's main political institutions persevered. However, as I argue in this article, the central institution of Greek parliamentary democracy, the Hellenic Parliament, suffered greatly. In particular, parliamentary autonomy was eroded as an indirect consequence of the economic crisis, undermining the already damaged legitimacy of the Hellenic Parliament (Chrysogonos 2011, Sigalas 2015).

The objective of the article is to explore the development of the political autonomy of the Hellenic Parliament as the country plunged deeper into recession. The article is structured as follows. Firstly, I re-visit the notion of parliamentary decline, and I argue that it is better to talk about parliamentary autonomy instead of independence. Secondly, I explain why Greece is an ideal case to test the hypothesis that executive and party fragmentation enhances parliamentary autonomy. Following that, I present my methodology and data. Subsequently, I demonstrate how the legislative and control functions of the Hellenic Parliament have been eroded since the beginning of the economic crisis. Finally, I conclude that we need to re-consider the relationship between parliamentary autonomy and executive and party strength.

## Parliamentary Decline and Autonomy

In parliamentary democracies there is a hierarchical relationship between the executive and the people with the parliament acting as a mediator (Shugart 2006).<sup>3</sup> The citizens vote for the parliament, and the parliament votes for the government. Thus, the government is accountable to the parliament, which in turn is accountable to the people it is representing. Legislation has to be approved by the parliament, and the latter has supervisory and scrutinizing powers over the government. In other words, the legislative and the control

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<sup>1</sup> The views expressed here are strictly personal, not of the EACEA or of the CIIR.

<sup>2</sup> In 2014 the Greek GDP p.c. was €16,300 (at current prices). In 2003 it was €16,200. All economic indicators are taken from Eurostat's interactive tables (<http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat>).

<sup>3</sup> Parliamentary authorities are all too keen to remind us that parliaments are essential for democracy. Visitors of the Canadian parliament, for example, read in a permanent exhibition that, "Parliament is a forum where all Canadians can make their voices heard through their representatives in the Senate and the House of Commons".

functions of the parliament are integral to parliamentary democracy and justly considered as the main, if not most important, parliamentary functions (Marshall 2005).

In contrast to this ideal-typical account, scholars have pointed out that in reality the parliament is not as independent or as powerful as the official account implies. Instead, it is in decline or even in crisis. It is not a new observation (Manin 1997). Already at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Carl Schmitt was arguing that parliaments no longer served the original spirit of parliamentarism. Schmitt (1998 [1923]) maintained that parliamentarism is in crisis, because it is at odds with democracy. “The belief in parliamentarism, in government by discussion, belongs to the intellectual world of liberalism” and not to that of mass democracies where parties and party loyalties prevail over MP autonomy (ibid. p. 14).<sup>4</sup> More recently, other scholars (e.g. Grosser 1964, Wheare 1969, MacGuigan 1978, Norton 2000, Baran and Fox 2010) repeated the argument that the erosion of MPs’ autonomy and the strengthening of the executive are behind the decline of parliaments.

Although many, if not most, scholars acknowledge the parliamentary decline as an important problem, there are reasons to be cautious. For instance, Andeweg (2012) is pointing out the high levels of public trust toward the Dutch parliament, and Longley and Davidson (1998) are highlighting the growth in numbers and in importance of parliamentary committees across the world. Flinders and Kelso (2011) are openly critical to the parliamentary decline thesis. They argue that high public expectations about the role of parliament have played an important role in entrenching and perpetuating the notion of parliamentary decline. Nevertheless, Flinders and Kelso (2011) do not deny that the balance of power between the parliament and the executive has indeed shifted in favour of the latter over time. Thus, regardless of whether parliament as an institution is in perceived or real decline, there is broad consensus that is not as powerful and independent as it once was.

As Ginsburg (2006) explains, restrictions in the parliament’s sovereignty are compatible with the ideals of liberal democracy. Constitutionalism and judicial review are safeguards against majoritarian excesses. Furthermore, a powerful and consequently potentially obstructive parliament is against the principle of responsible government (Birch 1964, Flinders and Kelso 2011). Nevertheless, it is difficult to argue convincingly against the irrelevance of the parliament and the risks associated with it if the executive dominates the parliament. It is not only that all political power is concentrated in the hands of the executive, but also that the parliament’s legitimacy is undermined (Beetham 2011). What do we need a parliament for, if the only thing that really matters is which party is in government?

The question is particularly pressing in systems of ‘majoritarian parliamentarism’ where a single party government effectively controls the parliament (Shugart 2006). Wherever the electoral system favours a coalition government, or wherever a minority government has to rely on the opposition parties to pass its legislation (‘transactional parliamentarism’), the parliament is supposed to be comparatively more independent (Shugart 2006).

In majoritarian systems parliamentary independence is contingent on the cohesion of the governing party, which in itself is dependent on the party loyalty of the MPs. As Schugart (2006: 353) puts it, “as long as the majority party remains united, the executive is unassailable, because it enjoys the confidence of the parliamentary majority”. As soon as the parliamentary group cohesion subsides and MP loyalty can no longer be taken for granted, the governing party has to take into account the views of the backbencher and

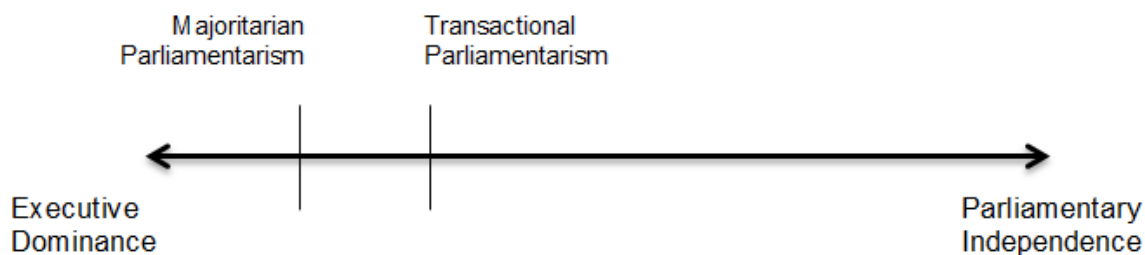
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<sup>4</sup> See also Bobbio (2005) for a similar critique, but from the left side of the political spectrum.

opposition MPs. Therefore, according to the theory, there is a negative relationship between party loyalty and parliamentary independence. The more cohesive the governing majority, the tighter the government's grip, the less independent the parliament.

Although party discipline ensures that the degrees of freedom are restricted in both majoritarian and transactional parliamentarism, the parliament should be relatively more independent in the latter case. If we were to place majoritarian and transactional parliamentarism on a continuum stretching from complete executive dominance to full parliamentary independence, the visual representation should look like **Figure 1**.

**Figure 1. Types of Parliamentarism and Parliamentary Independence**



Thus far the negative relationship between party discipline and parliamentary independence has been taken for granted. A stronger executive results to a weaker parliament, because the two are connected by definition. This article breaks away from the confines of the logical connection, to introduce an empirically verifiable relationship between government and party dominance, on the one hand, and the parliament's political autonomy, on the other.

By political autonomy I mean the parliament's real, as opposed to merely formal, ability to perform its main political functions (legislating and controlling the government) as prescribed in the constitution and/or in its standing orders. Unlike functional autonomy, which refers to the financial and administrative resources the parliament needs in order to function (Couderc 1998), political autonomy is conceptually related to parliamentary independence. It refers to the parliament's real rather than formal freedom to practice its legislative and control functions. The greater the respect of the parliament's powers and the engagement of the government with the backbenches and opposition, the more meaningful are the parliament's legislative and control operations, and consequently the more autonomous is the parliament. Conversely, the less respect the government shows toward the parliamentary functions and the more it ignores the opposition and its backbenchers, the greater the damage to the parliamentary autonomy.

Compared to parliamentary independence, the notion of autonomy has some advantages. First of all, parliamentary independence is a strong term and it is easily confused with parliamentary sovereignty. As already noted, because of the supremacy of EU law, constitutional limitations and judicial review, parliamentary sovereignty and consequently the idea of perfect parliamentary independence is essentially an anachronism. Secondly, the term independence implies that the relationship between the executive and parliament is always antagonistic. As a result, it does not take into account the reality of modern

parliamentary business where the relationship between parliament and government is not necessarily zero-sum but more complex.

Even in majoritarian parliamentarism the opposition does not always oppose the government and the government does not continuously or unconditionally ignore its backbenchers or the opposition parties. As Shugart (2006: 353) suggests, “the fear of alienating sufficient voters as to lose the next elections” make it sensitive to political disagreements even if they do not culminate in open rebellion. Thirdly, parliamentary autonomy, as defined here, has the advantage that institutional power is not exhausted in formal rights and obligations, but takes into account the actual exercise thereof.

Although independence and autonomy are not identical concepts, the parliament’s political autonomy should be influenced by the same factors affecting parliamentary independence. The presence of veto players undermines the government’s ability to ignore the parliament and its members. Therefore, the following hypothesis should hold. *The higher the number of parliamentary parties in government (or in support of the government), and the greater the independence of MPs from their party, the greater the political autonomy of the parliament.*

In the next section I explain why in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis the Hellenic Parliament is an ideal testing ground of the hypothesis. Then, following the operationalization of the variables and a brief presentation of the data, I test the hypothesis and discuss the findings.

### **The Greek Crisis and the Autonomy Prospects of the Hellenic Parliament**

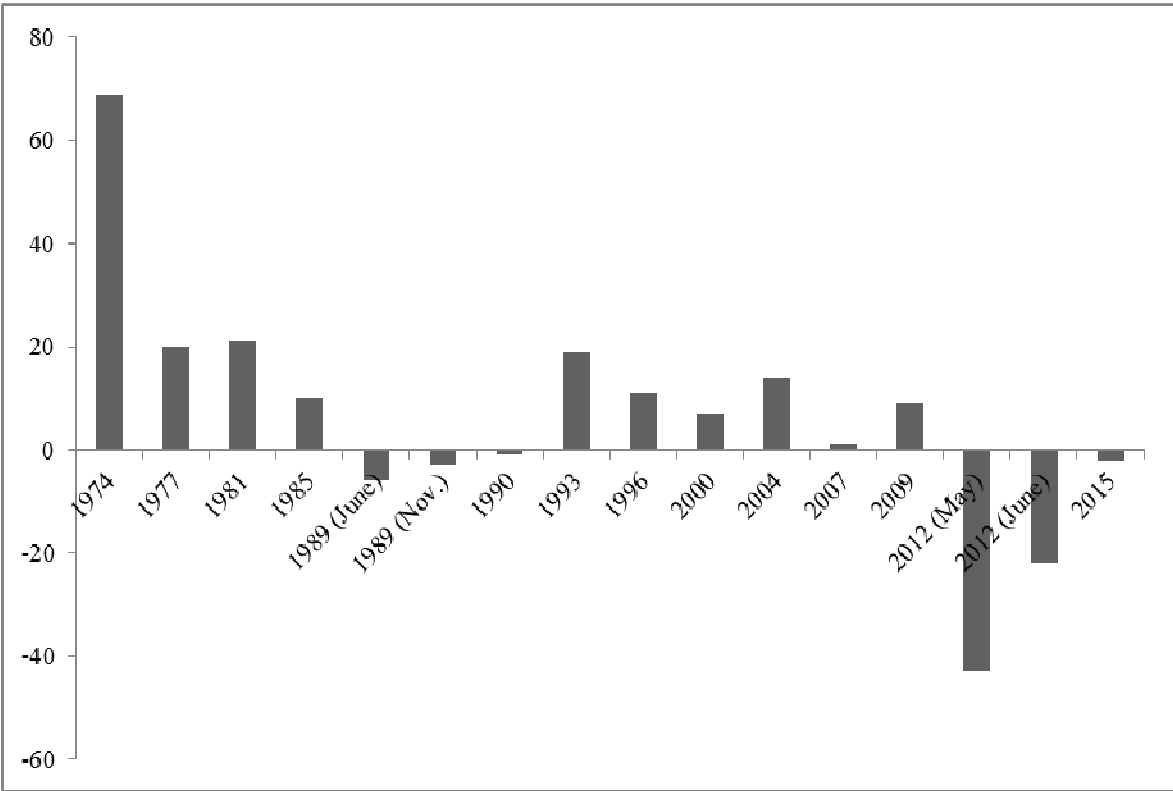
In order to test the hypothesis, it is necessary that the two independent variables, MP independence and number of parties comprising (or supporting) the government, vary. In real life this does not happen that often. Unless the country’s electoral system changes or unless extraordinary developments take place, the number of parties needed to form a government is usually stable. Therefore, the transition from majoritarian to transactional parliamentarism or the other way round is under normal circumstances rare. Similarly, individual MPs may from time to time vote against the party line, but they rarely pose a systemic threat that could trigger recasting the balance of power between the executive and the parliament. It is a fortunate side effect of the otherwise unfortunate economic crisis in Greece, that political developments are such that allow us the testing of the parliamentary autonomy hypothesis.

As I mentioned in the introduction, the global economic crisis that broke out in 2008 hit Greece particularly hard. Thus far, the country has been compelled twice to seek international financial assistance to avoid bankruptcy, in 2010 and in 2012. Both times help from the ECB, the Commission and the IMF was conditional upon painful and inevitably unpopular reforms. The explosive mix of economic recession and political scandals, in combination with the widespread sense that one of the victims of the economic crisis was the country’s sovereignty (Chrysogonos 2011), triggered important political developments. Some of these developments have been already described by others (e.g. Mavrogordatos and Mylonas 2011, Mavrogordatos and Mylonas 2012, Teperoglou and Tsatsanis 2014). What is important to stress here is that the collapse of the old party system meant also that Greece’s parliamentary system transformed from majoritarian to transactional.

**Figure 2** illustrates the surplus or deficit of parliamentary seats of the parties coming first in the Greek general elections since 1974 –the year democracy was restored. As the figure

shows, prior to the economic crisis, single party governments have been the norm in Greece, with the exception of a tumultuous yet brief period between 1989 and 1990.<sup>5</sup> After 2009, when the Greek economy started deteriorating, it was no longer possible to form a government with just one party; this despite the fact the electoral system is endowing the winner with an additional 50 seats. The one party rule in parliament ended in November 2011 when the Prime Minister (G. Papandreou) resigned and a national unity government of three parties (ND/centre-right, PASOK/centre-left and LAOS/populist right) was formed.<sup>6</sup> This coalition lasted half a year, and after a short interlude of a caretaker government ND came into power in June 2012 forming a government with the support of two parties (PASOK and DIMAR/centre-left). By the end of the first year DIMAR abandoned the coalition, but the government persevered until the end of 2014. After snap elections a new coalition government was formed (SYRIZA/left and ANEL/nationalist right) in January 2015. The economic crisis did not only put an end to the parliamentary omnipotence of single party governments, but undermined party cohesion as well. Unfortunately, there are no data readily available measuring the voting behavior of the Greek MPs. However, the parliamentary groups' defection rate during the turbulent years after 2009 offers a clear indication that MPs started rebelling against their party leadership. In particular, between 2010 and 2012 there were as many as 32 cases of MPs from the PASOK parliamentary group becoming independent, switching parties or being expelled from the parliamentary group. In the camp of ND there were 28 cases, in SYRIZA 4 and in LAOS 2.<sup>7</sup>

**Figure 2. Parliamentary Seats Surplus (Deficit) of the First Party**



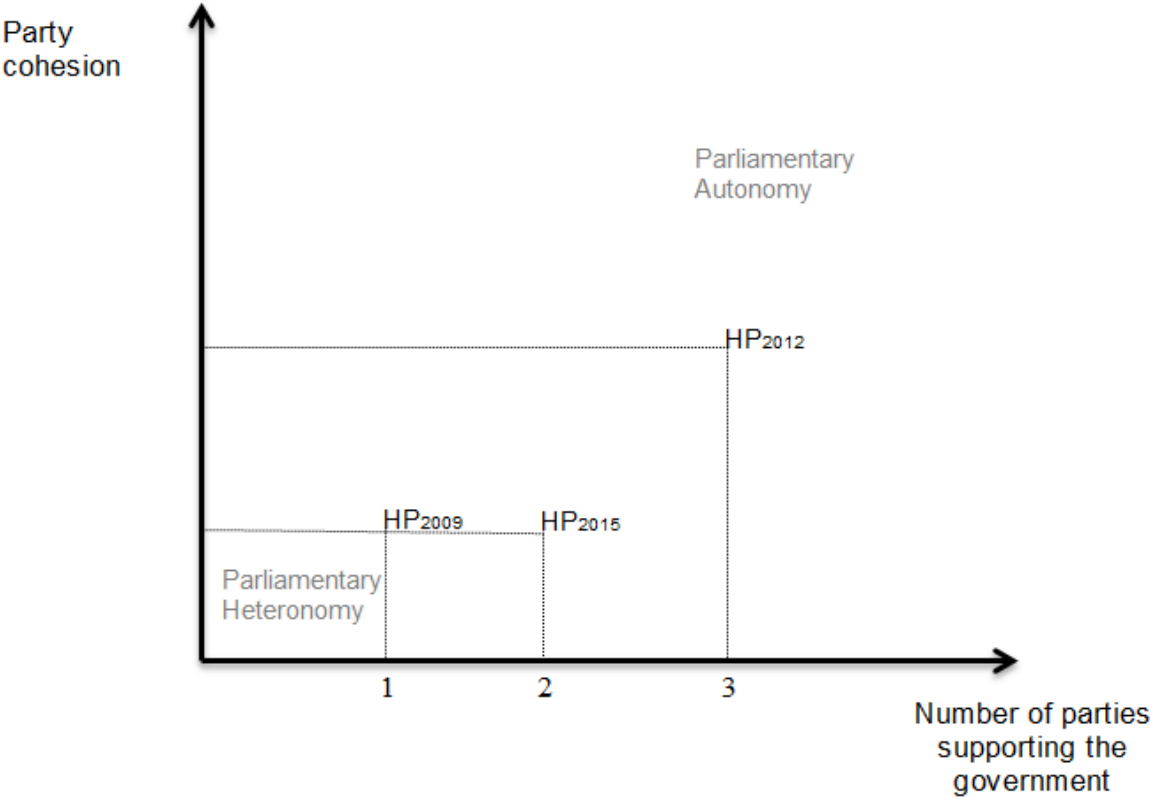
<sup>5</sup> For a summary of developments related to the so-called 'dirty 1989' see Koutsoukis (2006).

<sup>6</sup> LAOS withdrew its support from the Papademos government in February 2012.

<sup>7</sup> I am thankful to Elad Klein for providing me these data.

Given these changes in the Hellenic Parliament, and given the theoretical relationship between the number of veto players, party cohesion and parliamentary autonomy, one would expect the political autonomy of the Hellenic Parliament to change roughly as **Figure 3** suggests. Before 2009 party cohesion was high and there was a single party government. Thus, I place the Hellenic Parliament close to the political heteronomy corner of the figure (HP<sub>2009</sub>). In 2012 there was a government coalition with three partners and party cohesion was at its lowest point. Hence, HP<sub>2012</sub> is farthest away from the axes' intersection signifying greater political autonomy. By 2015 party cohesion was largely restored and the government partners were two. As a result, HP<sub>2015</sub> lies between HP<sub>2009</sub> and HP<sub>2012</sub>. In other words, the current level of parliamentary autonomy should be more limited than in 2012, but still higher compared to the pre-crisis era.

**Figure 3. The Hypothetical Development of the Hellenic Parliament's Political Autonomy**



However, the actual development of the political autonomy of the Hellenic Parliament as the crisis unfolded took a very different direction than what **Figure 3** indicates. I elaborate below.

**Methodology and Data**

The Hellenic Parliament is one of the least studied parliaments of Western Europe and systematic data about its operations are scarce. Most publications, either in English (Foundethakis 2003) or in Greek (e.g. Contiades 2009, Chrysogonos 2011, Alivizatos 2013,

Karavokyris 2014), tend to focus on the formal parliamentary rules, instead of on the parliamentary practice as the present study does.

To assess the impact of the economic crisis on the political autonomy of the Hellenic Parliament, I rely primarily on quantitative data on the legislative and control functions performance of the legislature. The website of the Hellenic Parliament provides some information in this respect, but it is very limited. After repeated requests, the Hellenic Parliament granted me eventually with data on the development of the main legislative and control output indicators between 2004 and 2014.

The legislative performance data distinguish between the use of the ordinary and extraordinary legislative procedures. As I explain in detail in the ensuing section, the latter procedure reduces the parliament to offering formal ratification services and little else. Thus, its abuse signifies the shrinking of parliamentary autonomy decline. The legislative data offered by the Hellenic Parliament indicate also the source (government or opposition) of the legislative proposals. Obviously, evidence of a number of laws stemming from the opposition suggests, that the government is trying to engage with the opposition in a constructive way. Thus, it is another sign of a less dominant executive and a more autonomous parliament.

The control performance data focus on a selection of the scrutiny instruments the Hellenic Parliament has at its disposal. Namely, on (1) the number of questions discussed in the plenary, (2) the number current questions submitted and discussed in the plenary, and (3) the number of questions to the Greek Prime Minister and the number of questions he actually answered. Instruments such as petitions and interpellations count also among the Hellenic Parliament's control instruments, but they do not attract as much media and public attention as the PM's question time or as the current questions discussed in the plenary. Furthermore, space and data access constraints make it impossible to present the development of all the control indicators here.<sup>8</sup>

The findings from the quantitative data are complemented with insights from personal interviews with the following former presidents of the Hellenic Parliament.<sup>9</sup>

- (1) Mr. Evangelos Meimarakis (ND, 2012-2015)
- (2) Mr. Filippos Petsalnikos (PASOK, 2009-2012)
- (3) Mr. Dimitrios Sioufas (ND, 2007-2009)
- (4) Mr. Apostolos Kaklamanis (PASOK, 1993-2004)

## **The Erosion of the Legislative Function**

On 31 March 2014 the leader of the parliamentary group of SYRIZA Mr. Alexis Tsipras, currently Greece's Prime Minister but head of the opposition at the time, made the following statement in the plenary of the Hellenic Parliament.

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<sup>8</sup> The minutes of the parliamentary committees are not always publicly available. Special permission from the parliamentary authorities is normally needed –a time-consuming process of uncertain effectiveness.

<sup>9</sup> The interviews were based on a semi-structured questionnaire and took place in Athens at different time points of 2014. All interviews were personal, with the exception of the interview with Mr. Petsalnikos who sent his answers in writing and spoke also on the phone with Dr. Spyros Blavoukos. The author conducted the remaining interviews. The length of the interviews varied from 15 minutes (Petsalnikos) to over an hour (Kaklamanis), but only a limited selection of findings is presented here.



There is no doubt, that in society's conscience the parliamentary process has been discredited, and what we are experiencing during the past years is a dehydration of democracy itself. Of course history teaches that in periods of crisis the depreciation of the parliament and of the institutions grows enormously. [...] What we are going through in this country, however, [...] is without precedent. I will speak in numbers. Four hundred executive laws have come through here [the plenary]. One hundred and eighty of them only during the past two years. Forty acts of legislative content have gone through. Nine bills under the very urgent procedure, that is [examined and voted] just in two days, during the past two years. (Hellenic Parliament 2014: 9567).<sup>10</sup>

All the former presidents of the Hellenic Parliament confirmed in the interviews that the Hellenic Parliament has been heavily affected by the economic crisis. Thus, Mr. Kaklamanis (PASOK) talked of the "worst institutional crisis" the Greek parliament has experienced thus far. His successor, Mr. Sioufas (ND), argued that "the crisis of the parliament grew from 2009 onwards reaching its height in 2012". Mr. Petsalnikos (PASOK) admitted that "parliamentarism is in crisis", albeit not only in Greece. And the President during Mr. Samaras' premiership, Mr. Meimarakis (ND), explained, that "the whole political system has been discredited". Two of the interviewees went as far as arguing that "decisions are no longer taken in the parliament" (Petsalnikos), or that the Hellenic Parliament "was confined to a ratifying role" (Meimarakis). Where there is clear consensus among all four former presidents is, that after the outbreak of the economic crisis, and especially after the 2012 elections, the government abused its constitutional prerogative to legislate by cloture motions (guillotines) and by resorting to the very urgent procedure acts. Cloture motions, known formally in Greek legal parlance as 'legislative content acts', are issued by the President of the Hellenic Republic "in extraordinary cases of very urgent and unforeseen need upon proposal of the ministerial cabinet" (article 44 of the constitution, Vouli ton Ellinon 2010). As soon as they are published in the government's gazette such acts acquire legal status. However, they have to be submitted to the parliament for ratification within 40 days. Until then they are treated as if they have been ratified, i.e. they are legally binding.

The 'very urgent procedure acts', as the term implies, are the outcome of an extraordinary legislative procedure that fast-tracks legislation. According to article 109 of the Hellenic Parliament's standing orders (Vouli ton Ellinon 2010), the appropriate parliamentary committee examines such acts in a single session, and they are subsequently debated and voted upon in the plenary during a session that can last no longer than 10 hours.

The legislative content acts and the very urgent procedure acts allow the Greek government to speed up law making, but they come at a cost. The very urgent procedure acts are synonymous to hastily drawn legislation. Whereas two readings are the norm for ordinary legislation, which allows for mistakes and omissions to be corrected, the parliamentary committee needs to conclude its work in a single session. Similarly, debate in the plenary has to be concluded in just one and session within a few hours. The legislative content acts are even more problematic. Firstly, they overturn the constitutional hierarchy between the different forms of law, because executive acts substitute parliamentary laws (Karavokyris 2014: 159). More importantly, they disturb the balance between the executive and legislative power, because they allow the government to legislate without taking into account the views of the parliament.

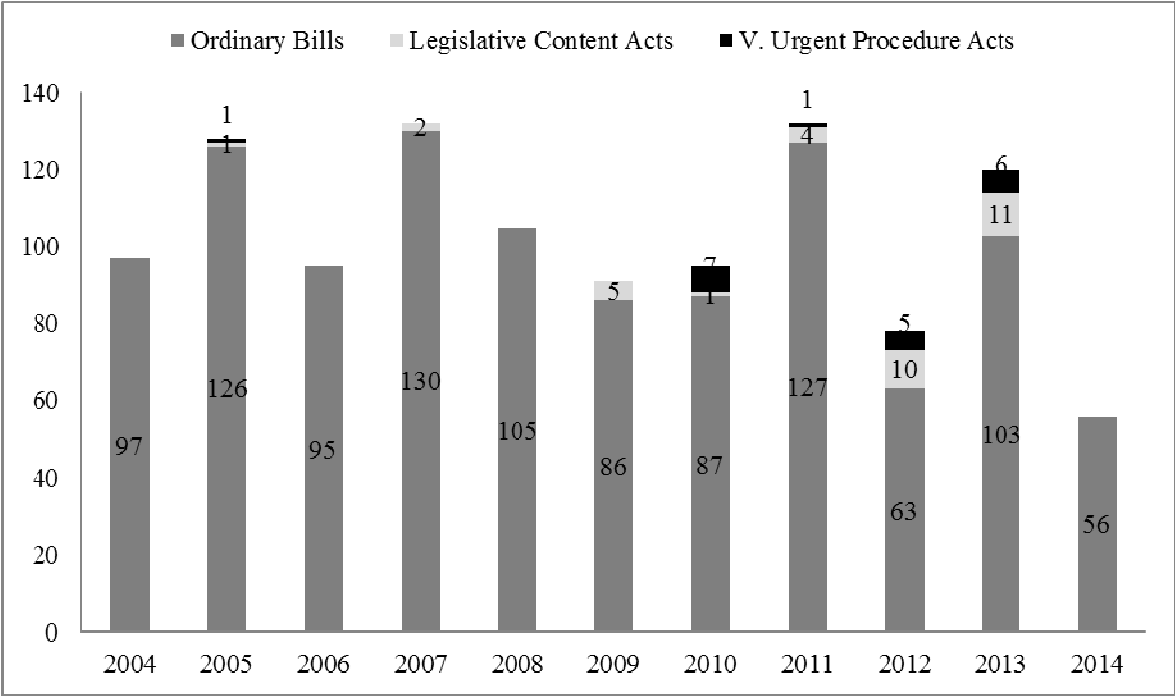
The development of the Hellenic Parliament's legislative output between 2004 and 2014 reveals, that the economic crisis prompted successive Greek governments to make

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<sup>10</sup> Author's own translation.

increased use of the extraordinary legislative procedures. As **Figure 4** demonstrates, there were very few legislative content acts and hardly any under the very urgent procedure prior to 2010. After 2010, however, the picture changes considerably. From an average of 106.5 ordinary bills per year between 2004 and 2009, the number falls to 89.2 between 2010 and 2014. In contrast, the average number of very urgent procedure acts and legislative content acts rises from 0.17 and 1.33 to 3.8 and 5.2, respectively. In other words, after the outbreak of the economic crisis the Greek government, especially that of Mr. Samaras, made a greater use of the extraordinary legislative procedures at the expense of the ordinary procedure.

**Figure 4. Legislative Output of the Hellenic Parliament (2004-2014)**



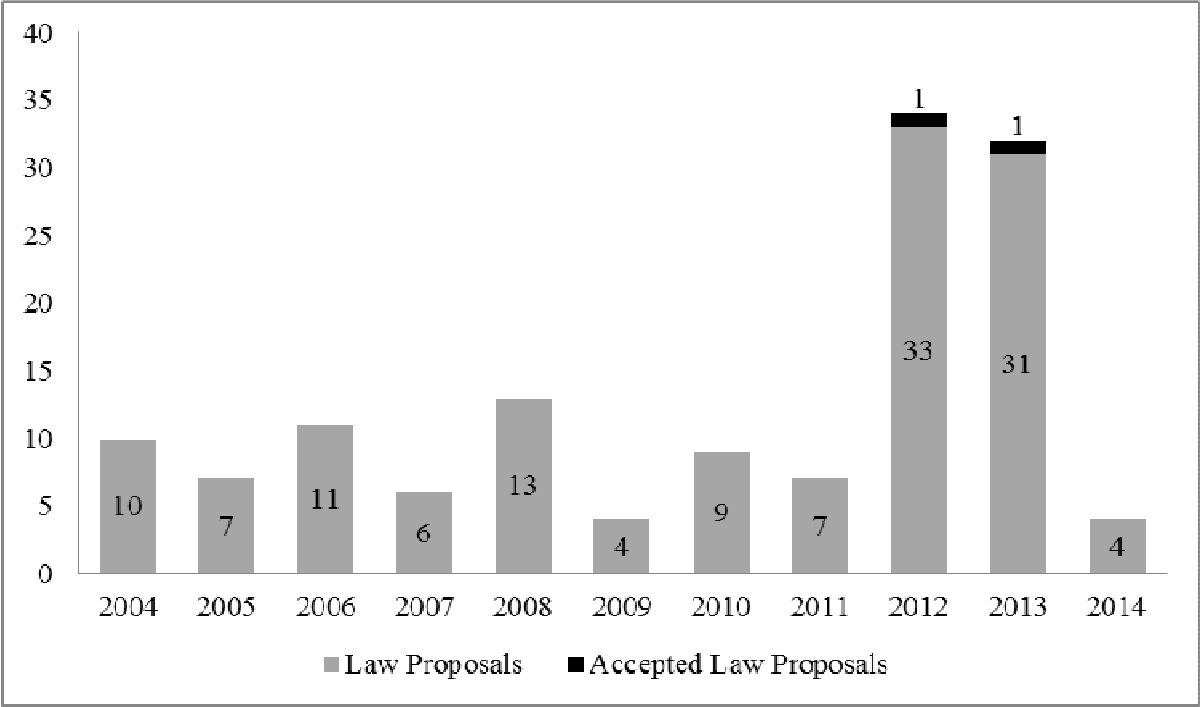
Notes: Data for 2014 are until 2 May.  
Source: Author's own data.

The troika's demands that the Greek government adopt certain measures may indeed count as an example of "extraordinary cases of very urgent and unforeseen need" that justify, according to the constitution, the resort to legislative content acts. However, Karavokyris (2014: 157) names some legislative content acts that were tackling neither urgent nor unpredictable problems. For instance, there is nothing unpredictable or urgent in the annual evaluation of military officers for their promotion. Similarly, there is nothing unforeseen in the prolongation of a social policy programme that was set to expire on a known date, or in the need for buildings to house the impoverished immigrants who crossed the borders illegally years ago. Expedient as the extraordinary legislative instruments may be, especially at times of crisis, they undermine the parliament's political autonomy and its legitimacy (Kaklamanis). The abuse of its legislative prerogatives is an indication that the government is showing little interest in working together with the opposition or even with its own MPs.

A similar argument can be made on the basis of the number of laws that have been initiated by the opposition rather than the government. **Figure 5** depicts the development of the legislative proposals ('law proposals' in the Greek parliamentary parlance) stemming

from the opposition. As one would expect, in majoritarian parliamentarism there is little interest in inter-party cooperation. Until the 2012 elections law proposals made roughly 10 per cent of all bills, but not a single one of them was supported by the governing majority. The 2012 elections signal an important change with the rise of SYRIZA as the main opposition party. The opposition decided to intensify its efforts to influence policy making by drafting as many as 33 law proposals, but only one of them was supported by enough MPs to become law. Similarly, in 2013 out of 31 opposition proposals the majority endorsed again only one. Thus, despite the shift from majoritarian to transactional parliamentarism, the governing coalition largely continued the practice of the single party governments to ignore the opposition’s proposals.

**Figure 5. Number of Legislative Proposals from the Opposition (2004-2014)**



Notes: Data for 2014 are until 2 May.  
Source: Author’s own data.

**The Erosion of the Control Function**

In the same speech Mr. Tsipras attacked the Samaras government for undermining parliamentary democracy by restricting the Hellenic Parliament’s legislative function, he criticized it for eroding also the parliament’s control function.

The Prime Minister shows up only to vote. He never comes to [answer] the questions that are submitted by the [parliamentary group] leaders or the MPs. He abolished the PM Time. The government ministers follow his example. The parliament no longer deliberates, it does not discuss in a political sense, it has acquired a strictly implemental role. (Hellenic Parliament 2014: 9567).<sup>11</sup>

Mr. Kaklamanis confirmed in the interview, that the Prime Minister, Mr. Samaras, did not come to address the parliament often or answer any parliamentary questions. Being an MP

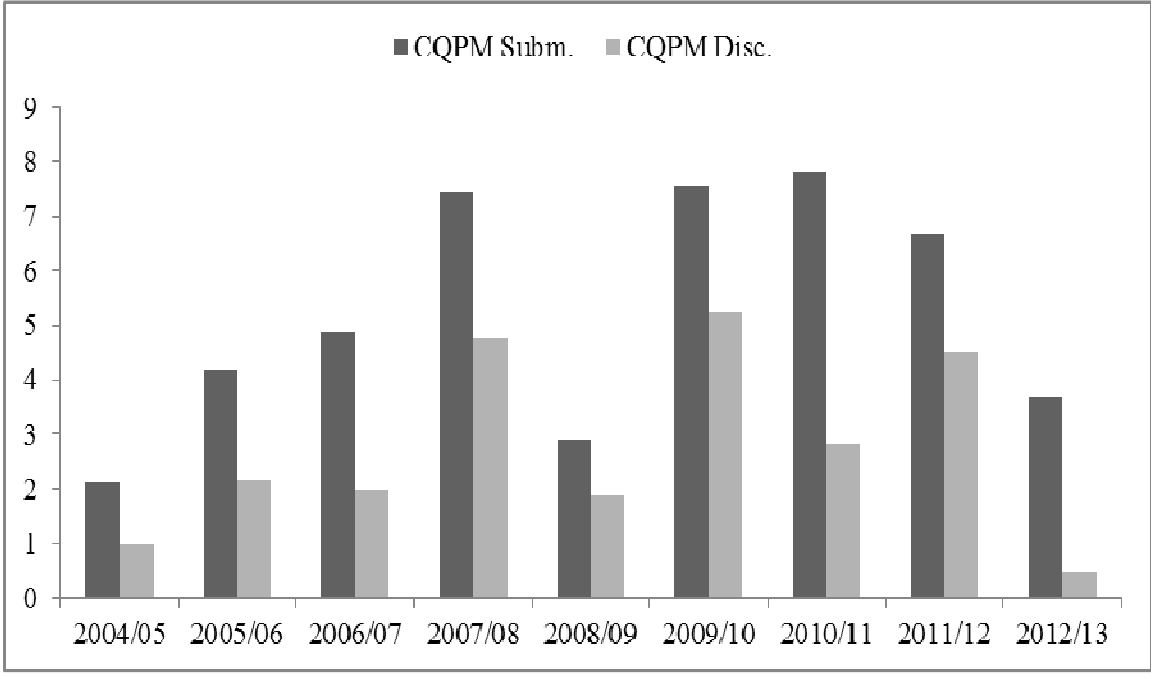
<sup>11</sup> Author’s own translation.

for over 40 years and also the longest serving parliamentary President (11 years), Mr. Kaklamanis said also he could not remember another Prime Minister neglecting the parliament this way.

According to article 129 para. 3 of the standing orders, the PM is not obliged to answer all questions, but he has to attend the plenary at least once a week and answer a minimum of two questions (Vouli ton Ellinon 2010: 231). However, the rules allow the PM to designate a minister to answer the questions instead of him, should, in the PM’s opinion, the question fall under the exclusive competence of the minister. Hence, there is no guarantee that the PM will answer any parliamentary questions.

The statistical data provided by the Hellenic Parliament largely verify Mr. Tsipras’ and Mr. Kaklamanis’ allegations. Until the year 2010/11 the average number of questions per month submitted to the PM has been growing continuously, with the exception of 2008/09, which was an election year.<sup>12</sup> The number of PM answers in the plenary has also been growing, but it reached the peak a year earlier (**Figure 6**). From 2009/10, during Mr. Papandreou’s premiership, the response of the PM to MP questions starts to decline. In 2009/10 the average number of PM answers was 5.22. By 2012/13 it was only 0.50 per month, or one answer every two months. Taking the Hellenic Parliament’s standing orders at face value, the number of times the Greek PM addressed the plenary to answer parliamentary questions should have been much higher. However, in practice what happened is that as the economic crisis unfolded the PM answered progressively fewer questions. In other words, the parliament’s control powers meant little in practice, at least as far as scrutinizing the PM’s actions goes.

**Figure 6. Number of Current Questions Submitted to the PM and Discussed (monthly average)**

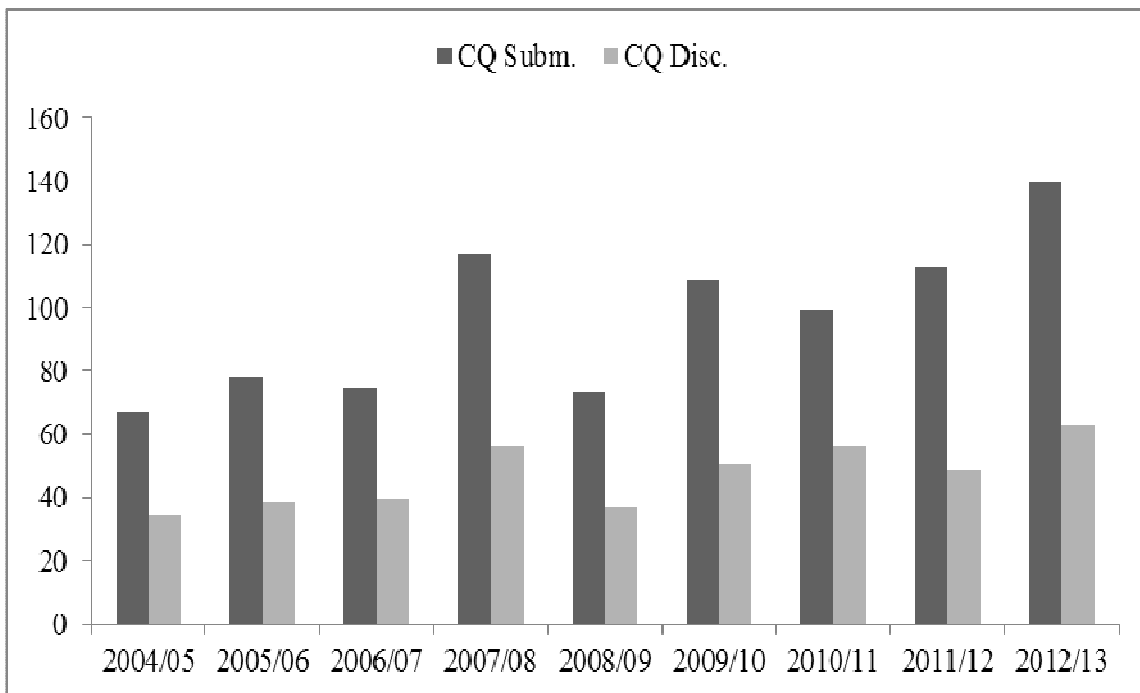


Source: Author’s own data.

<sup>12</sup> The monthly average has been selected as indicator, because the parliamentary data were provided per parliamentary period and the periods are of unequal length.

With regard to the MPs' current questions to the other government members, the data suggest again some erosion of the parliament's control function, but not as dramatic. **Figure 7** reveals that the number of current questions has been growing steadily. However, the available data do not offer sufficient support to claim that the economic crisis led Greek MPs to submit more current questions. The growth of the current questions started earlier going back to 2004/05 and possibly before then. What the economic crisis coincided with is the widening of the gap between the number of current questions asked and discussed. Whereas the number of submitted questions increased between 2010/11 and 2012/13, the number of current questions discussed in the plenary did not. As a result, the disparity between the two widened, as **Figure 7** shows. To put it differently, it did not matter how many more current affairs questions MPs asked in the years after the crisis began. The Greek government made little effort to keep up with the increased scrutiny attempts of the Hellenic Parliament. Maybe it lacked the resources, the willingness or both.

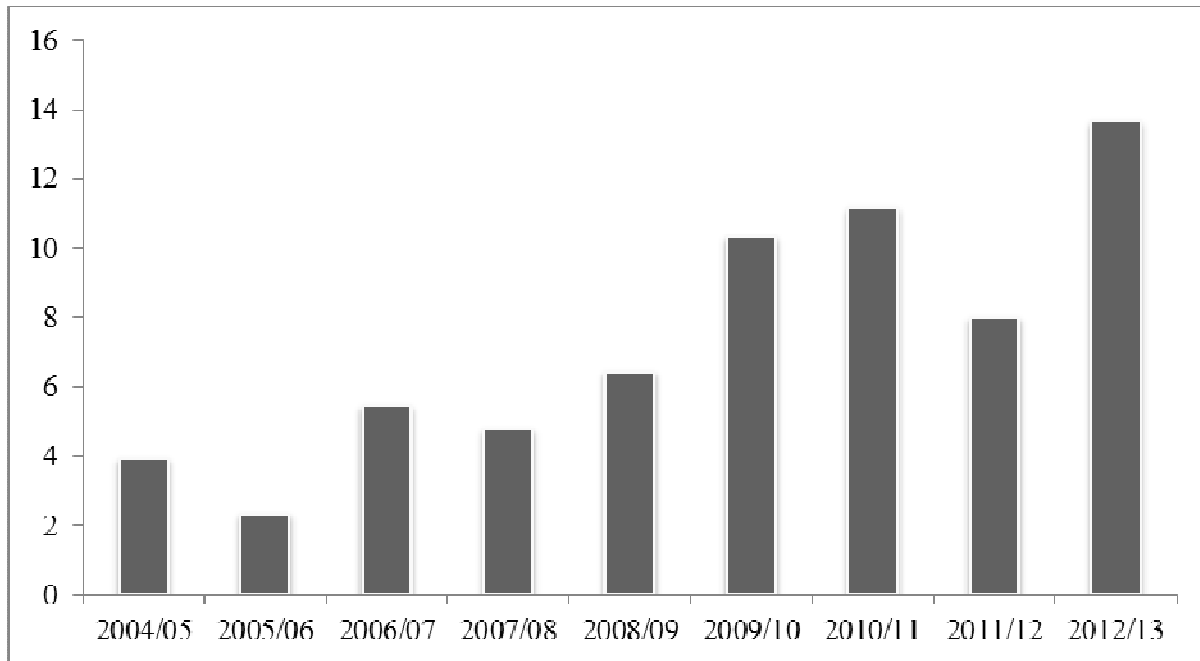
**Figure 7. Number of Current Questions Submitted and Discussed in the Plenary (monthly average).**



*Source: Author's own data.*

Despite the aforementioned problems, the Greek parliament's control function did not fade completely. The President of the Hellenic Parliament during the crucial 2012-2015 period, Mr. Meimarakis, confided in me that the assembly worked very hard to keep up with the developments in the government-troika negotiations. The workload of both MPs and the parliament's staff increased significantly. For example, it became fairly common to hold plenary sessions that lasted until well after midnight (Meimarakis). **Figure 8** seems to reflect this. The number of ordinary questions that was discussed increased substantially in the years after the crisis erupted. From a mean of 4.59 questions per month before 2009/10, the Hellenic Parliament reached a mean of 10.79.

**Figure 8. Number of Questions Discussed in the Plenary (monthly average).**



*Source: Author's own data.*

Looking at the political autonomy of the Hellenic Parliament from the perspective of its control function, we get mixed results but they lean toward less rather than more autonomy. On the one hand, after the crisis broke out, and under circumstances of immense public pressure and budgetary tightening (Sioufas, Petsalnikos, Meimarakis), the Hellenic Parliament intensified its scrutiny efforts. On the other hand, the PMs, especially Mr. Samaras, showed that they had little time to spare for answering parliamentary questions. Similarly, the government did not take any measures to meet the increased demand for debating current questions in the plenary. Hence, we have to conclude that the economic crisis affected indirectly not only the Hellenic Parliament's legislative function, but its scrutiny function as well.

## **Conclusion**

At the time of writing, the current Greek government (SYRIZA and ANEL) has already issued four legislative content acts after only five months in power. The first (27 March 2015) introduced measures to ensure the economic viability of a Greek company, the second (20 April 2015) dictated the transfer of all state funds to the Central Bank of Greece, the third (28 June 2015) dealt with the technicalities surrounding the referendum of 5 July 2015, and the fourth (28 June 2015) decreed the closure of all the Greek financial institutions in the run up to the referendum.

Given the dramatic turn of the negotiations between the Greek government and the troika, resorting to the legislative content acts was a legitimate choice; except for the first act that had nothing to do with the international negotiations. The Hellenic Parliament has already ratified the first two acts. The other two have to be ratified by the beginning of August, but it makes no difference. By then the referendum and its repercussions will have left their permanent imprint, regardless if a parliamentary majority repeals the acts or not. Hence, it

is fair to say that is of little use or interest, what the representatives of the Greek people hold of draconian measures, such as the introduction of capital controls.

It is still early to get a complete picture of the SYRIZA-ANEL government, but one thing is clear. Notwithstanding the critique of Mr. Tsipras while he was in the opposition, his own government seems to be as guilty, as far as undermining the parliament's legislative function is concerned. Out of a total of 13 laws until 7 July 2015, four of them are legislative content acts.

It is safe to conclude, therefore, that the erosion of the political autonomy of the Greek parliament is not down to the idiosyncratic behaviour of a single government. It is not because of ideological reasons either. The PASOK government belongs to the centre-left, the ND to the centre-right, SYRIZA is a leftist party and ANEL a far-right party. More importantly, the emergence of coalition governments in Greek politics did not have the anticipated effect. Contrary to the hypothesis that the political consequences of the economic crisis would have enhanced the Greek parliament's autonomy, the empirical results suggest that it did the opposite. Even though the crisis triggered the unexpected shift from majoritarian to transaction parliamentarism, and the party grip on the MPs loosened, the government's grip on the parliament actually tightened.

Apparently, extraordinary times demand extraordinary actions. The governments that were called to handle the economic crisis and its consequences had little time, or interest, in respecting the Hellenic Parliament's functions in full. Similarly, they had little interest in allowing the opposition to co-legislate. Even though the number of legislative proposals from the opposition increased, the government accepted almost none of them. In short, both the parliament's legislative and control functions were adversely affected; the former more than the latter. After 2009, the extraordinary legislative procedures, which allow the government to legislate essentially without the parliament, became a regularly used law-making method. Similarly, Prime Minister's question time was downgraded, and the fact that the PM, especially Mr. Samaras, attended the plenary sessions infrequently weakened the parliament's real, as opposed to formal, scrutiny powers further.

For parliamentary democracy in Greece these developments can only be bad news. The Hellenic Parliament has always been considered a relatively weak parliament that was dominated by the executive (Foundethakis 2003). This was routinely attributed to the electoral system that favoured the formation of strong single party governments, and to the party discipline that kept parliamentary groups united and obedient to the party leadership (Contiades 2009). In this respect, the Hellenic Parliament is a typical case of a parliament in decline, in the sense of being hostage to the executive and to the political party controlling it. If the economic crisis was an opportunity for re-negotiating the balance of power between the executive and the parliament in favour of the latter, then the opportunity went wasted.

Something good did come out of the Greek crisis, though, and this concerns primarily the scholarly community studying democratic parliaments. In this article I demonstrated, that party and governmental cohesion in democratic parliamentary systems are not necessarily related to parliamentary autonomy, let alone independence, as perceived wisdom holds. From an empirical point of view, it is possible for parliamentary autonomy to decline, while party and executive cohesion are declining too. To put it differently, in times of severe crisis the parliament is likely to suffer, even if its supposed 'natural enemy', the party controlling the executive, shows signs of fatigue and powerlessness.

My case study was a single country, but we should bear in mind that the recent political history of other European countries is similar to that of Greece. Portugal and Spain, for instance, suffered from a civil war and dictatorship and parliamentary democracy there is about as old as in Greece. Furthermore, the economic crisis hit these countries as well. Thus, it may be that parliamentary autonomy was affected in a similar way and for similar reasons in Spain and in Portugal, or in other countries comparable to Greece. Hopefully, future research will look into that.

Last, but not least, I hope I made a case why we should be studying parliamentary autonomy, and parliamentary practice in general, not only through the lenses of normative analysis. An empirical agenda might be able to help us reveal under what conditions exactly parliamentary autonomy decays or flourishes. If we identify these conditions, then maybe we will find also the means to halt the historical decline of parliaments. Thus, in principle it should be possible to prevent the relinquishment of the most important institution of representative democracy or, as Bauman and Bordoni (2014: 132) put it, 'of the world as we know it'.

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