

Greek Media: The Vigilante of the NGO sector

by Anastasios I. Valvis

Junior Research Fellow at the Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy

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HELLENIC FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN AND FOREIGN POLICY (ELIAMEP)

49, Vassilissis Sofias Ave., 106 76 Athens, Greece

Tel: (+30) 210 7257110-1, Fax: (+30) 210 7257114,

e-mail: eliamep@eliamep.gr,

url: www.eliamep.gr

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Anastasios I. Valvis

Junior Research Fellow at the Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy

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Author's Information:

Anastasios I Valvis is Junior Research Fellow at the Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy and assistant Editor of the Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea Studies since January 2013. He is PhD candidate of Political Science and International Relations, University of Peloponnese. He holds a BA on political Science from Athens National University and a MA in International Politics and Security Studies from the department of Peace Studies, University of Bradford. He has been for more than three years researcher at the Institute of International Economic Relations, and he has also participated in research projects such as at the University of Athens (Jean Monnet European Centre of Excellence, project on European and Greek foreign policy), and at the University of Peloponnese (Research project: Exploring the Integration Opportunities and Prospects of African Immigrants into the Greek Society). He has also cooperated with the Hellenic-African Chamber of Commerce and Development, the Association of SA and Ltd Companies and the Harokopio University. He has taught for one semester at the Hellenic Police Academy in Komotini

e-mail: valvis@eliamep.gr

Abstract:

The economic crisis that the Greek society has been embroiled in requests answers regarding its roots. Sources of wasteful money spending have been examined during these five last years attempting to provide the public with an answer. One group that attracted particular focus is the organized civil society. The Greek media have devoted significant time in bringing to the limelight possible corruption scandals with the involvement of state officials and favorable NGOs. Indeed, from the exposures so far it has become clear that to some extent there have been suspicious transactions between the state and some NGOs. However, while many cases are under investigation from the state authorities and the justice, many NGOs' representatives have expressed their concerns that the entire sector is becoming a scapegoat for all the cases of political corruption that have damaged the country since the mid-90s.

Key Words:

NGO, Media, Greece, Scandals, Recognisability

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2. Introduction

There is no doubt that Greece's economic meltdown has various effects on Greek society. In fact, this terrible economic vortex has a twofold impact on the population. On the one hand, austerity measures have led to a decrease in the social state's capacity to deal with people in need, and on the other, the excessive cut off of the state's expenditures (i.e. pensions, wages and so on) has led more people to the edge of unemployment or poverty and social exclusion; thus leading to a continuous victimization of the most vulnerable part of the Greek society.

However, conditions have never been ideal in Greece; even while Greece enjoyed a flourishing economy, the welfare state was absent in many respects. While this phenomenon is present in various countries, its magnitude is felt very intensely in Greece. Due to the absence of state programs, organized civil society was called forth to cover basic needs that were unmet by the government.

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) became the main representative of organized civil society. They were considered more (cost)-effective than the government in providing basic social services, and reaching the poor. Hence, it is not unexpected that the number of NGOs in Greece boomed over the last 20 years.

However, following a general global trend, Greek NGOs were engulfed in a series of scandals that eroded their public image. This resulted in the emergence of a vigorous discussion within Greek society on NGO accountability and the bonds that some of these organizations have with the central power and the political elites.

This paper will attempt to unveil the relationship among the Greek Mass Media and the NGO sector; how has it developed since the late 1990s and why? The paper will start by examining in a concise manner the NGO sector in Greece, questioning the way that organized Civil Society has been constructed. In parallel the paper will look at the fuzziness of the term NGO and, in the Greek case in particular, the vagueness of what is perceived as an NGO, in relation to the existing regulatory framework. Then, the role of media will be examined regarding the numerous scandals that have been presented in the press during the last 3-4 years. Again, there will be an attempt to explain the motives and reasons for so much attention and also the impact that these allegations have had on the organized Civil Society in Greece.

3. Defining Civil Society and NGOs: Not the easiest thing to do.

There has been a continuous theoretical discussion on the terminology and context of civil society and its most organized component, the NGO sector. Although the discussion should have established a solid definition of the term “civil society” and “NGO,” the bibliography indicates rather the opposite. The paper will present a brief version of the discussion around these two terms, which currently remains quite vague.

3.1. Civil Society

The meaning of ‘civil society’ has been widely discussed and debated for many decades. However, the debate peaked in the last three decades due to the emergence of many resistance movements against dictatorships, the emergence of new democracies and the retreat of the state from the market around the world.

The first foundations of the term “civil society” can be found in the work of great traditional political thinkers such as John Locke, Charles de Montesquieu and Alexis de Tocqueville. Their main legacy was achieving the demarcation between “civil” and “uncivil” society (Finke 2007: 11), which paved the way for contemporary political philosophers who from their side moved the discussion even further.

During the last two decades, the term ‘civil society’ gained prominence in the discipline of social sciences as its popularity rose. Over time, civil society has become a key term used by politicians, corporate executives, journalists and citizens, as well as charity foundations and human rights organizations. During the 1980s, the term ‘civil society’ was reintroduced into political discourse by the democratic opposition to the Communist bloc in Eastern Europe (Lewis & Kanji 2009:125). Yet, the broad scope of actors that participated in the civic movements, like trade unions, churches, citizens’ groups and individual intellectuals, created an even wider debate on how ‘civil society’ could be defined.

Gradually ‘civil society’ became a ‘catch-all’ term that shared common characteristics with the general concepts of democracy, liberalism and radicalism. However, this caused the meaning of the term to shift. “Civil Society” had become a *“melting pot into which ideas, arguments and examples are poured ceaselessly”*, which could render the term almost meaningless (Henderson & Vercseg 2010: 11).

For many scholars civil society is considered the third pillar between the state and the market (there are also those who claim that civil society is the fourth pillar – state, market, family, civil society). Yet, it is challenging to find ways to utterly disconnect it from the state or to elucidate civil society’s relationship to market forces. In order to do so, it is important to realize how civil society is and how or what it should be. Moreover, there are examples and areas among the three sectors that overlap which fuel the debate. Striking examples, according to Henderson and Vercseg are

social enterprises and credit unions, which exist on the edge “*between civil society and the market*” (Henderson & Vercseg 2010: 16). This, however, does not necessarily mean that the relationship between the three sectors is stable. On the contrary, the state, the market and civil society have a dynamic relationship that tends to change over time and in different contexts.

Consequently, it seems nearly impossible to draw a map or a guide to what can be called ‘civil society’. The most common way to define ‘civil society’ is by describing what it consists of or what are its constituents. According to Gemmill and Bamidele-Izu, in the broader sense, “*civil society has been characterized as a sphere of social life that is public but excludes government activities*” (Gemmill & Bamidele-Izu 2002). Thus, as Lewis and Kanji have put it, in political terms, civil society is a realm or a space in which there exists a set of organizational actors, which are not a part of the household, the state or the market. These organizations form a wide-ranging group. According to Huliaras, most academics would argue that civil society consists of voluntary associations, community groups, trade unions, church groups, cooperatives and business, professional and philanthropic organizations and of course NGOs. On the other hand, social movements should also be considered part of civil society (Huliaras 2014:3).

3.2. NGOs

The most prominent representatives of organized civil society are the NGOs. The term, “NGO” has been widely used, especially during the last few decades. Historically, there have been various ways to define it, mostly rooted in the different cultural and historical backgrounds. Indeed, there have been different understandings of the term linked with the societal framework in which they have developed. A striking example is the context in which NGOs function in the UK; a sharp contrast with how they function in the US. Specifically, in the UK, due to the strong tradition in voluntarism and charity, NGOs are correlated with voluntary work. On the other hand, in the USA, where markets dominate society, the term ‘Not-for Profit’ seems to adjust better (Lewis & Kanji 2009:7).

However, differentiations are not exclusively owed to terminology. They are also of a structural nature and due to variations in sources of funding and personnel. NGOs can be large or small, formal or informal, bureaucratic or flexible and informal. They may be well resourced and affluent, or may lead a ‘hand to mouth’ existence (Ibid: 3). Some of them have a highly professional staff, while other NGOs rely mostly on volunteers and supporters. Lastly, NGOs are driven by a range of motivations: for instance, they may be charitable, while other NGOs might seek to pursue radical political causes. Consequently, this diversity creates difficulties in employing the ‘NGO’ concept as an analytical category with specific characteristics.

Therefore, the term ‘NGO’ is used in both a broad and a narrow sense. For instance, for the UK Public Law Project, NGOs are ‘*privately constituted organizations-be they companies, professional, trade and voluntary organizations, or charities-that may or may not make a profit*’ (Sunkin et al. 1993: 108). Conversely, narrower definitions focus on the idea that NGOs are organizations

concerned with the promotion of social, political or economic change, correlating them with the general concept of 'development'.

In the current discourse, the "narrower" approach prevails. Therefore, the relevant debate has moved to establishing the key preconditions for defining an organization as non-governmental. The basic characteristics that have generally emerged in this debate are five: initially, it must be a formal organization, with an institutionalized structure (holding regular meetings, having offices, etc.). Secondly, it must be private, and institutionally separated from the government (but this does not mean that such an organization cannot receive support from the government, especially economic support). Thirdly, the organization must be non-profit; thus in the event of a financial surplus, the organization does not accrue a profit for owners or directors. Fourthly, it must be self-governing and therefore, able to control and manage its own affairs; and finally it has to be voluntary; even if it does not use volunteer staff as such, there must be at least some degree of voluntary participation in the conduct or management of the organization. Yet, even these five preconditions seem to leave room for further discussion, as they do not exclude trade unions and professional associations. Thus, scholars like Vakil, in order to make their definition even more precise define NGOs as *'self-governing, private, not-for-profit organizations that are geared to improving the quality of life for disadvantaged people'* (Vakil 1997: 2060).

Moving a step further with the NGO sector, it is fundamental to explain what these organizations do, and defining their role. Perhaps the most well-known distinction is the one suggesting that NGOs work in three different ways: as implementers, catalysts and partners (Lewis & Kanji 2009: 14).

As implementers, NGOs deal with the mobilization of resources to provide goods and services to people in need. This is a well-known role for NGOs that receives more and more attention. In fact, service delivery has increased in parallel with an increase in governments and donors contracting NGOs to carry out specific tasks in return for compensation. As catalysts, the role of NGOs is to inspire, facilitate or contribute to improved thinking and action in order to bring about change. This may include grassroots organizing, gender and empowerment work, lobbying and advocacy work, conduct and dissemination of research, and attempting to influence the political system (Ibid). Finally, as partners, NGOs work closely with other institutions, such as governments, donors, and the private sector in joint activities, such as providing specific inputs to a broader multi-agency programme or project.

To sum up our argument so far, we conclude that the terms "Civil Society" and the "NGO" sector is quite appealing and also fashionable nowadays. Yet discussions about these two terms can also be very confusing and deterring from reaching into a precise definition of them. Therefore, while some of the aforementioned thoughts and definitions seem to prevail over the rest, hitherto discrepancies always exist and create a vicious cycle of an interminable debate, which if applied to national contexts may require the intervention of other means, such as regulatory ones, for clarification.

4. The Debate on NGO Accountability

As described earlier, NGOs are considered the most organized part of Civil Society. Utilizing resources from private or public donors, NGOs have for a long time now been responsible for various projects aiming to benefit the most vulnerable people or even to contribute to the establishment of democratic values whenever these were absent or fragile. Yet, given the NGOs' nature and a series of highly publicized scandals that have eroded public confidence in them, concerns about the accountability NGOs have upturned globally. In Greece in particular, NGOs' prestige and reputation have been burned down to the ground due to the unprecedented scandals that have been circulated for the last 2-3 years, coupled with the severe and harsh fiscal consolidation that is taking place. Public's distrust on how NGOs function and what they accomplish have skyrocketed, leading to a mounting request for sturdier control. Consequently, "accountability" has become a *cliché* in the lips of stakeholders. Yet, easy as it may sound, accountability is very difficult to achieve.

While not the subject of this paper, a few remarks about what accountability is could be helpful. There are different definitions of accountability³, but in short accountability could be described in six words: responsibility, control, effectiveness, transparency, reliability and legitimacy. All these terms refer not only to the relations and actions of NGOs towards society but also to how these organizations function internally. So their direction is scattered and complex as well covering a variety of targets both internally and externally.

Moreover, in order to achieve accountability a number of mechanisms are available. From the literature review stems that these mechanisms differ between those that are perceived as 'tools' and others noted as 'processes'. Accountability tools are mostly devices or discrete techniques being used within a narrow period of time (according to Ebrahim these may include financial reports and disclosures or performance evaluations) (Ebrahim, 2003:3). They can be tangibly documented and they can be utilized in a repeatable way. On the other hand, processes are by and large broader and have more dimensions than do tools, while at the same time are less tangible in nature and time-bound. To put it simply, process mechanisms pay more attention on a course of action rather than a discrete end-result, in which the means are important in and of themselves (for instance participatory rural appraisal) (Ibid). Some of the most well-known mechanisms that stem from the literature are regulatory, external control and self-regulatory ones. As obvious, the difference lies on who is responsible to run accountability control, namely, external (run by the government or private institutions and donors) and internal control (run by the NGOs themselves).⁴

³ See for example Ebrahim 2013, Edwards 1996, Cornwall et al 2000, Naidoo 2004, Kaldor 2004, Nelson 2007, Agyemang et al 2009, Najam 1996, Kilby 2004.

⁴ For more on accountability mechanisms and tools see: Nelson 2007

To sum up this brief section, accountability is perhaps the ultimate goal not only for the stakeholders but also for the NGOs themselves. While it is not a panacea, accountability can be an accelerating factor for a high level of effectiveness for the NGOs. Nevertheless, moving from the theoretical and quite promising discourse to the practical implementation of accountability, things turn to be more complicated than expected. The fact that there are numerous accountability mechanisms is evidence to substantiate this claim.

5. NGOs in the Greek national Context.

In what follows the landscape of the NGO sector in Greece is critically assessed. The main concern is to explain in a prudent way the situation in Greece. To this end, each of the following parts will be discussing a “paradox”, so as to underscore the discrepancies existing in Greece’s particular context.

Paradox 1: The status of Greek Civil Society

While Greece followed the global explosion of NGOs during the past two decades, yet in terms of social capital and people’s mobilization the Greek case is far from reaching western standards. Indeed, various sources have indicated that at least in the second half of the 20th century Greece had lower levels of social capital, associational density, and civic engagement. The reasons for this outcome are multifaceted. Huliaras (2014) has summarized them by creating five categories of causes. The first category has to do with the rapid economic development that took place in Greece since the 1960s, which has not been followed by equivalent social transformations. The second category is related to the distorted Greek political system and the clientelistic networks that the Greek political elites have created throughout the years. State dominance and patricracy halted the emergence of a modern state organization and thus the rise of a healthy and active civil society. Indeed, Sotiropoulos seems to agree, arguing that “*the reason for civil society’s underdevelopment lied in the early emergence of strong party organizations, which just after the democratic transition created their own factions*” (Sotiropoulos 2014: 6). The third category deals with the role of the Church in Greece and its relations with the state. The religious homogeneity that exists in Greece, in contrast with other Western societies, is believed to have hindered the mobilization of civil societal action. Another category has to do with tax incentives for charitable donations. The Greek tax system endorses donations to the state, the Church, and to cultural institutions, while offering limited incentives for donations to NGOs and other civil society organizations (CSOs).

Last but not least, Huliaras points out that the lack of civic education is considered a major factor as well (Huliaras, 2014). In fact, acquiring civic skills is fundamental for active participation in civil society and public life in general. As research indicates, long-term participation in extracurricular and voluntary associations during childhood has a catalytic impact on building a tradition for civic engagement and strong social capital (Theocharis, 2013). According to Andolina et al (2003:275),

civic training in adolescence can influence future adult behaviors. Yet, in the Greek educational system civic training is at an embryonic level and depends mostly on the personal and sporadic initiatives taken individually by teachers. The Greek educational system shows a tendency that has been also noticed by Longo in the American system (Longo, 2007:1). It focuses almost exclusively on the potential of the school as a breeding ground of social improvements and reform, but it ignores any other contributions educational institutions could make to substantive change. Yet, there are voices suggesting that education should be expanded beyond traditional school methods. Voluntary work should be incorporated into school programs, thus creating the foundation for a more active society.

Other factors, like clientelism, have become the “Achilles heel” of Greek civil society. While the number of volunteer organizations has been expanding since the late 1980s, this has been accompanied by the expansion of EU funding for citizenship programs. However, EU funding was channeled through official state mechanisms that set the standards for eligibility for funding. Thus, while EU funds have provided important incentives for collective action and citizen mobilization, the involvement of the Greek state set the pace for the professionalization of voluntary organizations, which inevitably shifted away from their original purpose towards acting as sub-contractors of state services. This reality has planted the seed of distrust among citizens and between citizens and social and political institutions. Data drawn on OECD studies and the Eurobarometer surveys, have validated that assumption, underscoring that Greece ranks among the last in Europe in citizen-to-citizen and institutional trust (Theocharis, 2013; Lymperaki & Paraskevopoulos, 2002). In particular, the Eurobarometer’s report indicates that Greece lies in the 24th (out of 28 places) in the EU regarding citizens’ trust in institutions (Standard Eurobarometer 81, spring 2014: 64). Only 16% of Greek citizens tend to trust state institutions with the overwhelming majority (84%) declaring lack of trust (Standard Eurobarometer 81, spring 2014: 64). Furthermore, past research in social trust has shown that Greeks have blind trust in their family environment while being skeptical and distrustful of state institutions (Kathimerini, 28/06/2014).

Gradually, the further involvement of an inefficient and somewhat corrupted state spread the “virus” of corruption to organized civil society and NGO sectors, creating tremors in the public sector. In the 2000s, the issue of the accountability of NGOs came to the forefront of public discussion. At the same time, the press released stories on various economic scandals related to NGOs. As a consequence, the credibility of NGOs was harmed.

But problems were also apparent as regards the internal capacity of the NGO sector. As Sotiropoulos underlines, although active in many sectors most of the NGOs have never managed to become modern formal organizations. On the contrary, in many cases they have remained wobbly squads of personal friends and associates lacking organizational structures and management skills with the exception of course of few Greek civil society associations being annexes of international NGOs such as GreenPeace and Amnesty International (Sotiropoulos, 2014: 8). The immediate outcome was that under these circumstances there was no framework in the NGO sector for transparent decision making and thus accountability mechanisms were almost

invisible.

Paradox 2: The unknown total number of NGOs in Greece

Perhaps one of the oddest characteristics of the Greek case regarding the organized civil society is the lack of an official registry of NGOs; a result of the chaotic bureaucratic and underdeveloped regulatory framework that will be described later on. Thus, it is almost impossible to craft a reliable, solid picture of the size of the NGO sector in Greece. Estimations vary; for instance, a research which had been conducted by a committee of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had claimed the number of the NGOs to be at 30,000. However, since there is no concrete verification this number is reasonably contested.

Moreover, an effort called "The Campaigning of 800 NGOs" that took place in the mid 2000 was a systematized action aiming to grant the NGO sector constitutional guarantees, but constitutional reform eventually did not include this sector. This movement collected together 800 NGOs, including some of the most influential and organized. Another well-known initiative, that of the Greek Centre for the Promotion of Voluntarism, introduced a website with the name "anthropos" (the greek word for human being) aiming to promote the relations between Greek NGOs and to provide reliable information to the public, entrepreneurs, journalists and the donor community in general, on voluntarism in Greece. The founders of this quite ambitious initiative counted 1,800 active NGOs in 25 different sectors. A more official estimation of the number of the NGOs in Greece was made at the introductory report submitted to the Greek parliament upon the passage of the Law 4019/2011 on social economy and social entrepreneurship. This report, placed the number of NGOs in Greece somewhere between 1,500 to 2,000 (Sotiropoulos, 2014). In a research conducted by Prof. Sotiropoulos and Mr. Bourikos (2013) on behalf of ELIAMEP's Crisis Observatory, the authors referred to the official Record of NGOs active in Social Care that has been established under law 2646/1998 and is currently available at the Ministry of Employment and Social Security. In this record the number of registered NGOs dealing with social care is 545 (According to the official available data of the records in 2012). A different record is maintained in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In 2009, the Hellenic aid agency was set up in order to channel development assistance to the third world. This was made possible with the assistance of NGOs. In the agency, the records reveal the existence of almost 600 NGOs (528 seems from references in the press to be the accurate number).

Paradox 3: A scattered and fragmented regulatory framework.

The term NGO was introduced in the Greek legislature for the first time in the law for the development of the National System for Social Care (Law 2646/1998) and later on in the law for development assistance (Law 2731/1999). Yet, a concrete definition of the term is still missing from the Greek legislature. It is up to the interested organizations to determine whether they would prefer to be considered as non-governmental or not. However, this is not the only inconsistency.

Article 12 of the Greek Constitution clearly grants all Greek people the right to form *non-profit associations and unions, in compliance with the law, which, however, may never subject the exercise of this right to prior permission*, while article 14 paragraph 1 guarantees free expression indicating that *every person may express and propagate his thoughts orally, in writing and through the press in compliance with the laws of the State*.

Yet the current legislation does not foresee special provisions for the establishment and operation of NGOs. Therefore, an NGO can be established under the current provisions of the civil code indicating that it can be established as a not for profit legal person of private law (i.e. a union of persons, a civil not-for-profit company, an association, a foundation of public benefit etc.) The simplest way to institutionalize a civic movement is that of a union of persons that does not require extensive legal preparations. Relatively effortless also is the process of setting up a civil non-profit company that requires only two people. However, the vast majority of NGOs in Greece have the legal status of an association (somateio). This is mostly due to the special tax treatment in place for associations that are excluded from VAT (value added tax) and are not obliged to maintain records typically required of other institutions. Special tax treatment is also provided for public benefit foundations, which enjoy more prerogatives than other types of non-profit organizations.

Apart from these three legal forms, however, in 2011 under law 4019/2011 (also known as the law for Social Economy), a new concept of social associational enterprises for the common good and for solidarity was introduced; the so called “KOINSEP”. These organizations are typically associations with a social purpose and commercial status. Their members can be persons or legal entities (corporations) and they are divided into three categories according to their cause: Social inclusion, social care and common productive cause (Article 2, Law 4019/2011, Official Gazette 216, 30/09/2011). However, their potential social impact has been highly contested by the opposition parties. For example, during the parliamentary discussion on the provisions of the law, representatives from SYRIZA parliamentary group, criticized the law at its core. In particular, they accused off the law of withdrawing labor rights, affecting negatively social insurance and removing rights in health care and education. In addition, they expressed their concerns on the negative effects that the new law might have on the insurance funds and they also doubted the social nature of these newly formed Social enterprises. They also stated that the latter will be profit oriented at the very end, thus their social nature will be absent (IF/B/ΣIB/17017-17019).

The newspaper of the Greek Communist Party, “Rizospastis”, has robustly criticized the purpose of this initiative. The newspaper also contested the status and the employing policies of the newly born organizations, arguing that their intentions are bogus since they seem to take advantage of the high unemployment rates and offer jobs with extremely low salaries (Rizospastis, 2013). “Rizospastis” also accused these initiatives for bringing about a re-allocation of funds that could have been granted to local authorities, while leaving extra room for the private sector to engage in social services that otherwise should have been provided by the state. But the communist and the radical left opposition is not the only one raising concerns about “KOINSEP’s” role. The General Inspector for Public Administration, Mr. Leandros Rakintzis, in an interview for the newspaper

“Kathimerini” on 5 April 2014 expressed his concerns about “KOINSEP” organizations becoming a new kind of NGOs introducing unscrupulous habits and bad practices from the past (Kathimerini, 05/04/2014).

The regulatory framework, however, is now under scrutiny. In February 2014 PASOK, member of the governing coalition of the New Democracy party and PASOK, submitted a law providing for controls over the NGO sector (To Vima, 21/09/2014). On 24 September 2014, the government, through the Minister for Administrative Reform and E-Governance submitted a draft law to the parliament regarding the transparency of the economic status of NGOs⁵ (Ta Nea, 24/09/2014). The proposed law requires NGOs to upload all the donations they receive from the public sector above €3000 to the web platform “Diavgeia”, a tool for transparency and control of activities undertaken by the state.

6. NGOs, the mass media and the crisis in the Greek context

Media has been recognized as the fourth branch of government, as they can influence the three constitutionally-recognized branches (legislative, judicial and executive). In Greece, the media have taken this role very seriously and they have been very successful in their influence over the government. The easiest way for the media to influence political decisions is by generating social perceptions on specific issues. While, perhaps, a moral role for the media would have been to play the *watchdog* of the three branches of government, it is quite common that media's intervention is correlated with specific objectives driven by political or business interests (Luberda, 2008: 516). In that sense, media might be used by political rivals for their own benefit or even by the government in order to shift the attention of the public from important developments that could have triggered social unrest.

In the case of Greece, strong mass media corporations seem to be doing both; namely being a *watchdog* while also distracting the public's attention. Hence, when a barrage of negative news and revelations regarding the NGO sector came into the limelight, many journalists covered the scandals for several days. Without having any prior knowledge of the size of the problem, the reasons behind it, or the Greek NGO sector in general, journalists reached indisputably negative conclusions .

A judicial investigation on public funding to NGOs was initiated during late 2010, as several cases of civil society organizations (CSOs), being funded for projects outside Greece based on loose procurement rules and procedures, were revealed. Moreover, as final outcomes were, essentially, never monitored by government officials, there was no evidence that all funded projects were truly implemented and that any mismanagement ever took place. The then deputy foreign minister, Mr. Spyros Kouvelis (PASOK), had reported to the Greek Parliament in 2010 that around 26 million euros

⁵ It is important however to underline that in the proposed law KOINΣEΠ were also considered as NGOs or better put is not for profit organizations.

were allocated to 528 NGOs, for which an investigation was in process. Following significant public resentment, Prime Minister Antonis Samaras (New Democracy) had ordered, “a freeze on all public funding to NGOs” for projects inside and outside Greece (Kathimerini, 21 August 2012).

It is quite interesting how the media covered the outburst of the NGO scandals. Characteristic were newspapers' titles such as “Pactolus Of Money to Unknown Recipients” (Rizospastis, 16/2/2011), “Waste and Opacity in Non-Governmental Organizations” (SKAI, 16/2/2011), “Orgy of Waste with NGOs” (Proto Thema, 12/7/2011), “NGO: The Color Of Money” (Eleftherotypia, 8/2/2010), “Without Control Grants awarded to NGOs and Associations” (Ta Nea, 6/12/2012) and so on.

While the Media exacerbated the problem, the problem in fact existed. Therefore, it is also necessary to identify the two major reasons that have led to allegations against NGOs. The first reason, which has been explained earlier, relates to the lack of a specific regulatory framework. This structural deficiency was coupled with the second important problem that was also described earlier: the clientelistic networks that the Greek political elites have constructed all these years, distributing resources to NGOs in a less than transparent manner.

A typical example is the Hellenic Aid Agency, Greece's overseas development programme, which was founded in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Almost 600 NGOs were recorded under the umbrella of Hellenic Aid. The government's goal was to reinforce Greek relations with the emerging democracies of the western Balkans. To this end, the Greek government offered almost €87m to NGOs from 2000 to 2004. However, very little evidence exists whether this huge amount of money brought about any specific outcomes. The case of the NGO titled International Mine Initiative (IMI) is one of many which has attracted public interest. IMI's goal was to remove landmines in Bosnia, Lebanon and Iraq. However, closer scrutiny has shown that its claims of being a world leader in de-mining operations were questionable. More specifically, investigations have shown that it is unclear how many of the eight de-mining programmes undertaken with €9m of foreign ministry funding were actually completed (The Economist, 20/02/2014).

On 21/02/2014 an article at the newspaper “Kathimerini”, dealt with the issue of IMI presenting facts that have been published a week earlier in the Economist. According to the reporter, the article in “the Economist” had mentioned that the former director of IMI was temporarily imprisoned before going to court for the allegations of fraud. The Economist had also reported that three diplomats were also facing allegations including one of an ex-prime minister's closest advisers (Kathimerini, 21/02/2014).

The Economist again presented the hypothesis that IMI was part of R. Karadzic protection network. Before his arrest, the leader of Bosnian-Serbs has managed to slip from the NATO forces for several years. At the same time, a former member of his security team, D. Tesic had been hired by IMI to contribute to one of the programmes in Bosnia. Later on IMI, has replaced its multinational team with officers from a Bosnian-Serb company, called UNIPAK, which had strong ties with one of Karadzic's former ministers.

Two days earlier, another Greek newspaper, "To Vima", revealed evidence that had been gathered during 2003-2005 from members of the SFOR in Bosnia, indicating that members of the IMI enjoyed close ties with two men of Karadzic's security. These ties came into light with the arrest of both Tesic and Jankovic in January 2005 in Pale. According to the SFOR, Tesic had started cooperating with IMI's person in charge in Bosnia already since 2001. Later on, Tesic had meetings with the IMI's president in Bosnia.

According to Serbian media, Tesic has been appointed as a local partner in order to monitor the personnel engaged in the project while at the same time through the Serbian police he was in charge of checking up the criminal records of potential employees. A different perspective comes from what the president of IMI has stated in the newspaper. According to him, cooperation with Tesic was limited only to the assignment of tracking down a Jeep that was missed and was carrying a satellite communication system (To Vima, 19/02/2014). The story gained too much publicity and not unfairly so. The result was the imprisonment of IMI's president (The TOC, 18/02/2014) while one of the closest consultants of former Greek Prime Minister G. Papandreou, Alex Rontos, was summoned by Greek judicial authorities and was forced to pay a 50,000 euros guarantee after his plea (News.gr, 13/09/2014).

The peculiar case of IMI was not the only one that had attracted the public interest. There were many cases, which have been under investigation with some of them having also a redolent of scandal and political corruption. The most characteristic ones that have attracted the media's attention were the following two: the "Circle of Patmos" (ο Κύκλος της Πάτμου) and the organization "Network of Initiatives for Democracy in Western Balkans". Both organizations are under investigation. As far as the organization "Circle of Patmos" is concerned, a newspaper article published in December 2012 places it as one of the 600 NGOs under investigation for wasting public money (Ethnos, 22/12/2012). From what the criminal investigation has revealed it appears that there were extremely high amounts of money hidden in bank accounts in London that the organization's board of directors had never declared to the authorities. In addition, the funds that the organization had received during the 90s were impressively high in order to promote linkage between religious consciousness and environmental protection through the organization of international symposia and boats cruises around the world. According to the investigation's findings the authorities concluded that the organization's board had used these funds for personal profit rather than for the promotion of the organization's values and goals. According to the press, from 2000 to 2010 the organization "Circle of Patmos" has received, €1.190.000 from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, €1,2 million from OPAP S.A. (Organization for the forecasting of football games), €300,000 from the Greek Parliament and almost €60,000 from the ministry of culture (news247, 17/12/2012).

The second case, the organization «Network of Initiatives for Democracy in Western Balkans" (Δίκτυο Πρωτοβουλίας για τη Δημοκρατία στα Δυτικά Βαλκάνια), is more interesting. In this NGO a high-ranking member of one of the biggest Greek political parties was involved. A fusillade of articles originating mostly from newspapers and sites related to the opposition reported on this

case. The press focused on the seize of funding that the organization's outputs received and the outputs that according to the same articles were lacking (EFSYN, 16/03/2014). According to various newspaper articles, the organization for a period of almost ten years (2001-2010) received almost €2,5 million from the HellenicAid agency of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs (I Avgi, 05/07/2014). However, the ongoing investigation will conclude whether there is an issue of political corruption or not. Nonetheless, the opposition's media have raised the issue for many weeks in order to harm the ruling party, without however having in hand the final outcome from the ongoing investigation that is being conducted by the judicial authorities and the tax agencies of the state.

In 2011, the report that was produced by the Special Permanent Committee on Institutions and Transparency acted like a slingshot for the NGOs. The report investigated many suspicious activities concluding that the state had provided NGOs with funds amounting over €100m⁶ during the last decades (Protothema, 20/02/2014). This conclusion along with the dreadful economic situation that the Greek society has been the last 5 years caused a tremendous negative image for the entire sector.

The NGO issue has been raised even in prominent Greek television talk shows. One of them, called "Subversion" (Ανατροπή) devoted one of its weekly shows exclusively on the NGO scandals (24/02/2014). The anchorman referred to the deficiencies in the legal framework and the lack of accountability mechanisms as well as the involvement of the political elites, and left the overall impression that the NGO sector is corrupted as a whole and highly involved in political games and money laundering. The show made extensive reference to the reports of the parliamentary committee as well as the conclusions of the General Inspector of Public Administration, which were unable to provide a precise number of the NGOs in Greece. Moreover, the discussion included to the funding of the NGOs. According to Hellenic Aid, from 2000 to 2010 more than €100m were given to 431 NGOs, while according to the General Inspector of Public Administration it was estimated that every year €30 to €60m were being granted to the NGOs. Another quite well-known talk show called "Sniper" presented by a journalist known for political *exposés* and backstage political developments, also devoted a TV programme on the NGO scandals (20/02/2014). In this case, the focus was mostly on the involvement of the political elites in the NGO sector.

Perhaps the oddest thing in the whole discussion in the media was the unequal representation of the NGO sector. Allegations were made but no room was given to the NGOs themselves to express their position. In fact, in the first case mentioned above, the TV talk show "Subversion", in a panel of almost 10 guests there was only one representative of the NGOs who was subjected to immense criticism without having the adequate time to respond. The same situation almost applies to the context in which the Greek press functions. Most of the editorials, as it was already made clear above, were against the NGO sector with only few exemptions praising the work of specific NGOs.

⁶ Report 2011 Special Permanent Committee on Institutions and Transparency, Period ΙΓ', Session Γ', p. 34 available at: <http://www.hellenicparliament.gr/Koinovouleftikes-Epitropes/ektheseis?search=on&commission=2b188390-2f24-4d95-b867-912d485fa8cf&drcSessionPeriods=908c047e-6576-4a0c-aa3a-91e061ae4724>

Examples were articles presenting the work of influential NGOs receiving strong support from the business sector (Zougla, 15/11/2012 & Skai, 21/02/2013), the state (Epikaira, 06/12/2010) or from one of the most profoundly established institutions in Greece, the Church (Proto Thema, 01/01/2013).

Needless to say, all this unequal and most of the time populist critique has impacted the recognisability and image of the entire NGO sector. NGOs became synonymous with corruption and a fruitful field for political conflict between government and opposition. Allegations have been deployed in newspapers with strong ties with the opposition parties such as "Rizospastis". It was on 23/10/2013 when the Communist Party's newspaper unleashed an attack towards one of the most well-known NGOs in Greece, "PRAKSIS". The accusations had to do with the involvement of the NGO in the implementation of a programme which was funded by the Ministry of Interior in order to reduce poverty. The well-constructed answer of the president of "PRAKSIS" showed that this attack was mainly a vehicle for accusing the government and the Ministry's political leadership for misusing European funds. However, the fact that this NGO enjoys a good reputation, due to the important work that does, has not affected the positive view that society had about "PRAKSIS". Besides, from time to time positive reports in the press have validated the organization's integrity and contribution. A striking example was an article in the left-wing opposition newspaper "Eleftherotypia" on 29/7/2014 were the work of PRAKSIS in the prevention of diseases, such as hepatitis, was praised.

When the situation is more complicated it becomes harder to contain a blind accusation, distinguishing lies from truths. This was the case with accusations related to the implementation of development projects funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Opposition parties have taken up the "battle axe" taking advantage of the fact that the public was unfamiliar with specific issues and aspects of foreign policy. Indeed, several press reports depicted opposition parties attacked the government on the grounds of the lack of accountability mechanisms regarding the NGOs work. Other reports concentrated on the allocation of large sum of money to projects of an ambivalent nature. Building on two facts, the general and usually valid assumption that in order to do work in Greece it is often necessary to *grease the wheels*, as well as the lack of a regulatory framework, the opposition attempted to discredit its political opponents, finding fertile ground to sow the seed of disputing the role and projects of NGOs. Yet, on the altar of political power games, the entire NGO sector has been discredited. In a very interesting analysis in one of the most notable newspapers, "Kathimerini", a very well-known journalist and political analyst, Paschos Mandravellis, brought the discussion to a real and practical level. Motivated by the discussion around the "suspicious" funding provided by HellenicAid to NGOs in order to implement projects such as the one of removing landmines in Bosnia, Mandravellis wrote about the legal obligation that Greece has, as other developed countries, to provide development aid to the underdeveloped world. He stressed that while Greece claims to be a country fully aware of the problems of developing areas, it is the last country in OECD's long list of donor countries. Mandravellis has pointed out very accurately that it is totally different to question on the one hand whether Greece should have spent money on such kind of projects and on the other where the

money finally went (Kathimerini, 21/02/2014). However, this conceptual distinction has been avoided or downplayed in most of the articles in the media, thus leading the public to believe in an interminable junketing between national officials and favorable NGOs.

But this was not the first time such a confusion was preserved and will likely not be the last time. Similar accusations have been also made regarding the engagement of NGOs in a project of social work during 2011-2012. In early 2014, the major opposition party, SYRIZA, questioned the transparency of a social work programme, which was launched by the Ministry of Labor. The programme had been implemented with the involvement of the NGO sector that participated as intermediary and it was funded by the EU. SYRIZA claimed that the process was not transparent, arguing that there might be transfers of funds to the NGOs themselves, something that it was not foreseen at the beginning of this programme (Naftemporiki, 26/02/2014). Nevertheless, these allegations have yet to be proven.

But to be fair, opposition's concerns have not always been speculative. As already mentioned, judicial investigations have proved that there was an issue of transparency and suspicious funding for NGOs in the past. Chances are this resulted from agreements under the table and from political handlings. However, in order to avoid being absolute and condemn the entire sector, at least in the eyes of the public opinion, all suspect cases should be dealt with by the justice system.

7. Conclusions

Organized civil society in Greece is a very complex sector. It can be distinguished mainly in two parts. The first part has to do with the organizations which are non-state-actors but are resembling a long branch of the government, while the second part consists of NGOs, autonomous from the state actors, which seek to contribute to where society needs them. Therefore, it is important to understand to which of the two parts all the aforementioned allegations addressed. Indeed, most of the criticism is targeted against those NGOs that were founded under "peculiar" circumstances and under the government's initiative in order to serve specific "national" purposes. Striking examples were various NGOs registered in the Hellenic Aid Agency of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Nevertheless, this critique has also been diffused and has tainted, unjustifiably most of the time, to the whole NGO sector incorporating NGOs that have built strong bonds with local communities producing significant work.

Greek media wanting to attract public attention in an easy manner capitalized on the general distrust that the Greek governments have suffered from, during the last few years. This distrust was partially due to the unprecedented crisis but also justified by the Greek government's not-so-innocent past. Greek media have constructed an immoral and corrupted image of the NGO sector as a whole. They argue that behind the *façade* of NGOs doing good for the society there were other motives. Allegedly there were politically oriented motives or even attempts of money laundering through the funds provided to the NGOs. Such generalizations by the media have cost a lot to the credibility of the NGOs, despite the fact that a large segment of the NGO sector has a

good reputation in the eyes of Greek society due to this sector's effectiveness and role in assisting vulnerable groups especially during the last very difficult years.

To conclude, the critique of the NGO sector is not unjustifiable but it is mostly a product of the old political system's *free riding* and its insufficiency to create the proper regulatory framework and to establish adequate accountability mechanisms in the NGO sector. In addition, it becomes apparent from the theoretical vagueness around the concept of NGO and the notion of accountability that accusations should be downplayed or at least should not cover the sector as a whole. Therefore, in the case of Greek NGOs, the causes of the negative public image of NGOs should be sought in the past of Greek state-society relations and particularly in the legacy of political clientelism and the grave deficiencies in the regulatory framework which remains fragmented and inadequate.

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