Perspectives on European Politics and Society

Politics, the Media and NGOs: The Greek Experience

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ABSTRACT   *During the last decade, Greek non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have not only increased in number, but have also raised many questions regarding their legitimacy. Their image is negative. With that in mind, the aim of this article is to examine the environment within which Greek NGOs have to operate, and in particular, the interaction between NGOs, the state and the media. In so doing, the following questions will be asked and analysed: first, what is the role and position of Greek NGOs in their interaction with the political system and the media? Are they an expression of bottom-up and citizen volunteerism or a top-down process? How does this enhance or undermine their autonomy and credibility? Second, which opportunities are available to Greek NGOs in a society where culture, combined with the unprecedented economic crisis, heavily doubts and challenges their existence and importance?*

Introduction

Greek non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are involved in a wide area of activities, ranging from international security to human rights, the environment, social care and humanitarian assistance. In Greece, however, the image of NGOs is negative. Why is this the case? Two explanations are offered. First, the embryonic state of the Greek NGOs, coupled with the prevalence of clientelistic, statist and populist practices which characterizes the political system and the Greek state (Lyberaki & Paraskevopoulos 2002; Mouzelis & Pagoulatos, 2004). This reality has not only undermined the autonomy of Greek NGOs, but when considering also their dependence on state funding, it has generated public suspicion and mistrust for their work (Huliaras, 2014, p. 12) Second, the contemporary media culture which invests heavily on infotainment and commercialization

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(Plios, 2006). This allows the media not only to direct the image and recognizability of Greek NGOs, but also to set the confines of the public dialogue on the issues and actions NGOs are promoting (Tsaliki, 2010, p. 156).

Bearing the above in mind, the aim of this article is to examine the environment within which Greek NGOs have to operate, and in particular, the interaction between NGOs, the state and the media. In so doing, the following questions will be asked and analysed: first, what is the role and position of Greek NGOs in their interaction with the political system and the media? Are they an expression of bottom-up and citizen volunteerism or a top-down process? How does this enhance or undermine their autonomy and credibility? Second, which opportunities are available to Greek NGOs in a society where culture, combined with the unprecedented economic crisis, heavily doubts and challenges their existence and importance?

The State–NGO Relationship in Greece

Research indicates that participation in NGOs has increased since the 1980s. According to a study of Panteion University, 1200 NGOs operated in Greece in the mid-1990s, of which 75 per cent was established during the 1980s. Ninety per cent of these organizations were non-profit and financed primarily from private sources, 65 per cent had less than 50 members and 23 per cent more than a 100 members (Stasinopoulou, 1997). Another study by Panagiotidou (2002) estimated that Greek NGOs were 2400 in 1999. Of these, 14 per cent had active members, 79.3 per cent provided services at the local level, 10.7 per cent at the regional level and 10 per cent at the national and international levels. In 2011, the Greek Parliament estimated that NGOs in Greece were about 1500–2000, of which only 300 were active (Greek Ministry of Education, 2012, p. 44).

Natural disasters and the rise of street protests, the role of the social media in mobilization and growing mistrust on state institutions have played a role in the increase of civic engagement in NGO initiatives and activities. In September 1999, when a deadly earthquake hit Athens, almost immediately a vast number of NGOs (around 700), rushed in to offer food, clothes and healthcare to the victims. Their mobilization was very quick and effective, and their initiatives were taken without any structural support by or consultation or coordination by state authorities (Kallas, 2004; Sotiropoulos, 2004, p. 15). NGOs also stepped in to provide welfare services to immigrants and the people in need. Annex organizations of large international NGOs, such as 'Doctors without Borders' and 'Doctors of the World', provide to migrant children and ill persons. With regard to social care, there are also very active Greek NGOs, such as 'Klimaka' (Scale) and 'Praksis' (Action); orthodox Church-based NGOs, such as 'Apostoli' (Mission) and smaller voluntary associations. There are also some very visible NGOs active in child care, such as 'Helpida' (Hope), the 'Hamogelo tou Paidiou' (Children's Smile) and the 'Diktyo Dikaiomaton tou Paidiou' (Network for Children's Rights). In the area of human rights, there are NGOs such as the Hellenic League of Human Rights, the Minority Groups Research Centre (KEMO) and the Marangopoulos Foundation, 'Antigone' the Institute for Rights, Equality and Diversity (founded by Greeks) and the Greek Forum of Migrants, founded by legal migrants (Sotiropoulos, 2014, p. 18).

Significant is also the activism and work of NGOs on issues of environmental degradation. In the summer of 2007, in response to a destructive forest fire in Parnitha's National Park, near Athens, thousands of citizens and many NGOs, and with the use technology

(Internet and social media), demonstrated asking for protective measures and tougher legislation (Karamichas, 2007, 2009; Botetzagias & Karamichas, 2009; Botetzagias, 2011; Theocharis, 2011; Pantazidou, 2013). Today, there are approximately 300 environmental organizations in Greece. Among them, one finds small voluntary associations and annexes of large international NGOs, such as the WWF and Greenpeace. Most of these NGOs are located in Athens and Thessaloniki. However, some very active environmental organizations are based in small islands, such as in Zakynthos in the Ionian Sea, and mountainous areas, such as Western Macedonia and Epirus (Sotiropoulos, 2014, p. 18).

Last, but not least, a closer observation of how Greeks have responded to the economic crisis (2009) also shows that a large number of citizens have mobilized to volunteer (Garefi & Kalemaki, 2013; Loukidou, 2013). Social networks and self-help groups have emerged to become active in exchange and distribution of goods and services, healthcare, education, food and shelter protection, offering simultaneously a more critical view towards the state and seeking alternative forms of social organization. Characteristic examples are the exchange and distribution networks of goods and services for vouchers or online credit, which in 2013 numbered 22. Significant is also the operation of 11 social medical centres and 7 social pharmacies, established by volunteering doctors, nurses, pharmacists and social workers. Indicative is also the increasing number of network of volunteers which serve as intermediaries between supermarkets, restaurants and bakeries in order to supply food to soup kitchens, shelters, orphanages, homes for the elderly and other charitable organizations (Sotiropoulos, 2013; Sotiropoulos & Bourikos, 2014, pp. 12–15).

However, this increase in civic engagement in NGOs should not be understood as a reflection of Greece's social and political norms. In 2011, and despite the acute social consequences of the economic crisis, only 14 per cent of Greeks participated in voluntary activities, in contrast to 26 per cent of Italians, 15 per cent of Spaniards and 12 per cent of Portuguese (European Union (EU)-27 average: 24 per cent). In the same year, only 7 per cent of Greeks devoted money to community activities, whereas 33 per cent of Italians, 21 per cent of Spaniards and 23 per cent of Portuguese did so. Greeks on the average devoted 3 per cent of their time to community activities; Italians devoted 14 per cent of their time, Portuguese 10 per cent and Spaniards 18 per cent (Sotiropoulos, 2014, pp. 26–27). There are a number of reasons for this.

First, volunteering has not been widely promoted or accepted in Greek society, as family and networks of relatives have always created the basic framework of mutual aid, solidarity and co-operation. As a result, Greece demonstrates generally low levels of social trust, associational membership and social networking (European Parliament Special Barometer, 2011). Indicative are the results of the World Giving Index in 2011, according to which only five per cent of the Greeks donated money to charities. Such performance put Greece close to the bottom of the list of 146 surveyed countries, on a par with Albania, Georgia, Montenegro and Sub-Saharan countries (World Giving Index, 2012, p. 59).

With the Olympic Games of 2004, voluntary service seemed to gain a whole new image in the average Greek mind. They attracted an outstanding number of volunteers. According to the statistics provided by the Organizational Committee of 'Athens 2004', 160,000 applications were received by the volunteer committee, of which 43 per cent were young people up to the age of 24. However, despite the unprecedented rate of volunteers during the 2004 Athens Olympics, which was hailed as the beginning of a new era for volunteerism in Greece, research on Greek civil society published after the mid-2000s concluded that 'the Greeks care for their fellow citizen only occasionally, or under extenuating

circumstances, and during natural disasters' (Panagiotopoulou & Papliakou, 2007, p. 251). Either from the youth's (Demertzis et al., 2008, pp. 157–159) or the adult's point of view (Panagiotopoulou 2003, pp. 123–124), Greeks are notoriously inert towards any kind of collective voluntary action. Hence:

> … it appears that although there is an *availability* of volunteerism in Greece, it may not automatically be transformed into concerted collective action. The Athens 2004 Olympics constituted a unique and exceptional event, a 'bright', one-off moment, which may have called upon the national pride of all Greeks in order to be successfully executed, but which at the same time, lacked the capacity to launch a systematic and permanent volunteerism culture in Greece. (Tsaliki, 2010, p. 154)

As a result, studies of civil society's structure in Greece reveal an overall picture of apathy and disengagement of Greeks from NGOs. According to Sotiropoulos and Karamagioli (2006, p. 64), the majority of Greek NGOs are unable to attract members, as citizen commitment is low.

Second, the existence of a clientelistic and antagonistic political party system does not allow for the growth of an autonomous civil society and NGO sector. As numerous studies and analysts have pointed (Diamandouros, 1991; Mavrogordatos, 1993; Makrydemetris, 2002; Lyrintzis, 2002), the polarization of the political debate, as well as the dominant role of the state in the economy have not only turned politics into a struggle for office, but have also significantly reduced the space for the development of NGOs as the party in power uses the state to develop clientelistic networks that undermined meritocracy and interpersonal trust. Parties have acquired a dominant role, with trade unions and student associations developing close relations with them. As Sotiropoulos and Karamagioli (2006, p. 23) underline, political parties 'absorb' social demands, and are so successful in mobilizing citizens that even civil society organizations campaigning for global disarmament and peace in the 1980s were highly dependent on them for personnel, infrastructure and other resources.

As a result, up until today, the governing parties have not developed a clear set of rules to organize the space and the relationship between NGOs and the state.[1] Instead, various agencies and ministries have developed their own mechanisms and administrative arrangements depending on their needs and areas of responsibility.[2] As a result, the growth of NGOs in Greece 'was not so much bottom-up, starting from local initiatives that grew to encompass larger communities or from volunteering that was transformed into more organized forms of activism' (Huliaras, 2014, p. 17). In fact, public indifference for party membership in the late 1990s, led Greece's traditionally dominant parties to search for new constituencies through NGOs. They developed close relations with NGOs and supported well-known NGO activists to seek positions in the parliament and the state by endorsing their initiatives and causes. Indicative is the decision of former Prime Minister George Papandreou, to create in 1999 a new agency, 'Hellenic Aid', in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs exclusively devoted to funding Greek NGO projects in less developed countries or in countries in transition.

That the increase in NGOs was more a top-down process is also illustrated in the efforts of the EU to encourage civil society initiatives through generous funding. The European Refugee Fund funded NGOs in Greece to run reception centres, offer legal advice and provide social care to asylum-seekers. In addition, and since the launch of the LIFE

programme by the European Commission in 1992 until April 2013, a total of 204 projects (on issues of human rights, the environment and culture) worth 269 million euros have been financed in Greece. Such funding allowed new NGOs to be formed, to mobilize citizens and help civil society organizations to design, implement and evaluate complex social projects. However, as Huliaras (2014, p. 12) has argued:

> … generous funding also created adverse incentives, blurring the distinction between profit and non-profit activities and between volunteers and professionals. Some NGOs were simply created to win bids. Consultancies presented themselves as NGOs. Many NGOs that started as voluntary associations were transformed into sub-contracting agencies.

As a result, Greek NGOs, although active in many sectors, never managed to become modern formal organizations: self-governing and enjoying an institutional structure with voluntary participation in the conduct and management of their work (Vakil, 1997). The result of this process, as Afouxenidis (forthcoming) has shown, with the exception of course of a few annexes of international NGOs such as Greenpeace, Action Aid and Amnesty International, was the emergence and operation of a *quasi-autonomous* and *fragmented* NGO sector in Greece. During the past 20 years or so, as his research indicates, NGOs have become very closely attached to the party system and the state in order to secure funds. This is clear at three levels: first, the majority of NGOs have established and positioned themselves in the centre, both in geographical terms (with 90 per cent in Athens) and in terms of establishing an even closer relationship with the dominant institutional framework (with 70 per cent situated and operating in areas close to governmental offices and the Parliament). Second, the majority of NGOs function under the guiding principle of small group mentality governed by self-perpetuating boards, without proper oversight on their activities, and more importantly on their finances. Third, on the growing number of scandals regarding irregularities in the allocation and management of state funds by NGOs. A typical example, as noted above, is the Hellenic Aid Agency. Almost 600 NGOs were set up with the approval of George Papandreou, then foreign minister under the umbrella of Hellenic Aid. To this end, in the years 2000 – 10,600 NGOs, managed approximately 135 million euros of state money, under a virtually non-existent institutional and supervisory framework (Sakellariou, 2014, p. 1). However, very little evidence exists whether this huge amount of money brought any specific outcomes.[3] In fact, it was only following the onset of the crisis in Greece that parliament attempted to cast light on the funding of NGOs by the state. In a report, published in February 2011, it was noted that not only is there an absence of a clear institutional framework governing NGOs and a lack of coordination when it came to funding them, but also it is very difficult to determine their actual number; estimations vary. For instance, a campaign in the mid-noughties that promoted the need to develop a regulatory framework between civil society and the state, estimated that 800 NGOs were active in Greece. A research conducted by a committee of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs upraised the number to 30,000. The Greek Centre for the Promotion of Voluntarism established introduced a website with the name 'anthropos' (Human) and estimated that there are 1800 active NGOs in 25 different sectors.

This is not to argue that all Greek NGOs are tied to state politics and finance, and are not particularly interested in investing in citizen participation and activism. There are, as noted above, many NGOs which have done a lot of work over the past years. Yet, when

considering the significant role of the state in their emergence and financing, NGOs have undermined their autonomy. In addition, a few instances of NGO corruption that have been circulated during the last four to five years, coupled with the severe and harsh fiscal consolidation that is taking place, have also generated public suspicion and mistrust for their work. This reality, as discussed in the following section, is also inevitably influenced by the mass media and the logic of professionalized journalism which thrives on the negative publicity and reporting that clientelistic networks between a few NGOs and state agencies create.

The Media–NGO Relationship in Greece

For NGOs, seeking news coverage is central to their claim making and the advancing of their organizational goals. NGOs strive for media publicity to frame public debates and issues, to advance their causes, but also to gain validation (Koopmans, 2004; Cottle & Nolan, 2007). Greek NGOs, in particular, have exploited the opportunity provided by the law that the mass media should project freely the social messages and activities of NGOs. However, the disadvantage when advertising time is given for free from a television (TV) station is that NGOs do not have a say in terms of the time the spot will air. TV stations donate the time and determine when the spot will air – usually in the early morning hours.

Bearing this in mind, Greek NGOs strive to be competitive and creative, to raise interest, making people feel related and involved to the issue. That 's what NGO campaign managers do when they are appealing for citizen support to humanitarian crises – they use facts and documentation in combination with emotional elements that appeal to values like responsibility to care for others. Another way to get people related is to make them identify with an aspect of the problem. NGOs working on the violation of refugee's rights violations in Greece always make the problem seem more real to people if they are reminded of the history of Greek refugees. The aim is to relate to something they do not know about with something they know about. At the same time, NGOs also strive to acquire and develop more sophisticated direct marketing tools. Many Greek NGOs, for example, invest in direct dialogue, having young and specially trained employees stopping people on the street and asking them to commit five minutes of their time to learn about them and hopefully subscribe as members. This explicit use of direct marketing has been extremely helpful in finding new supporters. But still Greek NGOs have to use complementary tools such as printed material, the organization of events and email to keep informed and motivated their supporters (Frangonikolopoulos & Pantazidou, 2005).

The mass media on the other hand, and not only in Greece, operate with the logic to increase their ratings, readership and viewing. Their resonance with the public is directly connected with their financial survival and as a result they often distinguish between issues that are newsworthy and those that are not. Journalistic interest in dramatic, conflict-driven, sensationalist, event-centred and celebrity news strongly condition the news making prospects of NGOs. As market-oriented institutions, commercial goals are central to the functioning of leading news media. The actions and goals of NGOs do not abide with this logic and consequently find it very difficult to attract the interest of the media. Moreover, the terms of engagement between NGOs and the mainstream press are grounded in the dominant routines and norms of news work (Waisbord, 2011). In Greece, as Lionarakis (2002) has shown, the media prioritize information generated

mainly from the government, large business, entertainment and sports. Journalists are assigned to key government ministries in order to ensure a predictable and regular flow of information, and no correspondents are assigned to cover neither NGOs nor civil society issues. Although some news organizations feature issues such as health, education, community and women's, which fall within the scope of many, those issues usually do not rank highly in editorial priorities and the logic of professional journalism.

The organization of news work, therefore, is lopsided against NGOs. The mass media–NGO relationship is asymmetrical. The NGOs need the media to gain visibility and recognizability. The media, on the other hand, do not need the NGOs to survive. Greek NGOs, therefore, have to modify their goals and adapt their communication strategy to the infotainment logic of the medium, and especially TV (Panagiotopoulou 2007, pp. 171–172). They participate in 'attractive' and 'loud' activities and events that 'sell' and are 'topical'. A characteristic example is the tsunami that hit Indonesia in 2004. This natural disaster was overly projected by the Greek mass media, and especially TV, contributing not only to high levels of public sensitivity and awareness, but also to large amounts of donations to humanitarian Greek NGOs. According to the 'Doctors without Borders Greece', the donations of the public exceeded the goal of the organization, obliging them as a result to communicate with the donors in order to use their money in other projects (Grigoriadi, 2007, p. 72).

It is clear, therefore, that Greek NGOs are dependent upon the media to project their activities. Motivated by their best intentions they struggle to secure the interest of the media, believing that this will serve to the promotion of their goals. This may produce donations, but it cages NGOs into the logic of the media. Striving for media attention can bring an NGO upon facing serious ethical dilemmas. For example, supporters may need loud and urgent crises to get mobilized, donors and governments may want cost-effective projects that serve political agendas. The media want loud and non-controversial issues and so on. If media attention, however, is an effective way to raise funds and gain publicity, where is the genuine expression of civil society? NGOs are not able to change news agendas and challenge conceptions of news criteria. Rather, as Fenton (2010) would argue, we have the phenomenon of 'News Cloning', with the NGOs providing news that mimics or indeed matches the requirements of mainstream news agendas. NGOs may be getting more publicity, but the nature of that publicity remains firmly within pre-established journalistic norms and values, leaving little space for substantive analysis of the reasons behind economic and social problems.

This becomes all more important when considering that 75 per cent of Greek citizens resort for their information (internal and external news) mainly to TV, 29 per cent to newspapers and the radio 19 per cent (VPRC, 2012). The same applies to news regarding the activities of Greek NGOs. According to a study of 2006, 26 per cent derive their information from TV advertisements of NGOs, 23.8 per cent from TV news, 5.9 per cent from newspapers, 3.9 per cent from radio, and 4.3 and 5.3 per cent from NGO advertisements in newspapers and radio stations (VPRC-MEDA Communications, 2006).

In this context and in a society where the steady and long-term occupation with voluntary work is not the priority of citizens, the recognizability of NGO inevitably is directed by the mass media. The mass media afford limited space to the projection of NGOs, and when they do so they do not deepen their analysis on the need of NGOs to promote voluntarism and solutions to long-standing social and economic problems. NGOs benefit from favourable projection of their activities during emotionally charged periods (Christmas, Easter,

physical disasters and humanitarian tragedies). At the same time and when considering that most Greek NGOs are dependent upon state financing and grants, they are also projected as mongers of public money (Panagiotopoulou 2007, pp. 171–172). This contradictory logic, of 'good' but at the same time 'bad' NGOs, has the following results.

First, when projecting the 'good' side of NGOs, the media do not touch sensitive social and political issues or when that happens, their coverage has a topical character (tsunami, earthquakes, floods or help to war zones). The long-standing structural problems of Greek society are not dear to the agenda of the media. The media limit their coverage to non-controversial 'non-political' and 'soft' issues (Deacon, 2003), such as humanitarian aid, support to people in need and abandoned children. 'Hard' issues, such as security, defence or the economy are not touched. These issues, it is felt, are dealt with by the state and the political parties, and not by NGOs (Panagiotopoulou, 2007, pp. 190–191). As a result, and as recent research has indicated, the most popular NGOs in Greece are those engaged with social work, and in particular those working for the protection and rights of children, such as the 'Smile of the Child' and 'Action Aid' (VPRC-MEDA Communications, 2013). Second in line are organizations dealing with the environment and climate change (Greenpeace, WWF), as well as organizations working in the provision of medical health and care in developing countries (Doctors without Borders, Doctors of the World). In asking which areas NGOs concentrate, upon 31 per cent of the Greek citizens believe the protection of children, 27 per cent the environment, 21 per cent health aid and care in developing countries, 13 per cent poverty and social exclusion, 9 per cent the protection of human rights (racism, minorities), 7 per cent emergencies/physical disasters, 5 per cent diseases and handicapped people, 4 per cent the protection of animals, 4 per cent education, 3 per cent drug and alcoholic addicts, 3 per cent elderly people, 2 per cent culture, 2 per cent women's rights, 2 per cent refugees and 1 per cent the protection of consumers (VPRC, 2011).

Second, when projecting the 'bad' side of NGOs, the media facilitate a generalized suspiciousness of their activities and role. In fact, when scandals regarding the NGO sector are exposed, journalists and their organizations cover them for several days. Without enough information on the case reported, as well as enough knowledge of the Greek NGO sector (e.g. strong deficiencies in the regulatory framework which is fragmented and inadequate), journalists have reached an indisputable negative conclusion for the NGO sector as a whole. Journalists write and comment on the 'opacity' of NGOs, the 'orgy' of NGOs and the 'colour of money'. The same applies to TV and prominent Greek talk shows. One of them, called 'Subversion' devoted on 24 February 2014, almost two hours to the 'NGO problem'. While the anchorman referred to the deficiencies in the regulatory framework, as well as the involvement of the political system, the conclusion was that the Greek NGO sector is corrupted as a whole, benefitting from political games and money laundering. Allegations were made but the show provided no room to the NGOs themselves to express their position. In fact, in a panel of almost ten guests, there was only one representative of the NGO sector, who was the recipient of the immense criticism without having the adequate time to respond (Valvis, 2014, p. 20).

Although critique is not unjustifiable, the current condition of the Greek NGO sector is mostly the product of the political system's unwillingness to allow space for the existence of an autonomous civil society and to develop a clear regulatory framework and accountability mechanisms for NGOs. This, as noted above, has resulted in ad hoc funding of various NGO actions whose impact is not tested. This reality, combined with the

contradictory logic of the media, of 'good' but at the same time 'bad' NGOs, creates ambiguity and inconsistency on the image and role of Greek NGOs. In the mid-noughties, before and after the Olympic Games of Athens, NGOs, it was felt that it could contribute to an open and free society which rejects the dominant role of the state the party political system. In fact, according to International Transparency, in 2004 and 2005, Greek NGOs enjoyed high credibility by the public and were regarded as the least corrupted institutions of Greek society (Kathimerini, 2004, 2005). However, a rather significant turnaround can be observed from 2010 onwards and the financial crisis that hit Greece. The pressing need to re-evaluate, as well as decrease expenditure on NGOs, increased the arguments on the controversial management of funding to 'money-thirsty' organizations. In reading over 100 articles written for NGOs by the Greek press in the period of 2010–2013, it was found that NGOs are characterized as 'uncontrolled', 'closed' and 'unrepresentative' organizations that are totally dependent upon the funding and grants of the state, and are directly influenced in their policies by different ministries and parties. NGOs, it stressed, enjoy privileged access to funding, not because of their effectiveness, but because of their relationship with political and economic centres. According to the results of recent research, one to three citizens believe that Greek NGOs are not transparent about their economics. Indicative also is the fact that 52.4 per cent of Greek citizens do not donate to NGOs. To donate they would like to have more information on the provision of NGO work, as well a guarantee that their donations would be correctly used (VPRC, 2011). This reality sets and will continue to set limits to the process of developing a substantive area of interaction between Greek NGOs and citizens, and the creation of autonomous forms of political expression and action for NGOs.

Beyond State Funding and Media Attention

This ambiguity and inconsistency on the projection and understanding of Greek NGOs has cost a lot to their credibility. Negative reporting of NGOs has a broad impact in the Greek public space and often becomes viral in a variety of online spaces such as blogs, news portals and social media, triggering debate which enhances negative stereotypes about the whole sector dealing with pressing economic and social problems. Indeed, negative representations of NGOs, one might argue, facilitate the social engineering performed by crisis-politics in Greece, contributing to the 'temporary' suspension of democracy by the emergency politics of austerity, and the unprecedented humanitarian, social and political consequences the latter bring (Mylonas, 2012). Indicative is a recent research finding, according to which 78.2 per cent of Greek citizens do not trust NGOs for the progress and prosperity of Greece (Kapa Research, 2012). Research by the European Commission also indicates that 52 per cent of the Greeks believe that they do not need NGOs to influence political decision-making (Flash Barometer, 2013, p. 9). Greek NGOs, it argued, are trapped within a vicious circle, whereby not only do they undermine their autonomy by becoming sub-contracting agencies of the state, but also carriers of the beliefs, policies and procedures of a system they are trying to change (Pavlides, 2006).

This is an argument, however, that is not easy to agree with.

First, not all NGOs or people who voluntarily work for NGOs do it to 'change the system'. The majority of Greek NGOs is created and operates for 'humbler' purposes, usually to provide humanitarian assistance, health and welfare services, to protect

consumers and children, to support minorities, immigrants and refugees, encourage research and education, support the arts and protect the environment.

Second, it is wrong to conclude that Greek NGOs are trapped within a political and media environment that they are not able to influence. As *social constructivism* would argue, all systems, political, economic or social, are human creations, which may perpetuate or change through their own actions (Wendt, 1992, 1999; Finnemore, 1996). Human creativity produces not only new structures, but also their reproduction which allows them to survive. In other words, humans create, internalize, produce and reproduce structures, which may limit and in many cases determine the confines of human action, but at the same time also affect the ways through which they conceive their identity and interest (Aspinwall & Schneider, 2000). This implies that human behaviour is not only determined by the systems and structures within which they operate. Important also is how humans view them. Some may conceive them as dangerous and threatening, others as an opportunity. What is at stake is not the objective circumstances that confront humans so much, as their identity and how they view their fellow humans. To put it simply, there is no objective social or political reality independent of our understanding of it. The social world is not something 'out there' in the sense of a world of concrete objects, it exists 'inside', as a kind of inter-subjective awareness. Humans, whether acting as individuals or as social groups, construct the world in which they live and act according to those constructions. This affects both how they see themselves and how they understand and respond to the structures within which they have to operate (Barnett, 2011).

Given the above analysis, it would be wrong to argue that Greek NGOs are trapped, neither that they are devoid of any responsibility. They consist of people who have the capability to think critically on their actions and decisions so as to influence and shape, to the degree they can, the environment within which they operate. They have the possibility of choice. If they want to work and develop outside and beyond the logic and confines of the political and media environment, Greek NGOs should arrive at an agreement regarding their identity, their aims and seek to cooperate on the basis of certain criteria regarding their effectiveness and operation. In particular, Greek NGOs should begin to imagine a future without state funding and media attention. An important development in that direction was, at the onset of the Greek economic crisis, the decision of the government to freeze all state funds for NGOs. This policy, as Sotiropoulos and Bourikos (2014, p. 23, pp. 24–25, pp. 12–13) stress, seems to have emancipated many NGOs from the role of appendage of the state apparatus. NGOs, in realizing that the financing of their activities is limited or over, began to recruit volunteers, contract municipal authorities in order to obtain resources such as office space, divide tasks among their staffs in order to achieve a more efficient division of labour and seek funding from non-state actors, such as Greek and international charity organizations. In addition, they have also expanded their target group, to cater not only for foreign migrants and refugees, but also for poor or heavily indebted Greeks and Greek households. NGOs collect food, medicines and clothes, and in co-operation with social networks and self-help groups have become active in the exchange and distribution of goods and services, healthcare, education, food and shelter. In so doing, not only have they developed a more critical view towards state funding of their activities, but have also developed policy proposals with the aim of becoming more sustainable, accountable, transparent and effective.

The message is clear. If Greek NGOs do not want to be or be conceived as subservient to state interests and corruption, they should aim at their disengagement from state funding.

Such a strategic option, which would increase their image and recognizability, must rest on their co-operation. This should be the cornerstone of their activities. Instead of each NGO seeking alone the sympathy of the public, NGOs from all fields (environment, development, human rights, security, etc.) need to cooperate. Such a policy, in a future where state funding is of secondary importance, will allow Greek NGOs to investigate in times of severe economic crisis and problems the connection of development, growth and prosperity with the environment and human rights. Working together, with common objectives, campaigns and activities will give Greek NGOs the opportunity to influence the agenda of the media. In so doing, not only will they be able to explore the possibility and extent of co-operation with the governments, donors and supporters, but will also be able to determine the extent of assertiveness that they are willing to demonstrate in managing public issues.

Conclusion

Media criticism of Greek NGOs, coupled with logic of political clientelism, the deficiencies in the regulatory framework and the scattered evidence on their scope and scale, has facilitated the construction and spread of a corrupted image of the NGO sector as a whole. While the media exacerbate the problem, it cannot be neglected with regard to those NGOs that were established with the political and financial support of the political system (e.g. Hellenic Aid). Their dependence on state funding and the irregularities this has caused, however, should not be used to identify the whole NGO sector with money laundering and politically oriented motives. Such generalized and negative reporting not only fails to understand the political environment within which Greek NGOs have to operate, but also, and in particular in times of severe economic crisis, increase the suspiciousness and mistrust of the public even towards NGOs that have done good work. This is as noted, produces serious ambiguities and inconsistencies regarding their image and role in Greek Society.

   This, however, is not fatal, neither it is necessary. If Greek NGOs decide to co-operate, share the cost, functions and responsibilities, they have the capability to influence the system within which they operate. They can create powerful negotiating blocks that will project their own agenda and values to the media and the state. In fact, the economic crisis could be an opportunity for Greek NGOs to reflect on their situation, organize themselves and prepare their adaption to the new reality. There is an obvious need for the establishment of a co-ordinating mechanism of formal and informal organizations, a Code of Ethics, the compilation and codification of all legislation relevant to the setting up and functioning of NGOs, and the formulation of strategies regarding the relations between NGOs, the state and donors. This requires enhanced co-operation in order not only to discuss their own structural weaknesses, but also to put on the table burning issues such as the institutional framework of their co-operation with the state, issues of transparency in funding projects, evaluation of their implementation, determination of their priorities, as well as the formation of a framework for recruiting volunteers. Experience of how they have adopted their role during the economic crisis illustrates that this is possible.

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Notes

[1]   The regulatory framework for NGOs in Greece is based on the constitutional right to form a variety of not-for-profit organizations. In Greece, NGOs are formally set up by submitting a petition to the first instance civil court or their region and have their own standing orders and a recognizable, usually elected, administrative board. The court normally approves their petitions and does not proceed to a substantive control of the aims of the organizations, nor does it keep an updated registry of approved organizations (Sotiropoulos & Bourikos, 2014, pp. 6–7).

[2]   The most common reference laws in this regard are as follows: (a) law 2646/1998 which allows the Ministry of Health to register and certify non-profit organisations in the field of social care, and (b) law 3013/2002 which allows the Ministry of the Interior to maintain a register of Civil Protection organisations. The articles 10–17 of the law 2731/99 of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for International Development Cooperation describe the funding mechanism of NGOs that subscribe to the official register of Hellenic Aid, Greece's overseas development programme.

[3]   The case of the International Mine Initiative (IMI) is one of many which has attracted public interest. IMI's five goals were to remove landmines in Bosnia, Lebanon and Iraq. However, being under close scrutiny, its claims of being a world leader in de-mining operations became quite questionable (*The Economist*, 20 February 2014).

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