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“Exploring Greek civil society after transition to democracy: three case studies”

During moments of regime transition, public sociality takes concrete, power-related forms. New forms may be related both to the shaping of new identities, for instance, the political identity of a young-age group which has fought against the power of dictators and has helped bring down a dictatorship (Kornetis 2013), and to emergence of new parties, interest groups and social movements aspiring to influence or conquer political power (Perez-Diaz 1993). In particular, the period of transition to democracy is associated with opportunities for the rise of civil society. Civic associations find space to flourish and are encouraged to participate in the public agenda formation (Whitehead 2002, Linz and Stepan 1996) The State and political system have not yet developed means and strategies to control them (Crouch 2004).

In contemporary Greece, civil society is considered weak and unable to evolve within an over-sized yet ineffective State (Diamandouros 2000, Mouzelis and Pagoulatos 2007). In other words, public sociality is considered to have been diffuse and multi-faceted, giving birth to multiple co-existing political identities. Yet, with the exception of a few moments of wider political mobilization against the State (e.g., in the mid-1960s, just before the 1967 breakdown of democracy), public sociality has rarely been transformed into formally organized movements and networks functioning independently of the major political parties and the State. However, there are important aspects of civil society, such as activities of informal associations, which challenge this opinion (Sotiropoulos 2004, Kallas 2004) and highlight the need for further empirical analysis of the Greek civil society. It still remains an unresolved question whether the alleged weakness is an inherent trait of Greek civil society or the result of an ongoing process,



traces of which can be found in the first post-transition period, i.e., after the fall of the Colonels' regime (the “junta”) in 1974, a period on which this paper focuses.

More concretely, the paper studies relations between the State and civil society in Greece in 1975-1977, specifically focusing on cases of associations and networks putting concrete demands to the State. The paper's aim is twofold: first, to investigate different strategies and attitudes adopted by collective actors (associations, networks) within the new political reality of the post-authoritarian period and the State's uneven responses to the claims of collective actors, highlighting the multiple levels of political participation in the public sphere; and, second, to explore the traits and ways of action of informal associations, i.e., groups which are not legally registered with a judicial or administrative authority and therefore also often fall outside the radar of academic research.

The paper starts with a short section on hypothesis, methodology and sources, proceeds with an analysis of three case studies, and ends with concluding remarks about state and civil society in post-1974 Greece.

1. Research hypothesis, methodology and sources

The main research hypothesis of the paper is that the State is not just a passive receiver of pressures exerted by crystallized, “pre-cooked”, so to speak, associations and networks, but that the State is actively involved in the shaping of fluid identities and the making of strategies of such collective actors, by purposefully differentiating among them and selectively responding to their different demands.

In order to test this hypothesis, the paper examines three different case studies: the first one is the reform of family law and introduction of new legislation on divorce, launched at 1975, which incited public debate and competition among civil society organisations. The second one concerns the reform of primary and secondary education, involving civil society associations with common demands but different strategies towards State policies and the variable responses of the State. The third case study deals with the relocation of Athens's international airport, from the Hellenicon to the Spata area in Attica. Reactions by both formal and informal civil society organizations against the plans for relocation will be at the center of our analysis.



Our methodology includes the study of 76 relevant newspaper clips in daily press from that period (1975 – 1977), extracted by the Database of the project¹, which is produced by «mining» three newspapers of nation-wide circulation, namely *Macedonia*, *Kathimerini* and *Ta Nea*. The total number of newspaper clips, cut down by newspaper and research topic, is shown below:

Table 1: Newspaper clips

	MACEDONIA	KATHIMERINI	TA NEA	Total
Divorce Legislation	8	4	2	14
Educational Reform	22	4	5	31
Airport	9	6	16	31
Total	39	14	23	76

Source: Thales Database www.public-sociality.gr/gr/databases.html

2. Divorce legislation reform: contrasting civil society reactions

The discussion about the family law reform opened in 1975 and lasted until 1983. A significant point of dispute between the State, the Greek Orthodox Church and civil society was the launching of the “automatic divorce”, i.e. the right of a spouse to seek divorce after a prolonged actual, but not legally sanctioned, separation from the other spouse, as well as the launching of consensual divorce, i.e., divorce mutually agreed between the two spouses. Two main groups of civil society organizations, which took a position on this issue, appear in the relevant newspaper clips: the first group, in favour of the “automatic” divorce, includes Bar Associations from all over Greece (24 out of 26 associations), cultural associations (e.g., “Galaxias”) and the Separated Spouses’ Association “Alytrotoi” (which first appeared in 1977); the second group, opposing the family law reform, consists of the Greek Federation of Parents’ Associations along with other parents’ associations as well as various Christian Orthodox organizations (e.g. “Ioannis o Theologos”, “O Apostolos Pavlos”, “O Megas Vasileios” “Apolytrosis”, “Silas

¹ The Database of Thales Project contains 12247 newspaper clips, which refer to activities of civil society organizations.



kai Timotheos”). Such organizations are informally linked to the Greek Orthodox Church which encapsulates state religion in Greece.

Regarding the first group, our findings indicate that Bar Associations defended the right to terminate a marriage in a consensual way². Lawyers opted for a modernization of family law, which they understood as a step towards progress in society. However, apart from the progressive character of the new law, another possible reason for the stance of lawyers was the projected increase in their clientele³. As far as the Separated Spouses’ Association was concerned, a lot of its members were already separated from their families and claimed the right to create a new one. On the other side, parents associations as the Greek Federation of Parents’ Associations (ASGME), and the aforementioned Christian organizations claimed that they cared for the protection of women and the institution of family, “*Nation's last frontier*”.

The two opponent civil society groups did not engage in a public debate, but preferred to address their demands directly towards the State. The only exception was the failed attempt of the Separated Spouses’ Association in 1977 to meet representatives of the Orthodox Church, hoping to come to an understanding with them. Generally, collective actors, other than the associations of lawyers and those of parents, organized a few public meetings and delivered speeches on the reform under way.

This case highlights two different levels of political participation: organizations with higher institutional status (Bar Associations and the Federation of Parents’ Associations) addressed their demands directly to the State, while lower-status associations used more indirect ways to publicize their point of view (e.g., public speeches). Addressing direct demands to state authorities may also be interpreted through the organizations’ own understanding of their high-status and visible public role within the new, post-authoritarian political reality.

As far as the newspaper coverage of this issue is concerned, research shows that only activities of Bar Associations were reported on the front pages of newspapers (i.e., in

² As far as the Bar Association in Thessaloniki is concerned, a progressive but influential minority within the Bar’s Board of Directors seems to have played a vital role in favour of the reform.

³ Personal interview, with a member of the Board of Directors of the Bar Association of Thessaloniki, April 2014.



the newspaper *Macedonia*). This is indicative of the high status of such associations in Greek society and role in the political system, as Bar Associations are by law the State's official consultant on legal issues.

3. Educational reform: differentiation of collective actors' roles

Unlike the previous case study, in the case of educational reform, there was no competition between the two main collective actors, OLME (Greek Federation of Secondary Education State School Teachers) and DOE (Greek Federation of Primary School State Teachers). Both organizations highlighted the urgency for a new law in primary and secondary education. They shared similar general (or public interest) demands, such as the adoption of vernacular ('demotic') language in schools, along with narrower trade union demands, such as a rise in salaries. They also both adopted similar strategies of action, by announcing a general strike in order to press the government to submit the new law to the Parliament.

However, their common attitude towards the State changed after the submission of the bill of law to the Parliament on 20 November 1975. At that point there was a clear contrast in the responses of the two Federations: while OLME referred to "an important improvement" in the draft of the existing law and cancelled the announced strike, DOE spoke of "a disappointment, due to a lack of regulation of basic economic demands" and proceeded to the announced strike.

According to DOE, its own negative response to the proposed law derived from the State's unequal attitude towards the two unions (information on DOE published in *Macedonia* 22/11/1975). More specifically, the State, by selectively satisfying some of the salary-related claims put forward by OLME, but not the corresponding claims of DOE, was met with the resistance of DOE which now shifted to an occupation-based, traditional trade union role.

4. Relocation of the Athens International Airport: formal and informal aspects of civil society mobilization

The decision on Athens's International Airport relocation from the area of



Hellenicon to the area of Spata (in Attica) had already been taken before 1974, during the junta period. However, after 1974, in the new political milieu, a number of formal and informal organizations found the opportunity to express their opposition to this decision.

In detail, a number of formal organizations appeared in the public dialogue, such as the Technical Chamber of Greece (TEE) as well as various agricultural and viticulture cooperatives of Spata and the region of Mesogeia (Paiania, Koropi, Markopoulo), mobilized and started a public dialogue on the airport's relocation. Moreover, massive demonstrations were organized mostly by local informal associations of civil society, around the area of Spata where farmers owned plots of land, scheduled to be expropriated by the State. In the Greek press the demonstrators were often referred to in the press as “residents” of Mesogeia, Spata, Pachi, Pikermi, Paiania, Markopoulo, Hellenico or “youngsters” of Mesogeia.

However, our findings reveal a “top-down” aspect of informal civil society mobilization and a direct link of such loose groups of residents of Spata and neighbouring villages to formal organizations. More specifically, it was reported in the press that informal collective activities, which appeared in the daily press, were initiated either by municipal authorities or other, formal civil society organizations such as farmers' organizations and cooperatives. As mentioned in a newspaper clip, “thousands of vehicles drove through every village in the region, in order to inform the residents and prepare them for the escalation of the fight” (*Ta Nea* 18/10/1975)

Regarding the relationship between civil society mobilisation and the State, it became obvious that informal associations were more vulnerable to manipulation and criticism. However, they seemed to get the attention of the State which delayed the start of the relocation of the airport (eventually the airport relocation took place and the new airport at Spata was inaugurated only in March 2001). In the case of formal associations, the State was responsive to an invitation by the TEE Chamber, which is by law the State's official technical consultant. The competent minister participated in a public discussion (*Macedonia* 19/10/1975). A deliberation committee with the participation of all relevant officials and representatives was formed, as the Chamber had suggested.

In this case what became evident was the absence of a structured public sphere: a



channel of public dialogue between civil society and the State was formed only after the initiative of the Technical Chamber to organize a deliberation committee. However, the outcome of this deliberation was not been taken into consideration by the State (*Kathimerini* 04/07/1977).

5. Conclusions and open questions

The above case studies reveal that in all instances there was a quite large number of civil society associations with different form, purpose and a variety of demands and means of political participation. The cases indicate the re-emergence of civil society in the first years after transition to democracy. Informal civil society appeared to be a vital part of civil society, however it was mostly mobilized from above (e.g., by local authorities) and remained vulnerable to criticism and state-driven paternalism.

There are traces of the State's effort to control the re-emerging civil society in various ways: selective dialogue with formal and high status organizations, paternalism exerted on informal and unconventional forms of mobilization, participation of parties' representatives in the activities of civil society, selective reporting of civil society activities in the press. These efforts to control civil society “from above” were facilitated by the lack of a structured public sphere and stable channels of communication between State and civil society, forming an intense antagonism among organizations in order to access the State.

It remains an open question whether, later on, as the transition to democracy evolved, informal organizations reached a level of autonomy from the State and, in general, whether civil society organizations, were they formal or informal, managed to define their own identities and strategies or were frequently manipulated by State practices. In any case, there is a need for further in-depth research on post-authoritarian civil society and for a contextual analysis, in order to link the findings of the present empirical research with the more abstract and general theories about civil society in contemporary Greece.



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