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Creating Civic Engagement from the Top:

The dynamics of civil society in Greece

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Executive Summary

Organized civil society in Greece is extremely weak in relation to most other European countries. The causes of this weakness are complex and mono-causal explanations cannot offer persuasive answers. The article focuses on some neglected factors in the relevant debate – among others, church-state relations, tax incentives and civic education. Within the last two-three decades there is an increase in civic engagement initiatives and activities. However, this increase does not reflect significant changes in social norms, but is linked to European Union funding for NGOs and to different mobilization tactics of political parties of the left. The impact of the economic crisis on organized civil society in Greece is mixed: new initiatives are born but older ones are undermined – due to a change of priorities and a reduction of state support.

Introduction

While there is little precise agreement as to which entities should be included within “civil society”, most academics would argue that it consists of voluntary associations, community groups, trade unions, church groups, cooperatives and business, professional and philanthropic organizations. Social movements are also considered part of civil society.

The heterogeneity of civil society makes generalizations difficult or contested (Edwards 2011; Foley & Edwards 1996). This has led some social scientists to discard the whole idea as an “abstraction without substance”. Trying to make the concept analytically useful, many academics adopted a much “reduced” definition: it became a norm to exclude from civil society - apart from political parties - trade unions and other interest or “protective” groups. For a significant number of researchers, civil society became synonymous with formal and informal organizations that aim at promoting the so-called “public interest”. The study of social movements which have become a permanent feature of modern democracies evolved into an autonomous sub-field and was partly de-linked from the analysis of civil society (Della Porta & Diani 2006).

As the term “civil society” became more specific, research spectacularly grew. In the last decades hundreds of books and monographs and thousands of articles and research papers have been published or presented at international conferences on all aspects of non-state and not-for-profit activity in both developed and less developed countries. Drawing on the pioneering works of James S. Coleman and Robert Putnam, social scientists have argued that a strong civil society is closely related to high levels of interpersonal trust or “social capital”. In the 1990s, a consensus was reached on the fact that civil society is positively correlated to democracy and development. Many have confidently argued that a strong civil society is a cause of economic growth and democratization. Francis Fukuyama, one of the strongest proponents of the idea, claimed that social capital promotes co-operation between individuals, reduces transaction costs in the economic sphere and promotes the kind of associational life which is necessary for the success of modern democracy (Fukuyama 2001). Aid agencies and international organizations (among them the United Nations, the World Bank and the European Union) rushed to support local NGOs and civil society organizations in less developed countries or in post-communist countries “in transition”. The idea was that through the strengthening of civil society, economic development and liberal democracy could spread and flourish. Dissident voices that claimed, for example, that high levels of associationalism in Weimar’s republic served to fragment rather than unite German society remained largely marginal (Berman 1997). In short, for more than two decades, “civil society” is in vogue (Edwards 2011). Hulme and Edwards (1997) have argued that the development myth of the 1990s was the “myth of the market plus civil society” that replaced the “myth of the state” (1970s) and the “myth of the market” (1980s). Probably the myth of the first decade of the 21st century is the “myth of good governance plus civil society”. Civil society became the constant variable of all debates on modernization.

This paper uses this widely-used “reduced” or “downsized” definition of civil society to examine its dynamics in Greece. The paper attempts to answer two research questions: first, why civil society in Greece was and largely remains weak; and secondly, which factors affect the reported strengthening of civil society within the last twenty years.

The case of Greece

Several efforts have been made to quantify civil society. Some researchers focused on individual attitudes and behavior, others on organizational data and some on sectoral characteristics. Indicators that were used include estimates of generalized trust, turnout in referenda, membership of voluntary organizations and number of employees in civil society organizations as a share of the total labor force. Much effort was devoted to quantifying “social capital” (Svendsen & Svendsen 2009). Indeed different conceptualizations of civil society led to the use of different data and – sometimes – resulted in different conclusions. However, there is a widespread consensus that civil society is stronger in western democracies (the United States and Western Europe) than in the rest of the world.

Most analysts have argued that Greece remains far behind most of its EU partners in terms of the density and strength of civil society. The 2005 Civicus Survey concluded that civil society in Greece is weak and that the state, the political parties and the family are the country’s strongest institutions. The Survey noted widespread apathy and a lack of civic engagement among Greek citizens and underlined that institutionalized civil society organizations are few and poorly organized and, consequently, have little impact and limited influence (Sotiropoulos & Karamagioli 2006). This bleak picture is shared by most observers. In the words of an analyst: “every social scientist studying civil society in Greece or documenting and measuring social capital at the societal level (...) agrees that [Greek] civil society is cachectic, atrophic or fragile” (Hadjiyanni 2013: 20). In an introduction to Greek politics, Keith R. Legg and John M. Roberts argued that “if a latter-day de Tocqueville were to visit Greece, he would not conclude that Greece is a country of joiners” (Legg & Roberts 1997: 198).

The European Social Survey (ESS) offers the most systematic documentation and analysis of trust and other indicators of social capital that are crucial for fostering mutual support, solidarity and collective action. In the 2008 ESS and in the question “can we trust or should we be cautious of other people” 59.8% of Greeks responded that “we should be cautious” (in comparison to a 38.8% average in Europe). Similar responses were also obtained from the question “Do you believe that most people would try to take advantage of you if they had the opportunity or would they be fair to you” where 62.1% of the respondents answered that most people would try to take advantage of them (in comparison to 28.4% in Europe). Finally, in the question “Do you believe that people often help each other or they care mostly about themselves”, 58.3% of the respondents answered that “people care more about

themselves” (in comparison to 31.3% in Europe).¹ Not unexpectedly, according to several rounds of the ESS, participation in all types of voluntary socio-political organizations in Greece is low in relation to the European average. And this does not only include sports, cultural, business, professional, environmental, human rights and consumer organizations but also more “traditional” voluntary groups like religious organizations, trade unions and political parties.

Volunteerism in Greece follows the low levels of trust. A recent study has shown that although around 22% of Europeans aged over 15 are engaged in voluntary work, in Greece less than 10% of adults are involved in voluntary activities and only a very small fraction of them (around 32,000) are regular volunteers (European Commission 2010: 61). Further, the economic value of volunteer work in Greece is estimated at less than 1% of the GDP, compared with 3-5% in northern Europe (European Commission 2010: 8).

Similar results come from *The World Giving Index* which is compiled by the Charities Aid Foundation, using data gathered by Gallup. The Index ranks 135 countries according to how charitable their populations are. The survey asks respondents if in the last month they have donated money to a charity, they volunteered their time to an organization or they helped a stranger, or someone they didn’t know who needed help. In the 2013 Index, Greece occupies the last position. Only 6% of the Greek respondents have given money to a charitable cause and only 4% have given time to a philanthropic activity. The “Helping a stranger” dimension was much higher (30%), but even this was among the lowest in the world ! (Greece is in the 126th position among 135 countries) (Charities Aid Foundation 2013).

Finally, the *Composite Active Citizenship Indicator* that measures 61 indicators ranging from voter turnout to engagement in trade union organization, Greece also scores much lower than its northern European partners (with the exception of protest) (Hoskins & Mascherini 2009).

So we have data from various sources that confirm that Greece has low to very low levels of social capital, associational density and civic engagement. The only diverging data is on trust and comes from the *World Values Survey* that, strangely, places Greece between Canada and Finland and far ahead of more similar states such as Italy, Turkey and Spain.² However, this data is not considered as accurate by most observers of Greek society.

Some researchers have claimed that behind the scenes, there exists a vibrant unofficial, non-institutionalized and informal civil society. Sotiropoulos (2004: 25) has argued that there are several informal collective actors aiming to protect vested interests in their region or locale or to take sides in public disputes or to object to governmental policies or to volunteer to help people in need. According to this argument, “there is an informal civil society in Greece which may be not be as weak as the formal one” (Sotiropoulos 2004: 25). The CIVICUS Survey has reiterated the

¹ <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/>. Calculations by the author.

² [Http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/](http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/).

argument noting that various informal civic activities (ranging from self-help groups, groups of volunteers offering services to people in need and networks of computer users), which are difficult to measure, exist and even flourish at the local level (Sotiropoulos & Karamagioli 2006: 8-9). However, there is very little evidence that can confirm this claim. And there is also a counter-argument: the legal “barriers” for creating formal civil society organizations are not very high in Greece. It is relatively easy to create an “astiki mi-kerdoskopiki etaireia” or a “sotation” – the legal forms of not-for-profit civil society organizations in Greece. There is no apparent reason that many of these supposedly “strong” informal collectivities fail to become formal groups. However, this is relative. A British colleague that has worked with Greek civil society organizations, has found that the process of setting up an organization in Greece is both more complicated and more expensive than in the UK. In her own words: “in Greece it requires paying a lawyer and an accountant from day 1. Every lawyer and every accountant has a different interpretation of the requirements, which is disheartening, and it is difficult to find impartial advice”.

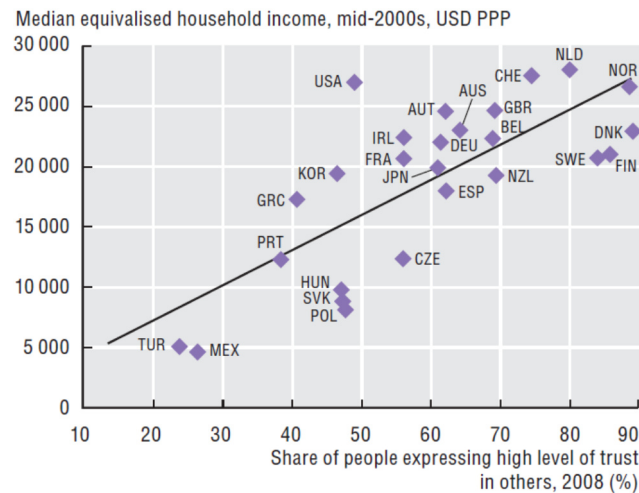
The causes

The assertion that Greek civil society is weak demands evidence and explanation. Several studies cite a number of historical, economic and political reasons to explain and account for its lack of robustness and vigor. Most factors cited are country-specific. But let’s start from the more general or “structural” explanations.

The level of economic development of a country is crucial for the strength of its voluntary organizations and associations. Most quantitative studies show a clear positive correlation between levels of income and levels of trust. Greece became a high-income country relatively recently. It is one of just 13 states worldwide that managed in a little more than a generation to escape the so-called “middle-income trap” and become a “highly developed country” (The Economist 2012).

The pace of economic change may well be a problem. Indeed, the fact that the Greek economy grew quickly from the 1960s onwards may mean that social transformations – that are usually more gradual - have remained incomplete. Moreover, Greece’s income per capita never reached the levels of its northern EU partners. Since there is a strong and well-documented correlation between levels of income and levels of interpersonal trust, it is rational to expect lower levels of trust in Greece in comparison to richer countries. Data seems to confirm this. However, the correlation is not perfect. There are huge differences in levels of interpersonal trust between countries with similar household incomes. For, example Spain (ESP) and Greece (GRC) had similar household income levels in the mid-2000s, but the percentage of people expressing high levels of trust in others differed spectacularly (62% in Spain compared with 40% in Greece in 2008) (Table 1 - OECD 2011: 93).

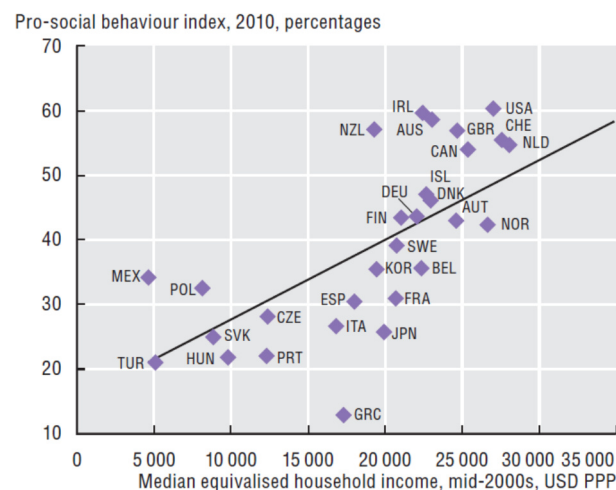
Table 1
CO1.2. Richer countries
trust more



Source: OECD 2011: 91.

Furthermore, there are huge differences in what the OECD terms “pro-social behavior” (in fact this is based on the same data of the Gallup World Poll that is used by the Global Giving Index). Here there are huge differences between Greece and countries with similar levels of income (Table 2). Mexico and Poland with a household income less than half of that of Greece exhibit percentages of pro-social behavior (money and time devoted to charitable causes) almost three times higher.

Table 2
CO3.2. Higher income countries have
more pro-social behaviour



Source: OECD 2011: 95.

So, we need other explanations. Some analysts have paid attention to the dirigistic nature of Greek capitalism. According to Legg and Roberts (1997), the dominant role of the state in the Greek economy has turned politics primarily into a struggle for office. Politicians and their supporters employed an emotional nationalistic rhetoric

and avoided genuine issues. In turn this led to the polarization of the political debate and diminished the space for the development of civil society organizations. The state became a prize for the party that won power and the government budget became a tool for the reward of loyal supporters.

For decades, the Greek political elite was unable to find ways of legitimization other than clientelistic networks. In turn, this led to the malfunction of institutions. Meritocracy was the exception in a spoils-system that rewarded the party cadres and led to discontinuous public policies. Clientelistic networks undermined interpersonal trust and subverted all social contacts beyond the immediate kin, neighbors and community members. Moreover, they weakened the trust towards the political elite and the bureaucracy.

The state-dominance explanation is linked to the party-dominance argument. For many analysts, the most important factor negatively affecting the strength of civil society in Greece is the dominant role of political parties. Throughout the post-junta period, trade unions, student associations and even cultural organizations were affiliated with a political party. Mouzelis and Pagoulatos (2002) have claimed that Greek civil society is the victim of “partitocracy”, that is of parties “colonizing” the associational sphere. The CIVICUS survey also follows the same line, arguing that political parties have “absorbed” social demands and aspirations in a way that no civil society organization could match. The authors of the survey persuasively argue that Greek parties were 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 (Sotiropoulos & Karamagioli 2006: 23).

Both the “state-dominance” and the “partitocracy” argument are based on Mouzelis’s much-cited analysis of the emergence of the modern Greek state (Mouzelis 1995). Mouzelis explains the weakness of Greek civil society as a symptom of the country’s imperfect modernization – “early parliamentarism and late industrialization” - that led to the dominance of clientelism and patronage and to the vertical, rather than horizontal, incorporation of the social spectrum to politics.

Another factor that may explain the weakness of Greek civil society is religion and more specifically the different role of the Church and its relations with the state in comparison to the West. Bailer et al (2013) have found that an important predictor of a strong civil society is religious fragmentation. Although they argue that it is hard to find a convincing explanation for this finding, they claim that one reason could be that “religious groups are highly effective in mobilizing civil societal action and that in religiously heterogeneous societies competition could increase such mobilization” (Bailer et al 2013: 307). Greece is religiously homogeneous (religious minorities are no more than 4-5% of the population). The competition motive simply does not exist. And also the Greek law for decades prohibited “proselytism” (conversion) and even required that the building of a temple of another religion required the “permission” of the local Greek Orthodox bishop!

Moreover, the Greek Orthodox Church is traditionally organized as a national/ethnic-based church. The Greek state was successful in reducing the church's autonomy by offering the clergy secured state salaries and making it part of the state administrative apparatus (Danopoulos 2004: 48). In short the Greek state "nationalized" religion. This "nationalization" of religion may well explain the weakness of Greek civil society. With secured status and funding and a clear role, the Greek Orthodox Church was not obliged to create "parallel" institutions (religious schools and associations) to safeguard its position. In sharp contrast to Catholic countries, the "nationalization" of the Greek Orthodox Church acted as a disincentive for civic engagement. Indeed, Greek Orthodox parishes did undertake philanthropic initiatives, but the resources devoted – though important compared to non-religious organizations – were small in comparison to, say, the Catholic Church or the Protestant Churches in other European countries.

There is no doubt that state formation and the evolvement of state-society relations have shaped the attitudes and orientations of modern Greeks. The semi-authoritarian past of Greece's political institutions for much of the 20th century was also not conducive to civil society growth. And the Greek junta strongly discouraged civic engagement with political demands. The latter seems particularly important since the rise of the activism of the feminist, student, peace and environmental movements in the West grew spectacularly at about the same era (late 1960s and early 1970s). But for other analysts it is also quite fruitful to look at the *long durée*, back to the 18th and the 19th centuries.

Social relations developed in the Ottoman empire may not only explain the weakness of Greek civil society but also the weak performance of civil societies throughout southeast Europe – irrespective of post-independence experiences, regime type or level of development.

The Ottoman elite was authoritarian and predatory. In the words of Acemoglu & Robinson (2012: 92-3):

"the Ottoman state was absolutist, with the Sultan accountable to few and sharing power with none. The economic institutions the Ottomans imposed were highly extractive. There was no private property in land, which all formally belonged to the state ...".

To cut a long history short, the Ottoman state was unrepresentative and unfair: it offered little in return of heavy taxation. According to Acemoglu and Robinson the Ottoman era heavily and adversely shaped the way the Balkans and the Middle East developed. The Industrial Revolution and the technologies it unleashed did not spread in the eastern shores of the Mediterranean. Moreover - as there was very little space for challenging the Ottoman authorities - individualistic strategies became the norm. The historians Koliopoulos and Veremis have used Ernest Gellner's "segmentary society" to describe the pre-modern structures that the Greek state inherited from the Ottoman empire. The "segmentary society" that was characterized by extreme familism, clans and splinter groups acted as an impediment to modernization. According to the two authors, this reactionary part of

the Greek society constantly militated against development and westernization for much of the 20th century (Koliopoulos & Veremis 2010: 190).

Comparative studies could shed some light to the question of why Greek civil society remained weak. An observer argues that there is a “Mediterranean pattern” and that Spain, Portugal and Greece have only recently acquired a nonprofit sector “because of the restriction or even prohibition of the freedom of association during the authoritarian or dictatorial regimes that these countries went through” (Archambault 2009: 10-11). Strangely, there is relatively little research on civil society developments in southern or eastern European countries. In one of the few comparative studies, Sotiropoulos notes that the levels of interpersonal trust in Greece are lower than in most post-communist Southeast European countries (Sotiropoulos 2005: 254). This is a strange finding – since civil society in former communist countries is generally considered very weak. Thus, may be “historical explanations” are not enough. May be the answer on the question of the Greek weakness is related to less “our history is our destiny” and are linked to more contemporary developments.

Tax incentives may offer an explanation of civil society strength or weakness, in particular in relation to associational density and the size of charities. Tax breaks seem to increase charitable giving. The United States offers by far the most generous tax breaks and has the highest giving as a proportion of the GDP (1.67%). A similar relation is evident in Britain (0.73%) and Australia (0.69%). In contrast, Germany does not offer similarly generous tax exemptions and, as a result, giving is much less (0.22% of the GDP) (Oxford Economics 2012). The Greek tax system offers limited and rather complex incentives to charitable donations (Dehne et al 2008). There is also a more generous treatment of donations to the state, the Church (in particular the Athos Monasteries and the Constantinople Patriarchate) and to cultural institutions than to NGOs, charities or other civil society organizations. However, one should be careful in reaching conclusions. First, tax breaks do not always work: despite the tax incentives, the French give donations that account to just 0.14% of GDP. Secondly, studies have shown that tax rules affect the size and timing of gifts but not the initial decision to give (The Economist 2012a). Third, tax exemptions for civil society organizations in Greece are not the only tax breaks, allowances and deductions – and as a result fail to give clear signals. Further, the poor functioning of the tax administration and the lax tax enforcement result in high levels of tax evasion (Kaplanoglou & Rapanos 2013). This may also mean that much charitable giving is not recorded. And fourth, levels of trust to NGOs in Greece are very low – due largely to negative press coverage – and this may affect donations.

Another factor that may explain the low associational density and the weak levels of activism is the lack of civic education. Schools are very important in fostering civic engagement. The 2009 Civic and Citizenship Education Study evaluated civil and citizenship education in the lower-secondary systems of 24 European countries. The results showed that Greece is one of the few European countries where civic and citizenship education is not offered as a specific and compulsory subject (IEA 2010: 35). Further, Greece is one of two European countries that are not offering training

to teachers on civic education (IEA 2010: 41). Finally, it is no surprising that in Greece less than 10% of school principals cited the promotion of students' participation in the local community as one of their three most important aims (in the UK the relative figure is over 40%) (IEA 2010: 127). So it could be argued that the lack of civic education is a factor that explains low levels of civic engagement in Greece.

Civil society rising

Most observers of Greek civil society argue that the number and strength of voluntary organizations started to increase from the late 1980s. Among the factors cited is the decline of "partitocracy": the grip of parties somewhat loosened in the second half of the 1980s, leaving some free space to voluntary organizations. Surveys and anecdotal information have identified an upward trend in the number of active volunteers in Greece during the last decades. According to a European Commission survey (2010: 8) among the reasons for this trend (that also characterizes most EU countries) are an increased awareness of social and environmental concerns: as post-material values became more important among younger Greeks, interest in and engagement in quality of life issues increased.

But probably the most important factor that explains the gradual strengthening organized civil in Greece, is her accession into the European Union (EU). EU funds have provided important incentives for collective action and helped to mobilize citizens while EU regulations that required citizen participation and provided for consultations between state institutions and civil society organizations also played an important role. EU-funding for citizenship programs helped boosting volunteerism. Several NGOs were formed focusing on human rights, environmental and cultural issues. Some of them were able to mobilize large numbers of citizens. EU financial support for environmental programs was crucial. Since the launch of the LIFE programme by the European Commission in 1992 until April 2013, a total of 204 projects worth €269 million have been financed in Greece (European Commission 2013). Among the beneficiaries were many Greek NGOs – especially in the field of nature and biodiversity. In several cases, LIFE-supported partnerships among universities, local authorities and NGOs outlived the timespan of the projects. LIFE was a great boost to environmental awareness in Greece and helped environmental NGOs to develop their capacity in designing and implementing projects.

A similar development can be observed in service-providing NGOs – especially in relation to migrants and refugees. After decades of outward migration, Greece became a destination of migrants in the 1990s. At some point (2010), 90 percent of irregular migrants in the EU arrived first in Greece (Donough & Tsourdi 2013: 69). In order to share the costs of reception, integration and voluntary repatriation of refugees and migrants, the EU member states agreed in 2000 to set up a European Refugee Fund (ERF). The ERF, UNHCR bilateral donors and the Greek state funded several NGOs in Greece to run reception centers, offer legal advice and provide social care, especially health or psychological care to asylum-seekers (Donough & Tsourid 2013: 81). In short generous funding from the EU (and the Greek state) were an important – and under-researched – factor in strengthening Greek civil society.

Indeed, the sustainability of NGO activity was directly related to EU funding. New initiatives were born, new NGOs were formed and old NGOs acquired the ability to fulfill their ambitions. EU funds helped NGOs to mobilize citizens, reach wider communities and offer help to marginalized groups (like the Romas). More importantly, EU support helped Greek civil society organizations to design, implement and evaluate complex social projects. However, 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. Clientelistic networks between NGOs and state agencies that managed EU funds undermined the autonomy of civil society and generated public suspicion and mistrust for their work. A number of scandals led to negative publicity: NGOs were considered as “*lamogia*”, the Greek equivalent of the American “*slangs*”. As NGOs fiercely competed to win contracts for all sorts of projects, cooperation among them became difficult. Non-profits ended up accusing each other as non-reliable, useless or “dirty” – in fact confirming the negative media reporting.

Contingency factors also played a role in promoting citizen mobilization and volunteering. The 2004 Olympic Games were a great boost for volunteerism (45,000 volunteers were mobilized) with significant long-term effects – especially for the sport sector.³ Natural disasters also played a role. In the early fall 1999, an earthquake struck western Athens. Almost immediately a vast number of associations, NGOs, foundations and private businesses rushed in to offer money, food, clothes and also health care and psychological support to the victims. And in June 2007, in response to a forest wild fire consumed a large part of the Mt Parnitha's National Park, close to Athens, thousands of Athenians took part in an unprecedented demonstration, asking for protective measures and tougher legislation (Botetzagias 2011). Some saw in the demonstration a rising environmental civil society, an indication of rising post-material values and growing mistrust on state institutions (Botetzagias and Karamichas 2009).. However, Greek environmental grassroots mobilization and associations continued to be dominated by Not-In-My-BackYard (NIMBY) movements (like mobilizations against waste – disposal sites).

Thus, other analysts were far more skeptical, arguing that these street protests should not be overestimated and should not be regarded as evidence of rising political mobilization (Tsaliki 2010). These analysts argued that in the contrary, they could be considered as “activist pyrotechnics”, acts of limited political significance that are facilitated and sexed-up by new information and communication technologies like e-mails, smss and internet-based networks like facebook and twitter. According to this view, a supporting and contextual environment that promotes and, above all, sustains citizen activism is missing.

³ Though there were some fringe benefits. Group leaders received a ‘compensation’ and army conscripts were granted a 20-day leave.

The debate became more intensive in relation to the December 2008 events, after the fatal shooting of a fifteen-year-old boy by a policeman in central Athens. The civil unrest that followed and spread all over Greece for more than a week was so massive and violent that some observers even talked of an “uprising”. Most analysts agreed that technology (mobile phones and the internet) played a crucial role in the young people’s mobilization. SMSs, Facebook and Twitter were credited as “facilitators” of engagement and mobilization. Indeed, research in other countries has shown that the internet can complement social capital. However, it is not clear if the low level of connectivity also explains low levels of social capital. According to a recent Eurobarometer survey, Greece has the lowest percentage of household internet connectivity in the European Union: 49% of the households do not have access to the Web (the EU average is 32%) (Eurobarometer 2013). Indeed, this also may explain why youth protests in Greece have failed to mobilize larger segments of the population outside the major urban centres. According to a recent study of social media in Greece, the capacity of individuals to fully participate in social activism through the use of Internet, “depends on previous offline experiences” (Afouxenidis 2014).

Although there was much reporting on the role of the social media in the mobilization of the youth, there was little agreement on the causes of the unrest. Police brutality was the obvious cause, but behind that many saw wider developments like high youth unemployment and the legitimacy crisis of the Greek political system. Others focused on more structural factors like the rise of post-materialist values in Greek society. Yannis Theocharis, for example, has analysed how postmaterialism influences online and offline political activity and indicated that Greek young people are disinterested in traditional forms of political participation – i.e. joining a political party – and are more interested in participating in political protests (Theocharis 2010).

Indeed, street politics have a long tradition in Greece. John Karamichas has offered a “memetic explanation”, noting a “self-reproducing, culturally legitimised pattern of youth rebellion in Greece” that goes back to the student struggle against the military junta - the Polytechnion uprising that is marked by a yearly march to the American embassy (Karamichas 2009).

However, much less research has focused on the role of political parties in mobilizing the youth in 2008. Although there is no evidence that radical left parties instigated the protests, there is a lot of evidence that they supported it. This reflects an important change of strategy of the Greek radical left, a change that seems to have significant consequences for the development of Greek civil society (Tsakatika & Eleftheriou 2013). By the mid-2000s, both the Communist Party of Greece (KKE) and SYRIZA, faced with an erosion of their electoral support, made a “turn towards civil society”. Indeed, their tactics were quite different, largely reflecting their distinct ideological orientations and organisational legacies. But they had in common a shared objective: to increase their influence in the wider society. KKE decided to form its own “trade union front” (PAME) in order to reach new constituencies. SYRIZA that had previously (under the name SYN) made a consistent effort to

approach the emerging environmental movement, established in 2001 a political and electoral alliance with a host of smaller parties, groups and networks of the extra-parliamentary left. This marked a significant change of strategy that initially did not seem to bear electoral support. But SYRIZA did not abandon the efforts. Especially, since 2009, with the economic crisis leading to confrontational forms of activism, SYRIZA made efforts to create linkages with two new social protest movements that made their presence strongly felt in urban areas. The first was the “Won’t Pay” movement (that refused to pay tolls in the country’s highways) and the second the “Indignants” movement that occupied central squares in Athens and other Greek cities. SYRIZA offered support to these movements trying to create an impression that it was the “vanguard” of a range of social and political forces (Tsakatika & Eleftheriou 2013: 96-7). It also offered discreet support to two violent NIMBY protests (in Keratea against a waste-disposal site and in Khalkidiki against a gold mining investment) that made headlines. In short, SYRIZA was successful in becoming the favoured party of any kind of activism with a anti-establishment political message. In turn, SYRIZA cadres became involved in a variety of initiatives, strengthening existing or creating new ones. Many were involved in anti-racist groups, human-rights NGOs and solidarity organizations. It was a real change in the Greek left that previously was almost always suspicious of any kind of initiatives that were not controlled by the party. It was also a change in the way the left thought about the role of the state in addressing social problems. In contrast to the past, state intervention was not the only solution; citizens could improve their lives by organizing themselves.

This transformation in the strategy of the Greek Left was also evident in the tactics of PASOK and – to a lesser extent – New Democracy Party since the second half of the 1990s. Facing public indifference for party membership and unable to imitate the large party rallies of the 1990s, Greece’s traditionally dominant parties tried to build new constituencies through organized civil society. They approached civil society organizations, promoted well-known NGO activists to the parliament and prestigious state positions. In parallel, ambitious politicians endorsed NGO causes and initiatives. In an impressive move, George Papandreou created a new agency (“Hellenic Aid”/YDAS) in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs exclusively devoted to funding Greek NGO projects in less developed countries or in countries in transition (especially in the Balkans). In turn, some of these NGOs together with other civil society actors played an important role in the Greek-Turkish rapprochement – the so-called “earthquake diplomacy” - that created great expectations and seemed to end a period of mistrust between the two countries (Rumelili 2005).

The third factor that may sustain the rise of the civil society sector in Greece is the economic crisis. Poverty levels, unemployment rates and homelessness have increased sharply as Greece’s economic crisis worsened, leaving the country’s social welfare system struggling to cope. Family support networks came under increasing strain as pensions were cut by almost 30 per cent. In one important respect, the 2009-12 crisis hit hard the civil society sector as state funding for civil society organizations substantially decreased or even ceased. But on the other side, the economic crisis acted as a motivating factor for civic engagement, political

participation and associational growth. Many new NGOs were born and old ones reported an increase in volunteers and a rise in private donations.⁴ Most of new initiatives aimed at filling the gaps between people's needs and the state's inability to provide certain social services.

Furthermore, in response to the crisis, some NGOs showed a willingness to cooperate. For example, 10 ten large environmental NGOs united to oppose drastic changes in environmental protection legislation and infrastructure and held the Parliament liable for easing the construction of buildings in protected areas (Lekakis & Kousis 2013: 316). Indeed, such initiatives were rather rare in the past (an interesting exception is the Union of 10 NGOs "Together for the Child" that was created in 1996).

Several observers have also noted a boom in informal networks, grassroots movements and support networks with cooperatives, social groceries and solidarity bazaars. Some have enthusiastically predicted that an "alternative, parallel" economy is in the making (Pantazidou 2013). However, many involved in civil society activism do not share this enthusiasm. The conclusion from a number of interviews with staff of service-providing NGOs conducted by the author in 2012, is that there is a clearly discernible increase in initiatives and activities in urban areas but it is neither widespread nor impressive and not linear. Initiatives are short-lived and activism is related to specific events or programs. After all, as the crisis has reduced incomes by 25-30% and unemployment rates surpassed 23%, the rise of post-materialist values that supposedly created the quality-of-life movements of the past is totally reversed. As families struggle to survive, material priorities become more and more important and much less time and money is left for philanthropical or solidarity activities. Much of the new initiatives is again top-down initiated by major private donors like the Stavros Niarchos Foundation and the Bodossakis Foundation that help to fight poverty and exclusion by disbursing to NGOs tens of millions of dollars.

It is also doubtful that the economic crisis increases political participation. Strikes, demonstrations and protests reached probably a peak in 2011 and since then have become less common. It is not clear if this is a result of fatigue or of people adopting more individualistic strategies for survival. Or it may well reflect changing tactics of political parties. NGOs report an inability to raise funds from small individual donors and though they also report a rise in the number of volunteers, they are ready to acknowledge that many of them are job-seekers looking for work experience or opportunities. Interviewees from the NGOs *Boroume* and the Greek *Food Bank* told the author that the main actors in the crucial sector of providing food to people in need are municipalities and Church parishes (initiatives by individual priests) – not NGOs or other civil society organizations.

An important development is that the relative awakening of Greek civil society activism that is due to the crisis is leading to a clear segregation. The Greek Orthodox

⁴ Interviews conducted by the author with NGO staff in spring and autumn 2012.

Church, despite being a much less active actor than the Catholic or Protestant Church, has dominated for decades “philanthropic” initiatives in Greece, in fact creating a widely-held perception that philanthropy is a “conservative” activity. Even today a significant part of philanthropic activities is ran by orthodox congregations and charities. The Greek Orthodox Church claims to feed every day more than 250,000 people (Henley 2012). On the other side, a significant part of the newly-born nonprofit sector is linked to left-wing political parties, labor unions, migrant associations or cooperative networks. As the Greek Orthodox Church remains “discursively distant” from political discussions related to the crisis, largely refusing to criticize local and foreign elites or castigate policies (Makris & Bekridakis 2013), the secular and the religious “civil society camps” are almost totally isolated from each other. Consequently, there is very little cooperation between religious and secular non-profits and there are indications of a growing antagonism and competition between them for funds and influence. Beneficiaries are also split between the two. The philanthropic activities of the radical rightwing party of Chryssi Avgi for “Greeks only” have made matters worse – leading to the further fragmentation of the emerging service-providing civil society.

Some academics have persuasively emphasized the supportive role of the state in strengthening civil society. Rather than considering civil society in opposition to the state, a strong, active and supportive state can greatly encourage the development of a vibrant civil society. Bailer et al (2013), based on data from the *Civicus Civil Society Index*, have argued that the main predictor of a strong civil society is well-functioning political institutions. Better-governed states, credible, accountable and transparent politicians and civil servants are conducive to the creation of a vibrant civil society. In the very end, trust in political institutions is a prerequisite of interpersonal trust. Confidence in national institutions in Greece is much lower than the OECD average (OECD 2011: 93). And trust in non-state institutions is also low. For example, trust in the media (radio, TV and press) is among the lowest in the EU (Eurobarometer 2011). In many respects, Greek civil society cannot become strong while the Greek state is a “lame Leviathan”, a state unable to collect taxes and offer reliable services. After all, there is little evidence of a reverse causality: civil society is not a remedy for poor governance. Civil societies cannot build states.

Conclusions

This article has reviewed the evidence that proves beyond any reasonable doubt that civil society in Greece is weak in comparison to other European countries. The article examined a number of causes that may explain the phenomenon and argued that well-cited mono-causal explanations (like a history of adverse state formation, semi-authoritarian governance, partitocracy and clientelism) should be re-examined, by taking into account other factors largely neglected by social science researchers. The latter include the pace of economic growth, church-state relations and ineffective policies like the lack of tax incentives and civic education. The explanations that focus on historical developments are in a sense problematic, because they cannot account for change and because their implicit message is that our fate is written in our past: that very little can be done to strengthen civic engagement in Greece. The author believes that this statement is not true.

There is a lot of evidence that organized civil society in Greece has grown in the last two decades. NGOs, volunteers and civic activity have all increased. However, this growth 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. Quite the contrary: the evidence is that the rather timid increase in civic engagement was more a top-down process mainly linked to two factors: first, EU efforts to encourage civil society initiatives through generous funding; and, secondly, changed tactics of the Greek left – partly in response to public fatigue for traditional ways of political mobilization. The economic crisis seems to have at the same time both encouraged and discouraged citizen participation in associations and activism but it is probably too early to discern not only the extent and depth but also the positive or negative character of the impact.

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