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Greece:

A Continuous Interplay between Media and Politicians

This chapter aims at describing the effects of media modernisation and commercialisation on journalism and politics in contemporary Greece. The Greek case is interesting for two main reasons: first, Greece appears to be very flexible and adaptive to new media developments; second, these developments are still heavily influenced by the country's troubled political history. It could be argued that it is not a coincidence that television licenses have not been granted for 27 years. Successive governments since 1989, the year of television deregulation, appear to have been playing an "on and off" game with television owners who also have other interests in the Greek economy. Today, it seems that we have entered a new era of "interplay" between media owners and politicians. In 2016, a new round of television licences was announced by the government.

Key words: television licences, journalism, media owners, politics, interplay

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1. Introduction: Placing Greece on the map of media systems

Media systems in many Southern European countries represent what Hallin and Mancini (2004) have described as the 'Mediterranean' or 'polarised pluralistic' model. This is because the media systems in Southern Europe share a number of characteristics which distinguish them from the rest of Central, Western and Northern Europe. According to Hallin and Mancini, the mass media in the Southern European countries were intimately involved in the political conflicts that mark the history of this region, and there is a strong tradition of regarding outlets as a means of ideological expression and political mobilisation. It is also argued that in the age of digitalisation, commercialisation and globalisation of communications and economies, there has been a process of convergence among media systems and practices, diminishing national and regional differences (McQuail 1994; 1995). To what extent these differences are diminishing has to be seen. Nevertheless, media and politics continually interact and influence each other in various ways. Greek media are an interesting case in point.

Greece is a medium-sized European country, located on the southern part of Balkan Peninsula. By the middle of the 19th century, Greece had just emerged from over four centuries of Ottoman rule. Thus Greece was for many decades confronted with the tasks of nation building, which has had a consequence for the formation of the over-extended character of the state (Mouzelis 1980).

The country has a total territory of 132,000 square kilometres, and a population of almost 11 million. About 4 million people are concentrated in the wider metropolitan area of the capital, Athens, and about 1.2 million in the greater area of Thessaloniki. This extreme concentration is one of the side-effects of the centralised character of the modern Greek state and the unplanned urbanisation of the country since the 1960s. Unlike the population in many other European countries, almost all Greeks—about 98 per cent of the population—speak the same language, Greek, as a mother tongue, and share the same, Greek Orthodox, religion.

At the same time, however, Greek political life has been dominated by profound cleavages between ‘modernists’ vs. ‘traditionalists’ in the cultural sphere, ‘leftists’ vs. ‘rightists’ in the political sphere and, more recently, the pro-Euro vs. the pro-drachma followers in the economic sphere (Demertzis & Charalambis 1993, Demertzis 1996). The Greek Church has always played a role in influencing the attitudes of Greek society.

76 Democracy had little real success in the birthplace of Western democracy. Modern Greece faced continuous political upheavals until 1974. After the Civil War in the aftermath of the Second World War, Greece struggled to consolidate democracy. In 1967–1974, a Junta was imposed by the Armed Forces. With the Restoration of Parliament in 1974, Greece entered a phase of western-type parliamentarism, but liberal institutions were only partly consolidated in the country. This is of profound importance when it comes to understanding the media system in Greece as well as in other Southern European countries.

Arguably, these structural preconditions, along with an atrophied civil society and a late development of the domestic capital stock, have been conducive to a model culture of an interventionist state. Much of Greece’s uniqueness is said to reside within the leading role that the state has taken in promoting the economic development of the country (Featherstone 1994). In fact, the slow development of the private industrial and services sector and its dependence on an interventionist state has meant that the state has become ever more autonomous vis-à-vis the rest of society. As Vergopoulos put it: “Ever since the middle of the nineteenth century, nothing could be done in Greece without it necessarily passing through the machinery of the state” (quoted in Mouzelis 1980: 248). This situation has also been attributed to a weak civil society, as a consequence of which the state has had to support society in building up politico-ideological orientations (Mouzelis 1980). On top of that even the business elites have failed to form well-organised and cohesive pressure groups. Mouzelis (1980) noted that, because of the persistence of

patronage politics, even political parties and interest groups had to be articulated within the state apparatus. The politicisation of business is a result not only of the important role that the state plays in the economy, but also of the nature of the political process. “What was important for an interest group”, write Lanza and Lavdas (2000: 207) about Italy and Greece, “was its ability to establish a special and privileged bond with a party, a sector in the public administration, a branch of the executive, a politician or a civil servant. In this way, institutions became permeable; otherwise they remained totally impermeable.”

Thus, it is not a coincidence that there are high levels of participacy in Greece. At the core of this participacy stands, as noted, the over-extended character of the state. Parties are managing this all-powerful state, and thus their position of significance is structurally guaranteed. Despite the gradual erosion of voters’ psychological attachment to parties and the undermining of (bureaucratic) clientelism, the financial basis of participacy in the late 1980s and the 1990s, the party structure in Greece seems to be maintained by popular vote. Parties are simultaneously instruments of conflict (since they promote conflicting policies) and instruments of integration to the extent that it is conflict that organises political life (Diamandouros 1993, Charalambis 1989 & 1996). Thus their capacity to organise conflict is one of their most important and enduring attributes, while their power is directly related to their ability to polarise opinion (Wattenberg 1991). These functions are the hermeneutic pillars of bipolarism in Greece. Their qualifying characteristic is that they organise reality in terms of party-relevance; at the same time, they may incorporate varying levels of ideologisation, personalisation, historical indexing, and intensity of conflict. The conflict element of this *interparty schism* performs the dual functions of polarising and of defining (Samaras 2002). The major interpretative poles during the last 40 years have included the cleavage between the centre-right Nea Dimokratia–ND and the centre-left PASOK. Nowadays, in the era of fiscal crisis and the never-ending austerity measures, this cleavage lies between pro-austerity/EU–IMF policies parties such as New Democracy and PASOK, and the anti-austerity/‘Keynesian’ policy parties such as the leftist SYRIZA, the communist KKE, the leftist DIMAR, and the rightist Independent Greeks and the fascist Golden Dawn.

Transition to democracy is of course a complex process. It involves the transformation of political institutions—including the mass media—and of relationships among political, social and economic institutions. These transformations are often slow and uneven, and for that reason knowledge of political history is crucial to understanding current institutions. It is not a coincidence that the development of the media has been deeply affected by the political patterns of polarised pluralism, and that outlets have historically served, and participated in, this process of bargaining. Even though the media operate in a market framework, outlets offer information, analysis and comment produced by a few elite groups, which address other political, cultural and economic elites in order to send messages and to start

negotiations. This pattern has been most characteristic of Italy and Greece, but it seems to apply to the other Mediterranean countries, too. Last but not least, since the state has—due to the atrophied nature of civil society—played a central role in most aspects of social and economic life, it has also affected the development of the printed press and the electronic media.

This chapter will describe the effects of media modernisation and commercialisation on journalism and politics via the case of contemporary Greece. The Greek case is interesting for two main reasons: first, Greece appears to be very flexible and adaptable to new media developments; second, these developments are still heavily influenced by the country's troubled political history.

2. The state and the media

The Greek state has played a decisive role in the media sector, especially in broadcasting. The interplay between the state and the media has largely arisen from the tensions within Greek society itself. In the case of the Greek media, the state may intervene in various ways (Hallin & Papathanassopoulos 2000). First, the birth of the modern Greek print press largely coincided with the struggle for independence from the Ottoman rule in 1821 (Koumariou 2005), while its development paralleled the growth of political life in the nascent Greek nation-state (Papadimitriou 2005).

Second, the Greek state has subsequently also played an important role as an owner of media enterprises. The electronic media have traditionally been under the total and tight control of the state. The general pattern of the broadcast media in the state monopoly era was that a transfer of political power was followed by an equivalent change-over among the executives of state media institutions. In other words, all key radio and television appointees were politically sympathetic to or affiliated with the government of the day, reflecting a tradition of political clientelism in Greece. Responsible posts in state broadcasting have traditionally gone through rapid changes in personnel. News and editorial judgments of particular importance would be made in close agreement with the government's position on a whole range of policies and decisions. This attitude of the Greek state has remained one of the most important features of the state electronic media. It is not surprising that various recommendations by foreign experts concerning the structure of state broadcasting were half-adopted or entirely neglected by most governments (Papathanassopoulos 1990, Papathanassopoulos 1997).

Third, in a more indirect but nonetheless effective way, the state has enforced its policies on ownership as well as the unwritten rules of power politics by using a wide range of means of intervention. These means include sizeable financial aid to the press, on which individual enterprises have become dependent (Papathanassopoulos 2014a). The central role of the state in the Greek media system has

no doubt limited the tendency of the media to play the ‘watchdog’ role so widely valued in prevailing liberal media theory. The financial dependence of the media on the state has been combined with the intertwining of media and political elites within a highly centralised state polity. This has led to a journalistic culture which has historically been cautious about reporting news which would be embarrassing to state officials.

Fourth, this political context has made the Greek media system less self-regulatory and the regulatory bodies less independent compared to their counterparts in liberal countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, and the democratic corporatist countries.

Sixth, the trends above reflect to certain extent the tradition of political clientelism in Greece which has been ‘imposed’ on the media system as well. Clientelism has affected the content of the media—initially the press, and later the electronic media—as a means of negotiation among conflicting elites rather than one for the information of the public. As Leandros commented (2010: 890): “The entry of industrialists, ship-owners and other business interests into the media scene was an important way for these interests to try to influence public opinion and to exert pressure in the political arena to the benefit of their business interests.” With the downturn of the economy, this potential benefit, however, has turned out to become a structural flaw.

Seventh, this condition has forced journalism logic to merge with other social logics—of party politics and family privilege, for instance. This damages horizontal solidarity among journalists, as it does with other social groups. Thus, because of the overriding importance of political interests, the journalism culture in the Anglo-Saxon tradition, which has once been manifested both in relatively strong journalistic autonomy and in highly developed systems of ethical self-regulation, is absent in countries with a stronger history of clientelism. A sense of a public interest transcending particular interests has been more difficult to achieve in societies where political clientelism has historically been strong, which contributes to the difficulty of developing a culture of professional journalism.

3. The Greek media system today

Since the fall of the military junta in 1974, the Greek press has undergone a process of modernisation. The introduction of new printing technologies in the 1980s (Leandros 1992), the entry of private investors into the media sector, and strong competition from television have changed the media sector at large (Psychoyios 1992, Zaoussis & Stratos 1992, Paraschos 1995). As a result, the printed press had to reposition itself: editorial content had to become more objective, and close ties with political parties were being loosened. This has partly arisen out of the need to attract a broader spectrum of readers in order to increase circulation in times when

the rate of economic and social development in Greece was yet again declining. Yet, in one way or another, newspapers never abandoned their political stance, if not affiliation. This move was partly a reflection of a drift away by political parties themselves towards the major political orientations of the modern Greek electorate. However, the Greek media, collectively, are still a very influential institution, usually aggressive and sensationalist in tone, especially in periods characterised by a climate of political tension and, of course, during times of elections (Komninou 1996).

The deregulation of radio took place in 1987, followed by the deregulation of television in late 1989. As in most European countries, the imminent deregulation of Greek broadcasting was associated with partisan ends, and eventually led by a haphazard reaction of politics, rather than a coherent plan resulting in an overcrowded broadcasting universe (Papathanassopoulos 1997 & 2001). In November 1989, the first private channel called Mega Channel entered the Greek television landscape, and a month later a second channel by the name of Antenna TV followed. Since then, a plethora of national, regional and local television channels have sprung up all over the country without, however, an official license to broadcast. In effect, in Greece 8 national private channels, 3 state channels and 153 local and regional channels are operational. From the very first year of their existence, the general content orientation private channels have dominated the television sector in terms of audience rates and advertising expenditure. At the same time, the emergence of private stations has had disastrous effects on the public broadcaster.

As far as its structure is concerned, the Greek media are primarily characterised by excess in supply over demand. This over-supply appears to be logical, since a plethora of newspapers, television channels, magazines and radio stations have to compete for a small-country audience and advertising market (Papathanassopoulos 1999).

Although the developments in the Greek media sector may not entirely respond to the needs of the advertising industry, it has been surprisingly adaptive to swings in the economic business cycle (Papathanassopoulos 1997). However, the fiscal crisis starting in 2008, coupled with the crisis of the economy, brought about major losses in advertising revenues for the media industry (Korderas 2012) and thousands of media personnel have lost their jobs. While the advertising market has faced collapse since 2008, orders from public works or other public sector government activities have also gradually worsened the situation of the press. This was due to the inability of the state to either pay-off or reimburse the contractors for the public works that it had ordered. This has had a negative knock-on effect on the media in general and newspapers in particular, since the entrepreneurs in public construction projects, who were also active in the media field, could no longer cross-subsidise their media outlets from revenues earned on public orders. In 2013 a major television channel, Alter TV, went bankrupt and closed down. In 2016, Mega Channel, the country's biggest media concern and television market

leader is “in dire straits.” Employees’ salaries were cut by 20 per cent, allowing the channel to pay its debts to the banks. Ironically, the main owners of Mega Channel (Lambrakis, Tegopoulos, Bobolas, and Vardinoyannis) have been the owners of the most influential Athenian newspapers as well, and also have interests in travel and culture (Lambrakis), construction (Bobolas), telecommunications (Tegopoulos, Lambrakis), and the shipping and oil businesses (Vardinoyannis). Tegopoulos has gone bankrupt, the Lambrakis group is heavily indebted to banks, while Leonidas Bobolas has been on charges of tax evasion. Bobolas’ family is the largest shareholder in Mega Channel, and he himself was released on bail only after he paid \$1.9 million in back taxes.

Today, all media outlets are facing their most difficult period ever, but it is the print media (newspapers and magazines) which are suffering the most (Papathanassopoulos 2010). Although press decline in terms of sales, readership and advertising revenues is a worldwide phenomenon, the Greek press has entered a state of permanent crisis since the mid-1990s. Since then, fewer and fewer Greeks read a newspaper on a daily basis (Papathanassopoulos 2014a). National newspapers have lost about 15 per cent of their readers, while the biggest losses have been seen in daily editions (ADNA 2016). Some have already closed down, like the well-known *Eleftherotypia*, a daily that once was the most widely circulated newspapers in the country.

4. The closing-down and re-opening of the public broadcaster

The independence of all public broadcasters has, to varying degrees, been subject to political disputes in the history of European media. Most countries in Western Europe, however, have succeeded in developing buffer institutions that separate public broadcasting from the direct control of the political majority (Hallin & Mancini 2004). The countries of Southern Europe, however, have not moved as far in this direction. In Greece, as in other countries of the region, the ruling party directly controls public broadcasting. The management of the news divisions of public television changes along with changes in the government, and the news is at important moments mobilised to politically support the government. In Greece, news editorial judgments are expected to be in close agreement with, if not identical to, government announcements across a whole range of policies. A governing board appointed by parliament according to proportional representation therefore results in government control.

ERT’s history is often identified with the history of Greek broadcasting, but the emergence of private stations has been disastrous for the public broadcaster. ERT has sharply declined in terms of audience ratings and advertising revenues. Nowadays, 80 per cent of ERT’s funds derive from the license fee and 20 per cent

from advertising. In effect, ERT's three channels have witnessed a steady erosion of market share since private television channels were launched in late 1989. ERT's management and the government realised that the public broadcaster could no longer justify its presence in the system. ERT was too bureaucratic, in debt (with an accumulated debt of 112 million euros by 1997), its programming was uncompetitive, and its news output was lacking credibility. Moreover, since 1989, politicians have been unable to approve any of the numerous plans for the public broadcaster's salvation.

In 1997, ERT's management, under the government's instructions, changed the face of the state broadcaster in order to re-approach the Greek public. In effect, the first channel ET1 became a general quality entertainment channel and adopted a family entertainment profile. The second channel, formerly known as ET2, does not exist any more: it has been re-launched and dubbed NET (Nea Elliniki Teleorasi—New Hellenic Television). It is mainly a 24-hour information channel with news bulletins, information programs, talk shows, documentaries and live soccer games. Other programmes include the local version of international formats such as *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* as well as content from the History Channel. ET3 is rather independent from the main corporation and has formed its programming independently from the other two channels of ERT.

Moreover, ERT's management aimed to reduce labour costs by applying a system of voluntary retirement to some of its personnel. It also decided to reduce the number of external collaborators and to increase the productivity of the existing staff. These measures failed to bring impressive financial savings, since it had to increase their numbers to fulfil its new ventures. Nevertheless, financial problems did not disappear. This could be attributed to two reasons: first, the acquisition of expensive premium programming such as live soccer games; and second, ERT employed a considerable number of personnel, indeed quite a high number considering the Greek market size.

While there was no digital or analogue cable television service in Greece, digital terrestrial television became the next priority for the country, mainly due in part to the EU recommendation for member-states to switch from analogue to digital broadcasting by 2012 (see Iosifidis 2006). The government aimed to undertake the integration of the Greek television industry into DTT through the public broadcaster (Papathanassopoulos 2014b).

As in many other European countries (Iosifidis 2007b), ERT acted as a pioneer, introducing DTT exclusive television services to the Greek public. The digital channels are being broadcast free-to-air and are funded exclusively from ERT's budget, as they carry no advertisement. ERT's digital terrestrial offerings were only available in Athens, Thessaloniki and a handful of other major cities. In effect, the Law of 2007 foresaw that 15 per cent of the taxes earmarked for ERT would go to the new public-private digital company, and allowed the ERT board to provide material resources for the new company. ERT's union of employees, called

POSPERT, conducted a series of work stoppages to protest the Bill as a threat to the public character of ERT, bringing newscasts to a temporary standstill. ESIEA, the Union of Athens Dailies¹ Journalists, and the Greek Federation of Labour supported POSPERT's protest. The government responded that ERT Digital was created by the previous socialist government, which also envisaged the entire privatisation of ERT Digital.

At the same time, the private terrestrial broadcasters accused the government of giving the 'green light' to the public broadcaster to enter the digital terrestrial landscape, while they were left with promises only.

The then two major political parties (the conservatives and the socialists) were climbing on and off the commercial bandwagon, ERT became a minority service in terms of audience ratings and advertising revenue. Then the financial crisis affected the public broadcaster, too. ERT abandoned its digital channels through ERT Digital. International channels such as BBC News World, TV 5 Europe, and Deutsche Welle started broadcasting in their digital frequencies. In the meantime, the Samaras Government was critical of ERT, since it considered that ERT's Union was overwhelming in favour of the opposition, in particular the leftist SYRIZA party, a fact that was reflected in the public broadcaster's news output.

On Tuesday, 11 June 2013, the screen of the public broadcaster ERT went black. In effect, it was practically closed down overnight. The radio stations of the Greek public broadcaster had already been silent for a few hours. The conservative-led coalition government had a few hours earlier announced its decision to close down and to subsequently restructure the Greek public broadcasting corporation ERT "on the right track."

The closing down of the public broadcaster by the government provoked an angry reaction among oppositional parties and trade unions. The opposition, led by the SYRIZA party, claimed that the government had fired ERT's 2,500 employees in order to prove to Greece's international lenders (the so called 'Troika,' including the International Monetary Fund, the European Commission, and the European Central Bank) that it was serious about cutting the country's bloated public sector.

ERT was replaced by a new public broadcaster, NERIT. As the closing down of ERT was a permanent bone of contention, those responsible for NERIT could not do anything. The government declared that (in theory at least) the broadcaster would be independent in line with Western counterparts. However, in reality the government regarded it as its own political mouthpiece. It is not a coincidence that its chairman and managing director Professor Antonis Makrydimitris and his deputy, journalist Mr. Rudolph Moronis, resigned after just four months of their assignment. As Mr. Moronis wrote in his Facebook account: "When they (the government) said they wanted a true public service broadcaster, the problem was they did not mean it." At the same time, the last resort of POSPERT was an attempt to rally people in northern Greece against the government "of Athens" by

staging a month-long sit-in at the studios used by ERT's Thessaloniki channel ET3. They used the ET3 equipment for their pirate programming, relayed by ESIEA's website and accused the government of attempting to stifle the voice of the north. While the conservative government stated that the second NERIT channel would be based in Thessaloniki, SYRIZA said that it would restore ERT as it used to be if and when it comes to power.

On 11 July 2015, employees of Greece's state television ERT hugged each other and cried as the channel aired its first broadcast in two years after it had been shut down. Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras made its re-opening one of his priorities as part of efforts to roll back cuts demanded by the lenders, and called it "a great victory for democracy." The government re-employed all of the roughly 2,500 staff who had been made redundant, including 600 journalists, at a cost of about 30 million euros a year. The previous government had shut down ERT as a move to appease the country's lenders, who claimed that Greece had an overextended public sector that had to be cut.

After a year of ERT's new full operation, the public broadcaster's audience ratings remain low (approximately 11 per cent of the television market share for the three channels). Several months after returning to the airwaves, ERT issued an open call for new programming—a faint ray of light for the struggling industry. Needless to say, all key radio and television appointees were once again politically sympathetic of or affiliated to the SYRIZA-led coalition government.

5. The politics of digital television

In August 2008, the then conservative government requested private broadcasters to participate, in effect to take the lead, in the digital switch-over. According to the New Act on Concentration and Licensing of Media Undertakings of 2007, private analogue television broadcasters were encouraged to collaborate with the public broadcaster ERT in forming a single multiplex operator company that would act as the network operator for the whole Greek Digital Terrestrial Platform. In effect, the government aimed to use private broadcasters as the drivers of the digital development. The components of that digital television policy as well as the adoption of flexible, effective procedures regarding the granting of the digital licences aimed at the finalisation of the Greek digital map.

In July 2009, Digea Digital Provider S.A. was officially named as the DTT network provider for the seven main Greek private television channels (Mega, ANT1, Alpha, Alter, Star, Macedonia TV, and SKAI). Broadcasts from Digea began in the summer of 2009 and gradually have spread in many regions of the country until the full digitalisation of the terrestrial frequencies (November 2014).

But little was done. The next, socialist, government was faced with the worst economic crisis, and in practice seemed to have postponed any initiative in this

area by the public broadcaster. In effect, in March 2012, the then socialist-led coalition government decided to close down ERT's digital arm, ERT Digital, along with its three digital channels. In an unprecedented move, the government decided to broadcast BBC World, Deutsche Welle, Euronews and TV5 Europe in their frequencies and, in practice, left the development of DTT entirely to the private broadcasters (Papathanassopoulos 2014b).

In October 2015, the Greek Parliament passed an overhaul of the country's licensing system for private television, a reform the governing Syriza party saw as part of its quest to take on Greece's business conglomerates and tycoons.

The new legislation foresees how licenses will be issued, how long they will be valid for, and under what circumstances they can be revoked, among other conditions. New licenses will be valid for ten years. The cost of procuring a license and the maximum number of employees that can be hired by each channel will vary depending on the content of the network. Broadcasters of national reach and general content must have a personnel of at least of 400, and national thematic content channels must have at least 200 employees. National television channels of non-informative content can employ up to 50 and regional ones up to 20 people.

The opposition parties attacked the government over the bill, arguing that it gave too much power to the minister responsible for media to decide on the license bids (currently Mr. Nikos Pappas, a close aide to PM Tsipras). With most of Greece's private media already in considerable debt and with advertising revenues shrinking, the television industry feared investors would steer clear of the sector.

But Syriza and New Democracy could not agree on the board members of the country's regulatory body, the National Broadcasting Council (ESR). The Syriza–Independent Greeks coalition was hoping to appoint a new ESR board, as the body is due to oversee the launch of a tender process for new broadcasting licenses. However, New Democracy and other opposition parties rejected the candidates put forward by the coalition. Sources said that the government may now seek to pass new legislation allowing the cabinet to launch the tender.

In order to make its decision more 'scientific,' the government ordered a study from the European University Institute in Florence on the number of licenses, which concluded that Greece could issue up to four television licences for private television channels broadcasting nationwide. The study pointed out that—since each multiplex can carry at most two HD channels—the total number of private channels broadcasting nationally in Greece could be up to four.

Eventually, the coalition government's controversial television licensing amendment was approved in Parliament on Thursday, 11 June 2016, with 154 MPs supporting the initiative, while 102 opposition MPs (from the ranks of New Democracy, PASOK, The River and Union of Centrists) voting against it and 14 (from KKE and Golden Dawn) voting present.

During the debate that preceded the vote, the government and the opposition parties accused each other, with PM Tsipras claiming that the legislative amend-

ment aims to rid the media sector of corruption and vested interests, while the opposition parties countering that the aim was to control the media.

The main opposition leader Kyriakos Mitsotakis responded that the Prime Minister represented vested interests and was “more old than old,” and accused the government of attempting to “disorientate.” Similarly, PASOK’s leader Fofi Gennimata argued that the government’s amendment bill was anti-constitutional. She added that “it is one thing to put some order [in the media sector] and another to want to determine [it].”

The managing board of Greece’s largest journalist union ESIEA expressed its concern over the development, while demanding that rules to ensure transparency in media ownership be introduced.

6. Concluding remarks

Most Greek politicians claim that control over the media equals political power. The deregulation, commercialisation and privatisation of the media and the dominance of television in the Greek media universe for news and entertainment forced politicians and political parties to adopt the media logic. Greek politicians have come to realise that they are more vulnerable than they were in the past. Former Prime Minister and father of the current leader of New Democracy Constantine Mitsotakis once accused the “web of interests of media publishers” of being the main reason that he lost power. Ex-chairman of the Hellenic Parliament and MP of PASOK Apostolos Kaklamanis has attacked the media many times, especially their owners, on the grounds that they were using their channels to promote their own business interests. Similar statements have been made by other politicians. Even PM Tsipras in his speech delivered in parliament on television licences in February 2016 painted a clientelist relationship between businessmen “who are maintained and financed by banks in order to support politically bankrupt parties” and the two parties which have governed Greece for decades. “Now it is time for all those who lived like parasites and sucked all the power of Greek society to give their explanations and go through the cash register to pay their taxes, as well as all those who have sent their untaxed money overseas; for media owners to pay taxes and advertising fees, just like all businesses, and put some order in the media, just like in every other EU country” (quoted in *To Vima* 2015).

It could be argued that it is not a coincidence that television licenses have not been granted for 27 years. At the same time, the awarding of the licenses seems to have been used as a part of the domestic political game. During the administration of the conservative government (April 1990–October 1993), announcements of license awards usually followed political disputes, especially with radio stations. When the late Andreas Papandreou came to power after the 1993 legislative elections, his government announced that it would re-examine the whole regulatory

environment as well as the licenses. But up to his death in 1996, no official government license was granted. His successor, the Simitis Government announced in the Spring of 1997 the allocation of frequencies for the Greek television domain. According to its action-plan, the so-called “order in the airwaves,” the government would award new licenses and would require a re-evaluation of the existing ones, but nothing happened. Its successor, the conservative Karamanlis Government announced the digital map, while the then Prime Minister Costas Karamanlis called the owners of the mainstream media “the pimps of the Greek media system” (quoted in Konstadaras 2004).

Why this policy of non-action? The reason seems to be simple. Successive governments since 1989, the year of television deregulation, appear to have been playing an “on and off” game with television owners who also have other interests in the Greek economy. In effect, they seem to be saying “be nice to me so that you get an official license.” It is not a coincidence that various governments passed relevant broadcasting laws which have not been implemented. Up to now, governments and politicians threaten to introduce legislation (for example, the Presidential Decree no. 214 of 1998, and the Law of Main Shareholder in 2005) which would control either the television licenses or media concentration, but these have either been lost in space or were against the EU regulations.

Today, it seems that we have entered a new era of “interplay” between media owners and politicians. In this new game, each party tries to get tactical advantages because each needs the other. Here it is important to stress that it is not commercial motives alone that drive entrepreneurs and other business interests to enter small media markets such as those in Greece. To an extent, broadcasting is in this way similar to the press, where most newspapers are dependent on considerable yearly subsidies, bank loans, or on the wealth of their owners. The entry of businessmen and shipping owners and other business interests into the media scene has been an important way to influence public opinion and to exert pressure in the political arena for their business interests. For instance, the legislation initially required television channels to bid for ten-year licences via auctions, and proposed that nationally syndicated networks with general content offer at least eight million euros for license procurement, while networks with thematic content offer at least five million euros, and television channels without informative content offer at least two million euros. A few months later, in April 2016, Minister of State Nikos Pappas and Alternate Finance Minister Giorgos Houliarakis signed a joint ministerial decision setting the starting price for television license bids. According to the decision, television channels competing for one of the four national private television licenses would have to submit offers of three million euros or above when the competition is launched in the next few months.

It is obvious that the new government and its political allies want to have the upper hand in order either to put pressure on media owners and their vested interests in the Greek economy, or to form new alliances with other media owners and

vested interests. In the final analysis, the interplay between the two poles remains unchanged. At the same time, polls indicate that the Greek public appears to be increasingly cynical about both politicians and the media.

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