

Broadcasting, politics and the state in Socialist Greece

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Introduction

In Greece, people had been accustomed to a broadcasting environment consisting of two nation-wide television channels and four radio stations. They now need to adjust both their TV and radio sets to a new landscape which includes new private radio stations, satellite channels re-transmitted throughout UHF frequencies and new private channels against a background of complex political manoeuvres.

Such deregulation has been associated with the 'hot politics' of the time rather than with the pursuit of a well-organized plan. Broadcasting has a symbiotic relationship with the political controversies of Greece with the starting point that both radio and television were born and established under dictatorships in modern Greece's troubled history. Consequently, both radio and television have been regarded as 'arms of the state'. Moreover, the debate has been focused on governmental control and regular interference in television production, a condition which has become part of post-dictatorship politics. Since Parliament was re-established, the Conservatives and Socialists have dominated the political scene, and have accused each other of too much governmental control over broadcasting.

This situation has largely arisen from the tensions in Greek society since the Second World War. These tensions combined with the absence of a strong civil society made the state an autonomous and dominant factor in Greek society (Mouzelis, 1986). This has also been reflected in broadcasting. Even in the recent case of the deregulation of both radio and television, party politics were directly involved despite the constant dislike shown by

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the Greek people toward state control and demands for less state controlled broadcast media.

This article attempts to describe and interpret broadcasting deregulation in Greece, by looking at the role of the state in broadcasting affairs.

The relative autonomy of the Greek state and the media

As noted above, the state plays a decisive role in Greek broadcasting. This is because the state is not only relatively autonomous but also has an 'over-extended' character. Mouzelis (1980: 261–4) points out that this situation has been associated with a weak atrophied civil society where the state has to take on additional politico-ideological functions. This fits the case of broadcasting. The over-extended character of the state has coincided with the underdevelopment of capitalism in Greece. This makes the system less self-regulatory than developed capitalism such as exists in Britain. Thus, the state has to intervene and adopt a dirigist attitude because it has to 'fill the gaps' in various sectors of the society and economy (Ziemann and Lanzendorfer, 1977).

Moreover, the lack of self-regulation is also noticeable at the level of politico-ideological superstructure because in a weak civil society even the economically dominant classes do not manage to form well organized and cohesive pressure groups. Mouzelis (1980: 262) notes that because of the persistence of patronage politics, even bourgeois parties and interest groups are articulated within the state machinery in a clientist/personalistic manner. This leads the state to promote the interests of particular types of capital rather than the interests of capital as a whole. Therefore, lack of self-regulation makes the state intervene also in the politico-ideological sphere and thus diffuse its repressive mechanisms. The fact that the state plays a decisive role in the formation of the Greek economy and polity illustrates the state's relative autonomy from its society. It is not accidental therefore that there has been such strict control over the broadcasting media in Greece.

Looking at the media in general, the strong state, not only in Greece, in its role as a rule maker, defines the extent of the relative autonomy it is willing to grant to the media. Even in the case of the press, which enjoys a liberal regime, the state defines press autonomy. This can easily be seen in the press laws or in cases of declared national emergency where the state reserves the right seriously to reduce press autonomy. In a more indirect but more effective way, the state acts to enforce these formal rules, as well as to enforce the unwritten rules of power politics, by using a wide range of means of intervention which are at its disposal. A very effective means which the state uses to enforce written press limits is by providing sizeable financial aid to the press, on which individual enterprises become

dependent since they cannot cover their production costs. Other means, not too frequently used, are courts, censorship, suspension of publication, etc. In broadcasting as noted the state not only intervenes but is the active agent. Greek broadcasting was established, as in most European countries, as a state monopoly. This was inevitable since both radio and television were established during dictatorial periods of modern Greek history, but the state monopoly remained after the restoration of Parliament in 1974. According to the Constitution of 1975, 'radio and television will be under the direct control of the state'. Officially, this was justified on the grounds of limited frequencies being available as well as by the need to provide full coverage for such a mountainous country with its many islands. Incidentally, a new television station wishing to provide nation-wide coverage would need to pay a considerable, if not prohibitively large, amount of money (about £11 million) to introduce such a service. Therefore, the only feasible way would be to co-operate with the state broadcaster, ERT (Hellenic Radio and Television) and share or lease some of the latter's transmitters. In practice, the state has felt, as in most countries, that broadcasting was its exclusive affair.

Therefore, the state became the sole agent of the broadcast media. The government manipulation of news output is a suitable example of the dirigist role of the state. In Greece, broadcasting, especially television, has traditionally reflected and reinforced government views and policies (Papathanassopoulos, 1989b: 33). As a result, ministerial censorship has been common practice and state control greater than is usual elsewhere. The general pattern in the Greek state broadcasting media has been that a transfer of power is followed by an equivalent changeover in the state media institutions' executives, resulting in major changes in the message reaching the audiences. In other words, all key radio and television appointees were politically sympathetic, or affiliated, to the government of the day. The outcome was news and editorial judgements of particular importance were in close agreement, if not identical, to government announcements on a whole range of policies and decisions.

This tight state control has ruled Greek broadcasting and doomed even the most capable and well-intentioned executives to failure. Those who occupy the key posts in the state broadcasting media, especially the Director-General (DG), come under not only permanent press criticism but also the wrath of the government. In cases where they allow (mostly by accident), anti-government messages to 'go-on-air', they face the government's anger and most probably dismissal. Thus, since the restoration of Parliament, the responsible posts in state broadcasting have come and gone with great frequency.

This paternalism of the Greek state, in television in particular, has remained one of the most important parameters of the media. It is not surprising therefore that the proposals of Sir Hugh Greene (modelled on

the BBC way), when he was invited to make a feasibility study on the structure of broadcasting, were not adopted by the then Conservative government of Constantine Karamanlis. In contrast, the Conservatives in power (1974–81), adopted a policy which although it excluded ‘party politics’ from television, over-emphasized the government’s activities and achievements.

The Socialist government of Andreas Papandreou (1981–8), although when in opposition it strongly criticized government manipulation of news output, simply adopted what it had opposed, forgot the principle of objectivity and misused the media for partisan ends. This was mainly because the Socialists followed most of the typical incorporative tactics that Greek parties in power usually adopt (Mouzelis, 1987: 280–1).

The Socialist government and broadcasting

The year 1981 saw the first Left government to come into office in Greece. The Socialists’ slogan was *alaghi* (change), a catch-all policy phrase, which was to express the willingness of the Greek people to change their political ways. Broadcasting was one of them. Unfortunately for Greek broadcasting, the Socialists, in their first term in office, did not change anything, while towards the end of their second term in power, they were forced to deregulate Greek broadcasting.

The Socialists in power adopted a dirigist attitude linked with a kind of populism. The major characteristic of the Socialist government was the lack of a clear-cut, consistent and coherent policy. Its policy was at times confusing and subject to change (Featherstone, 1983, 1987) and abandonment of its original programme (Lyrintzis, 1987: 667–8). In their second term in power (1985–9), the Socialists were forced to launch a dramatic U-turn in their economic policy aiming at economic stabilization (i.e. to curb inflation and reduce foreign debt) by adopting an austerity policy (by moving away from the easy incomes and spending policies) which openly contradicted the Socialist election campaign ‘for even better days’ (Featherstone, 1987: 12; Lyrintzis, 1987: 667).

As regards broadcasting, the Socialist government’s policy was equally incoherent but with one consistency, i.e. manipulation of news output. While in their 1981 election campaign, the Socialists adopted the fashionable slogan of impartiality for the state broadcasting media, they changed very little. Although one could say that change cannot be continuous or instantaneous or costless (Carroll, 1984: 73–4) and that new policies are constrained by past choices and preferences (Krasner, 1988: 71; Hogwood and Peters, 1982: 225–6), it seems that in the Greek case, the deeply paternalistic attitude of the state, especially when it is not threatened by internal pressures and external realities (see next section) makes increasingly difficult the adoption of ‘relative neutrality’ (and of

meritocratic criteria in public appointments) in the state media and other public institutions.

Thus, some changes introduced by the Socialists in the broadcasting media were either superficial or short-lived. For example: (1) although the opposition's statements were broadcast and some party conferences, news coverage, commentaries and interviews were aimed at providing greater publicity for the government and the Socialist party. Incidentally, Mr Papandreou's, the Socialist Prime Minister, frequent appearances on the TV screen made some comment that in his eight years in power, Papandreou more frequently spoke on television than in Parliament; (2) news bulletins often gave the impression of broadcasting statements rather than covering events; (3) the managers of state broadcasting came and went with great frequency mainly because they somehow did not cover the government's policies well enough. For example, in 1981–9, ERT had thirteen chairmen and DGs, and sixteen news-directors with an average term of about eight months; (4) the 1985 experiment, the so-called 'spring' of state-run TV, initiated by the Socialists, lasted for only two and a half months. In this experiment, the government attempted to present 'light impartiality' in news programmes by appointing other than 'its own people' to the state broadcaster. After this experiment, Papandreou announced that impartiality and pluralism on state media were incompatible because this *distorts* government policy.

Afterwards, the Socialist government, although one would expect it to loosen its tight control over the media with the deregulation of radio, when most radio stations provided alternative to state media information, it reinforced it. For example, when Greece held the Presidency of the European Community (July–December 1988), the government forced ERT's managers to resign because they did not broadcast the whole speech given in Athens by the EC Commission's President, Jacques Delors, so it was distorted! Especially between the summer of 1988 and the general elections of June 1989 — a period which coincided with Greece's most serious political crisis since the restoration of democracy, associated with the country's financial scandals — the Socialist government desperately sought to 'save its image'. It tightened its control over television to use it for improving its image with the public, replacing the news bulletins with a government spokesman. It appeared that the Socialists paraphrased de Gaulle's approach to the media, from 'my enemies have the press, I have broadcasting' to 'our opponents have radio, we have television'.

Deregulating the broadcasting monopoly and the 'relative weakness' of the state

The Greek state, because it has had to take on additional politico-ideological functions, has become not only relatively autonomous but also

very strong. However, because of its semi-peripheral character, it has also been relatively weak, restricted by structural constraints. This combination of high autonomy and high structural dependence upon both the national and international capitalist system is one of the characteristics of the Greek state (Mouzelis, 1980: 264). Also the combination of internal structural constraints and pressures and external constraints (Offe, 1975) appears to be the major reason for the deregulation of the state broadcasting monopoly in Greece.

The deregulation of Greek broadcasting, as in other European countries, seems to have been more than the removal of certain rules and regulations. It is rather the outcome of the internationalization of broadcasting in relation to pressure from domestic forces. As an EC member, Greece is also influenced by the Community's policies, which since the publication of *Television Without Frontiers*, has adopted a liberal and mercantilist policy towards broadcasting in its Directive. In effect, when the ERT brought the mayor of Thessaloniki to court because he was operating a local TV channel, it lost the case. The court ruled that ERT's monopoly was against the Treaty of Rome. Yet, broadcasting deregulation in other European countries has strengthened Greek domestic forces with neoliberal ideologies to press for the removal of obstacles to the introduction of market forces in broadcasting. This claim in relation to the demand for the 'liberalization' of broadcasting from political partisanship puts further pressures on the state's position. The break-up of the state broadcasting monopoly, however, came only after *direct action*. The state seems to be vulnerable to direct action when conditions are ripe, because the state cannot determine the policy outcome by using its *tactical advantage*. Tactical advantages, according to Wilsford (1988: 132), are methods and procedures and the capacity to employ them which the state may use for short-term objectives.

As in any strong state, the Greek state's strength lies also in its weakness. For the Greek state, by dealing high-handedly with its opponents, cuts them off from normal avenues of political negotiation. The government having absolute control over the broadcasting media, excluded any negotiation for more pluralism in them. In doing so, it forced its opponents to exit from normal politics. In daily politics this meant by going on demonstrations, strikes, boycotts and sometimes riots. In the broadcasting case such direct action cannot work successfully. Another kind of direct action was needed, an action specially concentrated and co-ordinated to reduce the effectiveness of the state.

In the aftermath of the 1986 municipal elections, the mayors of Athens, Thessaloniki and Piraeus, all leading members of the Conservative opposition, stated that they would launch first radio and then television stations in their respective cities. In effect, they led the way with their stations Athina 98.4, Kanali 1 and Thessaloniki 100. Their example was quickly followed in other cities and municipalities. Because of this

unexpected direct action the state could not find any tactical advantage to secure its vulnerable position. Thus, the mayors' initiative was extremely effective. The state tried to use its tactical advantages in order to determine the policy outcome. Before this de facto deregulation had actually taken place, Prime Minister Andreas Papandreou tried to defuse the situation by pronouncing that his government intended to liberalize the radio frequencies. Consequently, with the decree of 1987 local radio stations may belong to (i) municipalities or local authorities or (2) companies of which shareholders are Greek citizens. The outcome of this has been a proliferation, if not explosion, of radio stations mainly in the big cities, and of course the entry of purely commercial stations.

Having the tactical advantage, however, does not mean that the strong state will always win its political battles against interest groups (Wilsford: 1988: 132). With the decree of 1987, the government on the one hand allowed the introduction of private commercial radio stations and, on the other, restructured state broadcasting. But the state lost the battle on television as a result of another direct action, which copied that in relation to radio. In January 1988, the mayor of Thessaloniki commenced retransmitting programmes received from the satellite channels by distributing them to the UHF antennae in the city. The government took the mayor to court for his apparent violation of ERT's monopoly. But when later in the same year the mayor of Athens announced his intention to do the same while the mayor of Piraeus was going ahead with a terrestrial pay-channel, the government again tried to respond rapidly. Thus, ERT started retransmitting satellite channels through UHF frequencies to ten of Greece's largest cities. ERT also argued that this ten-city plan provided coverage of a third of Greek TV households (about 1.5 million), and considered it an experiment for future developments. In this time the 'power of the dish' helped the Opposition to organize its direct action against the state.

In effect, since the first break up of the radio monopoly, the Socialist government had realized that it had to invent new ways to respond to the challenges provoked by the Conservative opposition mainly organized under the 'umbrella' of the municipalities (Papathanassopoulos, 1989a). The decree of 1987 indicated that the government probably anticipated direct action in relation to television. The 1987 decree tried to reorganize the state-broadcaster as a public company in a way similar to the BBC, with two national channels (ET 1 and ET 2) and four radio stations. In 1989, a third channel was launched in northern Greece but it was largely regarded as the Socialist government's attempt to compete with the mayor of Thessaloniki's television station (TV 100) which was anti-governmental. The government also realized that the satellite *trial* period would not last for ever and thus before the 1989 general elections announced its intention of launching private channels. In doing so, the government wanted to get a

tactical advantage over the developments in television and to come out from the defensive and weak position into which the recent direct actions had put it. That defensive position has also to be linked to the government's lack of popularity attributable to allegations of financial scandals and of bribes associated with arms contracts. Privatization of television could 'liberate' the government from its weak position and put it on the offensive with the argument that it was the first Greek government to lead the country in the era of 'free' broadcasting.

Privatizing TV and the first effects of radio deregulation

A little before the June 1989 legislative elections, the government set up an interparliamentary commission to assess the feasibility of private television stations in Greece. At the same time a number of private interests (mainly publishers and businessmen) were snapping at the heels of the government to get a licence — the government received eighteen applications — confirming that the state had recovered from the side-effects of direct actions. At this time the government played an 'on-and-off' game especially with the publishers. It appeared that the government favoured those who were not critical of its policies and image. Its tactic was to postpone any decision by arguing that 'legal problems' linked to the new regime should be solved first, and then it would license the private channels (Pretenderis, 1989: 8). The new government — an unprecedented coalition between the Conservatives and the Left with the aim of clearing up Greek polity from scandals and corruption — announced in July 1989 its intention to award private TV licences: two in Athens and two in Thessaloniki. This time the publishers favoured by the government appear to be those who were critical of the previous Socialist government.

What is interesting from the story of broadcasting deregulation in Greece is not only the entry of publishers and other entrepreneurs into the broadcasting media (this is similar in most cases in Europe), but also the fact that it has largely copied the situation in the printed press. This is because the clear indication up to now is that — although radio stations have flourished since the deregulation of local radio frequencies — there are too many stations for too few commercials. Although radio stations are flexible in accommodating advertisers' wishes and attracting sponsorship, apart from the very big stations the majority do not seem to be viable, a situation reminiscent of the Greek press — where most newspapers are dependent on either considerable yearly subsidies or soft state-bank loans or on the wealth of their owners. Incidentally, the radios 'libres' have not opened up new ways of doing radio; nothing innovative has come from radio deregulation. Stations copy each other, and all present more or less

the same output at the level of the lowest common denominator. A private station, Kanali 15, which had intended to provide quality programming was indirectly bought up by commercial interests with the result that its DG and minority shareholder lost his job, and the station's quality output decreased. It could be said that a better mix of programmes and more reliable information on the political scene came with the new stations (Lowry, 1989: 38), but the general outcome was poor quality, as well as lack of imagination and professionalism. All the noise and shuffle inside the radio stations suggests that one is getting a version of the blatant commercialization of the US system with nothing innovative to offer. Yet, they have not provided any alternative to the state radio's output, the latter still remains better in terms of general quality of output.

The owners of private radio stations are publishers, political parties and politicians, businessmen and shipowners, municipalities, as well as previous radio 'pirates' (Lakopoulos, 1989: 31). It is obvious that for the first four, radio has been regarded as a means for applying political pressure like newspapers, rather than a business-oriented enterprise. As with the printed press, radio can play a role for political interests, and those who own can apply pressure for political and business ends.

In policy terms, the Socialist government's reaction is described as a haphazard response to the politics of the time, a policy without any plan or test. It was a reactive response to the direct action of the Opposition and in the face of the general elections of June 1989. Thus, the satellite channels which ERT retransmitted involved the company with the prospect of facing legal action from most satellite channels because they argue that ERT has retransmitted their signals without authorization (apart from CNN and MTV). Nevertheless, it must be admitted that ERT has simply exploited the loopholes and the absence of European agreement produced either by the European Community or the Council of Europe. Recently, the American Film-makers' Marketing Association warned the Greek government about the copyright issue.

What appears certain is that the Socialist government followed a short-sighted policy aimed at responding to the politics of the time and to electoral speculations rather than to the needs of Greek broadcasting. It also appears that the tactical advantages which the government could use were lost in the face of direct action. This situation also illustrates the fact that in Greece, broadcasting has more to do with partisan ends rather than a well-organized plan and coherent proposals. It is also apparent that general rhetoric as well as speculation, confusion and misunderstanding have replaced any serious thinking about how to build up a new broadcasting structure. For example, some radio stations do not respect their frequency allocations and use others, while a proposed new private TV station, Megachannel, in Athens, is planning to transmit using the PAL

system when Greece's system is SECAM (as reported [30 July 1989] in *Ethnos*, a daily newspaper of which the owner is the chairman of one of the two private channels in Athens).

Conclusions: broadcasting and democracy

In general, the Greek Socialists maintained a traditional relationship with the broadcasting media, i.e. total control excluding any critique of government policies. But the strong and monolithic position of the state in relation to broadcasting could not be maintained because of its failure to invent new tactical advantages to overcome the opposition's direct action, and because of external constraints or forces. Clearly, broadcasting deregulation in Greece was the result of political circumstances. Thus the pressure from private groups, in conjunction with the direct action of political forces, with the U-turn in government policy, broke or at least limited the government's ability to manoeuvre and adopt effective strategies. The result was that the monolithic state-regulated monopoly underwent dramatic radio and ill-planned television deregulation. Thus, while the political parties were climbing on and off the commercial bandwagon, in their effort to break the state monopoly, they gave no real thought as to how to renovate the public sector and how to redefine the concept and mission of public service in broadcasting.

The present Conservative-Left coalition government has put as a top issue in its policy-agenda the 'liberalization' or democratization of television from political interference. This long-term demand by most Greeks, it seems, may take place due to the fact that the June 1989 legislative elections resulted in a hung parliament with no political party strong enough to secure a workable majority and thus form a government. This situation seems to have helped the democratization of Greek television since the government is dependent not only on one party but on two with very opposite views. The Parliament also has strengthened its position in relation to the executive. But it is too early to say whether the democratization will become really established. The entry of private channels may help TV's democratization, but since the state will maintain a determining influence over who will get licences and since the anticipated elections may result in a party strong enough to form a government, it may lead to another version of the state, if not totally controlling, heavily influencing TV networks. The fact that the government has not yet announced the establishment of a body, along the lines of the Independent Broadcasting Authority in Britain or the Conseil Supérieure de l'Audio-visuel in France, to work as a buffer between the partisan interests of the government of the day and the broadcasting companies, highlights how ambivalent the coalition government has been. Although such an Authority is in the last analysis an illusion of liberalism by permitting the

politicians to show their distance from the media, it makes the broadcast media more responsive to public tastes and, most importantly, to the broader public interest, by controlling the quality and not the political content of broadcast output. Instead, the government announced the creation of a National Broadcasting Council, yet to be formed, but without any real power since it can only advise the government but not take decisions, meaning that the central government is still in position to maintain control over state electronic media.

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