Civil Society

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Abstract and Keywords

In the post-1974 era Greek society suffered from low levels of civic engagement, associational density, and volunteering. Non-governmental and civil society organizations were relatively few and poorly organized, relying mostly on state and European Union funds. This, in turn, compromised their autonomy and diminished their capacity to act as a check on state power. However, Greek civil society has been changing since the early 1990s. Several new NGOs have appeared, focusing mainly on environmental issues, their activities have been strengthened and widened, and people have been devoting more time and money to social activism. There are several reasons that explain this development: apart from wider cultural shifts, an important factor has been that political parties have loosened their grip on the associational sphere, leaving more space for voluntary organizations. The change of stance of a significant part of the Greek Left, which previously regarded NGOs with suspicion, was crucial. The receding welfare state in the last decade encouraged civic engagement and mobilized citizens. The number of volunteers increased, new organizations were formed, and older ones became more active in providing social services to impoverished Greeks and migrants. Importantly, the new forms of activism and engagement that are on the rise are not linked to the state. The crisis seems to have strengthened Greek civil society: the dependency on EU and state funds of previous years that had constrained NGO independence and autonomy may at last have started to wane.

Keywords: NGOs, CSOs, volunteers, post-materialism, civic education, Orthodox Church, taxation

22.1 Introduction

IN their well-known introduction to Greek politics, Keith R. Legg and John M. Roberts (1997: 198) wrote that ‘if a latter-day Tocqueville were to visit Greece, he would not conclude that [it] is a country of joiners’. Most researchers have argued that Greek civil society in the post-1974 period was ‘poorly developed’ (Mavrogordatos, 1988; Tsoucalas, 1993; Mavrogordatos, 1993; Mouzelis, 1995; Polyzoidis, 2009). Featherstone (2005: 230)

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summed up the key conclusions of the post-1974 academic literature on Greek politics by stating that there is a consensus that 'civil society, as conventionally understood, is weak: participation rates are low and organisations lack independence from the state and/or political parties'. In the apt words of an analyst: 'every social scientist studying civil society in Greece (…) agrees that [it] is cachectic, atrophic or fragile' (Hadjiyanni, 2010: 20).

However, this is not entirely true. Some social scientists have questioned the 'underdevelopment' of Greek civil society. Sotiropoulos (2004) has argued that researchers fail to take into account the important informal and non-institutionalized groups. Iordanoglou (2013) has challenged the 'conventional wisdom' by including in Greek civil society interest groups of various kinds like professional associations and labour unions where, quite often, participation is not entirely voluntary, and by noting that some of these organizations were particularly strong and influential in post-junta Greece. And Rozakou (2016: 84–6) completely rejected Greek civil society's 'weakness' narratives, claiming that the whole debate is an externally imposed public discourse, reflecting a 'civilizing mission' of 'modernization' and 'Europeanization' that presents the relative lack of Western-style charities and volunteers as a *problem* that Greece should 'address and resolve'.

There is some truth in these arguments. Indeed, informal groups—especially at the local level—were and are quite active and effective in providing social services to people in need throughout Greece. In addition, informal Not-In-My-BackYard (NIMBY) **(p. 352)** movements have at times become very influential in their localities (such as mobilizations against waste-disposal sites). Especially since the beginning of the financial crisis in 2010, several unregistered groups have arisen spontaneously, providing goods and services to people in need. One analyst that 'discovered' these civic initiatives while visiting crisis-hit Athens in 2012 enthusiastically used Hannah Arendt's poetic description of civil society initiatives as 'oases in the desert' (Guisan, 2016: 397).

Moreover, some associations and 'protective groups' have been strong enough to affect policy-making. For example, associations of disabled people have been highly effective in raising public awareness and influencing law-makers. One example of such kind of activism that appeared almost immediately after the country's return to democracy in 1974, is the 'Struggle of the Blind People' vividly portrayed in the same-titled documentary. And to a large extent, it is true that the debate about civil society in Greece was 'imported' in the late 1980s from the Anglo-Saxon world, with Greek academics quarrelling about the proper way of translating it into Greek (finally *κοινωνία πολιτών* became the accepted term).

The structure of this chapter is as follows. The first part presents empirical evidence that details the weakness of Greek civil society and examines some factors that can explain it. The second part identifies the dynamics of Greek civil society organizations since the 1980s with specific reference to the important role of the European Union. Next, the chapter focuses on the impact of the economic crisis on Greek NGOs and informal groups. Finally, the chapter presents some challenges that the Greek case poses to academic literature on civil society and identifies issues that need further research.

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22.2 Causes of Civil Society’s Weakness

Since the early 2000s, a number of reliable empirical and quantitative studies have documented the low levels of social capital, civic engagement, and associational density in Greece. The 2005 Civicus Survey noted widespread apathy, underlining that Greek civil society organizations are few and poorly organized and have little impact and limited influence (Sotiropoulos and Karamagioli, 2006). Data collected by the European Social Survey (ESS) have also shown very low levels of interpersonal trust. In the 2008 and 2010 ESS rounds, Greece ranked as one of the three countries with the lowest levels of social capital in Europe; only Poland and Portugal scored slightly lower (Jones, Proikaki and Roumeliotis, 2015: 29–33).The World Giving Index, which is based on more than half a million interviews about donations to charities and aid organizations, volunteering time, and offering to help strangers, consistently rated Greece at the very bottom. In the 2013 Index, Greece ranked 135th among 135 countries with just thirteen points out of a maximum score of 100: only 6 per cent of the Greeks participating in the survey had contributed money to charity and only 4 per cent had donated money to philanthropic causes (Danopoulos, 2017: 71).

(p. 353) But it is not only charities and NGOs. There is ample evidence that participation in trade unions, professional associations, and other protective groups is also comparatively low. In the Composite Active Citizenship Index, which measures sixty-one indicators ranging from voter turnout to trade union membership, Greece also scored much lower than other European countries (Hoskins, 2009). A 2013 Eurobarometer Report noted that Greece is one of five European countries where a majority of respondents claimed that ‘European citizens do not need NGOs’ and 46 per cent argued that they do not trust associations (the third highest figure in the EU). In the same survey (Eurobarometer 2013), only 10 per cent of Greeks had ever signed a petition online or on paper (the second lowest in the EU after Cyprus—7 per cent), a clear indication of ‘a political culture emphasizing atomistic goals attained through individual recourse to people in positions of power’ (Pridham et al., 1995: 61).

Several reasons have been put forward to explain Greek civil society weakness. For many analysts, the most important factor is the dominance of political parties. Throughout the post-junta period, trade unions, student associations, and even feminist organizations and peace movements were affiliated with a political party. Mouzelis and Pagoulatos (2002) argued that Greek civil society became the victim of ‘partitocracy’, that is, parties ‘colonizing’ the associational sphere and leaving little space for autonomous civic engagement. The Civicus report also stated that political parties have ‘absorbed’ social demands and aspirations in a way that no civil society organization could match (Sotiropoulos and Karamagioli, 2006).

The party dominance argument is linked to the state dominance explanation that focuses on the ‘dirigistic’/interventionist 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, fostering clientelism. Politicians have employed an

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emotional nationalistic rhetoric that avoided genuine issues, leading to the polarization of the political debate and diminishing the space for the development of an autonomous civil society. This view reflects Mouzelis's (1986) much-cited analysis that explains the weakness of Greek civil society as a symptom of the country's imperfect modernization, the 'early parliamentarism and late industrialization' argument that led to a vertical rather than horizontal incorporation of the social spectrum into politics.

These views present Greece as a rather unique case—clearly distinguishable from other countries of Western Europe. Nevertheless, there are important similarities with other south European countries. Some observers have noted that there exists a 'Mediterranean pattern' of civil society weakness that could be explained by '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). Indeed, it could be argued that the dictatorship 'inhibited' Greek society from being influenced by a number of important civil society movements emerging in Western Europe in the late 1960s and early 1970s (like the May 1968 events and the founding of 'global NGOs' like Medecins Sans Frontières in France).

(p. 354) Thus, comparative research could offer persuasive explanations of Greek civil society's underdevelopment. Some historians, following an argument made by Putnam (1993), focused on the long durée, arguing that the Industrial Revolution and the social changes that it brought spread into the eastern Mediterranean with much delay, more than 100 years later. Historians Koliopoulos and Veremis used Ernest Gellner's 'segmentary society' to describe the clans and splinter groups that were a persistent characteristic of Greek society until much of the twentieth century (Koliopoulos and Veremis, 2010: 190). This 'extreme familism' was characterized by much 'bonding' but very little 'bridging' social capital (Putnam, 2000).

22.3 The Relationship of Civil Society with State and EU Authorities

Whatever the causes of weakness, Greek civil society has been changing since the late 1980s. Many new NGOs have been formed, their activities have been strengthened and widened, and people have been devoting more time and money to social activism. Environmental NGOs have been among the most active, mobilizing citizens and making their impact felt on a number of issues. Although researchers have continued to question their ability to influence policy-making (Kousis, 1994; Pridham et al., 1995; Demertzis, 1995), in some cases and despite their small size, Greek environmental NGOs have managed to build alliances with their European counterparts and have proved effective in raising the issue of abuse of EU subsidies. One such case was the Achelöos River diversion project where a successful NGO campaign in the mid-1990s persuaded the European Commission to withhold funding. This NGO campaign has contributed to making successive Greek governments—though publicly continuing to be committed to the project—more sensitive to growing public resistance to environmentally destructive projects (Close,

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1998). By the late 1990s, a study by Panteion University found that 1,200 NGOs were operating throughout the country, of which 75 per cent were established in the 1980s (Stasinopoulou, 1997).

There are several reasons that explain this development. Apart from wider cultural shifts like the rise of post-materialism (Inglehart, 2015), an important factor has been that political parties have loosened their grip on the associational sphere, leaving more space for voluntary organizations. The availability of EU funds for civil society organizations has also played a very important role.

The European Social Fund and Community Programmes such as LIFE and EQUAL have financed NGO projects with hundreds of millions of euros for projects implemented throughout the country. The LIFE programme was instrumental in raising environmental awareness and helped NGOs to develop their capacity and attract public (p. 355) support. The EQUAL programme helped to tackle discrimination in the labour market and pushed Greek NGOs to develop transnational networks. Funding for poverty-alleviation projects was also important in helping disadvantaged groups.

EU funds were significant in strengthening the organizational capacity of Greek NGOs. Several NGOs with weak structures and little experience of how to manage funds and implement projects became more ‘professional’, learning how to set objectives, make needs assessment, manage their human resources, monitor and evaluate their activities. Voluntary organizations with limited project experience have developed their ability to plan, create, and maintain transnational networks.

EU requirements to apply sound management and bureaucratic procedures aimed at promoting accountability, efficiency, and transparency. However, in several cases, the result has been to impose on civil society organizations a ‘business’ model that acted as a disincentive to citizen participation and engagement. Fake ‘voluntary’ organizations linked to profit-making consultancies and exploiting a loose and outdated legal/regulatory framework multiplied. Some NGOs were simply created to win EU funds. Local authorities created ‘pseudo-NGOs’ in order to create job positions for the unemployed.

Moreover, EU funds fuelled a ‘dependency culture’. NGOs became indifferent to other funding opportunities, neglecting their efforts to communicate their activities to the wider public and mobilize volunteers. Thus, external funding became a disincentive to maintain and strengthen the NGO grassroots bases. The ‘upward’ accountability of NGOs to the EU and responsible state agencies increased at the expense of their ‘downward’ accountability to their members and the broader society. This, in turn, compromised their autonomy and diminished their capacity to act as a check on state power. Many NGOs became reluctant to criticize the government and its policies and neglected advocacy, focusing simply on service provision. Civil society organizations, championed in theory as agents of associative democracy, were groomed to become service-providers or sub-contractors. In some respects, EU funding for NGOs hindered rather than fostered the formation of a more autonomous and democratic society that could act as a counterbalance to

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the arbitrariness of state institutions and the dominance of political parties (Tzifakis, Petropoulos and Huliaras, 2017).

Within the older NGOs, the growing professionalisation meant a shift of power from volunteers to experts and professionals. The participation of citizens and the mobilization of society were put on the back burner and hiring skilled staff became a priority. Some big NGOs began to look more and more like consultancies, with fundraising departments, press and communication officers and a hierarchy that resembled well-organized businesses rather than bottom-up initiatives. A proposal-writing and reporting-capacity in order to secure a constant flow of funds became a *conditio sine qua non* for a successful organization. Moreover, faced with short project timeframes, NGOs engaged in opportunistic behaviours and chased after everything that might provide funding.

At the same time, Greek state authorities found it convenient to 'delegate' whole sectors of social provision to NGOs. Social care for people with disabilities, drug (p. 356) addicts, asylum-seekers, and the management of national parks gradually became the sole responsibility of EU-funded NGOs. The availability of EU funding also affected NGO priorities. This is the typical 'goal succession' problem: in order to increase their resources, NGOs shifted their emphasis 'away from their original goals to adapt them to public donor priorities' (Salgado, 2010: 519).

Moreover, the lack of coordination among state agencies that managed EU funds led to extensive duplication and overlap. The change of governments and ministers and the resulting switching of priorities made matters worse. Funds were shifted from environmental projects to migration and from women empowerment to Romas without a clear strategic framework (Tzifakis et al., 2017: 2183).

Many NGOs focused on contacting politicians, regularly visiting government offices and trying to influence funding priorities and persuade officials about the need to 'support civil society' (Frangonikolopoulos, 2014: 610).

All these developments generated public suspicion and mistrust for NGO work. A number of scandals linked to development assistance grants provided to NGOs by the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the late 1990s led to negative publicity: the Greek media presented them as 'lamogia', the Greek equivalent of American 'tricksters'. Generalized and negative reporting increased the suspicion of the public even towards NGOs that did good work (Frangonikolopoulos, 2014: 616). As NGOs competed fiercely to win contracts for all sorts of projects, they ended up accusing each other of being unreliable, useless, or even 'dirty'—in fact confirming the negative reporting.

Despite all these partly negative developments, there was a growth of genuine and spontaneous civic engagement. Natural disasters have indicated a rising citizen interest for issues beyond their immediate concerns and above their family connections. In September 1999, when an earthquake hit Athens, hundreds of NGOs and informal groups immediately mobilized to help the victims (Sotiropoulos, 2004: 15). And in summer 2007, after a forest fire destroyed a large part of Parnitha's National Park, NGOs initiated a campaign

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that mobilized thousands of citizens: demonstrators asked the government to introduce tougher legislation and take more measures for environmental protection (Botetzagias, 2011). Some analysts saw in these developments a belated awakening of Greek civil society on environmental issues (Botetzagias and Karamichas, 2009).

However, other researchers remained quite sceptical about the ability of these 'bright moments' to launch a systematic and permanent volunteer movement (Tsaliki, 2010: 154). They argued that these short-lived campaigns should be considered as 'activist pyrotechnics', acts of limited long-term significance that were facilitated and 'sexed-up' by new information and communication technologies such as emails, blogs, and internet-based networks like Facebook. A supporting and contextual milieu to promote and, above all, sustain citizen engagement was, in this view, still missing. Family and networks of relatives continued to be 'the basic framework of mutual aid, solidarity and cooperation' in the country (Frangonikolopoulos, 2014: 608-9).

The 2004 Olympic Games were considered by the optimists as a great boost for volunteerism. The Games attracted an impressive number of volunteers: it was (p. 357) reported that the Volunteering Committee of the Games received more than 160,000 applications of which 43 per cent were young people under 24 (Frangonikolopoulos, 2014: 608). However, it should be noted that this figure also includes many applications from abroad. Moreover, these were not exactly non-paid positions: there were a number of fringe benefits for volunteers, ranging from 'compensations' for group leaders to a twenty-day leave for army conscripts. Moreover, the mobilization was not entirely new: sport volunteering in Greece always attracted more people than other sectors.

Finally, as Greece became a migrant-receiving country, several migrant organizations were founded. Migration grew sharply in the 1990s and Greece experienced 'the largest proportional increase in immigration in the EU between 1990 and 2005' (Clarke, 2013: 284). A 2009 study by Harokopion University recorded 128 migrant organizations, representing migrants from more than forty countries as well as from ethnic groups, including Assyrians and Kurds. Using the year of registration as an indicator, an analyst calculated that the number of migrant organizations increased tenfold in the 1995–2009 period (Clarke, 2013: 284–5). Though organized along ethnic lines, migrant associations gradually formed 'umbrella groups' (like the Greek Forum for Migrants) that played an important role in promoting an integration agenda that included a reform of the Greek citizenship law.

22.4 The Economic Crisis

The prolongation and deepening of the 2009 economic crisis tested the limits of the social welfare system. Poverty levels, unemployment rates, and homelessness increased sharply, increasing the strain on family support networks. The economic crisis affected the development of Greek civil society.

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The crisis hit NGOs hard, as public funding decreased or even ceased altogether. However, at the same time, the receding welfare state raised public awareness of social needs, encouraged civic engagement, and mobilized Greek civil society. New organizations were formed and older ones became more active in providing social services to both migrants and impoverished Greeks. Further,

> informal social networks and self-help groups emerged and became active in exchange and distribution of goods and services, healthcare, education, food and shelter provision, offering simultaneously a more critical view towards the state and seeking alternative view of social organisation.
>
> (Sotiropoulos and Bourikos, 2014: 52)

A variety of organizations providing social services have been formed since 2009, ranging from cooperatives to support networks and for social groceries to solidarity bazaars (Polyzoidis, 2015: 120; Sotiropoulos and Bourikos, 2014; Vathakou, 2015). Among them were large-scale grassroots' initiatives like the 'potato movement' that (p. 358) aimed to bypass intermediaries and deliver food staples at a lower price to poor Greeks and migrants. Some argued optimistically that an 'alternative, parallel' economy was in the making (Pantazidou, 2013).

A 2015 nation-wide survey by the University of the Peloponnese provided data that showed that the number of NGO employees and volunteers was steadily increasing throughout the crisis years (https://greekcivilsocietynetwork.wordpress.com/). The OECD reported in 2016 that '41.4 per cent of Greek students aged around 24 volunteered at least once in the 12 preceding months compared to the OECD average of 29.7 per cent' (OECD, 2016: 5).

Part of these positive developments reflected a change in the stance of a significant part of the Greek Left, which previously regarded NGOs with suspicion. By the mid-2000s, both SYRIZA and to a lesser extent the Communist Party of Greece (KKE) made a 'turn towards civil society'. This largely reflected their effort to reach new constituencies. Especially since 2009 SYRIZA has allied itself with a number of movements (including the 'Won't Pay' and the 'Indignant' movement that occupied central squares in Athens and other Greek cities) and NIMBY protests (among others one against a waste-disposal plan in Keratea and another one against a gold-mining investment in Skouries) in order to present itself as a 'vanguard' of social and political forces (Tsakatika and Eleftheriou, 2013: 96–7). SYRIZA activists also organized food kitchens and time banks and helped ameliorate the impact of the crisis on marginalized social groups throughout the country. At the end, SYRIZA's approach 'which emphasised pluralism and openness to social movements proved more adept in the fluid political environment of the 2008–2012 period' (Tsakatika and Eleftheriou, 2013: 16). However, it seems that many of these service-providing initiatives were part of an electoral strategy in the old-fashioned party politics. Thus, following the rise of power of SYRIZA, Greek civil society witnessed lower levels of collective mobilization (Simiti, 2017: 367).

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Another factor was the mobilization of the Greek Orthodox Church that controls a vast network of orphanages, nursing homes, boarding schools, and food kitchens. The Church announced an increase in its philanthropic spending from 96 million euros in 2010 to 126 million in 2015, claiming that its social programmes had more than 1.3 million beneficiaries. However, these figures are not entirely reliable due to the Church's fragmented structure (a large number of dioceses with dissimilar reporting methods) (Tzifakis, Petropoulos and Huliaras, 2017: 2186).

22.5 Philanthropy vs Social Solidarity

There is no doubt that a very significant part of the crisis-born non-profit activities was linked to left-wing political parties and migrant associations. However, as the Greek Orthodox Church remained 'discursively distant' from political debates related to the crisis, largely refusing to criticize local and foreign elites or castigate policies (Makris and Bekridakis, 2013), the secular and the religious 'civil society camps' remained almost totally isolated from each other.

Interestingly, this split had a 'discursive' dimension. Left-wingers preferred the term 'solidarity' instead of the term 'philanthropy' that was used by the Church and private foundations like the Stavros Niarchos Foundation (Theodossopoulos, 2016). This was partly ideological. The Greek Left was always quite sceptical of the proclivity to de-politicize and individualize suffering. According to this view, 'philanthropy' addresses some of the immediate consequences of austerity but at the same time diverts attention from the root causes of poverty and inequalities. In contrast, 'solidarity networks' and informal citizen initiatives aim at bringing change.

Various surveys cited many examples of citizen networks seeking alternative modes of economic conduct and doing advocacy for marginalized groups (Sotiropoulos and Bourikos, 2014; Rakopoulos, 2014). However, in reality 'philanthropic organizations' and 'solidarity networks' largely provided the same goods and services and differed little in the scope and content of their activities. Indeed, there were some politicised initiatives that sought 'alternative modes', but they were few and short lived. The split between NGOs and informal solidarity networks was mostly artificial and discursive, largely reflecting also the long-term rejection of the word 'philanthropy' that brought memories of the Civil War and the charitable efforts of the 'hated' Queen Frederica with her philanthropic 'Child Cities' (Danforth and Van Boeschoten, 2012). In reality, this discursive conflict limited cooperation among organizations and led to uncoordinated efforts with much duplication. Unfortunately, the possibly more neutral word 'charity' has no Greek equivalent.

The deterioration of socio-economic conditions in Greece negatively affected small donations from individuals, while the adoption of fiscal consolidation policies since 2010 brought about a diminution of state financing to the sector. However, the crisis gave rise

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to new sources of funding with the emergence of private foundations as the leading donors for NGO activities.

Private philanthropic foundations such as the Stavros Niarchos Foundation, the Alexander S. Onassis Foundation, the John S. Latsis Foundation, or the Bodossaki Foundation had been established long before the outbreak of the economic crisis, supporting cultural and arts-related events, and environmental initiatives, and providing scholarships to students. However, their priorities changed with the multiplication of appeals by NGOs that struggled to provide support to vulnerable groups hit by the crisis. In 2012, the Stavros Niarchos Foundation announced a 100 million euros programme entitled 'Initiative Against the Greek crisis'. Within the next couple of years, the Foundation allocated another 200 million euros to NGO projects and actions for the youth. Moreover, several new philanthropic foundations were established: among them, TIMA Charitable Foundation in 2011 focusing on the elderly; Solidarity Now (initially funded by the Open Society Foundation) in 2013 and Laskarides Foundation in 2017, both with a more general focus; as well as Hellenic Hope and Hellenic Initiative in 2012, two organizations created and funded by the Greek diaspora (Tzifakis, Petropoulos and Huliaras, 2017: 2190).

(p. 360) The emergence of private philanthropic foundations as the most important donors of Greek NGOs has had an impact on sectoral priorities: NGO activities on culture, international development assistance, and education received less funding than projects on health and social inclusion. It also reinforced the 'rent-seeking' mentality that had already characterized civil society's ecosystem since the early 1990s.Many Greek NGOs continued to look for funding at the 'top' rather than at the 'grassroots', depending on big private foundations instead of citizens (Tzifakis, Petropoulos and Huliaras, 2017: 2195–6). However, the competitive procedures that most of the foundations demanded had, as did EU funding, a positive impact on NGOs: the efficiency and effectiveness of projects increased, as monitoring and evaluation mechanisms were strengthened.

Another source of funding came from the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programmes of large Greek enterprises. Though many companies that saw their profits diminishing were unwilling to engage in CSR activities, the banking and the metallurgy sectors have shown a growing interest (Metaxas and Tsavdaridou, 2013). Moreover, some private media outlets like Skai TV and radio (the 'Oloi Mazi Mporoume' project) have played an important role in promoting volunteerism.

22.6 Post-Crisis Civil Society

The Greek economic crisis has had a 'mixed' impact on organized civil society, giving rise to informal solidarity groups and networks. In economic terms, NGOs came under increasing strain. But at the same time the crisis motivated NGOs to seek ways to increase their resilience. Greek civil society organizations adopted a variety of 'adaptation' strategies, such as restructuring to improve effectiveness, diversifying their funding sources, giving greater emphasis on transparency to meet donor expectations, and paying more attention to communication strategies in order to promote awareness of their causes (Tzi-

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fakis, Petropoulos and Huliaras, 2017). The crisis seems to have strengthened Greek civil society: the dependency on EU and state funds of previous years that had constrained NGO independence and autonomy may at last have started to wane.

The plight of the Greek economy was devastating, but it also brought solidarity and collective action and raised public awareness of poverty and marginalization. The number of volunteers increased, new organizations were formed, and older ones became more active in providing social services to impoverished Greeks and migrants. Importantly, the new forms of activism and engagement that are on the rise are not linked to the state. There is—probably for the first time—a civil society that is discernibly autonomous from traditional political authority (political parties, government agencies, etc.). In terms of membership, organized civil society in Greece is largely virtual (Internet), ideological (mainly left-wing), secular, progressive—especially relating to human rights issues—and young (i.e. it consists mainly of students, unemployed, and professionals in their late 20s and 30s).

(p. 361) Sotiropoulos has persuasively argued that in parallel to 'considerate' and 'empowered' modes of civil society, Greece also witnessed the rise of an 'uncivil society': a segment of citizens mobilizing against austerity policies who 'resorted to racist and xenophobic as well as anti-parliamentary and destructive attitudes and activities' (Sotiropoulos, 2018: 142). Radical groups emerging from both the right and left of the political spectrum pursued violent means of political intervention, incompatible with the rest of civil society and with democratic institutions. These groups, especially after 2010, 'were often left unfettered to roam the central streets of Athens and—depending on their political ideology—either to attack migrants and refugees or to destroy private and public property' (Sotiropoulos, 2018: 150).

Some analysts were also quite sceptical about the importance of the positive trends. Tellingly, Simiti (2017) has argued that the increased density of civil society 'may be a misleading indicator of its strength' as the economic crisis multiplied social needs, corroding the equal representation of social groups, changing the nature and patterns of civic engagement and participation and in effect and in several ways undermining civil society's range of activism and autonomy. For example, the rise of volunteering did not only reflect feelings of solidarity strengthened by the social crisis. As Clarke (2015) notes, the phenomenon of crisis volunteering is more ambivalent than frequently acknowledged since it also mirrors economic and psychological survival strategies on the part of volunteers themselves. Further, it is doubtful if crisis-related patterns of volunteering observed in crisis-ridden Greece are relevant to longer-term trends (Clarke, 2015: 78).

Thus, although the crisis has provided Greek civil society with a chance to develop, it is rather premature to foresee future developments. Social change is a gradual and non-linear process. Eastern European civil society flourished in the early 1990s, following the collapse of communism, but declined afterwards. A report by Transparency International Greece (2011: 165) summed up this scepticism, concluding that organized civil society in

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Greece ‘has a long way ahead of it until it can serve as a contributing factor to social consciousness’.

The development of civil society is closely linked to the performance of state institutions. Interpersonal trust is closely associated to trust to institutions. If the rule of law is weak (according to the 2016 Rule of Law Index, Greece was in the 22nd place out of 24 EU and North American countries—and 34th out of 36 among high-income countries), cooperation among citizens becomes costly. Greek civil society cannot become strong while the Greek state is a ‘lame Leviathan’, unable to effectively collect taxes and offer reliable services. After all there is little evidence of a reverse causality: civil society is only a partial remedy for poor governance.

22.7 Conclusions

Research on Greek civil society is not restricted any more to ‘armchair’ studies. Several reports, papers, and books that are based on extensive empirical work and some (p. 362) nationwide quantitative research are now available. However, several aspects are still under-researched.

Within the last two decades, the Greek NGO sector has undergone significant changes. Although the multiplication of initiatives and the increase of volunteers have been documented by several studies, there was not a significant rise in transnational networking. With few exceptions and until very recently, most Greek NGOs did not maintain systematic and long-term ties with foreign or international NGOs. Transnational cooperation was largely opportunistic and mainly within the framework of externally funded projects. More research is needed to understand this ‘introvert’ dimension of Greek civil society organizations.

Further, the refugee crisis has created a new dynamic environment for the Greek NGO ecosystem and acted as a significant transformation driver (Chtouris and Miller, 2017). Available funding, mostly from European institutions, has increased while, as transnational NGOs and international organizations (like UNHCR) expanded their operations to Greece, close cooperation and partnerships with local NGOs multiplied. However, there is very little research on the impact of the refugee crisis on a traditionally weak sector. Refugee-crisis related developments raise important issues with regard to the autonomy of organized civil society in Greece, such as an increasing dependence on big donors and a widening cleavage between professionalized NGOs and grassroots movements.

Moreover, other important issues related to Greek civil society need more research. There is a clear correlation between tax incentives and charitable giving. For example, the United States offers by far the most generous tax breaks and has the highest levels of giving as a proportion of the GDP (*The Economist*, 2012). However, research on the Greek tax system and in particular on how the very few, limited, constantly-changing and com-

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plicated exemptions provided to civil society organizations affect donations is almost non-existent.

Another issue has to do with the Church. Bailer et al (2013) found that an important predictor of a strong civil society is religious fragmentation. This may be related to the fact that in religiously heterogeneous societies, religious groups compete to attract followers (Baker et al., 2013: 307). Greece is religiously homogeneous to an extent rarely seen in the developed world. Also, the Greek Orthodox Church has a secured position as the 'official religion', acknowledged as such by the country's Constitution, and in several respects is part of the state administrative apparatus. So, more research is needed on how the State–Church relationship has affected Greek civil society and, in particular, on how the 'de-nationalization' of religion could promote civic engagement.

The Greek educational system does not encourage the participation of students in civil society activities. Though civic and citizenship education is offered in the lower secondary school as a compulsory subject, it has a 'legalistic' content focusing on the Constitution, the parliament, and other state institutions with an almost complete lack of extra-curricular activities (Huliaras, 2015: 16–17). More research is needed on how civic educational programmes in primary and secondary schools can promote volunteerism.

(p. 363) In short, researchers should shift their attention from explanations of civil society weakness to more practical aspects, examining how public-policy reforms can increase civic engagement, promote volunteerism, enhance the autonomy of NGOs, strengthen Greek civil society and, at the very end, enrich democracy.

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