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Citation: Iosifidis, P. & Papathanassopoulos, S. (2019). Media, politics and state broadcasting in Greece. *European Journal of Communication*, 34(4), pp. 345-359. doi: 10.1177/0267323119844414

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“Media, Politics and State Broadcasting in Greece”

Published in *European Journal of Communication*, April 2019

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First Published 19 April 2019

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323119844414>

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Abstract

This article focuses on governmental control over state broadcasting media in Greece and analyses whether Hellenic Broadcasting Corporation can be considered as public or state broadcaster. The first part explores the interrelationship between media, politics and the state in Greece, and the ways the latter has affected the development of Hellenic Broadcasting Corporation. By doing so, it makes references to similar Southern European broadcasting models that are also characterised by clientist manners, ministerial censorship, a powerful state and a weak civil society. Furthermore, it looks at the devastating impact of haphazard deregulation and market liberalisation on Hellenic Broadcasting Corporation since the early 1990s, when the Hellenic Broadcasting Corporation lost much of its formerly loyal audience and advertising income to a number of newly launched commercial television channels. Part 2 assesses the degree of political, editorial and financial independence of Hellenic Broadcasting Corporation under the current SYRIZA-led administration. Hellenic Broadcasting Corporation was re-launched by the left-wing SYRIZA government after a temporary 2-year closure, but it is struggling to maintain a competitive advantage and a politically neutral output.

Keywords Greece, Hellenic Broadcasting Corporation, media, politics, public service broadcasting, state broadcasting

Accepted Version:

Introduction

Most media systems in general, and public broadcasting systems in particular are to some degree subject to political power, and disputes over the independence of public broadcasting are common to the history of European media. In effect, most southern European public broadcasting systems have been to a certain extent subject to political influence and dependence. In the case of Greece, Hellenic Broadcasting Corporation (ERT) even nowadays after four decades of the breakup of its broadcasting monopoly is still labelled by many as ‘state’ rather than ‘public’ broadcaster. This wide public perception stems from ERT’s one-time role as a mouthpiece of government propaganda and its on-going close relationship with the government of the day. As both radio and TV broadcasting were launched under dictatorships, they have been regarded as ‘arms of the state.’ Post-dictatorship politics and the restoration of Parliament in 1974 witnessed the Conservatives (New Democracy) and Socialists (PASOK) dominating the political scene accusing each other of too much governmental control over state broadcasting media. Even the new ERT, re-launched by the current left-wing SYRIZA government after a temporary two-year closure, is criticised from opposition parties and the press, accusing the broadcaster of promoting the government’s positions. ERT never obtained a reputation for investigative reporting, but some political voices and mainstream media argue that today has a fundamental bias towards SYRIZA, the party in power.

This article focuses on governmental control over state broadcasting media and analyses whether ERT can be considered as public or state broadcaster. The first part explores the interrelationship between media, politics and the state in Greece, and the ways the latter has affected the development of ERT. By doing so it makes references to similar Southern European broadcasting models that are also characterised by clientist manners, ministerial censorship, a powerful state and a weak civil society. Further, it looks at the devastating impact of haphazard deregulation and market liberalization on ERT since the early 1990s, when the Hellenic Broadcasting Corporation lost much of its formerly loyal audience and advertising income to a number of newly launched commercial

television channels. Part two assesses the degree of political, editorial and financial independence of ERT under the current SYRIZA-led administration. ERT was re-launched by the left-wing SYRIZA government after a temporary two-year closure, but it is struggling to maintain a competitive advantage and a politically neutral output.

Part One

The powerful Greek state

The symbiotic relationship that broadcasting and politics present in Greece is closely linked to political upheavals of the country - both radio and television broadcasting were introduced under dictatorships in modern Greece's troubled history. Radio was formed in the late 1930s under the Metaxas dictatorship and television in the mid-1960s under the Colonels (1967-74). Consequently, both radio and television have been regarded as 'arms of the state.' Moreover, the whole debate about the electronic state media in Greece before deregulation of the sector was focused on governmental control and interference in television programmes. This has become part of post-dictatorship ritualised politics and since Parliament was re-established in 1974, the Conservatives and Socialists have dominated the political scene accusing each other of too much governmental control over state broadcasting media (Papathanassopoulos, 1999).

This situation has largely arisen from the political tensions in Greek society since the Second World War. These tensions, combined with the absence of a strong civil society, have made the state an autonomous and dominant factor in Greek society. For example, shortly after the end of World War II, Greece endured a Civil War between supporters of the government that was in exile during the war and returned to Greece after liberation from the Germans, and the Communist Party in Greece. The civil war led to deep political polarisation and was widely regarded as a missed opportunity to establish a civil society organisation that would work for democracy, equality, consensus and culture beyond the nation-state (Christodoulakis, 2016). The political instability and the dictatorship (1967-74) that followed saw Greek people's civil liberties vanishing. Greek democracy was only cemented in 1974

with the abolition of the colonels' regime and further strengthened in 1981 with Greece's European Union membership.

These developments, even from the inauguration of modern Greece, have turned the Greek state to become not only relatively autonomous but to also perform an 'over-extended' character. In tandem, some Greek commentators like Mouzelis (1980: 261-4) point out that these conditions have been associated with a weak, atrophied civil society where the state has to take on additional politico-ideological function. This makes the system less self-regulatory than nations with developed capitalism such as exists in Western European countries like Britain or in the US. 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. Mouzelis (1980: 263) 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.

In economic terms, the central accumulation of revenues in the Greek state made necessary government intervention in planning, financing and management of economic development (Christodoulakis, 2016). The state with the 'power of the purse' has the ability to create, buy-off or maintain political coalitions. As Houliaras and Sotiropoulos (2018) contend, those in charge of the state have the power to create client groups *ex nihilo* in order to help keep themselves in power. Thus, the political dynamics of state-society interaction become rudimentary, one-sided and usually lacking in real-content. Spanou and Sotiropoulos (2011) mentioned that over-regulation and legalism have dominated state-economy relations, while after 1974 in the public sector necessary democratisation was limited to the granting of new rights to civil servants and establishing new political institutions, such as independent regulatory authorities. The state was more accessible to citizens but never became more efficient. In other words, institutional reform prevailed over managerial reform. But in the case of media even the creation of independent bodies has been proved problematic, since the broadcasting regulator ESR (set up by law 2863/2000) has never gained a reputation of being financially and politically independent. Meanwhile, organised interests, such as networks of business enterprises in the construction and media sectors, the liberal professions and insiders of the labour market, such as employees of state-owned enterprises, focused on rent seeking, competing for resources and subsidies (Houliaras and Sotiropoulos, 2018).

Media, politics and clientelism

The interrelationship between media and politics has affected the development of the news media in many ways (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). First, it has encouraged the uses of the news media for other purposes than the balanced provision of news stories. The politicisation of business is a result not only of the important role 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) referring to Greece and Italy, ‘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’. In Italy, the public broadcaster, RAI, was essentially under the control of the ruling Christian Democratic Party in the 1950s and 1960s, but in the 1970s, when a broader coalition was formed and the ‘historic compromise’ allowed the Partito Comunista to share in the *lottizzazione* – the division of political power and benefits – control of RAI was divided among the parties, with the Christian Democrats retaining control of one channel, the ‘secular parties’ the second and the Communists the third. In recent years the board of directors of RAI has been reduced in size, making proportional representation impossible, and a move which may require a degree of de-politicisation of appointments to the board (Hallin and Papathanassopoulos, 2000).

With reference to the French context, Kuhn (2010) writes that the claims of public broadcasters to public service status have to be qualified by their long historical association with the political executive that has often negatively impacted on their capacity to provide independent and balanced news. In Malta, the state, the political parties, the Church and the university own radio and TV stations, thereby confirming the strong presence of institutions, especially political parties, in the broadcasting scene (Borg, 2007: 254). Spain is another country in Southern Europe in which the ruling party directly used to control the public broadcaster (Bergers, 2017). As a consequence of the close connection between Spanish political elites and the public broadcaster, Leon (2010) contends that the output of the Spanish public television offerings cannot contribute to the fulfilment of its public service role. Similarly, Portugal has had a public broadcasting system in which the government majority has

effective control, thereby leaving little room for editorial autonomy (Costa e Silva and Sousa, 2017; Mancini, 2000; Papathanassopoulos, 2007).

The concept of clientelism is useful in media analysis because it explains normative issues of media performance in a democratic system. Clientelistic relationships coexist in a complex relationship with other forms of political organization (Hallin and Papathanassopoulos, 2000). Their centrality varies, for they are most central in Greece and Italy, where the political parties are tied relatively closely to the party system and less developed in Malta, where there is a more active civil society.

In northern Europe, clientelist relationships have been displaced to a large extent by rational-legal forms of authority and, especially in the smaller continental European countries, by democratic corporatist politics, both of which decrease the need for economic elites to exert particularistic pressures and form partisan alliances (Hallin and Papathanassopoulos, 2000; Hallin and Mancini, 2004). In countries with a history of clientelism, such as Greece, Italy and some other southern European territories, rational-legal authority is less strongly developed. The judiciary and administrative apparatus are more party-politicised and there is often a tradition of evasion of the law. The persistence of a culture in which evasion of the law is relatively common means that opportunities for particularistic pressures are evident: governments can exercise pressure by enforcing the law selectively, and news media can do so by threatening selectively to expose wrongdoing. Legal proceedings against media owners are thus fairly common in many southern European countries (Papathanassopoulos, 2007).

This situation has also affected the content of the media as means of negotiation among conflicting elites rather than means for the information of the public. Looking at the mass communication sector in general, the strong state 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 to reduce press autonomy. In a more indirect but equally effective way, the state acts to enforce these formal rules, as well as to implement the unwritten rules of power politics, by using a wide range of means of intervention that are at its disposal. A very effective means that the state uses to enforce written press limits is to provide sizeable financial aid to the press, on which individual enterprises become dependent if they cannot cover their production costs.

Since entrepreneurs in public construction projects were also active in the media field, they cross-subsidise their media outlets from revenues made out of public orders (Leandros, 2010). Other means that are rarely used are Courts, censorship, and suspension of publication. A recent effective way in financially-troubled Greece was a kind of financial aid through bank loaning under the ‘auspices’ of the government. In most of the cases the media owners could not pay off their loans.

Media and the state in Greece

In Greece, the deregulation of radio took place in 1987, followed closely by the deregulation of television in late 1989. As in other Southern 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), thus resulting in an overcrowded broadcasting scene. In November 1989, the first private channel called Mega Channel entered the Greek television landscape (now closed), 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 2018 there were nine national private TV channels, three state channels, 65 regional and 45 local TV channels (ESR, 2018). From their launch private channels have dominated the television sector in terms of audience ratings and advertising expenditure, affecting negatively ERT (see next section). The Greek media are primarily characterised by excess in supply over demand. This oversupply is explained by the fact that numerous print and broadcasting media outlets have to compete for a small-country audience and advertising market share.

In the case of 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 which remained after the restoration of Parliament. According to the Constitution of 1975, ‘radio and television will be under the direct control of the state’ (Dagtoglou, 1989). Although ‘direct control’ did not necessarily mean ‘state monopoly’, state monopoly was justified on the grounds of limited frequencies being available, as well as the need to provide full coverage for such a mountainous country with its many islands. Therefore, the state became the sole agent of the broadcast media. The government manipulation of

state TV news output is a suitable example of the dirigist role of the state, since it has traditionally reflected and reinforced government views and policies (Papathanassopoulos, 2007).

As a result, ministerial censorship was common practice and state control greater than was usual elsewhere. The general pattern of the Greek state broadcasting media was (and still is) that a transfer of political power will be followed by an equivalent changeover in the state media institutions' executives. The outcome, especially in the past, was news and editorial judgments of particular importance in close agreement, if not identical, to the government announcements on a whole range of policies.

In the era of the dominance of private television such a practice is rather absurd. However, the political affiliation of the executives of the Hellenic Broadcasting Corporation is self-evident as all parties in the Opposition still accuse the government of the day-to-day control of the news output. In this sense, it could be said that Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) never really existed in Greece. The main difference between a state broadcaster and a PSB is that the former does not enjoy editorial, political and financial independence and it often focuses on pure entertainment, while the latter has a public interest focus (Iosifidis 2017; Banerjee and Seneviratne 2005: 12). The troubled political history of the country formed a state rather than a public broadcaster. To understand this, one has to note that the license fee is not collected directly from the TV households, but from the very beginning through the electricity bills. In effect, there was never a license fee in a Western way. By and large, in Greece ERT was unable to function according to the public service regulations compared with those in Britain, Scandinavia or other northern European countries. As Hallin and Mancini (2004: 106-7) note 'it is probably significant that democracy was restored ... at a time when the welfare state was on the defensive in Europe, and global forces of neoliberalism were strong'. In other words, the deregulatory deluge of the 1980s found ERT unprepared and weak.

The ongoing financial crisis in Greece and the imposition of austerity measures by the so-called Troika (*European Commission, International Monetary Fund and European Central Bank*), apparently aiming at restoring the Greek economy, has in fact deepened Greek woes and brought major losses of advertising income for the media industry. Advertising expenditure from 2007 (just before Greece entered the financial crisis) to 2015 has fallen dramatically from €1.8 billion to €685 million in 2015, according to data provided by Tempo/Media Services (2018), representing a decrease of 62 per cent.

However, from 2015 to 2018 there has been an increase from 685 million in 2015 to 789 million (estimate) in 2018, representing an increase at about 15 per cent. In the period, however, between 2007 to 2018 the advertising expenditure in Greece was decreased by 56.5 per cent. All media outlets are facing their most difficult period ever, though it is private TV channels and the print media (newspapers and magazines) that have suffered the most as the former dominate the advertising market (€473 million, or more than 61 per cent of the total advertising expenditure) followed by the print media at around €135 million. Alongside advertising (and sales, in the case of print) losses, the traditional media face competition from new media services (broadband and digital media) brought about by developments in new technology. As elsewhere, this puts the media landscape in a consistent state of flux that requires rapid, direct decisions and initiatives from media companies. However, the ‘get-rich-quick mentality’ among Greek business entrepreneurs, their risk-averse stance, as well as their attitude to spend their energy in seeking political protection rather than in initiating new activities (Huliaras and Sotiropoulos, 2018), are among the factors that played a significant role in shaping the deregulated media ecology and continue to plague Greece.

Part Two

The closing down of ERT

ERT’s history is identified with the history of Greek broadcasting, but the emergence of private stations has been disastrous for the Hellenic Broadcasting Corporation. ERT has sharply declined in ratings and advertising revenues. In effect, all ERT’s three channels have witnessed a steady erosion of market share since private TV launched in 1989 (see Graph 1). ERT’s management and the government realised that the broadcaster could no longer justify its presence in the system. ERT was too bureaucratic, with an uncompetitive output, and was labelled ‘mouthpiece of the government’. Amidst great difficulties, some of which are typical of PSBs in other, particularly southern EU countries (increased competition, decreased legitimacy, technological challenges), whereas others are related to the specific problems facing public broadcasting in Greece (frequent changes of leadership, concentration of media and political power in the hands of the Head of Government), ERT has been unable to maintain its

‘institutional credibility.’ Moreover, since market deregulation in 1989 politicians had been unable or reluctant to approve any of the three main plans (in 1989, 1997 and 2013) for the broadcaster’s salvation.

Many voices called for a major restructuring of ERT to make it more trustful, less bureaucratic and more independent from the government, but instead of restructuring the then coalition government decided to close it down. On Tuesday, 11 June 2013, the screen of ERT went black. In effect, it was practically silenced overnight. The radio stations of the Greek public broadcaster had already been seized for a few hours. The conservative-led coalition government of Prime Minister Samaras 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’.

ERT’s shutting down by the government provoked negative reaction among oppositional parties, trade unions and international bodies. The Opposition, led by the SYRIZA party, claimed that the government had fired ERT’s 2500 employees in order to prove to Greece’s international lenders (Troika) that it was serious about cutting the country’s bloated public sector (4000 jobs to go by the end of 2013). Moreover, the European Parliament, the Council of Europe, the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), press associations as well as more than 50 Directors General of European Public Broadcasters, including the BBC, ARD, ZDF, RAI, RTVE, RTBF and France Télévisions, reacted to this decision condemning the Greek government’s ‘undemocratic and unprofessional’ course of action, which ‘undermines the existence of public service media in Greece’ (EBU, 2013). The legality of ERT’s closure under the lens of, first, European Union (EU) Law, and secondly, the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR) has also been addressed. Iosifidis and Katsirea (2015) contended that the Greek government’s sudden move to shut down ERT was not designed as a reform measure and the argument that Greece acted strictly in implementation of EU law appears precipitate, especially given that the 1997 Amsterdam Protocol recognises the importance of PSB for the democratic, social and cultural needs of each society.

In considering whether ERT’s closure violated Art. 10 ECHR, the above commentators established in an earlier work that there has been an interference with freedom of expression, first, of the employees working at ERT who had a right to impart information and ideas and, secondly, of the viewing public who had a right to receive ERT’s programmes. Further, the closure of a PSB on the

basis of purely financial considerations is in any case, in the authors' view, not allowed under Art. 10 (2) ECHR, for the only legitimate objective that could come into question is the protection of rights of others. Iosifidis and Katsirea (2014: 14) concluded that 'if the government's intention was to clean the "Augean stables" in a single day, then surely this could have better been achieved by opening the stables' doors to the waves of reform than by knocking the entire edifice down'.

ERT's reopening and the lost chance to become a public service institution

ERT was eventually reopened in July 2015 by the SYRIZA-ANEL coalition government that had taken office a few months earlier. Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras made its re-opening a priority as part of efforts to roll back cuts demanded by the lenders and called it 'a great victory for democracy'.

The 'new' ERT consists of:

- Two nation-wide channels (ERT1, ERT2) based in Athens and a regional channel (ERT 3) based in Thessaloniki; ERT Sports HD; an intentional satellite channel, ERT World and two web channels (ERTPlay1, ERTPlay2).
- Hellenic Radio (ERA) with five national radio programmes, (First, Second, Kosmos, Third, ERA/Sport) and an international sixth programme the 'Voice of Greece' which targets Greeks abroad, 19 regional programmes, as well as Webradio.
- It publishes the free weekly TV/radio ERT listings magazine *Radioteleorasis* and has a strong presence on the web (www.ert.gr) and Musical ensembles.

In financial terms, 80 per cent of ERT's funds derive from the license fee (which is paid by all Greek households through the electricity bill), while 20 per cent come from commercial means, chiefly advertising. ERT has a relatively healthy income, compared to that of the commercial channels, despite the fact that the monthly licence fee is one of the lowest in Europe (reduced to about 3 Euro per household in 2013 due to the ongoing economic crisis). In 2018, ERT had a revenue of €199.5 million, with €180 coming from the license fee, whereas the rest originating from advertising, sales and sponsorship. Lack of resources obviously does not allow for a strong indigenous production and quality programming, something that would have apparently improved ERT's reputation. At the same time the

SYRIZA-ANEL coalition government continues illegally, if we take into consideration the Amsterdam Protocol, as its predecessors did, to collect €40 million of ERT's income per year to subsidise electric power! ERT's revenues are squished by the governmental action, but ERT still has a revenue of about €160 million, when the advertising market for the revenues of private channels is no more than €250 million (*Kathimerini*, 2018). In other words, ERT, financially, is in better shape compared to its private competitors.

However, after three years of ERT's relaunch, its audience ratings remain low (approximately 10 per cent of the television market share for the three channels combined). The 'new' ERT employs 2,307 staff including 600 journalists, at a cost of about €30 million a year. Most of them (2,114) have been employed on the basis of their previous job in 'old' ERT. According to 'new' ERT structure, the broadcaster consists of six Directorates (Divisions), and is run by the Chairman and the Managing Director as well as the Board of Directors (seven members). The Divisions cover News and Current Affairs, Content, ERT 3, New media and Technology as well as the Administration and Financing. Additionally, ERT's organisation chart includes 3 special Divisions (Corporate Communication, Archives and Music) as well as ERT's Law Office. The Chairman, the Managing Director and 3 members of the Board of Directors are nominated by the Minister of Digital Policy Telecommunication and the Media who is responsible for the public media as it is foreseen by law 4324/2015, article 9 (formerly the Ministers of Finance and the State) and they are appointed by the Parliament's Ethics and Transparency Committee. In effect, all members of the Board of Governors are appointed (and approved) by the above mentioned Committee. Needless to say, the government has the majority of this Committee since it echoes the power of the political parties in Parliament. Even in disputed cases, as in the recent 2018 case of the appointment of a member of the Board, where she was also a communication advisor of the leader of the ANEL party, the Parliamentary Committee appointed her with an 11 in favor against 3 votes. The Directors of the Divisions, especially of the News and Current Affairs, are appointed by the ERT's Governing Board, but in practice in accordance to the responsible Minister. As journalist and chief editor of daily *Kathimerini* Papachelas (2018) has commented:

“from public transport to public broadcaster ERT, it is obvious that the only criteria in management are: a) if the managers are ‘our people’ and b) how many we can appoint. Nothing more, nothing less”.

Thus, the ‘interlinkage’ between the government and the broadcaster remained as all key radio and television appointees were once again politically sympathetic of or affiliated to the SYRIZA-led coalition government. It is not then a coincidence that within the three years of new ERT’s operation there have been various criticisms that the SYRIZA-ANEL government continues the tight control over the Hellenic Broadcasting Corporation as its predecessors. Sheehan (2016: 118) notes:

‘in government, instead of affirming and building on what this popular struggle had achieved, (SYRIZA) disregarded the popular demand for a new model of public broadcasting, based on critical and creative programming and worker’s self-management. Instead, they reinstated the old order and hierarchical management. (ERT) became government broadcasting, as it had been previously, expect that SYRIZA was now the government whose line was privileged’.

This echoes SYRIZA’s parliamentary spokesman Nikos Xydakis who in a panel on ‘Protecting the Fourth Estate: Democracy, Accountability and the Media’, described the situation at ERT as ‘tragic and third world’. His comments prompted an exchange of counter arguments between Opposition New Democracy and the SYRIZA press office, but also a demand for a retraction and an apology from ERT President Dimitris Tsaknis. In his response he said that he had been over-the-top in his statement that ERT has been allowed to operate like a branch of the civil service but admitted that mistakes were made in relaunching it (*Kathimerini*, 2017). In mid-April 2018, ERT’s journalists made an appeal asking for ERT’s independence from the government and the political world (*To Vima*, 2018).

Discussion and conclusions

The Greek media ecology changed dramatically after the deregulation in the 1980s that ended the public broadcasting monopoly. Many media outlets appeared in a small market of just 11 million people to the

extent that the media landscape today is characterized by an excess of supply over demand. From a broadcasting field of two public TV channels and four radio stations, in the late 1980s, it has become an overcrowded environment comprising 120 private TV channels and 920 private radio stations, all of them lacking an official licence to broadcast. Traditional print media and ERT faced an unprecedented challenge as competition increased first from powerful (unregulated) commercial analogue broadcasters and then digital media. To address sharp decline in sales, the main publishers, helped by a weak regulatory regime, moved to electronic media, thereby raising levels of media market concentration (Iosifidis, 2007; Leandros 2010). The interplay between political and media elites and the strong clientelistic relations which characterise the Greek political system are identified as the main factors behind the ineffective and contradictory nature of broadcasting regulatory policies.

Greece has undergone three separate troika-led bailouts between 2010 and 2017, which led to significant political instability, social unrest, and deteriorating social conditions (Kovras, 2018). The multi-layered economic, political and social changes driven by the ongoing economic crisis pose continuous challenges to the political role of the media system. Current ideological and institutional shifts suggest the formation of an unprecedented elite political consensus in support of the neoliberal restructuring of Greek society. Pivotal to this development has been the shift of the SYRIZA-led Government away from its anti-austerity electoral platform, and its endorsement of yet another memorandum agreement to more austerity measures and privatisations. The extent to which alternative online media may be able to rejuvenate public communication remains to be seen. However, the implementation of austerity, as a principle means of devaluing labour power and redistributing wealth towards capital, depends upon the disciplining of the affected workforce and the ideological assimilation of opposition. Thus, the direct connection between the economics and the politics of the crisis suggests that law and order news remain a key media topic necessary for contesting official definitions (Nikolaidis, 2015).

Furthermore, the deregulation and commercialisation 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 conservative (New Democracy) Prime Minister 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 regularly attacked media 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 (*To Vima*, 2016).

In effect, politicians seem to use on the one hand, the TV licenses as a means of pressure and maintain a competitive advantage in the tactical ‘war’ with the media and business entrepreneurs. On the other hand, political parties, especially those in power, want to maintain the control over the public broadcaster echoing, to some extent De Gaulle, that centralised control of the public broadcaster guarantees that high culture prevails while government’s enemies control printed media (Kuhn, 1995: 123). In practice they follow, as their counterparts in some other southern European countries, the pattern that the ruling party has the privilege to directly control public broadcaster and its news output. Greek politicians want to have the upper hand on ERT since they feel vulnerable in a confrontation with the vested interests which at the same time own the mainstream private media.

Although we are at the end of the so-called *Metapolitefsi* - the period in modern Greek history after the fall of the military junta (1967-74) - and Greece has entered the age of the social media, the ‘old’ political behaviour remains strong. In practice, Greek politicians behave like living in an analogue rather than the digital era. It could be argued that it is not a coincidence that television licenses have not been granted for almost three decades. Meanwhile, the awarding of the licenses seems to have been used as a part of the domestic political game. The reason of this non-policy is simple. Successive governments since TV deregulation in 1989 appear to have been playing an ‘on and off’ game with television owners who also have other interests in the Greek economy, particularly in the construction sector and shipping. For instance, during a conservative government administration (1990–93), announcements of license awards usually followed political disputes, especially with radio stations. When the late Andreas Papandreou came to power after the 1993 general elections, his socialist government announced that it would re-examine the whole regulatory environment including licenses.

But up to his departure in 1996, no official government license was granted. His successor, the socialist 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 require a re-evaluation of the existing ones, but nothing happened. Inaction was also evident by its successor, the conservative Karamanlis government, despite then Prime Minister Costas Karamanlis calling the owners of the mainstream media ‘the pimps of the Greek media system’ and announcing the setting up of a ‘digital map’ (Papathanassopoulos, 2017). The over-extended state, meanwhile, is considered by the private interests as a better place to create business (for example, public works), than the market, which has remained underdeveloped. It is in this context that one can understand why the power of private media has increased considerably, whereas the power of both journalists and ERT remains weak (Iosifidis and Boucas, 2015; Iosifidis, 2017).

The ongoing financial crisis and recession has affected the media sector as a whole and turned some media outlets financially unsustainable. However, the most dramatic development occurred in 2013 with the sudden closure of ERT. The shutting down of ERT and subsequent redundancy of its employees was seen by many as part of the latest public spending cuts imposed to meet the terms of the country’s bailout deal. In effect, this has left the commercially dominated Greek broadcasting landscape without a public channel and people dependent on the private media sector for the provision of information, entertainment and education. One can rightly accuse ERT of lacking clear public interest objectives, overstaffing, bureaucracy, wastefulness and over-rewards for senior management, but its abrupt closure without consultation and a strategic plan is an attack on free speech and public space by the Greek government. ERT required restructuring, but not closing down. Public service broadcasters play a crucial role in producing and disseminating public service output that brings citizens together and enhances the educational and cultural aspect. It is not acceptable to close down a PSB without consultation and to dismiss its employees, just to justify the wishes of the ‘troika’ for redundancies in the public sector. The closure of ERT was an attack on free speech and public space by the Greek government (Iosifidis and Katsirea 2014). ERT’s role is important especially today given the growth in social tension and the rise of the far right in Greece (Golden Dawn). Worse, it is a dangerous precedent to close down PSB entirely or even to link PSB reform to austerity. Greece is not the only country

undergoing austerity measures and looking to cut public spending, and while some slimming of budgets is unavoidable, we need to consider carefully the position of PSB in these conditions and prevent such arbitrary axing becoming a trend.

This article argued that public service broadcasting never really existed in Greece. ERT has been unable to function according to the public service obligations observed in public broadcasters in Britain, Scandinavia or other northern European countries. Greece, like some other southern European countries, entered rather late into ‘modernity’ and has neither a strong civil society nor a strong market. The Greek media have been used as vehicles for negotiating with and pressuring the government of the day, rather than reflecting public discourse. Progress remains to be done regarding ERT’s staffing and management. All political parties which came to power had grandiose plans for the broadcaster that were ‘over nightly’ abandoned in the first day of their administration. The old governmental ‘behaviour’ is on again, while ERT’s output is neither innovative nor attractive. Provision of additional resources for the institution should be considered to enable ERT to principally invest in Greek production and investigative journalism, thus fulfilling its public service remit. In the last three years after its re-opening ERT has taken some initiatives for investing in Greek productions (which is in bad shape due to the financial crisis) and very few in investing in journalism (apart from re-employing journalists, which was motivated by political criteria). Above all, there should be a fresh commitment of political elites to enhance the accountability of new ERT in order to function as a PSB.

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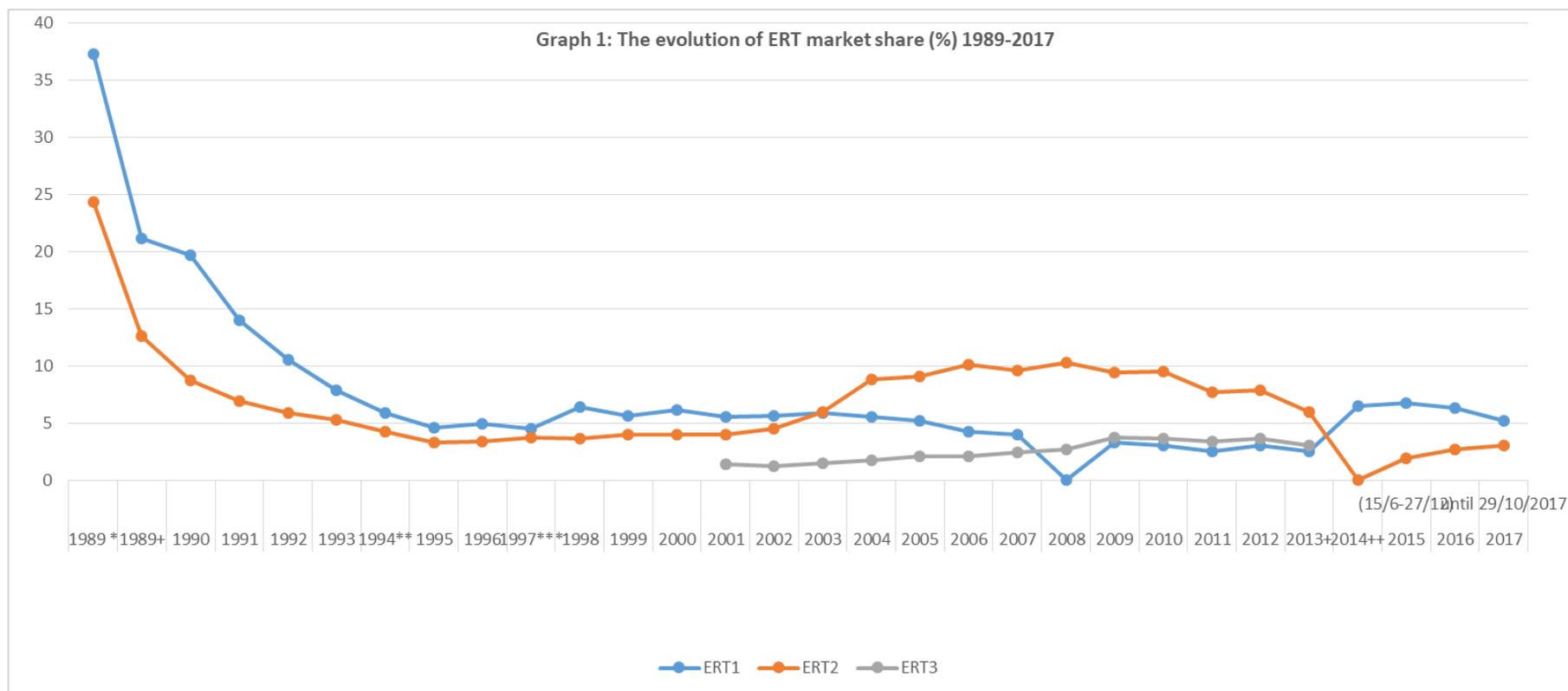
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ERT 1: Until ERT’s closure in 2013 was known as ET1. Since 2015 as ERT1

ERT 2: in 1997 was formed to NET. Formerly was known as ET-2. Since 2015 as ERT2

1997: after the restructure of ERT

2013: until ERT’s closure

2014: As NERIT with N1 and Nsports from summer 2014

2015: for the period 15/6-30/12/2017 –the period of ERT’s reopening

2017: data up to 29/10/2017

Source: Authors' analysis based on data from AGB Hellas Media Research