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BOOK CHAPTER:

Greek ERT: State or Public Service Broadcaster?

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Introduction

While most Southern European public broadcasting systems are to some degree subject to political influence and dependence, in the case of Greece, the Hellenic Radio and Television (ERT), stands out: it has the dubious distinction of being labelled a 'state' rather than 'public' broadcaster. This public perception is related to 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 long been regarded as 'arms of the state'. Post-dictatorship politics and the restoration of Parliament in 1974 saw the Conservatives and Socialists dominating the political scene, accusing each other of too much governmental control over state electronic media. Even the 'new ERT', re-launched in 2015 by the left-wing SYRIZA government after a two-year closure, has been criticised for government interference. This situation has largely arisen from the 'traditional' political tensions in Greek society and the overextended character of the Greek state, since the latter plays an active role in the formation of the Greek economy and policy. In the case of broadcasting the state not only intervenes but is an active agent.

This chapter analyses whether the ERT can be considered a public or a state broadcaster. The first section briefly addresses the relationship between the media and politics in Greece and the role of the strong clientist state in the development of media, as

against a weak civil society. Part two looks at the history of the Greek media, the functioning of ERT in its early stages of development, and the impact of deregulation and market liberalization on the public broadcaster since the early 1990s. The role of communications regulatory agency (ESR) in the process of allocating licences and combating market failures such as oligopolistic trends is also examined. The third section explores how independent financially, editorially and politically the ERT is under the current SYRIZA left-wing administration.

Politics and media in Greece

All 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 the case of Greece, broadcasting has developed a symbiotic relationship with the political upheavals of the country – both radio and television broadcasting were introduced under dictatorships in modern Greece's troubled history. Radio broadcasting was established in the late 1930s under the Metaxas dictatorship and television in the mid-1960s under the Colonels (1967-74) (Papathanassopoulos, 1997). 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 condition has become part of post-dictatorship ritualized 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. The state is not only relatively autonomous but also has an 'over-extended' character. Mouzelis (1980, pp. 261-4) points out that this situation has been associated with a weak, atrophied civil society where the state has to take on an additional politico-ideological function. This makes the system less self-regulatory than nations with developed capitalism such as exists in 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 economy and of society. Mouzelis (1980, p. 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.

This interrelationship has affected the development of the news media in many ways (Hallin & Papathanassopoulos 2000; Hallin & Mancini 2004; Papathanassopoulos 2005). First, it has encouraged the use of the news media for other purposes than the balanced provision of news stories. The politicization of business is a result not only of the important role the state plays in the economy, but of the nature of the political process. "What was important for an interest group", write Lanza and Lavdas (2000, p. 207) about Italy and Greece, "was its ability to establish a special and privileged bond with a party, a sector in the public administration, a branch of the executive, a politician or a civil servant. In this way, institutions became permeable; otherwise they remained totally impermeable." 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 & Papathanassopoulos 2002, Hallin & Mancini 2004). In countries with a history of clientelism, rational-legal authority is less strongly developed. The judiciary and administrative apparatus are more party-politicised and there is often a tradition of avoiding the implementation of the laws. The persistence of a culture in which evasion of the law is relatively common means that opportunities for particularistic pressures are common: governments can exercise pressure by enforcing the law selectively, and news media can do so by selectively threatening to expose wrongdoing (Papathanassopoulos, 2013). Legal proceedings against media owners are thus fairly common in many southern European countries (Papathanassopoulos 2004).

This situation has also affected the content of the media as a means of negotiation among conflicting elites, rather than a means of informing the public. Looking at the mass communication sector in general (Greece is not unique in this regard) 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 infringe or restrict 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 since they could not otherwise cover their production costs. Since entrepreneurs in public construction projects were also active in the media field, they cross-subsidized their media outlets from revenues made out of public projects (see also Leandros, 2010). Recourse to the courts and the imposition of censorship, including suspension of publication, although remain possible tools of control, are less commonly employed. (Papathanassopoulos, 2013) Means of control have continued to evolve, however: one recent – and effective – means of exercising control was the approval of financial aid through bank loans under the auspices of the government. In most of the cases the media owners could not pay off their loans.

In the case of broadcasting the state not only intervenes but is an 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' (Alivizatos, 1986; 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 geographical coverage for such a mountainous country with its many islands. Thus, 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, 2013).

As a result, ministerial censorship was common practice and state control was 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 that were in close agreement, if not identical, to the government announcements on a whole range of policies and decisions. Thus, it is hardly surprising that those holding positions of responsibility in state broadcasting have come and gone in step with the political parties that constitute the

government of the day. This is as true for governments led by New Democracy (Conservative) as it is for those formed by PASOK (Socialist). The common cycle is that each side deplores the policy when in opposition, only to discover its merits anew once they have been appointed to government.

In the era of the dominance of private television such a practice may appear absurd. However, the political affiliation of the executives of the public broadcaster 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 PSB never really existed in Greece. The troubled political history of the country formed a state, rather than a public, broadcaster. To understand this, one has to note that the television license fee is not collected directly from households possessing a television set, but is levied as a component of electricity bills. In fact, there has never been a license fee in the form familiar to many Western countries. By and large, in Greece the public broadcaster was unable to function according to the public service regulations compared with those in Britain or Scandinavia or other northern European countries. As Hallin and Mancini (2004, pp. 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 the state broadcaster unprepared and weak, as well the rest of the media system in general and the daily newspapers in particular.

The media in Greece

Since the fall of the military junta in 1974, the Greek press has undergone a process of modernization. The introduction of new printing technologies in the 1980s (Leandros 1992), the entry of private investors into the media sector, and strong competition from television have changed the media sector (Psychoyios 1992, Zaoussis & Stratos 1992, Paraschos 1995). Print media have had to reposition themselves: editorial content has had become more objective, and close ties with political parties were loosened. The reasons for these changes stem largely the press's need to attract a broader spectrum of readers in order to increase circulation in times when the rate of economic and social development in Greece were again declining. It has reflected, in part, a drift away from the political party community itself towards the major political orientations of the modern Greek electorate. In effect, this means that the Greek media, collectively, is still a very influential institution, usually

aggressive and sensationalist in tone, especially in periods characterized by a climate of political tension and, of course, at election time (Komninou 1996).

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

The Greek media are primarily characterized by an excess of supply over demand. This logic of this oversupply characterization seems undeniable, since a plethora of newspapers, TV channels, magazines and radio stations find themselves competing for a small-country audience and consequently limited advertising market share (Papathanassopoulos 1999).

But when politics become the determinant factor in shaping the re-organisation of the broadcasting scene, it is bound to produce less-than-ideal results and many side effects. Some of them have been:

- The rapid and disproportionate increase in the number of channels in a country of only 3.3 million households;
- The increase of media cross-ownership since the speed with which the publishers and other business interests moved into the broadcasting landscape was impressive; (In fact, leading politicians and analysts have been concerned over how easily and quickly the media sector could be concentrated in the hands of a few influential media magnates (Papathanassopoulos, 2004, p. 67).)
- Successive governments have shown an inability to intervene and regulate. It is no coincidence that every time the government announces its willingness to grant

official TV licenses, general elections come to interrupt the process. In effect, the procedure for granting operating licenses to broadcast stations has been an unresolved issue from the very first days of the introduction of commercial television. In this unregulated field, all private local and national TV channels are, technically speaking, 'illegal', without operating licenses, using television frequencies that are state property. In effect, the Greek government has attempted to allocate TV licenses without success in the past. In 1998, the then Socialist government decided that all TV stations that had applied for a TV license should be considered as temporary grantees of TV licenses. The new Syriza-Anel coalition government announced that it would award 4 national TV licenses. The plan came to nothing, as the country's highest administrative court, the Council of State, ruled that the whole procedure was unconstitutional. On May 2, 2018, the broadcasting regulator, the National Council for Radio and Television (ESR), approved the applications of five media companies to receive a temporary nationwide broadcasting license. The ESR unanimously concluded that SKAI, Star, Alpha, Antenna TV and Epsilon TV met the requirements laid out in the regulator's call for tenders and abided by the relevant regulations.

- Unregulated and indebted television channels degrade notions of quality and freedom of speech. It has been argued that only a strong PSB could 'show' the way to quality in such a commercialised and anarchic environment (Panagiotopoulou, 2006). But the political parties, while climbing on and off the commercial bandwagon, gave no real thought as to how to renovate the public sector and redefine the concept and mission of PSB.

Although the developments in the Greek media sector may not entirely meet the needs of its associated advertising industry, it has been surprisingly adaptable to swings in the economic business cycle (Papathanassopoulos 1997). The fiscal crisis that began in 2009, however, coupled with the economic crisis, brought major losses of advertising revenues for the media industry. Additionally, the current austerity package put in place by the so-called *Troika*, the European Commission (EC), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the European Central Bank (ECB), which aims at restoring the Greek economy, is set to deepen Greek woes.

ERT: The mouthpiece of the government and the victim of a haphazard deregulation

The deregulation of Greek broadcasting, as in other European countries, was more than the removal of certain rules and regulations. Greece, as an EU Member State, was also influenced by the Community's policies and the European political environment (Papathanassopoulos, 1999, pp. 391-4; Iosifidis, 2007b, p. 77). The 1980s was the era of broadcasting deregulation in almost all European countries. This environment provided good motives to domestic Greek forces with neoliberal ideologies to press for the removal of obstacles to the introduction of market forces in the sector (Papathanassopoulos, 2005).

ERT's history is identified with the history of Greek broadcasting, but the emergence of private stations has been disastrous for the public broadcaster. ERT has sharply declined in ratings and advertising revenues, which resulted in large advertising losses. ERT's TV channels' viewership has decreased tremendously ~~shanked~~ (ET1 - 9.08%, ET2 - 5.6% in 1992, ET1 4.5% and ET2 3.7% in 1997) which has resulted in large advertising losses. In effect, ERT's three channels have witnessed a steady erosion of market share since private television launched in late 1989 (see Diagram 1). Nowadays, 80% of ERT's funds derive from the license fee, while 20% from advertising revenue, while ERT1 and ERT 2 attract 6% and 2% of the viewership respectively, according to Nielsen. ERT's decline in viewership was principally due to the fact that ERT's news programmes were regarded as pure government propaganda with low trust among the audiences (Sorogas, 2000). Moreover, the government did not prepare the public broadcaster for the new environment in which it would have to take on its private competitors. On the contrary, successive governments, both Conservative and Socialist, consistently failed to invest in the public broadcaster, at the same time it was facing chronic financial problems (Valoukos, 2008; Papathanassopoulos, 1997). It is not a coincidence that ERT's audiences was composed principally of the older generation (55 years and older) and mainly the male viewers of this age segment.

ERT's management and the government realised that the public broadcaster could no any longer justify its presence in the system. ERT was too bureaucratic, weighed down by an accumulated debt of €112 million (Typaldou, 1997); worse still, its programming was uncompetitive and its news output lacked credibility. Moreover, since 1989, politicians had been unable to approve any of the numerous plans for the public broadcaster's rescue. In the recent history of the Greek public broadcaster there have been three attempts from

opposite directions to turn the public broadcaster around (Papathanassopoulos, 2010). Unfortunately, all three failed.

The 1997 attempt to restructure ERT under the modernists

ERT's management under the Simitis Administration [1996-2004 DATES] aimed to turn a new page in its troubled history. Since the turn of the century, the PSB's managing directors aimed, with the government's blessing, to restructure the corporation. The re-organisation of ERT has been a two-pronged approach: first, regarding the organisational structure of the broadcaster and second, renovating ERT channels' profiles and their public image.

In 1997 ERT's management, at the government's request, changed the face of the state broadcaster in order to re-launch with the Greek public. In effect, its flagship channel, ET 1, became a general, quality-entertainment channel and adopted a family entertainment profile. Its programming consisted of motion pictures, telefilms, Greek series (in the last three TV seasons, it has produced 27 new TV Greek series with well-known Greek actors and directors) and children's programming, as well as international sporting events such as the Olympic Games, World and European soccer championships and European Final-Four basketball championships.

The second channel, formerly known as ET2, no longer exists under its old name but has been re-launched and dubbed NET (Nea Elliniki Teleorasi – New Hellenic Television). It mostly airs 24-hour news and current affairs programming, with news bulletins, information programs, talk shows, documentaries and live soccer games.

ET3, as noted, is rather independent from the main corporation and it also forms its programming independently from the other two ERT channels. It is a generalist channel with an emphasis on news and quality programmes and with a particular focus on Northern Greece. By and large, the changes have been welcomed by the audience (Sorogas, 2000) and this can be seen in the TV ratings shown in Table 1. Since 1997, ERT's strategy has aimed both to increase its profile in the Greek market and develop its digital terrestrial services in order to get a competitive advantage in the digital era.

At the same time, ERT's management has aimed to reduce labour costs by applying a system of voluntary retirement of some of its personnel. It should be noted that in 2002 ERT's management aimed to retire 1062 of its personnel through a redundancy plan. This plan was considered because 76% of ERT's revenues went to payroll and only 24% to

production and to the upgrading of the technical infrastructure (see also Tsourvakas, 2004). By following this path, ERT's management considered that on the one hand, it would reduce one of the major financial burdens on the company, and on the other, by saving money it would have resources to invest in programming and respond to technological developments. It also decided to reduce the number of external collaborators and increase the productivity of its existing personnel. These projected savings, in the event, did not materialise, however, as it had to increase the number of staff to undertake its new ventures (see Papathanassopoulos, 2010).

Far from disappearing, ERT's financial problems did not disappear, but grew. These can also be attributed to the lack of adequate funding, since the monthly licence fee today is about €3 per household (reduced from €4.7 in 2013, due to the ongoing economic crisis). Lack of resources obviously does not allow for strong indigenous production and quality programming, necessary for improving ERT's reputation. On the other hand, in the era of fiscal crisis this may be a myth. ERT's license fee, compared to the EU average, is very significantly lower. But ERT's income, compared to their private/commercial counterparts, is very high. In 2018, ERT is projected to have a revenue at €200 million. €194 million comes from the licence fee, whereas €14 million will come from sales (advertising and sponsorship, principally). Against the backdrop of these financial worries, the Syriza-Anel government, following in the footsteps of its predecessors, continues to claw back €40 million of ERT's revenues to subsidise alternative electric power sources and research and development, in direct contravention of its obligations under the Amsterdam Protocol. Although their revenue has been seriously compromised by the government's actions, ERT still has an income of about €160 million (staff wages total is no more than €60 million), when the advertising market for their private counterparts is no more than €250 million. In other words, ERT, financially, is in better shape than its private competitors. Thus, ERT's management should invest, as a priority, in Greek production and investigative journalism, fulfilling its remit. In the last three years after its re-opening, ERT has commissioned a number of Greek productions but has invested very little in journalism, apart from re-hiring a number of journalists – some for political criteria, it would appear.

ERT as a vehicle for the development of digital terrestrial television

While there was no digital or analogue cable television service in Greece, digital terrestrial television became the next priority for the country, mainly due in part to the EU recommendation for member states to switch from analogue to digital broadcasting by 2012 (Iosifidis 2006). The Conservative government of Costas Karamanlis aimed to undertake the switchover of the Greek television industry to digital terrestrial television (DTT) through the public broadcaster (Papathanassopoulos 2014) and give ERT the role that most Western European governments were giving to their public broadcasters: to be the vehicle for the development of DTT in the country.

Thus, as in many other European countries (Iosifidis 2007b), ERT acted as a pioneer, introducing DTT exclusive television services to the Greek public. In effect, ERT undertook a pilot project launching three new entirely channels in the first half of 2006 which were available only on digital terrestrial television. ERT started broadcasting DTT channels before any legislative framework was in place in Greece. The channels were broadcasted free-to-air and were funded exclusively from ERT's budget, as they carried no advertisements (according to ERT's officials the PSB did not want to offend or alienate the commercial broadcasters by eroding their advertising revenues) (*TV International*, 2007). The conservative government assigned two multiplexes to ERT – with four channel spots each (DVB-T & MPEG-2). Despite the fact that the government had clearly stated that ERT's DTT broadcasting was a pilot scheme, the legislative vacuum had to be filled. At that time, ERT's digital terrestrial offerings were only available in Athens, Thessaloniki and a handful of other major cities (see Papathanassopoulos, 2014).

On 19 July 2007, the government, through the Law 3592/2007, tried to establish a comprehensive legislative framework that would integrate it with the new regulatory framework for electronic communications networks and services being pursued by the EU. The legislation made a clear distinction between 'platform-' and 'multiplex operator' (sometimes it is called 'network operator') and the 'content provider'. The platform- or multiplex operator was under a general license regime, provided that his undertaking/company was registered by the Hellenic Telecommunications & Post Commission (E.E.T.T.). The Ministry of Transport & Communications and the Ministry of Press and the Media were responsible for establishing the digital frequencies map and planning. The new Act makes it possible for licensed television stations to transmit their analogue TV programmes digitally, using frequencies that are to be allocated for the period

up until the digital switchover. The majority of those frequencies were used for analogue TV broadcasting by local TV stations but the frequencies will be cleared so as to be available only for digital terrestrial TV broadcasting. The procedure for licensing digital terrestrial television stations was to be regulated through a Presidential Decree.

Nevertheless, the 2007-2013 period could be characterized as a period of stagnation. In the case of digital television, ERT did not bring to fruition the expansion of its DTT network, leaving the majority of Greek towns and regions (apart from Athens and Thessaloniki) with no DTT signal. This delay was attributed to efforts by the Conservative government to encourage commercial analogue TV broadcasters to collaborate with ERT in forming a joint multiplex operator company that would act as the network operator for the whole Greek digital terrestrial platform. This plan would keep the costs of rolling out a nationwide DTT network at a reasonably low level, while fostering the necessary economies of scale (Papathanassopoulos, 2014). Commercial broadcasters and ERT were brought together to the negotiating table but the talks did not produce the desired outcome. Commercial broadcasters decided to continue to rely on their strengths and in June 2009 they formed a joint network operator company, called Digea. Digea was established by the seven major commercial TV stations in Greece (MEGA, Antenna TV, ALPHA, STAR, Alter, TV Macedonia and SKAI) and started broadcasting (simulcasting the analogue channels in two multiplexes) utilizing DVB-T MPEG-4 in September 2009 from an area in the Corinthian Gulf in the Peloponnese (see Galanis, 2009).

ERT, on the other hand, “reactivated” its plans and started moving to the Greek periphery, executing regional switch offs in Thrace, Thessaly and the northern part of Peloponnese by the end of 2011 (ERT, 2011). Furthermore, the public broadcaster aimed to rearrange the channels spot in the two multiplexes by merging two digital channels and creating a new one, ERT HD. ERT, in this phase was managing two multiplexes: the first (DVB-T, MPEG-2) that comprised public channels: PRISMA+, CINE/SPORT+, the Parliamentary Channel and the Cypriot RIKSAT, while the second (DVB-T, MPEG-4) would comprise the ‘old’ analogue channels (ET1, NET, ERT3), plus the new ERT HD channel. ERT included five radio stations in the offering of its second multiplex (Vernadou, 2010).

For some, ERT’s digital project was an indirect way for the government to get rid of the ‘old’ ERT with its problems and inefficiencies, and in particular to break the dominance of ERT’s unions (Papathanassopoulos, 2014). The ERT employees’ union, POSPERT,

conducted a series of work stoppages to protest at the adoption of Law 3592/2007 as a threat to the public character of ERT, bringing newscasts to a temporary standstill. ESIEA, the Union of Athens Dailies' Journalists, and the Greek Federation of Labour supported PROSPERT's protest. The government responded that ERT Digital was created by the previous socialist government, which also envisaged the entire privatisation of ERT Digital (Papathanassopoulos, 2014).

But the financial crisis affected the public broadcaster and so ERT, in the end, abandoned its digital channels under the banner of ERT Digital. In March 2013, the socialist-led government decided to close down ERT Digital, with its three digital channels. The government, in an unprecedented move, decided to broadcast BBC World, Deutsche Welle (in English), Euronews (in English) and TV5 Europe (in French), in what had been ERT Digital's allocated frequencies. Obviously, the government decided to transmit these international channels in order to maintain the frequencies (Papathanassopoulos, 2014). In the meantime, the Samaras Government was critical of ERT, since it considered that ERT's union, PROSPERT, was overwhelmingly in favour of the opposition, in particular the leftist SYRIZA party, a fact that was reflected in the public broadcaster's news output. In practice, the government left the development of DTT entirely to the private broadcasters, which it lauded as 'champions'. Thus, Digea has emerged as the sole provider of DTT in Greece and consequently has a monopoly on DTT, as well as holding a dominant position in the DTT market in particular and digital television in general. The case of Euronews is, perhaps, indicative. As the European channel began to broadcast in the Greek language, the public broadcaster, following government orders, excluded Euronews from ERT's digital terrestrial frequencies. Eventually, the Greek switchover was completed on February 6, 2015 by Digea. Those people who had bought set-top boxes or new TV sets with the previous MpEG-2 format were now forced to purchase new set-top boxes or new TV sets. Some were even forced to buy new reception equipment since Digea broadcast in MPGE-4 format. The transition from analogue to digital TV transmission was, however, a boon for consumer electronics stores, suffering from a downturn in sales due to the economic crisis, as the changing of formats forced the viewing public to buy new TV sets and reception equipment (Papathanassopoulos, 2014).

The Closing down and the re-opening of the ERT and the lost chance for ERT to become a public service institution

On Tuesday, 11 June 2013, the screen of the public broadcaster ERT went black, as it was closed down practically overnight. The radio stations of the Greek public broadcaster had already been silent for a few hours. The conservative-led coalition government of Prime Minister Antonis Samaras had a few hours earlier announced its decision to close down and to restructure the public broadcasting service in Greece (Avgi, 2013). Government spokesman Simos Kedikoglou, said in a televised statement, broadcast on ERT on the night of ERT's closure: "At a time when the Greek people are enduring sacrifices, there is no room for delay, hesitation or tolerance of sacred cows." ERT's channels and radio station would cease operations after midnight and be relaunched at a later date as a leaner organisation, Kedikoglou said. "ERT is a typical example of unique lack of transparency and incredible waste. And that ends today," Kedikoglou said. "It costs three- to seven times as much as other TV stations and [has] four- to six times the personnel – for a very small viewership, about half that of an average private station." (*The Guardian*, 2013)

The closing down of the public broadcaster by the government provoked an angry reaction among opposition parties and trade unions. The opposition, led by SYRIZA, claimed that the government had fired ERT's 2,500 employees in order to prove to Greece's international lenders (the so called 'Troika,' including the International Monetary Fund, the European Commission, and the European Central Bank) that it was serious about cutting the country's bloated public sector (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, 2013a). Additionally, the EBU relayed ERT's signal via satellites (via Hotbird 13A in Europe, APSTAR 7 in Asia and Intelsat 19 in Oceania as well as via the Internet web page). In effect, ERT made use of new technologies by sending its signal via hundreds of Internet sites and social media; it adopted a new cooperative method of news production and content, it managed to host various views and voices and finally achieve ratings never previously achieved in its history:

2.8 million single users watched its programmes in the first days from the EBU site (EBU, 2013b). On the other hand, the government asked all private media stations to stop re-broadcasting ERT programmes, arguing that any broadcast bearing the logo ERT, would 'face disciplinary action'.

More than a month later, a transitional TV channel called 'Public Television', formed by the government in the aftermath of a decision by the Court of Appeals that a channel with a public service mission should stay on, and in response to the international and local outcry, started transmitting a poor diet of programming based on old documentaries, films and subsequently, news on the ERT's digital frequencies. Although, for some the motives of Samaras government were clearly political, as his government considered ERT's union to be overwhelmingly in favour of the opposition, in particular the SYRIZA party, a fact that was reflected in ERT's news output. But the decision to close or to undertake the major restructuring of ERT goes back to the early years of the Restoration of the Parliament when Sir Hugh Greene was amazed by the tight governmental control of the state broadcaster or when the BBC's experts came to a similar conclusion in early 1990s (Papathanassopoulos, 1993). More recently, the then minister of **state** during the George Papandreou socialist administration responsible for the public broadcaster, Professor Elias Mosialos had also announced his plans on 18 August 2011.

Mosialos proposed the formation of a public broadcaster that would not be politicized, giving greater emphasis to multimedia platforms and which would be cheaper to maintain. The latter was within the government's plans to reduce spending. He suggested that an independent committee would look to the management structures of public broadcasters in the UK, Sweden, France and Germany for examples to follow. The measures he announced included the closure of ET1 and ERT's digital channels Cine Plus and Sport Plus, which had already merged into a single channel. ERT's other channel on the digital platform, Prisma, would remain but would be aimed at disabled people. ET3, the TV channel based in Thessaloniki, would be designated as a regional channel, covering cultural, entertainment and sports-related issues. Satellite channel ERT World would continue in its current format. Public radio, ERA, would also be affected by the changes. Five of its 20 medium-wave transmitters would be shut down and 19 regional stations would be merged into nine. Thessaloniki, which had three state radio stations, would now only have one. Moreover, the City of Athens' multilingual radio station, AIR 104.4FM, would be merged

with ERA's Filia 106.7FM. *Radiotileorasi*, the weekly TV and radio listings magazine, would also be closed. An ERT building in Thessaloniki and one in Athens would be used to house government departments, thereby saving more public money. A process to evaluate the employees at ERT was also set to begin.

The closure of ERT could be described as a government failure for various reasons. The government said that the ERT's closure was as a move to appease the country's lenders (Guardian, 2013), who claimed that Greece had an overextended public sector that had to be cut. But, the closure is of interest mainly the way in which the decision was taken and executed. Notably, in an era in which public broadcasters have been disputed in various ways, the government's decision to close down overnight an institution that was closely associated with the history of Greek radio and television demonstrates how the political world in Greece understands public service broadcasting, i.e., the party in power considers itself as the owner of the public (state) media. This incomprehensible and dangerous attitude seems to have followers, not only among Greek politicians but in other European countries (see Poland, Hungary, Turkey, etc.).

In the even, ERT was replaced by a new public broadcaster, NERIT (New Hellenic Radio Internet Television). As the closing down of ERT continued to be a bone of contention and a source of much controversy, those responsible for NERIT found that their hands were tied. The government declared that (in theory at least) the broadcaster would be independent in line with Western counterparts. However, in reality the government regarded it as its own political mouthpiece (Galanis, 2014). Its chairman and managing director Professor Antonis Makrydimitris and his deputy, journalist Rudolph Moronis, resigned after just four months in post. As Moronis wrote in his Facebook account: "When they [the government] said they wanted a true public service broadcaster, the problem was they did not mean it." POSPERT's efforts to reverse the decision led them to attempt to rally people in northern Greece against the government "of Athens" by staging a month-long sit-in at the studios used by ERT's Thessaloniki channel, ET3. They used the ET3 equipment for their pirate programming, relayed by ESIEA's website, in which they accused the government of attempting to stifle the voice of the north. While the conservative government stated that the second NERIT channel would be based in Thessaloniki, SYRIZA said that it would restore ERT as it used to be if and when it came to power.

On 11 July 2015, employees of Greece's state television ERT hugged each other and cried as the channel aired its first broadcast in two years. Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras made its re-opening one of his priorities as part of efforts to roll back cuts demanded by the lenders, and called it "a great victory for democracy." (*iefimerida.gr* 2015). The government re-hired all of the roughly 2,500 staff who had been made redundant, including 600 journalists, at a cost of about €30 million a year.

After three almost years of ERT's new operation, the public broadcaster's audience ratings remain low (approximately 11% according to Media Nielsen ratings of the television market share for the three channels). In effect, neither government attitudes toward the state broadcaster nor ERT's dubious efficiency have changed. In effect, the 'model' of state broadcaster as mainly news-oriented (in effect government propaganda) surrounded by entertainment programming has remained intact, even in the age of social media. Several months after returning to the airwaves, ERT issued an open call for new programming — a faint ray of light for the struggling industry. Needless to say, all key radio and television appointees were once again politically sympathetic of or affiliated to the SYRIZA-led coalition government. The 'new' ERT employs 2,307 staff. 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 organization chart includes 3 special Divisions (Corporate Communication, Archives and Music) as well as ERT's Legal Office. Needless to say, the Chairman, the Managing Director and 3 members of the Board of Directors are nominated by the Minister of State responsible for public media and are appointed by Parliament, where the government has a majority (as foreseen by the Law 4324/2015). The other two members are elected by ERT's employees. However they are nominated, *all* members of the Board of Governors are appointed, according to the Law 4324/2015, article 9) by the Minister of the State responsible for the public media (nowadays this jurisdiction has been moved to the Minister of Digital Policy, Telecommunication and the Media). In other words, the criteria of appointing ERT's management are primarily political, not to say, partisan, rather than according to their media expertise or their plans for the state broadcaster's future.

Since the re-launch of ERT there have been various comments and accusations that the SYRIZA-Anel government continues to exercise tight control over the public broadcaster in the manner of its predecessors. Helena Sheehan notes her in book on Syriza, *The Syriza Wave*, that:

“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. Instead, of public broadcasting, it became government broadcasting, as it had been previously, except that Syriza was now the government whose line was privileged” (2016: 118)

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” (in *Kathimerini*, 6/3/2017). 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 a day later, **Monday** he said that had been over-the-top in his statement but added that mistakes were made in relaunching ERT in May 2015 after it had been shut down for two years, saying it has been allowed to operate like a branch of the civil service (*Kathimerini*, 6/3/2017). In mid-April 2018, ERT’s journalists made an appeal, asking for ERT’s independence from the government and the political world (*To Vima*, 13/4/2018).

Concluding remarks

Most Greek politicians claim that control over the media equals political power. Deregulation, commercialisation and privatisation of the media and the dominance of television in the Greek media universe for news and entertainment forced politicians and political parties to adopt the media logic. Greek politicians have come to realise that they are more vulnerable than they were in the past. Former Prime Minister Constantine Mitsotakis once accused the “web of interests of media publishers” of being the main reason for his loss of power. Ex-chairman of the Hellenic Parliament and PASOK MP Apostolos Kaklamanis has attacked the media many times, especially 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 Prime Minister Tsipras in his speech regarding television licences, delivered in Parliament 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. (Quoted in *To Vima* 2015).

It could be argued that it is no coincidence that television licences have not been granted for 28 years. Indeed, the awarding of the licences seems to have been used as a part of the domestic political game. The reason of this policy is simple. Successive governments since 1989, the year of television deregulation, appear to have been playing an “on and off” game with television owners, who also have other interests in the Greek economy. In effect, they seem to use, on the one hand, the TV licences as a means of applying pressure and maintaining a competitive advantage in the tactical war with media and business entrepreneurs. On the other hand, political parties, especially those in power, want to maintain their control over the public broadcaster, echoing General De Gaulle’s quip that while their enemies have private television, they control the public broadcaster. In practice, they follow, as their counterparts in other Southern European countries, the pattern that the ruling party has the privilege of directly controlling public broadcasting in general, and management of the news and news output, in particular. In Greece, news editorial judgments are expected to be in close agreement with, if not identical to, government announcements across a whole range of policies. In other words, politicians want to have the upper hand on the public broadcaster since they feel vulnerable in a confrontation with the vested interests which at the same time own the mainstream private media of the country.

Although we are at the end of the so-called *Metapolitefse*, the 40-year period of the restoration of the Parliament after the Dictatorship and the establishment of Democracy according to the Western rules and values, and Greece has entered the age of social media, the ‘old’ political behaviour remains strong. In practice, Greek politicians seem to act and react as though they were still living in an analogue world, rather than in the digital era. The sudden closure of ERT is an indication of this attitude since the main cause was not the financial burden as the government announced. It was the feeling of losing the traditional tight governmental control over the state broadcaster news output.

In brief, it can be asserted without risk of contradiction, that public service broadcasting never really existed in Greece. The troubled political history of the country formed a state rather than a public broadcaster. In effect, in Greece the state broadcaster was unable to function according to the public service obligations observed in Britain, Scandinavia or other Northern European countries (Iosifidis, 2012).

Every Managing Director who has taken up office has laid out grandiose plans for the public broadcaster, only for them to be precipitously abandoned on the first day of their tenure. This trajectory of office is the true constant of the role of Managing Director: ambitions are enunciated but few, if any, of the office holders survive long enough to see their plans brought to fruition. The new ERT, everybody admits and the TV ratings confirm, has failed to distinguish itself. Regarding news, the old governmental 'behaviour' is on show once again, while its programming is neither innovative nor attractive, leading to sharp words from independent media analysts and journalists and to falling ratings, as the viewing public votes with its feet.

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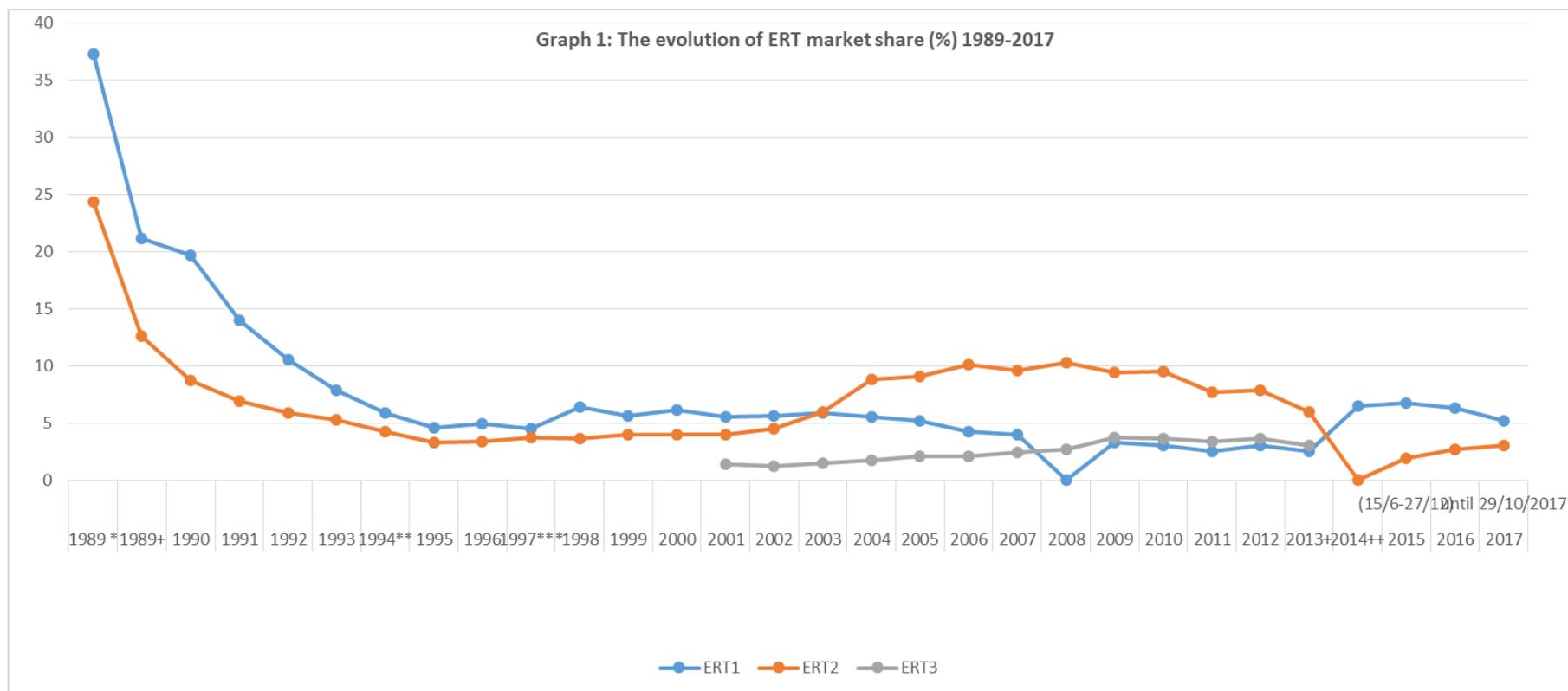
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ERT 1: Until ERT's closure in 2013 was known as ET1. Since 2015 as ERT1

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