

The Impact of Covid-19 on the Greek Media

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Abstract

It is widely recognized that Greece effectively managed the COVID-19 pandemic crisis through the early implementation of stringent measures and the imposition of lockdowns, similar to strategies adopted by other nations. Another noteworthy achievement was the rapid adaptation of the Greek populace to digital services. However, the situation differs in the realm of media, particularly in the context of traditional or "legacy" media. These media outlets, emerging from a decade-long financial crisis marked by significant declines in advertising revenues, confronted the adverse repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic. While there was an increase in media consumption during this period, advertising revenue experienced a substantial decline. What remains unaltered, though, is the persistent "traditional dirigist role of the Greek state" in shaping the media landscape. Adversarial media or media supporting the "Opposition" political parties as well the major Opposition accused the government of discrimination regarding the allocation of the COVID-19 public communication campaign. The pandemic has reaffirmed the inclination of the Greek media to endorse an interventionist state model, even in the digital age. Much of Greece's distinctive characteristics are attributed to the prominent role the state has assumed in promoting the country's economic development.

This paper aims to highlight the side-effects of the COVID-19 crisis in the Greek media sector. It will also attempt to show that regardless of the changes caused due to the financial crisis and the fact that media outlets changed hands, the interplay between the Greek media and the political system still plays a pivotal role.

Keywords: advertising, Covid-19, dirigist state, financial crisis, legacy media, media consumption, state aid

1. Introduction

In the realm of public discourse, it is widely recognized that Greece effectively managed the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic through the early implementation of stringent measures, including a nationwide lockdown. Another noteworthy achievement was the rapid adaptation of the Greek populace to digital services. Concepts such as remote work, telecommuting, and video conferencing swiftly became commonplace for a significant portion of the Greek population. Furthermore, the educational sector, led by universities, demonstrated a remarkable ability to adapt to the evolving requirements of remote learning. Telecommunication companies also played a pivotal role in this context, demonstrating a sense of social responsibility by offering triple play services at reduced rates. Additionally, they responded to the crisis by providing their customers with complimentary mobile internet and limited-time free access for one month.

On the other hand, the landscape of the media industry, particularly the traditional "legacy" media, has undergone significant transformations in recent years. Emerging from the aftermath of the decennial financial crisis, during which they experienced substantial losses in advertising revenues, media outlets were confronted with the unforeseen challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. While media consumption witnessed a surge, advertising revenue experienced a considerable downturn. Amidst these fluctuations, one constant persisted—the enduring influence of the Greek state on the media system, has been characterized as the "traditional dirigist role of the Greek state" (Papathanassopoulos, 1990).

In response to the crisis, Greek media outlets and their unionized employees implored the government for assistance in sustaining their operations. Consequently, the government announced a 20 million euros campaign, albeit indirectly, aimed at alleviating the financial strain faced by the beleaguered media, which was grappling with dwindling

advertising revenues. Nevertheless, this initiative was not without its controversies, as adversarial media outlets and those aligned with the major Opposition accused the government of discriminatory practices in the allocation of "Covid-ads."

The unfolding events during the pandemic brought to the fore a striking observation—the Greek media landscape seemed to continue endorsing the model of an interventionist state, even in the digital age. This peculiarity can be attributed, in part, to the enduring and leading role that the state has assumed in promoting the economic development of the country. This paper attempts to shed light on the side-effects of the COVID-19 crisis on the Greek media sector. Furthermore, it seeks to demonstrate that despite the changes precipitated by the financial crisis and the shifting ownership of media outlets, the intricate interplay between the Greek media and the political system remains a pivotal and enduring facet of the landscape.

2. The Greek Society in the Aftermath of the Financial Crisis

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Greece effectively responded to the crisis by implementing early, stringent, and unprecedented measures, including the imposition of a 'lockdown' similar to measures adopted by other nations. Between mid-March and mid-May 2020, the Greek government implemented a series of rigorous measures aimed at mitigating the transmission of the potentially lethal coronavirus. These measures encompassed actions such as the closure of national borders to neighboring countries, the suspension of in-person educational institutions, cafes, and a majority of commercial enterprises starting on March 5th. Furthermore, a comprehensive set of restrictions was introduced, encompassing the prohibition of all public gatherings and events, the implementation of a curfew, and the temporary closure of all retail establishments except those involved in the provision of essential goods, notably supermarkets, bakeries, and pharmacies, among others.

In general, one could say that Greece took, in a timely fashion, all necessary measures (including precautionary social distancing measures) that effectively slowed down the COVID-19 spread in the country. It is common belief in Greece that both the strictness of the measures and the way the Greek people have, to a certain extent, abided by them was the key to Greece avoiding the worst ravages of the global pandemic.

Nonetheless, the COVID-19 pandemic presented a formidable challenge not only to the healthcare system, which had been severely weakened by numerous budget reductions imposed by creditors in the context of successive EU bailout agreements, but also to various other sectors, with a primary impact on the country's economy. In an endeavor to enhance the adaptability of households and businesses in response to this formidable situation, the government unveiled a series of supportive measures aimed at addressing various areas of concern. Consequently, the government responded by implementing substantial financial packages designed to bolster the healthcare system, provide income and liquidity support, and revitalize sectors most heavily impacted by the pandemic, notably the tourism industry (OECD, 2020).

To reinvigorate the struggling economy, the government has formulated an ambitious reform agenda with a focus on stimulating growth and investment. Prior to the onset of the pandemic, Greece had sustained a period of economic expansion for over three years, with an average annual growth rate just below 2 percent. This growth had been sustained through structural reforms, high primary budget surpluses, and debt relief measures enacted by European partners, which had contributed to Greece's recovery and restored confidence in its economic prospects. Rising exports of goods and tourism had further supported growth, job creation, a reduction in unemployment rates, and reinforced private consumption (OECD, 2020).

However, the pandemic presents the risk of exacerbating Greece's longstanding financial challenges. It is imperative to prioritize long-term productivity growth to expedite the recovery and elevate living standards. Achieving this goal will necessitate additional efforts to reduce barriers to competition, particularly in professional service sectors such as notaries, lawyers, and the retail sale of medicines, while also enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of the public administration, including the justice system.

Despite its success in containing the virus to a significant extent, Greece remains vulnerable to a substantial economic setback, especially given its nearly decade-long economic crisis and heavy dependence on tourism, a critical source of employment and revenue. To mitigate the economic repercussions of the COVID-19 health crisis, the Greek government has proactively leveraged European Union support mechanisms, extended financial assistance to small and medium-sized enterprises, and provided subsidies to displaced workers.

3. The Greek Media in the Aftermath of the Financial Crisis

It is noteworthy that the Greek media landscape, akin to the Greek economy, was emerging from a profound fiscal crisis during the previous decade. Additionally, the crisis within the Greek media sector was not an unforeseen occurrence, as the market's limited size made it unsustainable for the multitude of media outlets, including newspapers, television, and radio stations. This fiscal crisis starkly highlighted the irregularities within the Greek media landscape. Furthermore, the

advertising expenditure experienced a significant decline of approximately 65 percent between 2007 and 2016, as reported by Papathanassopoulos (2020b). Conversely, there was a subsequent increase of approximately 13.2 percent during 2018-19. Furthermore, the financial crisis and austerity measures adversely impacted the advertising budgets of government ministries and public entities. The Greek government, through its ministries and public organizations, played a substantial role as an advertiser, given its extensive presence, but due to its overextension, it contributed to the reduction in advertising spending (Leandros 2010; Papathanassopoulos 2013). Furthermore, the government delayed numerous public works orders, which had a detrimental ripple effect on the media industry, particularly newspapers, since many entrepreneurs involved in public construction projects were also active in the media sector (Papathanassopoulos, 2013; Leandros, 2010). Consequently, owners of TV and radio stations, as well as newspapers, found it increasingly challenging to subsidize their media outlets with revenues from public works contracts (Papathanassopoulos, 2013).

In the aftermath of the fiscal crisis, and even in the present day, Greek media outlets in general, and traditional media in particular, have confronted their most challenging period to date. Notably, print media, encompassing newspapers and magazines, bore the brunt of these challenges. The Greek print media has been ensnared in a persistent crisis since the mid-1990s, with a diminishing number of Greeks regularly reading newspapers (Papathanassopoulos & Mpakounakis, 2010). Furthermore, four major media groups, namely Dimosiographicos Organismos Lambraki (DOL), Pegasos, IMAKO, and Liberis Publications, collapsed. A parallel trend was observed in regional newspapers, which, despite experiencing increased readership rates in the 1990s, encountered substantial difficulties. Nationally, over 40 local daily newspapers either ceased publication or transitioned to weekly editions, accompanied by a significant decline in subscribers (Skamnakis, 2018).

The situation within the television sector did not fare any better. Two private/commercial channels, Alter TV in 2011 and Mega TV in 2018, succumbed to financial woes. In fact, nearly all TV and radio stations grappled with severe financial challenges due to the plummeting advertising spending. Notably, the acquisition of the national private channel, Alpha TV, by Motor Oil, controlled by the Vardinoyannis family, who also possess Star channel, another nationwide TV channel, marked a significant development. While Alpha TV was evidently facing financial difficulties, the consolidation of these two nationwide TV channels under the same ownership went largely uncriticized, including by the Authority on Competition or the National Council of Radio and Television (Papathanassopoulos, 2020a).

Within this context, the closure of the public broadcaster, ERT, on June 11, 2013, can be partially attributed. Although ERT's shutdown was primarily a politically motivated decision rather than one stemming from the financial issues of public broadcasters, the opposition at the time contended that the government terminated ERT's 2500 employees to demonstrate its commitment to reducing the nation's bloated public sector to meet the expectations of Greece's international lenders. The troika of international lenders had anticipated the elimination of 4000 jobs by the end of 2013 (Iosifidis & Papathanassopoulos, 2019).

In one way or another, there existed a degree of optimism regarding the future of the media market, as the economy began to recover, and advertising expenditure showed signs of recovery.

4. The Impact of COVID-19 on the Greek Media Sector

In the aftermath of the recent financial crisis, the media industry experienced significant declines in advertising revenues. Subsequently, it confronted the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, along with its attendant repercussions on the media economy. Simultaneously, the pandemic exerted a discernible influence on the daily lives of the Greek populace, thereby influencing their patterns of media consumption, akin to its impact in other countries.

The first weeks of the lockdown there was a substantial rise of TV and news consumption. An increasing number of citizens demonstrated heightened engagement, particularly with news broadcasts and press conferences, as disseminated by the National Public Health Organization (eody.gov.gr). This phenomenon is explicable in light of the extended periods of time that Greeks dedicated to television consumption during the COVID-19 pandemic, characterized by an intensified consumption of streaming content, news segments, classic sitcoms, and video games within the confines of their residences. Nevertheless, as reported in the press, there was a gradual attenuation of their attachment to "TV and news diet" as the pandemic evolved (Chaimanta, 2020).

In effect, during the "lockdown", the TV total audience has considerably increased. According to the Nielsen, in March and April 2020, TV viewing ratings have increased by 25 per cent, and by more than 60 per cent among four-to-17-year-olds (Ntarzanou, 2020). During the first 3 weeks of the lockdown, the average TV viewing was skyrocketed to 8 hours daily. The TV news programs of the national channels also attracted almost half of the Greek population tuned on to their frequencies. Gradually, this number of TV viewers, as noted, started declining, according to the data of the measurement company Nielsen (Chaimanta, 2020). Nevertheless, these findings suggest the emergence of important developments such as the resurgence of the role of legacy media, especially television, and the fact that

citizens who usually remain far from the information have reconnected with the news provided by the legacy media and not the social media as it was the trends in the recent years, especially in Greece (see Nielsen et al., 2019).

In the context of the press industry, the government of Greece permitted the operation of newsstands and kiosks even during the most severe phases of the pandemic. However, this decision posed additional challenges to the distribution of printed newspapers, as a significant portion of the Greek population traditionally purchases newspapers from these physical outlets rather than subscribing to them. Consequently, the newspaper industry experienced a substantial decline in sales, leading some observers to speculate that this period marked a critical juncture for the Greek press (Papathanassopoulos, 2020b).

The listenership of radio also decreased during the pandemic, primarily due to the fact that many Greeks habitually listen to radio broadcasts while commuting to work or driving their vehicles, activities that were significantly curtailed during the lockdown period.

Conversely, the online news portals of leading Greek media organizations witnessed a notable surge in website traffic. Internet users exhibited a considerable increase in their visits to newspaper applications and websites, potentially surpassing the engagement levels of their European counterparts. Indeed, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the daily average time spent online by Greek internet users exhibited a remarkable uptick, with a 50 percent increase observed from February to mid-March 2020. A similar trend was observed in mobile internet usage during the same period (Papazoglou, 2020). Furthermore, TV streaming and subscription services sector experienced growth as a result of Greeks staying at home during the lockdown. Services such as Vodafone TV witnessed a substantial increase of 142 percent, while pay-TV services like Cosmote TV and streaming platforms like Netflix also reported notable boosts in viewership (Papazoglou, 2020).

However, the pandemic had a severe impact on the advertising market, with approximately 80 percent of advertisers postponing their advertising campaigns. This caused a significant decline in advertising revenue, with a 60 percent reduction experienced across the industry, particularly affecting commercial media organizations, Sunday newspapers, and private-commercial TV and radio channels. Consequently, this downturn had far-reaching consequences for media professionals. In particular, newspaper journalists were severely affected, with more than half experiencing reduced work opportunities and income during March and April 2020. Many sought state-aid to mitigate the financial hardship. Media personnel within the print industry, like employees in other sectors of the economy, received a one-time stipend of 800 euros. Salaried journalists were comparatively less impacted, although 8 percent had to resort to temporary unemployment. Additionally, the pandemic necessitated significant changes in journalistic practices, as face-to-face interviews, press conferences, and access to various locations were greatly impeded. Journalists had to adapt by relying more on online sources and conducting interviews via telephone.

In mid-July 2020, the Greek government initiated a gradual easing of restrictions, marking the beginning of a return to a semblance of normalcy. News consumption patterns began to normalize, although there was an increasing acknowledgment of "corona-fatigue" among the populace.

5. In the Service of State-aid Again

As noted above, the media industry was one of the sectors that were severely hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. Almost all sectors of the economy asked for state aid. Of course, Greece was not a unique case. As in other countries, governments closed businesses and imposed lockdown and social distancing to people and society in general. As in other countries, the Greek government promised generous state aid to keep the economy on life support. The Greek media have urged the government for support to sustain their business. In effect, the government announced a 11 million campaign regarding COVID-19 with a view to increase it to 20 or even 30 million euros, but it was an indirect way to help the desperate starving media for funding. Adversarial media or media supporting to the Opposition accused the government of discrimination regarding the allocation of the 'Covid-ads'.

The government took several measures, mainly to promote a major campaign against COVID-19. The media, on the one hand, through daily TV ads would inform and warn the Greek citizens that the weak healthcare system meant harsh measures had to be implemented early to save lives, even if the economy was hit hard. On the other, the campaign would provide a much-needed revenue for the cash-stagnant Greek media, old and new. Precisely:

On March 15, 2020, the government (with the Ministerial Decision/decreed 179) asked from TV and radio stations to broadcast free messages regarding the campaign against Covid-19. Art. 21 of Act of Legislative Content O.G A' 55/11-3-2020 and Art 31 of Act of Legislative Content O.G A' 64/14-3-2020. Six days later, on March 21, with a legislative act (Number 227), the government decided to commit 11 million euros from the national budget to an urgent publicity campaign that would run until the end of May to promote measures to contain the spread of COVID-19 and provided that 35 percent of the expenditure of 11 million euros would be paid directly to the media companies by the

Ministry of Finance. A day before, with another legislative act, the government decided that the public broadcaster, ERT, was now free to employ media personnel for the next 4 months without any restriction, while the deadline for the regional press register was postponed to April 30.

On March 23, the government directly assigned [the management of] the direction of the COVID-19 campaigns to Initiative Media advertising company. On April 25, 2020, the government (Decision/decreed 337) decided to increase the advertising COVID-19 campaign budget by 9 million euros. A few days later, on April 30, the government decided (Decision/decreed 347) to amend the above Decision 179 on the broadcast of free messages, limiting their mandatory viewing to one every two hours from 6.00 am until midnight. The government's aim was that a fair amount of the 20 million-euro COVID-19 campaign could be directed to radio and television stations.

With a new legislative act on March 30, the government suspended payments for six TV companies of the annual fees they had to pay for their awarded nationwide licenses to broadcast. As each of them was due to pay 3.5 million euros in 2020, the fiscal year's loss of income would be up to 21 million euros. The content of the legislation was unclear especially on the way the suspended fees would be paid in the future. The government said that the suspended amount would be transferred per TV station/company in the next years. Each licensed TV company could then pay their compulsory annual instalment in 9 portions. The collection of 50,000 euros per license to the media regulatory agency National Council of Radio and Television (NCRTV) was also suspended (300,000 euros).

Additionally, with another Legislative Act, on May 1, 2020, the government decided to ask Digea, the private digital transmission operator, to reduce by 50 percent the rental fee of private TV stations (particularly for the months March, April, and May 2020). This amount was offset by the company's instalments to the State for the use of the public frequencies, which is provided by its contract in 2014 with the telecommunications' regulatory agency National Council of Telecommunications and Posts. At the same time, for those stations that have used this, it was prohibited to limit the power or to interrupt their TV signal from the 1st of May until the 31st of August.

As noted, the Greek press's fragile circulation collapsed during COVID-19 lockdown. Newspaper owners and employees' associations made a plea for government support. The government to reverse the downward trend of sales, on March 21, 2020, asked supermarket chains to sell daily and Sunday newspapers during their opening hours. According to the Ministerial Decision 31927/2020 'the food retail stores are obliged to sell newspapers' (article 3). The association of regional newspapers reacted arguing that 30 per cent of the 11-million-euro package should be committed to the regional press. It also claimed that urgent advertising bought by regional municipalities around the country "is not following any of the criteria envisaged by the law". The government was supposed to prepare a press funding program of 7.5 million euros for national newspapers and 16 million euros for 4 years, for regional newspapers, but nothing was announced.

Finally, the government aims to replace the fundamental law on media (2328/1995) to update its provisions and extend their operation to digital platforms (with taxation). In this respect, it seems that the government responded positively to the claims of the pay-tv operators, like Cosmote TV and Nova, to tax Netflix, as the previous SYRIZA led government has imposed a pay-tv tax (10 percent) on their subscribers, but not on Netflix subscribers.

Finally, the Journalists' Union of Athens Daily Newspapers (ESIEA) issued an announcement on 18 March 2020 asking all involved parties and stakeholders in the news media to respect their obligations regarding factual reporting, and to abstain from spreading fake news. Nevertheless, incidents of fake news and misinformation were not avoided!

6. The Re-politicization of State-aid

As we have seen, the government was keen to respond to the pressures of the media industry. But its decisions, especially the allocation of the campaign money, raised strong criticism among the opposition political parties, certain media and MPs. In effect, they accused the government that it was using the aid to the media during the pandemic with a *view* to improve its relations with the media without transparency procedures.

Moreover, concerns were also raised that the final 20 million euros campaign was directly awarded to a private company with a 3 percent commission on the total amount, without further criteria. The principles for how media outlets were chosen to transmit the campaign ads ('we stay home') and what amounts of public money were distributed to the chosen media outlets were also not made public initially.

Some asked why that campaign was necessary at all, since all media, were discussing the if media are already obliged to broadcast free messages and they are reporting on COVID-19 on a round-the-clock basis (Fotiadis, 2020). Others also asked why the government suspended the TV licenses instalments. The government spokesperson, Mr. Stelios Petsas, responded that the 'we stay home campaign' was part of the government's swift response to the pandemic that managed "to curb its spread, bolster the health service and save lives... [and he added] ... The urgent and emergency conditions made it necessary to use all possible means to inform citizens' adding that the 'urgency of the situation prompted the

authorities to assign the tender to the project to a contractor with the necessary specialist knowledge and staff to carry out the project efficiently' (in *Kathimerini*, 2020). He also argued that if the government held a tender, it would 'need at least six months' before starting the campaign, which would be completely inefficient. He also insisted that in the end, the amounts given to media companies under the program would be made public and that TV licenses fees would be paid in full. After the completion of the campaign, the government announced the list with the allocation of the campaign money to various media.

This was not enough, however, for the main opposition party, SYRIZA as well as pro-SYRIZA media. On Monday 6, 2020, SYRIZA demanded the government also release the original orders and invoices for the ads placed during its COVID-19 campaign, following the publication of list of the sums given to each individual media outlet. Otherwise, it warned, this would confirm that 'all these weeks, the list was being 'doctored'.' And added: 'After an unbelievable 90-day delay, the government spokesperson today served up a list with the 20 million euros given to the media for the coronavirus campaign. It is obliged, however, today, to also publish the initial orders for ad space sent by the company initiative, along with the original invoices. And the announcement went on: 'If it does not do this, this will confirm that all these weeks the list was being 'cooked' so that government ministers will avoid their responsibility for squandering public money, even on media outlets that were non-existent... The government must also explain while some media outlets were excluded 'simply because they criticize it' and why some were given tiny amounts while those that systematically attack SYRIZA have been richly remunerated, SYRIZA said, noting that this method was being used to create a fake impression of pluralism' (in Athens News Agency, 2020). Additionally, SYRIZA in a new announcement, accused the New Democracy government of 'ducking' the request to reveal the sums given by 'leaking sordid comparisons with what previous governments have done to gain time and massage the numbers' and went on by pointing out that 'SYRIZA passed laws so that advertising spending, even that of banks, should be published so that there is full transparency. It neither handed out public funds to non-existent mass media companies, without even a single employee, nor illegally handed out money to sites not on the online media register, nor guiltily hid the list of where this money went' (ANA, 2020b).

7. Discussion and Concluding Remarks

One would expect that after a decade of severe financial crisis that led to the disruption of the political and media systems, in the era of digital communications some traditional 'attitudes' regarding the relationship between the media and politicians would have changed. The above politicization of the unquestionable needed State-aid to the media does not come as a surprise in the history of the Greek mass communication. Although State-aid for the media does not necessarily lead to government control or intervention in the media output (Sparks, 1992), it works well as such in cases of a weak private economy sector. The Greek case reflects this picture. In effect, the slow development of the private industrial and services sector and its dependence on an interventionist state, has traditionally meant that the Greek state has become ever more autonomous from the rest of society (Iosifidis and Papathanassopoulos, 2019).

In fact, State-aid for media outlets in Greece comes as some sort of special economic intervention with strong political repercussions on both politics and the media. First, the implementation of government aid has traditionally interlinked to the political culture of the country. Broadly speaking, government intervention in Greece is signified by these hidden practicalities of state-media relations.

Since the small Greek market cannot sustain the plethora of media outlets, it is inevitable the media companies are cross subsidized through other funds or sectors of the economy. In most of the cases, media have become dependent on *occasional* government hand-outs, bank loans, and, likewise, the financial goodwill of their owners. Notably, a regular, transparent, and government-neutral public financial media subsidy scheme has not been established in Greece, and state policies of this kind have not been visible yet. But indirect subsidies or aid are greatly supporting media outlets, and these are rather unclear. As mentioned above, media owners and the political elite have built up invisible but close ties of mutual dependence, reliance, and control. According to Mouzelis and Pagoulatos, "the owners of the media represent a center of power that no politician dares to question, unless he aims to commit political suicide. Their power is being reinforced by their dominant position in numerous business fields (telecommunications, information technologies, construction etc.);" (Mouzelis & Pagoulatos, 2003, 22). In effect, as Leandros noted, since the late 1980s, "successive governments have tried to promote transparency and limit concentration in the media sector. However, (...) their actions were contradictory and ineffective" (Leandros, 2010, 891).

In other words, state aid to the media in *Greece* has not been governed by a clear and transparent legal framework. On the contrary, State-aid is traditionally handed over to the media through various rather clandestine channels (Komninou 1996). The overarching principle of these practices may be attributed to a paternalist and clientelist culture of *Greek* politics, which has held together the state and the media in a network of mutual benefits (Papathanassopoulos, 2017).

It is questionable, therefore, whether the pandemic would disrupt this model of state support and government

intervention. As *Economist* has pointed out: ‘It is no accident that the state grows during crises’ (2020, 9), and we would add, the modern history of Greece is full of crises! In other words, the recent crisis due to the pandemic has further strengthened the long-lived interdependent relationships between the media owners and the government of the day, the ruling party, and leading politicians, a tradition that goes back to the establishment of the modern Greek State (Papathanassopoulos, 2013). COVID-19 may have not slow down the economy, but it has strengthen the strong ties between the ruling elites and the media.

A troubled economy in most cases has negative effects on advertising expenditure, and since there is already a big number of unemployed media people in general, and press journalists in particular, it seems that this situation may easily undermine media autonomy from a different direction: it can drive media companies to ask for new bank loans and state aid. Since the banks due to their re-capitalization needs have become increasingly dependent on the Greek state, this may provide the conditions for tighter clientelist relationships between the state and the media owners. Besides, the globalization of the pandemic has given the upper hand to most, if not all, governments around the world since they are the only institutions that are able to support various sectors of the economy. Above and beyond, in the age of the Internet, it seems unlikely for legacy Greek media, newspapers in particular, to survive without subsidies, and consequently from the bank loans. Much will depend on the ownership structure of the industries involved, the nature of the party system, and, eventually, the party-political elites in power.

In effect, since the early 1990s, successive governments appear to have been playing an “on and off” game with media owners who also have other interests in the Greek economy. The COVID-19 pandemic signifies that we may have entered a new era of ‘interplay’ between the media and politicians. In this new game, each party tries to get tactical advantages because each needs the other. Here it is important to stress that it is not commercial motives alone that drive entrepreneurs and other business interests to enter a small media market such as Greece. To an extent, digital and electronic media are in this way similar to the press, where most newspapers are dependent on considerable yearly subsidies, bank loans, or on the wealth of their owners. The entry of businessmen and shipping owners and other business interests into the media scene has been an important way to influence public opinion and to exert pressure in the political arena for their business interests. On the other hand, the COVID-19 pandemic with its side-effects on the economy in general, and the media sector in particular, gave an advantage to the government of the day in general and the ruling party in particular.

It is obvious that any Greek government or ruling party wants to have the upper hand in order either to put pressure on media owners and their vested interests in the Greek economy, or to form new or to strengthen the old alliances with other media owners and vested interests. In the final analysis, the interplay between the two poles remains unchanged, with or without the pandemic. The ‘dirigist tradition’ of the Greek State seems to become stronger in the aftermath of the recent fiscal crisis and the ‘pandemic lockdown’. In effect, it seems that the central accumulation of revenues in the Greek state made necessary government intervention in planning, financing, and management of media development, and most importantly it is welcomed, if not demanded, by the major players of the industry. From another perspective, the pandemic or any major crisis may be the tools for the government of the day to control adversarial media. At the same time, polls indicate that the Greek public appears to be increasingly cynical about both politicians and the media.

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