

Opinion Article

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The State, NGOs and the Rest

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Certainly, recent revelations involving two Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in financial scandals did not come as a shock. In our country, NGOs have been identified with opacity and lack of accountability, with the exception of some luminous cases.

In addition to showcasing the problematic institutional framework within which NGOs operate in Greece since the 1990s, these two scandals have offered an excellent opportunity to initiate a fruitful and meaningful public debate, much broader than merely the issue of NGOs, based on the following central question: what should be the role and size of the state in Greece, which is trying to overcome the crisis? This question acquires even greater significance in light of the upcoming revision of our Constitution.

The article at hand will be limited to a finite frame of analysis. Should the Greek State change, reduce or completely remove funding -or aid by various means- to the following organisations: **1**-NGOs, **2**-political parties, **3**-the Church and, **4**-the mass media?

NGOs first appeared in our country in early 1990s and underwent great development from 2000 onwards, whereas the State has been a major -and in some cases their principal- financier. In order to get a picture and understand the magnitude of this relationship between the State and NGOs, we ought to mention one striking fact: in the decade 2000-2010, 600 NGOs, which were in close cooperation solely with the Foreign Ministry, managed approximately €135 million of state money, under a virtually non-existent institutional and supervisory framework. On the other hand, it is common knowledge that the majority of NGOs in Greece operated as an extension of state patronage and cosy arrangements for “our people”.

NGOs were created with the primary aim of covering the space between the State and the citizen. Despite the fact that many NGOs receive government assistance in foreign countries as well, many major organisations such as Greenpeace have chosen not to accept government subsidies, in order to maintain their independence and to focus on their work unhindered.

However, even if we assume that we are living in an ideal world where all NGOs operate with transparency and according to sound regulatory framework, one question still remains: why should Greek citizens be obliged to pay taxes on NGOs? Would it be better and more equitable if they supported only those organisations that they, themselves deem appropriate and feel that they actually provide a significant service?

Apart from many NGOs, the State has also been funding the political parties in Greece (at least those that have managed to enter the parliament and the European Parliament, as well as certain smaller parties under specific

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conditions). Despite the serious economic crisis and the subsequent reduction of state subsidies to political parties, the latter have received approximately €190 million from the State in the period 2010-2014 (excluding loans and the conditions under which they were granted). The state subsidisation of political parties has been one of the few issues which diachronically enjoy bipartisan consensus (with the exception of some populist and meaningless “fireworks”).

The main argument of state funding is that this is the only way for parties to avoid economic dependence on private interests. Thus, they argue, democracy is reinforced and the public interest is protected. Nevertheless, this argument is far from convincing. It seems that lavish state subsidies were not enough, so that the parties remain particularly vulnerable to private economic interests. Some may propose the increase of state subsidisation as the solution. Most likely, however, this would be like carrying water to sea. Perhaps the solution lies exactly in the opposite direction: complete elimination of state funding and strengthening of political parties by individuals who wish to contribute, under the most stringent control and greatest transparency possible. Neighbouring Italy, for example, decided recently to gradually reduce state funding to parties by 2017. From then onwards, state subsidies will be replaced by voluntary contributions of Italian citizens.

The last type of organisation to receive state aid is the Church. For various reasons, the State and the Church were never fully separated, as was the case in most countries of Europe. As a result, the Church plays a catalytic role in the life of citizens, who are obliged to finance it (regardless of whether they are Christian Orthodox, Catholic, Muslim, Hindu, Agnostic, Atheist, etc.). Some political forces have long been arguing in favour of the abolition of state funding of the Church, counter-proposing the voluntary contribution of people who wish to do so, instead.

The last case concerns the financing of the mass media through public advertisements. Through the latter, Greek governments and media owners have built a relationship of blatant collusion and balance of terror, where one side is hostage to the other. In 2002, the amount spent for state advertising was €42 million, only to reach €85 million in 2008. The fact that media of questionable journalistic quality and impact received the lion's share of government advertising funds is indicative of the way this system functioned (and perhaps continues to function). There are well-known cases of newspapers, which received state money in total mismatch with their circulation.

The complete abolition of state subsidisation of NGOs, political parties, the Church and the mass media, would result in enormous financial benefits for the citizens, who would automatically be exempt from annual taxes worth millions of euros, taxes which they have never been asked for and probably never benefited from.

The Catholics of Syros (island) or the Orthodox Christians of Thessaloniki will be able to offer as much money as they wish to their respective churches, whereas the atheists of Athens will be able to use the money that will return to their pockets on issues far more important to their lives than the Church.

The same applies to the parties. The supporters of New Democracy will not be obliged to sponsor SYRIZA with their money; similarly, the supporters of the Communist Party (KKE) will not be obliged to finance the Golden Dawn (Chrysi Avgi).

Finally, the same goes for the mass media. Citizens can support their favourite media by purchasing the newspapers they prefer, by listening to their favourite radio stations and by watching their beloved TV

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channels.

Beyond the financial benefits, the elimination of state funding will put an end to the intertwining relations between the State and these organisations. The most significant aspect, however, is the following: the relationship between the State and its citizens will be revised, with the latter enjoying more freedom and say on issues that affect them directly.

All of the above issues are undoubtedly politically and ideologically charged. Nevertheless, maybe it is time that we (the citizens and the parties) resume debating these issues that are important to our lives, regardless of whether we agree or not. In this respect, perhaps the disclosure of scandals related to the NGOs proves beneficial in many ways – besides the administration of justice.

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