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Foreign policy and the media in Greece: Marking a shift from ‘confrontational’ to ‘peace’ journalism

The role played by the Greek mainstream media in foreign policy is an area of research that has only recently begun to develop. Most of the published and research work concentrates on the ways in which the media contribute to the reproduction and reinforcement of ethnocentric and nationalist discourses (Giallourides 2001; Kostarella 2007; Panagiotou 2005a). As a result, little attention is given as to how the Greek media may facilitate alternative, resolution-orientated coverage. This piece aims to kick off the debate for further research and discussion in this direction.

Foreign policy in Greece, and in particular policy occupied with the country’s uneasy relationship with Turkey and former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM)¹, is a dominant issue in the national public agenda and public sphere. This may be attributed to Greece’s ‘memory’ of traumatic experiences resulting from a long, and in some cases painful, process of nation-building (Asia Minor 1922), as well as from the constant – as far as the perception of external ‘threat’ is concerned – display of Turkey’s revisionist stance (from the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974 onwards)². Thus, public opinion as well as the country’s political elite do not sufficiently appreciate Greece’s current position in the international geopolitical arena, and perceive the country through the prism of ‘Greek exceptionalism’. At the core of this ideological position is

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¹ The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.  
² Since 1973, Turkey has sought to revise the legal status of the Aegean, contesting the Greek islands’ right to a continental shelf; the extent of Greek Air Space and territorial waters; and the military status of the islands in the Eastern Aegean (Aydin & Istantis 2004).
the ‘culture of the underdog’, basic traits of which are introversion, xenophobia, siege mentality and a prevalence for conspiracy-related approaches and interpretations of international developments (Diamandourou 2000; Ioakeimidis 2007). As a result, Greek foreign policy is not only dominated by ethnocentric stereotypes but also heavily influenced by a political discourse dominated by an ‘ethno-populist’ content. This discourse moulds the Greek population to believe that although they are ‘superior’, history has been playing tricks with them and they have been permanently betrayed by ‘foreign allies’ and the powerful ‘West’.

Furthermore, as foreign policy-making in Greece is largely motivated by the need to maximize electoral impact and popularity, public opinion becomes a fundamental source of decisions and priorities, facilitating the adoption of inflexible and usually irrational political positions (as for example, the Greek embargo on the small and newly neighbouring state of FYROM in 1995). This amplifies the perception of ‘a country under siege’ from external pressure, and in many instances restricts the government and policy-making mechanisms from prioritizing wisely and appropriately. In retrospect, foreign policymaking in Greece becomes reactive and is driven by impulse and demagoguery (Ioakeimidis 2003).

Under such conditions, and given their political and commercial motives (Daremas and Terzis 2000; Papathanasopoulos 1997), the Greek media pursue an important protagonistic role in defining what should be acceptable in foreign policy decisions and negotiations; however, in so doing, they ‘reinforce’ the reactionary defensiveness and victimization mentality of the Greek public, as foreign policy issues are framed in a way that re-accenuates populist perceptions and expectations. Characteristic of this is the so-called ‘Macedonian issue’ and the consensus that developed among the government, policy-makers and Greek society during the early 1990s, which rested on the position that the newly independent neighbouring country (then still referred to as ‘Skopje’) should be renounced diplomatically by Greece, the European Union (EU) and the international community should it decide to employ the name ‘Macedonia’ or any other of its derivatives. The Greek media supported and reinforced this position. According to a content analysis of Greek newspapers of that period, 71 per cent of articles published adopted a rigid ethnocentric and nationalist line (Panagiotopoulou 1996). FYROM was referred to as a small, inferior political entity that should not enjoy the full rights of sovereignty and self-determination – a ‘statelet’ or ‘pseūdo-state’. As far as its inhabitants were concerned, the Greek press made constant use of terms connoting poverty, such as ‘barefoot’ or ‘gipsy Skopjeans’. When the nationalist political parties (Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (Vнатрешна македонска револуционерна организација, VMRO)) of FYROM published maps depicting large parts of northern Greece as part of FYROM’s national territory, the ‘enemy’ was also represented in the Greek press as a homogeneous entity determined to deprive Greece of its territory (Tsagarousianou 1999). Such coverage created insurmountable obstacles for foreign policy decision-makers. Any politician in favour of an alternative policy, negotiating the name of the neighbouring country, was characterized by the Greek press as ‘submissive’. Today, and despite the détente of Greek relations with FYROM, the ‘name issue’ still remains far from resolved.

Equally indicative is the coverage of the Imia crisis in 1996, which brought Greece and Turkey to the brink of war. Turkish actions were reported in the Greek media using direct war vocabulary. The Turkish journalists’ activity on
the islet, for example, was characterized as ‘landing’, ‘invasion’ and ‘agents’ assault’. In fact, Greek media journalists went so far as to request from the leadership of the Greek Navy not to undertake any operations during nighttime, since that would mean less than clear media coverage of the hostilities in the Aegean (Predenteris 1999: 97). All this created a psychosis of war and led to continuous appeals for aggressive and heroic acts; ‘Let’s answer with new Thermopylae, Marathons and Salamines’, ‘Ciller’ for Imia? We for Constantinople’, ‘Ciller threatens us with war, Ciller wants 1,000 islands’, ‘We must be armed to the teeth, the Turks understand no other language’, ‘We will reply to Tsouler’ [cunning pun with ‘tsoula’, meaning ‘hussy, slutty’ in Greek] – thus read the headlines and reported the TV stations across Greece (Panagiotou 2005b).

As the coverage of the Annan Plan (2004) for the settlement of the Cyprus conflict also indicates, the Greek media reflect and feed public opinion, creating a vicious circle concerning the perception of the ‘Other’, perpetuating and reinforcing tension by putting considerable pressure on the government to look ‘tough’. The negotiations were reported as a ‘victory’ for Turkey. Turks and Turkish Cypriots celebrate’, read the Greek papers. In this context, the subsequent rejection of the Annan Plan by Cyprus was projected as being ‘inevitable’. ‘National unity’ was considered imperative in face of ‘imperialist plans’ and the ‘Turkish threat’. The Turkish-Cypriot positions were absent whereas Greek arguments were praised in accordance with international law (Panagiotou 2006).

NEW DIRECTIONS

It is clear, therefore, that the media representations and coverage of Greek issues of national importance fall into the category of ‘confrontational’ journalism or what Galtung (2006) has described as ‘war-violence journalism’. This is a kind of journalism that focuses on the conflict arena, with two parties, one goal (to win) and a zero-sum orientation of ‘us–them’. ‘Them’ is the problem and ‘them’ should be dehumanized, by exposing their ‘untruths’ and reinforcing our ‘truths’, focusing on our ‘suffering’ and, in so doing, conceal any peace-oriented approaches and initiatives before ‘victory’ is at hand. What is required, instead, is a logic of ‘peace-oriented journalism’ that explores the backgrounds and contexts of conflict formation, presents causes and options on each side (not just ‘both sides’), identifies the goals of the various parties involved directly or indirectly in a conflict and possible contradictions between them and offers creative ideas for conflict resolution, development and peace-making, while respecting all cultures and belief systems (Lynch and McGoldrick 2005).

Bearing that in mind, future work should include research, first on the ‘features’ of the Greek media and the ‘constraints’ (institutional, technical, political and economic) thereby imposed on the work of journalists, especially in times of crisis (Ozgunes and Terzis 2000). Questions such as the following should be addressed: To what extent is the lack of constructive and resolution-oriented journalism the result of Greece’s increasing commercialized media landscape? To what extent do media concentration and the power games that ensue discourage alternative approaches? How far do the Greek media play a role in ‘manufacturing consent’ (Chomsky and Herman 1998), legitimizing the nationalist positions of Greek governments? How is one to explain the dependence of Greek journalists on official sources only? To what extent do journalists claim that they represent the national collective consciousness, and of journalists and photographers, asking the mayor to remove the Greek flag and hoist the Turkish one. Hurriyet published a front page editorial depicting the Turkish journalists removing the Greek flag on the very next day, to which the Greek media replied. In particular, the Greek TV stations intercepted the episode with the flag from the Turkish channels, and aired it repeatedly.

5 Taner Ciller, Turkey’s Prime Minister during the crisis and Turkey’s first female Prime Minister.

6 Until it gained independence in 1940, the Cyprus problem was a question of self-determination within the framework of decolonization (from British rule). From its independence until the Turkish invasion (1974), the Cyprus problem was basically a state issue; that is, an issue concerning the coexistence of two ethnic communities, the Greek-Cypriot and the Turkish-Cypriot community within one integrated state entity. Since 1974, the Cyprus problem has become a complex international issue concerning the occupation of the territory of Cyprus, a UN and EU member state, the formal declaration of an independent Turkish Cypriot state on the occupied section of the island, as well as the problem of the reunification and coexistence of two communities within a state entity in the form of a functional and viable bi-zonal, bi-communal, federation. In November 2002, following intense, yet fruitless, direct bi-community talks,
must therefore adjust their news coverage and framing to dominant, popular and comfortable social views and perceptions? Do journalists and owners of media conglomerates fear that if they differentiate themselves from the rigid ethnocentric ideas and norms of the Greek public at large, they will be rejected by their audiences?

On a second level, a move from confrontational to peace journalism should include research on how the Greek media can be encouraged to act as a mediator of new foreign policy discourses, especially in light of Greece’s decision since 1999 to embrace Turkey’s efforts to join the EU, as part of the resolution of the bilateral disputes between the two states (Lazarou 2009). It is also necessary to study the ways through which journalists can be encouraged to make constructive contributions in times of (perceived) crisis. In particular, what is required is an investigation of the methods through which journalists can develop greater knowledge and empathy with the position and the problems of the ‘Other’. This requires more public debate and improved contact and communication between journalists. For example, journalists from Greece, Turkey and FYROM could establish a common Internet site or non-governmental organization (NGO), through which they could portray the anxieties and positions of their countries, while at the same time facilitating a two-way communication with academics, artists, professionals and civil society organizations. This would also allow journalists to comprehend and appreciate the subtleties across Greece, Turkey and FYROM. In Turkey, for example, not all members of the armed forces have ‘bad’ intentions; nationalists, Kemalists, Marxists, and liberals, all have significant ideological differences between them, as well as different attitudes towards Greece. Greek journalists should learn to distinguish between these differences and, in so doing, inform citizens on ‘resolution’-orientated approaches instead of fuelling conflict.

The challenge towards the development of peace journalism, one might argue, is to abandon the zero-sum logic of coverage selectivity, by focusing only on the ‘threatening’ statements and actions of the political and military leadership of the ‘Other’. What is required is a more balanced coverage of the ‘real’ as opposed to perceived political, economic and social conditions of the ‘Other’. In this direction, it would also be interesting to see Greek, Turkish and Skopjean journalists collaborate, through the co-production of TV documentaries on common economic, social and environmental problems, as well as on the aspirations and achievements shared by civil society in their countries (Hadjidimos 1998/99: 30–34). This is important, for journalists will be encouraged to cooperate and travel together, undertake joint research and interviews, and collect, interpret and cross-examine the facts. Moreover, journalists will be able to promote and discuss identities other than the national, highlighting that the ‘Other’ is not the ‘Enemy’. In Greece, neighbouring countries are only projected and covered within the framework of the country’s so-called national security interests. This approach, however, facilitates the perception of a ‘historical’, ‘eternal’, ‘principal’ and ‘unified enemy’. In real terms, though, the ‘Enemy’ comprises not only ultra-nationalist politicians and armed forces but also individuals and groups with different positions and priorities. It is therefore vital that journalists give the ‘enemy’ a ‘human face’ and develop a ‘positive curiosity’ for the culture and identity of the ‘Other’.

The point is not to substitute confrontational journalism by compensating with some token peace stories. For, to use an intriguing analogy of Galtung (1998), how would the health section of the newspaper look like if it were devoted only to the study of diseases? There would never be any news devoted
to preventive medicine, research on possible cures or advances in understanding and curing disease. Instead, the health section would focus almost exclusively on the most frightening diseases, illnesses or epidemics on the horizon, and sad stories about the sick and the dying.

Such is the nature of media coverage of disputes in Greece today. As a result, audiences are misinformed about the country's policy issues because of the low level of explanation and the context which is given in reporting. Confrontational media coverage works only towards the continuation of Greece’s disputes, as Turkey and FYROM are constantly presented as being ‘aggressive’ and ‘expansionist’ with ‘provocative behaviour’, and as homogeneous entities, intending to deprive Greece of its national identity and territory. By equating the representations of the citizens, political forces, government of the ‘Other’ with ultra-nationalists, the emphasis on Turkish and Skopjean aggressiveness – as opposed to the Greek position of ‘defence’ – enhances the ideology of victimization and justifies the use of all means necessary to protect all things Greek (Panagiotou 2003). Simplified, one-sided, rigid and ethnocentric approaches to foreign and international developments inevitably lead to deadlocks, by concentrating only on the threatening actions of the ‘Other’. The Greek media do not allow for any ‘retreat’, nor for any serious consideration of the factors that might lead to the resolution of the country’s disputes.

This rupture must be healed by redressing the balance between the current priorities of reporting and the need to properly inform the public. In a turbulent world, where the global agenda is so complex and multifaceted, it is necessary that Greek (as well as Turkish and Skopjean) journalists prompt and equip national citizens to acknowledge and appreciate different cultures, ‘negotiate’ their own readings, open up multiple meanings and inspect propaganda and other self-serving representations.

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