

THE “MODERNIZATION” OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN CONTEMPORARY GREECE: A SITUATION ANALYSIS

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In the last 15 years particularly, political communication in Greece has moved into the “modernization” phase (Negrine and Papathanassopoulos 1996; Papathanassopoulos 2000a). The causes of this change can be grouped into three basic categories: (1) the modernization of Greek society; (2) the deregulation of Greek broadcasting; and (3) broader political changes.

1. The modernization of Greek society

In the last twenty-five years, every sector of Greek society has been substantially transformed. This has been accompanied by a series of changes affecting its structures, institutions, mores and, of course, its members themselves (Zotos and Lysonski 1994; Lysonski, Durvasula and Zotos 1996, 2004; Kintis 1998; To Vima 2000; Zotos Boutsouki and Kosmopoulou 2004).

The principal features of this new age are:

a. **The crisis in existing traditional social structures and values.** The contestation of traditional institutions, values and mores (Zotos and Lysonski 1994; Kintis 1998; 19-23, 108, Tsoukalas 2000: 25-32; Doulkeri 2000; Markis 2002) within the polity has led to the need for political parties to seek a new ideological identity, to a decrease in voter partisanship and to the devaluation of politics.

b. **The rise of individualism.** The rise of individualism has led to a weakening of interest in public affairs and to electoral support of parties that serve voters’ personal interests.

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c. **Social mobility.** Growing social mobility in Greece has led to party mobility and increasing numbers of “self-mobilized” citizens (Dalton 1996).

d. **Prevalence of commercial logic and (hyper)consumerism.** The commercialized logic of the marketplace dominates most aspects of the country’s life, including information and politics. The consumerist mentality characteristic of today’s society (Lysonski, Durvasula and Zotos 1996, 2004; Kintis 1998: 46; Doulkeri 2000: 61) has invaded its political culture. People see politics, and are seen by politicians, as consumers rather than ideologists.

e. **The supremacy of the media.** The media, and particularly television, are not only the public’s chief means of entertainment but, and more importantly, virtually its only source of information about social and political affairs (Doulkeri 1999: 19-21, Markis, 2002: 94). Public information has become thoroughly mediatized.

2. The deregulation of the Greek broadcasting system

With the deregulation of radio and television broadcasting in Greece, which took place in 1987 and 1989 respectively (Papathanassopoulos 1993, 2000b, 2000c; Doulkeri 1999; Leandros 2000; Yannas 2002; Chodrouleou 2004), private television has adopted the commercialized logic of the marketplace (Leandros 2000, Sorogas 2000).

Newscasts and information programmes are pervaded by the infotainment mentality (Altheide and Snow 1991; Papathanassopoulos, 1997; Brants and Nelens 1998; Altheide 2004). The emphasis is on spectacle, impression, drama, exaggeration, personalities and image. For the private television channels, what is newsworthy is what sells. The emergence of television as the primary medium of communication and public information has resulted in the imposition of media logic in the political field.

3. The broader political changes

Global and local socio-political changes in the late 1980s and early 1990s have also played a part in the transformation of political communication. The most notable of these changes were:

a. **The sovereignty of the free-market philosophy.** The collapse of “existing socialism” and the the “triumph” of the free market convinced a large segment of the population that implementing the free-market model, with the state playing primarily

a social-regulatory role, was the only way for the country to survive. There was a perceptible voter shift from the left towards the centre and the right of the left-right ideological continuum (Chadjipantelis and Panagiotarea 1997; Loulis 1999, 2003; Vernardakis 2005).

b. Greece's entry into the European Economic and Monetary Union.

Greece's resolve to join EMU forced successive governments to follow a specific programme of convergence to achieve specific economic targets. This commitment compelled all governments to follow the same policies in fundamental matters, and restricted their differences to secondary questions (Papathanassopoulos 2000c).

All these changes had a catalytic effect on how politics and political communication are conducted in Greece. The results can be grouped into three categories: (1) the ideological repositioning of the parties of government and blurring of the differences between them; (2) the "mediatization" of politics, and the impact of its exercise through the mass media; (3) the "marketization" and the "professionalization" of politics.

1. The ideological repositioning of the parties of government and blurring of the differences between them

These social, political and economic developments substantially devalued the traditional positions of the parties, which lost their role as the absolute exponents of the public's political ideologies (Loulis 2003; Vernardakis 2005).

Greece's parties of government, PASOK² and ND³, addressed this problem, in the 1990s, by moving into the broad middle ground. PASOK transformed itself into an essentially free-market party (Spourdalakis 1998; Lyrantzis 1998; Loulis 2003; Botopoulos 2003; Gerontas 2003; Vernardakis 2005; Givalos 2005), while ND shed much of its liberal philosophy for a more centralist position (Loulis 2003, 2004; Vernardakis 2005; Pantazopoulos 2005).

The differentiation between the parties has thus shifted from ideology to administration (Loulis 2003: 47). The dilemma voters must now resolve is to decide which party has the ablest candidates and the leader most suitable for premier, and is in general best fitted to govern.

² Panhellenic Social Movement.

³ New Democracy.

The two parties of government have become catch-all parties (Kirchheimer 1966; Scammell 1999; Mancini 1999; Spourdalakis 2003; Vernardakis 2005; Venizelos 2003). In focusing on their endeavour to win as many votes as possible from all social groups and classes, they have “de-ideologized” (Loulis 1999: 20) or even “depoliticized” themselves (Spourdalakis 2003: 55). Clear, well-defined and usually rigid old-style party ideologies have been replaced by vague generalities and fuzzy, flexible, “feel-good” (expression used by Holtz-Bacha 2003) positions, geared to the demands and wishes of the electorate. These positions are commonly accompanied by outright attacks on opposition parties and candidates, in the “negative campaigning” (Maarek 1995: 30; Baines 1999: 408) characterized by mud-slinging, sloganeering and scare-mongering.

2. The “mediatization” of politics, and the impact of its exercise through the mass media

Political communication today is chiefly characterized by the pervasive influence of the media, and particularly of television (McNair 1998; Blumler and Kavanagh 1999; Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999; Papathanassopoulos 2000c, 2000d). For most citizens, the mass media constitute their primary, if not only, source of information about social and political affairs (Chaffee and Kanihan 1999). Media involvement in politics has shifted from simple mediation to the active imposition of media logic (Altheide and Snow 1991; Papathanassopoulos 1997, 2000d; Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999; Demertzis 2002; Altheide 2004).

Aware of the critical role of the media, parties and politicians seek maximum media exposure. The adaptation of political communication to the commercialized logic of the media is evident on three levels: (a) the focusing on appearance and image, (b) the use of marketing and public relations techniques, and (c) the content of political dialogue, which has largely shed political substance for sound-bites, slogans and comfortable, vague, general positions.

3. The “marketization” and the “professionalization” of politics

Political marketing is a predominant feature of modern political communication. In Greece it predated private television, but came of age with the commercial imposition of media logic (Yannas 2002, 2005; Samaras 2002; Flessas 2005). Private television has essentially served as catalyst for the domination of

political marketing. The use of political marketing is evident in many aspects of political communication, including advertizing, poll-based policy-shaping, image management and news management.

Greece's parties of government are increasingly adopting the marketing concept (Newman 1999; Butler and Collins 1999; O'Shaughnessy 1999, 2001; O'Cass 2001; Lees Marshment 2001a, 2001b, 2003; Newman and Perloff 2004; Zotos, Boutsouki and Kosmopoulou 2004; Doulkeri and Kotzaivazoglou 2005). The strategic implementation of political marketing is evident in both parties' modification of basic political positions to ones more closely reflecting voter needs and wishes.

It would, however, be premature to say that Greece's political parties have wholly adopted the marketing concept or have become market-oriented parties. While the parties of government may have significantly shifted their positions, they cannot be said to have rebuilt their entire political platforms from planks totally shaped by the needs and wishes of the electorate and the demands of the political conjuncture. Their transformation seems to be basically driven by vote-seeking, and is concentrated within pre-election periods.

With the introduction of marketing into politics, the developments in the communications and technological environment and the transformation of the political process, a new group of professionals has emerged in politics – the consultants who provide their several sorts of expertise (Mancini 1999; Papathanassopoulos 2000d).

These professionals neither come from, nor operate solely within, the world of politics. They are hired, at great expense, by parties and politicians as expert advisors (Mancini 1999; Papathanassopoulos 2000d; Yannas 2005). Their only object is to secure victory, by any means and at any cost, for the political agency that engaged their services. They take an active part in planning and implementing the election campaign, in many cases supplanting the traditional party officials.

Preoccupations about the quality of democracy

The changes that have come about have led to the “spectaculization”, the “visualization” and the substantial “depoliticization” of politics. Politics is largely conducted according to non-political criteria, and image prevails over substance. Campaign costs have soared, and there are frequent accusations of complicity between politicians and the media (Giahantzis 1998: 212-266; Frangonikolopoulos

2005: 14; B. Nottas 2005: 54-56; Mandravelis 2005: 88-90; Pappas 2005: 88-90; Polimilis 2005: 115; Milakas 2005: 123-132; Kontogiorgis 2005: 136-138, Papakonstantinou 2005: 253).

One of the most worrying results of current practice in political communication in Greece, as a real threat to democracy, is that it has undermined and discouraged public interest in politics. The result, evident since the mid 1990s, has been described as “couch elections” (Spourdalakis 1998: 67, Papathanassopoulos 2000c: 53, Samaras 2003: 24), with “tele-citizens” passively watching the political process from their living rooms. The majority of Greek citizens today are indifferent to and disenchanted with politics (Zoulas 7.10.2004; Laskaris 2005; Kaltsogia-Tournarviti 2005). Loulis (2003: 57, 102, 152) has observed that since the 1985 elections voting has been essentially negative, with abstention steadily growing and those who do vote basically choosing the “lesser of two evils”.

Taken together, these findings give rise to serious preoccupations regarding the way in which political communication is conducted in Greece today and the impact this will have on the quality of democracy.

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