

Transformations in Greek civil society during economic crisis: new challenges, new perspectives

Katerina Loukidou, Phd Candidate

Faculty of Political Science and Public Administration, University of Athens

Abstract:

The paper seeks to investigate the way contemporary civil society in Greece responds to the new economic and social conditions. In order to achieve that, the paper examines aspects of civil society in Thessaloniki -the second largest city in Greece- in two ways:

First, research in the District Court archives traces the course of establishing formal associations during the period 2009-2012 and the differences between organizations addressing demands to the State and those adopting a neutral attitude. Secondly, a number of personal interviews with organizations' leaders unveils differences between formal and informal organizations regarding their conception of their role in society and the ways they oppose to the State and to public policies in times of crisis.

Findings show that during crisis there is a decrease in establishing new formal organizations, especially those with an oppositional attitude towards the State and public policies. It is argued that this is indicative of the transformation of civil society into more alternative models of organization, mainly through a shift from formal organizations to informal ones, which appear politicized and confrontational.

Introduction and research questions

Political participation in Greece has traditionally been limited either to elections and parliamentary representation or to clientistic relationships between state and society usually mediated by the parties. Hence, in the area of collecting and addressing social demands, civil society has had little space to grow. According to the

prevailing opinion, Greek civil society is considered weak and “colonized” by the party system, unable to evolve within an oversized Greek state (Makrydemetris 2002, Moyzelis & Pagoulatos 2007).

However, recent studies on civil society reveal an unexplored field of associational life: that of non-institutionalized, often informal, non-profit organizations. Experience and research indicate a substantial body of third sector activity often escaping the radar of empirical research (Toepler 2003, McCabe et al.2010) This also seems to be the case in Greece, where contemporary research often points out the low number and small size of formal organizations (Lyberaki and Paraskevopoulos 2002); on the contrary, many scholars argue about the existence of informal aspects of civil society (Sotiropoulos 2004a,b Kallas 2004, Karamichas 2007) which tend to be distant from the State and more politicized (Bourikos and Sotiropoulos 2014), along with the need to empirically explore the range and character of such an associational activity.

According to Colin Crouch and his theory of post-democracy, in periods of severe crises there is a chance for new mobilizations and identities to emerge, changing the predicted course of political apathy and the gradual decay of political participation (Crouch, 2003). In contemporary Greece, trust in traditional representation institutions seems to decline (Standard Eurobarometer 79). Trust in traditional formal civil society organizations is also undermined by a series of scandals implicating NGOs and their relationship with State funding, leading to several criminal prosecutions. On the other hand, experience shows an increase of collective action through demonstrations, social movements and new examples of social mobilization “from below”. Can that be a sign of informal, oppositional and sometimes radical aspects of civil society, gaining ground in the area of political participation?

This paper includes new empirical field research, based on my dissertation. Its purpose is twofold: first to investigate the impact that crisis has on the course of establishing new organizations, regarding their subject and attitude towards the State.

Secondly, to explore the ways in which political, economic and social conditions in contemporary Greece interact with formal and informal civil society associations. Specifically, it aims at highlighting the trends within civil society, which arise or become more apparent due to the crisis and open new ways in horizontal political participation.

The paper's main research hypothesis is that crisis had a direct impact on the establishment of new formal organizations. Such result can be indicative of civil society's transformation through the emergence of alternative organizational patterns i.e. a shift from establishing formal organizations to creating informal ones.

Research methodology and restrictions

In order to investigate the aforementioned hypothesis, a combination of two types of research is required.

The first one consists of an archive research at the District Court in Thessaloniki, the second largest city in Greece. This type of research unveils the course of establishment of formal¹ associations in a longer period i.e. the years between 1990-2012. Then, focusing especially on the 2000-2012 period, a double classification of the organizations (2.825 Unions) was conducted: first according to their subject² and then according to their potential attitude towards the State³, followed by an investigation on the different courses of establishment among various categories.

The second type of research aims at analyzing key characteristics of both formal and informal⁴ civil society through 50 personal interviews with prominent members of the organizations, in order to explore the way they perceive their role in

¹ There are two legal forms of civil society associations: the Unions [somateia] and the Societies of civil law [astikes etaireies]. The present research refers merely to Unions, which is the most common form of formal civil society associations.

² For this kind of classification we used the International Classification of Nonprofit organizations ICNO, of Johns Hopkins Centre for Civil Society Studies.

³ For this classification we used the division of Foley and Edwards (1996) as well as the one of Hasenfeld and Gidron (2005).

⁴ More specifically, interviews were conducted to 25 formal organizations (9 Unions, 14 Civil Law Societies, 2 Social Economy Cooperatives) and 25 informal organizations

society and interact with the crisis. Their function is either complimentary to the State, i.e. through the provision of public goods or oppositional, i.e. by raising demands towards the State or protesting against certain policies. The findings of the interviews have been enhanced by web and press monitoring as well as personal attendance and participation in various expressions of civil society, for the 2009-2013 period.

Needless to say, these findings refer to specific organizations in the aforementioned time and place and preclude any generalization at a national level.

The decrease in the number of new organizations in the crisis period.

Variations among different organizations.

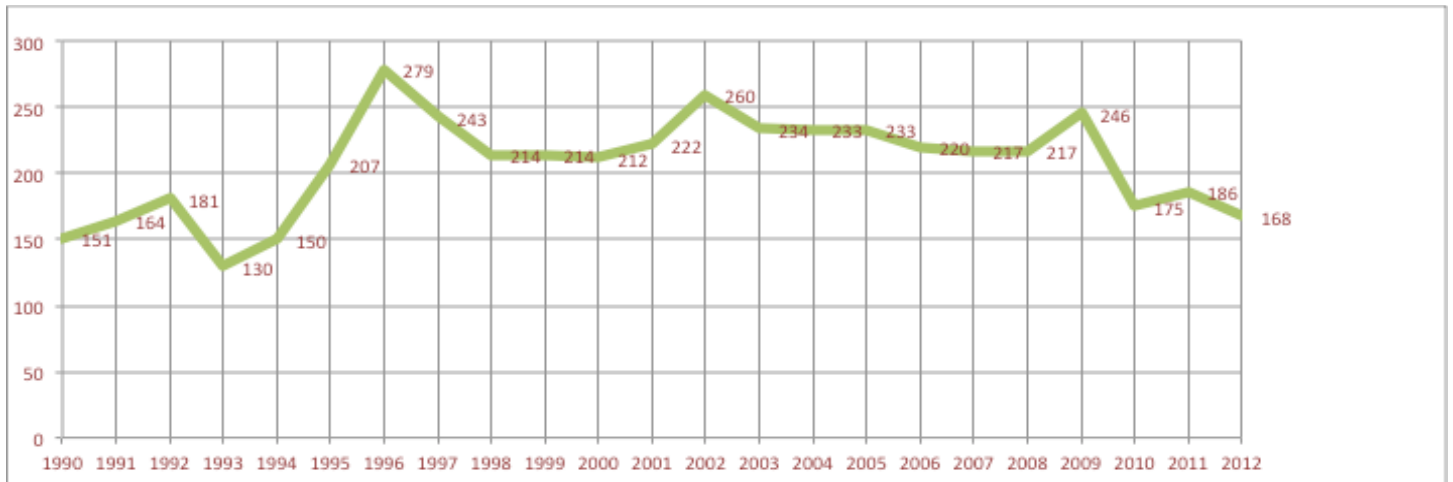
Investigation in the District Court archives of Thessaloniki, reveals the following data: the number of registered organizations until 2012 is 9.007. In the years between 1990-2012, 4.756 new Unions were registered, 206,7 being the annual average number of new unions.

Three different tendencies in the course of new establishments (Table 1) can be noted:

In the 1990-1994 period, the number of new organizations does not exceed the value of 181, with an average of 155,2 foundations. In 1993 the lowest number of new organization occurs, when, the party of PASOK won the general elections and came into power⁵. Then, a 15- year period appears (1995-2010), with an increased tendency of establishing organizations and an average annual number of 230 new Unions. In this period, three peaks in the number of new organizations stand out (1996, 2002 and 2009). In any case the annual number of new organizations does not fall beyond 200. (Table 1)

⁵ This supports the argument that there is an inverse relationship between the foundation of new associations and the holding of general elections (Sotiropoulos 2004). However this is not the case in 1996, also a year of general elections, where we find the peak in the number of new organisations. Since then, the rates of new registrations have been relatively stable then and for the last 15 years, with an annual average registration of 226 new associations (Table 1)

Table 1: Course of establishment for new Unions in Thessaloniki 1990-2012



Source: Primary research at the District Court Archives of Thessaloniki

This is not the case for the 2010-2012 period, when a sudden decrease in the annual number of new Unions appears, with an average annual number of 176,3 new organizations (decreased by 23% compared to the previous period). The lowest number of this period is to be found in the last year of research, 2012. In any case the low rates do not reach the levels of the first period (1990-1994) (Table 1).

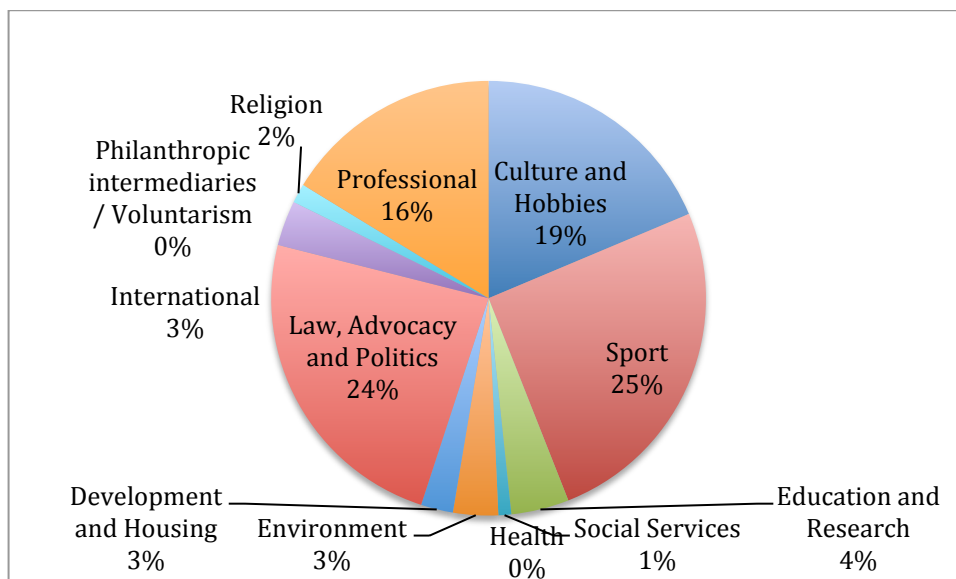
The decreased numbers of new Unions in the years following 2009 can be indicative of the link between the psychological, social and political consequences of the crisis and the austerity measures, supporting the hypothesis of an inverse relation between crisis and formal organizational activity. It would not be unreasonable to assume that the number of new unions will continue to decrease the coming years.

However, counting the aggregate number of new organizations does not provide any information about variations among different organizations. A research question arising is whether the decrease in the numbers of establishments is a general one or applies to certain categories of organizations. In order to trace

differences between organizations, 2.825 Unions, established in the years between 2000-2012 were classified in 13 major categories⁶ according to their subject⁷.

The first classification revealed that the most popular organizations during that period referred to Culture and Hobbies, Sports, Profession and Law and Advocacy (Table 2).

Table 2: New Unions (2000-2012). Classification by subject



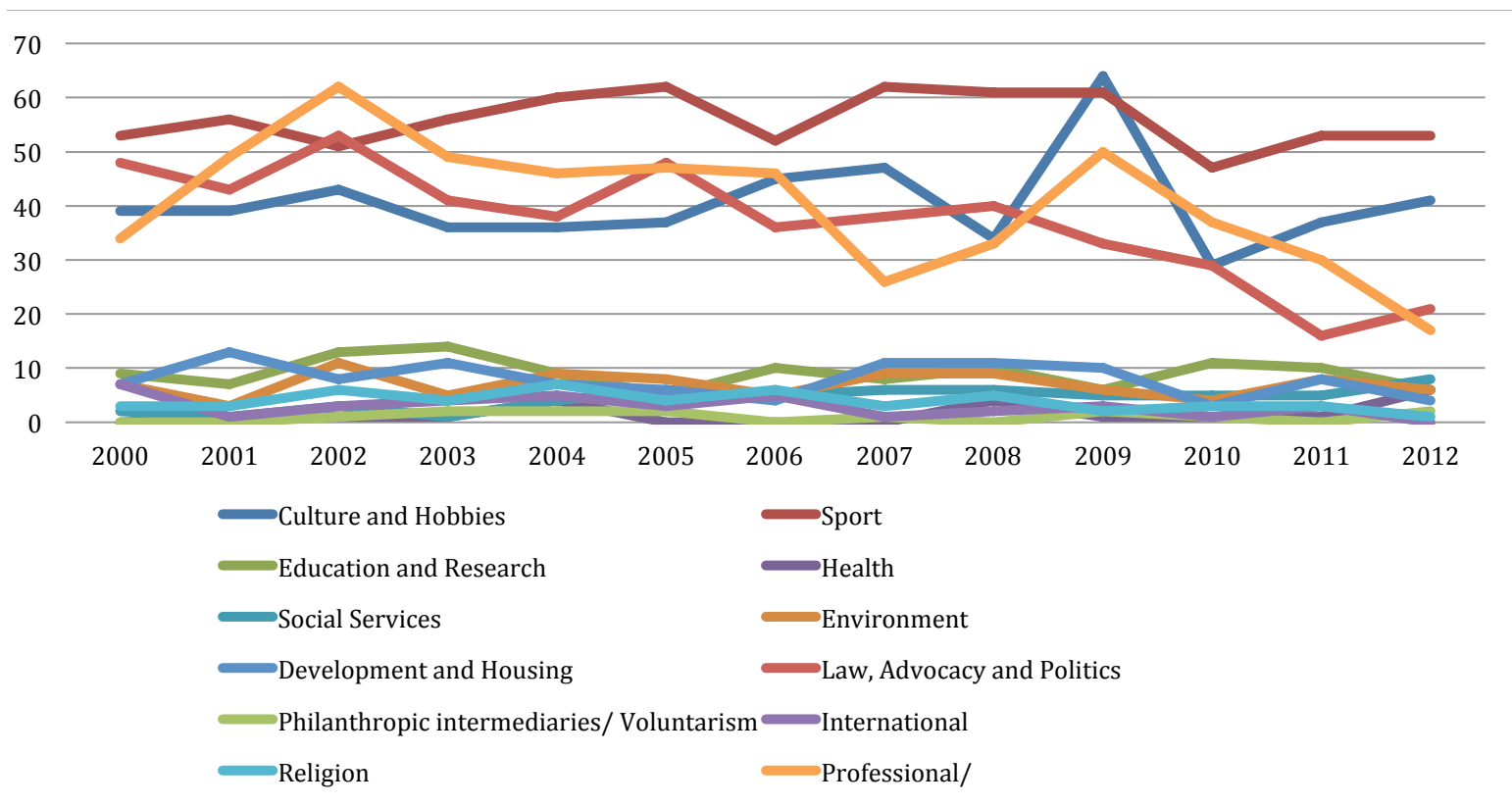
Source: Primary research at the District Court Archives of Thessaloniki (processed data)

When studying their course of establishment in the 2000-2012 period, one can notice that these major categories have a different reaction to the period of the crisis. More specifically after 2010, organizations regarding Culture and Sports tend to

⁷ Organizations are classified in 13 groups: Culture and Art, Sports, Education and Research, Health, Social Services, Environment, Development and Housing, Law Advocacy and Politics, Philanthropic intermediaries / Voluntarism, International, Religion, Business, Professional Associations, Not elsewhere classified. We used [followed] the International Classification of Nonprofit organisations ICNO[,] of Johns Hopkins Centre for Civil Society Studies (Salamon and Anheier 1996) with minor adaptations to the Greek case.

rebound, reaching the levels before crisis (2008), while the number of new organizations concerning Profession and Advocacy continues to drop. (Table 3)

Table 3: Course of establishment by subject 2000-2012



Source: Primary research at the District Court Archives of Thessaloniki (processed data)

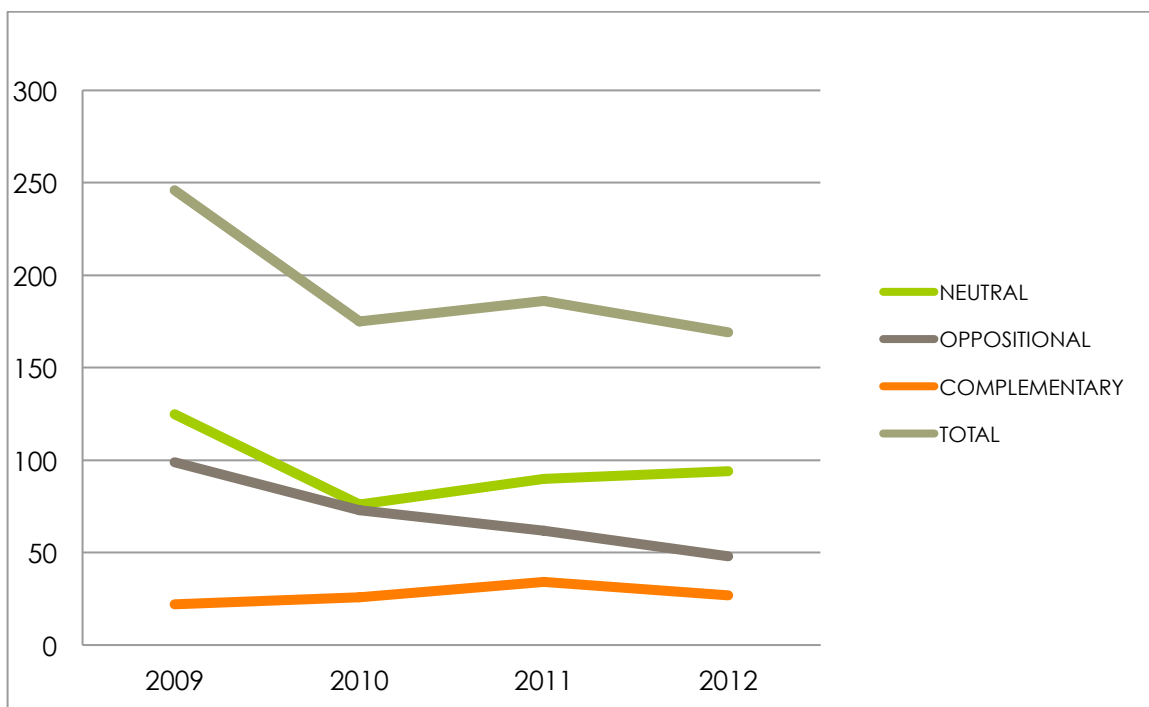
In an attempt to further analyse this finding, the 12 categories were grouped according to their attitude towards the State⁸ in the following categories:

⁸ The main criterion used for this categorization was the existence or not of a demand towards the State, as assumed by the organizations reference.

Oppositional⁹ Complimentary¹⁰ and Neutral¹¹ (see Foley and Edwards 1996, Hasenfeld and Gidron 2005).

What has become obvious is that the numbers of new Oppositional organizations -either posing permanent demands towards the State or have an oppositional attitude towards certain policies- has decreased since 2010, with no signs of rebound (Table 4). On the contrary, the number of Neutral organizations started rising again after the 2010 sudden and general drop. Finally, complementary organizations tend to remain stable, with a minor increase of new establishments after 2011 and insignificant variations in the total period between 2000-2012 (Table 3).

Table 4: Course of establishment by attitude towards the State (2010-2012)



Source: Primary research at the District Court Archives of Thessaloniki (processed data)

⁹ Organizations with a reference to: Environment, Development and Housing, Law Advocacy and Politics, Business-Professional Associations were included in this group

¹⁰ Organizations with a reference to: Education and Research, Health, Social Services, Philanthropic intermediaries/ Voluntarism, International, Religion were included in this group

¹¹ Organizations with a reference to: Culture and Art, Sports were included in this group

The aforementioned finding raises many questions. The decrease of new oppositional organizations seems paradoxical in a period when social and political rights are at stake, due to austerity measures and a number of policies attributed to the economic crisis. A number of factors such as the restricted resources of the organizations, limited access to decision making centres or decline of political participation need to be examined in order to reach to interpretation.

Another question arising is whether this decrease refers merely to Unions or signals a general forsaking of collective claims and, if not, where this dynamic of collective demands is channeled to. Recent empirical examples of massive demonstrations indicate a dynamic of collective mobilization which challenges the view that materialistic and post-materialistic demands are abandoned, as well as the dominant opinion of a “weak” Greek civil society.

Combining the previous research questions leads to the hypothesis that this decrease in the number of new oppositional organizations is confined mainly to formal civil society (i.e. to Unions). On the contrary, collective mobilization is transformed into new, alternative, unconventional and some times radical forms of action which either escape or deny the need for a traditional legal form, or even for a specific demand other than that for social justice.

Politicisation of civil society

a. Selection of the organizational form

Choosing the form of action is one of the primal decisions associations have to make. In earlier parts of the study, leader's responses indicate that organizations attribute specific characteristics to their form, based on how they conceive their place in the existent political environment, as well as on the means and resources they intend to use (Loukidou 2013).

Organizations were asked¹² about the main criterion when choosing their legal form. Replies varied between formal and informal organizations. Just over half of formal organizations (52%) named "operational reasons" as their main criterion i.e. legal personality, official status, self-definition, economic transparency, transparency in the decision making process, potentiality of legal representation. 28% of them referred to "the ability of economic transactions", meaning the ability to be funded by the State or the EU, organise fund raising events or participate in public procurement procedures. 8% were interested in "flexibility and rapidity of action", as civil law societies are said to be more easily to be founded and can be smaller and more flexible during the decision making process. Another 8% replied "Ideology¹³/independence form the State", referring to the ideology of co-operativism as their main criterion for establishing a social enterprise instead of a private sector enterprise. Finally, 2% stated they had "other reasons".

On the other hand, 40% of informal organizations named "Ideology/Independence from the State" as their main reason for not obtaining any legal form and particularly their unwillingness to integrate in the EU and State funding system and their intent to remain independent. 12% of them referred to "operational reasons" such as the decision making process i.e. a direct-democracy system (General Assemblies) easy accessibility to the members. Another 12% highlighted "Flexibility and rapidity of action" as their main criterion, referring to

¹² Question No 3: What was the reason for choosing this type of operation?

¹³ This was the answer chosen by the legal form of Social Enterprises (social economy)

freedom of expression and the ability to use unconventional and sometimes illegal means of action. Finally, a considerable amount (32%) state that they “Haven’t had the need for a legal form yet”, since it is quite common for many formal organizations to have initially operated as informal ones for a long period.

Needless to say organizations have their own subjective conception about the features, which are attached to their type of operation. It is common for informal organizations to be present in the public sphere, engage in consultation with local authorities and exhibit a continuous activity in the local society without having obtained a legal personality. On the other hand, it’s not unusual for formal organizations to remain independent from the State, while some informal ones maintain a close relationships to governmental parties.

In any case, 40% of informal organizations (20% of the total sample) appear highly politicized, consciously denying any kind of relationship with the. Many of them speak of and practice alternative organization patterns, alternative currencies, time banks, barter economy, new ways of organizing everyday life based on the values of direct democracy, self-organization and volunteering. According to their declarations, this is a direct reaction to the traditional “colonization” of civil society by the State and the party system. Their choice to remain outside the legal system protects them from being approached by the State but also enables them to use means and resources which remain in the “grey zone” of the law¹⁴. Service exchange in time-banking, “can’t pay-won’t pay” movements, naked bike ride, squats and field occupations could not be organized by formal, and therefore legally accountable associations. One can speak of a broader spectrum of means, which includes more direct and radical actions. These actions can be unconventional in the sense that they re-contextualize and politicize existent forms of participation or invent new ones (De Nève and Olteanu 2012).

¹⁴ Sometimes the character of the intended action leaves no any other choice than avoiding a legal personality.

b. Participation in demonstrations and the Indignant movement

In order to investigate the politicization of civil society associations, leaders were asked about the groups involvement either in the “Indignant” movement in Thessaloniki¹⁵ (May- August 2011) or in demonstrations against public policies¹⁶.

As far as the participation in the “Indignant” movement in Thessaloniki is concerned, 12 out of 46 organizations (26%) which were active in 2011¹⁷ have been involved to the movement, either by being present in the White Tower square as a group (and not as individuals) or by providing information about their cause to the people in the square. One of these organizations was created during the demonstrations by people who realized they had a common cause (Residents committee of the Centre). A comparative analysis between formal and informal organizations shows that the majority (75%) of the 12 organizations involved in the “Indignants” are informal, while 25% of the organizations were formal ones and Unions in particular (Table 5). The informal organizations which took part in the “Indignant” movement represent almost 20% (9 organizations) of the total number of organizations, while formal ones represent 6,5% (3 organizations). Within informal organizations the number of participants represents 43%, while within formal organizations 13%.

Regarding participation in demonstrations, protests and rallies, 11 out of 50 organizations (22%) declared to have taken part as a group (and not as individuals) to demonstrations and rallies¹⁸ against the memorandum or against certain public policies of the State. As far as differentiation according to the type is concerned, the vast majority (90%) of the organizations (10 organizations) are informal ones, while only 10% (1 organization) is formal. This corresponds to 4% of formal organizations

¹⁵ Question: Was there any kind of participation/communication of the association with the Indignant movement?

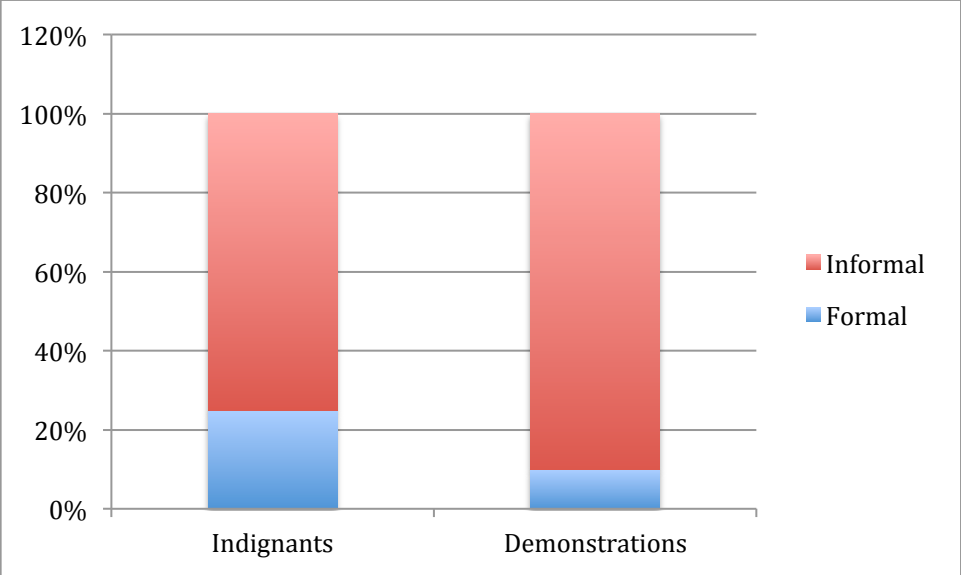
¹⁶ Question: Has the association ever participated in demonstrations or rallies against the memorandum or against other public policies?

¹⁷ (4) Four organizations were founded after the summer of 2011 and are considered as missing values

¹⁸ Organizations mentioned the demonstrations against the memorandum in 2011, against austerity measures, against the voting of laws on the 19 and 20th of October 2011, against the shutting down of public television (June 2013) and against the Goldmines in Skouries (2012, 2013)

and 40% of informal ones.

Table 5: Participation (%) in the Indignant movement and in demonstrations



Source: Primary research (interviews)-processed data

The aforementioned findings indicate a clear differentiation between formal and informal organizations in terms of the adopted attitude towards the State and state policies. Formal organizations tend to focus on operational subjects trying to enforce their position in the political environment or in the decision making process. Moreover formal organizations appear rather unwilling to oppose to the State or public policies and have a low participation rate in movements like “the Indignants” or in collective mobilizations against public policies. On the other hand, a considerable amount of informal organizations exclude themselves from participating in public dialog or from the funding system. Choosing to exist and take action outside the traditional field of State-civil society interaction, they consider it an act of resistance against this traditional interaction or a way to access to more radical means of struggle. They are, also, more likely to take part in protest movements against the State or against public policies, showing signs of further politicization.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to investigate whether current economic, social and political conditions in Greece have an impact on contemporary civil society. The main hypothesis was that there is indeed a direct impact on the establishment of new formal organizations, indicative of a shift from traditional civil society organizations to more informal, oppositional and sometimes radical forms of mobilization.

In order to test this hypothesis, two types of research were conducted:

Archive research on the course of formal organizations establishment in the 1990-2012 period reveals a 15-year "golden" period of Unions in Thessaloniki, when the number of establishments exceeded the annual limit of 200 new organizations. In the crisis period 2009-2012, a sharp decline in the number of Unions occurs. However, this decrease varies depending on each association's objective. Further elaboration on these data concludes that organizations, which are posing permanent demands towards the State or adopting an oppositional attitude towards certain policies have decreased since 2010, with no sign of rebound, while organizations with neutral relationship towards the State rise again starting 2010.

Moreover, interviews with organizations' leaders demonstrate an explicit differentiation between formal and informal organizations regarding their attitude towards the State and state policies. Formal organizations tend to focus on operational issues, seem rather unwilling to oppose to the State and have a low participation rate in the "Indignant" movement and in collective mobilizations against public policies. On the other hand, a considerable amount of informal, highly politicized organizations exists, consciously choosing to remain outside the legal system as a direct reaction to and resistance against the traditional "colonization" of civil society by the State and party system. They operate in accordance with the values of direct democracy, self-organization and volunteerism, while the absence of a specific form enables them to use a broader spectrum of means and resources, which can include more direct and radical actions. They have also higher participation in the "Indignant" movement and demonstrations and rallies against

public policies, during the crisis period.

It seems that in contemporary Greece -next to the visible and formal civil society- there is a new evolving sphere of participation, consisting of organizations which avoid obtaining a legal form and entering to the formal “arena” of civil society. In crisis period, one can argue that this trend is gaining ground within civil society, resulting in a shift from establishing formal organizations to creating informal ones. In this sense, civil society transforms itself by becoming more politicised and oppositional, adopting alternative forms and radical means of action.

The findings of an active and politicized informal civil society challenge the dominant view of a weak civil society in Greece and point out the need for in depth empirical research on Greek civil society, especially within a socio-economic context.

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