



Research Note

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Contested Civic Spaces in Greece in the Context of Foreign Immigration and the Refugee Crisis of 2015

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Abstract: This article takes a closer look at various developments in Greece with regard to the status of civil society (more specifically regarding certain NGOs and volunteer-run solidarity initiatives), a country that was challenged in the last decades by foreign immigration and especially by a serious refugee crisis in 2015. The latter had an immediate impact on NGO activities in the country, which became in many cases seriously questioned, contested or restricted. Greece's case can be used as a testing ground for examining and understanding the complex intricacies between establishing viable civic structures and becoming aware of local sensitivities pertaining to security and other issues.

Keywords: NGO sector, civil society, Greece, foreign immigration, refugee crisis of 2015, government-nonprofit relations

1 Introduction

Being a liberal democratic country, a European Union (EU) member state (since 1981) with a stable political system and a close ally to the Western world, Greece would theoretically be a prime host of a firm civic space. However, although there exist many informal, less visible aspects of civil society including loose groups and spontaneous networks of collective actors without a respective legal personality, the situation on the formal level is a different one, given that this country exhibits various particularities. It still has a rather weak and underdeveloped tradition of civil society in comparison to West European countries for a number of – sometimes interrelated – reasons. This is not due to the rise of illiberal and authoritarian

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regimes and policies (Hummel 2019), but rather to structural aspects of modern Greek society. There exist, for example, low levels of associational membership, volunteering, and social trust, which are vital indicators of a well-established civil society. The country's nonprofit sector is also relatively limited with a less institutionalized arena of civil society groups and initiatives including NGOs – often subsumed under the broader category of “civil society organizations”/CSOs (Huliaras 2020; Sotiropoulos 2004).

Various reasons have been advanced to explain this situation. These relate to the power and influence of political parties, which have their own organized representations in labor or student unions, whereas various NGOs are funded or subsidized directly by the state or specific ministries (and with EU funds). In addition, there is a long tradition favoring a narrow communitarian spirit of trust (e.g., among extended family members) without much interest in the common good, non-family members, the welfare state, and civil society at large. The whole situation was also connected to the legacy of clientelism and patronage stemming from the long Ottoman rule (1453–1830). Additionally, notions of the self, their religious underpinnings, and resulting social attitudes have been considered to matter; for example, in connection to the dominant Orthodox Christian tradition with its non-rational, mystical, and otherworldly religiosity, as well as its weak individuality and historicity (Marangudakis, Rontos, and Xenitidou 2013). Greece's overall development after the fall of the dictatorship in 1974 was quite positive in terms of democratization, civil rights, and modernization, yet it did not support conditions that would weaken statism and enable a stronger civil society (Huliaras 2015). Aside from the above historical-culturalist explanations, the weakness of the Greek civic sector has been attributed to prevailing neoliberal policies of the state, which aim at continuously creating new profit-oriented opportunities for companies and individuals and hence impinge upon the nonprofit civil society sector. The tradition of volunteerism in the country is also considered to have been rather weak – a noteworthy exception being that of the 2004 Athens Olympic Games (Sotiropoulos and Karamagioli 2006). However, the flourishing of free and informal solidarity initiatives at the grassroots level and outside neoliberal frameworks aiming at the reconfiguration of social life can be also observed (Rozakou 2016a). The latter situation sheds light on an otherwise unexpected civil society potential in Greece.

Despite their occasional commonalities and overlaps, it is vital to make a distinction here between the formal NGO sector and the numerous voluntary civic networks, collectivities, and solidarity groups, which often emerged spontaneously in order to cope with specific problems and challenges (regarding immigrants, environmental issues, etc.). Aside from those being affiliated with well-known and internationally operating NGOs (e.g., Amnesty International,

GreenPeace, WWF, Doctors Without Borders), various national NGOs had a limited scope and kept the rather informal, loose character of a voluntary association without always acquiring a formal structure, legal entity, management, communication skills, or detailed records. This attests to the often fluid boundaries between the above two categories of civic activities in the country, which experienced a gradual rise during the last three decades due to various socio-political changes. However, in this context various NGOs became dependent on the state, which remained a hindrance for their autonomy, transparency, and freedom of expression (e.g., in denouncing narrow party interests). Cases of fraud and malpractice exploiting various funding possibilities were also not out of the ordinary (Rozakou 2016a, 87). Specifically with regard to humanitarian relief for immigrants, the related widespread activism was deployed in various ways, namely through formal NGOs, in a quasi-NGO form or in a totally independent manner. The fact that such networks, collectivities, and solidarity groups and even several NGOs were not officially registered with state authorities proved to be a source of problems in the long run, especially in the aftermath of the 2015 refugee crisis.

If we were to classify the relations between the state and the above broad NGO sector in Greece – following Young’s conceptual framework (2006) –, we would characterize them as lying somehow between the “complementary” and the “supplementary” mode. This is because in some cases the state or specific political parties collaborated with such NGOs in a partnership relation or even supported and controlled them (e.g., through financing). But there were also cases in which the state did not interfere with their work and allowed them to operate, given also the fact that many of them were not registered at all. Despite occasional problems and matters of friction, this particular situation generally appeared to function well, yet not so much concerning the issue of foreign immigration, which shed a negative light on the broad NGO sector, especially in the wake of the 2015 refugee crisis.

2 Foreign Immigration and the Refugee Crisis of 2015: Their Repercussions on Civic Spaces

The influx of numerous immigrants (including refugees), both legal and illegal, over the last three decades has been a seminal development that seriously affected Greek society in various ways (Triandafyllidou 2009). This also included its attempted mutation from a mono-cultural to a relatively multi-cultural one – a difficult and controversial process. It is worth mentioning that at least 10% of the

current population of the country have an immigration background whereas there exist related “ghettos” in major urban centers (in central Athens, aside from its greater metropolitan area). Greece’s rather homogenous population was traditionally Christian Orthodox (at least nominally and culturally), while only a sizeable and varied Muslim minority (basically in Western Thrace) existed. This radical change took place in various waves from the early 1990s after the fall of communism in Eastern and Southeastern Europe. Initially, a large number of immigrants included Albanians due to the geographical proximity between the two countries. In addition, many immigrants from various ex-Soviet Republics were of Greek descent and had less problems of integration, even though they did not speak any Greek when they first arrived. Due to warfare and other socio-political problems in the Middle East (cf. the two Irak wars), in northern or sub-Saharan Africa and in Asia, numerous immigrants (overwhelmingly Muslims) also asked for asylum in Greece (and by extension in the EU). All this alarmed state authorities, which began in the 1990s to implement stricter controls and create detention facilities across the land and maritime borders to Turkey.

Yet, the continuous immigration process became gradually more complicated, especially in the 2010s in connection with further crises that Greece faced (McDonough and Tsourdi 2013). It goes without saying that the NGO sector and especially various informal solidarity networks were from the beginning quite active in providing humanitarian aid and both legal and medical support for the immigrants (Rozakou 2012). This broad spectrum also included “immigrant associations” as the self-organizations and solidarity providers of the migrant communities themselves (Papadopoulos, Chalkias, and Fratsea 2013). All of them criticized the problematic treatment of immigrants either by state authorities, specific societal groups or the international community at large (e.g., the EU border agency Frontex, originally founded in 2004), especially when these immigrants intended to cross the borders to other European countries. Numerous immigrants were detained in overcrowded temporary facilities in border areas without the necessary infrastructure, where special police operations following the implementation of Law 3907/2011 aimed at systematically controlling immigrant flows and returning those undocumented or illegal to their home countries. More specifically, the operation “Xenios Zeus” since August 2012 aimed at controlling, arresting, and detaining illegal immigrants in large urban centers. Even if adapted to general EU directives, Greece’s immigration policy was deemed by many NGO activists as repressive in intimidating migrants and violating their rights. Moreover, the state was often criticized of supporting business and profit under a humanitarian cover. The state policy of creating special “detention or pre-departure centers” for immigrants was also condemned as a sheer manipulation to cover up the entire problem, given that NGOs had normally no access to such

centers to provide their own services. In fact, in terms of humanitarian and other aid for immigrants, the state was in many cases absent, while the gap was filled to a large degree, either formally or not, by the NGOs and volunteer-run informal initiatives, which often did not enjoy state or wider public acceptance.

In actual fact, a considerable part of the Greek population started worrying about the growing immigration flows and their potential effects on society and culture, a development that went hand in hand with the intensification of xenophobic attitudes. The above measures in controlling immigrants were thus positively received, although the political Left had always voiced its critique against them. However, the whole situation took on an unexpected twist in 2015 when the refugee crisis broke out – the worst one in Europe since World War II. It reached a peak especially in the Greek Aegean islands neighboring Turkey – the name of the dramatically overcrowded refugee camp “Moria” on the island of Lesbos, which has been the epicenter of the crisis with ca. 500,000 asylum seekers in 2015, made international headlines. The same also applies to the thousands of immigrants that were stranded in Eidomeni on Greece’s border with North Macedonia (between August 2015 and May 2016), herded together in the open air under miserable conditions and expecting in vain to make it eventually to Western Europe (Anastasiadou et al. 2017). This crisis was mainly due to the prolonged civil war in Syria, but immigrants from many other countries used the opportunity as well to attempt thereby to reach Europe. The whole issue became a hotly debated one on the EU level, with some countries being ready to accept large numbers of immigrants and other countries being reluctant to do so.

As expected, this humanitarian emergency had an immediate impact on civic activities towards immigrants, especially from the broad NGO sector. This is because this crisis led to an exponential growth of domestic and international activists (mostly from Western Europe), who started organizing various initiatives in supporting immigrants in both formal and informal ways, especially during the early phase of the crisis until the summer of 2015. Later on, humanitarian aid became more “professionalized” as national and international NGOs took the lead. All this also took place under the aegis of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, which was officially active in Greece and administered various aid programs, as well as of other international institutions including the EU. The whole situation was largely facilitated by the fact that since January 2015 Greece had for the first time in history a Left government, whose political agenda had a clear pro-migrant policy supporting “open borders” both for Greece and for Europe at large. When in power, this party was, however, forced to make various compromises to its liberal immigration policy and consider other parameters for the country’s sake, as it first attempted to place the broad NGO sector under state surveillance in January 2016. Even so, the result was the huge increase of immigrants in the

country. The latter found itself totally unprepared to face this challenge. This also pertained to the state authorities, which often followed ambiguous, improvised strategies of border control and non-recording of immigrants attesting to forms of “irregular bureaucracy” (Rozakou 2017a). The state started taking more responsibilities on the matter in early 2016, while in March 2016 an agreement was reached between the EU and Turkey in controlling or stopping immigrant flows. This ended the above crisis formally, yet the flow of immigrants to Greece continued at a varying frequency in subsequent months and years.

Truth be told, humanitarian assistance and related activities for the immigrants’ sake were not questioned as such, and the work of recognized NGOs (such as that of “Apostoli” of the Orthodox Church of Greece) was especially praised. The “socialities of solidarity,” produced through the opening of social spaces in the relations between immigrants and local residents of Greece helping them, should also not be ignored (Rozakou 2016b). In this context, various forms of vernacular humanitarisms (termed as “solidarity humanitarisms”) were deployed by grassroots, informal groups and independent volunteers challenging or transforming established schemata of humanitarian action (Rozakou 2017b). However, especially the almost uncontrollable activities of such informal solidarity groups and networks of domestic and foreign provenance (also including tourists during the early phase of the crisis), often combined with an “anarchic humanitarianism” in the absence of the state or of an official coordination mechanism for the numerous actors on the ground did create a lot of problems. The state exhibited a lack of preparedness for the unprecedented problem, which gave a strong reason for NGOs to step in and provide crucial services. The state also had initially serious difficulties in managing funding streams available through the UN and the EU. There were other deficits too, such as tensions between NGOs and other volunteers and independent activists (Anastasiadou et al. 2017, 33–70; Papatzani et al. 2020, 59–63). This became quite evident through the creation of two separate “camps” at Moria, one run by the state and professional NGOs and the other by volunteers and independent activists, a development that resulted in tensions. The latter were often transferred to the local host society, so that the mayor of Mytilini (Lesvos) considered in January 2016 the presence of unregistered and informal civic activists as disruption rather than as help. This led to enhanced police investigations and subsequent arrests of various independent volunteers charged with violation of immigration and other laws. The Law 4368 of February 2016 also attempted to minimize the role of such informal networks and actors in refugee camps (Skleparis and Armakolas 2016, 176–79).

These dramatic developments created a lot of debates in the country and were often met with disapproval by opposition political parties and a considerable part of the Greek population. Not least, they had, among other things, collateral

detrimental effects upon the image of the broad NGO sector, as there was wide and growing distrust in such groups and activities. For instance, surveys have shown that 62% of Greeks believed that several NGOs were just profiting financially without helping immigrants, while solely 19% believed that NGOs should be given more responsibilities on immigration matters. Moreover, solely 18% trusted the media coverage of the refugee crisis (Dixon et al. 2019). Especially NGOs and activists supporting an open-border humanitarian ideology for the whole of Europe were criticized as neglecting or even purposely bypassing the current Greek social, political and cultural scene. In fact, the attempted transformation of Greek society into a multi-cultural one, which had started since the early 1990s, was gradually perceived by many as posing a most serious threat to the preservation of the diachronic Greek identity. This took place, despite the fact that some persons with an immigrant background had become famous and were officially naturalized as Greek citizens enjoying general, albeit sometimes constrained, acceptance by the public (e.g., the NBA player Giannis Antetokounmpo, born in Athens in 1994 to Nigerian parents).

Most importantly, the enhanced significance of the NGO sector during the above crisis was marred by a conglomerate of largely intertwined problems within Greek society. These difficulties concern, on the one hand, the tenuous relations between the state and the broad NGO sector regarding immigrants, which led to suspicions and even the “criminalization” of NGOs without distinction among a large part of the Greek public. On the other hand, these complications relate to a situation that may be termed a “multiple crises constellation”; namely, when a country is simultaneously challenged by a variety of different emergencies and turmoils that create an overall negative and pessimist environment, which, among other things, is not advantageous for the proper development of viable civic activities and structures. No doubt, the NGO sector on an international level has been instrumental in managing crises of all sorts (including the recent Covid-19 global pandemic: Kövér 2021) and alleviating their harmful social consequences, yet it all depends on the particular contours of civic activities within a given geographical and temporal setting.

In the Greek case, these general difficulties have first to do with the deep financial crisis since late 2009, which lasted until the late 2010s and which had broader political, social, and cultural repercussions, not least in the civic sector (Clarke, Huliaras, and Sotiropoulos 2015). In the context of economic calamity and strict austerity measures imposed under the instructions of international creditors, this crisis led to considerable political dislocations and a collapse of the welfare system, giving rise to reactionary street protests and illiberal trends and movements (Petmesidou and Guillén 2014). These protests did not always take place in peaceful ways (e.g., due to the excess of verbal and physical violence, destruction

of public property, disruption of urban life). The political system, which was held responsible for the bankruptcy, was profoundly shaken and became for a long time unable to provide the basic needs for numerous afflicted categories of citizens. This gap was filled to a large extent by NGOs of varied provenance and orientation, which provided all kinds of humanitarian assistance. It also led to the emergence of informal, spontaneous civic action, observed in the rise of social solidarity or self-help groups and related loose networks, usually without official registration, which undertook multiple functions to assist the needy people in various categories (Pantazidou 2013). This civic activism drew mostly positive reactions from the Greek public, also on the part of the state. However, the latter annulled tax-exemptions and cut down subsidies for state-supported NGOs as a means of reducing public expenses and raising public revenues. This led surviving NGOs to seek financial assistance otherwise (e.g., from private sponsors and donations), while adapting their activities to concrete societal needs; for example, distribution and exchange of food and clothes, provision of specific services (e.g., medical, psychological) to needy or jobless persons, and initiatives to fight corruption (Tzifakis, Petropoulos, and Huliaras 2017).

The numerous protests of populist character against the austerity measures imposed by the government and against international creditors supposedly exploiting Greek public resources and wealth offered a fertile ground for the rise of conspiracy scenarios about foreign centers of power and influence that were targeting the country as a whole. Protesters tended to oversimplify the problems according to a binary mode of thinking that led, among other things, to xenophobic attitudes and public intolerance towards foreigners. In this highly polarized context, foreign immigration to Greece was also implicated in the cluster of key causes that had led to the eruption of the economic crisis in the first place. All in all, despite positive signs regarding a growing civic engagement, civil society during this period was still constrained by a number of decisive factors inhibiting its autonomous evolution. For instance, the number of Greeks participating in civic voluntary activities and solidarity networks did experience a rise (Kalogeraki 2018), yet it was limited and lower in comparison to other countries, such as Italy, Spain, and Portugal, facing similar financial problems during the same period within the Eurozone (Cristancho and Loukakis 2018; Sotiropoulos 2014).

In close connection to the above economic crisis, there was a parallel rise of the political Far Right that grew exponentially and challenged civic spaces as a whole by heavily criticizing and even forcibly attacking NGO initiatives towards pluralism, multi-culturalism, diversity, tolerance, as well as broader social cohesion and solidarity. The Far Right was mainly represented by the neo-Nazi party “Golden Dawn” (*Chrysi Avgi*), which managed to enter the Greek Parliament in 2012

and remained there after repeated elections until 2019, receiving always between 6% and 7% of the entire electorate. It also managed to enter the European Parliament in the elections of 2014 and 2019 with three and two deputies respectively. This shows that its program had an appeal among the Greek electorate, while its general sympathizers must have reached higher numbers (Vasilopoulou and Halikiopoulou 2015). Interestingly enough, the Golden Dawn developed its own civic activities and social services parallel to those of the NGOs and informal networks, yet with an exclusive focus on the “pure,” “native,” and “autochthonous” Greek citizens, whom it claimed to protect from all evil (Koronaïou and Sakellariou 2013). After all, a significant part of its racist discourse (including hate speech and culture of fear) and at times violent actions were mainly directed against immigrants, who were supposed to have altered demographically Greek society that had to remain homogenous. Thus, the Golden Dawn turned against the classical values of civil society by creating its own “uncivil canopy” (Dalakoglou 2013).

Historically speaking, the Far Right political spectrum did not play a role in the post-1974 period and was marginal. It was represented by various small organizations, which went mostly unnoticed in the public sphere without electoral demand. Yet, there were attempts to reorganize this spectrum in the 1990s, which entered more dynamically the public scene in the early 2000s, particularly because the country started becoming a welcome place for immigrants (Galariotis et al. 2017). Their predominant Muslim identity caused widespread fears about an upcoming Islamization of the country via its gradual de-Hellenization and de-Christianization due to the promotion of new ideals about diversity and multiculturalism. After all, the strong national and Orthodox Christian identification of modern Greeks as a demarcation mechanism and its detrimental effects on minority issues have been shown by recent surveys (Pew Research Center 2018). The time started to ripe not only for criticizing the political establishment, but also for applying “law and order” in society, especially due to rising immigrant criminality, especially in major urban centers. The parallel resurgence of contentious issues at that time, including the building of an official mosque in Athens (Roussos 2010-11), triggered further ultranationalist jingoism and chauvinistic ethnocentric reactions, including those of the Far Right, which stirred up especially the xenophobic elements in its public agenda. In this context, the refugee crisis was used as further evidence of the ongoing perilous alienation of Greece through a forcibly imposed immigration, a development that alarmed a large part of the population. After all, there was varied evidence that immigration was not free of challenges of all sorts for the country. For example, a report from the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs showed that there were 2339 incidents of desecration of the country’s Orthodox church buildings between 2015 and 2020,

making them the main target among the various religious groups in the country, accounting for approximately 92.57% of the cases. A correlation between the increase in immigration and these desecration incidents appeared quite plausible, given that many happened to be close to reception facilities for immigrants (Papadopoulos 2022). Although the Golden Dawn was finally charged in October 2020 of being a criminal organization leading to the indictment of its leader and leading members, anti-migrant and xenophobic feelings are still predominant among a wide spectrum of the Greek population, a situation that has an impact upon the broad NGO sector and its public image.

Another problematic issue connected with immigration concerned national security issues, especially due to the long-standing, cross-border disputes between Greece and Turkey over maritime zones and over sovereignty rights of the Greek islands in the Aegean Sea (Heraclides and Çakmak 2019). At the same time, there were serious security concerns at the EU and NATO levels, given the potential inclusion of terrorists or ex-fighters of the Islamic State among the immigrants. This situation led to all kinds of suspicions, such as against foreign-led NGOs and especially against unregistered solidarity networks, activists, and volunteers of foreign provenance. Hence, in some Aegean islands especially affected by the refugee crisis, local reactions harassing and intimidating NGO actors or disrupting their work were not out of the ordinary. Securitization issues are usually prone to exploitation, and this also took place with the previously mentioned Far Right political spectrum (Lazaridis and Skleparis 2016). Not seldom, this situation led to a general distrust towards the NGO sector as a whole, which was also portrayed in negative colors within a conspiracy scenario frame as part of an internationalist plan aiming at the abolition of borders and at undermining Greece's national interests and security. Restriction measures by the state were often directed against unregistered volunteers and aid workers, who were banned from operating in such border areas or were accused for violating Greek legislation. Accusations were also raised against several NGOs that "cooperated" with traffickers in enabling the passage of immigrants from Turkey to Greece. In September 2020, for example, the state filed charges against 33 foreign members of four foreign NGOs (plus against two foreign nationals working on migration issues) on the island of Lesbos for assisting human traffickers, forming and joining a criminal organization, espionage, violation of state secrets, as well as violations of the Immigration Code under the pretext of humanitarian action (Keep Talking Greece 2020). However, such measures do not seem to impact upon the work of major national or international NGOs. Although often falsely generalized, such incidents affected the overall reputation of NGOs in public perception leading to their defamation as organizations undermining Greece's national security.

The ambiguous attitude of Turkey sheltering millions of immigrants within its borders has also complicated the whole situation. In fact, in February/March 2020 Turkey tried to instrumentalize, albeit unsuccessfully, thousands of such immigrants to cross illegally and by force the Greek border in Thrace and enter EU territory, probably with the ultimate goal of getting geopolitical and other advantages in bilateral disputes and EU negotiations. However, this forced the Greek state to strengthen its defense mechanisms at the borders (also with EU funds) including a kilometer-long steel fence, a highly developed surveillance system, and an increased border guard force (Tagle 2022). As military tensions over maritime zones between Greece and Turkey reached a peak in 2020, this had in turn a negative effect on the issue of immigrants, while related flows were largely stopped due to the stricter immigration policy of the right-wing conservative government (since July 2019) through the severer control of both land and maritime passages. In this context, NGOs and other actors often criticized Greece for inhumanely pushing back immigrants attempting to cross its land and maritime borders.

Even if immigrants and refugees in recent years mostly used Greece as a passage to move to another EU country, many of them were, in fact, forced to remain longer or even permanently in the country. One basic problem was the distinction between legal and illegal as well as between registered and unregistered persons, especially in order to identify those who had legitimate asylum rights. Another challenge was their successful integration and assimilation or their potential segregation. In the case of the first immigration waves in the 1990s, Albanian immigrants have been integrated to a large extent into their host society after three decades and have reached a degree of social acceptance (e.g., Albanian boys born in Greece, acquiring Greek or dual citizenship and serving in the Greek army). In the case of Muslim immigrants from various Asian and African countries, things were in most cases and especially in the years following the 2015 crisis more complicated. The reason was not only the different religion, but also cultural, social, and political issues due to the traditional Greek-Turkish cleavage and the historical Christian-Muslim opposition. In general, foreign immigration to Greece exhibited many facets. Not least, it contributed, even if unintentionally, to the rise of xenophobic attitudes among the average Greek citizen and the overall public perception, a development that affected the NGO sector in general. Political responses to this challenge were traditionally ambiguous trying both to respect international standards and to protect Greek national interests (Skleparis 2015). Despite the stricter immigration policy of the current government and the fact that the 2015 crisis seems to belong to a distant past, Greek society still remains polarized over the sensitive immigration issue. The state intends to make the immigrant problem somehow “invisible” by dispersing immigrants to various

camps throughout the country, although the enhanced immigrant presence, both legal and illegal, is still quite visible in large urban centers. Even so, this state policy remains quite contentious on a local basis, as organized or spontaneous groups of citizens protest to the transportation of immigrants by blockading streets and occupying public spaces.

Bearing all this in mind, it becomes obvious that the aforementioned “multiple crises constellation” created a serious contestation of civic spaces in the country, particularly with reference to the work of the broad NGO sector. It is thus not amiss to argue that the latest relations between state and NGOs in the sensitive domain of immigration remain tenuous, given that the ideal cooperation or division of responsibilities between them has not been reached. NGOs keep criticizing the state for specific aspects of its immigration policy that are considered harmful to the interests of immigrants as well as exploitative and oppressive. For example, NGOs protested for the suspension of cash assistance for asylum seekers since October 2021, which, however, was restored a few months later. In November 2021, there were further protests regarding the denial of food support to recognized refugees and rejected asylum seekers. Such and similar petitions were signed by numerous national and international NGOs formulating recommendations for the improvement of the reception and integration system of the country and in collaboration with international institutions as to ensure a collective migration management system respecting human rights and international law. The fact that the NGO sector is no longer defined for the most part by informal spontaneous networks and volunteer-run initiatives, as during the 2015 crisis, shows that this sector is being gradually more professionalized and seeks official acceptance within the Greek state.

Yet, this does not seem to lead automatically to the normalization of their mutual relations and to a viable framework for their cooperation in the future. The immigration situation is not as critical as in 2015, thus many NGOs and other activists have already withdrawn while the state has started taking over the management of related activities and responsibilities. The current Ministry of Migration and Asylum, which in a first form had been founded in 2016 due to the country’s growing sensitization to this serious issue, attempts to cooperate with various organizations in accordance with national and international legislation. It appears to be particularly interested in stopping the trafficking of immigrants and the illegal crossings of the Greek (and by extension of the EU) borders without endorsing or promoting the ideology of a “Fortress Europe” of keeping refugees outside the EU external borders. Needless to say, all this is hardly satisfactory for the broad NGO sector, as the state in view of the aforementioned “multiple crises constellation” has also obliged all national and international NGOs operating in the country to go through an official rigorous evaluation and registration process

due to concerns about transparency and accountability. It is about new measures with the purpose of charting and eventually controlling this NGO sector in view of the crucial significance of the immigration issue for the country. Several NGOs have gone successfully through this process, and their names are listed officially at the website of the above Ministry (<https://ngo.migration.gov.gr/registered.php>). However, this was not the case with numerous NGOs (e.g., the “Refugee Support Aegean”), which failed to meet the criteria set by the state and were ordered to suspend operations. In turn, such NGOs expressed their complaints about being stigmatized, discriminated and constrained in their civic work, which is supposed to be free of state intervention. Many of them also claimed to fulfill the requirements for registration and that permission to operate was not granted to them for other reasons. Interestingly enough, the entire controversial issue has reached the EU institutions. Among others, the Expert Council on NGO Law of the Council of Europe in two documents (July and November 2020) called on Greece to withdraw restrictions on the registration and certification of Greek and foreign NGOs active in immigration issues. In particular, the last Joint Ministerial Decision 10616 of 9 September 2020 was criticized as impeding civic spaces in the country in disagreement with European standards and the European Convention on Human Rights (Council of Europe 2020); for example, because of the vague reasons for refusing NGO authorization; the unrestrained discretion of state authorities to deny registration for an NGO; the excessive requirements and complex procedures for NGO registration; and the arbitrariness, non-proportionality and inflexibility of related state decisions. The current right-wing government has remained adamant so far in its position regarding the official registration and control of the NGO sector, given that the immigration issue will continue to be a sensitive one in the years to come. However, there have been appeals to the Greek Council of State to judicially review the above Ministerial Decision, while the hearing is still pending.

3 Conclusions

In light of these complications, the situation of the broad NGO sector in Greece appears to have been ambivalent in recent years, as it was constrained by various interrelated parameters. This implies, on the one hand, the greater state intervention in registering and overseeing NGOs operating in the country through various mechanisms. No doubt, such an intervention is connected to a greater state control of NGOs and an eventual restriction of their civic autonomy in operating independently as non-state, non-market, and nonprofit organizations (Smith and Lipsky 1993). On the other hand, the recent developments in Greece have shown the imperative need to polish and rectify the image of the NGO sector (especially of

its informal aspects) in public perception and discourse, given that this sector was mostly portrayed negatively during the last years as a factor that poses serious threats to the national security of the country and intends to alter its historical religious and cultural identity.

Despite all this, it would be amiss to argue that the state-NGOs relations in Greece have significantly changed and that they have taken on an “adversarial” mode – following Young’s typology (2006), although his three categories of government–nonprofit relations are not mutually exclusive. The same holds true if we were to use similar or more detailed typologies of government–nonprofit relations (Najam 2000). Even if the state hindered the operation of certain NGOs and sidelined them for specific reasons, it generally does not consider them as a burden or a threat and does not intend to curtail their activities on a large scale. This goes in line with the overall state perception about civil society in general, which is unequivocally evaluated in positive terms and is also supported through various means. In this respect, the initial Gramscian perception of civil society in a conflictuous relationship with the state in the battle for societal hegemony does not seem to apply. A better functioning and mutually beneficial relationship (“the partnership paradigm”) came to prevail in recent theories conceptualizing the various government-nonprofit engagements (Salamon 1995), a perspective that continues to be elaborated in more detail even further (Grønbjerg and Smith 2021). In any event, the above difficulties do not render the Greek case idiosyncratic in comparison to other countries, given that similar problems have appeared not only in ex-communist countries in the course of their democratization (Ayvazyan 2020), but also in Western liberal democracies (Anheier, Lang, and Toepler 2019).

Furthermore, focusing specifically on the narrow NGO sector does not intend to draw general conclusions about the overall status of civil society in Greece, given that civil society predates by far the recent proliferation of NGOs and should be conceptualized on a much broader canvas. Despite the aforementioned particularities, there is varied evidence at multiple levels that the country has made considerable progress in the overall civic sector during the last three decades, both from bottom-up and top-down processes. Focusing on the immigration issue and the 2015 refugee crisis, this article attempted to contextualize them and show the broader “multiple crises constellation” that Greece has faced in recent years, which had a negative impact on civic spaces (especially concerning the operation of the broad NGO sector). In fact, the aggregation of overlapping, unforeseen, and uncontrollable crises may poison the overall climate in a given setting and thus obstruct such civic initiatives. However, it is more appropriate to speak here of a “contested” (Hummel 2020) rather than of a “shrinking” civic space. This contestation did not originate from the government or any other central state

policy, but was mainly due to the interrelated and multilateral crises of recent years that had a direct or collateral negative impact upon certain civic activities and actors – in this particular case, regarding the humanitarian and other aid provided by formal NGOs and informal voluntary networks to immigrants. Even so, here it is rather about a contingent aspect that is not expected to have a permanent detrimental effect on civil society perceptions and activities at large. Hence, the situation in Greece also reflects the paradox of both growing and dwindling civic space and engagement at the same time. Considering the ever changing face of civil society globally, its features and its contexts respectively, the Greek case, once more, cannot be considered as exceptional.

Finally, the article tried to highlight various caveats that NGOs as well as international policy makers drafting charters for migration and asylum need to consider when referring to or operating in a given socio-political setting in order to avoid hindrances, constraints and restrictions in implementing their activities. Generally, NGOs as nonprofit organizations claim *a priori* an independence vis-à-vis the state and the market in developing their activities without external constraints. However, the situation in specific local contexts may be completely different, as NGOs activities cannot be deployed beyond space, time, geography, and history. The ideal scenario would be to develop humanitarian and other civic activities by simultaneously respecting national, religious, regional, and other sensitivities a local population or country might have. With regard to immigration, humanitarian and other aid have been often and certainly unduly “criminalized” in recent years across the Mediterranean (Strachwitz 2019), yet this was mostly due to imbalances between all involved parties, especially between state authorities, the host society, the local population, and NGO activists. It goes without saying that such operations are not risk-free of all sorts. During the 2015 crisis, this concerned, for example, international activists and experienced aid workers, who voluntarily flew to various Aegean islands to assist arriving immigrants in numerous relief operations. However, this sometimes created unintended rifts between professional NGOs and such volunteers leading to the erection of separate camps administered by them respectively. This development shows that civic actions need better coordination and systematization in order to become acceptable and more effective in the long run. Many issues are at stake in such a precarious context, including legal responsibility, liability, and accountability, especially when the state supervision of the NGO sector and informal networks is not systematic, continuous, and real. The thorough professionalization of humanitarian responses at all levels within the legal framework of a given country is thus a prerequisite both for their uncomplicated local acceptance and the success of their various initiatives. In this regard, the specific Greek case, which aligns well with broader developments, can shed additional light at larger issues at hand.

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