Juan Miranda Ruiz

Universidad de Puerto Rico, Río Piedras

Greece’s Solidarity Movements[[1]](#footnote-1)

Studying the Civil Service in contemporary Greece is insightful, mostly because it unexpectedly gives a broad and deep understanding of the current Greek crisis. One aspect that stands out is the Greek Civil Service unions’ interest in foreigners, as evidenced by the actual case of the refugees from Syria. Moreover, it highlights the Greek *party government* system that supports the *partitocracy*, being the former often ignored or accepted as the “way to rule” while the latter is widely condemned by almost everyone in Europe.[[2]](#footnote-2) Before the Greek crisis, the two main parties were the center right New Democracy (ND) and the center left PASOK. However, this is changing with a third party recently coming to power, which is the leftist Party SYRYZA.

This paper is loosely based on one of my principal arguments of my current Masters thesis, which is to recognize to recognize the positive aspects that unfold with (at least) western economical and political crisis. A crisis is often thought as only something to be feared; as it is mostly conceived as an economical and a financial term in Western Civilization. As Investopedia states: “A financial crisis is a situation in which the value of financial institutions or assets drops rapidly. A financial crisis is often associated with a panic or a run on the banks, in which investors sell off assets or withdraw money from savings accounts with the expectation that the value of those assets will drop if they remain at a financial institution.[[3]](#footnote-3)

But as we may know, the term was originally a medical one, coined by Hippocrates which means as the turning point of the patient, whereas he or she lives or dies. As a doctor, it is important to know when ir occurs as it could be the last moment the doctor has to administer the cure or leave the patient be, whatever the proper way of treatment may be. Another issue to consider is the fact that a crisis might relapse, meaning that the crucial moment has to do with the disease also, and not only to the specific time as I wrote earlier.

As we can see, the importance of that moment, defined as crucial, is carried over from the medical term to the economical one. What we tend to forget is the disease itself, or the fact that we usually (or as the current Neoliberal policies states) tend to confuse the symptoms with the actual disease. If we compare the economic crisis that took part recently in Iceland such as Iceland, Spain, Italy, Portugal, Venezuela, Puerto Rico, we can appreciate that they all have a lot in common, that is the incapacity of a state or a colony to sustain the way of life by not properly (or beyond their control) growing economically. Ergo they incur in debt to meet today’s needs hoping that things will change tomorrow or that the next Party in power will fix the issue. Another thing in common (at least recently) is that we try to apply the same method to every country, regardless of the particularities they have and prior examination of its condition. In the shallowest explanation, they see excesses, things to liberalize and budgets to reduce, regardless the after effect these policies had in past experiences, which we know are detrimental to the patient/country. It reminds me of the Dengue virus, a mosquito transmitted virus which has fever as one of the main symptoms. If the patient does not now he has have the virus, he might make the dreadful mistake of treating the fever with aspirin, which worsens the condition and might kill him.

It is not only the disease and the crucial moment that stands out, but also the particular manner in which the people cope and deal with the crisis and that is one piece needed in order to deepen the crisis narrative. There are three mayor arguments of this paper: First, the importance of analyzing *party government*  and not just *partitocracy* in the crisis narrative. We, as citizens should be aware we could take part ethically in these kind of practices and how it might relate to a given crisis. Second, a critique to certain ideologies that the economy is always the ulterior causality therefore the ulterior motive of human actions. Ergo, human actions, problems and solutions are based on economics. Third, question the negative aspect of crisis as a term. Even though crisis is mainly a negative thing for the people, it also awakens positive aspects from it, like the unusual modality of the Solidarity Movements in Greece which are the main topic that summarizes these arguments. I like to thank Professor Dimitri Sotiropoulos for his research on the matter, for without him there would be hardly a paragraph written about this subject.

**Brief summary on Labor Unions and Civil Service in Contemporary Greece**

Contemporary Greece in this context means since the formation of the Third Republic in 1975. It is by then that the Constitution was ratified and gave legal support to Greeks unions. It is also the beginning of the democratic governmental institutions on which labor unions found a place to organize. There are two main confederations which amass the majority of the Greek workers, the General Confederation of Greek Workers[[4]](#footnote-4) (in greek GSEE) for workers in the private sector and the Civil Servant’s Confederation[[5]](#footnote-5) (in greek ADEDY) for the public sector. Aside from these two, by 2013 estimates, there are between 800 and 30,000 Non Governmental Organizations (NGO). The reason for that unusual estimates is because the hard time the Greek government has keeping track and proper records.[[6]](#footnote-6)

According to the CIVICUS Civil Society Index studies, Greek Civil Service has been historically weak. In one hand, the two main Confederations, ADEDY and GSEE, have been taken in control by the two major political parties in Greece. This has resulted in a deformation of Democracy in the sense that policies are made, based on which political party supporters are either benefited or affected on either sector. For instance, a PASOK administration will not make policies affecting public or private workers union if they are aware of the possibilities of losing influence. At the same time, workers affiliated to a party currently in power, will try to block any jobs opportunities to those who are known to be from the opposition. In that sense, what we see is that party government takes an important role and affects adversely in both ways. One is the efficiency of the government agency, while the second is the policy making at state level. This is a key aspect in order to understand the famously called “corruption culture’’ in Greece.

NGO’s in Greece also have been subject of criticism, not necessarily because of their nature and their objectives, but due to poor regulation and accountability, even actual numbers are not completely reliable. Since Greece started giving signs of economic crisis in early 2000, governments have been pushing out the two Confederations out of the policy making, while at the same time, cases of fraud and scandals from corrupted NGO arises. Cases like the “Patmos Cycle”[[7]](#footnote-7) and the “Anti landmine charity”[[8]](#footnote-8) have become notorious because of their schemes. This however, does not mean that NGOs are a complete failure in Greece, as for the current Syrian refugee event, mobilization from NGOs and voluntary work have taken place to provide medical aid to 54,000 refugees, also ADEDY has expressed their solidarity.[[9]](#footnote-9)

**Solidarity Movements**

Since the crisis in 2009, Greeks living conditions have worsened to the point that in Athens alone, estimates show that in the in the wider metropolitan area of the city there are at least 120,000 “who experience acute forms of poverty and homelessness.”[[10]](#footnote-10) and another study made by the City of Athens Homeless Shelter (KYADA) showed that at least 9,000 people are homeless in the city alone, of those, 71% ended on the streets in since the crisis started.[[11]](#footnote-11) NGOs have taken part in dealing with these kind of issues, but what really stands out are the so called Solidarity Movements. These groups are conformed by people that do not necessarily shares the same political views although some groups do.

The Solidarity Movements are organizations created by common citizens in order to minimize the adverse effects of the crisis and their primary services consist on providing shelter, food and health services to the general population. Aside from the basic needs, they are also grassroots organizations dedicated to provide technical and logistic support to other movements of this nature. So far, it stands out that “Solidarity for all Movement” (Solidarity4all). Solidarity4all offers technical support, capacity building and network-scaling for grassroots movements in Greece.[[12]](#footnote-12)

In a more local level there are Social Solidarity Clinics (SSC) in several places around Greece. These have taken more attention to the media, but also have been subject of critics, specially from the medical organizations. These SSC are also organized by common citizens, some of them belong to the Greek Orthodox Church, and other are run by municipalities. But all have taken public abandoned spaces, built new ones and use volunteers private property to satisfy the medical aid they can provide, based on donations, either money and medical equipment to the people who cannot afford healthcare, sometimes even municipalities rely on volunteers and donations too. The need for a decent life and their commitment have taken their imagination to new levels, by creating a network with an array of medical expertise personnel who are willing to donate their time in order to attend referrals made by any local SSC. It needs to be pointed out, that keeping track on these kind of movements are really hard, usually because they get no special attention from academics aside of being mentioned.

These movements are often illegal and some people, especially the health sector in Greece have expressed their discontent. On April 29, 2015 the Arta Medical Association wrote that Social-Clinic Pharmacy is illegal and liable and individual physicians involved are unlawful.[[13]](#footnote-13) Social Pharmacies are also part of SSC, which gathers donated non-expired medicines from pharmacies which patients deny the use of them or remain unused because the patient no longer needs them. There has been also some controversies between the Ministry of Health at the time Adonis Georgiades[[14]](#footnote-14) and the Metropolitan Community Clinic at Helliniko (the acronym in greek is MKIE). One infamous controversy is the case of a 66 year old uninsured patient with cancer who passed away while treated at MKIE because of the refused admission to public hospitals.[[15]](#footnote-15) Another sad case, is the 54 year old uninsured patient with a heart condition who’s scheduled surgery was canceled and therefore got no attention and went to the MKIE clinic for help.[[16]](#footnote-16) The political party in power plays an important role regarding the interactions between the government, these types of initiatives and the needs of the people. For example, in 2013 the Police raided the MKIE clinic followed by a complaint about unauthorized distribution of drugs to drug addicts.[[17]](#footnote-17) A year later, MKIE accused the Health Minister of sending uninsured patients to social clinics through the Social Insurance Institute.[[18]](#footnote-18) Obviously, problems like this are uncommon when the administration changed.

This is a small account of these Solidarity Movements in Greece, according to Omikron Project[[19]](#footnote-19), there are 377 grassroots movements in 2014, if we count SSC individually, there are 419 total.[[20]](#footnote-20) From Social Kitchens, Social Trading Systems, Social Cultural organizations, Social Information Technology groups, to even animal protection. As we can see, portraying a crisis doesn’t mean the usual bad stuff as we are accustomed to see. And although there are plenty registered NGO’s and two main workers Confederations, since the crisis erupted, people are pointing to another methods and ways of dealing with their needs. The limitation within these two Confederations in this dire context is that they offer services primarily to their own sectors, while the unemployed, the immigrant, uninsured, the hungry and homeless are left to the mercy of the people and some NGO’s. Little of course, is the help the State can provide after three memorandums.

I want to conclude by quoting Omikron Project to what they consider the problem which they are trying to respond with their work: *“Greece is often portrayed internationally as a failed state, or a poverty pit, or a 24/7 war zone.” “Essentially, the issue is this: the images of poverty and violence that characterize coverage of the Greek crisis are real, but how representative are they? How many other stories of creativity in the crisis, or resilience, go untold? This is the debate people across the world need to start having.”*[[21]](#footnote-21)

1. This paper is mainly based on the report made by professor Sotiropoulos. Sotiropoulos, Dimitri. “Civil Society in Greece in the Wake of the Economic Crisis.” Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Auslandsbüro Griechenland 2013, 12 pages. Report found in the London School of Economics website at <http://www.lse.ac.uk/europeanInstitute/research/hellenicObservatory/CMS%20pdf/Publications/Sotiropoulos-Civil-Society-Crisis-Greece.pdf> (accessed at January 14, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Party Government and Partitocracy are terms I borrowed from Mauro Caseli’s article. Whereas party government is defined as a form of government in which one or more parties hold a monopoly of access to government personnel, government resources, and government policies. And Partitocracy takes from party government and it tends to dominate all government positions, ergo giving control to the any given party or parties and influencing mass media in order minimize media coverage of second and third parties. See more at: Caseli, Mauro. “The Italian Particracy: Beyond President and Parliament”. Political Science Quarterly, Vol. 109, No 3, 1994. pp.441-460. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Financial Crisis definition, Investopedia. <http://www.investopedia.com/terms/f/financial-crisis.asp> accesed on January 12, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. GSEE was founded in 1918 and its membership comprises around 450,000 workers with their main office in Athens. For more information visit the official webpage (in greek) at <http://www.gsee.gr/istoria/istoriki-anadromi/> (accessed at January 14, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. ADEDY was founded in 1947 and its membership comprises around 567,000 workers (as reported on 2016) with their main office in Athens. For more information visit the official webpage (in greek) at <http://adedy.gr/istoriki-anaskopisi/> (accessed at January 14, 2017). The reported number of workers can be found at Greek Reporter online newspaper at <http://greece.greekreporter.com/2016/11/23/there-are-567000-public-sector-employees-in-greece/> (accessed at January 14, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Sotiropoulos, op. cit, p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The “Cycle of Patmos” was a fraud perpetrated Greek Eco-NGO, on which 14 people including former executives were charged on illegal profiting, assigning closed associates without getting bids, not refunding canceled meetings, and billing the Greek Bank and the government for the same item. See more at Greek Reporter online newspaper at <http://greece.greekreporter.com/2012/12/23/greek-eco-ngo-charged-with-fraud/> (accessed at January 14, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The “Anti landmine charity” was another case involving corruption, on which the organization failed to meet the funding requirements. Also they are charged with fraud, complicity and money laundering. Se more at Greek Reporter online newspaper at <http://greece.greekreporter.com/2014/02/17/greek-diplomats-linked-to-anti-landmine-charity-fraud-scandal/> (accessed at January 14, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The Kilkis Hospital is located just 50 kilometers from Greece’s northern border. See more at Al Jazeera online newspaper at <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2016/03/greek-solidarity-movement-embraces-refugees-160322125912707.html> (accessed at January 14, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Arapoglou, Vassilis and Gounis, Kostas. “Poverty and Homelessness in Athens: Governance and the Rise of an Emergency Model of Social Crisis Management” GreeSE Paper No. 90. Hellenic Observatory Papers on Greece and Southeast Europe, Hellenic Observatory, European Institute, March, 2015. Paper found at London School of Economics at <http://www.lse.ac.uk/europeanInstitute/research/hellenicObservatory/CMS%20pdf/Publications/GreeSE/GreeSE_No90.pdf> (accessed at January 14, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. I couldn’t find the study, but I did find two different sources citing them. The Greek Reporter, <http://greece.greekreporter.com/2016/05/31/most-of-the-athens-homeless-are-greeks-victims-of-economic-crisis/> and Ekathimerini <http://www.ekathimerini.com/209157/article/ekathimerini/news/majority-of-athens-homeless-ended-up-on-street-in-past-five-years-study-finds> (both accessed at January 14, 2017). For more information regarding KYADA, see <http://erymanthos.eu/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=706:-------------a--&catid=55:koinonia-politon&Itemid=61> and <https://www.cityofathens.gr/organotiki-domi-dimoy-athinaion/dimotikoi-foreis/kentro-ypodoxis-astegon-dimoy-athinaion-k-y-d> (all links accessed at January 14, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For more information see the Counterpunch interview to Christos Giovanopoulos, member of Solidarity4all at <http://www.counterpunch.org/2016/03/11/building-alternative-institutions-in-greece-an-interview-with-christos-giovanopoulos/> See also the Solidarity home page at <http://www.solidarity4all.gr/en/news/solidarity-all-building-hope-against-fear-and-devastation> (both accessed at January 14, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For more information regarding the topic see the Arta’s newspaper online website at <http://www.ixotisartas.gr/index.php/local-news/item/1840-iatrikos-syllogos-artas> (accessed at January 14, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Georgiades is the current vice president of the center right conservative party New Democracy (ND) and served as Grrece’s Health Minister from June 25, 2013 to June 9, 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Greek Reporter. <http://greece.greekreporter.com/2014/01/03/uninsured-patient-dies-after-being-refused-admission-in-hospital/> (accessed at January 14, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The official MKIE website, this specific link gives more information regarding the controversy between the Health Minister and the MKIE. <https://mkie-foreign.blogspot.com/2014/06/press-release-mr.html> (accessed at January 14, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. <http://www.enetenglish.gr/?i=news.en.article&id=1565> (accessed at January 14, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. A copy of the referral regarding one patient can be seen here, <http://www.mkiellinikou.org/blog/2014/04/11/ypoyrgeio/> (accessed at January 14, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Omikron Project is another Grassroot initiative, supported by volunteers in order to highlight the untold stories about Greece. See more in their official page at: <http://omikronproject.gr/faq> (accessed at January 14, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. <http://omikronproject.gr/grassroots> (accessed at January 14, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid. cite 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)