

Citizen Mobilization for Water : The Case of Thessaloniki, Greece

Water Politics

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<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429453571-12>

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12 Citizen mobilization for water

The case of Thessaloniki, Greece

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Introduction

The European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) 'Right2Water' collected nearly 1.9 million signatures between September 2012 and September 2013 to put the Human Right to Water and Sanitation on the European political agenda. The ECI is a tool established by the Lisbon Treaty as a means to bring the European Union closer to its citizens. It gives people an opportunity to bring an issue to the European political agenda if they manage to collect over one million signatures in one-year, from at least seven EU countries, with a specific minimum for each country (European Commission, 2011a). A broad European civil society coalition called for the European Commission to develop legislation that would ensure the realization of the human right to water and sanitation across member states. Further, it called for the Commission to contribute to universal access to water and sanitation for all and a halt to the liberalization and privatization of water services. Right2Water united a hugely diverse group of over 250 organizations and was supported by thousands of people that campaigned all over Europe. It gave new momentum to social movements that were active on water issues and extended the focus of some of the social movements that did not pay attention to water until that moment. Right2Water became the first successful ECI.

The ECI passed the threshold of the minimum number of signatures in 14 of 27 countries in which it campaigned. One of the countries where Right2Water was successful was Greece. In the end, 36,000 signatures were collected against a threshold of 16,500. It was a remarkable result because in the first instance, from September 2012 until March 2013, no signature had been collected in Greece. Trade union contacts in Greece noted that Greek citizens were disconsolate at the time because of the austerity measures imposed upon the country and the crisis situation. This changed when, during the second round for the Greek bailout, privatization of the water companies of Athens and Thessaloniki became one of the top priorities in the measures proposed by the Troika of the IMF, the European Union and the European Central Bank. Water privatization was pushed especially vis-à-vis Greece and Portugal (Hall and Lobina, 2012). Right2Water had by then gained a lot of media attention and

support of many people in Europe as the conflict with the European Commission proposal for a concession directive was exposed. Liberalization of water services was part of this directive and was explained as a ‘privatization through the back door’ by Right2Water campaigners. This co-incidence appeared to be a significant influence on both campaigners in Greece as well as for campaigners at the European level. Signature collection skyrocketed in two months and this did not go unnoticed in Greece. In Thessaloniki people organized among different lines to protest against the Troika’s measure of privatizing water and a clear link could be established between EU policy, water privatization and Greece. Seeing that in western European countries people protested against the privatization of water services gave the Greek activists the boost that they needed to mobilize people against the Troika-imposed austerity measures that had almost knocked them down.

The Right2Water movement campaigned against the intention of the European Commission to further privatize drinking water utilities in Europe. Privatizing water provision services was, and still is, encouraged by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, which makes public-to-private takeovers a condition of lending. As a result, the early 1990s saw a rush of cities and countries around the world signing over their nations’ water resources to private companies. It is argued by industry and investors that putting water in private hands translates into improvements in efficiency and service quality, and that services will be better managed (see, e.g. Bakker, 2010; van den Berge et al., 2018). Privatizing also provides governments with an opportunity to gain revenues by selling off water services, and for companies to generate a profit. But with profit being the main objective, the idea of water as a human right arguably becomes a secondary and often forgotten concern. In many cases, problems with water privatization often began to occur soon after the initial wave of enthusiasm – from lack of infrastructure investment to environmental neglect (Lawson, 2015). Privatization of water provision services can also lead to increased prices for consumers, lack of service, slack repairs and unequal access to the water service (Boelens, Perreault and Vos, 2018). Although those who support neoliberal policies advocate a retreat of the state from the market, in reality, governments at national as well as European levels are closely involved in the processes of privatization: “Without the various state levels paving the way and imposing conditions that guarantee privatization and then secure profitable operation afterwards, this accumulation by dispossession could not possibly take place” (Swyngedouw, 2005: 89).

Water in Europe is subject to both European and national law: it is therefore a shared responsibility between the European Union and Member States, making it a suitable issue for an ECI. The initiative aimed to shift the focus of the European Commission from their market-orientation to a rights-based and people-oriented approach to water policy. Right2Water joined in the ongoing struggle for water justice that, in divergent ways, was framed and organized by many civil society groups, and it took a stance against profit-driven water companies with the slogan “Water is a public good; not a commodity!” (van den Berge et al., 2018).

In Greece water services have been in public hands, as was established in water law in 1980. The water companies of Athens (EYDAP) and Thessaloniki (EYATH), that together provide more than half of the population with water services, are stock listed with a majority of shares owned by the state of respectively 61% and 74%. They are both well-functioning and economically-profitable water companies. The other half of the water services are provided by municipal companies called DEYA.

Prior to the ECI, the human right to water had not been a subject of debate in Greek policies and the provision and management of water services was left to local levels. In 2010 the Greek government abstained in the vote at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) that recognized water and sanitation as a human right, without explanation (UNGA, 2010). The Greek constitution states that water sources, as vital to life, should be under public control. However, various governments have had plans for privatizing water services since the nineties following the European neoliberal approach to the economy, including the belief that the single market functions best if governments facilitate the operation of market forces and borders are opened without barriers for businesses across the whole of Europe. A privatization agenda has been part of the European agenda of opening markets in public services since the early nineties (Hall & Lobina, 2012; van den Berge et al., 2018). Liberalization and privatization of local and national public services have been proposed by the European Commission since the Maastricht treaty in 1991.

The Greek crisis and water service privatization in Thessaloniki and Athens

Following the financial crisis, indebted countries within the EU, and especially Greece, Ireland and Portugal, were bailed out by the Troika in exchange for the imposed restructuring of their national economies, including labor market deregulation, cutting of public sector employment and privatization of public companies (Lapavitsas et al., 2012). Italy too came under pressure in the second half of 2011, when Jean-Claude Trichet, then President of the ECB, and Mario Draghi, who succeeded him in November 2011, urged “the full liberalization of local public services (. . .) through large scale privatizations” (Bieler, 2015: 9).

The push for privatization in Greece during the Eurozone crisis took place in the framework of austerity measures as a supposed answer to the economic crisis (Zacune, 2013). Between 2008 and 2015, Greece’s Gross Domestic Product fell by 29.6 percent (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2017). The Greek economy had the largest contraction of any advanced economy since the 1950s (Financial Times, 2015). The severity of the economic downturn in Greece created a more explicit push towards the privatization of public water and sanitation services (Bieler and Jordan, 2017).

In 2010 the European Commission, together with IMF and ECB ordered the Greek government to sell a number of public assets as part of the (first) bailout, that is, extending financial support to the country to avoid bankruptcy

(European Commission, 2010). The Greek government planned to reduce its shares in the water utilities EYDAP and EYATH to 51%. This privatization of water companies met with huge resistance. In Thessaloniki, people from the trade union and employees of EYATH came together with local NGOs to discuss possible actions to prevent the privatization of the company. The trade union would take the lead in mobilizing people in Thessaloniki; the first step in what became a movement later. The most common argument against water privatization concerned tariff increases, which occurred in the vast majority of cases, making safe water inaccessible for many (Lawson, 2015).

The privatization of Greek state-owned enterprises was proposed to ensure a reduction in “subsidies, other transfers or state guarantees”, while also leading to “an increase in efficiency of the companies and an extension in the competitiveness of the economy as a whole” (European Commission, 2011b: 33). Interestingly, the Athens Water Supply and Sewerage Company (EYDAP) and the water company of Thessaloniki (EYATH), both earmarked for privatization, have historically been profitable. As Yiorgos Archontopoulos from SOSteToNero stated: “the forced privatization is providing an opportunity to foreign investors to take over our profitable and good functioning public utilities for a real bargain. In five years time, the investment of 40 million Euros will be gained back through the annual and consistent profits of 8 million of EYATH” (Archontopoulos pers. comm., 15 February 2018).

Greece’s ‘debt crisis’ intensified existing social antagonisms, and consequently exacerbated conflicts. While elites and the mass media were trying to drag the population into a collective guilt trip over ‘Greek people living beyond their means’, a national social engineering operation was set in motion, dispossessing and excluding the bulk of the population. Most importantly, state assets and infrastructure were sold to the highest bidder. The wages, pensions, labor rights and welfare arrangements of the popular classes were therefore slashed overnight (Karyotis, 2017).

Although Greece was not the only country affected by the crisis, it had nevertheless undergone one of the lengthiest and most intense programs of austerity in Europe after 2010. The framing of the crisis as “a national and moral problem” (Mylonas, 2014: 305) that can be blamed on an “overgenerous welfare state” and on “the laziness of people” (Pentaraki, 2013: 701) contributed to boosting authoritarian, nationalistic and xenophobic ideas and practices. The privatization of state assets has always been an integral feature of Greece’s international bailouts. In three rounds of bailouts between 2010 and 2015 Greece faltered on promises to sell vital parts of its infrastructure – ports, airports, marinas and waterworks – in exchange for billions of euros in loans. Details of exactly what Greece was required to privatize emerged in August 2015, with the leaking of the ‘Memorandum of Understanding for a three-year ESM program’ prepared by the Troika (European Commission, 2015). The leaked document listed 23 state assets, ranging from airports to service utilities, and presented precise steps and timelines for privatization (Hellenic Republic Asset Development Fund [HRADF], 2015). This list included two large public

water companies: EYDAP and EYATH. Under threat of being forced out of the Eurozone, Athens agreed to transfer 'valuable assets to an independent fund (HRADF), with the aim of raising €50 bn. The privatization fund was the issue that almost forced a Grexit (Rankin and Smith, 2015). Resistance to privatization grew, forcing the new Syriza government to indicate that they would not cross this limit.

Resistance and the rise of social movements

The first initiatives in Greece towards politically decisive resistance over water service provision came from the country's second largest city, Thessaloniki. Here the preliminary steps towards privatization in 2007 were slowed down in part through the resistance by the water workers' union, which staged a four-day hunger strike during the city's international trade fair. The first tenders were eventually announced in 2009 and again the union – which, unlike most unions in Greece, had determinedly maintained its autonomy from all political parties – responded with a 12-day occupation of the company's main building. The water workers union's alliance with activists in Thessaloniki proved to be a foundation on which the growing anti-privatization campaign could build (Wainwright, 2013). The EYATH water workers union saw that privatization plans would not only cut jobs but would also make profits disappear. Being small in terms of citizen numbers, to change the political landscape they searched for coalitions with municipal actors and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). The workers invested heavily in time to discuss the ideal water provision for citizens. Thus, when, after 2010, the proposal for privatization was brought back to the table (again) they had no difficulty in mobilizing people to combat this plan.

In the spring of 2011, Thessaloniki's 'indignados' movement orchestrated a mass mobilization with well over half a million people taking to the streets to defy austerity and demand democracy. In particular, the protest cohered around opposition to the push for privatization. The water workers of EYATH and a group of citizens set up the 'Initiative 136' (K136) to get water into the hands of the people. K136 opposed the privatization of the Water and Sanitation Company EYATH in Thessaloniki and proposed its social management through local-level cooperatives. The idea of K136 was that every water user would buy a non-transferable share. If one divides the estimated value of EYATH by the number of the users, the result would be the symbolic number of 136 euros, an idea born during the discussions that took place in Thessaloniki, in the so-called White Tower assemblies of the 'squares movement' (known as the 'Indignados'). The different movements decided to join forces in this common endeavor with four purposes:

- The acquisition of 40% of the shares and the management of EYATH by the citizens
- Social control of the city's water provision

- Democratic operation of the company
- To strive for a non-profit based character of the company, in line with social policies and environmental protection¹

On 9 February 2012, the Greek Parliament ratified the second ‘rescue’ memorandum and turned it into State Law. With this law, all the privatization procedures that had been debated during eight months were accelerated, causing a severe deterioration in the standard of living of the Greek people and the selling off of national assets. Under the auspices of the International Monetary Fund and the European Commission, the Greek government put on public tender, among many others assets, the Water and Sanitation Company of Thessaloniki (EYATH), even though it had been an efficient and profitable company that offered quality water services for low prices, without ever reporting any financial loss (EYATH, 2016).

In 2013 ‘SOSteToNero’ (SOS for water) was set up by the same water workers that made the link between Right2Water and the fight against privatization of the water companies in Greece. They believed it was necessary to combat privatization both at the local as well as the EU level and gave the momentum to the ECI in Greece. They emphasized the importance of this struggle being part of a wider European movement (Bieler and Jordan, 2017). The EYATH workers’ union was central to the establishment of this city-based umbrella social movement organization that brought together water, environmental and social activists and organizations. At the same time, ‘Save Greek Water’ was set up in Athens. Their argument was that water is essential to life and that selling the water company to foreign investors meant selling life. Even a partial sale could not be accepted. The president of the Thessaloniki water workers’ union, George Archontopoulos, feared that private investors “will be given management control as a present”. Therefore “whether it is 49% or 51%, we oppose further privatization of the company” (Kishimoto and Hoedeman, 2015). A water movement developing across Attica, the region of Athens, converged on this same target; the imminent threat of privatization. They insisted on the autonomy of their movement from all political parties which, in part, was the response to a history in which independent civil society had been suffocated by the two main political parties.

All Greek organizations united in SOSteToNero and Save Greek Water joined the Right2water campaign to show citizens how EU policy threatened local public control over water. At the same time, the ECI campaigners could point at Greece to indicate that European policies were undermining the confidence in and support for the European project. The success of developing a united front against the privatization of public water and sanitation in Thessaloniki meant that SOSteToNero had become an overarching social movement that coordinated the activities of all its constituent organizations (Bieler and Jordan, 2017). Individual activists of the Athens and Thessaloniki water company unions had developed novel political practices in an attempt to address the disconnection between their organization and wider civil society. They changed

the framework in claiming their right to water, transforming their role from powerless citizens in a bankrupt country to self-confident people defining the way that the commons and their right should be governed (Kaika, 2017). This was part of a process of emancipating union activists “from the hierarchies, dependencies and pervasive forms of domination associated with a state operating through clientelism” (Wainwright, 2014: 27). Equally important, union activists shifted their political practice towards so-called ‘social movement unionism’ (Kretsos, 2011) – a form of unionism that attempts to integrate workers, trade unions and the wider labor movement into broader coalitions for social and economic justice (see also, Perreault, Boelens and Vos, 2018). Such a strategy aligned with the building of a multi-actor and multi-scalar water movement in Greece: The water movement did not emerge alone. It was intrinsically related to the wider social, ideological and political movement that emerged during the ‘Greek crisis.’ For example, food distribution networks were set up, which inspired the K136 campaign (Calvário, Velegrakis and Kaika, 2016).

Right2Water came at a crucial moment. It took, however, time and endurance to show people in Greece that they were not alone in their struggle and to generate signatures for the European Citizens’ Initiative Right2Water. In turn, Right2Water campaigners supported the Greek organizations in organizing a referendum against the privatization of the Thessaloniki water company EYATH. After seeing the massive support for Right2Water in the European Parliament (at the hearing on 17 February 2014), activists in Thessaloniki felt strong enough to call for a referendum. This confidence was not visible in Athens. On 18 May 2014, coinciding with the first round of the local elections, the citizens of Thessaloniki organized a popular, non-binding, referendum to give the chance for the people to express their opinion on the sale of the municipally-owned water company EYATH. The referendum was inspired by the Italian experience and succeeded in achieving the quorum. The Greek government, through a circular by Minister of the Interior Michelakis, declared ‘illegal’ the self-organized water referendum threatening the organizers with arrest for “obstructing the electoral process” (Save Greek Water, 2014; EPSU, 2014).² The volunteers behind the referendum announced that they would go ahead risking arrest by the police. Nevertheless, the 11 local mayors of the metropolitan area supported the referendum and denounced in forceful terms the attitude of the government. A thirty-person international delegation, many of whom were affiliates of the European Federation of Public Services Unions (EPSU), came to Thessaloniki to observe the referendum (EPSU, 2014). None of the organizers were arrested. Instead, the referendum resulted in a 98 percent vote against water privatization. This citizen-led initiative mobilized 218,002 voters and sent a crystal-clear message rejecting the planned sale of EYATH shares to private investors. In this light, the referendum can be seen to be the biggest success of citizen-led mobilization against austerity and in support of public water. In spite of this success, the Greek government ignored the outcome.

Situating struggles against water privatization in Greece and Portugal within an understanding of the commons became crucial (Bieler and Jordan, 2016). Indeed, the citizens of the group K136 against water privatization in Thessaloniki viewed the crisis as an opportunity to intensify the search for democratic alternatives. Working on an alternative model of how to run the city's water services, it emphasized the importance of a new form of democratic water management based on direct democracy and self-management (Steinfort, 2014).

Theodoros Karyotis, one of the founders of K136, spoke of his experiences with the referendum saying:

It was an empowering moment, where Thessalonikians felt that they have recovered a bit of the dignity taken away from them in four years of austerity and dispossession. Many people, disillusioned by the electoral process, went out just to vote in the referendum; it is unbelievable to see what great effect making one's voice heard on an important issue can have in a political system that systematically treats voters as clients and promotes apathy and resignation. This is another aspect where the referendum has been crucial: in creating political consciousness and collective empowerment.

(Karyotis, 2014)

Karyotis warned against crying victory over the success of the referendum:

Staying humble at this moment means: Recognizing that the movement is diverse and multitudinous; that no one person or group can represent or speak on behalf of the whole movement; that no one political party, mayoral candidate or group can claim credit for the outcome of the referendum; and most importantly, that the big common "NO" to the privatization is only a preamble to an open and democratic discussion about the future of water management and about the best possible way to ensure democratic participation, environmental protection, transparency and social justice in the provision of this valuable resource.

(Karyotis, 2014)³

Who wins, who loses? (and what?)

The Greek government at first declared the referendum illegal although the organizers had the support of all eleven municipalities in the service area of EYATH in Thessaloniki. When the government rejected the outcome of the referendum, the EYATH water workers' union decided to go to court. In response, the Council of State decided that the government was not allowed to sell the water companies of Athens and Thessaloniki because such an act contravened the Greek Constitution: water and sewerage services were inseparable from the core State activity (Katrakaza, Papoutsis and Xenoyiannis, 2016). In the end, the government decided to put a stop to the privatization of water services in both Thessaloniki and Athens (MacroPolis, 2014).

A remarkable aspect of the referendum was that it had the support of the local governments and local politicians across the political spectrum. Such an organization was remarkable in spite of the opposition of national governments. Here we see that local authorities appear to develop a closer connection to people in understanding their needs and daily struggles during the time of the crisis, as opposed to a national State subject to elite capture and dominated by two political parties that had ruled Greece for over twenty years. There is also a difference in the interests between the local and national government. As Bieler shows in his chapter on “structure and agency in the struggle for public water in Europe”, the national government is merely “obeying Troika orders” by imposing the sale of public water companies and slashing public services (Bieler and Jordan, 2017). Local government, however, has to provide these services, face local inhabitants and local public servants every day, witnessing the impact of austerity measures on local peoples while maintaining the trust and legitimacy of their political authority granted by local constituencies. Whereas Bieler sees the class struggle and the struggle of capital against labor, we focus in the case of Thessaloniki on the conviction of the inhabitants of the city that water should be a common and public good. Commoditization and privatization of water involved, both in the eyes of the movements in Thessaloniki as well as in the Right2Water movement, crossing a line that should not be crossed. This was confirmed by the outcomes of the Referendum and of the European Citizens’ Initiative (van den Berge et al., 2018). Such proposals, therefore, led to a mass mobilization that crossed political lines and conventional political groups. There is however a clear aspect of class struggle in the sense that the referendum helped in creating collective empowerment and raising the voice of workers and people while linking the water movement to the wider social movement that was rising.

Soon after, the Greek government had to call for new elections as it could not achieve support from the Greek population for another deal with the Troika on new austerity measures. This moment turned into a landslide defeat for traditional governing parties followed by the rise of the ‘extreme’ right wing and the two left-wing parties New Democracy and Syriza. The latter became the winner of the elections, gaining the support of the population to negotiate another deal with the Troika. Although it was said that conditions imposed by the Troika were ‘too high’, others argued that the new government had to give in to reach a new bailout. This apparent capitulation was a huge disappointment to the movements that had put their hope in the Syriza government. Syriza, during the elections, had promised a clear social policy to the people suffering from austerity measures imposed and from decades of governmental mismanagement. Before the election, the party had campaigned with social movements against privatization, but once in government, it changed its position. The Syriza government agreed to a new deal with the Troika that included the sale of (23 percent of) the water company EYATH, plus management. Trying to downplay the sale by pledging that 51 percent would remain in government hands, the government were confronted by organizers of the

referendum who contested any further privatization (Archontopoulos, pers. comm, 2018). Again, disappointment was the result, a situation that can be explained by the structuring conditions of capitalism (see the chapter by Bieler in this volume), conditions that the new Syriza government were not able to evade.

The Thessaloniki water company EYATH, however, did put its ideas on social policy into practice. It introduced social tariffs that allowed poor people to receive 30 m³ water free of charge for a four-month period. This applied to low-income households with total taxable income less than 8.000 EUR per year, increased by 3.000 EUR for each dependent child. For consumption of 31 to 80 m³ of water per four-month period, they were able to benefit from a 50 percent discount of their water bill.⁴

A year after the referendum on water privatization in Thessaloniki, the President of the Greek Parliament Zoi Konstantopoulou solemnly pledged her support for the implementation of the Human Right to Water as a just societal demand. She made the announcement at a meeting of the Thessaloniki City Council, explaining that she wanted Greece to become the first EU-country to recognize such a right. The President of the Parliament declared that she is open to the demands of social movements and supported the Right to Water movement.⁵

At the European level Right2Water achieved a wonderful result with the first ever successful ECI. However, the European Commission did not propose new legislation (see van den Berge et al., 2018). And in Greece, the referendum did not lead to the expected new legislation to prevent the privatization of the water companies. On a more positive note, the movements considered the increased awareness around water among citizens as perhaps the best outcome. In 2015, over 50 citizen groups – made up of thousands of people – therefore supported the struggle to make water a public good (Steinfort, 2014).

In 2015, for the first time in modern Greek history, the two traditional parties that had ruled the country since the end of the military dictatorship were cast out of government. This outcome did not bring the political change that people – especially the poor, lower class workers and the EYATH water workers – had hoped for. Instead, they paid the price of the crisis and remained losers in the fight against austerity claiming success in preventing the sale of the most essential public service providers. The European Commission, as part of the Troika, above all lost credibility. Insisting that it had not forced privatization upon Greece, the evidence was however clear. In a letter to Food and Water Europe (which is part of the Right2Water movement), the Commission admitted its support for privatization.⁶ While temporarily losing in its push for full privatization of Greek state assets, the EC was successful in ensuring the Greek government's acquiescence towards the Troika in its demands for a third bailout.

Forces of capital continue to push back against the gains made by social movements. The third bailout agreement between Greece and the Troika in July 2015 included provisions for further privatization of the Thessaloniki and Athens water companies (Rettman, 2015; Pempetzoglou & Patergiannaki, 2017). The bailout agreement, therefore, outlined the need to establish “a new

independent fund (the ‘Super Fund’), which will have ‘in its possession valuable Greek assets’ (European Commission, 2015: 28). The two biggest water companies in Greece were included in this new fund. In the visit of President Macron to Greece, a delegation from the French multinational Suez took part and expressed their continuing interest in EYATH. While the Super Fund was supposed to raise the Greek income in 2018, the Greek water movements were preparing for a new campaign against privatization and a continuing struggle. In this campaign, some activists found themselves pitted against some of their previous supporters who, after the referendum, had joined Syriza. K136 is no longer a member of the new campaign. Instead, they stuck to their ideal of a cooperative and to the principle of self-management, something that does not match with the ideal of a public and state-owned company. The movements are now divided along different ideological lines between ‘cooperativists’ and ‘public ownership activists.’

Discussion and conclusions

The ECI, based on a broad alliance of trade unions, social movements and NGOs, was successful at a time, when austerity policies were enforced across the EU member states, including pressures towards further privatization especially on the countries in the EU’s periphery such as Greece. Although the Greek people were facing many difficulties in their daily lives (huge and increasing unemployment, closure of banks, non-payment of salaries, etc.), they supported the Right2Water from the moment that they saw the link between EU policy and (national) privatization plans.

The simultaneous development of the ECI Right2Water and the imposition of austerity measure by the Troika pushed social movements at various levels into each other’s arms. The European campaigners found support for their cause at local levels in Greece, and Greek activists realized that their protest should not only be directed to their national government but also needed to resonate in the European capital. A situation of mutual alignment of forces and arguments emerged with Greek popular support for the Right2Water in exchange for European popular support to SOStoNero. Working on the same campaign simultaneously enabled links to be established across borders, and in turn, facilitated international support for local campaigns. The anger over severe austerity, as well as the conviction that ‘water is life’, made people stand up against the privatization of water. The confidence that SOStoNero had gained over the previous years was paid back in huge support. After a large turn-out and significant rejection of privatizing the Thessaloniki water company in this ‘unofficial’ referendum, with 98 per cent voting ‘NO’, the pressure on the Greek government not to privatize mounted. In a parallel but entwined process, a sufficient number of signatories in Greece was achieved for the ECI, despite the high bureaucratic barriers to achieving a quorum.

Similarly, SOStoNero and the other organizers of the referendum on water in Thessaloniki politicized mobilized citizens against the privatization of water

service provision, showing that a different form of managing a water utility is possible. Both movements achieved and sustained their success by keeping a diverse range of people acting for the same purpose. The social movements managed to unite these diverse interests for a common goal (van den Berge et al., 2018), however, success is fragile if victory is called too early and a movement can fall apart when individuals seek their own gain. Water appeared a powerful agency in the struggle for social justice and in unifying different social groups. At the same time, it is no more than a component in the struggle, having its limitations for achieving wider change in capitalist society as shown in the chapter by Bieler (within this volume). Nevertheless, neither Right2Water nor SOSStoNero, K136 and other Greek movements had the intention of fighting the political order. They opposed the privatization of water and in this fight, they succeeded.

After the success of the referendum and Syriza winning the elections, the disappointment regarding Syriza's lack of commitment to preventing the privatization of the water companies made social movements and activists turn their back on the 'old' political fractions and caused the falling apart of water activists into historical-political divisions. For the new movement, it should be a lesson that unity among the diverse is a condition for success in social struggles. Nevertheless, importantly, both the ECI as well as the referendum have led to greater awareness and consciousness about the importance of water services in the daily life of Greece, and consequently the growing willingness to resist privatization. Recent developments in Greece show that this struggle against privatization must continue.

Notes

- 1 www.136.gr/article/what-initiative-136
- 2 www.savegreekwater.org/archives/4080 and www.right2water.eu/news/right-water-condemns-greek-government-obstructing-water-referendum
- 3 <http://www.autonomias.net/2014/05/people-vs-corporate-rule-some-personal.html>
- 4 www.eyath.gr/swift.jsp?CMCCode=060202&extLang=LG
- 5 <http://rights4water.net/en/articles/38-international-conference-on-water-privatization>
- 6 www.foodandwatereurope.org/pressreleases/eu-commission-forces-crisis-hit-countries-to-privatise-water/

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