

# The international face of Thessaloniki: The “Greek crisis,” the entrepreneurial mayor, and mainstream media discourses

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## **Abstract**

Thessaloniki and its mayor have been portrayed quite favourably in international mainstream media compared to the Greek state after the 2008 economic crisis. The dominant (media) discourses on Greece interpret the crisis as the result of the failure of the Greek state to reform due to the prevalence of a traditional political culture over a modern one and the moral failures of the population. In the international media representations of Thessaloniki, the local government has been described as “exceptional” in its crisis management compared to the state and other local governments, and the city's mayor, Yiannis Boutaris, has been portrayed as a reform hero, due to the implemented entrepreneurial development strategy and the revamp of the city's image through place branding. Analysing the key role of international media in the production and reproduction of a place branding campaign of Thessaloniki in international media by employing critical discourse analysis, the paper questions the favourable representations of the city compared to the Greek state during the same period. I argue that the serial repetition of positive images contributed to Thessaloniki being perceived as an example to be followed by other Greek local governments and the central state, acting as a best practice example for transformations envisioned on wider scales. The paper contributes to place-branding debates by illustrating the important role of international media in the dissemination of place brands, and by analysing how media representations of place may serve the legitimisation of processes of neoliberalisation on scales wider than the concrete urban setting where they occur.

## **Keywords**

agnotology, critical discourse analysis, economic crisis, Greece, international media, place branding

## **Inrtoduction**

While Greece groans beneath the weight of the debt crisis, most Greeks remain buoyant – especially in Thessaloniki, an ancient port that is now a buzzing creative center. ... No city in Greece is as much a symbol of hope for a better future as Thessaloniki. The country is suffering from sanctions and austerity measures, but right here, startups are popping out of the ground like mushrooms beside design firms and delicatessen factories, hip restaurants and action groups. In these desperate times, the people of Thessaloniki ... are boldly following their own ideas – and putting them into practise. ... The many young people are one reason for the upswing; they bring creative potential to the city. All the same, the most important force for renewal is an elderly gentleman: Yiannis Boutaris, 72, mayor of Thessaloniki since 2011. Dressed in rainbow-striped suspenders, wearing metal-rimmed glasses and sporting tattoos, the ex-winegrower and ex-alcoholic looks the very antithesis of the political establishment. While his predecessors, convicted of corruption, sit out their prison sentences, Boutaris, who never belonged to a major political party, is now celebrated like a guru, which is why the muscle outside his office is there mainly to stop fans from storming in. (Becker, 2015, pp. 35–36).

The above quote from Lufthansa's inflight magazine is characteristic of the international media representations of the city of Thessaloniki<sup>1</sup> during the “Greek crisis” and its differences to more general representations of the Greek state in the same period. Greece received extensive international media interest in the last decade, owing to its construction as the epicentre and main culprit of the economic crisis in the Eurozone (Blyth, 2013; Lapavitsas, 2012; Laskos & Tsakalotos, 2013). International mainstream media of the wider centrist spectrum played a key role in this process of blaming, promoting narratives of the Greek state's self-imposed debt crisis, through discourses of the failed policies implemented by the government, the structural deficiencies and incapacities of the Greek political system and the intellectual and moral failures of the population (Bickes et al., 2014; Kutter, 2014; Mylonas, 2012, 2015). At the same time, and in the same media, Thessaloniki and its local government have been described as exceptional in their crisis management compared to the state and other local governments, and the mayor Yiannis Boutaris has been portrayed as a reform hero.

This paper draws on critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2013; Wodak & Meyer, 2016) to critique the ways in which Thessaloniki has been presented as a poster child of austerity urbanism in international media accounts. I argue that the crisis context has been framed as an opportunity to reposition the city in interurban competition and to legitimise and reinforce austerity urbanism and processes of neoliberalisation. International media played a key role in this place-branding strategy, through the conflation of creative city and new localism discourses with stereotypical discourses of “Greek exceptionalism” (corruption, clientelism, etc.) and Europeanisation updated and verified by the crisis. The paper contributes to place-branding debates by illustrating the important role of international media in the dissemination of place brands, and by analysing how media representations of place may serve the legitimisation of processes of neoliberalisation on scales wider than the concrete urban setting where they occur. In the next section, I situate Thessaloniki within the broader context of crisis in Greece and elaborate on the roots of the Greek crisis discourses. After discussing work on

the role of media in the production of representations of place and place branding, I employ critical discourse analysis to international media representations of Thessaloniki. The paper concludes with an attempt to understand the discourses on the city with regards to the wider discourses on the Greek state and the crisis.

### **Thessaloniki/Greece in context**

Thessaloniki has been analysed as a city in crisis long before 2008 (Kafkalas et al., 2008; Kamaras, 2004; Labrianidis, 2011), since following deindustrialisation and capital flight in the early 1990s, the city experienced economic decline, rising unemployment and state disinvestment. Economic decline was accompanied by the inability to put into practice various neoliberal development visions (Karaliotas, 2017), the dominance of nationalist discourses in local politics which led to Thessaloniki's reputation as “the capital of intolerance and neo-conservatism” (Labrianidis, 2011, p. 1811), and political corruption scandals. In this regard, the former mayor Papageorgopoulos, who was in office from 1999 to 2010 backed by the Nea Dimokratia (New Democracy) party, was sentenced to life imprisonment in 2013 for the misappropriation of at least €18 million during his incumbency.<sup>2</sup>

Boutaris was elected in 2010 (and re-elected in 2014), supported by several centre-left and centre-right parties, with an agenda on the improvement of public finance administration and state devolution. Taking office amidst the unfolding of the “Greek crisis,” the municipal government launched a place-branding campaign emphasising the city's multicultural heritage – marking a clear break with the previous image of Thessaloniki based on a national(ist) reading of its past – and representing it as a creative and vibrant city, aiming at the attraction of tourists and investments. Place branding and tourism development became central components of urban policy and were closely connected to regeneration projects in parts of the city centre, which induced commercial gentrification and the privatisation of public space. Moreover, Boutaris actively supported the privatisation of Thessaloniki's port and airport imposed as conditions of the economic adjustment programmes.

Greece received its first bailout loan from international financial and political institutions (EU, ECB, and IMF) in 2010 and the crisis was treated as a regional anomaly, a result of depoliticised mismanagement, and blamed on local institutional arrangements, ignoring uneven development within Europe, the Eurozone architecture, and the role of major European banks (Blyth, 2013; Hadjimichalis, 2018). Mainstream accounts (e.g., Kalyvas et al., 2012; Pelagidis & Mitsopoulos, 2016) explained the crisis mainly endogenously, as the result of incomplete Europeanisation, the incapacity to implement structural reforms, and fiscal profligacy; of the accumulation of national debt through an increase in public spending, combined with corruption, clientelistic practices, and widespread tax evasion. This narrative emphasised the excessive behaviour of the Greeks, naturalising the crisis and presenting the adopted measures as inevitable, as a necessary evil for the Greek state to get back on the growth track and to become more European.

The roots of this discourse can be traced back to a dominant understanding of Greek history, summarised as “cultural dualism” (Diamandouros, 1994), as the domination of an “underdog culture” over a “modern one.” The former is seen as a nationalist, introverted culture

that favours clientelism and corruption, while the latter is described as striving for democracy and free market economics in the European tradition. This dualism became the main interpretative tool for the analysis of the Greek state and society by national and international economic and political elites (but also in social sciences), situating Greece in the semi-periphery of modern societies, through the prevalence of clientelism and corruption in state functions, and belated and fragmented industrialisation (Mouzelis, 1986; Tsoukalas, 1987), leading to a failed transition to modernity. It was claimed that the “underdog” culture did not allow the country to overcome its structural “particularities” and to catch up with the modernised West, despite its European Union membership (Diamandouros, 1994). Since the 1990s, these modernisation discourses were coupled with discourses of neoliberalisation, and successive neoliberal reforms “failing forward” were seen as failures to modernise (Karaliotas, 2017).

Mainstream media have played a key role in the dissemination of such stereotypes and discourses, which continued during the economic crisis through the attribution of the crisis’ roots to Greek culture (Liakos & Kouki, 2015). International media accepted and promoted non-systemic crisis narratives (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012) and contributed to the circulation of blame, by focusing on the inadequate regulation of the market by the state, the intellectual and moral failures of people, and their “culturally induced” striving for corruption, greed, or laziness (Bickes et al., 2014; Kutter, 2014; Mylonas, 2012, 2015). They thus shaped public opinion and created specific images of place and people, legitimising the economic adjustment programmes (Hadjimichalis, 2018).

### **Place branding and international media**

Since the 1990s, and in the course of ever increasing competition for capital and consumers, cities internationally have attempted to manipulate their imagery and the ways in which they are perceived through place branding (Vanolo, 2017). Forming a significant part of wider place-promotional activities, place branding, “an urban governance strategy for managing perceptions about places” (Eshuis & Edwards, 2013, p. 1067), has been considered as an entrepreneurial development policy for attracting tourists and investors (Evans, 2003), but also for constructing and reinforcing local identity and identification with a place (Harvey, 1989; Kavaratzis, 2004). As a set of promotional policies, place branding is based on selective storytelling (Sandercock, 2003), on the employment of a limited number of hegemonic, optimistic, and boosterist representations, excluding dissident voices and negative representations, therefore creating disparities between the promoted image of a place and reality (Paddison, 1993). The role of crises has been acknowledged as stimulating the development of place-branding initiatives, for instance as a reaction to the crisis of Fordism (Greenberg, 2008; Short & Kim, 1998). With reference to post-2008 Turin, Vanolo (2015) argues that the economic crisis is a taboo subject in place-branding discourses, as it is inconsistent with the optimistic representations of cities favoured by branding professionals. Representations of place in branding campaigns follow specific blueprints and images of urban success, resulting in the serial reproduction of best practices that circulate globally in processes of policy mobility (González, 2011; McCann, 2013). In addition to local and regional governments and their dedicated place-branding organisations, other actors are also involved

in place-marketing activities, with mainstream media playing a prominent role in the production and dissemination of representations of place.

In critical political economic terms, mainstream media interpret socio-political developments in ways that are favourable to corporate and state interests, because of their entanglement with these (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). Due to their legitimation and access to wide audiences, mainstream media are privileged spaces for the reconstruction of hegemonic discourses (Freedman, 2008; Mercille, 2014) not only mediating the public discussion, but also actively producing discourses and representations that exercise power over people's perceptions of cultures, people, and places (Fairclough, 2001; Short & Kim, 1998). In the case of distant places, perceptions are largely formed through popular, mainstream media representations (Burgess & Gold, 1985). Media represent places in various ways, but major and tourist cities that get more coverage and have the budget available to invest in marketing campaigns usually receive positive publicity that also generates positive perceptions of place. Other places go unmentioned until negative events occur, which tend to be used to reinforce unfavourable images and stereotypes, hence requiring place-branding interventions and media strategies (Avraham, 2000).

While the key role of media in place branding has been researched (Colomb, 2012), the literature has mainly focused on paid-advertisement/place-branding campaigns by local governments and other state actors in these media (e.g., Short & Kim, 1998) and on the role of local and national print media in the labelling of a city (e.g., Boland, 2008; Greenberg, 2008), following a similar emphasis in the "New Urban Politics" literature (Ward, 2009), where local and national media, particularly newspapers, played a key role in growth coalitions and other civic boosterist activities. As a result, the importance of international media in the production and dissemination of place-branding discourses has been neglected.

This paper is situated in this important academic literature on place branding, the role of media, and urban development and governance, focusing on global north media representations of Thessaloniki between 2011 and 2017 and their relationship with more general media representations of crisis-ridden Greece in the same period. The selection was not reduced to specific media due to the limited number of accounts that would be available in this case. The articles were selected on the basis of their explicit focus on Thessaloniki and its mayor, and included news reports on topical issues, opinion and travel articles, and interviews with the mayor. In total 40 articles published in major media (such as *Der Spiegel*, *Die Presse*, *HuffPost*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, and *The Globe and Mail*) – 14 from Germanophone and 26 from Anglophone media of the global north – were analysed with critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2013; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). I followed Fairclough's (2013) three-stage conceptual tool for the examination of textual discourse, focusing on the context in which these articles are published (discursive practice) and on the more general ideological context in which the discourses take place (social practice).

## **Discourses of renewal and reform**

Just by looking at the titles of the news articles on Thessaloniki in recent years, it becomes apparent that these primarily focus on mayor Boutaris and his administration, who are framed as the counter-example to decline and crisis and to the standpoints of the Greek political establishment, by tackling “Greece's problems in miniature” (Daley, 2012). Boutaris is presented as a hero, model mayor, and beacon of hope: “Greece's Model Mayor: Reform Hero Takes on Corruption in Thessaloniki” (Heyer, 2012), “This Greek hero slays monsters of the fiscal variety” (Reguly, 2013), “Why the tattooed mayor of Thessaloniki is a beacon of hope for Greece” (Leach, 2014). Boutaris combines what is regarded as an unconventional style for a politician with a narrative of the crisis that comes very close to hegemonic perspectives.

#### Counter-example to the Greek political establishment

A first discourse is that of Boutaris and his local administration as a counter-example to the established practices in the European south; he typifies “a new breed” (Daley, 2012), attempting to reform the state and to bring economic development by fighting established practices and trade unions. Boutaris is presented as opposing the Greek political class, as the progressive who seeks to do things differently with the goal to “make Thessaloniki a place where businesses can flourish” (Daley, 2012, n.p.). At the same time, Boutaris is praised, unlike the rest of the Greek political system, for his acknowledgement of the responsibility of the Greek state for its indebtedness, which follows the mainstream crisis narrative:

Unusually, Boutaris refused to blame the outside world for his country's anguish. Instead, he questioned the addiction of Greeks to cheap money after joining the euro in 2001, and the systematic covering-up of debt that eventually required an unparalleled €240 billion bailout that made Greece a byword for national peril. (Spillius, 2013, n.p.)

Boutaris is stylised as the counter-example to the political establishment; a post-political figure who is not affiliated to the dominant political parties, and who is responsible for implementing reforms, an excellent interlocutor for his European counterparts. But Boutaris' function in the discourse has multiple purposes. He is not only the opposite of the old political establishment, but is also instrumentalised as the counter-example to the new coalition government, formed in January 2015 and re-elected in September 2015, led by a party of the “radical left,” Syriza. Der Spiegel immediately called Boutaris “one of the few credible politicians in the country” and presented him as the alternative to the new prime-minister, as the “anti-Tsipras” (Heyer, 2015, n.p.), shifting the discourse from the critique of the old, corrupt political establishment to the new, anti-austerity coalition, that endangers the hegemonic European project.<sup>3</sup>

#### “The good student”

Another discourse is one building on policy mobilities. In this discourse, Boutaris is portrayed as the poster-child of the local government reform strategy, as he is ready to seek advice in order to counteract Thessaloniki's problems, visiting German and other local governments to learn from their best practices. For instance, at the headquarters of Berlin's waste management utility, “Boutaris raises his hands and says: ‘We need your help’” (Heyer, 2012).

The way policy mobility is conceived in the articles positions Greek state actors to an inferior role, in need to be disciplined by and to learn from Germany and the other Northern/Western European states, supporting the hierarchical structure within the Eurozone and EU (Blyth, 2013). Greece as a whole is not presented as a good student body (unlike others states, such as Ireland), but within Greece there are a few exemplary cases of local administrations who want to hear and learn. The benefits of this policy mobility are also acknowledged by the troika, whose officials praise Boutaris for his reform efforts, which represent a “model for all of Greece.” Boutaris, the student, thus becomes a mentor for the other local (and state) government officials in Greece:

It's relatively uncommon for the international observers working for the so-called troika of the European Union, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the European Central Bank (ECB) in Athens to say something complimentary about a Greek politician. And it's almost unheard of for them to praise a Greek for his penchant for reform, as they are doing with Boutaris. In their reports home, the officials write that, since Boutaris came into office, Thessaloniki has been an ‘island of hope’ and a ‘model for all of Greece.’ A member of the European Commission team in Athens says: ‘Boutaris is the exception, a beacon. Everyone else can learn something from him.’ (Heyer, 2012, n.p.)

### Creative Thessaloniki

The third discourse of renewal present in the media representations is that of the creative city (Peck, 2005). This discourse takes a two-fold character. On the one side it focuses on the unconventional mayor and on the other on the “creative class” and the flourishing art scene of the city. Several articles focus on Boutaris’ unconventional appearance, regarded as uncommon for a politician, which is matched with a progressive political stance, thus creating conflicts with the conservative intelligentsia and especially the Greek-Orthodox Church. A prominent example referred to in the media is his support for the gay pride organisation.

Boutaris’ progressive attitude is further illustrated by his support for Thessaloniki's gay pride parade. ‘In the society that we want to build, everyone has the right to express himself without feeling any kind of oppression,’ he said. ‘Reactions exist and will exist every time we are before a new reality. From the side of the church and from other organizations, but we cannot do anything about it.’ (Leach, 2014, n.p.)

The hype about Thessaloniki and Boutaris is further upheld by comparing him to and listing him with mayors from around the world who have contributed to transforming their cities (Maisel, 2014; The Globe and Mail, 2014). Such reports attempt to shift the emphasis on the role of local governments in finding solutions on the world scale, following an optimistic or even triumphalist literature (for instance Barber, 2013; Florida, 2017; Katz & Bradley, 2013) that focuses on civic glocality; on an urban discourse in which the entrepreneurial mayor acts as a policy initiator, which appears as a new neoliberal credo.

Thessaloniki is also branded the “cultural capital of Greece” (Wilder, 2011, n.p.) or “the country's gastronomic capital” (Enfield, 2015, n.p.). The city's museums, festivals, art

scene, and vibrant nightlife are presented, and so are accounts of young artists and creative entrepreneurs, including bar owners, curators, and designers, in order to underscore the argument of the city undergoing an image change. Since 2015, the creative city discourse has driven to an extreme, given a place in discourses of a city defying the economic crisis. Here, Thessaloniki is presented as a booming, partying city, which unlike the rest of the Greek state has not been hit hard by the debt crisis due to its urban renaissance driven by the mixture of hip bars and restaurants, the city's multicultural past, the tourists, and of course the mayor. For instance, the Sunday Times published an article with the subtitle “Crisis? What crisis? Greece's second city is determined to party its way through hard times” (Ochyra, 2015).

### **Constructing the city's image in international media**

The municipality of Thessaloniki and the Thessaloniki Tourism Organisation recognised the importance of international media for their place-branding campaign and took a proactive stance towards them, accommodating journalists during their visits to the city and organising tours and meetings with local economic and political elites and creatives. The favourable publicity was not the result of a paid-advertisement campaign; as Spiros Pengas, the municipality's Deputy Mayor for Tourism, argues: “All these years, there have been articles in foreign media, in both magazines and newspapers, that in my opinion (if we had paid for them) would have cost more than €4 million. We did it without spending a single euro” (Kazantzidou, 2018, n.p.).<sup>4</sup> Rather, what attracted the interest of international media was the overlap between Thessaloniki's place-branding and urban-development objectives – the attraction of capital and tourists, urban regeneration of the city centre, and privatisation of public infrastructure – and wider place-branding and neoliberal-city blueprints, and the city's exceptionality in the Greek context. International media constructed and disseminated the official place-branding discourses of the city, following a pattern of writing on cities as becoming creative, which is a trademark in civic boosterism (Peck, 2005). The ideological underpinnings of the promoted image are most apparent in reports negating the economic crisis, presenting a one-sided account of a city on the way to prosperity, marketing it for middle-class tourists. While foreign media primarily address their own state's audience, the promoted discourses have also been available to the Greek public, through their reproduction by Greek media and the local government or in most cases through open access to the media websites. As a result, discourses presented in international media have also influenced local perceptions of Thessaloniki's image. Although it is impossible to prove a causal correlation between the branding campaign and the development of the city (Greenberg, 2008), the international media representations provided discursive legitimation to the implemented austerity policies in Thessaloniki.

At a more abstract level, the type of selective and overly positive attention that Thessaloniki received by international mainstream media compared to the negative representations of Greece can be interpreted through an agnotological approach. Agnotology studies the intentional production of doubt and ignorance in the population for political causes (Mirowski, 2013). It is “the study of ignorance making,” where focus is set on “knowledge that could have been but wasn't, or should be but isn't” (Proctor & Schiebinger, 2008, p. vii). Agnotology shifts the attention from epistemological questions of how we know, to questions of not knowing and how this ignorance is produced (Proctor & Schiebinger, 2008). As such, ignorance is strategically produced and sustained in order to promote hegemonic discourses on



the economic crisis and imposed austerity. Building on Slater's (2014) insights on the manufacturing of ignorance by think tanks, three interconnected strategies can be differentiated in relation to the deployment of media reports regarding the Greek crisis and Thessaloniki: (1) they divert attention away from systemic and institutional failures that are the root causes of crisis and austerity; (2) they co-produce and reproduce specific causal stories of austerity and economic development, simplifying and objectifying them; and (3) they ignore alternative courses of action for dealing with austerity.

In adopting this approach, I argue that specific concepts and discourses have been strategically used by international media to manufacture doubt about and hide the structural causes of crisis and austerity, and to give the impression that austerity was an inevitable outcome solely of inadequate revenue collection and overspending in the Greek public sector. The same media also directed attention away from viable alternatives to austerity, by underscoring the lack of alternatives or, when accepting them, stigmatising them as catastrophic and/or utopian wishful thinking, in order to make austerity immune to empirical rebuttal. On the contrary, arguments supporting the claim that austerity works have been sought, and the presentation of Thessaloniki's local development strategy has provided an excellent example in this respect. Doubt is produced about the criticism of austerity and neoliberal capitalism, as successful practical examples of its deployment are presented. Regarding alternatives and alternative narratives, these are not even mentioned in any of the selected publications. There is no critique of the local government by oppositional parties or social movements included in the articles, nor is there any reflection on the continuing humanitarian crisis in the city, which is not different from the rest of the Greek state.

Therefore, it can be concluded that through the international and national media representations of a place, this place might become a discourse category of its own, acting as a metaphor for transformations envisioned on wider scales, in this case the state scale, for which it plays an exemplary role. It is in this respect that Boutaris and Thessaloniki take a privileged role in media reports, acting as a counter-example to the Greek normality, which is characterised by corruption, laziness, and reckless consumption habits. As the crisis and its effects increasingly played out, Thessaloniki's story represented a counter-narrative to the Greek debt crisis reports, and allowed discourses on the city to be seen as a euphemism for political and social transformations occurring in the Greek state. Local developments in Thessaloniki were thus perceived as a precursor for those expected and desired on the state scale.

## **Conclusion**

I have argued that international media representations of Thessaloniki reproduced the conflation of neoliberal-city blueprints, including austerity and the creative city, with a more orientalist discourse about the Greek state, updated and verified by the Greek crisis and the implemented economic adjustment programmes. These representations produced and reproduced the official place-branding discourse of the municipal government with the generic entrepreneurial goal to transform the city's image from a relatively unknown, decaying former light industrial city in a state in crisis to one attractive to tourists and investors. By doing so, they contributed to the legitimation of austerity policies in the city. The Thessaloniki case study illustrates how place-branding campaigns through and by international mainstream media not

only converge with wider entrepreneurial promotional and urban governance programmes, but also how the serial repetition of “success” within a crisis context acts as a best practice example for transformations envisioned on wider scales.

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### **Endnotes**

1 The city of Thessaloniki (Thessaloniki Urban Area) is divided into seven self-governing municipalities. In this paper I focus on the municipality

of Thessaloniki, which in media representations is equated to the city.

2 The sentence was reduced to 12 years in the second instance and Papageorgopoulos was released in July 2015, taking advantage of a law easing

the terms of confinement for inmates with chronic illnesses or disabilities.

3 Given Syriza's U-turn to its pre-electoral pledges, Boutaris soon came to terms with the new government.

4 Original in Greek. My translation.

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