Internet and Greek Pontian Associations in Thrace

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Abstract

Greeks of Pontian ancestry migrated, forcibly, from Pontus to Greece where they founded Pontian Greek communities, mainly in northern Greece. The rapid increase in usage of the Internet during the past years appears to be significantly affecting the activity of cultural associations in general. The Greek Pontian associations of Thrace have begun taking advantage of the Internet and social networks for their diversified activities, a "modernization" which has not been studied extensively thus far. In this paper a corresponding analysis is performed, concluding that the activity of the associations on the Internet reflects an upward trend, while an increasing number of them seek to maintain an active presence on the Internet through web sites and social networks. This activity includes primarily press conferences and informative announcements.
Keywords: Greek Pontian associations; Thrace; Internet; social networks.

1   Introduction

The Historic Pontus is the geographic area of the northeastern part of Asia Minor. Greeks of Pontian ancestry migrated from Pontus to the Greek state (either directly or via the former Soviet Union) by violent means. The largest

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number of these refugees arrived within the 1912-1924 period, where the culmination was observed during the years between 1921 and 1924, totaling an unparalleled 1.221.849 people. The main cause of this was the Greco-Turkish War in Asia Minor, especially the Catastrophe of Smyrna. Greeks originating in Pontus belong to the ethno-regional group category and upon arriving in Greece they founded associations initially for livelihood purposes.

The objective of this paper is to examine the Greek Pontian associations of Thrace and their organization with regard to their cultural and educational contribution. In specific, it argues that the cultural associations significantly influence the rescue and spread of the Pontian culture, judging by the characteristics of their function and activity. For the purpose of emphasizing this matter, a few sociology terms and concepts are cited initially, with reference to social, collective and ethno-regional Pontian identity coupled with a presentation of the region of Thrace. Afterwards, a selection of general historical facts on the foundation, contribution and activities of Greek Pontian associations are quoted. In a second stage, a tracing of their benefaction to education and culture is attempted, by utilizing the presence of Greek Pontian associations on the Internet and social networks. In parallel, a study of the potential evolution of their presence with the passage of time is pursued. In this context, a research was conducted in two steps-phases (the first in 2016 and the second in 2018). Following the description of the data collection method, the statistical results of the comparative study between the two years are analyzed, demonstrating the particularities of the activity of the Greek Pontian associations of Thrace on cultural and educational level while employing modern technology.

2 Social, Collective and Greek Pontian "ethno-regional" identity and the region of Thrace in Greece

During the last few years, the concept of social identity is continuously gaining ground in research related to social psychology, even though the two are not absolutely relevant. According to H. Taifel and J. Turner (2004), social identity consists of aspects of the self-image of a person. Those aspects originate from the social categories or groups where the person believes he/she belongs to.

K. Woodward (2004) claims that personality describes qualitative characteristics of self, while identity contains elements which are chosen by the person himself/herself. Identities correspond to features and traits, to social relationships, to roles undertaken by social group members, which define who we are (D. Oyserman, K. Elmore and G. Smith, 2014).

The social identity of a person affects both his/her self-image and the way he/she perceives others (W. Arts and L. Halman, 2006).

N. Ellemers, R. Spears and B. Doosje (2002) state that the degree of commitment or identification towards a group determines how the characteristics, the norms and the luck or overall course of that group shall affect the perceptual (cognitive), emotional and behavioral responses or reactions of the people who belong to it.

In contemporary societies, identity is a declaration of the person's necessity of self-determination in a social circle which is under constant social alterations (J. Howard, 2000). Engagement with one's identity constitutes a testimony of the person's hesitancy to define who he/she is in comparison with others (M. Vergeti and F. Charalampidou, 2015). Collective identity is the social group's identity.

M. Vergeti (2003) defines collective identity as the sense of belonging to a specific group. Collective identity is delineated from two dimensions; the first one is in regard to the emotion of positive identification of the group members and the second pertains to the integration with the group and to the forms of activity that the person performs as a member. These two dimensions contribute to the determination of the group members (M. Vergeti, 2000).

A. Melucci (1982) considers collective identity a form of collective action. Actions are the means by which both people and groups give shape to their identity. P. Schlesinger (1987) supports A. Melucci by further stating that A. Melucci's point of view is applicable even for identities pertinent to social bodies which are considerably firmer, such as national identity.

M. Hogg relies on the collaborative essence of social life and the sociability of humanity. It is in the nature of human to identify with numerous groups, which may differ in size, time duration and function. Groups provide collective identity to their members. Collective identity grants cohesion to the group. It operates as a means of resolving conflicts and disputes, for collaborative efforts, as well as for pursuit of the common good. These powerful beliefs encompassing the identity originate from important similarities between the members of the group (M. Hogg and S. Reid, 2006).

Culture is the core determinant in designating the collective identity's essence. According to M. Vergeti, collective identity is defined by culture, social delimitation or both (M. Vergeti and F. Charalampidou, 2015).

Culture occupies a prominent position and constitutes a vital element of the Pontian Hellenism's identity, which settled into the Greek state in the 1920s and earlier. An overview of the related bibliography indicates that this culture dictates and influences the way of life of the Pontian Greeks in addition to contributing to their overall presence in the historical, social and cultural becoming of the Greek nation, by bestowing it with a sui generis complexion and identity even to this day.

M. Vergeti (2000) has taken extended interest in studying the Greek Pontian identity. She has inspected narrations from Greeks of the first, second and third generation of migrants from Pontus and the first generation of Greeks who settled in Greece originating in the former Soviet Union. Greeks from the Greek Pontian communities of Athens participated in the corresponding research. According to the conclusions reached by M. Vergeti (2000), the migration of first generation Greek Pontians to Greece is the cause of the Greek Pontian identity's appearance in the area of Greece. They acquire conscience of their Greek, as well as their Pontian, identity which is gradually restructured due to the predominant historical context and ideology, aside from the identity's social limits. She introduces the term "ethno-regional identity" with the objective to denote the identity of the social group which migrates from its place of origin without the opportunity to return. The identity of such a group can neither be characterized as purely ethnic or national since it comprises part of a nation in its wider interpretation, nor as regional since the region which used to serve as a reference point ceased to exist (M. Vergeti, 1993).

Thrace was the entry point for most Greek refugees of Pontian ancestry upon arriving in Greece and thus constitutes one of the most highly populated settlement areas. It is a historic region of the country and forms its northernmost and easternmost geographical region. Geographically it is designated by the Thracian Sea to the south, by the Rhodope Mountains to the north, by the Nestos river to the west and by the Evros river to the east.

The region is divided into three regional units; Evros (whose total area is 4.242 km^2 and its capital is Alexandroupoli), Rhodope (whose total area is 2.543 km^2 and its capital is Komotini) and Xanthi (whose total area is 1.793 km^2 and its capital is Xanthi). Their population is 146.378, 108.566 and 110.887, respectively, according to the 2011 census. The region is located east of the Macedonia geographical region and is bordered by Bulgaria to the north and by Turkey to the east. It has been named Western Thrace, on historical and geographical basis, to be distinguished from Eastern and Northern Thrace which are part of Turkey and Bulgaria, respectively, since the three of them form the greater geographical area of Thrace.

3 Foundation and activity of Greek Pontian associations

A brief citation to historical facts is provided in this chapter, which may aid in better understanding of the Greek Pontian associations' identity.

Greek Pontian refugees of 1922 founded communities under adverse survival conditions. Apart from undergoing a massive expatriation, the

unfavorable reception that these refugees (both those coming directly from Pontus and those coming through Russia) received from the local Greeks necessitated these foundations. In the absence of associations, communities and solicitude for anything which empowered the solidarity between them, Greek Pontian refugees would have been forced to cope with Greek society utterly defenseless. Therefore, communities were a matter of survival during this initial phase of their deracination (M. Vergeti, 1998) (M. Vergeti, 2000).

The first Greek Pontian associations were founded in Greece between 1922 and 1933 upon the arrival of the Pontian Greeks.

The standard of living for a considerable amount of people who have been members of the communities since then, has improved gradually. The most urgent concerns of existence receded, thereby allowing refugees originating in Pontus to occupy themselves with the reinforcement of their collective identity, which would lead to social cohesion. The defensive disposition of the communities yielded to an assertive dynamic. Greek Pontians started an effort to gain recognition for their real position within the Greek society (M. Vergeti, 2000). Consequently, the second generation of Greek Pontians founded their own communities or enhanced the existing ones from the first generation, due to their need for expressing their ethno-regional identity through various demonstrations. Taking into account the historical-political conjuncture (starting from the Treaty of Lausanne and population exchange in 1922, up to the period succeeding the fall of the military junta of 1967–74 in Greece), Greek Pontian communities show interest in rescuing and spreading their cultural heritage, in academic terms, quite belatedly (M. Vergeti, 2000).

Third generation Greek Pontian associations have become the spearhead of protestations, due to their efficiency and legal support, in pursuit of a broad acceptance of historic truth and advocacy of culture and customs regarding the Pontian Greeks. They perform studies, research and every possible attempt to preserve and highlight the historic, linguistic and folklore monuments of Pontus. They support development of every form of art, in addition to emphasizing the importance of the holy shrines of Pontian Hellenism. Furthermore, they attend to the coordination of all kinds of cultural, recreational, social, rustic, philosophical, philanthropic, athletic, artistic and musical-dance events and the preservation of heirlooms and documents connected to Pontus. They never cease to accentuate the augmentation of the spirit of love, family bonding, solidarity, mutual assistance, material and moral support (C. Tellidou, 2017).

The forthcoming of the third generation of Greek Pontians marks a broad shift in favor of Greek Pontian associations, leading to a massive enlargement of the ranks of either existing or newly-founded ones. During the two decades between 1970 and 1990, there is an upsurge in foundation and operation of new associations, largely due to the appropriate historical, political, economic

and social conditions that had developed within the country. Their purpose is to rescue, promote and disseminate the cultural elements and exemplars of the Pontian Greeks. The third generation is the one which is no longer experiencing social exclusion and can, without hesitation, highlight and promote its Pontian identity, having joined and incorporated into Greece as an indisputable and integral member of the nation (C. Tellidou, 2017). Greek Pontian associations are gradually ceasing to accept solely Pontian members. Their main concern is their receptiveness towards the wider society.

After 1990 and up to the beginning of the 21st century, when the fourth generation of Greek Pontians appears, the activity of the previous generation is resumed with equally vigorous zeal. By exploiting technology, the Internet and social networks, through various approaches, to promote and communicate their activities, attract new members, publish photographic material and communicate with other associations, members and any other interested party (C. Tellidou, 2017).

Communities contributed to the incorporation of Pontian Greeks into the Greek society. Nowadays they constitute educational institutions and through them the collective identity of the Greek Pontians is being recovered, preserved and augmented both on and off the Internet (M. Vergeti, 2000) (M. Vergeti and F. Charalampidou, 2015).

4 Research methodology for the presence of Greek Pontian associations on the Internet

With the objective to trace, in depth, the manner in which the Greek Pontian associations of Thrace endorse education and culture, a survey was carried out with focus on the use of contemporary technology. Granted the wide and frequent usage of the Internet by young people, a search was conducted on the presence of associations within this pattern.

In specific, the first step of the survey lasted a few days over a month and was completed on July 2016. It included a search on the Internet aimed at exploring the presence of the Greek Pontian associations of Thrace in social networks and on cultural or other content websites which referred to these associations. The ownership of a web site and/or a blog, published (recurring or not) digital press releases, ability of direct online communication and presence on social networks were recorded. As an indicative sample, the Facebook social network was chosen, since it is considered the most widespread among users of the World Wide Web, judging by the number of its registered members.

In December 2018, the second step of the survey was carried out, which employed an identical search regarding these associations on the Internet, in order to trace their potential evolution due to the adoption and integration of

the Internet in their activities. Videlicet, an attempt was performed to determine whether these associations adhere to the developing tendency of the wider society to use contemporary technology, as well as whether they adopt it as a method to promote their actions to a broad audience and, conceivably, to attract new members.

The sources where all Greek Pontian associations of Thrace were retrieved from to be recorded are the statutes of the existing associations in that area, which were retrieved after communication via telephone or e-mail with the prefecture and municipality offices of Thrace and especially with the appointed persons responsible for cultural matters. Subsequently, the cultural associations themselves were located and an examination was conducted on which of them are occupied with the preservation, promotion, publicizing and spreading of the Greek Pontian identity, through the Internet or direct phone communication with the associations' chairpersons.

The following map indicates the location of every Greek Pontian association in Thrace, as registered in the official records of the corresponding prefectures and municipalities.

Figure 1 – Map depicting the locations of the Greek Pontian associations in Thrace

5 Statistical results from Internet searches for Greek Pontian associations of Thrace

The following remarkable data have emerged posterior to a comprehensive analysis of the results of the survey described in chapter 4:

A. A total of 38 Greek Pontian associations were located in Thrace, 10 of which reside in the prefecture of Xanthi, 17 in the prefecture of Rhodope and 11 in the prefecture of Evros. These associations demonstrate variable activity and/or longevity.

B. According to the results of the first step of the survey in 2016, 34 out of 38 associations are listed on search results from the most widespread Internet search engines where they appear due to a linked press conference or informational report in case of events. For the rest four no noteworthy presence on the Internet was detected. On the second step in 2018, these percentages remain unaltered. Taking into consideration the statistical results it becomes clear that quite a vast percentage (almost 90%) of the associations adopts the practice of publicizing their cultural and educational activities via online press conferences. In such a manner, they are able to highlight the value of their actions globally on any matter; on culture, for instance.

C. During the initial step of the survey in 2016, results indicated that 26% of the associations operate their own web site. In the 2018 step, this percentage increased to 29%. Ostensibly, a major percentage of 74% had not, initially, opted for promotion through web sites or blogs. The short decline of this number to 71% in 2018 could be a sign of reluctant progression in this area.

Nonetheless, it was observed that 4 associations in Thrace are effectively inactive while 12 others prove negligible activity. Should we exclude these 16 associations from the 38 in total, then the presented percentages are expanded; on that account 50% of the associations operate a web site or blog, thus leading to a noteworthy observation given the nature of these associations and/or the distribution of generations their members belong to. It's plausible that specific associations have a majority of elderly members, resulting in less familiarity with usage of the Internet. Furthermore, it is reasonable that the bonding and interaction between members on physical level is in superb standing, therefore rendering digital communication purposeless.

D. Out of the 11 associations which maintain their own web site, two provide functionality for direct online communication. It is worth noting that utilization of these direct communication tools has been observed at a mediocre level, which essentially indicates that

investment in state-of-the-art web sites does not constitute a high priority item, despite leveraging it could introduce in straightforward communication with web site visitors. It follows that, out of the total of 38 associations, these two comprise an insignificant percentage, moreover lacking any noteworthy upward trend since it remained constant between 2016 and 2018. It is presumed that the cause behind this observation is the growing popularity of social networks in contemporary society which prompts the Greek Pontian associations to adopt them as a means to provide their visitor – friends with the ability to directly contact them, since this could lead to impact on a broader audience.

E.   In 2016, 16 associations out of 38 were identified in possession of a social network account (primarily on Facebook). In 2018, 22 out of 38 associations operate an account on Facebook. Videlicet, six more associations created a Facebook account within a two-year period. Furthermore, if we exclude the 16 inactive associations mentioned in C above, the result indicates that all Greek Pontian associations of Thrace operate a social network account. Therefore, in contrast to the less preferred direct communication via web site, this evident inclination to utilizing Facebook's platform suggests that Greek Pontian associations focus on promoting their activities and profile via this ubiquitous route.

F.   In 2016, three out of the 16 associations described in E above had 4.000 or more "friends". In 2018, this percentage has not fluctuated. Additionally, 12 out of the 16 in 2016 and 11 out of the 22 in 2018 have more than 1.000 "friends". This percentage may be deemed as quite substantial, in view of the fact that the management of a Facebook account requires due interest, knowledge, time and feedback. As a consequence, we may imply that associations indeed impact their audience, keep pace with contemporary technology and hence disseminate knowledge, ideas, memories and culture. In specific, out of the 16 associations in 2016:
   a. four had 1.000 or less "friends",
   b. five had 1.001 to 2.000 "friends",
   c. one had 2.001 to 3.000 "friends",
   d. three had 3.001 to 4.000 "friends" and
   e. three had more than 4.000 "friends", as stated before.

Correspondingly, out of the 22 associations in 2018:
   a. ten have 1.000 or less "friends",
   b. five have 1.001 to 2.000 "friends",
   c. one has 2.001 to 3.000 "friends",
   d. three have 3.001 to 4.000 friends and
   e. two have more than 4.000 "friends".

The number of "friends" was not available for one of the associations.

The aforementioned statistics denote that these associations demonstrate an outstanding number of visitors on their social network profiles, taking into account their location since Western Thrace is a minor geographical region of Greece with relatively sparse population.

6 Conclusions

Greek Pontian associations have personal web sites and blogs at their disposal and participate in social networks, primarily Facebook. Furthermore, the percentage of these associations has been observed to constantly increase while their participation rate in social networks has reached 100%. Their regular activity via press conferences on the Internet "puts the seal" on their universal dynamic presence, in the process of promoting the events they organize in context of cultural and educational actions.

In parallel, it was observed that the use of tools such as direct communication forms is minimal on the web sites of these Greek Pontian associations. This may be interpreted as a consequence of the developing tendency of our era in favor of social networks, where instant communication is offered over and above numerous convenient features.

Based on the above, it may be suggested that Greek Pontian associations consider social networks and the Internet as their allies in their prevalent effort to promote and communicate their activities, highlight photographic material, connect with other associations, members and interested parties as well as attract new members.

Universally, the existence of these actively registered associations constitutes an indispensable fact of the intense activeness of citizens originating in Pontus besides their devotion to Pontian tradition and identity. Every implemented activity of the associations has an objective regarding the rescue, preservation, promotion and bequest of their collective ethno-regional Greek Pontian identity. Technology is one of their critical supporters in the process. The contribution of Greeks originating in Pontus to the region of Thrace is most significant within the contemporary society context, since they observe its progress (social networking, information exchange, interaction through activities) and maintain communication (mutual acquaintanceship, collectivity, exchange of views, et cetera).

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