



Kostis Papaioannou

The Profiteers of Fear?

Right-wing Populism and the COVID-19 Crisis
in Europe
Greece

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About this publication

The right-wing populist and far-right agenda in Greece has shifted from the refugee issue and the name dispute between Greece and the Former Yugoslav Republic of North Macedonia – today's Republic of North Macedonia – to the coronavirus. However, it is unclear who will step in to claim this political space: The leadership of the Nazi Golden Dawn party is now in prison, and some key figures of the right-wing populist and far-right political spectrum who could help build support for the movement against public health measures have shifted over to the conservative New Democracy party. There are, though, anti-mask and -vaccination movements on social media. Compliance with the social distancing measures was openly undermined by a significant number of Greek Orthodox clerics. Conspiracy theories exert a strong influence, and one far-right parliamentary party is seeking to give voice to this movement, but with little effect so far.

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INTRODUCTION

The coronavirus pandemic is a health, economic and social crisis with global dimensions. The economic and social impacts are immense; inequality and exclusion are widening; political discontent is intensifying. For some governments, the pandemic is a pretext for promoting authoritarian models of governance: they are undermining the rule of law as well as transparency and accountability mechanisms, excessively bolstering executive power by legislating without parliament, and curtailing media freedom. On the other hand, social distancing measures and the immense economic impacts of the market lockdown are causing social upheaval, the ramifications of which are as yet unknown.

Greece is particularly exposed to these impacts after a decade of extreme austerity, recession and unemployment, a period of major social upheaval and a re-alignment of the political stage. Levels of social and economic stress were already extremely high before the virus made its appearance. The long-term impacts of the pandemic are not yet clear. What is discernible is mistrust, insecurity, fear and discontent. The purpose of this paper is to present in summary form how the populist right wing and far right have attempted to exploit these feelings.

MEASURES TO ADDRESS THE PANDEMIC AND THE POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

Greece's National Health System (NHS) has been facing major problems for some time now. Since 2010, the fiscal adjustment measures adopted after the country sought support from the IMF, the European Commission and the ECB resulted in extreme cuts in public spending and reductions in the number of doctors and healthcare staff. The NHS, understaffed and ageing, was not in a position to cope with the pressures which the outbreak of an epidemic of such dimensions would unavoidably exert.

The first phase of the pandemic, from March to the summer of 2020, was addressed by the conservative New Democracy government with an immediate lockdown: all educational establishments were shut, followed gradually by catering establishments and commercial premises, and

lastly places of worship. Major restrictions were imposed on traffic and movement. Support for the economy, businesses and employees was also announced. The reaction was considered to be effective, the public health measures yielded results, and the pandemic was temporarily brought under control. As summer progressed the measures were gradually scaled back, restrictions on travel were lifted, businesses – including tourism businesses – reopened, as did schools.

When the tourism sector got back to business, a climate of complacency set in. This was partly a result of the government's celebratory tone, which sent the message that the country had overcome coronavirus. This led to a major rise in the number of cases, patients and deaths in August. At the time of writing, the second wave of the virus is currently under way; society and the economy are exhausted; and the public health system is having difficulty coping with the immense pressures. The second lockdown – covering education, catering and commerce – continues, and the prospects for a return to normalcy are far from clear. The disease statistics show a small improvement, but that does not mean we can rest on our laurels yet. At the end of 2020, the number of deaths stood at 4,800 and Greece was ranked among the worst places to live in the time of pandemic, according to the COVID Resilience rankings prepared by the Bloomberg agency.¹

During the first lockdown, most opposition parties tolerated or consented to the government's measures. After the summer, criticism from the opposition focused on the lack of support for the NHS, on the small number of diagnostic tests, on measures not being taken to curtail crowding on public transport and in schools, and on the decision to reopen the tourism sector. Opposition parties also pointed

¹ <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/covid-resilience-ranking/> and <https://www.naftemporiki.gr/story/1673403/oi-kaluteres-xores-giana-zei-kaneis-stin-epoxi-tou-koronoiou-epese-19-theseis-i-ellada> (retrieved on 15.12.2020). The ranking is based on ten criteria, from the total number of cases and the mortality rate to the availability of tests and direct access to vaccines, and from the effectiveness of the health system and the impact of restrictions on the economy to the degree to which citizens are free to move around. In November 2020 Greece ranked 31st, but in December it fell to 50th place out of 53 countries, just above Peru, Argentina and Mexico.

to the lack of transparency in how expenditure for the pandemic was being managed, and to the efforts being made to influence the media via extraordinary government-controlled financing. The left-wing parties are opposed to restrictions on the right of assembly. There have also been many complaints about a major increase in the number of cases of the police acting arbitrarily on the pretext of enforcing compliance with measures to control the coronavirus.

Overall, during the second wave, opinion polls have increasingly shown that the public believe that the pandemic is being managed badly² and that there have been delays in adopting adequate measures.

THE FAR RIGHT IN GREECE: BRIEF BACKGROUND

After the fall of the dictatorship in 1974, the far right lacked any significant electoral power, except in rare cases. Voters with a similar ideological position primarily supported conservative parties, with purely far-right parties receiving only small shares of the vote.

In the 1990s a combination of factors (above all, migration from Albania, as well as the dispute over the use of the name “Macedonia” by neighbouring FYROM, now the Republic of North Macedonia) exacerbated xenophobia and nationalism and favoured the rise of the far right. In the 2000s the Popular Orthodox Rally (LAOS) party was established; its rhetoric was clearly xenophobic, anti-immigration and anti-Semitic. Figures with a pro-dictatorship, anti-Semitic and/or neo-Nazi past were involved. The party formed a coalition government in 2011 with conservative New Democracy party and the social-democratic PASOK party. That broke a taboo. The next taboo was broken by the then leader of New Democracy, Antonis Samaras – who often used xenophobic and nationalist rhetoric himself – when he opened the door of the conservative party to prominent members of the far-right LAOS party. Since then, they have risen up through the party’s ranks and now constitute a significant grouping within New Democracy.

After 2010, thanks to the economic crisis, the imposition of a strict austerity programme and the forced impoverishment of large groups, the far right consistently garnered

² For example, in one Prorata poll, 65% of respondents said that the government was not doing everything possible to prevent the second lockdown, while the majority of respondents said the government was not taking the measures needed to protect employees and businesses, <https://prorata.gr/2020/12/02/sfigmos-noemvrioy-2020/> (retrieved on 15.12.2020). In a poll conducted by the same company in September, 60% were negative about the way in which the government chose to reopen the tourism sector and 66% were also negative about the way in which public transport was operating, <https://prorata.gr/2020/09/17/i-ellada-stin-epoxi-koronoiou-i-pempti-ereyna-2/> (retrieved on 20.12.2020). Moreover, in a poll conducted by Alco, 54% said they were unhappy with the government’s handling of the situation, compared to 40% who held the opposite view, <https://www.libre.gr/dimoskopisi-alco-gia-to-open-dieyrynetai-i-dyl/>.

more than 10% of the vote in elections, peaking at a figure of 18.9% in the 2012 elections. LAOS’ involvement in the coalition government which implemented the Memorandum on Fiscal Adjustment quickly deprived the party of its initial antisystemic nature, rendering it politically inert. Key party executives with openly far right ideas moved to the New Democracy party and grew within it; the gap created by the weakening of LAOS facilitated the rapid rise of the violent neo-Nazi Golden Dawn party. Racist violence in the streets became widespread.³ Golden Dawn was repeatedly elected to Parliament until criminal investigations began (after a marked delay) into its involvement in criminal acts, murders and other felonies. Its leadership team were eventually convicted as a criminal organisation and were imprisoned in October 2020. However, the party had already lost its electoral strength and found itself with no seats in parliament in 2019. A new party called “Greek Solution” entered Parliament on the back of nationalist, conspiratorial and xenophobic rhetoric, but without espousing violence.

The far right’s overall electoral reach in 2019 appeared to be on the decline, and stood at 6.6%. However, the far right and populist right’s actual support base is significantly larger than election results suggest. Their voting for New Democracy in 2019 does not mean that they have permanently abandoned the far right. This partly explains the harsh government rhetoric on issues such as migration. The question of who represents the populist and far right in political and electoral terms is by no means certain, and these voters are up for grabs. We thus need to look at the stance adopted by that part of the political spectrum during the pandemic.

NATIONALISM AND XENOPHOBIA: RIGHT-WING POPULISM BEFORE THE PANDEMIC

Poverty, unemployment, pressure on the middle and low classes, and the delegitimisation of representative institutions have all shaped the social framework over the last decade. It was against this background that issues on the populist right and far right agenda were able to emerge. The most recent was the Prespa Agreement between Greece and North Macedonia, an issue which triggered traditionally strong nationalistic feelings, especially in Northern Greece. An attempt was made to prevent the signing of the Agreement (put forward by the SYRIZA government) through demonstrations and marches, some of which were violent. The Independent Greeks, a party on the populist right which was part of the coalition, left the government. Conservatives and socialists opposed the Agreement, contrary to their previous position on resolving the dispute with the neighbouring country by making mutual concessions.

³ According to the annual reports of the Racist Violence Recording Network, hundreds of physical attacks against foreigners were recorded, mainly aggravated and ordinary bodily harm, combined with threats, insults and damage to the property of others. Source www.rvrn.org.

However, the public's level of interest in the issue soon waned, and the current government is implementing the Agreement.

Since the major refugee influx in 2015, migration has also been a key issue for Greece and for local communities, especially those on the Aegean islands. It is of particular importance that on the local level – and sometimes on the central level – harsh xenophobic rhetoric was used by officials from the larger political parties (especially the New Democracy party while it was in opposition), journalists and representatives of the Church. As a result, this discourse has gradually become normalised and has been widely disseminated. There were many conspiracy theories and much fake news in circulation: about the displacement of the Christian population, NGOs promoting a plan to water down the local population, immense housing allowances being provided to refugees while Greeks are losing their homes, the desecration of churches, and crimes being committed by refugees. Hate speech has combined extreme racism, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism and harsh anti-communist rhetoric (especially when the refugee issue was being managed by the previous left-wing government).

FROM MACEDONIAN FIGHTERS TO ANTI-MASKERS: THE FAR RIGHT'S NEW STRATEGY

The right-wing populists have been investing in how the issue of the pandemic is communicated. This is partly explained by the void left after public interest in the refugee issue waned. In other words, we are seeing a shift in the agenda: the public health crisis is an opportunity for new far-right movements to fight against the system. There is much that connects them to previous such efforts. On the anti-maskers' social media pages, we saw a relatively stable 'value framework' during the first phase of the pandemic, and all the more so in September when schools reopened: calling official data into doubt, denying masks and vaccines, hostility towards systemic media, anti-Semitic conspiracy theories ("George Soros is getting rich today from the vaccine, just like he got rich from the movement of migrants to Greece"), xenophobia, as well as suspicion towards the authorities and institutions.

In some cases, the coronavirus has been directly associated in public discourse with racial origins, with the migration/refugee issue as a backdrop. There have been articles about the arrivals of refugees from the Turkish coast: "Officials believe Turkey is pushing migrants who are carriers of COVID-19 to cross over into Greece."⁴ These articles were then shared by individual government officials and military sources, but the government distanced itself from such information. However, many media directly tied the refugee issue

and the tensions between Greece and Turkey⁵ in March 2020 to the coronavirus. In articles published by right-wing newspapers, one read that "Foreigners from the centre of Athens account for half the cases in Evangelismos and Sotiria hospitals."⁶ This was in an attempt to lend a racist hue to the pandemic by presenting refugees and migrants collectively as vectors of the virus. In addition, some groups of citizens who were opposed to restrictions on movement tied these measures into the construction of new refugee camps ("We are being locked down so they can build camps unimpeded.").

In September 2020, several cities nationwide held meetings to protest the use of masks in schools. Turnout was low. The slogans that were used focused on the exercise of rights, freedom, individual self-determination, protection of children, and parental responsibility. One incident that took place in Chania is of note. In September, on the first day of school, the father of a pupil hit a teacher who prohibited the child from entering the school without a mask. The court imposed a penalty of 14 months imprisonment, suspended for 3 years. A few days later, waving the Greek flag, the same individual led an anti-measure, anti-lockdown march of around 150 anti-maskers and pandemic deniers.

THE RHETORIC OF THE 'ANTI-MASKERS'

Mandatory masks are presented by 'anti-maskers' as a means of oppression, social control and massification, which entails more risks to health than those it prevents. The same applies to the vaccine: "Globalisation is to blame for everything ... invisible forces acting in concert to ensure absolute control over us." These views go so far as to include strongly anti-science opinions ("They're implanting chips with 666 by vaccinating us."). In the social media profiles of supporters of these groups, one also often finds rhetoric with touches of Islamophobia and xenophobia. There are texts on "Turkish expansionist tendencies and Greek retreatist tendencies and defeatism" together with all the anti-mask discourse. Opposition to masks is associated with strong, identificatory beliefs: nostalgia about a past filled with freedom and respect for tradition, discourse that paints the future "they are preparing for us" as a place of extreme risk. In the most extreme version of this rhetoric,

⁴ Kathimerini, 11/4/2020, <https://www.kathimerini.gr/politics/1073483/metanastes-me-koronoio-proothei-i-agkyra-stin-ellada/> (retrieved on 17.12.2020).

⁵ In March 2020, with the arrival of a large number of refugees on the mainland border between Greece and Turkey on the Evros River, tensions between the two countries escalated. Attempts by the refugees to cross the border were repulsed by the military, Greece closed the borders and suspended the right to submit asylum applications. The military presence in the region was generally increased. The European Union supported the Greek position with a symbolic visit by high-ranking officials to the border. Tension in the region de-escalated after 20 days, but relations between the two countries remained tense over the next few months, as they do today.

⁶ Proto Thema, 11/9/2020, www.protothema.gr/greece/article/1043546/allodapoi-apo-to-kedro-tis-athinas-ta-misa-krousmata-se-euaggelismo-kai-sotiria/?fbclid=IwAR0VPVUszxBIHJH9k23VCPdVhQpL5vAx6OPgIG4UcH74MDibcAx0LN8_oE (retrieved on 23.12.2020).

we find fascist phrases about “traitorous politicians,” and there are also references to the Bilderberg Group⁷ and about “subjecting us to globalisation.” Some anti-maskers call the mask a muzzle, but sometimes it is referred to as a burka, a direct reference to Islamophobic and xenophobic feelings. At most rallies, the gatherers held Greek flags; even clerics attended some meetings.

It is interesting that the words of right-wing populists borrow or appropriate terms from the democratic ‘anti-fascist movement’. They employ phrases typical of left-wing supporters of the welfare state. There is condemnation of government policy that is favourable to large economic interests; selectivity in imposing distancing measures; the suffocating rules imposed on catering and other professional sectors – coupled with the forbearance shown to large companies and workplaces where there are large numbers of employees – as well as the unwillingness to support public transport and public hospitals. “People of Chania! Fellow democratic citizens ... Terrorism and fascism will not pass! All of us put democracy, popular freedoms, and the people above political intrigues and the interests of the multinational pharmaceutical companies. We say No! On the pretext of COVID today, or some other virus tomorrow, or on the pretext of some terrorist act after that, we will not allow those who trade in peoples to transform our homeland, Chania, Crete, Greece ... the world ... into an immense new Spinalonga,⁸ into a generation of people fully controlled, utterly un-free, robotic post-humans in the Orwellian sense!”⁹

Another characteristic method employed to question the measures overall is to refer to existing problems about how public health data are kept and published: “The measures are imposed based on a brutally fascist procedure and mentality. They don’t even cite data about those infected or comparative data from other areas (not even for the sake of appearance), but only refer to the despicable recommendation of the national public health committee for combating COVID-19, citing it as a vague pretext without giving any data from it whatsoever!!!”¹⁰

This rhetoric is attractive to those who have lost out in the process of neo-liberal globalisation because it has a strong anti-system sound to it, invokes free critical thinking and challenges truths that are centrally imposed. It resonates with a significant portion of the population – a portion that

is frequently not identified in polls and does not tend to be represented by traditional political groupings – and sometimes it is disseminated horizontally, crossing social and political silos. This rhetoric is bolstered by the inconsistency of officials who do not comply with the social distancing measures themselves and the haughty disdain of all those who express reservations.

INDIVIDUALS AND ORGANISATIONS GEARED UP TO OPPOSE VACCINATIONS

One of the first people who sought to profit politically from the pandemic was the neo-Nazi MEP Giannis Lagos, convicted of being responsible for running a criminal organisation.¹¹ He called on people to attend demonstrations outside schools, saying people should resist the tyranny of the mask. In specific areas with a “tradition” of mobilising around schools, the strategy for how such demonstrations are organised was rapidly adapted. In Gerakas, Attica, a school occupied in 2018 in protest over the Macedonian question was again occupied in 2020, this time to protest mandatory masks. Groups close to Lagos played a leading role in both cases. In general, Golden Dawn made piecemeal attempts to muscle into this area but failed due to the pressure exerted by the impending court ruling. In a few cases, officials from the party appeared at gatherings, and even the leader of the party, Nikos Michaloliakos, who was on trial at the time, attended an anti-mask/-vaccination/-migrant demonstration that took place in Athens.

The far-right journalist Ioannis Papazisis played an active role in Thessaloniki. At a meeting he said, among other things, that politicians were “satanists and child killers” and “they plan to damage our children’s lungs with these masks.” Extreme words, but words that resonated. On 22 April 2020, he discouraged citizens from getting a vaccination if doctors did not sign a certificate stating that, without any need to litigate the matter and win, they would compensate the person being vaccinated “if [they] suffered any psychological or physical harm.” The post containing the text of the solemn declaration received several thousand shares on social media.¹²

The newly-established TOLMA movement (“Now Everyone Together”) is also opposed to masks and the vaccine. Its founder has a history in right-wing populism and extreme rhetoric (a former candidate for LAOS, he spoke in favour of the death penalty, against the New Order of Things, against the ‘treasonous’ Prespa Agreement) and spoke to the or-

7 At the Bilderberg meeting, high-ranking politicians and heads of state as well as experts from industry and finance from leading industrial nations gather once a year. The aim of this meeting is to enable the free exchange of opinions. Confidentiality is therefore an absolute requirement to be able to participate. Due to its confidentiality and its exclusive composition, the Bilderberg meeting repeatedly gives rise to conspiracy theories.

8 Spinalonga is a Greek island where lepers used to be sent in isolation from the general population until the middle of the 20th century.

9 Extreme right propaganda using “stolen” phraseology, Marios Dionelis, Efimerida Syntakton, 23/9/2020, https://www.efsyn.gr/efkriti/koinonia/260982_akrodeksia-propaganda-me-klemmeni-fraseologia (retrieved on 24.12.2020).

10 As above.

11 In July 2019, Lagos, a leading figure from Golden Dawn, involved in many criminal acts, announced that he, along with others, were leaving the party. He remained an MEP and established a new body called “National Popular Consciousness” (ELASYN). Removal of his immunity by the European Parliament is pending.

12 Anti-maskers take to the squares, Giannis Papadopoulos, Kathimerini, 13/9/2020, <https://www.kathimerini.gr/society/561076879/stis-plateies-ton-maskomachon/> (retrieved on 24.12.2020).

ganisation called United Macedonians about their fight against masks. It should be recalled that the United Macedonians are a racist and nationalist group that came to the fore around the time of rallies against the Prespa Agreement and had organised a racist barbecue with pork and alcohol outside the Diavata refugee camp near Thessaloniki. Moreover, TOLMA's 2nd Vice President uses extreme nationalist and xenophobic rhetoric, talks about "venal TV channels" that are terrorising us about the disease, and scorns international scientific organisations.

KYRIAKOS VELOPOULOS: FROM JESUS' LETTERS TO A WAR ON MASKS

The only parliamentary party which has directly adopted conspiracy theories is Kyriakos Velopoulos' Greek Solution party.¹³ His discourse encapsulates and exemplifies the basic features of anti-vaccination, conspiracy theory-driven, right-wing populism. Velopoulos knows how to express his key views in catchy phrasing. In a speech in Parliament on 10 December 2020, he said, "I'd rather follow conspiracy theories. I don't want to be vaccinated. Vaccinated along with every single Hassan out there, which is what the Prime Minister wanted." By defining himself as a "conspiracy theorist" he seeks to represent all those who are decried as being "irrational conspiracy theorists."

He has also directly tied his stance to the pandemic into the migration issue, resonating with his audience on many levels. Vaccination means being implanted with something. It means the intermixing of races, a constant threat which Velopoulos personifies through reference to "Hassan" so that the threat has a name and a face, so that it is tangible. Through his words Velopoulos seeks to represent anyone who does not want to be "every Hassan," a figure who, having been injected with the vaccine and the "dangerous unknown" it signifies, threatens to transfer his own "sickness," his own "microbes" into the body of every Greek.¹⁴ In the same speech he said, "I will never turn my own father into a guinea pig. I can do whatever I want with my own body. But I won't turn the body of my friend, my uncle, my fellow citizen, the bodies of Greeks into guinea pigs." For him, the pure Greek body should not be contaminated, be placed at risk or experimented with, whether that involves vaccination with unknown substances or having to exist alongside foreigners. A purely racist discourse, it creates mental links between vaccination and "contamination of the body of the nation."

¹³ A TV personality himself, Velopoulos was elected as an MP for LAOS and in 2016 set up his own party that in many ways is similar to LAOS. His political campaign is almost purely TV-based: using resources he has refused to disclose, he has secured extensive air time on regional TV channels, primarily by blending telesales (wax salves, herbal remedies, and so-called "letters written in Jesus' own hand") with conspiracy theories and fake news. He fully espouses Putin's views on geopolitical issues and adopts an extreme conspiracy-theory view of things.

¹⁴ On the anti-scientific and anti-vaccination rhetoric of Velopoulos, Simos Andronidis, 22/12/2020, <https://www.paratiritis-news.gr/article/232769/Gia-tin-anti-epistimoniki-kai-anti-emboliastiki-ritoriki-Belopolou> (retrieved on 26.12.2020).

Discourse like this seeks to deconstruct scientific efforts by constantly calling them into doubt: Nothing is what it appears to be. Everything is done in secret for the sole purpose of generating profits for large corporations. Scientists are being bribed. ("All these experts have received a lot of money. Amounts from € 500 to € 700,000 from purported research programmes," he said.) Some combine multiple evils, including dodgy financing, assisting migrants and involvement in suspect NGOs: "Linou¹⁵ is an executive, if not founder, of Prolepsis. An NGO for illegal immigrants. Quite by coincidence, whether indirectly or directly, they are raising money and appearing on TV channels to tell us how dangerous the coronavirus is and to keep up locked up at home. What business does Mrs. Linou have with NGOs?"

Velopoulos has opposed masks from the outset: "I wouldn't put a mask on my child. Let me say that clearly. That's my opinion. How would you persuade a 7- or 8-year-old child to wear a mask for so many hours? I've asked for the studies. I've never heard of asymptomatic illnesses. I'm not here to call the pandemic into doubt. I'm calling the wearing of masks into doubt. Tsiodras and Sypsas¹⁶ make contradictory statements. They're telling lies. They're pulling the wool over people's eyes. Three months ago, they said masks were dangerous. They have received € 2.5 million."¹⁷

It was in any event clear that all other parliamentary parties condemned those views. Moreover, in terms of personality, Velopoulos doesn't have what it takes to keep like-minded people in thrall on a more permanent basis.

CORONAVIRUS, MEASURES AND IDEOLOGY: WHAT OPINION POLLS SHOW

The finding that self-identifying with the right wing of the political spectrum significantly correlates with the likelihood of supporting "conspiracy theories" is also confirmed in relation to the coronavirus. Prorata's poll in April 2020¹⁸ showed that 64% of those who self-identified as very right wing to far right (9–10 on the political self-identification scale which runs from 0 (left wing) to 10 (right wing)) shared the belief that the coronavirus was manufactured in a lab, but that is not to say that this theory does not find support elsewhere (28% of those who self-identified on the left and 45% who self-identified in the centre also espoused this view). On the issue of mandatory use of masks in schools, there is also a clear correlation with political views, since around 20% of the sample across the board were anti-mask, irrespective of

¹⁵ Professor of Medicine at the University of Athens, President of the Prolepsis Institute of Preventive, Environmental and Occupational Medicine.

¹⁶ Nikos Sypsas is Professors of Medicine – Infectious Diseases at the Athens Medical School. Sotiris Tsiodras is head of the team managing Greece's response to the coronavirus epidemic.

¹⁷ https://www.ethnos.gr/politiki/123304_belopoylos-sto-diko-moy-paidi-den-tha-ebaza-mask-a-sto-sholeio (retrieved on 24.12.2020).

¹⁸ <https://prorata.gr/2020/04/26/i-ellada-stin-epoxi-koronoiou-i-tritireyna/> (retrieved on 26.12.2020).

how they identified themselves politically, but the figure rose to 34% among the far right (Prorata, September 2020).

Those who self-identified on the right-wing side of the political spectrum tended to downplay the clergy's responsibility for enforcing compliance with the measures in places of worship and to more strongly believe that the measures are being complied with in those places. In particular, 37% of those who self-identified on the left declared that the main responsibility for complying with the measures in churches lies with the clergy, whereas 41% said responsibility lies with the government. Whereas as we move to the right and the far right, blaming priests for failure to comply with measures drops considerably (23%), while many believe that churches are complying with the measures (29%). At the same time, the likelihood of one's thinking that protective measures should not be applied to Orthodox churches rises significantly among those who self-identify on the far right of the political spectrum, with the figure standing at 30% (Prorata, April 2020).

As far as the prospect of vaccination is concerned, a high figure of around 30% of the public declares that they would not take the COVID-19 vaccine, though the majority said they would take it. In a poll conducted by Metron Analysis, 50% of people who self-identified as "left wing" said they would not take the vaccine, whereas among the "centre-left" the figure fell to 31%. 36% of "centrists" say "no" to the vaccine, whereas the figure drops to 25% among the "centre right" while 49% of those self-identifying as "right wing" said they wouldn't take it.¹⁹

THE CHURCH AS A VECTOR FOR RIGHT-WING POPULISM

In spring 2020, Orthodox priests and monks attended meetings protesting against masks and the measures. In some cases, the Archbishop of Athens and All Greece, Ieronymos, was condemned because he did not openly oppose the mandatory use of masks in churches and schools and because he called faith in doubt by wearing a mask himself.

The Greek Church was caught in the eye of the storm over its stance on the measures to combat the pandemic. Even when it was strongly criticised for the unwillingness or refusal of many clergy to comply with the anti-pandemic measures, it did not actively support them. This was followed by a slow rocky road from refusal to acceptance of the measures. At the same time, however, we had inadequate compliance by the clergy or direct violation of the rules in many cases.

There were different voices from within the Church. Some of the more prudent (yet not decisive enough), such as the Archbishop, called on the faithful to show a spirit of respon-

sibility and to follow the Health Ministry's recommendations. Others were opposed, and this fuelled the climate of non-compliance with the protective measures. In December, with the death toll in the thousands, the Metropolitan of Corfu declared the Church "under persecution" and announced that, in light of churches being closed at Christmas, the flags would fly at half-mast at churches. He compared the situation with regimes such as communist Albania. At the same time, he filed a request to allow Corfiots to pay homage to the sacred relics of Saint Spyridon.²⁰ The Metropolitan of Xanthi announced that he would open the churches in his area despite the ban. "The Body and the Blood of Christ are the only things that shield us from coronavirus and any other illness," he said.

Overall, but with some exceptions, the Church looked negatively on not being able to administer Communion. In most churches, Communion continued to be received by hundreds of people, all sipping from the same chalice, as is customary. The Holy Synod insisted that Communion "certainly cannot become a vector in the transmission of diseases" and that it is a "mighty manifestation of love." However, the authorities' ambivalence and the government's unwillingness to impose measures on churches were also problematic. This led to delays and allowed gatherings of the faithful – attended by government officials – to take place, even as late as October at the celebration of the feast day of Saint Dimitrios in Thessaloniki, even though the number of infections in the city was already extremely high.

However, the worst development was the Church's adopting a very tough line again over the feast of the Epiphany and the blessing of the waters on 6 January 2021. While the government announced that there would be no public religious rituals – in other words, the sacrament of Communion would be performed without the faithful – the Holy Synod (the supreme body in the hierarchy, comprised of all Metropolitans) decided not to follow the rules: "The churches should remain open for the faithful to participate in Communion." There were cases of overcrowding, and in some churches blessing ceremonies were held in public and fines were imposed on priests and the faithful alike. In at least one case, a fine was imposed on a Metropolitan for publicly conducting a blessing, even though he had been sick with COVID-19 himself.

Unfortunately, the traditional fear felt by some political figures (and scientists, journalists and opinion leaders) in the face of the Church's "sacred outrage" remains strong. To avoid disgruntling priests and the faithful, some scientists have not taken a clear and categorical stance on the risks entailed by receiving Communion and crowding into churches. One thing is for certain: this combination – the Church digging in its heels and cornering itself into a trap with its reactionary position that leads nowhere, and, on the other hand, the State's failure to adequately address the

¹⁹ <https://www.tanea.gr/2020/11/26/greece/to-embolio-dixazei-tous-ellines-poiies-ilikies-lene-oxi/> (retrieved on 27.12.2020)

²⁰ Saint Spyridon is the patron saint of the island of Corfu. His feast day is celebrated on 12 December.

issue by imposing a strict ban on overcrowding at churches from the outset – exposed people to risk.

As a result, there was great dissatisfaction with the Church. Opinion polls showed that only 5% trusted the church “a lot” or “absolutely” in how it was managing the pandemic, while 67% replied that they did not trust it at all. In the autumn, there were many cases and deaths of Greek Orthodox priests, a tragic result of the Church’s erroneous stance. The Church is facing its greatest crisis of recent decades.

SELECTIVE CONCLUSIONS

FOR GREECE

The months to come will be critical. On the one hand, there is some optimism thanks to the first vaccinations. On the other hand, however, there are strong doubts about the operational ability to manage such a large vaccination programme. There is a risk that, apart from the people who do not want to be vaccinated, many who want the vaccine will not be able to obtain it. Such a development could call into doubt the official institutional line and result in a mandatory extension of the measures. To make matters worse, the Prime Minister and members of his government have repeatedly flouted the measures in effect. This undermines the credibility of these measures and strengthens right-wing forces.

It is not easy to weigh up whether the healthcare crisis has in fact bolstered right-wing populism in Greece. Right-wing populism does not appear to be so strongly represented right now that it could threaten to permeate the political stage, filtering, in particular, from the extreme right into the conservative political space. Some of the political figures who could assume such a role can be found within New Democracy. At the same time, the individuals trying to capitalize on the anti-vaccination/conspiracy theory-driven anti-systemic challenges do not appear to have the individual impact factor and the potential to influence things. However, if the months to come significantly intensify the consequences of the pandemic, in terms of health and finances, then there may be upheavals and centrifugal dynamics.

The COVID-19 crisis has seriously damaged the church. Many Church representatives rejected the protective measures, ignored or underestimated the danger, and insisted that worshipers come to church and receive Communion from the same cup. The government did not take a determined stance against priests’ open disregard for the protective measures.

For the time being, the majority of people appear to have placed some of their last few remaining hopes in the vaccination and the measures taken by the European Union (Recovery Fund, employment aid scheme) to address the economic impacts of the pandemic. The vast majority, almost 7 out of 10, consider these steps to be positive or quite positive. However, it is important to bear in mind that the respond-

ents appear to be cautious about the extent to which the funds will be used properly by the Greek side. In particular, 23.9% said they trusted the funding would be used properly, while 35.6% appeared to be distrustful and 31.9% neutral.²¹ Distrust is the common thread linking this crisis to the previous one and fuelling the lack of confidence in institutions.

FOR EUROPE

Many European governments have been criticised for their inadequacies, lack of transparency, distorted priorities and operational weaknesses. The reply has been that those making the criticisms are conspiracy theorists. This is not merely untrue; it is detrimental to democracy. Those who contest scientific discourse are frequently, though not exclusively from the far right. But whatever their political perspective, those who criticise the emergency measures as jeopardising or violating the rule of law and human rights are not conspiracy theorists.

The pandemic is testing many of our assumptions – things we took for granted. It is very tempting to claim to have the monopoly on proper discourse and to target those who express clearly anti-scientific views, but it’s a big mistake, and one made frequently by European elites, opinion leaders, intellectuals, many political parties and traditional media. It is easy to accuse someone of populism, stigmatise them as ‘backward’, and claim a monopoly on proper discourse. But in doing so, we are actually playing into the far-right narrative: The rise of right-wing populism in Europe is a self-fulfilling prophecy, with the coronavirus as only its latest backdrop. In fact, the burning issue is the poor political decisions and stark inadequacies of many European governments and the EU as a whole.

²¹ <https://www.in.gr/2020/12/06/greece/dimoskopisi-ti-lene-oi-ellines-gia-empolio-gia-ton-koronaio/> (retrieved on 26.12.2020).

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EUROPA

In many countries the COVID-19 crisis had initially led to increased trust in government. The restrictions to personal freedoms, curfews, restrictions on social contacts, the closure of large segments of the economy as well as the widening of executive powers in many countries was largely accepted and supported by the public. However, frustration and distrust of government have been increasing the longer the restrictions have been in place. Some countries, such as Germany, witnessed large demonstrations against the counter measures. Moreover, the wide dissemination of fake news and conspiracy theories are influencing the public debate on how to handle the pandemic.

Reports from Sweden, Finland, Italy, France, Spain, Greece and Germany – all countries with large or growing right-wing populist movements and parties explore the question, if right-wing populism in Europe has been able to benefit from the Corona-crisis. A synopsis interprets and classifies the developments in the individual countries in a comparative perspective.

Further information on the project can be found here:
fes.de/c19rex