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Nikolaos Lampas

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Did Securitization Fail to Contain the Covid-19 Pandemic? The Case of Greece¹

Nikolaos Lampas²

Abstract

In response to the COVID-19 Pandemic many European governments responded by securitizing the pandemic and adopting a series of emergency measures in order to curb the spread of the pandemic. However, in most cases the measures were unsuccessful. Does this constitute a failure of securitization? In order to address this question, we will analyze the case of Greece. The case of Greece is particularly interesting because it was one of the first countries to adopt emergency measures and for a time it was heralded as a success story in countering the effects of the pandemic. According to the findings of this brief, the case of Greece does not constitute a failure of securitization. The Greek government did show a degree of inconsistency in its efforts of securitizing the pandemic but that was consistent with the fluctuation of the number of confirmed cases and COVID-19 related deaths and the impact of the pandemic on the Greek economy and attitude of the general population.

Keywords: COVID-19, Pandemic, Securitization Theory, Securitization, Greece

Introduction

“We are at war”, French President Emmanuel Macron declared on March 16 as he implemented a nationwide lockdown in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Mallet, 2020). A similar sentiment was echoed by President Trump when he tweeted about the virus as the “invisible enemy” (Shafer, 2020). This type of rhetoric was adopted by many world leaders and is consistent with the framework of securitization. The theory of securitization refers to the efforts on behalf of actors to frame a particular issue as a security issue in order to justify the implementation of comprehensive measures to counter the threat. In response to the pandemic, the majority of governments implemented a set of emergency measures such as quarantines, tests and lockdowns in order to curb the spread of the disease. However, despite the adoption these measures and efforts to securitize the pandemic most countries were unable to counter the spread of the pandemic. Does this constitute a failure of securitization?

In this policy brief we will attempt to assess the efficacy of securitization as a response to the pandemic by focusing on the case of Greece. The case of Greece is particularly interesting because it was one of the first countries to adopt a securitization rhetoric along with a comprehensive set of

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² Dr. Nikolaos Lampas is an Assistant Professor of International and European Affairs, at the American College of Greece, Deree, and also serves as Coordinator for the International and European Affairs program.

restrictive measures and was initially heralded as a success story in Europe. According to the COVID-19: Government Response Stringency Index, the average of the strictness of the measures adopted by Greece from the period of January 22, 2020 till October 29 was 72.22 (Hale et al. 2020). Compared to the rest of the European countries the strictness of the measures implemented by Greece ranked 16th out of the 27 European member states. However, despite the adoption of emergency measures, from the period of late August 2020 till early November 2020 Greece experienced a rapid increase in both the number of confirmed cases and COVID-19 related deaths.

Theory of Securitization

The fundamental premise of the theory of securitization is relatively straightforward. Any issue can become a security issue whenever an actor declares it as such. The theory is associated with the Copenhagen School of Security and was originally developed by Ole Weaver. The theory conceptualizes security as a speech act. Therefore, security issues need to be constructed and defined as such by political actors. The process of constructing any as a security issue is defined as *securitization*. As Buzan, Weaver and De Wild argue, “the special nature of security threats justify the use of extraordinary measures to handle them” (Buzan, Wæver, de Wilde 1998: 21). In this context, the concept of securitization means “the elevation of an issue beyond the level of everyday politics, which justifies the use of emergency measures to deal with it”(Hoffman, 2020: 10).

The issue of the securitization of the pandemic has gained significant attention from the scholarly community. Studies have engaged with different types of pandemics, like the influenza (Kamradt-Scott and McInnes 2012, Watterson and Kamradt-Scott 2016), AIDS (Elbe, 2006; Viera, 2007; McInnes & Rushton, 2013), and most recently the SARS, Bird Flu, and H1N1 (Cook, 2010). Therefore, it stands to reason that the Covid-19 pandemic, which had a deeply upsetting effect globally would generate significant interest. Existing literature on the securitization of the Covid-19 pandemic has taken an ideological perspective (Gaudino, 2020; Nunes, 2020), a regional perspective (Hoffman, 2020) and a national perspective (Liu and Bennett 2020). Moreover, the existing literature on COVID-19 has touched upon the impact that the pandemic had on migration (Byaruhanga, 2020). Despite the burgeoning literature on the securitization of the COVID-19 pandemic most studies have largely ignored the issue of efficacy of the process of securitization. In this policy brief, we attempt to cover this gap by focusing on the case of Greece.

Before we begin the analysis, it is imperative to analyze the conditions under which the process of securitization is considered a success. Buzan, Weave and de Wilde argue that a successful securitization consists of three steps: a) identification of existential threats, b) emergency action, c)

effects on inter-unit relations by breaking free of rules (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998, 6). According to this argument the first necessary step for the successful securitization of an issue is the securitizing move, which refers to the process of one actor persuading an audience of the necessity to adopt comprehensive measures against a potential threat (Taureck, 2006). However, in practice, the process of securitization is not open to all units and is largely dependent upon power and capability. Therefore, it is customary that only actors who possess the means and ability to socially and politically construct a threat to be successful. Recent studies suggest that there are three conditions under which securitization is successful: only when “(1) the identification of a threat that justifies a response (securitizing move) is followed by (2) a change of behavior (action) by a relevant agent (that is, the securitizing actor or someone instructed by the same), and also (3) the action taken is justified by the securitizing actor with reference to the threat in the securitizing move” (Floyd, 2016: 1). According to this argument, the efficacy of securitization does not depend on the idea of a sanctioning audience and on the insistence on existential threats (Floyd, 2016).

The securitization of the Pandemic in the case of Greece

According to the World Health Organization the first documented case of COVID-19 was on February 27th, 2020 (World Health Organization, 2020). The government adopted an act of legislative content on February 24th, issuing standard guidelines intended to caution the population (Hellenic Ministry of Health, 2020). Progressively, the measures adopted by the Greek government became more restrictive. On March 10, the operation of daycares, primary and secondary schools as well as universities ceased. At the same time, the government announced a nationwide “Stay at home” media campaign informing the public of the necessity to limit transportation as much as possible. Soon after, on March 14, the Greek government shut down shopping malls, restaurants, bars and cafes as well as movie theaters. On March 23, the government announced a country-wide lockdown prohibiting the movement of citizens which was initially intended to last until April 27 but was extended until May 4. During the lockdown the movement of all citizens was restricted apart from those commuting to work, the members of the government and the health sector and the members of the security forces. Moreover, the Greek government adopted an SMS text message system which enabled limited transportation on behalf of the general population. Violators would be issued a fine of 150 euro. However, one issue which created a great deal of controversy during the period of the first lockdown regarded the operation of churches. The Holy Synod of the Greek church proposed that religious services will stop during the weekday but that Sunday services will continue. They also recommended

that vulnerable populations do not attend church. On March 16, the Greek Prime-minister tweeted that the operation of all religious sites will be ceased, and only individual prayer will be allowed.

The efforts of the government to securitize the pandemic begun earlier than the imposition of the lockdown. On March 13, the Greek Prime-Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis issued a statement declaring that Greece was in a state of war because of the pandemic (Mitsotakis, 2020). The Greek Prime-minister echoed the sentiment expressed by other European leaders like France's Emanuel Macron. Similar rhetoric was adopted by other members of the administration. For example, the Undersecretary of Civil Protection, who was spearheading the effort of combating the pandemic frequently characterized the struggle against the pandemic as war. Consistent with the findings of the studies by Gaudino (2020) and Nunes (2020) the debate regarding the securitization of COVID-19 took an ideological perspective in the case of Greece. More specifically, media outlets and newspapers that were supportive of the government's efforts adopted the securitization rhetoric (Mandravelis, 2020), whereas those that were aligned with the opposition adopted a critical stance (Kwstopoulos, 2020).

Initially, the measures adopted by the Greek government and the efforts of securitization the COVID-19 pandemic were successful. According to data from the World Health Organization the number of average daily new cases of COVID-19 in Greece between the period from January 2020 till May 1st were 21.59. Comparatively, the average daily number of new COVID cases for the country of Italy were 1712.2. The number of average daily COVID-19 related deaths is even more revealing. For the same period, Greece had an average of 1.05 deaths daily whereas, at the same time, Italy had 190.3 daily deaths. During this period Greece was heralded as a success story by many European and global media outlets (Perrigo and Hincks 2020). Moreover, a medical article published in August 2020, argued that the combination of timely applied preventive measures and strict compliance to guidelines were the most significant factors for limiting the spread of COVID-19 (Bamias et al. 2020).

When the lockdown ended on May 4th, the Greek government progressively relaxed the emergency measures. Some were maintained, like the obligatory use of mask in indoor places, and travelling outside the boundaries of municipalities, and others were modified, like the quarantine period for every Greek citizen returning from abroad, which was reduced from 14 to 7 days. During the summer period, one of the major concerns of the Greek government was tourism. On June 13, the Greek prime minister announced from the island of Santorini the official opening of the tourist season in Greece, and argued that Greece "is a safe destination for tourists" (TA NEA, 2020). On September, the government announced that universities could resume operation under the condition that classes would include less than 50 participants and that all safety measures would be upheld. Two factors

contributed to the decision on behalf of the Greek government. Firstly, the number of confirmed cases and COVID-19 related deaths was relatively low and secondly, the shock the Greek economy experienced as a result of the lockdown.

Alongside the emergency measures, the government progressively relaxed its rhetoric. Between the period from May 4th till early August both the prime minister and members of the government stopped making references to the “war against the pandemic” however, they did continue their warnings that the general population should adhere to the recommended safety regulations. Moreover, they did warn for the appearance of a second wave of during the months of October and November 2020. In early August, the rhetoric of the government chanced once again. The sudden increase in the number of confirmed cases confirmed the suspicions of the medical community that the second wave of the pandemic was coming earlier than anticipated.

Despite the comprehensive measures adopted by the Greek government the number of confirmed cases and deaths started to increase. According to data from the Our World in Data program of Oxford University we calculated the growth ratio of the number of confirmed cases and COVID-19 related deaths in Greece from the period of August 1st till November 22nd. The average growth ratio for the total number of confirmed cases was 3% and the average growth ratio of the total number of COVID-19 related deaths was 2% on a daily basis. At the same time, the average daily growth rate of the total confirmed cases and COVID-19 related deaths in Italy was 1.5% and 0.3% respectively. Therefore, despite the vast numerical difference between the cases of Greece and Italy, the former had a higher daily growth rate between the period August 1st till November 22nd, 2020.

Conclusions

Our analysis suggests that the case of Greece does not constitute a failure of securitization. The Greek government clearly communicated its message regarding the severity of the threat of the pandemic. This was evidenced by the attitude of both the Prime minister and key officials within the government. In addition, the same message was relayed by the group of medical experts that participated in the advisory team that the government formed to help with the necessary measures to counter the spread of the pandemic. Moreover, the Greek government adopted a comprehensive set of emergency measures specifically designed to counter the spread of the pandemic. The adoption of the 1st lockdown did prove successful in keeping the number of confirmed cases and COVID-19 related deaths in decline. However, immediately after the end of the lockdown on May 4th, the Greek government did show a degree of inconsistency in its securitizing moves. The government toned down its rhetoric and the emergency measures taken were steadily revoked despite the arguments on

behalf of medical experts that the second wave of the pandemic was approaching. Perhaps, the most significant mistake on behalf of the Greek government, which also communicated a message of relaxation to the general population, was the opening of the tourist season. Studies have shown that there is a significant statistical significance between the number of inbound and outbound tourism and the number of COVID-19 related deaths (Farzanegan et al. 2020). However, the degree of inconsistency on behalf of the Greek government is partially understandable for two reasons. Firstly, the immensely negative impact of the emergency measures to the Greek economy, and secondly, the impact on the attitude of the general population. Particularly, regarding the tourist sector studies suggest that the impact of the pandemic “would lead to a decrease in GDP about 2.0% to 6.0%, a decrease in employment of about 2.1% to 6.4% and an increase in the trade balance deficit of about 2.4 to 7.1 billion euros, respectively”(Mariolis, Rodousakis, and Soklis, 2020: 1). This policy brief does not argue that we should willingly jeopardize the health and safety of the population in order to decrease the negative impact on the economy. However, in the context of Greece, the combined effect of the lasting economic crisis and the negative impact of the pandemic does provide a level of justification for the behavior of the Greek government particularly during the period from May till August 2020 where the number of confirmed cases and COVID-19 related deaths was low.

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