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Sofia Alexopoulou, Antonia Pavli

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Responsible Citizens against an Irresponsible State: The Case of Greece amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic¹

Sofia Alexopoulou² & Antonia Pavli³

Abstract

How is it possible for citizens to act responsibly if they live in an irresponsible state? This is the key question that this paper revolves around in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in Greece. Individual responsibility is the dominant ‘mantra’ of post-modernity and is widely spread by the neoliberal dogma. The individual has to take care of him/herself in any possible way to avoid risks without depending so much on the benevolent state, which, in the developed world, takes the form of a welfare state. Thus, a new type of citizen appears, the “responsible citizen”. The oxymoron, however, in the Greek case is that the state and particularly the political elites maintain bad practices of the past without being able to overcome the country’s path-dependency structures by acting responsibly. The concept of “empathy” is undoubtedly the missing link in this intriguing puzzle of good governance. Will the Greek political elites be able to recognize and embrace empathy in practice?

Key Words: responsibility; responsible citizens; irresponsible state; political elites; COVID-19; neoliberalism; empathy; Greece.

Introduction

Responsibility of the individual is the dominant ‘mantra’ of post-modernity. The individual has to take care of him/herself in any possible way to avoid risks without depending so much on the benevolent state, which, in the developed world, takes the form of a welfare state. Michael Freeman and David Napier (2009: 403) claim that “[a] responsabilized society does not see individuals as socially situated but as autonomous actors making choices that determine their lives”. This neoliberal discourse is not new. Instead, it flourished back in the 1980s when politicians, such as Margaret Thatcher in the UK and Ronald Reagan in the USA, came to power and applied a rigid neoliberal model. Since then, the neoliberal dogma has been spread to the rest of the world. In the COVID-19 era, the concept of responsibility has received a lot of attention since, according to the discourse that has been adopted both by politicians and medical experts, the limitation of the virus spread heavily relies on the “citizen”, enacting thus a new type of citizen, the “responsible citizen”. The aim of this paper is twofold: On the one hand, to shed light on this new type of “citizen”, a citizen who has been constructed by the existing political regime in Greece under the shadow of the Covid pandemic, and,

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² Sofia Alexopoulou is Ph.D. Candidate in Political Science at Örebro University.

³ Antonia Pavli is Affiliated Researcher at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens.

on the other hand, to expose the inconsistencies of the Greek political elites while they transfer their political responsibilities onto the citizens' shoulders.

From the socio-economic crisis to the COVID-19 crisis

The consequences of the long-lasting socio-economic crisis, which had challenged the Greek citizens for almost a decade, were still fresh. The implications of the socio-economic crisis, however, were not only vivid on the citizens' lives. Instead, the pressure that the European Commission, the International Monetary Fund, and the European Central Bank exerted on the Greek government to proceed immediately with radical cost-cutting measures and structural reforms on the operation of the welfare state (i.e., Pavli, 2017) strongly affected the healthcare sector (Hauben et al. 2012; Economou et al., 2014; Kentikelenis et al., 2014; Stylianidis & Souliotis, 2019). Specifically, according to OECD (2016), from 2009 to 2013, there was a significant decrease in public spending on health by 5 billion euros. This decrease in public expenditure on the healthcare sector was translated as a measure for downsizing the medical and paramedical staff, a lack of the necessary medical supplies (with the regional hospitals to be affected more), an increase of waiting time for patients to book an appointment with a physician and/or the need to book an appointment to visit a physician in a hospital in a different region from the region that they used to live, and so on (Kentikelenis et al., 2014; European Commission, 2018; NCDP, 2019). Thus, several barriers prevented citizens from enjoying their right to health.

Additionally, the austerity-driven policies influenced the 'habits' of the Greek citizens in terms of demand for healthcare services. Specifically, the abolition of the 13th and 14th wage in the public sector, the crucial cuts on the wages both on the public and private sector, and the rise of the unemployment rate, which left a lot of citizens without insurance, had – as a result – major impacts on the healthcare services landscape since the Greek citizens could not afford to seek for health-related services from the private sector (Zavras et al. 2016) or to have any access to healthcare services (European Commission, 2015; Stylianidis & Souliotis, 2019). To put it differently, the socio-economic crisis had a crucial impact on the proper operation of public hospitals and healthcare in general, while it affected the changing needs of citizens (Economou et al., 2014). Those citizens belonging to the more vulnerable social groups were worst affected (Rotarou & Sakellariou, 2017; NCDP, 2019).

Therefore, at the dawn of the COVID-19 crisis, the Greek healthcare system was unprepared to face the challenges associated with the pandemic. According to OECD (2020), in 2020, Greece was placed in second-to-last position on the list regarding the availability of Intensive Care Units (ICU) among

the EU countries, since there were only 5,3 ICUs per 100,000 citizens. Although the Greek state tried to enhance the healthcare infrastructure by adding more ICUs and by hiring medical and paramedical staff through the course of the pandemic (Mpouloutza, 2020), the demand proved so high that it put the healthcare system under colossal strain, ultimately being unable to meet the medical needs of the citizens (Eurofound, 2021). The weaknesses of the public healthcare system to equally offer its medical services to the citizens resulted in loading citizens with extra responsibilities. Specifically, as the Greek media have extensively pictured it, citizens' actions and behaviours have been the 'critical factor' for spreading the virus. For the pandemic to be under control, it was up to them, enacting a new form of citizen: the "responsible" citizen.

Enacting the "responsible" citizen

Following the discourse that has been developed since the very first days after the outbreak of the pandemic, both by politicians and medical experts and reproduced by the media (Žižek, 2020), citizens are the ones who are responsible 24/7 for controlling the spread of the virus by strictly adhering to hygiene rules as well as by interrupting or avoiding any type of social relationships, introducing the now infamous concept of "social distancing". Citizens, thus, have been responsible for accepting and obeying all the orders/restrictions imposed by the state without any disobedience. To be sure that this would be achieved, citizens are under the supervision and control of the state's panopticon. In this new reality, recalling the words of Michel Foucault (1979: 200), the individual becomes "the object of information, never a subject in communication". This, however, is not the only problem. As Foucault further argues:

He who is subjected to the field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection (Foucault, 1979: 202-203).

Those who refused to subjugate themselves on this regime are labelled as the 'deviants' or the 'scapegoats' since they put the so-called 'general good' in danger. A very illustrative example of the 'deviants' is young people in Greece who were accused or framed by politicians and the Greek media as the source of spreading the virus in society. Specifically, young people have been criticized for not taking the state's recommendations/orders seriously (In.gr, 2020). In the opposite direction, when there was a rapid increase in the reported COVID-19 cases after the opening of the tourism industry

in summer 2020⁴ by the government, tourists, as someone would expect, were not framed or directly framed as the source of spreading the virus. Instead, what prevailed was silence. It is worth mentioning here what the deputy minister for Civil Protection and Crisis Management states – in Yorgos Avgeropoulos’s documentary “Parontes” (Being Present) (2021) – considered responsible for the increase of COVID-19 cases. According to him, the increase in COVID-19 cases was not linked with the high number of travellers on ships but with the irresponsible behaviour of young people who went to parties during their holidays on the islands. In other words, the spread of the virus in the middle of summer 2020 lay in the irresponsible behaviour of young people and not in the political decisions of governmental authorities (ibid.).

Exposing the ‘irresponsible’ state

As stated at the end of the previous section, the government in power (the political party that is in office during the pandemic, i.e., New Democracy, ND) decided to set in motion the practice of transferring the responsibility to certain social groups (i.e., young people) (Ethnos, 2020a) by downsizing its political responsibilities for addressing/handling the COVID-crisis. Strategically this practice is not something new in the Greek political scene. On the contrary, it is common to hide the long-standing and structural problems of the Greek state, such as bad governance (incidents of corruption and political scandals), the tendency to depreciate the public sector, and the inability to implement real reforms. Echoing Makrydimitris (1999), it seems that the “great patient” is still alive. By this concept, Makrydimitris means that both the state and the public administration were held accountable for setting obstacles to the country’s social transformation after the fall of Junta in Greece. During this period, a ‘paradoxical’ or vice versa analogous relationship was formed between the democratization of the state and society, on the one hand, and the modernization and quality of the administration, on the other. In this light, various initiatives for the modernization and re-organization of the state seemed to fall into the void. However, the “great patient” does not only cover the operation of public administration, which has been accused heavily for all the weaknesses of the Greek state, as Makrydimitris argues. Instead, as we see it, it is extended to the quality of the political staff and not to something vague, as the state machinery.

In what follows, some examples expose the politicians responsible for managing the pandemic, either by blaming and/or transferring their responsibilities to others or by violating the same restrictions that

⁴ In August 2020 there was a tremendous rise in the number of the recorded infections that reached 5,207 cases. Also, this dramatic increase fueled the public debate for what seemed to be an imminent second wave of the Covid-19 (Giannarou, 2020).

they have imposed on the rest of the citizens without, however, being equally treated. More specifically,

- the wrong decisions and delays for imposing the lockdown in the second populated city of Greece, Thessaloniki, during the second wave of the pandemic (Ignatiadis, 2020),
- the lack of the necessary medical supplies for treating patients properly, such as face masks, gloves (Ethnos, 2020b), and let alone the lack of ICUs at the public hospitals, which led to the commandeering of private clinics, see, i.e., the case of Thessaloniki (Ta Nea, 2020),
- the non-prioritization of the vaccination of medical and paramedical staff who are more vulnerable and more exposed to the virus in favour of some ND politicians (Efsyn.gr, 2021),
- the Deputy's Minister of health accusations towards physicians as the ones who were responsible for the deaths of patients with COVID-19 instead of the lack of ICUs (Naftemporiki, 2021),
- the Prime Minister's behaviour who disobeyed the recommendations/restrictions that his government forced the Greek citizens to apply, such as not wearing a face mask when he met some people while he was cycling in Parnitha (Almpanis, 2020) or when he participated in a social gathering in Ikaria with the number of the participants to be much higher than the number that was allowed for all the other citizens (In.gr, 2021),
- the enactment of a law that gives immunity from prosecution to all the stakeholders involved in handling the pandemic crisis (Kamilalis, 2021),
- the irresponsible actions from the parties of the opposition such as the public announcement of the former Deputy Minister of Health who admitted that he has not been vaccinated and he is not planning to do it soon (Ethnos, 2021), and,
- by the leader of the far-right political party, "Greek Solution", who has deliberately spread "fake news" regarding the effects of the vaccines (Ethnos, 2020c).

Certainly, irresponsible politicians and policymakers exist worldwide, even in countries praised for their transparency and high levels of trust. The difference is that they recognize their mistakes or their irresponsible behaviour and are willing to act as any other citizens when they are in a similar status. A relevant example is that of the Norwegian Prime Minister, Erna Solberg, who violated the Coronavirus restrictions when she celebrated her 60th birthday with 13 relatives at a mountain resort in late February, despite the prohibition of gatherings of more than ten people (Solsvik & Fouche, 2021). However, the Norwegian prime minister recognized her mistake for violating the existing restrictions and paid a fine of 20,000 Norwegian crowns as citizens in her country do. As the police chief said for justifying the fine to the country's Prime Minister: "Though the law is the same for all,

all are not equal in front of the law. It is therefore correct to issue a fine to uphold the general public's trust in the rules on social restrictions". In Greece, however, though the political staff had violated similar restrictions, none of them has acted like a "regular" citizen to set a 'good example' at any cost.

To summarize, the dysfunctional character of the Greek political scene is already known along with its long-standing problems, while tones of ink have already been spilt in describing them. In our view, beyond the country's path-dependency patterns of political irresponsibility, what is missing for changing the current situation is the introduction and cultivation of the concept of "empathy". Empathy is described "in shorthand as the ability to "put oneself in the other's shoes" (Pedwell, 2012: 280). In the Greek case, "empathy" presupposes that the political elites will make an effort to understand the feelings and the difficulties that citizens confront daily, without paying attention only to their preferences and interests that to be fulfilled they do not hesitate to manipulate and bend the law concerning COVID-19 restrictions.

Conclusion

After the above observations, a rhetorical question comes to mind: how is it possible for citizens to act responsibly if they live in an irresponsible state? Even if the question is rhetoric without an answer to be required, political scientists cannot stay apathetic. Otherwise, the discipline of political science is at risk of becoming "the cult of the irrelevant" (Desch, 2019), which means that it will not have any practical value for the real world. Political scientists must delve into the policy problems that arise in a given context and not only attempt to understand the parameters of the problem, but ideally to propose realistic solutions that will positively affect the citizens' lives. A good way to move forward is to apply "empathy", a relatively simple concept as we saw, but with a great power that can make citizens feel that they have responsible political leaders who are not so different to them. However, empathy needs time and effort in order to thrive. For this reason, empathy is important to be cultivated at least to younger generations as early as possible via the educational system. Typical training of empathy involves instruction about the benefits of showing empathy, how to identify emotions in other individuals, how to feel those emotions and how to act properly. While at the current moment empathy is absent in the Greek example, hope never dies, as they say.

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