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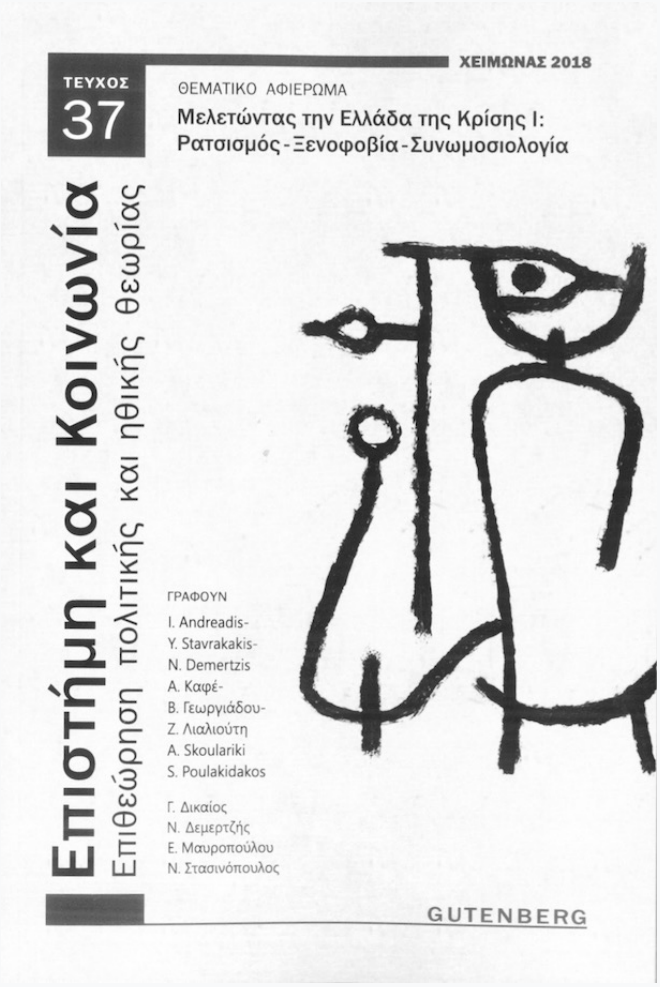

Conspiracy theories before and after the Greek crisis: Discursive patterns and political use of the "enemy" theme

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CONSPIRACY THEORIES BEFORE AND AFTER THE GREEK CRISIS:
DISCURSIVE PATTERNS AND POLITICAL USE OF THE 'ENEMY' THEME

Conspiracy theories have been associated with a paranoid way of thinking; however they are not always marginal and utterly irrational. Conspiracist narratives reflect rival strategies of interpretation, and can have a real impact on the social and political praxis. Over and above factual accuracy, I suggest that what distinguishes a conspiracy theory is a type of discourse, its key features being: suspicion, intentionality, personification, speculation and denunciation.

This paper examines conspiracy theories that dominated Greek public discourse before and after the economic crisis of the 2010s, particularly those introduced by political actors as a means of political persuasion and mobilisation. Greek political culture and the discredit of the political system since 2010 led to frequent expressions of distrust towards political elites and foreign "powers". My analysis focuses on the acceptability of conspiracy theories in relation with social representations, dominant stereotypes and widely shared interpretative schemata.

The following cases of conspiracy theories are discussed: a) the wildfires that ravaged large parts of Greece in 2007, supposedly set

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by 'foreign agents'; b) the alleged assassination plot in 2008-2009 against the PM Karamanlis by Western / US secret services; c) the conspiracy theories attributing the economic crisis to a deliberate foreign plot against Greece. The paper examines in particular the attribution of blame to presumed 'enemies', in line with nationalist discursive themes and stereotypes.

Introduction

THE ANALYSIS of public discourse in contemporary Greece often draws attention to its populist dimension. Connected to some extent to populism,[1] but having a distinct epistemological interest, is the question of conspiracy theories, which have become increasingly manifest in the Greek public sphere over the past decade. This paper aims to discuss the specificities of conspiracist rhetoric in Greece, focusing on political discourse and, more precisely, on conspiracy narratives introduced by political leaders and state officials.

Although conspiracy theories have been associated with a paranoid way of thinking (Hofstadter 1965), they are indeed not always marginal, nor utterly irrational, whereas the impact of even the most outrageous narratives is very real. Moreover, their use for purposes of manipulation, political persuasion and propaganda should not be underestimated.

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1. Populist and conspiracist discourse converge in the dualistic, absolute and essentialist distinction between those who are seen as genuinely good (the people perceived as a homogenous entity) and those who are depicted as powerful, corrupted elites (national or supra-national). Paul Taggart (2000: 105) wrote on the issue: 'The populist tendency to demonize elites and to see danger around them leads them to be particularly susceptible to such theories. Bringing together various groups such as bankers, politicians, intellectuals and captains of industry, it is a short step to the claim that they are in cahoots, as part of a conspiracy.' The suspicion towards the 'system' and the rhetoric of denunciation are also common features. Conspiracy theories are often embodied in populist and nationalist discourses. However, populism does not imply that power groups only operate in secret, nor that they pull the strings in all situations.

To begin with, the question is how to define a 'conspiracy theory', since the same case is seen by others as a genuine conspiracy. Bale (2007: 46) has observed that scholars, unwilling to deal with such controversial matters, '*often deny the importance –if not the actual existence– of real clandestine and covert political activities*'; he argues that a '*clear-cut analytical distinction*' needs to be made between '*bogus conspiracy theories*' and '*actual conspiratorial politics*', which are a common feature of political history (Bale 2007: 48-50).

Historian Carlo Ginzburg remarked that '*conspiracies exist and, false conspiracies often conceal true ones*', and posed the question: '*Is it possible to trace a dividing line between a healthy skepticism toward certain official versions and a conspiratorial obsession?*' (Ginzburg 2012: 164, Taguieff 2013: 25)

Undoubtedly, there is a level of subjectivity and a need for case by case examination. But more than the factual inaccuracies, I will argue that what distinguishes a conspiracy theory is a type of discourse.[2] Let me stress some of its key features:

a) the distrustful rhetoric vis-à-vis mainstream politics (or generally 'the system'), especially in regards to their transparency, and the obsession with parts of reality that are allegedly kept secret from the public.[3] It is combined with an alarmist approach, emphasising risks, usually pertaining to political or economic domination, (inter)national security, or public health issues.

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2. Hofstadter (1996 [1965]: 5) has already stressed the importance of rhetoric, when referring to the 'paranoid style' of conspiracy theories, précising that 'Style has to do with the way in which ideas are believed and advocated rather with the truth or falsity of their content.' In this sense, I argue that the same story (e.g. the Kennedy assassination) can be narrated or reported, either in a balanced way, presenting different opinions or hypotheses with counterarguments, or, on the contrary, using conspiracist rhetoric, denouncing an obscure plot in absolute, alarmist and sensational terms.

3. D. H. Fischer described as the 'furtive fallacy' the 'idea that everything that is truly significant happens behind the scenes'; David Hackett Fischer, Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought, New York: Harper and Row, 1970: 74-78; quoted in Bale 2007: 58.

b) the idea that negative events are deliberately planned and orchestrated by powerful actors, influential minorities, undercover agents, or other 'power' structures, who serve their proper interests. Intention is the primary explanatory principle (Moscovici 1987: 156). To quote Pierre-André Taguieff (2013: 15), conspiracy theories explain social phenomena '*by identifying the hidden plans of a person or group, which constitute* [their] *necessary and sufficient cause*'. The presumption of guilt is based on the criterion of '*cui bono?*' (for whose benefit?). Structural causes, open political processes, the antagonism between social groups, and complex power relations are not taken into account. Instead, '*for conspiracy theorists, conspiracies are not simply a regular feature of politics whose importance varies in different historical contexts, but rather the motive force of all historical change and development*' (Bale 2007: 52).[4]

c) the rejection of randomness or coincidence (Barkun 2003: 3-4, Taguieff 2013: 42), and the inability to acknowledge that multiple factors affect the course of events. According to the conspiracy mentality, coincidences are never accidental, they are indicative of hidden connexions, which are used to explain the causes of events (Taguieff 2013: 14).

As suggested by Hofstadter (1996 [1965]: 39), people or groups who feel that they have no access to the political bargaining and decision-making, the ones who feel excluded from the regular political process, tend to conceive '*the world of power as omnipotent, sinister, and malicious*'. Research has demonstrated how a sense of powerlessness and of lack of control (Whitson & Galinsky 2008: 115-117), as well as the inability to grasp the complexity of reality, are leading certain people to believe imaginative conspiracy theories, which however are schematic in their structure: negative events are caused by evil people with bad in-

4. Bale (2007: 53) also points out: 'It is precisely this totalistic, all-encompassing quality that distinguishes 'conspiracy theories' from the secret but often mundane political planning that is carried out on a daily basis by all sorts of groups, both within and outside of government.'

tentions. Their plans never fail, whatever happens was the exact realisation of their authors' intention (Taguieff 2013: 15).

d) the rejection of 'official' or 'first level' narratives and explanations, and the adoption of 'alternative' scenarios, which are not based on substantial evidence or even plausible indications, but rather on speculation. Paradoxically, while official accounts are met with extreme suspicion and disbelief, conspiracy theories are not subject to critical scrutiny by their advocates (Taguieff 2015: 55).

e) the denunciation of a 'culprit', usually a group, who is to blame for the conspiracy, and who eventually serves as a 'scapegoat'. Perceived as powerful and malevolent (Glick 2005: 255), the group targeted is not chosen arbitrarily;[5] it represents a 'usual suspect', according to one's prejudice and/or ideology.[6] By identifying a culprit, a conspiracy theory lifts the burden of uncertainty and gives to people the feeling that they can act – in particular, against the group in question (Barkun 2003: 4).

Notwithstanding the psychological explanations of people's tendency to adopt a conspiracist worldview, Barkun argues that these kinds of beliefs '*alert us to the existence of significant subcultures far outside the mainstream*', which in times of crisis may have a potent influence in politics. In some cases therefore, conspiracist ideas may become a cultural norm (Barkun 2003: 2, 8)

In this paper, I will discuss some Greek conspiracy case studies that are based to a certain extent on real plots or clandestine operations, but which gave rise to conspiracy theories way out of

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5. On the process of stereotyping and social categorisation leading to scapegoating, related to the research on prejudice, see: Glick 2005: 244-261 and Brown 1995.

6. According to Glick (2005: 247), in the last decades, research on scapegoating focused 'on the roles of shared (collective) frustrations (e.g. economic collapse, social disorder) that produce social movements with scapegoating ideologies that lead to organized persecution. Frustration's role thus becomes indirect, with ideology being the proximal cause of aggression.' More specifically, his approach emphasises 'the role of culturally shared beliefs, stereotypes and ideologies' (Glick 2005: 251).

all proportion to the facts. The aim is to highlight the characteristics of conspiracy narratives in Greece from the year 2004 and on, i.e. before and after the 2010s financial crisis.

My analysis focuses on the acceptability of specific conspiracy theories in relation with social representations, dominant stereotypes and widely shared interpretative schemata.[7] It also focuses on the conscious use of conspiracy theories by political actors as a means of political persuasion and mobilisation, or as a way of avoiding responsibility for failures and of denouncing adversaries. The conclusions one can draw are of general interest for the study of conspiracist discourse and its uses.

The Greek context

Greece is a country where conspiracy theories often find fertile ground in which to spread, due to several structural reasons: a) a school education that does not encourage critical thinking, often reproducing national stereotypes, a victimised perception of Greek history (Antoniou et al. 2015: 8) and a particularly ethnocentric point of view (Frangoudaki and Dragona 1997); b) a tradition of partisan media (Papathanassopoulos 2001, Komninou 2017), which favour the expression of opinion and of political commentary over verified facts and analysis; also a significant number of populist newspapers that excel in speculation, disinformation, and in the demonisation of the adversary;[8] c) a politi-

7. Serge Moscovici (1987: 157) remarked that the function of conspiracy theory is not to offer a plausible cause of events, but rather 'it responds to the need to integrate one's image of society in one cause', 'it integrates people's mind-set and prevents any "rupture" in their mentality'. He associates conspiracy mentality to a social representation, and underlines that 'we are dealing with very familiar widespread images.'

8. The role of the media in the proliferation of conspiracy theories is of particular interest. Not only they circulate conspiracy theories in mass audiences, but most importantly they have an impact on the formation of the conspiracy mentality per se: news media tend to present and analyse events through the

cal culture marked by the bitter experience of multiple foreign interventions, some of them behind the scenes – such as the support of the 1967 military junta by the CIA, and generally the role of Britain and the US after the Second World War (Couloumbis *et al.* 1976, Papachelas 1998).

These and other factors, namely the discredit the political system has fallen into since 2010, lead to frequent expressions of distrust and suspicion towards political elites and foreign 'powers'. In such an environment, conspiracy theories abound. Yet, along with the conspiracy narratives that spread among the public through inter-personal communication, specialised publications or the internet, there were other cases in which conspiracy theories were introduced by official sources (government, state intelligence, politicians) and were reproduced by the media, before they reached the wider public.

Especially after 2004, under the government of the right-wing Nea Demokratia, public discourse was regularly submerged in an avalanche of conspiracy theories,[9] some of which were emanating from the political system itself. Since 2010, the economic crisis and its socio-political consequences gave a further boost to conspiracist thinking, its main theme being the interpretation of the crisis[10] as the consequence of a supposedly deliberate foreign attack against Greece.

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prism of individual actors, while they disregard complex accounts implicating social structures and social relations. Additionally, they often seek 'culprits' and try to establish individual responsibility for negative developments, thus cultivating a frame of interpretation which leads to conspiracism (Emke 2000).

9. The first conspiracist accounts of secret operations during this period were the 'wiretapping scandal' against members of the government by foreign (US) intelligence, revealed in March 2005, which will be mentioned later in this paper, and the abduction of Pakistani immigrants by foreign (British) secret services related to an anti-terrorist investigation in July 2005, which was refuted by the government, before it was proven to be true. Although these stories were not fictions, they gave rise to conspiracy theories in the media and the political discourse.

10. For a discussion of the concept of crisis as a social/discursive construct, see Stavrakakis et al. 2017. The authors quote Colin Hay, according

In an attempt to discuss the issue, I am proposing to explore the public discourse[11] on two cases of conspiracy theories that present a particular interest: a) the wildfires that ravaged large parts of Greece in 2007 and were attributed to arson by foreign agents; b) the alleged assassination plot against the (then) PM Kostas Karamanlis by Western/US secret services in 2008.

Those two cases do not concern conspiracy theories spread by rumours, marginal websites or fringe publications, but rather conspiracy theories that were introduced by mainstream media, emanating from political parties or members of the government, and were even considered as credible by the judiciary, which launched an official investigation. Although they prompted reactions and political debate, they were widely reproduced and were eventually adopted by part of the general public.

My hypothesis is that these 'official' discourses referring to international plots against Greece prepared the ground for the widespread conspiracy-oriented interpretations of the crisis in the following years, as will be discussed in the second part of this paper.

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to whom 'Crises are representations, and hence 'constructions' of failure', as well as Moffit (2015: 195, 198), who stressed that 'populist actors actively perform and perpetuate a sense of crisis, rather than simply reacting to external crisis'; 'populist actors actively participate in the 'spectacularization of failure' that underlies crisis, allowing them to pit 'the people' against a dangerous other [...]'. Therefore, 'systemic failure and "crisis" – that is to say crisis narratives – are not to be confused with each other.'(Stavrakakis et al. 2017: 7)

11. This study is based on a qualitative, hermeneutic approach, using discourse analysis (Bonnafous, Krieg-Planque 2013; Charaudeau, Maingueneau 2002; Howarth 2000; Wodak, Meyer 2001) and framing theory (Gamson et al. 1992; Gamson, Modigliani 1989; Entman 1993). The corpus of discourse was selected on the base of relevance with the object of research, that is the public statements and news media excerpts using conspiracist rhetoric about the issues under study: the wildfires of 2007 (period covered: 2007-2017), the assassination plot against PM Karamanlis (2008-2017), and the causes of the Greek economic crisis (2010-2017). Due to the big number of news media reproducing the same information, the citation of media reports is not exhaustive, in order to avoid redundancy.

Case studies

a) *Foreign agents causing the 2007 wildfires*

In July and August 2007, a series of wildfires ravaged Greece, namely the mountains of Attica, surrounding Athens, as well as the Peloponnese. In total, 2.700km^2 of land were ravaged by fire and at least 67 people died. Although, wildfires occur every year during the summer, this disaster was not comparable to anything experienced before. Many reasons can be advanced to partly explain the expansion of the wildfires and the lack of adequate response by the competent authorities: a) climate conditions: there was a severe drought and strong winds; and b) organisational and infrastructure shortcomings at the central, regional and local level. When the fires reached the archaeological site of Ancient Olympia and burned its surroundings, the government of Kostas Karamanlis faced public outcry. The unprecedented number of casualties was shocking.

In an apparent attempt to divert public opinion from pointing to state responsibilities,[12] members of the government claimed that the country was '*under attack*', facing an '*asymmetric threat*'[13]

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12. For a detailed report on the communication strategy developed by the government for the management of the wildfires crisis, see: G. Terzis, 'Οι δύσκολες ημέρες στο Μέγαρο Μαξίμου', *Καθημερινή*, 2 September 2007 http://www.kathimerini.gr/296668/article/epikairothta/politikh/oi-dyskoles-hmeres-sto-megaro-ma3imoy (retrieved 10 August 2017). The article quotes a 'source close to PM Karamanlis' who revealed what would be the 'spin': '*The citizens' rage will fall upon the arsonists*', he said.

13. Statements by the Minister of Public Order, Vyron Polydoras, ('Β. Πολύδωρας: Ασύμμετρη Απειλή', *Capital*, 26 August 2007, http://www.capital.gr/story/349582/b-poludoras-asummetri-apeili (retrieved 10 August 2017)), and by the Minister of Foreign Affairs Dora Bakoyanni (initially on 26 August while speaking with journalists off the record), who later explained that she was referring to the (Greek) anarchists who might have started 'burning outside of Athens in order to undermine the state'; 'Μπακογιάννη κατά γνωστών-αγνώστων', *Καθημερινή*, 29 August 2007, http://www.kathimerini.gr/296214/article/epikairothta/politikh/mpakogiannh-kata-gnwstwn-agnwstwn (retrieved 10 August 2017)

(an expression borrowed from the US vocabulary of the so-called 'War against Terror'), and insinuated that foreign agents were acting as arsonists in order to destabilise Greece. Most media and especially the pro-government populist press backed these claims and gave extensive coverage to conspiracy scenarios (Skoulariki 2007, Iliadeli 2010).

Despite the reactions from the opposition and the subsequent political debate on the issue, it seems that the public largely adhered to the conspiracy theory advanced by the government.[14] Confronted with an exceptional natural disaster, people were searching for an exceptional cause. The multitude of coinciding circumstances leading to the expansion of the wildfires was difficult to assess. '*So many fires, at the same time, in different parts of the country, can't be a coincidence*', PM Karamanlis hinted at first.[15] '*Certainly, all this cannot be accidental*', insisted the government spokesperson.[16] '*There was a hand behind all this*', argued another minister.[17] The media inflated the issue even more. The dramatic news was announced by private TV channels with titles such as: '*Our country is targeted*',[18] while

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14. According to the poll organised by Public Issue/VPRC in August 2007, 67% of the respondents answered '*probably yes, they are*' to the question: '*Are the wildfires an organised plot against the country?*'; 'Οργή αλλά και αίσθημα εθνικής απειλής', *Καθημερινή*, 29 August 2007; in details: http://www.publicissue.gr/33/ & http://www.publicissue.gr/wp-content/gallery/varometro-kyma-2o-aug07-1-pyrkagies/Slide4.JPG (retrieved: 24 July 2017)

15. Televised address of PM Karamanlis, 25 August 2007; see: Chr. Corai, 'Σενάρια Συνωμοσίας…', *Ελευθεροτυπία*, 27 August 2007.

16. Thodoris Rousopoulos, statement quoted in K. Melissopoulos, 'Υπαινιγμοί Ρουσόπουλου για οργανωμένο καταστροφικό σχέδιο', *Βραδυνή*, 28 August 2007.

17. Michalis Kefaloyannis, Minister of the Marine, *Antenna TV* news, 31 August 2007.

18. *Antenna TV* news, 26 August 2007. The anchorman of *Antenna*, Nikos Evangelatos, went on air saying: '*Ladies and gentlemen, the country is under attack*'. For more details about the media coverage of the wildfires, see Skoulariki 2007.

newspapers wrote about '*enemy plots*'[19] and '*warfare*'[20] (Skoulariki 2007).

Many news media reproduced unofficial statements incriminating 'foreign agents',[21] while some insinuated that the US secret services could be behind the wildfires. '*Operation chaos: The dirty plan of foreign secret services is being deployed, they set fires to Greece, they inflamed the elections, they are demolishing the system, The Minister of Public Order spoke about an Asymmetric Threat*', were the headlines of populist daily *Avriani*.[22] '*A terrorist mastermind behind the fires?*', was the question that dominated the front page of *Adesmeutos Typos*.[23]

Others blamed Balkan nationals, targeting in particular those who are stereotypically seen as 'enemies': Albanians, Kosovars and 'Skopjans with Albanian passports' – they even named a certain 'Danilo from Kosovo'[24] (Skoulariki 2007, Iliadeli 2010: 73-75). Their purpose would have been to 'undermine' and 'destabilise' the country. Although some articles gave extensive details about the secret operations, allegedly based on leaks from the Greek Intelligence Service, no more explanations were given regarding the motives of what was named an '*anti-Greek crime*'.[25]

The claim that agents of neighbouring countries were behind wildfires in Greece was not new. The Turkish secret services had been openly accused by politicians and news media over similar cases in the past, especially concerning acts of arson in

19. 'Εχθρικό σχέδιο κατά της πατρίδας μας', *Απογευματινή*, 27 August 2007.

20. 'Πόλεμος. Η Ελλάδα δέχεται επίθεση', *Χώρα*, 27 August 2007.

21. 'Ξένοι πράκτορες μας "καίνε"', *Ακρόπολις*, 28 August 2007.

22. *Αυριανή*, 28 August 2007; quoted in Iliadeli 2010: 69-70. On 17 August, the government had called for early elections to be held on 16 September, which the ruling party of Nea Demokratia won, without being inflicted any damage from the wildfires affair.

23. *Αδέσμευτος Τύπος*, 26 August 2007.

24. '*The Kosovar "Danilo" is indicated by the EYP* [i.e. the National Intelligence Service] *as the mastermind of the network of arsonists who burned down Greece*'; frontpage headline of *Αυριανή*, 28 August 2007.

25. *Ibid*: 16-17; quoted in Iliadeli 2010: 75.

the Aegean islands. This claim was not totally unfounded. Former Turkish PM Mesut Yilmaz admitted in 2011 that secret state funds were allocated for such operations in the mid-1990s.[26]

Based on the above and proceeding by generalisation, politicians and several media or individual journalists alleged without any substantial evidence that the 2007 fires were a Turkish plot against Greece.[27] Among them, two members of the government at the time, Vyron Polydoras (Minister of Public Order, 2006-2007)[28] and Thodoris Roussopoulos (Minister and spokesperson

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26. Yilmaz' statement was part of an interview for the Turkish newspaper *BirGün* published on 23 December 2011. The following day, Yilmaz claimed that he was misquoted, and that he only spoke of arsons by Greek agents at the Turkish coast. The issue prompted political and media reactions in both Greece and Turkey. See: 'Mesut Yilmaz karanlik yillari birgün'e anlatt: Yunanistan'da orman yakmak devlet sirriydi', *BirGün*, 23 December 2011; 'Outrage as former Turkish prime minister says the country secretly started huge forest fires in Greece', *Business Insider*, 28 December 2011, http://www.businessinsider.com/turkey-greece-yilmaz-2011-12 (retrieved 2 August 2017); 'Yilmaz denies fire remarks that caused outrage in Greece', *Today's Zaman*, 27 December 2011, http://www.todayszaman.com/diplomacy_yilmaz-denies-fire-remarks-that-caused-outrage-in-greece_266929.html (retrieved 3 June 2016); Orhan Kemal Cengiz, 'Turkish deep state and Greek forest fires', *Today's Zaman*, 27 December 2011, http://www.todayszaman.com/columnist/orhan-kemal-cengiz/turkish-deep-state-and-greek-forest-fires_266931.html (retrieved 3 June 2016); 'Former Turkish PM's arson admission fuels anger', *eKathimerini*, 26 November 2011, http://www.ekathimerini.com/137956/article/ekathimerini/news/former-turkish-pms-arson-admission-fuels-anger (retrieved 5 August 2017)

27. Former Head of the Greek Intelligence (1993-1996), Leonidas Vasilikopoulos, made clear in an interview that suspicions for the potential involvement of Turkish agents only concerned cases of arson on the coasts of Aegean islands and not in other parts of Greece. He also said that one should be cautious regarding the motives of Yilmaz' revelations in that particular timing; V. Lampropoulos, 'Ναι, ξέραμε για τους Τούρκους εμπρηστές', *Το Βήμα*, 28 December 2011; http://www.tovima.gr/society/article/?aid=436556 (retrieved 30 July 2017)

28. 'Ήθελαν να "κάψουν" και τον Καραμανλή το 2007 στην Ηλεία', 'Ιδού οι πράκτορες της ΜΙΤ και οι Γκρίζοι Λύκοι που έβαζαν φωτιά στα δάση μας', *Κυριακάτικη Δημοκρατία*, 1 January 2012, http://news247.gr/ei-

of the New Democracy government, 2004-2008), both mentioning Yilmaz' statement.[29]

On the political level, such allegations about the supposed arsonists served to hide domestic responsibilities and shortcomings of the Greek authorities as far as civil and environmental protection is concerned. Even if only a part of the public is convinced, these theories contribute to maintaining prejudice and negative stereotypes against neighbouring nations, and foster the phobic impression that Greece is surrounded by enemies who are permanently plotting its destruction. As Umberto Eco rightfully notes (2012: 100), '*People only believe what they already know, and this is the beauty of the Universal Form of Conspiracy.*'

It is interesting to see an example of how a conspiracy theory was introduced by the media, specifically how an allegation based on pure speculation was presented as a mere fact: On 3 April 2014, an article with the title: '*Revelation: Turkish agents put the fires in 2007 in Elis*' was published by the newspaper *Parapolitika*.[30] The name of the newspaper, *Parapolitika*, is itself interesting, since it refers to political gossip and backroom politics. In the introduction, the report affirms with the same certainty that the journalist Michalis Ignatiou (who was a well-known correspondent of important Greek media in the US and was regarded as a 'serious' journalist, although he was often expressing nationalist views) 'revealed' that the 2007 fires were set by Turkish agents.

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diseis/poludwras-hthelan-na-kapsoyn-ton-karamanlh-to-2007.1557862.html (retrieved 31 July 2017)

29. 'Βόμβα Ρουσόπουλου: Οργανωμένο σχέδιο των Τούρκων οι πυρκαγιές του 2007', *Το Ποντίκι*, 19 March 2017, http://www.topontiki.gr/article/212739/vomva-roysopoyloy-organomeno-shedio-ton-toyrkon-oi-pyrkagies-toy-2007 (retrieved 30 July 2017)

30. http://www.parapolitika.gr/article/73509/apokalypsi-toyrkoi-praktores-evalan-tis-foties-2007-stin-ileia (retrieved 3 June 2016); Elis is a department in the Western Peloponnese, where Ancient Olympia is located. The same news story, based on Ignatiou's article, was reproduced in many other news portals.

The newspaper left no doubt that the so-called 'revelation' of Ignatiou was based on facts. However, when one sees Ignatiou's statement as quoted a few lines below, it becomes clear that the journalist was just speculating: he first mentions some illegal recordings that were leaked in Turkey, according to which the Turkish government was planning a 'provocation' in Syria. Without any apparent connexion, Ignatiou then claims that '*it is not the first time that the politico-military establishment of Turkey planned illegal and criminal actions against Greece and Cyprus. It's no secret that for many years the successive Greek governments knew that the wildfires, which usually started in many parts of Greece in the beginning of the tourist season, were the work of Turkish agents. Following discussions with political and military factors in Greece, I am convinced that especially the fires of 2007 were put according to a plan by Ankara.*'

The claim is not substantiated by any solid argument or proof, other than the above-mentioned 'discussions'. Ignatiou says he is 'convinced', which is subjective enough. And while it cannot be judged as professional for a journalist to spread allegations that are not crosschecked and verified, the newspaper adds to the abuse by presenting the whole story as the 'revelation' of some hidden but absolute truth.

Interestingly, Ignatiou continued by mentioning as relevant to his claim, that 'the events of 1964' in Cyprus were equally a Turkish provocation, which was allegedly presented 'by Greek-speaking agents of Turkey' as being perpetrated by 'Greek-Cypriot fanatics'. '*Only few years ago we learned the truth*', he concluded. One of the typical features of conspiracy theories is to jump from one case to the other, producing a kind of 'association' that is supposed to strengthen the point one wants to make, without giving any details or proofs. Ignatiou concluded his remarks with more alarmist statements against Turkey, which was from the very beginning the 'culprit' he was searching to denounce on all possible grounds.

To sum up: even if some or even all the claims mentioned above were true, what makes them fit into the conspiracy theo-

ry pattern is their discursive construction: the fascination for the 'hidden truth' and the motto of 'revelation', the fact that negative developments are attributed to a sinister plan, the denunciation of a 'guilty party' (responsible for the 'plot') and the alarmist statements against it, as well as a series of logical fallacies: allegations lacking argumentation and evidence, semi-truths combined with speculations, and assertions based on correlations, arbitrary conclusions, and on the selective reference to comparable cases. In Eco's words (2012: 99): '*Here's a form to be filled out at will, by each person with their own conspiracy.*'

b) *The assassination plot against former PM Karamanlis*

A few years later, it was 'revealed' that another alleged conspiracy occurred during the government of New Democracy: specifically, an assassination plot against Prime Minister Kostas Karamanlis.[31] The report on the issue appeared in June 2011 in the news-magazine *Epikaira*, which was often publishing so-called 'revelations' about economic scandals, geo-political analyses, military issues and, of course, conspiracies.

The story goes as follows: in February 2009 the National Intelligence Service (EYP) had produced a confidential report, according to which it had received information from a Russian official who was based in Greece and was connected to the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB, the successor of KGB), about an assassination plot against PM Karamanlis, back in 2008. The

31. Kostas (Konstantinos) Karamanlis (born in 1956) was Prime Minister from 2004 to 2009. He was elected as President of the conservative New Democracy party in 1997, mainly because he was the nephew of the former President of the Republic and founder of New Democracy Konstantinos Karamanlis (1907-1998). Politically moderate, he encouraged a centrist realignment of the party, willing to attract the voters of what he coined as the 'middle-space' of the political spectrum. In many cases, however, notably on issues related to the national identity, the Church, the Cyprus issue and the Macedonian dispute, he embraced conservative, so-called 'patriotic' views, in line with the traditional rhetoric of the party.

Greek report (based on the Russian report) claimed that Russian agents had come to Greece for counter-espionage, because Karamanlis, along with the Russian President Vladimir Putin and the Bulgarian PM Parvanov were victims of wiretapping. It also claimed that the Russian report mentioned that Karamanlis was targeted by Western and Israeli secret services, which were opposed to his agreement with Russia for the construction of the Burgas-Alexandroupolis and the 'South Stream' pipelines.[32] Allegedly, the Russian agents even claimed that in April 2008, while following the car of Karamanlis close to his house in Rafina, they came across another car with US agents who were planning his assassination, and the two teams exchanged fire, but eventually the latter managed to escape. The Greek authorities gave to the plot the code name 'Pythia 1', from the famous oracle of Delphi in Ancient Greece.

The reception of the news about the plot against Karamanlis was mixed. Many in the media expressed scepticism and even scorn: two years after his fall from power (in the elections of October 2009), it seemed as if some were trying to present the (often described as 'idle') former PM Karamanlis as a hero; he had supposedly resisted the US supremacy in order to align Greece with Russia, which by a growing number of nationalist Greeks was seen as a powerful, orthodox and traditional ally. According to some analysts, the supporters of Karamanlis inside the party were trying to prepare the way for his come-back.

In July 2011, the report of the Greek Intelligence Service was leaked to the press. The Greek intelligence seemed to harbour some doubt about the credibility of the Russian report, and did not exclude that the alleged plot might be an attempt at '*disin-*

32. Conspiracist claims about a US reaction to the pipeline agreement with Russia were already voiced in the press in 2007, presented as a motive for the alleged arsons' 'attack' against Greece. *Avriani* (Sunday 2 September 2007) had even a headline with the following rhetorical question: 'Who are seeking to shape developments [leading] to a powerless Greece, absent from the Balkans and particularly without special relations with Russia?' (Iliadeli 2010: 69).

formation against the Greek authorities, aiming at serving specific objectives'.[33] Even the newspaper *Demokratia*, which is close to the New Democracy party, reminded that the media ought to maintain a '*significant distance from sources of secret services, which do not have a reputation of being transparent*'.[34] Other media also published unofficial statements of Greek intelligence officers who said that the 'Russian' account was not convincing.[35]

Interestingly, in 2013 a magazine known for its propensity for conspiracy theories titled *Hot Doc* published an extended report which 'revealed' the conspiracy of the conspiracy: how and by whom the alleged assassination plot was set up.[36] According to it, a team of Greek agents had fabricated the story in order to abuse state funds. The magazine was accusing the same team for being responsible for many other manipulations, related to both internal and foreign affairs.

All the same, others were absolutely convinced that Karamanlis had been targeted. The reception of the story depended in large part on political affiliation, as well as on pre-existing stereotypes, namely against the US and/or pro-Russian. In most cases, the right-wing media reproduced the news without questioning anything, underscoring the courageous policy of the former PM who allegedly had risked his life.

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33. St. Chios, 'Η έκθεση των Ρώσων για το σχέδιο δολοφονίας του Κώστα Καραμανλή', *Δημοκρατία*, 28 July 2011, http://www.dimokratianews.gr/content/1497/%CE%B7-%CE%AD%CE%BA%CE%B8%CE%B5%CF%83%CE%B7-%CF%84%CF%89%CE%BD-%CF%81%CF%8E%CF%83%CF%89%CE%BD-%CE%B3%CE%B9%CE%B1-%CF%84%CE%BF-%CF%83%CF%87%CE%AD%CE%B4%CE%B9%CE%BF-%CE%B4%CE%BF%CE%BB%CE%BF%CF%86%CE%BF%CE%BD%CE%AF%CE%B1%CF%82-%CF%84%CE%BF%CF%85-%CE%BA%CF%8E%CF%83%CF%84%CE%B1-%CE%BA%CE%B1%CF%81%CE%B1% CE%BC%CE% B1%CE%BD%CE%BB%CE%AE (retrieved 10 August 2017)

34. *Ibid*.

35. V. Lampropoulos, 'Το άγνωστο παρασκήνιο της "απόπειρας δολοφονίας" του Κώστα Καραμανλή', *Το Βήμα*, 15 March 2012, online: http://www.tovima.gr/society/article/?aid=448608 (retrieved 7 August 2017)

36. 'Ποιοι έστησαν το ψεύτικο σχέδιο δολοφονίας του Καραμανλή', *Hot Doc*, n. 27, May 2013.

The conspiracy theory was further developed to explain the fact that Karamanlis was not eventually assassinated: once informed by the Russians, his security elaborated a safety plan; the former PM was changing itineraries constantly and was under strict protection. In December 2011, journalist and press editor G. Trangas (well-known for his sensationalist, populist and often vulgar mode of expression) published a special report on the issue, 'revealing' that the former PM had lived as a 'hostage' for 242 days.[37] Afraid for his life and totally restricted in his movements, he was allegedly forced to abandon his position, so he proclaimed the early elections of 2009, which he deliberately lost.[38] Thus, this version of the conspiracy theory claims that the fall of Karamanlis' government was due – not to its failure in the political and economic field – but to an American plot against him.[39]

Additionally, several scandals that had marred the New Democracy mandate (namely the Vatopedi and Zachopoulos affairs) were also attributed to the conspiracy, which supposedly aimed at destabilising Greece. Eventually, the 2007 wildfires,[40] as well

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37. '242 ημέρες ομηρείας Καραμανλή. Έζησα σε καραντίνα μέχρι το βράδυ των εκλογών', *Crash*, 9, December 2011, http://www.crashonline.gr/%CF%84%CE%B5%CF%8D%CF%87%CE%BF%CF%82-9%CE%B4%CE%B5%CE%BA%CE%AD%CE%BC%CE%B2%CF%81%CE%B9%CE%BF%CF%82-2011/ (retrieved 10 August 2017). According to Trangas, his sources were the personal diary of Karamanlis and people close to him.

38. 'Δύο νέες "σκιές" για το σχέδιο δολοφονίας Καραμανλή', *Παραπολιτικά*, 26 February 2015, http://www.parapolitika.gr/index.php/article/duo-nees-skies-gia-to-sxedio-dolofonias-karamanli (retrieved 10 August 2017).

39. Earlier the same year, Trangas had interviewed Karamanlis; the former PM spoke about the US reactions to his agreements with Russia, for which Putin had warned him, insinuating that he faced the consequences. 'Πώς είδα τον Καραμανλή σε ένα δίωρο τετ-α-τετ', *Crash*, 2, February 2011, http://www.crashonline.gr/%CF%84%CE%B5%CF%8D%CF%87%CE%BF%CF%82-2-%CF%86%CE%B5%CE%B2%CF%81%CE%BF%CF%85%CE%AC%CF%81%CE%B9%CE%BF%CF%82-2011/ (retrieved 30 September 2017)

40. In February 2017, two retired Fire Brigade officers published a book presenting the 2007 wildfires as part of the broader plot by foreign agents

as another important case, the wiretapping operation against the PM and members of the government in 2004-2005 (which according to credible evidence was undertaken by the US)[41] were considered as part of the same plot.

Following the underlying logic of the conspiracy mentality implying that 'everything is connected', some eventually included in the same conspiracy theory the 2008 riots in Athens, which were prompted by the assassination of a 15-year old student by a police officer. Among them were the former Parliament Speaker (elected with SYRIZA) Zoe Konstantopoulou[42] and the current Minister of Defence Panos Kammenos (ANEL), who at the time was member of the government of New Democracy.[43] According to this view, the 2008 riots were instigated by foreign (i.e. US) agents, in order to spread chaos in Greece and to overthrow the government. The fact that politicians with opposite political affiliations were supporting such claims indicates the penetration of the conspiracy mentality in the political main-

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to undermine the Greek government. Former PM Karamanlis, along with three of his former ministers, attended the book launch event. Ιωάννης Σταμούλης, Νικόλαος Διαμαντής, *Οι ασύμμετρες πυρκαγιές του 2007 στην Ελλάδα*, Αθήνα: Αλεξίπυρο, 2017. See: http://www.thetoc.gr/koinwnia/article/epanerxontai-oi-thewries-sunwmosias-gia-tis-purkagies-tou-2007 (retrieved 10 July 2017). For a critical response by other Fire Brigade officers: http://www.tovima.gr/society/article/?aid=863483 (retrieved 10 July 2017).

41. Ch. Zervas, 'Η Vodafone έδειξε την αμερικανική πρεσβεία', *Κυριακάτικη Ελευθεροτυπία*, 4 September 2011, http://www.enet.gr/?i=news.el.article&id=306783 (retrieved 10 August 2017).

42. 'Ποινική δίωξη για σχέδιο δολοφονίας Καραμανλή', *Σκάι*, 15 March 2012, http://www.skai.gr/news/politics/article/197646/poiniki-dioxi-gia-shedio-dolofonias-tou-karamanli-/ (retrieved 10 August 2017).

43. 'Καμμένος: Υπήρχε σχέδιο δολοφονίας του Καραμανλή', *enikos*.gr, 30 October 2014, http://www.enikos.gr/politics/273923/kammenos-ypirxesxedio-dolofonias-tou-karamanli (retrieved 10 August 2017); 'Καμμένος: Η πολιτική Καραμανλή με τη Ρωσία έριξε την κυβέρνησή του', *Πρώτο Θέμα*, 30 October 2014, http://www.protothema.gr/politics/article/422402/kammenos-i-politiki-karamanli-me-ti-rosia-erixe-tin-kuvernisi-tou-/ (retrieved 30 September 2017).

stream, especially among those using a pronounced populist rhetoric.[44]

A similar trend can be discerned in the media: the populist or 'yellow' press and those individual journalists who have a populist approach were often publishing conspiracy narratives. Among them, the press specialised in sensational 'revelations' and political scandals had the strongest predilection for conspiracism. Other types of media that systematically promoted conspiracy theories were newspapers, magazines or news portals devoted to defence or nationalist issues.[45]

Generally, the political orientation of each news media determined which type of conspiracy theory it would opt for. In cases of conspiracy narratives advanced by political leaders, partisanship was a decisive factor for their reception and coverage.

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44. A recent empirical research (Van Prooijen et. al. 2015) has demonstrated a correlation between conspiracy theories and political extremism (both left and right). The authors argue that 'political extremism and conspiracy beliefs are strongly associated due to a highly structured thinking style that is aimed at making sense of societal events'. However, 'extremism' is ill-defined in the study, which is based on participants' self-classification. Additionally, one could object that, as far as the political discourse is concerned, a) not all extreme or radical left groups or members support conspiracy theories; and b) many politicians and followers of non-extreme parties, also advocate conspiracy theories (as can be seen in the case of Greece). Populism, with its underlying logic of dichotomy between the people (as an undifferentiated entity) and its (powerful) opponents is more likely to facilitate conspiracy thinking (Taggart 2000: 105).

45. We are referring here on one hand, to newspapers of the ultra-nationalist and far-right milieu (*Eleftheri Ora*, *Stochos*, *Chryssi Avghi etc.*) and on the other, to magazines of broader audience, combining a nationalist and populist approach, such as *Epikaira*, *Crash*, *Pro News*, which propagated the conspiracy theory about Karamanlis' assassination plot, based on leaks from his environment and the secret services. Many more news portals and blogs with nationalist content were regularly publishing reports on this topic and other alleged conspiracies, often copying one another. The same media mentioned above were among those denouncing the EU response to the Greek financial crisis and regularly published conspiracist interpretations of the crisis and international relations.

Yet, few newspapers dared contradict or challenge a theory endorsed by official sources, such as the one examined here. In most cases, the news reports were factual, without comments or counter-arguments, but, more often than not, with a sensational title, taking the conspiracy for granted. The attribution of blame to foreign powers on an issue that had to do with national security and sovereignty seemed to discourage critical inquiries by the press and even to put off partisan debate.[46]

Since 2011, the 'assassination plot' against Karamanlis has been investigated by the judiciary. The judges who are running the investigation seem not to question the reliability of the story. In 2013, the file on the wiretapping scandal was unified with the one on the assassination plot. However, while for the wiretapping case charges were filed against a Greek-American agent of the CIA, based on strong evidence, for the assassination plot there was nothing but contrasting allegations by Greek and foreign members of Security Services. Eventually, in September 2017, the Court closed the case, since no suspects had been identified.[47]

Nevertheless, for those in the wider public who are fascinated by conspiracies, the assassination plot against former PM Karamanlis is more than certain; it should have been expected. It corresponds to the dominant perception of the role of the CIA,

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46. For a discussion of the journalists' tendency to adopt the government / state positions on issues of national importance, due to the dominant ethnocentric bias, in order to meet the expectations of the public, or due to their dependence from the official sources of information, see: Skoulariki 2005: 237-250, 439-446; Skoulariki 2007b: 76-87.

47. P. Stathis, 'Σχέδιο "Πυθία": Το δικαστικό αφήγημα για την "πτώση" της κυβέρνησης Καραμανλή', *capital.gr*, 19 September 2017, http://www.capital.gr/epikairotita/3240873/sxedio-puthia-to-dikastiko-afigima-gia-tin-ptosi-tis-kubernisis-karamanli (retrieved 20 September 2017). Despite the decision of the judiciary, the magazine *Pro News* published an extensive report on the 'great conspiracy', assuming that the main suspect for the wiretapping operation (W. Basil) was also the one who had been planning Karamanlis' assassination; Y. Petridis, 'Σχέδιο δολοφονίας Κώστα Καραμανλή. Τα άγνωστα στοιχεία και τα πρόσωπα της μεγάλης συνωμοσίας', *Pro News*, nº 17, October 2017, pp. 6-15.

its clandestine operations against hostile foreign leaders, and its tradition of overthrowing democratic governments in third-world countries. According to this view, Karamanlis paid for the pipeline agreement with Russia, for the fact that (practically) he did not support the Annan plan for the re-unification of Cyprus (against the will of the US and the UK), and for his decision to veto the accession of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to NATO in 2008 at the Summit of Bucharest (a move that indeed infuriated the US administration).[48]

While the reasons invoked to explain the discontent of the US with Karamanlis might be plausible (although the general orientation of the ND government was clearly backed by the US), the idea that this discontent could justify a plot for the elimination of the Greek leader by the American secret services seems rather extreme. Those who support this conspiracy theory tend to analyse in a seemingly rational way the first (the reasons of the American discontent), but proceed by a logical gap to the second (the assumption of the assassination plot). They also neglect to critically examine the plausibility of the alleged plot in its details, to question the credibility of the available sources of information about it, and to challenge the motives for such a 'revelation'.

Interestingly, while the US is regarded with extreme suspicion by those who endorse the assassination plot theory, no caution whatsoever is demonstrated vis-à-vis the intentions of the Russian state and its agents. This pro-Russian bias is the latest

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48. 'Ο Κώστας Καραμανλής σπάει τη σιωπή του', *6 meres*, 13 April 2013; quoted in: *News 247*, 13 April 2013; http://news247.gr/eidiseis/politiki/kwstas-karamanlhs-polu-travhgmeno-to-senario-dolofonias-moy.2208756.html According to anonymous sources from his environment, Karamanlis himself did not believe in the assassination plot. However, he never voiced openly any disagreement with the media reports on the issue, nor with the judicial investigation. Additionally, this report contrasts with previous accounts based on G. Trangas' interviews with Karamanlis and his close associates, where the former PM seemed to support the assassination theory; see the footnotes 37 and 39.

manifestation of traditional Greek Russophilia, in combination with a widespread prejudice against the US (Lialiouti 2016), especially regarding its foreign policy and interventionism around the world.

Conspiracy-oriented analyses of the Greek crisis

It is worth noting that the narrative about the alleged conspiracy against Karamanlis and his government was developed while Greece was plunging into the economic crisis. The shocking and unexpected collapse of the national economy in 2009-2010, followed by the bailout agreements with the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the IMF (the infamous 'troika'), by several years of political instability, austerity policies, and by the degradation of living standards for the vast majority of the population, led to widespread disillusionment and to the redefinition of the self-image of Greeks, who oscillated between perceptions of guilt and victimisation (Bithymitris & Lialiouti 2017).

In this context of fear, anger and political polarisation, conspiracy theories came to dominate public discourse.[49] Large sections of the population, from the right and the left equally,[50] attributed

49. Hofstadter (1996 [1965]: 39) notes that 'the paranoid disposition is mobilized into action chiefly by social conflicts that involve ultimate schemes of values and that bring fundamental fears and hatreds, rather than negotiable interests, into political action. Catastrophe or the fear of catastrophe is most likely to elicit the syndrome of paranoid rhetoric'.

50. After the crisis, the political distinction between right and left was blurred by another major dividing line: the support or the opposition to the austerity policy and the implementation of the Memorandum of Understanding that accompanied the bailout agreements with the 'troika'. The ruling political parties since 1974, centre-left PASOK (in power in 2009-2011) and conservative New Democracy (shifting from an initial opposition to the Memorandum to the support of the reforms, after joining a coalition government in November 2011), along with smaller liberal parties, promoted a narrative of collective guilt for the crisis, blaming the clientelist political system, the lack of meritocracy, the generalised tax evasion, and the

the crisis itself to an external machination: not to domestic and international financial politics, failed Eurozone policies or the power of the markets, but to a deliberate plot by 'foreign powers' to destroy Greece – allegedly for being too independent, or as a means to depreciate Greek assets and resources (and thus profit from their acquisition), and/or in order to use the Greek bankruptcy as a case in point, to prevent other nations from defying the austerity doctrine.

Germany in particular was seen as the main instigator of an austerity policy that aimed at the "subordination" of Greece and the European South, as a means to affirm its hegemony in the EU.[51] In 2013, Professor Nikos Kotzias, later to become the Mini-

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pressure of 'populist' demands. Opposed to the reforms, and rejecting the 'anti-populist' discourse, were the Communist Party (KKE), the Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA), the far-right Independent Greeks (ANEL, founded in 2012) and the neo-nazi Golden Dawn. These parties, despite their significant differences in most other aspects, formed a eurosceptic block that rejected neo-liberalism, and more or less blamed the international financial system, the inequalities inside the Eurozone and Germany's austerity doctrine for the crisis in Greece and the European South. Public debate was eventually marked by the polarisation between the two antagonistic discourses and the reciprocal accusations for 'populist' and 'anti-populist' demagogy (Sevastakis, Stavrakakis 2012, Stavrakakis et al. 2017, Vamvakas 2014: 9-41). On this basis, in January 2015, SYRIZA, having won a 36,3% of the votes, formed a coalition government with the smaller ANEL political party (4,75%); after the failure of negotiations for the revision of the bailout terms, and in spite of having organised a referendum in July 2015, in which 61,3% of the voters rejected the proposed Memorandum, Alexis Tsipras' government, with the support of the ANEL, started implementing the reforms requested by the former 'troika', henceforth called 'the Institutions'. Accusing SYRIZA of having 'capitulated', several MPs and party members left to form their own radical left, anti-euro, political parties, namely former Minister Panayotis Lafazanis and former Parliament Speaker Zoe Konstantopoulou, without succeeding to be elected.

51. In an opinion article published on the website of the national news agency, journalist Dimitris Konstantakopoulos wrote about a 'faustian coalition' between Merkel's Germany and 'the most extreme powers of global finance', which incited 'the markets to attack Greece', thus gaining

ster of Foreign Affairs of the SYRIZA governments (2015-to this day), affirmed in his book entitled *Debt colony*: '*Germany is showing a neo-colonial imperial attitude towards Greece* [...]. *A policy of "discipline" and "punishment"*.'.[52] The expression 'debt colony' was one of the slogans of left-wing criticism against the austerity policy imposed by the troika, and was also used by the future PM Alexis Tsipras, when SYRIZA was in the opposition.[53]

In this context, the references to a 'new German occupation' and to a (supposed) 'Fourth Reich'[54] were frequent, while Chancellor Merkel and the German MFA Schäuble were often depicted with nazi uniforms in political satire or in protest signs. The MP of Independent Greeks Vassilis Kapernaros affirmed in 2013: '*While the assassins are plunging the well-known European states in misery*, [...] *the Germans of the IV*th *Reich, the instigators of*

'the weapon' Germany needed in order to discipline the EU; 'Το νέο "γερμανικό ζήτημα"', ΑΜΕ/ΜΠΕ, 17 August 2015, http://www.amna.gr/article-featured.php?id=85514 (retrieved 10 August 2017). In 2011, G. Trangas was writing in his magazine's editorial: '*Does anybody still has doubts that what we are living, what we are going through eleven million laboratory animals in the Balkan South aren't but the (first) phases of a well-planned, premeditated crime?*'; 'Ποιος θα πει "άι σιχτίρ";', *Crash*, 8, November 2011, p. 3, http://www.crashonline.gr/%CF%84%CE%B5%CF%8D%CF%87%CE%BF%CF%82-8%CE%BD%CE%BF%CE%AD%CE%BC%CE%B2%CF%81%CE%B9%CE%BF%CF%82-2011/ (retrieved 10 August 2017)

52. N. Kotzias (2013). *Ελλάδα αποικία χρέους. Ευρωπαϊκή αυτοκρατορία και γερμανική πρωτοκαθεδρία*. Athens: Patakis.

53. 'Τσίπρας: Όχι σε μια αποικία χρέους', *enikos.gr*, 24 October 2012, http://www.enikos.gr/politics/90986/tsipras-oxi-se-mia-apoikia-xreous (retrieved: 9 August 2017); 'Α. Τσίπρας: Αποικία χρέους και νεόπτωχων η Ελλάδα της τρικομματικής', *Αυγή*, 28 April 2013, http://www.avgi.gr/article/10842/249027/a-tsipras-apoikia-chreous-kai-neoptochon-e-ellada-tes-trikommatikes-binteo- (retrieved 9 August 2017).

54. Apart from many references in the press, see the statement of the MP of Independent Greeks, Terens Quick: 'Ο Κουίκ για τη Μέρκελ: Να αποκαλούμε τη Γερμανία Δ' Ράιχ', *enikos.gr*, 18 July 2014, http://www.enikos.gr/politics/251578/o-kouik-gia-ti-merkel-na-apokaloume-ti-germania-d-raix (retrieved 10 August 2017).

all the pre-arranged plans for the economic catastrophe of most European states, are treasuring up'.[55]

The media[56] were particularly prone to reproduce schematic, controversial and sensational statements, which attract the audience and prompt debate. Besides, the ethnocentric bias is deeply inscribed in most people's mentality. In TV news, the framing of foreign officials' interventions and statements was rarely positive, reflecting the distrust of Greek journalists and commentators (Poulakidakos 2014: 131-132).[57] A research on Greek news portals' coverage of the crisis stressed that most titles were echoing '*the feeling of injustice and of the disposition of the foreigners to accuse, to "sabotage" Greece or to use it as a sacrificial lamb*' (Zarali and Frangonikolopoulos 2013: 284-285).

At the same time, according to a poll,[58] 1/3 of the population (33%) believed that Greeks were victims of chemtrails, which allegedly serve to make people passive and submissive.[59] To quote

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55. 'Καπερνάρος: Θησαυρίζουν οι Γερμανοί του Δ' Ράιχ!', *paraskinio.gr*, 1 April 2013, http://www.paraskhnio.gr/kapernaros-thisayrizoyn-oi-germanoi/ (retrieved 10 August 2017).

56. For the consequences of the crisis on the media landscape and on the quality and ethics of journalism in Greece, see: Pleios 2013; Komninou 2017.

57. Poulakidakos (2014: 146) did not find conspiracist comments (contrary to one of his research hypotheses), but his corpus consisted exclusively of TV news reports concerning statements of foreign political actors and institutions. He notes however that instead of advancing a conspiracy theory involving some 'obscure decision-making centre', commentators directly accused specific foreign leaders for the economic disaster in Greece.

58. Opinion Poll by Metron Analysis conducted in September 2013; 'Επίσημο: Το 33% των Ελλήνων πιστεύει ότι μας ψεκάζουν', *Lifo*, 13 October 2013, http://www.lifo.gr/team/bitsandpieces/42567 (retrieved 10 August 2017).

59. Social anthropologist Alexandra Bakalaki (2014, 2016) made an interesting parallel between the chemtrails narratives and the discourse on the Greek crisis and its causes. However, she does not analyse the chemtrails theme from the scope of conspiracy theory, partly because, according to one version, the alleged damage to the environment and humans is unintentional, a mere consequence of programs developed in order to fight the cli-

the headline of the far-right newspaper *Eleftheri Ora*, '*It's not our fault. They spray us with gaz that makes us dump*'.[60] In October 2011, two MPs of the populist and nationalist party LAOS (People), addressed a question about the chemtrails to the government.

The idea that Greeks have a tradition of resistance against tyranny and occupation is a widespread national stereotype. Thus, despite a series of massive protests in 2010-2012, culminating at the movement of the Greek 'indignants' (Georgiadou et al. 2017), the fact that the majority of the citizens suffered from the austerity policies imposed by the foreign creditors without recourse to a popular uprising, seemed inexplicable to those who were convinced that Greeks had an inherently 'resistant character',[61] or even – as the expression goes – a 'resistant DNA'.[62] Under the shock of the financial crisis and the collapse

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mate change that went wrong. Even so, the ideas a) that public health is endangered by large scale use of experimental technology, and b) that the authorities are hiding the truth, are typical of conspiracist thinking. Even more fitting to the conspiracy theory pattern is the other, predominant version of chemtrails fear, according to which powerful elites (often related to the New World Order) are intentionally spraying with dangerous chemical substances the world population – and in this case, especially the Greeks – in order to impose their political agenda without resistance.

60. 'Δεν φταίμε εμείς. Μας ψεκάζουν με ηλιθιογόνα αέρια', *Ελεύθερη Ώρα*, 23 October 2010.

61. For a critical discussion of the 'resistant character of the Greek people', see: Akis Gavriilidis, 'Ο διαφοριστικός ρατσισμός του Νίκου Σβορώνου', *Θέσεις*, 91, April-June 2005, http://www.conspiracywatch.info/L-alliance-Syriza-Grecsindependants-le-facteur-complotiste_a1356.html (retrieved 3 June 2016); Pantazopoulos 2015: 9-22.

62. See e.g.: D. Konstantakopoulos, 'Η παγίδα κλείνει', *Το Παρόν της Κυριακής*, 25 March 2016, http://www.konstantakopoulos.gr/2016/03/25/%CE%B7-%CF%80%CE%B1%CE%B3%CE%AF%CE%B4%CE%B1-%CE%BA%CE%BB%CE%B5%CE%AF%CE%BD%CE%B5%CE%B9/ (retrieved 9 June 2016); G. Papasimos, 'Μνημονιακός "ανθελληνισμός" και πολιτικός "κατήφορος"', 1 June 2013, https://pratto.gr/2013/06/01/%CE%BC%CE%BD% CE% B7% CE% BC%CE%BF%CE%BD%CE%B9%CE%B1%CE%BA%CE%BF%CF%83-%CE%B1%CE% BD%CE%B8%CE%B5%CE%BB%CE%BB%CE%B7%CE%BD%CE%B9%

of their way of life, facing long-term insecurity and the consequences of a failing state, Greeks searched for hidden explanations and malign designs.

In all cases, Greece was seen as the victim of foreign machinations, while the main culprits were conveniently picked from the reservoir of the historical enemies of the nation: Turks and Albanians on the regional scale, the US and (lately) Germany on the global one. As Bithymitris and Lialiouti state (2017: 56), '*the anti-German discourse became a vehicle for anti-capitalist and anti-globalization rhetoric*', similar to the anti-American discourse of the post-dictatorship period (Lialiouti 2016).

It should be pointed out, though, that the perception of Germany as a threatening hegemonic power is new and subsequent to the crisis. The Second World War trauma was reactivated after many decades of peaceful relations not only on state-level, but also on the societal one, given the emigration of large numbers of Greeks to Germany in the 1960-70s and German mass tourism in Greece every summer.

Despite the predominance of a common conspiracist approach in both right-wing and left-wing discourses on the crisis (mostly among those who had a critical stance towards the neoliberal doctrine), political and ideological differences did affect the basic narrative-line and the attribution of blame.

On one side, while mainstream left criticism opted for an institutional analysis of the globalised post-capitalist economy and of international financial interests, part of the radical left used a binary, conspiracist rhetoric, blaming the hegemonic financial politics of Germany, the US and the IMF for having intentionally caused the collapse of Greek socio-economic conditions.

On the other side, the extreme-right variant of the conspiracy theory concerning the Greek crisis included references to

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CF%83%CE%BC%CE%BF%CF%83-%CE%BA%CE%B1%CE%B9-%CF%80%CE%BF%CE%BB/ (retrieved 9 June 2016). In this last text, the author refers specifically to 'the heroic moments in the historic trajectory of a People that function as its istoric resistant DNA'.

the Jews and 'Zionism', to international bankers and other magnates, to the New World Order, and insisted not only on financial, but also on security risks for the country. This rhetoric, despite its nationalist overtones, is in fact a Greek version of the old-new conspiracy theory imported from the US referring to international capitalism and the threat of 'global governance' (Barkun: 39-40, 62-64). The increasingly informal communication through the web, (semi-)private blogs and the social media helped diffuse this type of discourse among the Greek public.

The above-mentioned variant of conspiracist rhetoric concerning the Greek crisis was shared by political parties, namely the ultra-nationalist Golden Dawn and the Independent Greeks (ANEL), the right-wing, nationalist and populist party launched in February 2012 by Panos Kammenos, which eventually formed a coalition government with SYRIZA in January 2015.[63] Kammenos and his party argued that Greece was 'under occupation', that the country was the victim of a conspiracy and that the 'New World Order' and the 'Supranational Elite' were plotting to establish a 'Global Financial Power'. In a speech in 2012, Kammenos even named '*the Bilderberg Group*', '*George Sorros*' and '*the members of the different [Masonic] lodges*' as the ones who '*speculate at the expense of the country by imposing their own regime, which aims at bringing Greece to annihilation*'.[64]

Despite the appropriation of common, world-wide, conspiracy theories' themes and stereotypes, a difference seems to exist in the Greek case: interestingly, in recent years, Russia was re-introduced in the domestic conspiracist imagination as a powerful ally (Ioannidou 2013), reflecting an existing new trend in the Greek foreign policy, but also the return of an old national myth, namely the perception of Orthodox Russia as an ally of the Greeks, as was the case under the Ottoman Empire.

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63. On the Golden Dawn, the Independent Greeks, and the rise of the far-right and extreme right in Greece during the crisis, see: Georgiadou 2015, Georgiadou & Rori 2013, Psarras 2012.

64. ANEL, official press release, 2 May 2012; http://www.anexartitoiellines.gr/post.php?post_id=183 (retrieved: 5 June 2017).

Nationalist discourse and conspiracist rhetoric

The proliferation of conspiracy-oriented explanations of the crisis reflected and at the same time reproduced a common representation of the Greek nation as threatened and victimised (Frangoudaki and Dragona 1997: 84-85; Skoulariki 2007b; Antoniou *et al.* 2015). The perception of a permanent risk of war by neighbouring countries, combined with the feeling of an 'unjust' treatment of Greece by the international or European 'powers' is a *topos* of ethnocentric discourses in the Greek public space. According to this view, Greece is marginalised, its security risks (related to its geopolitical position) are disregarded, its contribution to the regional stability not acknowledged, and the long-term consequences of its tumultuous modern history not taken into account.

Based on this discursive background, the conspiracist rhetoric became a regular feature of Greek public discourse in the last decade. There is no doubt that the two phases of conspiracy theories that we examined above have different traits: in the period 2005-2009, the emphasis was on national security issues, while after 2010, the emphasis was on economy and national sovereignty. However, there is a clear continuity between the two, regarding: a) the perception of Greece as being targeted by foreign malign designs, b) the blame attribution to countries that represent either national 'foes' or hegemonic powers, which have been responsible for national calamities in the past and are accused of having a persistent 'anti-Greek' (*anthelliniki*) attitude.

The aforementioned conspiracist discursive themes reflect commonplace nationalist patterns of discourse: the representation of 'the nation under threat' and a stereotypical perception of out-groups as unchangeable over time, essentially aggressive enemies. Conspiracist discourse could not be embraced if it was not compatible with widespread schemes of interpretation.

Conclusion

The conspiracy theories examined here were introduced by official sources (government, state intelligence, politicians) and were reproduced by the media, before they reached the wider public. As such, they were serving a political purpose or the interest of a group, they were contested and debated, but eventually were spread by word of mouth and became commonplace. They had an impact and were adopted by a large part of the population, because they corresponded to established stereotypes and because, despite their imaginative details, they offered a familiar scheme of interpretation, based on a simple structure: intentionality, speculation, personification, and denunciation.

In particular, the alleged assassination plot against the former PM Karamanlis followed a typical conspiracist scheme: upon the basic pattern of the initial conspiracy theory, other cases were added and juxtaposed, until almost all the problematic issues were treated as part of one and the same plot. In Barkun's terms (2003: 6), a 'systemic' conspiracy theory was thus developed, interconnecting a series of supposed hostile plots against the government and the Greek state as a whole.

In consequence, since 2005, the Greek public was exposed to a public discourse that focused regularly on wire-tapping, foreign intelligence, agents, spies, provocations, clandestine operations, confidential documents and foreign powers putting pressure on Greece. Part of these accounts may have been true. Most of them however were exaggerated, uncorroborated and expressed with a sensational, alarmist and polemical rhetoric, which drew hasty conclusions and avoided counter-arguments. The type of discourse that is characteristic of conspiracy theories.

The fact that successive governments, political parties, mainstream media, and even the judiciary were making or supporting such claims contrasts with the basic feature of conspiracy theories, which usually defy official accounts. In the Greek case how-

ever, the main enemy figure was not the state, which was perceived as weak and ineffective, but foreign powers.

Even before the crisis, the rhetoric of victimisation had become a key trope of Greek political discourse. The corroboration of conspiracy narratives by official sources gave them credit, made the public more receptive to alleged foreign plots and prepared the ground for the dissemination of other conspiracy theories in the following years. After the crisis, Greek society was even less in a position to filter information, to opt for balanced analysis, and to resist the attractiveness of conspiracist discourse.

Pierre-André Taguieff (2013: 17) comments in the introduction of his book on conspiracy theories, referring to the Greek case: '*In a situation of crisis, society becomes illegible to its members; it appears to them not just complex, but incomprehensible and disturbing. When the ordinary certainty is shaken in a society, when the expectation of regularity and continuity in social life is shattered, a space opens up in public opinion in favour of conspiracy theories.*'

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