
COVID-19 Outbreak in Greece: Current Response, Personal Responsibility and Social Solidarity



**Theodoros Dimopoulos, BSc,
MSc**

*****@**yahoo.gr

Social Worker
External RRA Expert - SCHEER
Committee, EU Commission

COVID-19 is already a severe public health emergency for citizens, societies and economies of 164 countries, inducing not only a major and unprecedented economic shock but also a social turmoil. According to a survey by McKinsey & Company (Craven et al. 2020), the COVID19 outbreak could potentially result in the decrease of global GDP of 2,5-2% while the EU GDP growth projection varies from 1,29% to 0,99%. On 2 March OECD projected a global GDP's growth rate downturn of 2,4% instead of an already weak 2,9% growth in 2019 (OECD 2020). To the same extent, a significant increase in unemployment is projected by the International Labour Organization (ILO 2020) through three scenarios. The worst case scenario includes 24,7 million of unemployed, the mid-case scenario includes 13 million while the best case scenario speaks about 5,3 million of unemployed people worldwide.

Inevitably, Greece won't remain unaffected. In fact, its unsatisfying financial course was highly demonstrated in a recent Eurostat's release. During the 4th quarter Greece has shown a -0,7% GDP negative growth rate – prior to the Coronavirus outbreak period (Eurostat 2020). Similarly, the Hellenic Statistical Authority confirmed – as expected – that in the 4th quarter of 2019 the domestic GDP in volume terms decreased by 0,7% q-o-q and increased by an inadequate 1,0% y-o-y, showing that 'much talked about' technocratic effectiveness and political adequacy can easily be the point at issue (Hellenic Statistical Authority 2020). Last but not least, a release on 18 March from the National Bank of Greece confirmed the counterproductive course in domestic fiscal policy, accentuating that the primary budget deficit in the first two months of 2020 – prior to the coronavirus effects – stood at €383 million in cash contrary to a primary surplus of €832 million in the corresponding period last year (Central Bank of Greece 2020). Looks like Coronavirus isn't the only problem for Greece.

With regard to the current operational response, an overwhelming majority of scientific institutions and organisations have published reviews and given detailed and quite understandable narratives related to what each nation should do to form and implement a coherent plan of rapid and effective response coupled with measures alleviating the multidimensional pressure. However, the disease is at a different stage in each country and the domestic collective systems seem to be moving at a different, not so well coordinated way, except for some cases.

This shortage of coordination is visible even to those not directly related to healthcare/public health crisis management operations. However, this isn't the right moment to distribute the responsibility of each involved member at any stage. This isn't the moment to look at the past undermining the brave and self-sacrificing efforts of each medic, nurse and the rest of healthcare providers instead of intensifying efforts to better serve health's fundamental context by pushing back this virus.

Certainly, each of these stakeholders is using every currently available mean trying to find new ways of dealing with unprecedented situations and aspiring to shape a new mentality based on social responsibility. A sense of social responsibility will invariably align with the institutional and administration voices, but now is being questioned.

Greece and particularly its people made a tremendous effort to escape from a 10-year period of recession. The previous administration did manage to implement the reforms necessary to end the fiscal adjustment programme (August 2018), to restore national credibility acclaimed by the EU and global partners. There's still a deeper and substantial matter related to values and principles, this timeless but still ongoing unilateral mentality, which puts a spanner in the works. This unchanging behavioural insight vividly demonstrates the wide political spectrum's unwillingness to systematically cultivate the fundamental sense of following the rule of law.

Even though domestically there's a political consensus on the importance to work together, a part of the social mass seems to ignore any kind of institutional or scientific warnings. People with a peculiar sense of defending the right to faith are still surging to churches, encouraged by the clerics, while others keep ignoring both scientific and institutional adjurations to stay in their homes and implement the social distancing instructions. These people are imperviously defying the rule of law and the fundamental principles of public health protection.

The administration leadership has recently expressed a disapprobation on the Hellenic Standing Holy Synod's choice to keep celebrating Mass and administer the Holy Sacrament. Despite this, a part of the governing party's rhetoric prior to the aforementioned disapprobation delivered an encouraging – as widely interpreted by the domestic media – ambiguity and doublespeak. It has taken into account the potential political burden in combination with an abundantly inadequate single-minded neoliberal private sector-friendly perception, rather than promoted the need of rapid preventive actions, such as social distancing, and the front-loaded initiatives to support the domestic healthcare system. According to the collective cleric decision made on 16 March after much underlying pressure, the ruling body of Greece's Orthodox Church agreed to suspend all daily services and rituals for an indefinite period of time in line with the whole political system's efforts to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus. However, Sunday services would continue from March 22 to April 11 in a "simplified" format and would last for only one hour. Unfortunately, the Holy Synod or a part of it, seems to have failed to realise current difficulties and definitely failed to give a concrete and clear answer to the criticality of the situation. This led to an instant response (PM Mitsotakis ordered the closure of all churches and places of worship) on behalf of the administration's side, as a reminder of the previous disapproval in combination with the social necessity, given by the country's top experts.

Maybe concrete facts aren't enough for a part of society to understand that they have to do what should be already done. According to one study (Remuzzi and Remuzzi 2020), 42,2% of the deceased patients in Italy were 80-89 years old, 32,4% were 70-79 years old, 8,4% were 60-69 years old and 2,8% were 50-59 years old. On 15 March, the Public Health National Organisation's top expert, Infectious Disease Specialist Prof. Dimitris Tsiodras said that Greece had 104 new confirmed COVID-19 cases, reaching a total of 331. The average age of those infected is 67 years, while the 57% of those hospitalised are men. This was a 50% increase in one single day. A couple of hours before this was announced, the prime minister had said in an interview that inevitably there would be casualties. Despite this, a considerable part of the public still doubts that the COVID-19 outbreak is going to reach their door. The number of COVID-19 cases in Greece keeps growing, having reached 624 with 15 deaths by March 23, but a considerable number of peoples' state of mind remains more or less the same.

Given the critical situation and the exponential growth in the number of infections before its highly desired flattening, interventions need to pace up, as bearing a resemblance to the neighbouring Italy seems potent. Stakeholders need to intensify their efforts not only to support the system's operational mechanism in terms of staff, medical equipment, etc, but also, given the current capacity, to follow WHO's calls to start conducting mass tests in order to separate those infected from the healthy and mitigate the spreading. To that extent, Our World In Data (Ortiz-Ospina 2020) focuses on the need of testing, not only through urging for consolidation, such as: "Testing is key: for institutions to respond, and for all of us – when we know we are sick, we will stay home," but also by delivering data regarding the number of tests conducted in several countries. Indicatively, this is confirmed by example of early logarithmic scale flatteners. South Korea performed 316,664 COVID-19 tests or 6,148 tests per million people till March 20; Germany conducted 167,000 or 2,023,3 per million people till March 15; Australia performed 113,615 COVID-19 tests or 4,473,4 per million till March 20; and Canada did 113,121 tests or 3,389,7 per million till March 20.

With regard to public health preventive measures, Greece still tries to engage public concern, raise awareness about actions that can push back the coronavirus and allow healthcare workers, the modern heroes next door, to remain standing on the frontlines and continue fighting the catastrophic virus based mainly on the Prof. Tsiodras's expertise and moving rhetoric. At the same time it also is toughening its response trying to harness some people's unwillingness to act in line with rules and make them realise the severity of the situation.

Driven by concerns about the healthcare system's ability to cope with ongoing coronavirus outbreak burden in combination with a large number of citizens' behaviour between 20-22 March, the current administration in compliance with the rest of political system's will, imposed on 23 March a lockdown throughout Greece.

People must provide authorities with a convincing reason to be out, such as going to a pharmacy, a supermarket, a healthcare unit or a doctor visit, and a few other exceptions. In order to get to work there are three options: either by filling in a special form on the government website (forma.gov.gr), or by sending an SMS to the number 13033 or giving detailed explanation about their reasons in a signed personal declaration that can be written on a plain piece of paper. In any case, they must always carry their identification card or passport. Those who violate the newly established rules will be fined 150 euros per violation.

At an earlier stage, Greek authorities banned gatherings of more than ten people and applied a rule of 1 person per 10 sq. m for supermarkets. All museums were closed at the end of March. Schools and universities, restaurants, bars, clubs, theatres, playgrounds and gyms were closed too. Cruise ships and boats can't dock in Greece as of 15 March; most hotels and seasonal tourist accommodations are closed until 30 April while air travel from Italy and Spain to Greece is suspended as is the ferry service from Italy to Greece.

Additionally, strict warnings were given (especially towards the vulnerable groups, such as with chronic cardiovascular disease, chronic breathing problems, diabetes, chronic immunity system dysfunction), which include avoiding nonessential movement. Strict adherence to hygiene measures and a ban on visitors at hospital intensive care units (ICUs) has been applied, while the provision for prescriptions for those suffering from chronic ailments has been secured until 30 June so as to minimise the possibility of the virus spreading to the community.

By and large, Greece is facing an existential solidarity exercise. Criticism is not a priority now as it might discredit the national fight against the coronavirus and undermine the country's ongoing efforts. Everyone must comply not only with the officially imposed rules, but also with the acclaimed guidelines entailed in health preventive policies. Times require a high sense of personal responsibility, which means to behave as if one were infected and stay at home to avoid the disease transmission, as the evidently inspiring figure, Prof. Tsiodras, said. A conscious approach is needed in the name of sacred humanistic values and principles, such as respect towards the state and respect towards our mothers and fathers, respect to people's right to live a healthy life.

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