

Life Under Quarantine, and now Surveillance: A Dispatch From Greece

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It's been more than a week since the Greek government announced that all Greeks are required to isolate at home. On 13th March, the prime minister broadcast a formal address in which he ordered the temporary closure of cafes, restaurants and most other private businesses, urging everyone to stay at home indefinitely. The measure only excluded super markets, pharmacies, bakeries and other food-delivery/takeaway enterprises. All offices, gyms, beauty salons, and – a few days later – all retail and department stores were ordered to close, and failure to meet these new measures carried, and continue to carry, heavy fines. As a result, Athens and all cities around Greece are in what is now known as 'lockdown mode'.

For the sake of documenting how it all began, it might be worth mentioning that Greece's first coronavirus cases appeared in 22 February 2020, after two different groups of Greeks returned from trips abroad. One woman had traveled to northern Italy, presumably to visit the Milan fashion week, and the other group, which comprised of

more elderly individuals, were on a Christian pilgrimage to the Holy Lands in Israel/Palestine, via Egypt. The first death recorded in Greece due to Covid-19 was a 66-year-old man in the latter group, who entered hospital upon returning home, having already fallen sick during his trip.



Top of the stairway in my apartment building.

On March 22nd, with the death toll having risen to 15 and with 530 confirmed Covid-19 cases, the Greek prime minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis appeared on television to broadcast another urgent address. This informed citizens of a governmental decision to ban all but necessary movement and travel. Citizens moving outside their homes, he stated, must have the necessary documentation to justify their movements, and permissible movements can only be one of the following six: going to the doctor/pharmacy, going to work, but only if necessary (and with proof), going to the bank, exercising outdoors alone or in twos, grocery shopping, and visiting in order to assist someone in need. Finally, the ban requires all who exit the home to carry their identity card or passport at all times. Every movement must only occur after each individual sends a text message to a new 5-digit number, informing authorities of their stated reason, from the aforementioned list.

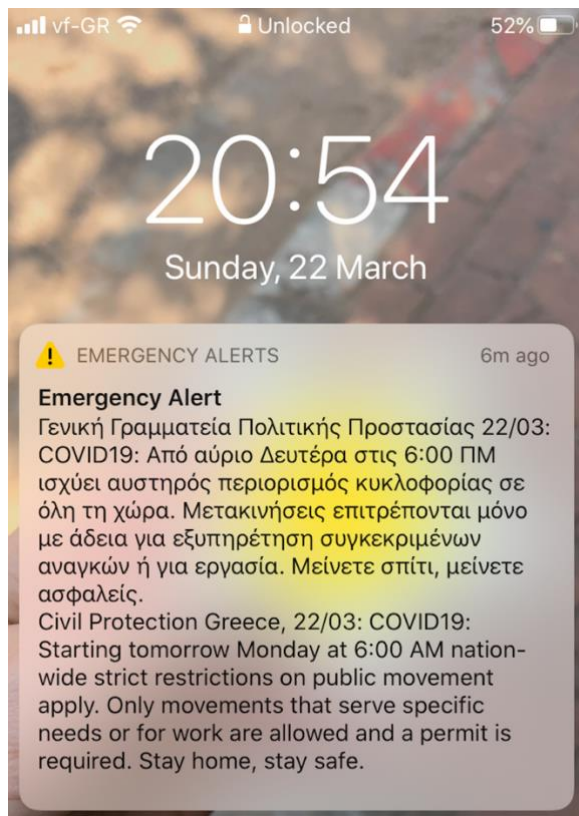


The prime minister announcing the ban and tight controls on all but necessary movement outside the home.

Desperate measures

Compared to other European nations, especially those in Southern Europe, Greece has admittedly acted quickly and has managed to curb the infection rate, and this is a success. Coronavirus infection rates in Greece are still low compared to other European states. But, as many critics argue, there is a cost to this. Though desperate measures may be deemed necessary in desperate times, these measures came, perhaps, a bit too early, and are reminiscent of military rule, even though Greece has not declared a state of emergency. Some have even questioned the legality of these decisions within a democratic framework, and instead promote the practice of carrying out a lot more tests (as is the case in [Germany](#), which also has a very low death rate but a high infection rate), in order to avoid quarantining the whole of the Greek population and limiting their movements to such a suffocating extent. The government announced that movement on the streets will be controlled by drones and helicopters. This begs the question: If so a surplus of money is available to spend on surveillance, why shouldn't it be used to equip hospitals, hire more medical staff, and increase medical salaries? (Doctors working in the Greek public sector are the worst-paid doctors in the whole of the EU). Rumors have it that hospitals are severely understaffed, and there is a dangerous scarcity in masks, sanitary gloves, and antibacterial solutions, which puts hospital workers at great risk.

Trying to rationalize the actions of the government, first we need to look at the temporality of these measures. With the Orthodox Easter holiday approaching, and with rising weather temperatures and sunnier days, Greeks, the government fears, will be tempted to socialize a lot more. Already, both weekends since the initial measures were introduced less than two weeks ago, thousands of Greeks have left the capital city to visit their villages or their islands (or island homes), in order to “breathe” away from the city, or to “isolate in their holiday home”, but also potentially carrying the virus with them to new and unaffected areas. This was great cause for concern these past few days, and evening news reportages were recruited to spread the message that the only way to prevent this pandemic from spreading more is to “Stay Home” and to conform to the rules and requirements set out by the government. Since, however, some citizens did not abide by these rules, the government decided to introduce even stricter measures. (There were several occasions where even clergymen ignored these rules, and carried



Alert message sent to every Greek mobile phone by the government on the evening March 22, 2020.

out their services normally. One priest even arranged for buses to pick up the faithful in order to bring them to church). Citing a few “irresponsible citizens” as the culprit, the whole population is now under strict surveillance in order to avoid such ‘mistakes’, which could prove “fateful”.

To further understand the severity of these recent measures, three important sociopolitical factors must be taken into account. The first one is Greece’s geographic proximity to Italy – now the epicenter of the pandemic globally – but also Greece’s population profile, which closely resembles that of Italy. As a recent article in *Wired* magazine surmises, Italy has been hit the hardest because it has the world’s second oldest population on earth, with 23 per cent of the population aged over 65. (In Greece, the percentage stands at 21.6, which is almost equally high). “At the same time,” the article’s author opines, “young Italians tend to interact a lot with their elders”, which is also true for Greece, where grandparents often care for their grandchildren and families are tightly knit. A recent survey even suggested that most families in Greece still rely on the pensions of their parents or grandparents; a direct consequence of the unending “Greek crisis” which has kept unemployment very high.

Thus, as in Italy, constant movement between family homes, villages, or cities, may have intensified the ‘silent’ spread of the virus across the country.



Helicopters roam above Athens on March 23rd, 2020.

Yet, there is another major reason why Greece needed to ‘act fast’. The short supply of doctors and nurses, as well as the sparse specialized equipment to handle such a massive health care crisis would render the Greek health care system, already battered by a decade of shortages and austerity, useless to tackle the epidemic if it reached Italy’s, or even Spain’s proportions. News reportages on television every evening repeatedly stress how Italy has ‘kneeled’ in the face of this pandemic, and Greece would be a lot less equipped to handle such a high number of infections. “There’s just no capacity for us, the infection curve needs to stay where it stands”, journalists, doctors, and government officials reiterate, every single day. Warding off the virus has become a collective and moral responsibility, but it is now also severely enforced by the state.

Concerns

A few anthropologists, including myself, are puzzled by these developments. Though, on the one hand, the need to prevent a healthcare disaster and the death of thousands fellow humans is the obvious and desirable goal, the increasingly tight measures are troubling. In just a few days, the Greek state has turned into an extreme

surveillance machine. Given that each Greek citizen, with immediate effect, has to inform the government via text or by printing an official form, of their planned route, and has to complete this trip within a specific timeframe, feels uncannily Orwellian. The tackling and prevention of disasters, historically speaking, have always had the potential to undermine democratic pathways in decision-making, because those in power need to act fast. It is, however, important to remember that, in great crises, fear also becomes a political weapon. And though we should all understand and respect the need to adhere to rules for the collective wellbeing of our communities, it should always be remembered that there is caution to be observed on how governments handle populations in such difficult and dark times. Simply placing the huge burden of responsibility on the population is not a right or democratic solution, if it is not also accompanied by other drastic measures, like creating new spaces for healing the sick, or buttressing rural areas with specialized personnel. (Some islands lack even basic health care services, even now, amidst this pandemic). Other options may include speeding up the creation of more intensive care units, and using the police force and other government services for testing, not just *controlling*.

Pandemics are largely curbed if measures are taken on time to prevent the spread, and Greece has (until now) succeeded in this respect. But without truly endorsing the healthcare apparatus, one ends up with a society of caged individuals, who remain caged indefinitely, until the storm passes. (And, when the storm passes, what happens to the surveillance apparatus? Does it simply vanish? I'm afraid not).

The political moves taken in this short time, though effective, contain morally and democratically dubious state behaviors. The health of the nation is now placed solely in the hands of 'responsible citizens'. But, just like it occurred with the immense debt gathered by the Greek nation, a debt which befalls now each and every Greek citizen who is required to "repay" his or her individual allotment to creditors (in the form of higher taxation and lower salaries), so it is with the burden of the new virus: Where the state has (already) failed, the burden falls on the shoulders of each and every individual to care for everyone else by caging themselves at home and being under strict surveillance; alternatively they will carry the guilt for letting their fellow humans die.

Finally, I ask, what will happen in the surveillance machine in the post-corona era? That is another troubling question.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Alexia Liakounakou completed her PhD at UCL in January 2020 and subsequently moved to Greece to pursue further research. Her interests focus on the appeal of anti-ageing technologies and cosmetics, as well as the changes brought about in Greek society since the inception of financial crisis and the country's entrance in a 'debt restructuring programme'. She is currently researching the experiences of ageing in women over 65, and particularly how they deal with their exclusion from the dating and marriage markets. Previously, she worked as an editor at an American independent magazine, and as a photographer. Before that, she was a teacher in rural Sierra Leone.