

The COVID-19 lockdown in Greece

Politicians, experts and public awareness campaigns in search of legitimisation

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About the Special Issue: Discourse Studies Essays on the Corona Crisis

Edited by Jens Maeße, David Adler & Elena Psyllakou

This special issue seeks to collect ideas, reflections and discussions on the multiple aspects of the ongoing corona crisis from a discourse analytical and discourse theoretical point of view. We publish short work-in-progress papers (approx. 1000–3000 words) that take empirical, ethical, psychoanalytical, economic, political and everyday aspects as starting point for developing discourse analytical research ideas and reflections which can be further developed into full research papers at a later time.

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Having transferred the duty of justifying the measures against COVID-19 to the “experts”, the Greek government reduced the political argument to moralistic imperatives which should determine both people’s behaviour and the state’s policies. Focusing on the Prime Minister’s announcements, the Ministry of Health briefings and the state public awareness campaigns, we explore how the government drew the veil of compliance over the lack of deliberation and accountability.

Keywords: COVID-19, discourse, politicians, experts, campaigns, lockdown

“In accordance with the Constitution, the State ‘shall care for the health of citizens’ and intervene when the exercise of individual liberty exceeds its constitutional purpose and threatens society. And when one’s responsibility proves to be deficient, then the public interest must be secured. In the name of collective good, I, therefore, proceed to today’s decision”. Using these words, the Greek Prime Minister, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, announced in an address to the people the “prohibition of non-essential movement” (Mitsotakis, 22/03/2020); the ultimate national measure to combat the COVID-19 pandemic and “the ultimate step of a Democratic State” (Prime Minister Gr, 22/03/2020). At the time, this announcement seemed rather unsurprising. Lockdown measures taken at the international level and their gradual enforcement in the Greek national context had been preparing the ground. However, measures against pandemics are not to be exempted from justification and documentation of their necessity, efficiency, scientific reasoning as well as their proportionality between the suspension of liberties and the size of risk (Giublini et.al., 2017; Rothstein, 2015). Having transferred this obligation to the “experts”, the Greek Prime Minister reduced the political argument to moralistic imperatives which should determine both people’s behaviour and the state’s policies. In the same time frame, campaigns were launched by state authorities to “inform” the public and encourage new patterns of behaviour. Even though part of them copied WHO’s advice for public, the campaigns more diffused and popularized were the ones that rearticulated top-down moralistic imperatives into narratives of everyday life. Using critical approaches to discourse analysis and deploying analytical and theoretical tools provided by foucauldian discourse analysis, CDA, and Essex School, we explore these articulations separately and in their interdiscursivities. The question we shall address is how they drew the veil of compliance over the lack of deliberation and accountability. In the section that follows, we delve into the Prime Minister’s televised addresses to the Greek people. Then, we turn to the daily briefings on the course of the pandemic, analyzing the discourse of the Ministry of Health representative, the “expert”. Finally, we examine the “public awareness” campaigns, critically engaging with their discursive pores and significations.*

* This working paper develops arguments that were previously discussed in Nikolopoulou, Aik. & Psyllakou, E. (2020), *Nomimopiisi choris diavoulefsi. Askisis symmorfosis stis meres tou koronoiou* [Legitimation lacking deliberation. Compliance exercises in corona virus days], in P. Kapola, G. Kouzelis, O. Konstantas (eds), *Apotyposeis se stigmes kindynou* [Footprints in dangerous moments]. Athens. EMEA- Nisos. Online. Available: <https://www.nissos.gr/>, pp. 99–105, and Psyllakou, E. (2020). *Zoume me koronoio. Ena scholio gia tis kratikes ekstrateies enimerosis* [Living with corona virus. A comment on national public awareness campaigns], *Media Jokers & Ena*, 2, pp. 43–50. Online. Available: https://www.enainstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/ENA_Media-Jokers_.pdf.

The Prime Minister

The invocation of crucial constitutional provisions on behalf of the Greek government followed the extensive employment of “wartime” rhetoric (Mitsotakis, 17&19/03/2020). Having described people’s immediate adjustment to COVID-19 restrictions as an “understanding of the threat” (Mitsotakis, 22/03/2020), the latter was then turned into the nodal and floating point of an increasingly restrictive policy. Drawing on the Constitution, the Prime Minister twisted together the concern for public health with the surplus individual freedom and one’s deficient responsibility. The latter are articulated as a threat to the public interest and the collective good. While the metaphor of the “invisible enemy” becomes literal, the “enemy” is no longer the virus but the “antisocial”, “irresponsible”, “disobedient”, and even “stupid” citizen. And while everyone agrees that the “one” who is not responsible enough is the exception, it is this construction that comes to the spotlight to act as the underlying legitimacy for lockdown measures.

At the same time, the exceptionally one-sided public debate has been persistently blurring the semantic boundaries between isolation, quarantine, social distancing and community constraints. It also tended to discursively equate the “prohibition of non-essential movement” or “the strict limitations of movement” with “total prohibition of movement”, even though the official announcements did differentiate them. In fact, these measures reflect separate pandemic practices distinguished not only by their characteristics, but also by their history, the moral and legal dilemmas they raise, their necessary degree of justification and legitimisation, and the ways in which they are applied in modern societies; they form part of an ongoing discussion that was revived on the occasion of recent events such as SARS-CoV epidemic in 2003, H1N1 pandemic in 2009 and Ebola epidemic in 2014 (see for example Gensini, 2004; Rothstein, 2015; Sokhieng & Hofman, 2017). In the COVID-19 pandemic context, these differences were concealed under the slogan “We stay home (and don’t move)”, used by the Greek government, eliminating all kinds of differences between possible pandemic policies together with the need for people’s consent. Far from promoting information and deliberation, the risks of the disease were ascribed to individuals that enjoy their freedoms, whereas staying at home was renamed from “restriction” to “an extremely democratic slogan of collective responsibility; respect for the whole” (Mitsotakis, 22/03/2020).

Ignoring the significance of public deliberation in times of pandemic that would reduce the tensions between the individual’s autonomy and the well-being of the community (Baum et al., 2009; Joint Center for Bioethics Pandemic, 2009; Kavanagh et al., 2011), the Prime Minister’s addresses to the people and his invocation of the Constitution introduced two main legitimisation strategies: a) the transposition of risk and threat from the virus to a suppos-

edly “surplus” individual freedom and society and b) the substitution of policy-making and information on international and national practices to combat the pandemic for individual and collective responsibility. Adding to this, the government’s punitive policy of fines led to certain preconceptions of compliance as motivated by the financial cost and the stigma of infringement.

At the same time, people’s active engagement in the implementation of the adopted measures as well as the reorganisation of everyday life was consistently silenced in the public debate. The only solidarity initiatives – and there were several – that were highlighted were the ones made by the country’s “rich” and celebrities. At the other end of “disciplined” citizens who were “just asked” to stay home, the “heroism” of those “behind the masks” or “in the front line” were in the full glare of publicity. While the rhetoric of heroism is constitutive of a wartime narrative of the pandemic (see for example Wagner, 2011; Martin-Moreno, 2014), what is most significant in this case is the consequent de-heroisation of the “vast majority” who consented to the suspension of its fundamental freedoms and quickly adapted to a new precarious life. Society was thus reduced in two categories, while any questioning of the imposed restrictions was identified as one group “insulting” the other (Prime Minister Gr, 22/03/2020).

On the fourth week of non-essential movement prohibitions, government officials started to abandon both the wartime rhetoric and the transposition of the risk and the threat to individual and collective behaviours. The Greek Prime Minister re-articulated people’s compliance as a statement of “confidence”, especially in his leadership. Claiming that “power” is “immune” in times of “need” or “emergency”, he pledged to “strengthen accountability” with “democratic sensitivity” after the “crisis” (Mitsotakis, 13/04/2020). It was a moment when questions of legitimisation had started to emerge among European officials.

Legitimisation issues were also addressed with the strategic deployment of the discourse of the “expert”, who was granted central role in the public debate within the context of the pandemic “crisis”.

The Expert

Since the documentation of the first COVID-19 cases in Greece, Professor Sotiris Tsiodras, Ministry of Health representative, and Nikos Hardalias, General Secretary and appointed Deputy Minister of Civil Protection and Crisis Management, held daily press conferences, which were broadcasted live by all private and public TV stations. These daily briefings combined “purely” medical data, such as the symptoms of the virus, with political information regarding the measures adopted by the government. In this way, the “objectivity” attributed to the scientific facts which are analysed first, reflected on the government’s choices that were presented afterwards, making

them look as the briefing's natural outcome, while Pr. Tsiodras, the personification of scientific truth, bore witness to their validity. Hence, they could only be challenged in scientific rather than political terms, and by analogy, whatever did not comply with them was constituted as irrational and irresponsible. However, the professor himself admitted that "every measure has its cost, social, financial, political" (Eody.gov.gr, 03/03/2020), recognizing the multiple dimensions of policy making, in contrast to the one-dimensional scientific character that many tried to inflict on it. What is more, it was he who announced the policies that the government decided in order to reinforce the public health system, thusly being involved in one of the most central terrains of the ideological and political confrontation.

Even though the Ministry of Health representative did not use terms such as "personal responsibility" often in official communications, the "responsible" citizen was presupposed thanks to a rhetoric that took for granted a particular ethical stance. At the same time, his team's choices were represented as grounded in science, but guided by ethics: "I got a letter from someone I know, a very important scientist, internationally renowned, who said that we make a big fuss about a few old fellow citizens, who are incompetent due to chronic diseases. [...] The answer is that we honour everybody, we respect everybody, we protect everybody, but especially them" (Eody.gov.gr, 21/03/2020).

Enhancing this moral framing, he systematically invoked values such as decency ("filotimo", in Greek, a quality often depicted as defining the Greek people), respect to the "fellow human being", the "frontline" workers, the elderly and the dead, as well as the duty towards "our Homeland" (which appeared with capital "H" in the press releases published in the National Public Health Organisation website). In effect, the effort in tackling the pandemic was represented as "national", summoning everyone to "do their bit" in order to maintain a positive "national image". Consequently, any form of dissidence, or what was pictured as such, would turn against national interest and was morally stigmatized.

Notwithstanding, the government spokesperson seemed to consider only the citizens and the journalists as possible offenders. Private companies that do not produce basic necessities but continued to operate normally, even after reports of confirmed cases among their employees were never addressed. Nor were the government officials who, not only are responsible for the current malaise of the National Health System but also took inadequate measures to support its personnel and facilities, even during the pandemic.

Having citizens and journalists tuned into their TV screens at the same time every evening, the daily briefing did not just "brief"; it became the heart of the daily agenda and was represented as the axis around which the public debate should revolve. Thusly, the public debate was limited to conflicting scientific opinions, regarding whether certain

medical evaluations were correct; albeit extremely important, the prevalence of this standpoint alone marginalized as "untimely" and "irresponsible" any attempt to question political motives and ideological decisions. In this way, the concepts of responsibility and "solemn" discipline were restricted to the individual level, in the same way that the professor addressed only individuals. At the same time, the citizens, who do not "speak" the language of the experts, could participate merely as spectators and trust them, as a token of responsibility, ruling out any bottom-up initiatives.

The rhetoric of the Ministry of Health representative was often applauded by the press, which contrasted it to political discourse. The combination of a scientific perspective with moral and emotional elements was pictured as the opposite of the discourse of the politicians who, were they to handle this situation, would "play games using the media" (Kanellis, 2020). It was configured as reliable and "authentic", discrediting, by the way, once again political argumentation.

One more strategy mobilized by the media was the impressive, yet quite old, personalisation of the government's strategy, converting Tsiodras to "the man of the hour". The debate was centered around a "face" and any kind of critique was rejected by invoking his exemplary personality.

Public Awareness Campaigns

While in the aforementioned contexts "staying home" was articulated as strict political decision relying on scientific advice and moral imperatives, state campaigns during the implementation and lift of the lockdown (March–May 2020) preferred the language of encouragement. To this end, state campaigns drew on the strategy of comparison, assigning the transmission of the message mostly to celebrities and to constructed everyday role models.

In two of the most popular celebrity videos, the request to stay home and (later) the request to use the mask are articulated in a fictional dialogue with the distant other and an imaginary dialogue with the audience. The former distinguishes the compliant celebrity who "takes things seriously" from the "other" (supposedly a friend or member of the family) who doesn't. The latter urges the audience to identify with the celebrity, promoting a positive and unifying comparison between those who fully comply in a "reverent" way; a religious metaphor that was often repeated in state campaigns. Intimate and didactic expressiveness have been crucial in the formation of these dialogues (Greek Government, 18/03/2020; 03/05/2020).

Such strategies of positive and negative social comparison are also employed in the campaign against overcrowding in public spaces in the early days of the lockdown lift. In this case the main message is not articulated in real-time fictional and imaginary dialogues, but in narrations of sup-

posedly personal incidents: two fictional private debates between a widely recognized actor and his girlfriend and a widely recognized actress and her friends (Open TV, 09/05/2020; General Secretariat for Civil Protection, 10/05/2020). The particularity of these two videos lies in their employment of “rational” and “irrational” dichotomy. The former pole was represented by the celebrities and the latter by their “others”. Due to its intense gender bias – the “rational man vs the irrational woman” – the first video was fiercely debated and eventually withdrawn. The second video was preserved and further promoted the message that a meeting with friends cannot possibly be consistent with keeping safe distances. Once again, instead of providing necessary information on how to behave when in public, this campaign relied on the fear of being judged by the “rational” other as “irrational”.

If in the previously mentioned campaigns the employment of negative and positive social comparison constructed dualistic reactions to COVID-19 restrictions – understanding/not understanding, seriousness/non-seriousness, rational/irrational – and promoted the identification of the audience with the former pole, two different campaigns relied more on the positive identification with everyday role models. During Greek Easter holidays – strongly related to movements from the city to the countryside – state authorities launched the “We stay home and come out winners” campaign (GSCP, 15/04/2020). The message was conveyed through succeeding images of empty public spaces, a song by Dionysis Savvopoulos – an iconic Greek composer and open admirer of the Greek Prime Minister – and a direct appeal to the audience to compare themselves with everyday people: those who have to work in order to provide basic supplies, and those who may feel insecure about the future but “do the right thing” by staying at home. This positive construction of a collective “we” culminated in its “Greek” identity; when this is over, the others may be able to learn something “from us, for us, the Greeks”.

In those same days, famous “Greeks”, including personalities of arts and letters, distinguished athletes and Olympic champions, participated in the Greek public television campaign under the slogan “We stay home for those we love” (ERT, April 2020). Having declared “love” as the emotional motivation of staying home, several individual statements were brought together to articulate a reconfigured “Greek” identity: protection of society, spirituality, unity, self-discipline, respectfulness, gratitude, pride, patriotism, decency. In the dialogic matrix of these messages, social comparison with the distant other was not only a strategy for an undisputable “rational” compliance, but also for the reconstruction of typical “Greek” attributes.

Moving towards a full lockdown lift, social comparison strategies were gradually abolished. In one of the most popular videos of the “Stay Safe” campaign under the slogan “Taking out the best of yourself”, the transition to open spaces, work environments and services was articulated as a transition to a new way of life (Greek Government,

04/05/2020). At the same time, the collective “we” became the thread that connects the lockdown, as the past, to the present and the future of the new everyday life: “it was not easy but we achieved something important and we achieved it together [...] now [...] now, we start going out again and we go out changed [...] we go out to move our lives forward [...] and that’s what we all need to ensure together”. However, while the audio message articulates this change in terms of better information and protection, strengthened health system, optimism and different modes of behaviour in personal hygiene, shopping, work and social distancing, the video screen is filled with individuals going out alone, wearing mask and keeping physical distance. Alternating figures in open spaces or portraits become the visual signifier of the imaginary “we” that is here reconceptualized as a total of “responsible” and “disciplined” individuals.

“Vaccine” against participation and grassroots action

Apart from more profound epistemological debates regarding the degree of independence of science from power, there are many who argue that, within risk society, more than ever before, every development in the field of public health should be treated as inherently political. Hence, the “health experts” should recognize that their technocratic opinions cannot be considered outside the political (Kickbusch, 2016; Ooms, 2015). Against the current backdrop, the instrumentalisation of scientific, quasi-objective discourse, integrated within a “vision” of technocratic governance, contributes to the legitimation of government decisions, ascribing to the majority the position of the docile observer. In the absence of deliberation, citizens are bombarded with demands for compliance that are expressed in different ways and by different agents, yet share key elements: the marginalisation of collective action, the elimination of accountability and the primacy of imposition, under circumstances defined as “crisis”.

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