



Weekly Briefing

Greece social briefing:

Technology during the COVID-19 pandemic in Greece

George N. Tzogopoulos

China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin

Kiadásért felelős személy: Huang Ping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.

 +36 1 5858 690

 office@china-cee.eu

 china-cee.eu

Technology during the COVID-19 pandemic in Greece

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought uncertainty and negative consequences to Greece's economy and society. But if there is a positive development that is monitored, this is the ongoing digitalization. While for years the country's performance had been poor, some changes are recorded. Minister of Digital Governance Kyriakos Pierrakakis have sought to export the Estonian model to Greece even before the outbreak of the novel coronavirus. During the public health crisis his effort is being intensified. Pierrakakis is expected to continue his work by launching new on enriching existing websites that are used by ministries and citizens. His role will be also critical in supervising the auction of the 5G spectrum that – according to his announcement – will be completed by the end of the year.

Greece digitalization record is not impressive. The 2019 Digital Economy and Society index that summarizes relevant indicators on Europe's digital performance and tracks the evolution of EU member states in digital competitiveness ranked Greece in the 26th position among 28 countries, only higher than Bulgaria and Romania. An article written in *Politico* magazine at the beginning of April by Nektaria Stamouli nicely describes bureaucratic adventures. According to the piece Greece remained the only EU country without a computerized land registry while the resistance of the justice system to follow the path of technology caused delays in the enforcement of contracts and the organization of public tenders.

Despite its problematic performance for years Greece made some progress during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the lockdown period, for example, citizens could send a free SMS to 13033 and explain the reason of their movement according to relevant guidelines. Digital Governance Minister Kyriakos Pierrakakis has talked about a race and said that this hotline was set up in only a few hours demonstrating reflexes. And he explained that it was not the purpose of the Greek government to monitor citizens, store data or keep records. An OECD report titled: 'Regulatory Quality and COVID-19: Managing the Risks and Supporting the Recovery' focuses on mobile applications which have enabled administrations to avoid unnecessary burden for citizens. In so doing it mentions the case of Greece and France which provided alternatives to printed form of papers. Another initiative of the Ministry of Digital Governance has been the creation of the website solidarity.gr. It aims at helping citizens find

access to the necessary digital tools provided for free or at low cost from private or public institutions. Distance learning, teleworking and entertainment are sectors of interest.

Before his appointment as Minister of Digital Governance Pierrakakis, who had received MA degrees from leading American universities, worked as Director of Research at Dianeosis – a new but active think tank in Greece – concentrating on the economic and social reconstruction of the country. While in government he has systematically worked to improve digital governance as other countries have done, for instance Estonia. *Kathimerini* has reported that former President of Estonia Toomas Hendrik Ilves, is one of Pierrakakis' advisers and a friend. Before the launch of the 13033 hotline, he contributed to the operationalization of the European emergency number 112. This control service center could respond to calls for help, identify the location of the caller and also send evacuation messages in serious emergencies or other instructions to protect citizens – as it happened during the COVID-19 pandemic. The service had not existed during the catastrophic wildfires of July 2018 in Mati and its establishment was considered a priority in the immediate aftermath.

Pierrakakis has played an important role for the creation of the [epresence.gov.gr](https://www.epresence.gov.gr) platform enabling civil service and local government to organize teleconferences. Furthermore, the [gov.gr](https://www.gov.gr) portal providing several digital services to Greek citizens is a new development. The portal endeavors to electronically coordinate different ministries, organizations and independent authorities and create a central electronic point of reference. Domains already covered on [gov.gr](https://www.gov.gr) encompass agriculture and livestock, justice, education, entrepreneurial activity, work and insurance, family, property and taxation, citizen's everyday life, culture, sport and tourism, military service as well as health and welfare. During the ongoing public health crisis the portal provides information concerning psychological support and other necessary instructions.

The Greek Minister of Digital Governance will be also responsible for the auction process of the 5G spectrum in the country in line with law 4635/2019. In January 2020 he gave an interview to *Kathimerini* newspaper saying that telecom companies – after buying their share of the spectrum – would have to act and invest fast in order for consumers to use 5G. On 24 March COSMOTE Greece became the first telecommunication company to announce its selection: that was Ericsson. Other Greek companies have not made their decision at the writing. On 30 April the Ministry of Digital Governance announced that the 5G frequency map prepared by the National Telecommunications and Post Commission had been ready. The latter can now proceed to the designation of the 700 MHz spectrum auction. With reference to Huawei

Pierrakakis had given an interview on *Euractiv* on 3 December 2019 suggesting that the Greek government would be open to additional Chinese investments.

While the 5G network will be critical for Greece's technological transformation and Greece needs to find a balance between American pressure and European strategic autonomy, the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed additional opportunities. Students and teachers have used the technological means and smart education applications during the pandemic. To start with, the Education Ministry offered educational television programs for primary school children via state broadcaster ERT. Additionally, teachers and professors have used tools such as Skype, Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Webex to replace their face-to-face meetings with pupils and students in classrooms. Education Minister Niki Kerameus and Pierrakakis secured zero-rating cellphone access to government platforms being used for distance learning. For his part, US Ambassador to Greece Geoffrey Pyatt said during an online conference with Greek journalists that he was proud that American companies such as Google, Cisco and Microsoft closely engaged with the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Tourism and the Greek Unemployment Authority, to help bring to bear the tools of US technology.

In the field of tourism, Greek government has developed the 'Greece from Home' platform. The aim has been to give the opportunity to potential visitors of Greece – who are currently unable to travel because of the crisis – to learn more about the country by offering them meaningful content. This has been an initiative of the Ministry of Tourism in cooperation with the Greek National Tourism Organization and Marketing Greece. Google became a partner supporting the learn section of the initiative. Steve Vranakis, who was appointed as Greece's chief creative officer by Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis in October explains that the project was implemented in a period of only two weeks. The platform was built on a platform called 'wix' with the participation of interns working remotely. It reproduces already available content but is also grounded on exclusives, premieres and livestreams. On the same wavelength, some Greek museums have started to offer virtual tours. The Museum of Cycladic Art, for instance, offers an online tour of its exhibition 'Cycladic Society: 5,000 Years Ago'.

Looking towards the future the question is whether this reliance on digitalization will continue. Pierrakakis has symbolically announced the abolishment of the fax service and is working on the use of a single number in people's dealings with the state that will incorporate the current tax number, the identity and the social security number. In spite of ambitions, the problem of digital literacy – especially for elderly citizens has not been addressed. More importantly, in a period during which e-commerce is developing fast in Greece, the theme of cybersecurity has not been constantly placed on the public agenda. Cyberattacks against Greek

governmental sites before the outbreak of COVID-19 also incite some fears about the existing level of protection. And this might impact on Greece's national interest should significant talks during the pandemic are intercepted via compromised devices of politicians.

Conclusion

The ongoing pandemic finds Greece keen on discovering the digitalization era. Minister of Digital Governance Kyriakos Pierrakakis has contributed to the country's transformation after years of political inaction and bureaucratic complexity. His work has already started to bring results including the launch of emergency numbers and websites offering digital services. Pierrakakis is also supervising the 5G spectrum auction. The Greek telecommunication company COSMOTE has decided to cooperate with Ericsson but others have not made announcements yet. The Minister of Digital Governance has said in an interview that new Chinese investments would be welcomed in Greece. The navigation between American policies and European guidelines in the digital sector will be a very difficult task for the Greek government in 2020.