Greece social briefing:
Greek Society in 2021 and COVID-19 pandemic
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Summary

This briefing is a synopsis of the Greek society in 2021. It describes the main events and tendencies of the year and the effects of COVID-19 pandemic on the society of the country. The debate pro-against vaccinations and restrictive measures taken by the government to reduce the spread of the virus monopolized the public discourse. Sings of polarization of the society and rise of violent attacks have been also registered.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected all aspects of the day to day lives of the people. In Greece, during the year, actions to accelerate vaccinations and restrictive measures to decrease the spreading of COVID-19 have been implemented. These measures created a strong movement against the vaccinations and the health measures in general. Among the opposers are radicals who have been organized and act in the borders of legality, or even proceed to violent and criminal actions. The rise of far-right extremism has been alarming, as well as other consequences of the pandemic to the Greek society, such as the increase of domestic violence, the exclusion of children from education for several months due to the lock downs and the deterioration of welfare of the general population.

Greek society in 2021

During this year the measures to fight against COVID-19 pandemic, taken by the government, have been the center of public and political debate in Greece. In particular the government, throughout the year, announced a series of measures, such as the mandatory use of masks, lockdowns, displaying a vaccination certificate or a negative COVID-19 test for entering public buildings, shops, restaurants etc. Moreover, at the end of November, the PM Kyriakos Mitsotakis announced that all Greek citizens over 60 should either receive the first vaccination shot or at least book an appointment to get vaccinated by the mid-January. In the case a citizen will not meet these prerequisites will be fined with 100 euros monthly. The Greek PM stated that this measure is not for punishing the unvaccinated people but more a mean to
protect the most vulnerable. Characteristically, the PM stated that “I felt a duty to stand by the most vulnerable, even if it might temporarily displease them” (1).

The restrictive measures imposed by the government in order to control the spreading of the COVID-19 pandemic has frustrated a group of people and have create a sense of polarization in the society. In Greece a strong anti-vaccination movement emerged during the current year and many demonstrations have taken place. For example, in August a very big demonstration of approximately 7,000 people protesting against the measure imposing obligatory vaccinations to the health care workers, took place in Athens. During the protest the police used tear gas to disperse a group who proceeded in violent actions, such as throwing flares and objects (2).

In a nutshell, the COVID-19 vaccination opponents are mostly divided in two big groups: a moderate group and a more radical one. The members of the latter group are in many cases linked to extremism and violent assaults. They are communicating through social media platforms, get organized and spread “fake news” and anti-vaccination propaganda in order to recruit more citizens. During the year the government has put a lot of effort to stop the spreading of fake news for COVID-19 vaccinations by legally pursuing websites and social media profiles which spread “fake” unscientific news. In particular, up until the end of November 20 people have been prosecuted with the accusation of spreading fake news (3).

However, despite the efforts of the government to eliminate the spread of fake news and concurrently persuade people to get vaccinated, it is evident that antivaxxers are well organized and in some cases have create groups with radical, nationalistic, and military links. Such a group is the self-calling “Guardians of the Constitution” (Thematofilakes tou Syntagmatos), whose anti vaccination activities came into the public light during the last months. This group has constructed its narrative based on the Article 120 of the Greek Constitution, which declares among others, that the observance of the Constitution is left to the patriotism of the Greeks, who have the right and obligation to resist by any means against anyone who attempts to overthrow it by force (4). In the current pandemic crisis, this group opposes vaccinations and in general any health measure, such as masks, tests etc. The organization of the group resemblance to military forces and their actions aim to replace the state structures. Moreover, numerous violent and criminal activities of the group have been registered and many people have been prosecuted. For example, on 10 December 2021, members of the group went to a public school in Pieria, handcuffed the principal of the school, put him in the car via force and drove him to the police station (5). Many other similar incidences in public schools and services have been recorded the last months.
Besides the organized radical anti-vaccination groups in Greece, other citizens opposing the vaccinations, as well as other health measures, are prone to follow the advice of advocates of conspiracy theories, priests of local churches, swindlers who expect to profit economically and other figures who oppose modern science and the general vaccination of the population. This year, a major issue on the public and political discussion about the measures and vaccination for the COVID-19 pandemic is the role of the church and the practices of religion during the pandemic. The government imposed the use of a mask inside the religious places and at the peak of the pandemic, during the general lockdown, the government announced that churches will be closed to the public. However, these rules were not followed by all churches and priests, despite the official position of the Orthodox Church to not oppose the anti-COVID19 vaccinations and health measures of the government. Thus, cases have been registered where priest condemned the vaccinations and advise the believers to not get vaccinated. It should be mentioned that among the priests it is estimated that approximately 60% are not vaccinated, however official statistics have not yet been announced (6). The opposition party, SYRIZA, has critised the government and accused it many times of reluctance towards the churches. On November SYRIZA announced that the party will submit an amendment to the parliament, which will introduce the mandatory presentation of negative COVID-19 test from the unvaccinated in order to enter religious places (7).

The climate of polarization of the society and the extreme practices of some anti-vaccination groups have been alarming. The COVID-19 pandemic and its economic and social implications created in Greece the fertile ground for the mobilization of far-right extremists as well as the growth of the already existing electoral basis of the far-right. This year many violent incidents have been occurred from members of extreme far-right groups, who consider themselves as the continuity of the Golden Dawn, which was convicted as a criminal organization in 2020. The violent attacks occurred in schools in Thessaloniki as well as in antifascist celebrations held in October (8).

In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictive measures have serious implication to many other aspects of the fabric of the society. During the lockdowns many people lost their jobs and their daily income, young children had no access to education and negligible chance for social interaction. Elderly were isolated in fear of virus. Uncertainty for the future spread to all members of the society, affecting the mental health of the citizens. It should be mentioned that among other factors the COVID-19 pandemic has played a major role to the increase of domestic violence. According to data presented by the Greek Police, from the
beginning of 2021 until last September, 5,857 cases of domestic violence were registered. This is an increased number compared to the 5,413 in 2020 and 5,221 in 2019 (9).

The characteristics of patriarchy present to the Greek society and other factors such as sexist narrative and behavior and the devaluation of women have resulted to numerous sexual assaults and scandals of sexual abuse were brought to light. #MeToo, the strong international movement against such criminal behavior appeared in Greece and strong support for the victims was advocated through the public discourse. However, these negative symptoms of patriarchy and the sense of a society in deterioration brought not only by the pandemic but from many other conditions existing for years in Greece, have led to the increase of femicides during the last years. Specifically, this year 15 women were murdered. The high number has socked the society and the government and actions to prevent these crimes need to be taken urgently.

**Conclusion**

During 2021, COVID-19 pandemic has produced numerous and multidimensional implications to the Greek society. Feelings of frustration, fear for the present and uncertainty for the future prevailed. The measures to fight the pandemic, such as the restrictive measures to prevent the spreading of COVID-19 and increase the vaccinations, as well as the polarized elite’s discourse, created an amalgamation critical to the cohesiveness of the society. However, the enemy, namely COVID-19, is common and still present, and actions need to be taken collectively in order to win this battle.
References


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