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RESEARCH ARTICLE

COVID-19 IN GREECE: FROM THE GOVERNMENT'S CLASH WITH THE GREEK CHURCH TO THE DIFFUSION OF ANTI-MASK SUPPORTERS

George Kordas

Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences

ABSTRACT: By March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic had reached Greece, forcing the Greek government to enforce lockdown for two months. While governmental measures included banning citizens' mobility, except for a six-bullets catalogue, the church was excluded, remaining open for its believers. That resulted in an official clash, having on the one side, the state and the scientists, while on the other was the official church. After the decline in the number of COVID-19 cases during the summer period, the governmental decision of enforcing the use of masks indoors triggered the rise of anti-systemic and anti-governmental rhetoric. Having the above in mind, we aim to apply a grounded theory methodology, drawing our data from two derivations: the official announcements of the church and the Greek government during the examined period; and the scientific approach to the Church's and anti-mask supporters stand. Consequently, our main research question attempts to answer how the anti-systemic rhetoric of Greek society has been transformed during the pandemic crisis.

KEYWORDS: Anti-Mask Supporters, Anti-Systemic Rhetoric, Church, COVID-19, Government, Greece

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

g.kordas@kpe-panteion.gr; giwkordas@hotmail.com

1. Introduction:

The COVID-19 pandemic emerged as a new global health crisis, as its first reference, back in December 2019 (Liu et al. 2020, 328), was soon followed by its declaration as a global pandemic almost three months later (Ghebreyesus, 2020). Its mysterious nature, combined with its rapid diffusion, took by surprise western European democracies, which, one by one, declared a national lockdown until the middle of March (Deutsche Welle, 2020). Greece could not be left untouched from the pandemic, although the country presented fewer deaths than the rest of Europe. The governmental decision for the lockdown was followed by activating some anti-pandemic measures to prevent the virus' diffusion. One of those measures was closing the churches, triggering an open clash with the Greek Orthodox Church. While that clash creates the main framework of the first wave of the pandemic, after May 2020, a new clash appeared, that time inside society. Many governmental decisions that compelled using a mask on indoor places were followed by a steady rise in the number of new COVID-19 cases, ending in a new clash between the government and the anti-mask supporters.

Having the current crises in mind, we have to acknowledge both the rising interference of the Greek Church in political life during the last 20 years and the significant levels of belief in conspiracy theories the Greek society has. Therefore, we form the following research question: *How has the pandemic crisis transformed anti-systemic rhetoric in Greek society?* To answer our research question, we will offer a brief overview of the discussion about the church's role in Greek political life, the management of crises in West European democracies and the conspiracy theories. Additionally, the paper employs grounded theory as its core methodology to draw from its data and create a theory regarding the anti-systemic rhetoric in Greek society.

1.1 Literature Review

As we explained, our research question focuses on a specific crisis that hit Greek society and how it transformed its anti-systemic rhetoric. Such rhetoric was already on the rise during the previous decade; hence, we have to be more specific regarding our research framework. Since 2008, multiple crises have hit Europe, highlighting the significance of crises management from European governments and its effects on society. Those crises – economic, refugee and migration, and health – resulted in a shift for the European societies to adopt an anti-establishment discourse. Thus, they favoured populist parties and other social movements which criticised the current political situation. Frustration was the result of those crises, directing people to explanations of the crises' origins. The most straightforward explanation was that someone else was responsible for triggering those crises. That led to the strengthening of conspiracy theories, with different targets at each crisis. Religious actors – especially in Southeastern Europe – became more active in public life, attempting to offer their services to those suffering from the crises impact. Except for that, they defended Church's function, often preferring a more conservative direction from what the official state suggested.

All those crises significantly hit Greece, resulting in the rise of new challenger parties, which competed with the mainstream ones. In parallel, society favoured populist voices and very soon popularised conspiracy theories while searching for the origins of those crises. The Greek Orthodox Church, a controversial actor in public life, preferred to adopt anti-systemic rhetoric most of the time while not avoiding diffusing conspiracy theories.

1.1.1 Management of crises on West European Democracies

Social crises can act as a triggering event for politics, as they rupture the existing normalisation favouring a national or international emerging crisis. Such crises during the last decade were the world economic crisis and the migration and refugee crisis, which was placed primarily on the European continent. Other crises can involve wars, famine or extreme weather phenomena. To describe their core characteristics, we had to draw on F.C. Hermann's argument back in 1963. Writing during the Cold War, and while the decolonisation had just started, Hermann (1963: 64) understood crises as situations that *threaten the high-priority goals of the decision-making unit and restrict the amount of time available for response before the decision is transformed*. Consequently, he argued that *crises occurred in such a way that surprise the members of the decision-making unit*.

While Hermann wrote under specific international developments, following the most recent contributions to the field will help us better frame our work. Therefore, Boin et al. (2005: 5) highlighted threat, urgency, and uncertainty as crisis core characteristics. Acknowledging the importance of those characteristics, Lipsy (2019, E107) argued about the existence of exogenous and endogenous factors that trigger such crises. COVID-19 pandemic draws from both factors, as major actors – like the USA and WHO – failed to prevent the crisis. Moreover, Lipsy (2019, E109) emphasised the importance of civil society: the stronger it is, the more effective the prevention becomes. Thus, Lipsy reaches a definition, describing a crisis *as a situation that threatens significant harm to a country's population or basic values and compels a political response under time pressure and uncertainty* (Lipsy 2019, E99). Defining a crisis like that, Lipsy shifts our interest to the way populations are affected and the difficulties those responsible for a political response are facing.

In line with Lipsy's definition, the current research will focus on the emergent crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic in the European Union, focusing on the Greek case. Consequently, we will have the opportunity to direct our interest on a West European Democracy that experiences its third crisis over a decade, a public health one that time.

1.1.2 Conspiracy Theories

The continuing crises Europe has faced since 2008 have triggered social frustration among its citizens, resulting in the transformation of the European political scene. The weakness of the mainstream political parties to manage such crises led to the rise of populist parties. Very briefly, populists view society in an “us vs them” framework. “Us” covers the citizens, those attempting to pass through the difficulties they face. “Them” are those responsible for such a situation: businessmen, politicians, foreign countries. Society reflects its uncertainty and inability to influence the political process in blaming those having power for their everyday life (Hofstadter 1965: 29; Radnitz and Underwood 2017: 115; Douglas et al. 2019: 7). Researchers have categorised such characteristics and distrust and the belief that conspiracies move history – to explanations for the diffusion of conspiracy theories among people.

There is a differentiation between conspiracy theories and conspiracies in the bibliography, based on the global level – the former has – or the local that describes conspiracies' nature (Jane and Fleming 2014: 130; Douglas et al. 2019: 4). Except for that, researchers have highlighted a secure link between conspiracy theories and the members of underprivileged or under threat religious and national minorities, as well as political groups (van Prooijen and Douglas 2018: 902; Douglas et al. 2019: 9). Besides the sociological side of conspiracy theories, their ideological link has also highlighted. Therefore, researchers have acknowledged the relationship between conspiracy theories and the extremist side of the political spectrum. Remarkably, they acknowledge

how extreme right is more familiar with scientific conspiracies, while the extreme left is more prone to conspiracies regarding capitalism (van Prooijen et al. 2015: 576).

For an in-depth understanding of the crises that have hit Greece during the last decade, we drew from ADL's research back in 2014. According to this, 67% of the total Greek population supports antisemitic stereotypes. That finding was confirmed by Antoniou et al. several years later (2017: 34). They found that 75% of the Greek population believes the economic crisis resulted from international agents and succeeded in measuring different ways antisemitism has been presented in Greek society (Antoniou et al. 2017: 20-26). Kostas Gemenis (2020, 99-100) highlighted how conspiracy theories fed on pandemics, while they are more prone to diffuse in countries facing long-time crises and international pressure. Greece is such a country, with vast numbers of believers in conspiracy theories. While the Greek case has been prone to the diffusion of conspiracy theories, the problem involves various social and political actors. Even though we cannot acknowledge the importance of the rise of populist parties across the political spectrum in Greece, it is of utmost importance to study how other actors behaved when conspiracy theories appeared. Such a case is the Greek Orthodox Church, as its presence is of great respect in Greek society. Although the rhetoric produced by the Greek Orthodox Church during the pandemic will be at the core of the current research, first, we will briefly examine the significance the Greek Orthodox Church has for the Greek political scene.

1.1.3 The Greek Orthodox Church as a critical player to the Greek Politics

To acknowledge the importance of the Greek Orthodox Church on Greek Politics, someone has to compare secular Western Europe to the more religious Southeastern Europe. Historical reasons connected with the nation-state's formation after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire transformed the church into a prominent actor on the political scene (Stavrakakis 2003: 165-166). The church has been seen as the spiritual and political guide and ally of the society during challenging periods, reinforcing its bond with the Greek society (Günel & Balci 2019: 132).

The church's disagreement with any progressive ideas that could jeopardise her view of Christian values put it after the end of World War II on the side of the Greek anti-communist government and the King (Chrysoloras 2008: 44). To deal with what was described as the communist threat for the Greek society, the church created a network of religious 'missionary movements' (Günel and Balci 2019: 137). In that way, the church succeeded to diffuse a conservative discourse across the Greek society until the end of the Greek dictatorship. Explicitly, the Greek Church cooperated with the junta regime to securitise its interests while creating an ecclesiastical fortune with the regime's help. Except for that, Church's anti-communism was still supported by many bishops (Sakellariou 2019).

Although the peak for such actions is deemed the Greek dictatorship, such ideas survived the transition to democracy, undermining the government's pro-European direction until the end of the century (Günel and Balci 2019, 142-143). Sakellariou (2019) highlights the continuation of the Church's function – after Greece's democratic transition – without isolating its pro-dictatorship members, resulting in the existence of many prominent bishops, who were former members of the junta regime. Nevertheless, two were the crucial points in the Greek Church's interfering in the political scene after 1990. First, it was the "Macedonia" name issue with FYROM, while in early 2000, it was the crisis of the identity cards. Especially after 2000, under Christodoulos' leadership, the Greek Orthodox Church adopts a conservative public discourse (Chrysoloras 2008: 45-47; Karagiannis 2009: 136). Christodoulos clashed with Costas Simitis social-democratic government regarding displaying religion in the identity cards (Karagiannis 2009: 136).

After the rise of the populist radical right party LA.O.S (Popular Orthodox Rally) in 2000, the Greek Church openly supported it, shifting its agenda to more nationalist positions. LA.O.S' decline in May 2012 (Ellinas 2013: 547) benefitted Golden Dawn. The party rose from its previous nonexistence to a remarkable 6,95% of the electoral vote (Ellinas 2013: 548). Even though the neo-Nazi party of Golden Dawn was more paganistic than orthodox, after 2012, it created a peculiar relationship with the Greek Orthodox Church. Both sides reached an ideological agreement regarding the importance of the family and religion for the continuation of the Greek nation. Therefore, they highlighted as common enemies the current and the former governmental parties, foreign countries, and everyone standing against the orthodox religion's principles. Their cooperation involved the economic and the migration crises, in which many Church's members openly supported Golden Dawn's positions. That became more visible during the migration crisis, as conspiracies regarding the dangers the Greek state was facing due to the Muslim refugees were popularised across the Greek society, having Church as their transmitter. Even though their relationship had an opportunistic nature, we could observe how it diffused anti-systemic rhetoric in Greek society, combined with conspiracy theories.

After presenting the directions from where the current article will draw to support its data analysis, we will move to the methodology chapter. By describing our methodology, constructivist grounded theory, we will attempt to connect it with our research topic, clarifying the importance of importing grounded theory in the study of anti-systemic rhetoric during the pandemic.

1.2 Methodology

Having presented our literature review – and before moving to our data analysis – it is of utmost importance to define our methodology. In qualitative methodology, we focus on how people define their experiences about the world, according to their interactions with their environment (Denzin and Lincoln 2011: 3; Bryman 2012: 35-36). Thus, the priority for the researcher is the criterion of *openness* – how the researcher will understand in-depth the other – acknowledging how openness has become much more critical regarding generalisation in qualitative studies (Flick et al. 2004: 8; Creswell 2013: 44; Beausoleil 2014: 21). As Stavros Tsiwliis (2014: 32) argues, it is the openness that directs us to avoid shaping hypotheses during the first levels of our research, highlighting the importance of subjectivity for qualitative research and its familiarity with the researcher's ontology (Mills et al. 2006: 26; Robson and McCartan 2016: 20).

The classical principles of logic could offer us some clarifications, as researchers have highlighted the differentiation between the *inductive* and deductive approaches (Ezzy 2002: 13-14; Bryant 2017: 265; Kelle 2019: 81). While it is an old theoretical discussion, nowadays, it has been freshened by importing the *abductive approach*, in which Aristotle (A2, 98b: 12-28) and later Peirce (CP 7.36: 1907) have marked the critical role of *surprise*. Surprise's significance can be understood while using our observations for the final levels of our research (Reichertz 2014: 126; Thornberg and Dunne 2019: 215). The abductive approach can be better understood through the constructivist definition of reality. According to that definition, reality is a social construction of the mind, while there are as many realities as persons (Guba and Lincoln 1989: 43; Gergen 1999: 236-237). Constructivism has applied to social sciences through pragmatism, understanding definitions as social constructions of the human interaction (Blumer 1969: 4), while scientific truth remains temporary (Charmaz 2014: 263; Weinberg 2014: 7-8).

The grounded theory appeared during the 1960s due to the domination of quantitative methodology in the social sciences and the absence of quality rules for qualitative studies (Dunne 2011: 112). Talking about a *data-driven* theory (Stern 1985: 150), it was forbidden to import other approaches to our data during the

theory's first years. While it remains a long debate for the various schools of grounded theory, we accept the use of the existed literature, as Strauss and Corbin first highlighted, back in 1990.

The theoretical sampling, the theoretical sensitivity, and the coding process represent essential characteristics for the grounded theory. Theoretical sampling has been described since the beginning as the simultaneous collection, coding and analysis of our data, in which we decide where we will research to find them (Glaser and Strauss 1967: 45; Glaser 1978: 37). Theoretical sensitivity focuses on the researcher's ability to filter her data according to her experience, being an active part of the research process (Strauss and Corbin 1990: 42). Theoretical sampling can help us during the coding by clarifying how our collected data is connected with our research (Morse and Clark 2019: 145-166). Through the coding process, we identify our data to, finally, categorise them and generate the definitions that will help us analyse our subjects (Charmaz 1995: 37; Bryant 2017: 118-119).

From the different theoretical approaches that have appeared since discovering grounded theory, we accept Cathy's Charmaz constructivist version for our research. According to Charmaz (2014: 12), there is a multi-level and structured social reality, of which the researcher remains an inextricable part. While the action is at the core of the theory, grounded theory's coding process aims to stay in active communication with the participants' experiences, constructing the reality around us without explaining it (Mills et al. 2006: 12; Charmaz 2007: 398). Charmaz acknowledged three coding levels during the coding process: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Each of them drives us deeper into our data until we finally generate our theory. Except for that, during the coding process, we will compare our data for differences and similarities in what is known as the constant comparative method (Niedbalski and Slezak 2019: 96-97).

In the current research, we attempt to answer questions of how and why (Jones 2009: 27) by adopting the abductive approach. Having an active interaction with our research field, we can control our data in continuous theoretical sampling while importing our views to the research field. Finally, we have to highlight a counter-argument to using grounded theory instead of using discourse analysis. In our case, our interest is directed to a specific period in which particular events are happening, answering how those events affect a core governmental policy, referring to the control of the pandemic. Discourse analysis offers us the ability to focus on how the participants speak and the dynamics their contribution hide, a different target for the one we will set.

Finally, it is significant to mention using the MAXQDA software to support our data analysis. MAXQDA belongs to a rising number of similar software used during the last decades in qualitative research, known as CAQDAS (Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Systems). Such software contributes to better handling and managing our data creatively while gaining time (Corbin 2015, 209; Costa et al. 2017: 4). Except for the above, we can design a hierarchical coding system suitable for grounded theory analyses (Rettie 2008: 499). Following the philosophy of grounded theory, codes and memos are core during the MAXQDA process, sketching the researcher's profile as the decision-maker for their content (Kuckartz and Radiker 2019: 19, 52-53; Woolf and Silver 2018: 80). Adding MAXQDA to our work will help us delve deeper into our data, understanding how both sides approached the emerging crises and finally generate a theory regarding anti-systemic discourse in Greek society.

After briefly presenting the methodology we will follow and the software we will use for our coding process, we must present how the empirical part is connected with our research. We collected our sample by researching the Greek government's official announcements, which covered March 2020 until September 2020. Thus, we had the opportunity to focus on the produced discourse at the beginning of the pandemic until a second lockdown was deemed a unique solution. Moreover, we directed our sample to those announcements that focused on the function of the Church and the society, splitting our analysis into two levels: 1) the clash between the government and the scientists, from the one side, and the church from the other, and 2) the clash

between the government and the anti-mask supporters. Our data were collected by those announcements of anti-pandemic measures that affected the Greek Orthodox Church and the ministerial and scientific announcements regarding the function of the Church during the examined period. Both of the two levels of the current analysis based their data on online newspaper articles that covered the situation, while in the case of the Church, we could also draw from its official site. For the second level of our research, we attempted to focus on the governmental positions regarding the diffusion of anti-mask supporters. Lacking any official announcements for the government, using articles from the online versions of newspapers was the only viable solution. Nevertheless, as we will further explain, we had difficulties collecting material regarding the anti-mask supporters, as they were prosecuted for judicial investigation, considering a danger for public health.

After briefly presenting the methodology we will follow and the data we collected, we must construct our research question, which will help us collect and analyse the data (Strauss and Corbin 1990: 35, 38). Our research question attempts to clarify *how the pandemic crisis has transformed anti-systemic rhetoric in Greek society*.

2. The Coding Process

The current part will focus on the coding process we followed to reach our results and how the methodology we followed helped us construct our theory. The selection of Greece in the current research comes from its pivotal role in evaluating the pandemic's determinants and consequences. Thus, our research interest lies in the period since March 2020, affecting both social and political scenarios. Our sample consists of the Greek government's official announcements and the reactions to them – by the church and the society – until September 2020, while a second lockdown was deemed to represent a unique solution.

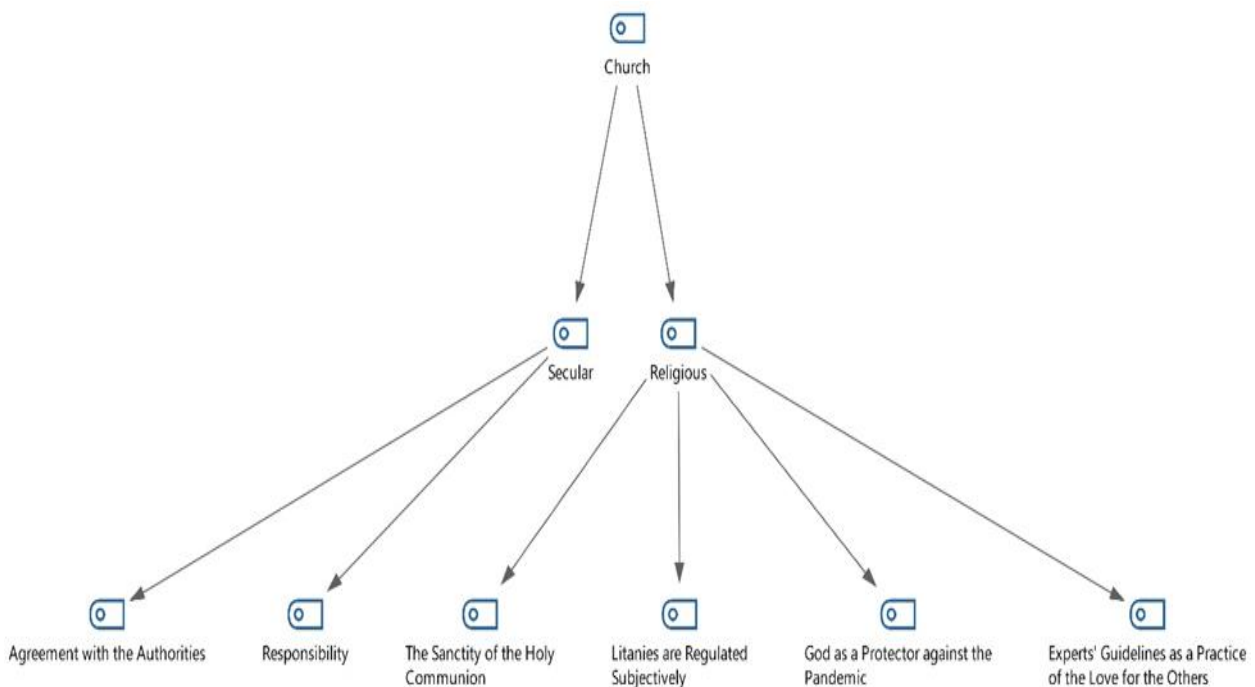
As we have previously mentioned, the constructivist grounded theory will be our methodology in the current research. Therefore, our coding process will follow Charmaz's (2014: 109) scheme: *initial* and *focused* coding. During the initial coding, our focus will be directed to identify those definitions that matter for our research (Strauss and Corbin 1998: 101). The researcher interacts with the collected data, whether it consists of specific words or text abstracts (Charmaz 2006: 46). According to those criteria, we searched the official announcements of the Holy Synod and the statements from the Archbishop and other Metropolitans during the examined period. Our research gave us 20 cases regarding the church's approach to the COVID-19 pandemic. We copied those cases to the MAXQDA software to better analyse the collected data, creating a document group for the examined period. In every record we created in the document group, we added the person who spoke, the body of his speech, the title, the date, and the link to the article. In that way, we could secure the transparency of our data.

For our initial coding process, we used *in vivo* coding to better imprint the speaker's content and understand how he acts in a specific moment (Tracy 2013: 189; Charmaz 2014: 134). Thus, by mirroring our participants' experiences, we strengthen our analysis's relevance and fit (Charmaz 2014: 133). Except for that, we analysed our data *word-by-word* to highlight better the structure and the content of the words and the researcher's feeling while analysing them (Charmaz 2014: 114, 124). Notwithstanding the importance of the coding process, the use of *memos* is of utmost importance to the grounded theory. In parallel with the data analysis, the researcher records his thoughts, activating abduction and avoiding importing existing theories. Using these memos will direct us to the final steps of our analysis and the creation of our theory.

After analysing how the grounded theory applies to our research, we will continue our analysis in the two levels we described: the Church's role during the pandemic and the rise and diffusion of the anti-mask supporters in the Greek society. The search of the official announcements of the Holy Synod and statements

from the Archbishop and other Metropolitans gave us 20 cases connected with the COVID-19 pandemic. From those cases, we created 51 codings. At that level, our data consists of many similar codes and a looseness regarding the cohesion of our categories. Thus, we move to focused coding, where we will delve into our first-level codings, creating and connecting categories with sub-categories (Charmaz 2014: 138). Through the MAXQDA software, we construct a hierarchical coding system. Specifically, from the menu MAXMaps, we choose the hierarchical code-subcodes model to optimise the relations between our codes. Thus, we construct the following model:

Figure 1 – Church Hierarchical Code-Subcodes Model.

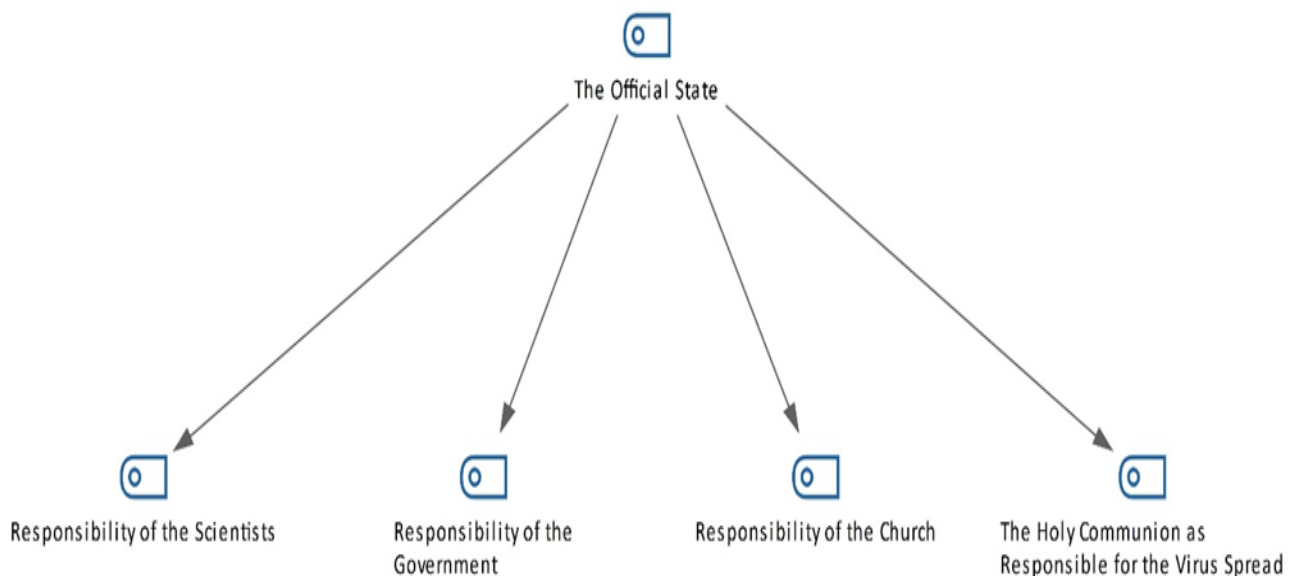


According to the previous model, our coding process provided us with two core categories that describe the church's discourse: the secular and the religious. The secular category consists of the sub-categories "Responsibility" and "Agreement with the Authorities". The religious category consists of "The Sanctity of the Holy Communion", "Litanies are Regulated Subjectively", "God as a Protector Against the Pandemic", and "Experts' Guidelines as a Practice of the Love for the Others". We assume there is an attempt from the church's side to stand on both sides. Nevertheless, later, we will describe how the relationship between those two categories is much more dynamic than the model presents us. That argument will be based on the content of our categories and the role of our core category.

Regarding the contributions of the official state (meaning the government and the scientists) on the public debate about the church's role during the examined period, we have just seven cases to observe, a significant reduction in comparison with the church's activity during the same period. Following the same methodological steps as in Figure 1, we have created four categories. Those were "Responsibility of the Scientists",

“Responsibility of the Government”, “Responsibility of the Church”, “The Holy Communion as Responsible for the Virus Spread”. Our coding process gave us the following model:

Figure 2 – The Official State Hierarchical Code-Subcodes Model.



2.1 Analysis

The categories that appeared after coding the contributions of the official state on the dialogue are much more neutral, as they generalise the existing problem but avoid touching its central nature. In the following chapter, we will analyse our data, attempting to sketch how the public debate was constructed in Greece during the first wave of the pandemic.

2.1.1 The clash between the secular and the religious

The first European state being hit by the pandemic was Italy (Belligoni 2020); hence, the Greek government had some time to prepare and secure the state. As we can see, the beginning of the pandemic finds the Greek government in total agreement with the church regarding the handle of the pandemic (Triantafyllou 2020), while the scientists were struggling to identify the nature of the new coronavirus (Karagiwrgos 2020).

“His Beatitude highlighted to the Prime Minister that, as always, the Greek Orthodox Church stands by the side of the Greek State, which will assist with all its powers and the ways in every topic that pertains to the Greeks... The experts, both from our country and the World Health Organisation, assure that there is no reason for panic and that most of those who will get sick will present symptoms familiar to the flu. Thus, we follow only the official announcements and what the scientists advice us.” (Triantafyllou 2020)

“We deal with a dynamic situation that develops every day. In the current period, I prefer to help with my experience and knowledge and convince the State and the Church regarding what needs to be done to achieve the shortest damage in the Public Health.” (Ilias Mosialos interviewed in Karagiwrgos 2020)

The split came only when the discussion turned to the Holy Communion, a doctrinal topic for the Greek Orthodox Church. The scientists attempted to highlight their scepticism regarding the safety of the Holy Communion during a pandemic (LIFO 2020). Nevertheless, they did not avoid the Greek Orthodox Church’s official announcement about the continuation of the Holy Communion mystery (IN.GR 2020). Such an announcement came when the scientists examined how saliva and ordinary spoons strengthened the spread of the disease. Moreover, we have to highlight the different approach of the Greek Orthodox Church regarding the Holy Communion mystery. The Greek Orthodox Church was divided regarding handling the pandemic. At first, the church came closer to the ultra-conservative Orthodox Church of Romania than to Western Orthodox Churches, which adopted the appropriate measures to securitise the Holy Communion (Baboulias 2020). With the agency of the Ecumenical Patriarch Vartholomaios, such disagreements were curbed, shifting Church’s positions to support the government’s measures against pandemic (Grigoriadis 2020).

After the pandemic reached Greece, the government took measures that ended with a national lockdown on March 26 (Stamouli 2020). Nevertheless, the absence of specific measures regarding the function of churches during the first weeks of the pandemic in Greece created a peculiar reality, especially for the health staff. There were complaints from the hospital staff that priests were visiting patients to commune with them, even though they had been diagnosed with COVID-19 (CNN 2020).

“We cannot blame the priest, and we cannot blame those that call the priest to take communion. The National Organisation of the Public Health (EODY) and the government need to be responsible and give specific directions for defending public health... In parallel, she mentioned that despite banning the visiting hours in hospitals, the patients get communed by the priests, at risk of their life (Daphne Katsimpa, the president of the Organisation of Thessaloniki’s Hospital Doctors in CNN, 2020).”

During the same period, we can observe that the centre-right government of New Democracy (ND) had an unspecific position regarding implementing the measures on the church. As ND is traditionally a party with deep links with the church, we have both pro- and anti-Communion voices, presenting us both the conservative and the more liberal groups of the party (TO VIMA 2020). SYRIZA, the left opposition, attempted to capitalise on the weak management of the first days of the pandemic, blaming the experts and the Ministry of Health for the irresponsible stand on the virus diffusion. Once more, the blame game is directed to the political actors and not to the church. Thus, we can observe the significance of religion across the Greek political spectrum, as the parties not opposing her positions.

The Continuous Holy Synod, the official representative of the Greek Orthodox Church, was open to cooperating with the Greek government, announcing the shortening of the religious mysteries on March 16 (EKKLISIA ONLINE 2020).

“(The Greek Orthodox Church) adopts every measure that activates the Greek State immediately to deal with the virus’ diffusion, and the same steps will follow to whatever else will be indicated regarding the virus’ outbreak during the next months (EKKLISIA ONLINE 2020).”

By representing herself as a responsible actor, the church acclaims a vital role in the Greek society during the current crisis, suggesting patience to the new situation, but clarifying that any changes have to be discussed by its officials before being accepted.

The Archbishop and other Metropolitans have repeatedly highlighted that responsibility. Simultaneously, they attempt to connect their stand with old Christian beliefs to provide a moral dimension to their decisions. Responsibility and action became the core of the Greek Church during the examined period, offering her an opportunity to acclaim a vital role in the new post-pandemic Greek society. Although a responsible and cooperative actor, the Greek Church has developed a thin line regarding its approach to scientific research, following their instructions, except when they focus on the Holy Communion.

Events like an on-the-road concert across Athens with the Greek singer Alkistis Protopsalti (Lakasas 2020) and the official statement of the viral diseases doctor Eleni Giamarellou (ETHNOS 2020), regarding the absence of dangers of a COVID-19 infection through the Holy Communion, added to the confusion of the official state. In the same period, the Greek Church had a more cohesive position, acknowledging even the importance of transferring the celebrations of Orthodox Easter for the end of May instead of the middle of April (Ziwziou 2020). Even though the Greek Church seemed to have specific plans for her next moves during the pandemic, she could not avoid being criticised on social media for her decisions (ETHNOS 2020).

Due to the weather's improvement after May, lockdown ended, and life normalised to some degree. Consequently, for the next three months, the question of the Holy Communion was not on the public agenda. The combination of the tourist period with the precocious loosening of the measures brought back to debate the Holy Communion issue in early August. The celebration of the Holy Mary on August 15 – one of the most significant celebrations for the Eastern Orthodox Christians – was the reason for new disagreements between the Church and the State. Although the Church officials have repeatedly claimed they follow the government's measures, both at the local and national level, there were essential differentiations. At the national level, just ten days before the celebrations, the Holy Synod's press representative argued they had no information from the state regarding the function of the churches. Therefore, he explained that their operation would remain a decision of the local religious officers (TA NEA 2020). Furthermore, to add to the government's confusion, the measures announced on August 14 included the Church in a diffusive way, having just some strong recommendations (EFSYN.GR 2020).

September came with a gradual rise in the number of infections, questioning the government's narrative regarding the country's success story against the pandemic. In parallel, scientists were sceptical about the decisions to combat the number of infections by interrupting the economy but leaving untouched the Holy Communion (ATHENS VOICE 2020).

“ Today... before stopping economic activities, and close businesses, the Holy Communion needs to be stopped” (Manolis Dermitzakis, Professor of Genetics, ATHENS VOICE 2020).

“Let someone provide us with clues about the diffusion through the Holy Communion. But that will not happen. We have priests who consumed the Holy Communion, and they suffered nothing. In any pandemic” (Metropolitan of the town Filippii, ATHENS VOICE 2020).

The result was the return of the topic to the public debate, with the Greek Orthodox Church emphasising once more her unquestioning belief about the safety of the Holy Communion. While the number of infections was steadily rising, Metropolitans often appeared in public, not wearing masks or claiming it is God's decision which places will be affected by the COVID-19 to implement more measures. The debate about the safety of the Holy Communion has not finished yet, as the scientific society remains divided on the topic (ORTHODOXIA NEWS AGENCY 2020).

2.1.2 The diffusion of anti-mask supporters

From the middle of July, the number of infections had increased again, forcing the government to seek alternative measures. Thus, the mandatory use of a mask on closed spaces was discussed to confine the rise of infected cases (CNN.gr 2020). Such a decision came after the Greek economy normalised and the country welcomed its first tourists, advertising its safety against the COVID-19. Moreover, during the first wave of the pandemic, the use of a mask on closed spaces was optional, confusing the Greek society about the government's handling of the situation. Nevertheless, on July 31, a decision was published in the *Newspaper of the Government*, adjusting the use of the mask in small businesses, markets and worship places (Newspaper of the Government 2020: 32052-32053).

After the middle of August, the return to schools during the pandemic was the new topic on the political agenda. As soon as it became noted that the mask will be mandatory, we had mobilisations from parents across Greece. Their primary arguments were how their children would breathe, how they will understand their teachers and how they will socialise with the other children. By creating groups on Facebook to promote their interests, they revealed their ideas about the current situation. They achieved a new conspiracy scheme, arguing in favour of a plan against their children. Their role was the revealing of such plans and their fight to reverse them and save their children. Due to the Greeks bias for conspiracy theories and the ambiguity regarding the pandemic's nature, the group reached some 64.000 followers. A district attorney was appointed to search for the diffusion of conspiracy theories, an order being given by the Minister for Civil Protection, Michalis Chrysochoidis (Giagkinis 2020). Soon after the search began, the group disappeared from Facebook.

The peak of the debate had representatives from both sides speaking to tv-shows (TO VIMA 2020). The fascinating fact that requires more research has to do with the political beliefs of anti-mask supporters. Although the field has been unresearched yet, it is deemed a connection between far-right and nationalists supporters – keen on conspiracy theories – and the anti-mask supporters. The most significant example remains the case of the leader of the *United Macedonians*, Dimitris Siampazis. Siampazis is infamous for organising a racist barbeque party across a centre for refugees and migrants at Diavata Thessalonikis (ETHNOS 2020). Although reporters recorded parents announcing their disagreement for having their children use masks (TA NEA 2020), the government's interference and the justice outnumbered the cases until the end of the month. Penalties were established while the district attorney examined the accusations against the anti-mask supporters (HuffPost Greece 2020). While the importance of the anti-mask supporters has declined on the public discourse, the country remains divided regarding the pandemic's management.

Despite the case of Dimitris Siampazis, we cannot conclude about the party identification of those involved in the anti-mask protest. During the same period, extreme-right blogs like MAVROS KRINOS reproduced significant conspiracy theories regarding the pandemic and the governmental handlings. Nevertheless, the use of masks was not their unique focus. Hellenic Solution – Kyriakos Velopoulos' populist radical right party that entered the Greek Parliament in 2019 – attempted to represent the anti-mask supporters. On the other side of the political spectrum, the anti-mask position was promoted by some extreme-left, non-parliamentary organisations, arguing that they were reacting to the governmental restrictions of their liberties. Although reactions to the use of the masks found support on the margins of the political spectrum, they failed to receive massive support across the electoral body.

3. Creating the Theory

Having completed our research, we return to our research question. The ten-years experience of the economic crisis in Greece was combined after 2014 with a refugee and migration crisis, boosting anti-systemic rhetoric across Greek society. Even though the political forces that primarily benefited from those crises have lost their parliamentary representation, their discourse still exists among Greek society. The new crisis, a health one this time, found a fertile ground to be spread.

By focusing on the Church's case, we attempted to understand what hides in the public clash we experienced during the previous months. As our model presented (Figure 1), we can split Church's discourse on a secular and a religious level. The secular one has more codings in our sample, highlighting the attempts from the religious officers to present a more mainstream profile during a difficult period for the country. Nevertheless, the religious level sketches the borderlines of such an approach. The Church seems to cooperate only until her interests are attacked. Even though the core explanation has to do with managing the pandemic, the Church prompts us that she is unwilling to step back from her doctrinal theses. Simultaneously, the official state remains more neutral against the Church. The unwillingness of the state to break its traditional links with the Greek Orthodox Church has been strongly criticised, especially on social media. By researching the official announcements from both sides, we found nothing like a public clash regarding the management of the pandemic crisis and the function of Churches during the examined period. By contrast, we met a fragile balance between both sides, with religious, mostly, voices with a more radical profile against the state policies. The Greek Church's coexistence with the conservative centre-right government of the New Democracy marginalised the Church's radical voices favouring a better relationship with the political authorities. Nevertheless, when the government attempted to shift Church's doctrinal topics, like the Holy Communion, the Greek Church entered a defence position.

Focusing on the anti-mask supporters, we have to consider them as a part of the ten-years crisis Greece is experiencing. During that period, we observed a shift from mainstream to anti-systemic politics, which affected the public discourse in Greece. However, their appearance is deemed more opportunistic, even though they contain diverse political forces. Their online activity resulted in justice's interference, ending with the disappearance of the online groups they have created, leaving us with no specific content of their uploads. Notwithstanding the disgraceful end of their activity, they were part of the first wave of the pandemic in Greece. While we were moving to the end of the year – with a second lockdown approaching – the discussions regarding the successful vaccines were thickened, and anti-vaccine voices appeared. Therefore, it seems we are in front of a new mobilisation, starting once more from social media. Following a different direction from the doctrinal positions and the political opportunism the Greek Church supported, the anti-mask supporters highlighted conspiracies as a keen explanation to the new reality. Such an argument brought them closer to the extreme left's anti-capitalist narrative and the extreme-right's nationalistic, anti-semitic and anti-globalisation narrative.

After briefly describing what our models and the categories of our research have indicated to us, we now return to our research question regarding anti-systemic rhetoric in Greek society. Such rhetoric has been used from both the political extremes applying to the current political agenda. As the COVID-19 pandemic represents Greece's third crisis in a decade, we can highlight some similarities. Applying Matthew Dentith's scheme (2015, 32), there was a conspirator, a secrecy condition, and a goal condition in each case. Specifically, it was believed that Germany, as the conspirator, planned the economic crisis (the secrecy condition). The outbreak of the refuge and migration crisis (another secrecy condition) in 2014 was characterised by various conspirators that attempted to undermine the existence of the Greek nation: Zionists, Turkish, and other

Europeans who use Greece to avoid the arrival of refugee flow to their countries. Finally, in the COVID-19 pandemic, the focus was on the attempts to destroy the Greek nation by implying compulsory measures, like lockdowns, the use of masks and the vaccination. The blame game was directed to the same conspirators each time: international organisations (EU), Zionists (antisemitism) and experts (as in every crisis they attempted to explain to the public the situation). While the target remains the same – experts, political elites, and popular conspiracy theories – the result (the goal condition) fails to confirm conspirators' plans: the Greek nation successfully overcomes the barriers and continues to exist.

The pandemic crisis has succeeded in emphasizing the absence of a secular state in Greece and the attractiveness of conspiracy theories in Greek society. It has also succeeded in bringing in the spotlight, a discourse the Greek society reproduces in every crisis. The radical transformation of the Greek political scene since 2012 offered the opportunity for electoral gains to populist powers. Rising across the political spectrum, those parties were keen on conspiracy theories, following van Prooijen et al. (2015: 576) scheme regarding the connection between extreme-right and scientific conspiracy theories and extreme-left and anti-capitalist conspiracy theories. Following Lipsy's definition of crises, we recognise the pandemic crisis as *a situation that threatens significant harm to a country's population or basic values and compels a political response under time pressure and uncertainty*. Applying that definition in our research helps us argue that *the pandemic crisis surprised the political body, leaving it alone in handling the crisis and directing it to political neutrality in favour of keeping balances with the other social actors*.

Regarding anti-systemic rhetoric in Greek society, compared with the Indignados movement during the first years of the economic crisis, the reactions are feeble. Even in comparison with Western Europe, the reactions had a lesser dynamic. Matching and comparing the pandemic's rhetoric with the public debate during the refugee and migration crisis, we can observe a political manipulation in the second crisis that lacks from the pandemic period. Nevertheless, we cannot skip the similarities regarding the construction of conspiracy theories in Greek society. Considering the above, we assume that the pandemic crisis infiltrates the political spectrum by reducing the power of political parties in favour of a "pure" anti-systemic rhetoric, often based on the position of other social actors while undermining the importance of experts.

Consequently, we argue that *the pandemic crisis has brought a new anti-systemic discourse at the vanguard, based on conspiracy theories. According to these theories, Greek society is threatened by the pandemic, the masks, and vaccines. All the above belong to a worldwide plan to undermine the public health of the Greek nation. Simultaneously, the Greek Orthodox Church reactivated as an important social actor. Basing its arguments on doctrinal positions, the Greek Church has presented itself as the protector of religion and the nation. Finally, anti-systemic discourse is deemed to be no more a characteristic of populist parties. The civil society – already keen on such discourse in Greece – has replaced populist parties as the primary producer of such discourse*.

4. Conclusion

Drawing our conclusion, in the current research, we attempted sketching how the first wave of the pandemic affected political actors' discourse in Greece. Acknowledging the Church's historical significance for the Greek state, we focused on the dialogue between those two actors, highlighting their balance between cooperation and clash. The focus was mainly directed to the doctrinal topic of the Holy Communion. In the second part, our focus was on the conspiracy scheme of anti-mask supporters, which was a pan-European phenomenon. Although we had the opportunity to delve deeply into our data on the Church-State debate and construct the view they had about the crisis, that was not the reality in the case of anti-mask supporters. Their problems with

the law occurred to the disappearance of their online activity, leaving us only with the journalists' cover. That lack of data results in a partial understanding of the transformations of anti-systemic rhetoric during the pandemic. Nevertheless, we can observe a shift in the producers of anti-systemic rhetoric, as it seems to infiltrate the Greek society, having no political sign, just a temporary dynamic.

However, it offers us the opportunity to focus more on the material we need to bring in light to understand the consequences of the pandemic to the public discourse. Thus, a focus on other social media, like Twitter, may offer us more material for the examined period. It is of utmost importance to survey a population sample to understand its more profound beliefs and thoughts regarding the current crisis. Another direction our research could follow is in a more comparative perspective, as both the Church and the anti-mask supporters presented different dynamic across Europe.

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Notes on the contributor George Kordas, PhD Candidate at the Department of Political Science and History, Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences, Athens, Greece

g.kordas@kpe-panteion.gr

<https://www.kpe-panteion.gr/en/about-us/scientific-associates/item/276-george-kordas>