

Young people and the police during the pandemic: the case of Greece

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Abstract

This chapter interrogates the tension and conflict between young people and the police during the COVID-19 pandemic in Greece. As early as mid-March 2020, the aggressive lockdown approach featuring curfews and other restrictions on movement in public spaces brought the police to the foreground of pandemic control. Police actions affected young people severely as they involved disruptions in education, social activities, and lifestyles. Moreover, the government's narrative and police enforced policies led to a gradual redefinition of young people in public discourse as a particularly risky and allegedly 'problematic' category, furthering the economic and social marginalisation of young people since the onset of austerity in the 2010s. We argue for an understanding of the growing tension between young people and the police as an instance of the neoliberal management of youth populations in contemporary Greece.

Introduction

Young people have occupied a prominent place in Greek public discourse and actual history, either as an active social and political force for change or as a preferential scapegoat social category, depending on the vicissitudes of the country's social and political situation. For example, strong social movements of young people, particularly student movements (e.g., Lazos 1987; Rigos 2010; 2016), have shaped Greece's political history at critical turns, such as the 1973 *Polytechnio* revolt against the military dictatorship or the sustained radical political mobilisations of the late 1970s; equally, in the more socially and politically oppressive times of the post-civil war period, the vilification of attitudes and lifestyles of young people even

gained legislative footing with the notorious Law 4000/1958 severely penalising young ‘troublemakers’ (Avdela 2013; Valsami 2017).

The COVID-19 pandemic and its management have added yet another intriguing chapter in the tense history of modern Greek society's relationship with its young people. The prompt for this latest chapter of tension and conflict can be readily found in Greece's approach towards the control of the pandemic, which is currently recognised as one of the most severe pandemic control regimes in Europe, recording moderate to major violations on pandemic management aspects such as ‘discriminatory measures’, ‘derogations of rights’ or ‘abusive enforcement’ (V-Dem 2021). Greece's government introduced a control regime featuring curfews and monitoring of movement in public spaces, as well as fiscal and other administrative measures as early as mid-March 2020. This regime also brought the police to the foreground as the predominant mechanism for the enforcement of the various measures, and, accordingly, police visibility in public spaces has risen to unprecedented levels since. The force of these controls has affected disproportionately a range of economically and socially vulnerable populations, but their effect was particularly severe on young people.

Arguably, however, there is a more complex reality shaping the present situation of young Greeks. This brief case study offers a chronicle of the increasing tension between young people and the police as a device to unpack the longer-term structural factors driving what we understand as the redefinition of youth as an economic and social category in an increasingly neoliberalised Greece. The chapter is straightforwardly structured in two parts, the first examining the official responses to young people in the context of the management of the pandemic, the second outlining how these relate to wider recent economic and social policy

trends in Greece. The concluding section offers some reflections on the longer-term implications of the pandemic management on the position of young people in Greek society.

Covid-19 in Greece: Managing the pandemic, controlling young people

With news of the rising death toll in neighbouring Italy and the first confirmed cases reaching the country in the end of February 2020, the Greek government laid out its reaction by means of a series of special legislative decrees, issued on the basis of the extraordinary procedure of article 44 of the Greek Constitution – essentially, time-limited executive orders requiring retrospective ratification by parliament. This exceptional framework authorised wide-ranging interventions and restrictions in the operations of the public services and private businesses, as well as restrictions to transportation, access to and movement in public spaces.

Initially, in early March this response practically involved an escalation of daily public health advice and partial measures, including local lockdowns, closures of schools, restaurants, and other entertainment venues. The full gamut of the government's preferred approach that would define the character of the lived experience of the pandemic in Greece for approximately a year was revealed on the 23rd of March with the imposition of a full national lockdown. In addition to social distancing guidelines and closures, the lockdown involved severe restrictions to most movement in public spaces except for six types of movement (e.g., on grounds of healthcare, essential goods shopping, carer duties). This system, which remained in place for more than a year, required any individual to give prior notification and receive approval of any movement via a special SMS message, as well as to carry personal identification documents and proof of the declaration of the movement at all times.

Complementing this system, additional restrictions in interregional and intercity movements were introduced, giving the police a prominent role in the enforcement of the measures. Additionally, another controversial provision, arguably in violation of the constitutional right of assembly, authorised the police to issue bans on any assemblies in open spaces, regardless of the observance of social distancing precautions. Overall, with the capacity of the Greek government to invest substantially in public health infrastructure remaining doubtful (Lytras & Tsiodras 2020; 2021), the key characteristic of the country's response to managing the pandemic has been a heavy emphasis on restrictions to movement in and access to public spaces.

While the onus of such emphasis was felt across the population, particularly those who still had to be physically present at their workplace, patterns of tension between police and young people spontaneously congregating in squares and other open spaces began to emerge soon after the imposition of the measures. Such gatherings were arguably inevitable effects of the restrictions, since the latter were particularly disruptive of typical young people activities, such as school, after-school education (Kassotakis & Verdis 2013), and youth lifestyles more generally. In line with wider public order police tactics in Greece, the police response has involved the deployment of riot or other specialised police squads, often leading to violence including the use of tear gas, in the effort to disperse the targeted groups (e.g., Proto Thema 2020; Tvxs.gr 2020). The frequency in the use of such tactics in public spaces, not only in the capital city of Athens but even in smaller towns, marked the everyday experience of young, triggering growing discontent.

As a result, in early 2021, young people's stance to the pandemic control measures gained a more conscious oppositional character as the government proceeded with controversial new

legislation and other public order measures; such were the enactment of new legislation on demonstrations, and university access, campus security and the establishment of a special public police body intended to operate on university campuses (Dimou 2021). Confrontations of young people with the police reached a culmination in March 2021, when following police beating of young people in the square of residential suburb Nea Smyrni in Athens, a large spontaneous demonstration ensued, leading again to a violent police crackdown (Papanicolaou & Rigakos 2021).

The tough police stance has not been unrelated with what appears to be the official government approach towards young people in the context of pandemic control. In November 2020, Prime Minister Mitsotakis identified young people as nothing less than a public health enemy:

“We know today which were the causes of the spreading of the virus. We know it. [...] The basic cause of the spreading of the virus in Greece and across Europe was young people having fun. [...] Obviously young people are more prone to such behaviours. [...] we have given constant battles [...] against the public health enemy” (Hellenic Parliament 2020: 2321, our translation).

This vilifying view of young people, which has been amplified and reinforced by the largely government friendly major media in Greece, has created considerable political controversy. As the case of young people stands out among a range of political debates surrounding the handling of the pandemic, in the next section we proceed to explore more closely the wider context of these events.

A bleak future made worse: What do young Greeks react against?

Arguably, the Greek conservative government's approach towards the population of young people during the pandemic has been a conscious extension of the neoliberalisation process that Greek society has been undergoing since the 1990s, and particularly since the onset of the austerity economic adjustment programmes of the 2010s. In this context, young people are being shaped as a flexible and obedient social category under expanding free market conditions. What cannot be achieved directly by neoliberal economic and social policies, it is managed by increasing police coercion.

Let us consider more closely the deteriorating economic and social condition of young people in Greece. Insecurity, poverty, and extensive disparities between those in and out of work shape a reality for young people that is markedly harsher than high general poverty levels, the inevitable result of a decade of austerity, would justify (UNICEF 2021). It is characteristic that during 2019, the at-risk-of-poverty rate for children and adolescents in Greece amounted to 21.1% after social transfers, while the at-risk-of-poverty rate for unemployed persons (including youth) was even higher and amounted to 45.3% (Hellenic Statistical Authority 2021).

The growth of youth unemployment, a dearth of adequate training schemes and cuts in social security have all meant that young people leave full-time education facing an uncertain, precarious future - for many, no future at all. In November 2021, youth unemployment rates in Greece reached a staggering 39%, the highest rate among EU countries, where the average rate was at 15.4% (Eurostat 2022). Moreover, in July 2021, 19.4% of Greek youth (young persons under 25) have been reported in the NEET category (OECD 2022). The economic crisis, now ongoing for more than a decade, combined with the pandemic, has affected not only the lives of the less-advantaged young people, but also the lives of middle-class youth. They are affected

by spiralling downward social mobility, and the opportunities for a better life are extremely limited, even for university graduates and highly qualified individuals (ILO 2020a; Labrianidis & Pratsinakis 2016). As a consequence, a considerable number of highly skilled young Greeks have been emigrating, mostly for reasons related to employment, in order to improve their career prospects and earn a satisfactory income (Labrianidis & Pratsinakis 2016).

The initiatives taken by the Government to address the impact of the pandemic on young people have focused on doubtful measures, including: provision of computers and tablets to pupils and students – through vouchers worth 200 euros (within the framework of the ‘Digital Care programme’); provision of a prepaid credit card (known also as ‘freedom pass’) worth 150 euros and a month’s worth of free phone data to young people aged 18-25 as reward or incentive towards vaccination, called ‘a gift of gratitude’; introduction of a new supplementary pension plan (based on choosing among three investment plans); a bonus of 1,200 euros for all those aged 18 to 29 who would get their first job within 2022 (i.e. those who would contribute to social security for the first time), for the first 6 months of work; the end of a connection tariff for young people aged up to 29 years using mobile phones; and a reimbursement of fuel expenses for young farmers during 2022.

Theoretical approaches to youth - and accordingly, to the way political authorities treat young people and develop policies for them - fall in Greece basically within two general categories: the first perceives the youth as a ‘danger and threat to the stability of the status quo’, with violent, reprehensible, problematic behaviour that needs to be controlled; the second approaches young people as the a priori hope of society for its improvement and reproduction, a group deemed vulnerable and in need of protection (Giannaki 2016). According to Giannaki, ‘it would perhaps not be an exaggeration to argue that in some cases, the concept of youth is conceived as an axial co-contextualization of Good, through the idealisation of the young, or

as an axial co-contextualization of Evil, where the young takes the form of the “folk devil” (Giannaki 2016: 79). The neoliberal approach to young people clearly falls within the first category of the above scheme; what occasionally differs is the emphasis that political authorities place on addressing the problem of ‘youth’, depending on political orientation. The logic of neoliberal governance is characterised by a downgrading of the value and the role of young people, who are often seen as another intractable and complex social problem.

In this context, and as ties to family, work, the welfare state, and other formal institutions are disintegrating, young people are forced to deal alone with a series of emerging risks, crises and opportunities. In other words, there is a ‘privatisation’ of (youth) problems. Thus, the interpretation of youth unemployment ‘as a consequence of a lack of qualifications on the part of the individual’ (Furlong & Cartmel 1997: 4) seems to be underpinning official discourses in today’s Greece; in this respect, young people are called upon to deal with their own problem by creating their own jobs. This is a typical example of the neoliberal logic that underpins most of the youth policies in Greece today which suggests less governmental involvement and greater reliance on market forces, resulting in the construction of ‘a new and increasingly exclusionary condition of being young’ (Mizen 2004). Thus, the problem of unemployment is put on young people, welfare programmes are withdrawn and replaced by training programmes as a means ‘to discipline the young to the new economic environment and job market’ (France 2007), and welfare benefits are connected to job searching and availability (Pechtelidis & Giannaki 2014).

Conclusion

It is a well- established fact in the research literature that young people are typically treated by the police as second tier-citizens, or non-citizens (Waddington 1999; Loader 1996): as police

scholar Egon Bittner once pointed out, juveniles are subject to almost continual surveillance and are accountable to adults for virtually everything they do. They not only cause trouble, they are trouble (Bittner 1976). However, when considering the wider evolving structural context of young people in Greece, their experience of escalating police authoritarianism goes beyond the above 'typical' friction.

The relationship of young Greeks with public space, more than an expression of being young (moving in public space, meeting their peers, expressing themselves freely without the supervision of the elders, enjoying life), has been inextricably linked with the lifestyles and patterns of social and political activity of the period before the crisis and the neoliberal transition. The newly emerging police authoritarianism in Greece has been targeting these patterns of activity, and, equally, their characteristic vehicles, such as social spaces for political activism, cultural creation and experimentation and acts of social solidarity. In the new context, shaped by neoliberalism, public space has become the laboratory, where a new disciplining of young people is being moulded, the pandemic providing an opportunity and vehicle for expediting this process. While the more immediately measurable impacts of the pandemic on youth mental health, well-being, socialisation and lifestyle are considerable (ILO 2020b; Boscovic & O'Donovan 2021), we would argue that this wider transition is just as consequential.

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