On a Society Increasingly Turning Fascistic: The Exploitation of the Pandemic by the Republic of Cyprus (Online Article)

Historical Note

This online article was published in November of 2020 on the blog Cypriot Footnotes and was signed with the pseudonym Delirium.

Content

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The article attempts to present a summary of the ways that the Republic of Cyprus has been politically exploiting the covid-19 pandemic since February of 2020. With the employed measures and the conditions of the pandemic continuously changing, in parallel with the general dominance of misinformation, the article is an attempt to paint a more general picture in relation to the authoritarian approach that has been taken by the Cypriot state since the beginning of the pandemic. Its main focus is the documentation of the authoritarian policies that the state has 'legitimized' on the pretext of protecting public health; and which appear to have reached the level of general normalization within broader society. The present text does not aim to downplay the general health policies that are in place - it tries, however, to demystify the “medicalization” of specific political decisions that are presented as neutral and necessary on the pretext of the public health crisis that we are all experiencing.



The first measure that was taken addressing the pandemic was the partial closure of the buffer zone checkpoints in the end of February; alongside additional delays at the checkpoints which the Greek Cypriot government kept open [1]. Even before this particular decision, the government had attempted (and to a certain degree had succeeded) to impose unilateral changes to the Green Line Regulations, as was the case with the checking of car fuel at the checkpoints [2], the forbidding of crossing to tourists aiming to stay at Turkish Cypriot hotels [3], as well as the banning of crossing to third country nationals [4]. That the same government did not enforce any checks at the airports and the marine ports, or attempted to improve the public health system, which reached near collapse a month later, as whole hospital sections had to close [5], is a further indication of the political exploitation of the pandemic.

There was of course the reaction of the bi-communal reunification movement, which was attacked by the mass media on the pretext of minor tensions that took place between soldiers, policemen and protestors at the Ledra street checkpoint [5], followed by general intimation by the police, which began to trace and charge protestors [6]. The fact that conscripted soldiers were suddenly sent for the suppression of a political protest in a demilitarized area of the green line was sidelined, despite attempts to bring it into attention in social media circles. The second protest at Ledra street also brought with it more violent repression, with Turkish Cypriot protestors pepper-sprayed by Greek Cypriot policemen [7]. Despite how remarkable these reactions were, there is little indication that they were widely supported in the Greek Cypriot community - the reactions were restrained to one checkpoint, while their repression did not bring any further generalization of reactions, or a notably larger turnout of protestors in the street. In parallel, far-right protests were held for the closure of all checkpoints [8], while the Pancyprian Association of Reservist Commandos declared itself openly available for the suppression of pro-reunification protests [9].



A snapshot from the protests in Ledra street against the closing of the checkpoints. March, 2020. https://web.archive.org/web/20200308204801/https://politis.com.cy/politis-news/kypros/xana-sti-lidras-oi-unite-cyprus-diadilonoyn-kata-toy-kleisimatos-ton-odofragmaton .

With the virus arriving on both sides of the green line on the same day, in the south from the U.K. and in the north from Germany, a complete lock-down was imposed, with the total closure of both the checkpoints and of the airports [5]. The reunification movement essentially froze with the "medicalization" of political decisions, while fundamental liberties were violated with an unprecedented ease - through the employment of an outdated colonial law, the government abolished the rights of movement, work, assembly and peaceful protest, as well as the right of Cypriot citizens to repatriation, with thousands left locked out of the country without any plan for their repatriation, as the government was demanding the presentation of a negative test in order to allow them back into the country - in a period during which no state was providing precautionary tests to the general public, making their repatriation essentially impossible [10]. In parallel, the Republic of Cyprus began to openly violate international law on the pretext of the pandemic, blocking boats with refugees from reaching the southern shores of the island, leaving them to drown in the Mediterranean - with the tragic irony of boats filled with children being rescued by the illegal state of the north, after having been illegally turned back by the legal state of the south [11]. This horrid image was completed with the collective deportation of migrants in May [12].

While up to this day a state of emergency has not been declared, a process that is a prerequisite for the abolishment of fundamental rights in the constitution of the Republic of Cyprus; and which pre-supposes the ratification of the declaration by the parliament; and while we know that the decisions in the governmental decrees are unconstitutional [13, 14, 15], reactions on this first phase, beyond the families of people left stranded abroad, were few. The parliament left the executive to do as it pleased, the political parties adopted to the new reality and the citizens locked themselves in their homes. That in this phase the government abandoned thousands of citizens in north Cyprus and

abroad - from students, workers [16], parents [17] and patients that found themselves abroad for treatment [18], to the Greek Cypriot and Maronite enclaved and Turkish Cypriot workers and students [19, 20], de-facto abolishing them as citizens of the state, was normalized though a logic prioritizing the safety of the citizens living under the area controlled by the Republic of Cyprus, with south Cyprus presented, more or less, as a clean island surrounded by the dangerous, foreign virus. The level of understanding over human rights and general democratic values in the Greek Cypriot polity was left exposed, with self-interested attitudes and social cannibalism appearing to be the rule, rather than the exception in the “island of Aphrodite”.

The ‘dangerous’/‘irresponsible’ groups were continuously changing - from the ‘unreliable’ Turkish Cypriots we turned to migrants and asylum seekers, concluding with the ‘bad’, ‘irresponsible’ doctor that brought us the virus from England - while in the same period the government continued to present the U.K. as safe, up until its statements of the 9th of March, issuing no guidelines for the self-isolation of travellers arriving from the United Kingdom [21]. After the lock-down came into force, public discourse switched to the ‘spoiled’, ‘mummy's boys’ university students studying abroad that were going to infect us, in the end concluding with the citizens themselves, where every failure of the government was presented as the personal irresponsibility of the citizens [5]. With the initiation of the repatriation system, asylum seekers were driven out of hostels in which they were staying and were placed in the Pournara Emergency Reception Centre alongside the remaining inhabitants; under horrible living conditions, with the government turning the centre into a concentration camp [22]. Cypriot citizens and permanent residents arriving from abroad were placed in mandatory quarantine at the few hotels which remained open [23] - a system that came into force after the fiasco with the houses in Troodos, which the government was presenting as ready to host people for the quarantine period and in which the first hosted individuals discovered that sheets, blankets and soap had not even been placed [24]. The guarding of people was undertaken by the National Guard, further entrenching the army as an integral part in the managing of the crisis [23].



After he announced possible checks in houses by the police, the Minister of Interior Nicos Nouris responded to a question of a journalist in relation to the legality of the measures, with the statement that “time will show if they are legal” and that the government is creating “new administrative structures and measures […] often […] at the limit […] of the law”. March, 2020. https://gregorisioannou.blogspot.com/2020/11/blog-post.html .

The authoritarianism and incompetence of the Republic of Cyprus in relation to the pandemic has

been discussed in the article of sociologist Gregoris Ioannou [5], which remains the most notable text written so far. We can note here that beyond the unconstitutional abolition of fundamental rights and the lack of any decisions for the improvement of the public health system prior to the arrival of the virus in Cyprus, the enforcement of the decrees has further intensified the militarization of the Greek Cypriot polity - a process that has been accelerated in the last few years through military patrols in the walled city of Nicosia [25], the incorporation of citizens in the National Guard under the status of waged soldiers [26] and the permanent presence of armed non-commissioned officers at the airports [25]. With the pandemic, however, militarization has reached new levels - not merely through the employment of soldiers for the repression of protests, but also through the general utilization of the army in the enforcement of the decree relating to the restriction on the free movement of citizens [27], with the army now assigned a supporting role in the policing of the state's own citizens. Beyond the usual 'noise' on facebook, reactions have been in general non-existent, with the first, miserable march of the 'chemtards' in Limasol remaining the only example of some form of political reaction to the measures employed - a reaction that was founded on conspiracy theories, nationalist rhetoric and Christian dogmatism, rather than on the general incompetence of the state in managing the pandemic.

With the retraction of the lock-down at the end of May, the government declared scabies as a dangerous infectious disease, with the aim of continuing the enclosure of Pournara [29], locking migrants and refugees inside an unhealthy, overloaded and inadequate space [30], while the Cypriot economy was opening for the tourist summer season. The checkpoints were opened for a limited number of people, primarily on humanitarian grounds (chronic patients, the enclaved, workers, students), while the rest had to present a negative test of the last 72 hours in order to cross [31], complicating the crossing process. While the country categorization system has been put in place and despite the number cases in north Cyprus remaining extremely low, the status at the checkpoints has remained the same since summer, betraying that the decisions in relation to crossing were, are and remain founded on political, rather than health and safety criteria.

The first meaningful mobilization after the retraction of the lock-down took place in June, through the march against the ongoing enclosure of migrants and refugees at Pournara that was organized by the left and anti-authoritarian scene. The march assembled around 600 people under conditions of state intimidation, as the protest was considered and confronted as illegal, with the police imposing on protestors charges and fines [33]. It is important to note here that Pournara is not a prison (in contrast to Menogeia), but a temporary reception centre for asylum seekers, who have the right to freely move outside the area and in which they are supposed to stay only for a few days [32]. While Pournara was subsequently opened in July (only to be locked again, alongside other refugee camps, through the decrees of November [34]), the abysmal living conditions and the permanent presence of armed police, which intervene with any reaction by the refugees, continue without any changes.



Barbed wire placed at the Pournara Emergency Reception Centre, which the government has turned into a concentration camp. June, 2020.
https://www.facebook.com/antifalefkosa/photos/3056144411128093 .

While the Cypriot economy had been open since May, protests remained illegal until August, with the government deciding to allow them again a few days before another protest by the 'chemtards', placing however terms and preconditions that negated their free conduct [35]. The handing out of leaflets was made illegal (even though no such ban had been introduced in any other context, such as the handing out of advertisement flyers), the mandatory use of masks was introduced in protests held in open public spaces (while the mandatory use of masks had not yet been introduced in all closed spaces or in busy open spaces) and the acquiring of police permission for the holding of protests was instructed. In addition, the registering of a formal 'organiser' was imposed, with the 'organiser' having the responsibility for the proper conduct of the protest, with the police essentially having the power to subsequently arrest and charge him if a protest was deemed to have not properly followed the protocols of the state. The terms under which the protests were allowed to function had a clearly repressive character, promoting the self-policing of protestors and repositioning the responsibility from the police to the 'organisers'. The protest of the 'chemtards' at Eleftheria square brought the first repression based on the new decree, with fines imposed through the recognition of protestors by utilizing photographs, videos and drones [36], while the photographing of protestors became a permanent practise by the police in subsequent mobilizations.

Most of the protests followed the relevant protocols, especially in relation to the wearing of masks - as was the case for example in the protest against the disciplinary action of artist Gariel by the Ministry of Education, the anti-fascist march called by the New Internationalist Left in Nicosia, the various protests against corruption held by the Active Citizens initiative, the march that took place outside the Presidential Palace by the anti-authoritarian scene and the mobilization of AKEL. Until today, no information has circulated indicating the spreading of the virus in protests held in open public spaces, in contrast to the information that we have in relation to nursing homes [39], schools [40] and

workplaces [37, 38], in which the protocols repeatedly appear not to be sufficiently enforced, exposing to danger first and foremost the workers themselves - as, for example, was the recent case of the Cypra slaughterhouse [41]. Despite the above, the government has again banned protests in mid-November [42] on the pretext of the last clashes in Limassol, with the police terrorizing individuals that aimed to take part in protests [43] and arresting organisers of protests even in cases in which no protest had been held, as was the case in Pafos [44].



The Minister of Justice Emily Gioliti hasted to publicly blame migrants for the first clashes during a protest in Limassol, at the same time that the police was announcing that the migrants initially arrested were not connected with the clashes. October, 2020.
https://dialogos.com.cy/lemesos-to-dikastirio-adeiazei-tin-ypoyrgo-dikaiosynis-oi-syllifthentes-den-syndeontai-me-ta-epeisodia .

The closure of two provinces, with stationed checkpoints in the highways manned by police and military forces, is merely the enforcement within the areas of the Republic of Cyprus of what was initially imposed at the checkpoints of the dead zone [45]. With the mandatory presentation of a negative test dated within the last week (we see here again the contradiction in relation to crossing into north Cyprus), those workers that are still permitted to work are forced to pay the costs of the test, while those that are entitled to a free test are left outside of chemist labs for hours, awaiting for their turn [46]. People that for various reasons have to visit other provinces, as is the case of divorced parents or patients visiting specialised doctors, are forced to either remain in their province or to pay for the cost of the test, which remains roughly at 60-70 euros, depending on the lab.

As we are awaiting a second lock-down; and while the government has been left by the rest of the

political system essentially uncontrollable in the announcement and enforcement of measures relating to the pandemic, the level of normalization of the authoritarianism through which the state has managed to abolish political rights and gains assumed as given in the Republic until February, remains horrific. The closure of checkpoints, the inhuman entrapment of citizens abroad and the abysmal treatment of refugees and migrants have reached their logical conclusion in the internal seclusion of provinces, the integration of the army in the policing of citizens and the suppression and complete abolition of political protests. The absence of any meaningful parliamentary opposition, or of public mobilizations against the measures with any meaningful political content, beyond the small extra-parliamentary left and the anti-authoritarian scene, indicate again the miserable condition of the political reflexes of (greek)cypriot society, that appear to confine themselves to individual and family interests, nationalist and other conspiracy theories and general disinterest. Under the sound of indifferent whistling and the national anthem at the Doikitiriou square, state authoritarianism and the chaotic management of the crisis continue to deepen.

The drama continues.

Delirium

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