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Authoritarianism masking incompetence? The case of the Republic of Cyprus (Gregoris Ioannou) (Online Article)

Historical Note

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Content

Authoritarianism masking incompetence? The case of the Republic of Cyprus

At the end of February, as the Covid-19 crisis developed in Europe, governments began to adopt measures which evolved by March into various sorts of lock-down aiming to impose physical distancing between individuals. In a context in which, after decades of neoliberal policies, underfunding and privatisation, national public health systems lacked the capacity to cope with the surge of demand provoked by the global pandemic, lock-downs were deemed essential.

At the same time as a substantial part of economic activity was suspended, governments pledged to support workers who had to abstain from work and businesses that had to shut, including the announcement of several social policy and temporary tax relief measures. Where adopted, lock-down measures typically included the prohibition of congregations and restriction of non-essential travel, granting enhanced powers to the police to enforce this where needed. The executive authority meanwhile assumed more powers, ostensibly to upgrade health care capacities and deal with the economic consequences mostly via executive decrees instead of proper legislation.

This is as far as the generalisation can go. When one gets into the specifics of each European state, significant divergences emerge not only with respect to the timing, the scope and the details of the measures adopted but also with respect to their focus, their direction and their logic or absence thereof. While for example some, such as the centre-left coalition government in Spain, have brought private hospitals under state control, others, such as the right-wing government in Greece, paid private hospitals premium money to use their facilities. Whereas the centre-left government in Portugal decided to give to all migrants and asylum seekers temporary citizen rights in order to automatically incorporate them into the social security and health care systems, in Bulgaria the army which was given police powers by the conservative government , set up checkpoints outside Roma neighbourhoods to control their movement.

While in some countries the emergency measures were assigned a fixed term of weeks or months, in others this was left open for review at an unspecified date in the future. Although violating civil liberties in unprecedented ways in peace-time democracy, in most cases these regulations were instituted “legally”, voted in by parliaments and following the stipulated constitutional procedures. In

some east and south European states however, such niceties were deemed unaffordable luxuries in times of crisis.

An absent EU

The EU so far has been largely absent from the whole crisis management operation and only came to post facto accept or turn a blind eye to the initiatives taken by the nation-states even when these violated treaties, principles, rules and regulations. A lot has been said about the economic consequences of the lock-down measures and on the sealing of national borders. A lot of speculation is also being expressed about the magnitude of the debt crisis looming ahead and the future of the Eurozone and the EU amidst resurgent divisions and polarisation among member-states. There is less discussion on the authoritarian drift observed and what there is tends to focus on eastern Europe, which already manifested authoritarian trends before the Covid-19 crisis. Hungary is the most cited example where Orban's government secured the power to rule by decree without parliamentary scrutiny, and restrict free speech without an end date.

The public health system

The authoritarian measures of movement restriction are justified through a discourse of "science", with lock-down presented as the implementation of physical distancing. While the example of China and the recommendations of the World Health Organisation (WHO) are cited by European states for this, most of them underplay or ignore the other half of the story: the rapid and massive diversion of resources into the public health system undertaken by China and the widespread testing of the population.

As the WHO tirelessly insists, "lock-down on its own cannot solve the problem", it seems that at least some European states are using authoritarian measures of population control as a substitute for the needed upscaling of public health system capacity. Through the enhanced "legitimacy" assumed as a result of the fear that has overtaken wide sections of society and through their friendly media some governments are able to frame the public health crisis as a public security crisis, invoking war imagery and discourse that shifts public debate and the public attention from state failures to "disobedient" individual citizens who need disciplining through ever-escalating collective punitive measures. The Republic of Cyprus is one of the most extreme examples of this in Europe and deserves to be more closely examined.

Authoritarian Cyprus

As Covid-19 began to spread in Europe in February, the Cyprus government initially ignored it taking no measures at all with respect to its busy airports and making no attempt to boost the capacity of its newly instituted NHS system (GESY) and its already crumbling public hospitals.

At the end of the month it surprised everybody by unilaterally closing 4 of the 7 crossings under its control to the northern part of the country in a nationalist and populist move, alleging that the threat to public health came from the Turkish Cypriot community, provoking the reaction of the peace and reunification movement and shifting public attention away from public health to the politics of Cyprus' division.

Soon the nationalist political authorities in the Turkish Cypriot community responded to the Greek Cypriot nationalist challenge by closing different additional crossings. When the first case of Covid-19 appeared in the island contracted by UK and German travellers, on the same day in the south and north respectively, all the crossings between the two parts of Cyprus were blocked. Ignoring the calls

of the peace movement for cooperation and coordination between the two sides to combat the spread of the virus, the Republic of Cyprus oriented itself towards Greece instead which it emulated using even identical phraseology in the instituting of lock-down measures. The Republic of Cyprus' measures, however, soon came to surpass those of Greece in severity, disproportionality as well as irrationality.

Not only did the Republic of Cyprus completely prohibit entry into Cyprus to visitors from anywhere, it was also the only state in the world to block its own citizens who found themselves abroad and in need of returning. After leaving thousands of citizens stranded abroad for a week and after the public outcry this provoked, it allowed some of them who were temporarily abroad to return and placed them in precautionary quarantine for 14 days, claiming that this would be extended for some other categories of Cypriots such as workers and students in the future.

Besides closing-down non-essential industries, it also closed public parks and made it illegal for everybody to leave their home without an "essential reason". Eight such "essential reasons" were listed in a print form, from which everybody had to tick one and sign, specifying the time and presenting it to the increased police patrols which were supplemented by army personnel.

On March 30, further restrictions were imposed, making a prior permit issued by the police via its reply to the SMS application obligatory to every person under 65 years old while only 1 exit from one's domicile per day was allowed and none between 21.00-6.00. A maximum of 3 persons per car was instituted and more alarmingly it was announced that the police would check homes to see if there were persons inside there other than the home residents. After the public outcry that this provoked, the government retreated clarifying that this would only be done either with consent or a court warrant.

No mere incompetence

While incompetence can take us some way in accounting for the rushed, disproportionate and irrational measures adopted by Anastasiades' government, the picture cannot be completed unless the chronic inefficiency of the Republic of Cyprus as a state is accounted for as well, and the condition of its public health system more specifically.

While in 1990 there was one hospital bed per 170 persons, in 2017 the underfunding of health led this to shrink to one bed per 290 persons. With an EU average of 541 hospital beds per 100 000 residents, Cyprus has 339. Long-term health care expenditure in many EU countries surpasses 20% of their total health spending, while in Cyprus the equivalent figure is 3%. At an EU average of total health spending of 10% of GDP, in Cyprus this stands at merely 6.8%.

Covid-19 found the Cyprus health system totally unprepared, lacking intensive care units and critical care physicians, lacking equipment and even protective equipment and disposables. In the first week, three of the country's five main public hospitals had to close entire sections as numerous health professionals became infected with Covid-19, testing was limited to only a few hundred per day until the end of March and there was no new hiring of health professionals to staff the already understaffed hospitals. The government restricted itself to the use of medical and nursing students and no significant effort was made to divert funds to public health.

Instead it immersed itself in a fully-fledged public relations battle with ministers constantly accusing "irresponsible" citizens and threatening yet further, more severe measures in its attempt to communicate an image of strength and decisiveness.

This image, besides shielding it from being held accountable for the sorry state of the public health system, also constructs a public enemy discourse which operates as a justification for its authoritarian drift. The Attorney General and the Head of the Law Association, while indirectly admitting when asked that the legal and constitutional basis for these governmental decrees in the absence of a formal declaration of a “state of emergency” is at best questionable, at the same time attempted to silence objections and postpone such constitutionality discussions for a future time “when there will be the luxury of time to make safe judgements”.



“We are on duty. You are in the house. We are breaking the transmission chain of Covid-19. #We stay at home” | Screenshot: Twitter: official account of the Cyprus Police, March 30, 2020.

This is a screen shot of the official twitter account of Cyprus Police on 30/3/2020 after the stricter lock-down measures were announced by the government. It was removed 3 hours later after a public outcry on social media. It was also discovered that the drawing was copied from another pre-existing graphic signed by 'Miss Matured' without attributing credit and thus possibly also infringing copyright law.

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It is in such a context that the Minister of Interior of the Republic of Cyprus stated on television that "time will tell whether such measures are legal or not" and that the government establishes "new administrative structures and measures that are at the frontier of the law". It is in such a context that the Police of Cyprus published the unacceptable image above in its March 30 tweet which in all its crudeness illustrates quite aptly how it imagines its role.

Although there has been some reaction to the police-state image communicated by the government, forcing it to a retreat, at least at the rhetorical level it remains to be seen whether the progressive section of society and the parliamentary opposition parties will continue to more or less tolerate the authoritarian drift operating as a cover for incompetence and public health system degradation or whether they will stand up to it, set limits to governmental arbitrariness, and hold it to account.

Returning to the bigger European picture, although Cyprus might be an extreme case, it does raise wider issues as to how authoritarianism may mask institutional failures diverting resources and attention from public health into police operations and substituting citizen for government responsibility. More importantly if authoritarianism is left unchecked to shape the public discourse, it can self-propel and legitimise itself, diverting the blame from the state onto society.

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