

Greece Beats Back Coronavirus

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Greece wasn't exactly in top fighting form when coronavirus came knocking. Like Italy, Greece is home to a large elderly population, a full quarter of which are pensioner age. Nor was the country's healthcare system in the best shape. After a decade-long financial crunch – during which the economy contracted by 26 percent – state hospitals bore heavy cuts in return for rescue loans from international lenders, creating a system that has yet to fully recover.

In late February only 560 Intensive Care Unit beds were readily available. There was no room to test mitigation strategies, or aim for herd immunity as is being done in Sweden. Simply put, Greece was not set up for a successful fight. But in a stunning turnaround, the Mediterranean country has the lowest number of cases and coronavirus-related deaths in the entire eurozone. In a country of over 11 million, based on the latest figures (Saturday, April 19) Greece has 2,235 recorded cases, 110 deaths and only 67 ICU beds in use – most of whom were elderly and possessed underlying health conditions. By comparison, Italy, the hardest-hit country in the union, has logged over 20,000 deaths from the virus.

French think tank The Bridge declared Greece the highest performing country in the eurozone to deal with the crisis, praising swift and early containment measures that nipped the pandemic in the bud well before even the first 100 cases were detected within the country's borders. Italy, France, and Spain were comparatively less swift to

implement lockdowns and other ensuing measures, with the result being severe outbreaks, higher rates of mortality and infections, and overwhelmed healthcare systems. Delaying measures by even one week has proven to be deadly to many.

“The contrast between Greece – which suspended public events and closed schools even before the first 100 cases were detected – and Spain – which took similar decisions at a much later stage of the epidemic – is particularly striking”, the report states.

Acting Swiftly

Coming down hard on the virus very early was a major factor in Greece’s success. “There were realities, weaknesses, that we were very aware of” said Dr. Andreas Mentis, who heads the Hellenic Pasteur Institute and sits on the 25-strong scientific committee that advises the government on the deadly disease. “Before the first case was diagnosed, we had started examining people and isolating them. Incoming flights, especially from China, were monitored. Later, when others began to be repatriated from Spain, for example, we made sure they were quarantined in hotels.”

Since the onset of the pandemic, Greece has managed to double the number of ICU beds, but has yet to boost testing, which remains mostly limited to hospitals. Though an increase in testing will be needed to restore confidence that the pandemic has in fact been curbed, the low death rate speaks to the overall success in flattening the curve.

From the very start, the committee pushed for a widespread lockdown despite the economic devastation it could cause to a country, having just won the economy’s long-awaited and hard-fought recovery. The results have shown it was the right choice. Even before the first coronavirus-related death, Greece had shut down carnival parades. By March 4 – well ahead of most other European countries – schools had closed, followed swiftly by shuttered bars, stores, museums, and archaeological sites. All Greek schools were closed within thirteen days of the first positive test. Italy did not shut its schools until 33 days after its first positive; Spain delayed the move 43 days after the confirmation of the pandemic within its borders.

But the cost to Greece’s economy, which is dependent on tourism, is high. The lockdown is expected to last until mid-May, followed by a gradual lifting of restrictions, and is likely to have a compounding, knock-on effect on overall growth. Alex Patelis, Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis’ chief economic advisor, believes “If we pull through this, if we show that we are competent and can deliver, the rest will come”, adding Greece’s actions now could help the country regain the international credibility that was heavily eroded during the bailout years. “The faster you deal with a health crisis, the greater the short-term economic costs, but then the greater the long-term benefits too.”

A recession is all but inevitable and forecasts expect a 5 to 10 percent downturn in Europe during 2020. Growth may revive in 2021, however, and Mitsotakis is banking on that hope. The government plans to spend up to 20 billion euros – in addition to 10

billion euros from European funds – supporting businesses and protecting jobs during the pandemic.

“It’s certain, that when the crisis is over we’ll look at the people who stack supermarket shelves differently. We will care if the man on the bike is wearing a helmet. We’ll be saying good morning to the women and men emptying our neighbourhoods garbage containers”, said the prime minister in a televised address. “They will no longer be invisible”.



Orthodox Easter is Greece’s biggest holiday. “This Easter is different. We will not go to our villages. We will not roast in our yards. We will not go to our churches. And, of course, we will not gather in the homes of relatives and friends,” government spokesman Stelios Petsas said. “For us to continue being together, this year we stay apart”. Copyright: Kostas Koutsaftikis / Shutterstock.com

Pursuing Reform

During this time, the administration has taken the opportunity to push through a host of long-overdue digital reforms, helping citizens access healthcare and modernising the state. Many processes that once required showing up to a government office in person were moved entirely online, which has helped to slow the rate of viral spread by eliminating citizens’ need to travel. Complicated and frustrated procedures were streamlined as well, allowing those in need to access government aid. This has, in turn, increased institutional trust.

"When the pandemic broke, the need to simplify government processes became paramount", said Greece's Minister of Digital Governance, Kyriakos Pierrakakis. "One of the first things we did to limit the incentives for people to exit their homes was to enable them to receive prescriptions on their phones. That, alone, has saved 250,000 citizens from making visits to the doctor in the space of 20 days. It has dramatically helped reduce the number of people exiting their home, which can only be a good thing."

Greece's crisis management, with its focus on science-based policies and practical solutions, has united the country and resulted in little pushback against the centre-right government headed by New Democracy's Kyriakos Mitsotakis. "There are problems you can solve through spin and others that require truth and transparency. It was very clear we needed experts and we needed to listen to them. That said, Greeks have been through crises; they know what it is. I think that also enabled them to adapt and be stoic", Patelis surmised.

Takis Pappas, a Greek political scientist at the University of Helsinki who has written about the country's response to the coronavirus crisis, noted in an interview that "Mitsotakis went into the crisis with several advantages and was able to move very fast. He made the case for a common response and there was no room for the Opposition to slow him down".

Meanwhile Health Minister Sotiris Tsiodras has expressed concern that Orthodox Easter, during which citizens traditionally flock to their ancestral villages, could reverse Greece's hard work and good fortune, but remains cautiously optimistic about their overall prospects. The government was able to persuade the Orthodox Church to suspend daily services and sacraments, which has helped matters. Over the weekend, Greek authorities also deployed drones, monitored churches, and ramped up street patrols to discourage worshippers from travel and congregation. Over 5,000 extra police were dispatched to patrol the greater Athens region alone. Violators faced a 300 euro fine per infraction, and penalties doubled if those individuals were found to be indulging in "purposeless movement".

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Most Greeks followed the rules, and some families did what they could to hold on to tradition, roasting pascal lamb in their private yards and verandas. But not everyone is playing ball. Last week, Bishop Nektarios of Corfu openly flouted restrictions by conducting a religious service, including the taking of holy communion from a shared chalice. In a show of support, the event was attended by the Ionian island's local mayor and senior municipal councillor. When a public prosecutor subsequently ordered Nektarios be put on trial after pressing charges, the bishop's lawyer retorted that "there is no decree prohibiting holy communion".

In a televised address to the nation, the prime minister tempered praise with caution. "We showed our best self and this...fills us with pride, it arms us with more courage to keep fighting", adding that "the war has not been won yet".

"It's not our health which is at risk...but the health of the faithful." Mitsotakis said. "Only a thread separates victory from defeat."