

Exploring the internal and external environment of the Civil Protection institution of Greece in the period of the Covid-19 pandemic

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Abstract: The danger of Covid-19 was an invisible enemy for life but also an opportunity both for political consensus on the essence and direction and for the strengthening of basic state institutions (structures and procedures). The General Secretariat for Civil Protection is the body that was called upon to coordinate the management of Covid-19 in Greece and to act within the framework of the operation of the European Civil Protection Mechanism. The management of the health risk was a challenge for the organization both for the effective and efficient operation of the body itself and for the implementation of a policy of multilevel governance and European cooperation. The present study attempts to map the internal and external environment of the civil protection institution of Greece with the use of secondary data from the literature, drawing the attention of relevant stakeholders, policy makers and governments, in order for the public policy of governments to find scope and be implemented effectively and efficiently.

Keywords: Greece, civil protection, Covid-19, national Crisis Management and Risk Response Mechanism (Nat-CHAMM)

JEL Classification: H12

1 Introduction

Lifestyles in both developing and developed countries are now affected daily by natural and technological disasters. The global health crisis due to Covid-19 was an additional factor that endangered the supreme good of "life" and brought about long-term and possibly irreversible effects on people's living conditions, the economy and the environment.

The basic constitutional obligation of any modern democratic state is the safety and security of citizens and the environment. To support this obligation, at the strategic level, each state establishes specific (administrative) civil protection systems and mechanisms at national, regional and local level, with a single planning and specific rules (Lekkas & Andreadis, 2015).

Civil Protection refers to a set of procedures and actions that cover all phases of the risk management cycle (prevention, preparedness, early warning, rapid response, consequences management, rehabilitation) utilizing the scientific and technological capabilities of various sciences. It is formed in the context of the existing organization of the state, is related to implemented policies and its design reflects the existing policy to reduce the likelihood of manifestation of negative effects from the manifestation of a phenomenon or event (Dandoulaki 2011). Its implementation presupposes political commitment, institutional regulation and social participation.

Civil Protection as a state body aims at the planning, organization, coordination of actions, the interconnection of bodies and services of the public administration (according to competence), and the private potential and means for the prevention and response to natural, technological and other disasters or emergencies (Karamanou, 2021, Goudrichou & Dandoulaki, 2017).

2 Methods

The present study presents the Greek Civil Protection System, the regulatory framework for operation, the way of organization and administration of this system. The methodology followed was based on the study of secondary sources, on laws of the Greek state, on official documents, scientific articles, reports and data from valid websites. The study focuses on the organizational structure, the planning at strategic and operational level and the coordinating function of

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the state Civil Protection body that has the responsibility of coordination during the management of the Covid-19 pandemic.

3 Research results

In Greece, civil protection came to the fore in an urgent way, especially after the deadly natural disasters, in 2017 by flooding (24 human losses) and in 2018 by forest fire (102 human victims), the material and environmental disasters caused in both cases.

3.1 Institutional framework for the operation of the GSCP

Although the institutional body for civil protection had been created in 1995 with the establishment of the General Secretariat for Civil Protection, it remained invisible while there was strong criticism of the negative actions of the country's civil protection system (overlapping of responsibilities, lack of coordination between the levels of administration, partial inadequacy of planning and prevention measures, reduced use of modern technologies) . The assessment of the events of 2017 and 2018 and the demands of society marked a political and institutional movement for the harmonization of the country with the internationally existing best practices but also the guidelines of the EU for crisis management and risk management.

On February 7, 2020, with the adoption of Law 4662/2020 on Civil Protection, the radical reform of civil protection in the country begins on the basis of a decade-long planning. The operational, executive and support structures for Civil Protection converge on the National Crisis Management and Risk Response Mechanism (Nat-CHAMM). The National Mechanism aims to create a single national civil protection system of vertical organization governed by specific statutory principles and which covers the entire spectrum of the cycle of disasters and risks (prevention, preparedness, response, rehabilitation), taking into account the needs of all citizens, including those with disabilities (information, individual rescue plans, accessible infrastructure, etc.).

19 days after the publication of the law, the first case of Covid-19 in the country is announced and Greece enters the vortex of the global pandemic. On March 12, 2020, the first death from the coronavirus is announced.

On March 11, by an act of legislative content (Government Gazette A ' 55 / 11-03-2020) the Secretary General of Civil Protection is given the authority to declare, by decision, areas of the Territory in a state of civil protection emergency for reasons of public health following a relevant recommendation of the National Committee for the Protection of Public Health (article 19). At the same time, the National Public Health Organization provides the GSCP with personal data of citizens of epidemiological correlation.

On March 15, the Secretary General of Civil Protection is upgraded to Deputy Minister of Civil Protection with special responsibility for the management of the pandemic and with a speech by the Prime Minister undertakes the general coordination of actions in "war conditions". With Presidential Decree 70/2021, the GSCP now comes under the newly established Ministry of Climate Crisis and Civil Protection, is an administrative structure and an overlying operational structure of the National Civil Protection Mechanism.

3.2 Organization of the Greek Civil Protection System

In the Civil Protection system of Greece, all citizens and especially public officials, as executors of the will of the State, are considered valuable resources, since they can participate in reducing the risk and dealing with the disaster, starting from their individual, family, neighboring and work environment.

In general, the organization of the Greek Civil Protection System follows the constitutionally defined system of public administration. The administration of the Greek state is organized according to the decentralized system. The regional bodies of the State have general decisive competence for the affairs of their region. The central bodies of the state, in addition to special responsibilities, have the general direction, coordination and control of the legality of the acts of regional bodies, as defined by law (Article 101 of the Constitution on Administrative Decentralization).

Despite the fact that due to the advent of the pandemic, a significant part of the articles of Law 4662/2020 were suspended, within the framework of this law, the GSCP activates the National Crisis Management Mechanism and prepares the strategic plan in cooperation with all co-competent Ministries and bodies. In this context, it is developing a system of digital, technological management of the crisis to shield the country against the virus by utilizing the most modern technological means and scientific data.

The pillar of this plan was the exhaustive tracing of cases and their close contacts, so that the GSCP monitors the development of the situation on a daily basis with the greatest possible accuracy and intervenes where necessary with emergency measures and targeted movements. Greece, despite its initial intention, is not developing mobile phone

applications for contact tracing in EU Member States and the GSCP's "Tracing Centre" undertakes tracing and warning to break the chain of infections and save lives.

3.3 The role of tracing

The term "tracing" refers to a set of techniques used by the public authorities of the States, for the identification of persons who they may themselves be a case of a disease or simply have been close to a confirmed case. Tracing is carried out in order to precautionary, isolation and healing measures are taken. (Loukaiti, 2021).

Initially, the tracings were carried out by the National Public Health Organization while in March 2019 corresponding responsibilities were assigned to a special department of the General Police Directorate of Attica where 150 uniformed special investigating officers had the authority to identify the contact cycle of confirmed cases and to take quarantine measures.

Then the "Tracing Center" was put into operation in the building of the GSCP for the tracing process, which is undertaken by uniformed and private individuals hired by an act of legislative content.

Through telephone communication with confirmed cases, information and guidance on positive cases are provided and their close contacts are identified. This is followed by telephone communication with the close contacts reported by the cases who are informed about the current protocols and guidelines of the National Public Health Organization.

The tracing process stopped on September 30, 2022, two years and eight months after the first confirmed case of Covid-19 in Greece. Publicly available information on contact tracing activities is limited and there is no official evaluation report on the Greek government's contact tracing programme (Riza et al., 2021).

3.4 Greece in European Civil Protection Mechanism for the management of Covid-19

Since 2001, Greece has been participating in the European Civil Protection Mechanism which aims to strengthen cooperation and assistance in cases of emergencies inside and outside the Union through a coordinated response at EU level, when the magnitude of an emergency situation exceeds the capacity of the affected country to respond independently (2001/792/EC, Euratom).

On 19 March 2020, the European Commission set up a strategic rescEU capacity – a common European stockpile – for emergency medical equipment such as ventilators, protective masks, gloves and laboratory supplies, to help EU countries cope with the coronavirus pandemic. Greece started creating such a stockpile in September 2020.

In April 2020, the World Health Organization, the EU and global health organisations launched the Access to COVID-19 Tools Accelerator (ACT-Accelerator). The vaccination pillar of the ACT-Accelerator is the COVAX mechanism, which aims at equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines. In July 2021, the EU provided support to Greece for the delivery of 200,000 doses of vaccines against Covid-19 200,000 to Albania and North Macedonia.

4 Conclusions

Greece was called upon to manage the Covid-19 health crisis in the context of a newly passed law aimed at curbing recognized difficulties and weaknesses of the existing civil protection system. However, the application of the law was suspended for the most part. In the context of managing the pandemic, the GSCP, as the competent body for the management of the pandemic, adopted the ECDC's policy on contact tracing, without, however, having a special website for contact tracing or a dashboard, as is the case in other countries. The European Commission's websites reflect Greece's cooperation and assistance in the management of the pandemic, as well as in ECDC reports. However, information on the action plans of the GSCP, the activities and the implementation programs is limited and needs further research and evaluation, which will be carried out with primary research in a second year.

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