

# Greece comes out of lockdown and plans resumption of tourism

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A staged lifting of the lockdown measures imposed by the Greek government early in March in response to the COVID-19 pandemic began May 4.

In a televised address a few days before, New Democracy Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis announced that, as of May 4, citizens will no longer need to have documentary evidence justifying any outing, although travel outside of the prefecture of residence still remains restricted.

The gradual opening of retail stores will take place over a two-week period, except for shopping malls, which will open again on June 1 along with bars, restaurants and hotels. High schools will gradually start to open on May 11 starting with the senior year, while primary and nursery schools will remain shut.

With 2,691 recorded cases and 150 deaths, Greece's relatively low death toll is largely due to the prompt imposition of the lockdown measures, which were enforced earlier than other European countries. Before a death had been recorded in the country, carnivals were cancelled at the end of February. Schools were shut March 10, while commercial businesses except for supermarkets, bakeries and grocery stores were shut in the week that followed.

The lifting of the measures will undo this advantage, but is of crucial importance to the Greek ruling elite. According the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) latest projections, the Greek economy is set to contract by 10 percent as a result of the pandemic—an annual drop bigger than any seen during the austerity imposed during the previous decade at the behest of the European Union (EU) and IMF, which saw the economy contract by nearly 25 percent.

On May 5, Mitsotakis held a teleconference with bank executives to discuss plans to provide €16 billion liquidity at extremely low interest rates to Greek

businesses, either directly by the government or by the banks, through a series of interest rate subsidies and state guarantees. “We must absorb the shock waves as well as we can and set the basis for a dynamic re-start of the economy,” he said.

This credit line to Greek business is inextricably linked with the lifting of the lockdown since it must be supported by the extraction of surplus value from the working class.

Greek workers, like their counterparts internationally, are being told to accept a “new normal” of living with and dying from the virus. “Some will undoubtedly get sick,” declared Mitsotakis. “It is down to us to make sure that these are as few as possible and they receive the care they need. All who close their house door to go out open at the same time the door of responsibility.”

While placing the burden of keeping safe on the working class, the government is doing next to nothing to prop up the Greek health service, which has been decimated by a decade of austerity. The health budget is around 50 percent of what it was in 2009. Just 5 percent of GDP is spent on public health care, 2 percent lower than the EU average. Greece had only 560 intensive care unit (ICU) beds as the pandemic began. In 2012, as the austerity programme began to intensify, Greece had just six ICU beds per 100,000 inhabitants. This compared to 29.2 in Germany. In the intervening eight years, Greece's ICU bed availability has no doubt worsened.

With a rate of just 8,352 COVID-19 tests per 1 million of its population, Greece has one of the poorest testing regimes in Europe. Any claims by the government that they are well equipped to carry out effective contact tracing are unfounded.

At pains to portray the government as proceeding “cautiously,” Mitsotakis stated that “our plan for the

next two months [to lift the lockdown] is extremely detailed and refined.” Despite this, many in Greece’s scientific community have voiced concerns, especially over the opening of schools.

In an interview on Open TV the week before the lockdown was lifted, Athina Linou, a professor of epidemiology at Athens University, stated that “epidemiologically, the opening of schools is a danger whose magnitude we don’t know.” She made clear “there is [no scientific study] that really shows whether or not children transmit the virus,” adding that the decision to open schools is “partly scientific and partly political based on socioeconomic criteria.”

The truth is that the decision to lift the lockdown was based entirely “on socioeconomic criteria,” with any references to science made only to add a veneer of legitimacy. This is evident when one notes the abrupt change in narrative by Sotiris Tsiodras, the infectious disease specialist appointed as the Health Ministry spokesperson to give daily briefings on the COVID-19 spread in Greece.

Only a few weeks ago, Tsiodras was warning against the use of masks within the community outside of a health care setting. As part of the lifting of the lockdown guidelines, the use of masks has now been made compulsory on public transport, in lifts, hospitals, doctors surgeries and diagnostic centres, with Tsiodras now stating: “The use of masks will happen mainly to prevent the transmitting of the virus to others when we have mild or no symptoms.”

In other words, the government is assuming that many, many people infected with COVID-19 will come into daily contact with the noninfected, with paper masks the only guard against transmission of the virus. Moreover, each mask will cost around one euro, that is around €30 per person per month with just one day’s use! If one considers that nearly three quarters of all workers earn less than €1,000 a month, with almost a million workers earning just €200 to €500 a month, most people will either reuse masks day after day or rely on homemade cloth ones, which Tsiodras concedes are not as safe as the disposable kind.

Another area where Tsiodras has begun to deviate from WHO guidelines is with regard to immunity after recovering from a COVID-19 infection. While the WHO insists that “there is currently no evidence that people who have recovered from COVID-19 and have

antibodies are protected from a second infection,” Tsiodras has openly disagreed with this assessment. Instead he has stated that there exists “a second position being heard from scientific groups of recognised standing that based on the experience we have with coronaviruses, there will be protection for at least one year.”

It is not hard to see the commercial interests driving this assessment. Nine southern European EU members, including Greece, held a videoconference on April 27 where they called for the establishment of a “COVID-19 passport” within the EU, based on antibody tests being developed to aid the tourist industry, upon which all southern EU countries heavily rely. While Tsiodras himself has openly expressed caution stating, “It is still too soon to be talking about tourism,” citing the risk that the virus could be introduced from a country where the outbreak is flaring up, the fact that he has questioned the WHO’s warnings on immunity has given the elite the green light to open up the country to tourists this summer.

In this regard, Tourism Minister Charis Theocharis has openly touted Greece’s low incidence of COVID-19, stating, “We expect tourists from Europe and in this context our country has an advantage, as out of all Mediterranean regions we are the safest.”

Equally enthusiastic was Mitsotakis, who in a recent interview on CNN stated that as long as the specific protocols are established at the European level then “best case scenario Greece will be open for tourism July 1 and we are working towards that.”



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