

Greek government changes definition of COVID deaths in response to surge of disease

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19 August 2022

A record number of summertime COVID deaths have been recorded in Greece since the beginning of July. A total of 1,145 deaths were recorded by the end of that month, over four times more than the number of people who died during the same period last year.

According to National Organisation for Public Health (EODY) figures, August will surpass the COVID death tally recorded during the same month last year. In the first two weeks of this month, 651 people died from the virus compared to a total of 726 deaths in the whole of August 2021.

Greece has had one of the highest numbers of new deaths per capita in the world in recent weeks, surpassed only by Barbados, the Marshall Islands and Norway. All three, particularly Barbados and the Marshall Islands, have much smaller populations than Greece.

Opposed to re-introducing measures to contain the spread of the virus, the conservative New Democracy (ND) government blames the high number of deaths on the World Health Organization's (WHO) definition of deaths due to COVID-19, which ND now plans to ditch. The move was announced by Health Minister Thanos Plevris on August 8 in an interview with Open TV: "From now on when we report the number of deaths we will state how many died from COVID and how many died from another cause who had COVID." On this basis, he claimed, "We did not therefore have a rise in deaths".

As of August 14, the number of people killed by the virus in Greece stands at 32,028. The total number of recorded infections is 4,654,737—equivalent to 45 percent of the country's population—with a fifth of those being re-infections.

The surge in infections this summer is down to the premature lifting of virtually all public health measures in anticipation of the summer tourist season. Vaccination passports to enter restaurants, bars and cafes were scrapped in May, while travellers to Greece no longer had

to show proof of vaccination. Then in June mask mandates were lifted everywhere apart from healthcare settings and public transport. At the start of July, the government exempted hotels from providing special quarantine accommodation for tourists testing positive for the virus, who in any event are no longer required to adhere to the already short five-day isolation period.

The scientific veneer for the plan to redefine the way COVID deaths are recorded was provided by Gkikas Magiorkinis, an epidemiologist and medical doctor who sits on the public health board advising the government on COVID. In an August 9 Facebook post Magiorkinis downplayed the high number of deaths, stating that "more than 60 to 70 percent of the deaths are circumstantial".

This unscientific distinction between deaths "with" and "from" COVID was refuted by Dr. Nikos Kapravelos, head of the ICU department at Papanikolaou hospital in Thessaloniki. In an interview with the Greek edition of CNN last week he said, "Those who die in our departments after two months when the virus is no longer there have been suffering from hospital infections, lung problems, a weak immune system and problems in many organs." He emphasised, "If they hadn't been infected by the coronavirus they wouldn't have had these health problems."

As to the ditching of the WHO definition this was a mistake because "people will no longer see the coronavirus as a threat, which means we will fuel those who say that the virus is bogus and just like the flu."

In fact, this is precisely the government's aim. In the second week of July, EODY moved to reporting coronavirus cases, hospitalisations and deaths on a weekly basis instead of daily.

EODY's weekly report also no longer contains items previously reported, such as the rate of positive COVID-19 tests by region. This is an extremely valuable metric not least since the number of tests, and therefore

recorded positive cases, has been steadily declining over recent weeks—enabling the government to falsely claim that the surge in cases has been receding.

The only source of testing data by region is the daily press release on the number of free rapid tests conducted by each mobile testing centre (KOMY) nationwide. Yet this is overwritten every day with no historic public record maintained.

This writer set up a programming script to harvest the historic data since August 1 in order to analyse any underlying trends. While the KOMY tests are only a small subset of the tests carried out, which places limits on the conclusions, it has nonetheless been possible to see striking regional variations on the spread of the virus at the height of the tourist season.

For instance, while the rate of positive COVID tests conducted by KOMY centres has hovered around the 17 percent mark between August 1 and August 14, the islands of Skiathos and Tinos both consistently recorded strikingly higher rates over the same period.

In the week beginning August 1, Skiathos recorded a 41 percent positivity rate, while the following week the rate was 39 percent. This indicates that the spread of the virus remains at a similarly high level despite the fact that, according to the latest official figures, new recorded cases on the island were a fifth lower compared to the week before. Skiathos is a major holiday destination known for its vibrant nightlife. According to the latest flight statistics from the island's airport, total domestic and international flights at the end of July were four times greater than at the same time last year.

In the case of Tinos, the positivity rate on the island increased from 33 percent to 37 percent over the same period. Significantly, recorded cases on the island shot up by nearly 13 percent week-on-week. This is most likely driven by the increased influx of people who make yearly pilgrimages to the “Our Lady of Tinos” Church during the run up to the August 15 Festival of the Assumption. Thousands attended this year, including prime minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis.

The data harvest also exposes the fact that Mykonos, ?ilos and Santorini, all extremely popular tourist destinations, had *no* KOMY-run free testing facilities available for locals and tourist workers.

The last time the EODY reported on the positivity rate by region was in the July 6 daily report—one week before the switch to weekly reporting—when COVID rates for the three islands were 64.21 percent, 47.47 percent and 41.39 percent respectively. The figures underscore the

criminality of the ND government which has refused access to free testing even in key tourist areas, lest its own metrics reveal high rates of infection which would cut across the commercial interests and profits of the tourist industry.

All political parties in Greece, including the pseudo-left, endorse the herd immunity agenda. No calls have been made either by Syriza, the Stalinist Communist Party of Greece (KKE), Antarsya or any other political tendency in support for an elimination strategy. Any criticisms they make centre solely on managing the pandemic and keeping infections and deaths at levels deemed palatable by the ruling elite. These forces prop up the government's business-as-usual narrative by refusing to demand or implement, even at their own events, the most elementary safety protocols such as mask wearing.

A case in point is the annual festival of the KNE (the KKE's youth wing), which includes large social events organised across the country since July, set to culminate with a large three-day event in Athens at the end of September.

The fight to end the pandemic must be based on a mass movement of the Greek and international working class dedicated to a global elimination strategy. The focal point of this movement is the Global Workers' Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic, launched last year by the *World Socialist Web Site* with the aim of investigating and documenting the criminal response to the COVID-19 virus of governments, corporations and the media. We urge Greek workers, youth, those in the medical profession and scientists to contact the inquest and assist in its vital work.



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