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Panel Policy Challenges in 'Post-Crisis' Greece

« Post-Crisis » in Greece: Subordination Normalized

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Abstract: Pressed by creditor institutions, Greece implemented a national means-tested General Minimum Income (GMI) targeting the extreme poor. Based on a 2017-2019 qualitative survey in the Attica region, we examine the new policy and engage in a critical analysis of its deployment. Our investigation places the Greek experiment in its European context, which prioritizes workfare and residualized welfare. It highlights the arbitrary character of the biopolitical management of populations and its overall purposefulness—the regularisation of the poor—and discusses difficulties emerging at local micromanagement level that often translate into inequalities and injustices, contrary to the institutions' stated aims.

Key Words: Greece, Minimum Income, Governmentality, Austerity, Poverty, Welfare.

Introduction

This is work in progress. This paper studies the introduction in Greece of a Guaranteed Minimum Income (GMI), now (since 2016) called Social Solidarity Income (SSI) or KEA (Κοινωνικό Εισόδημα Αλληλεγγύης) as in the Greek acronym. The SSI came out of the Troika's[1] Second Memorandum (MoU) that recommended the implementation of a minimum income programme in the midst of the debt crisis (2012). Since 2013, the World Bank (WB) provided technical support to the development and implementation of the project. The SSI was pilot tested in 2014 and again in 2016, then finally launched nationally in February 2017. The scheme is intended to provide a means-tested safety net to households living under extreme poverty. This paper is based on a 2017-2019 qualitative survey and is part of a larger research project, supported by the French School of Athens, on the health effects of the long depression in Greece.

The aim of the study is to examine empirically through our fieldwork in the Attica region the effects of the new policy and engage in a critical analysis of its deployment. We conducted iterative field observations in the social services of one working-class municipality (altogether 2 months) and 43 open-ended interviews in and around that and another

municipality, including 16 with mayors and the municipal staff (some of which have been interviewed several times during the study), 8 with NGO workers, community activists and municipal agents working in solidarity structures (fish and grocery shops, distribution of meals and clothing, defence of inhabitants threatened with eviction from their homes, defence of children and of women), 15 with beneficiaries, 14 of whom were met and interviewed in their homes (snowball method), and finally 4 at national level (2 central managers, one adjunct minister, one expert from the WB). The interviewees were mostly met alone, interviews were in Greek and the authors conducted them together or separately. The survey took place in Athens, following a research grant, allowing longitudinal observations, interactions with colleagues, and a wide consultation of academic and informal literature (flyers, brochures, etc.).

Our starting question was whether the programme would in fact allow for an improvement of the situation of highly vulnerable populations facing durable and deep conditions of social precariousness. Although the scheme has very stringent eligibility criteria and extremely low benefits (e.g. €200 for a single person), governing institutions and executives generally reckon it is a positive and welcome development. For instance, the World Bank (2019) states that: 'the SSI is widely considered an important and successful means of public basic income-support for the poor', that it 'is a fundamental contributor to the welfare of beneficiaries… [and that the latter] consider the SSI benefit a very substantial contribution to their budget' (*ibid.*). However, the Bank acknowledges that the SSI 'quite expectedly…does not have much of an impact on poverty incidence and inequality', and that the eligibility thresholds being so low, most if not all beneficiaries 'would not make it over the poverty line' (*ibid.* 2019).

These seemingly contradictory statements regarding the effects of SSI raise questions about the intent and purpose of the public policy. Is the policy designed to empower people and allow them to live in dignity, as claimed by the initiating institutions? Does it generate outcomes that support these claims? Our study, which flows from the sociological data gathered in the survey, and which is informed by Foucauldian studies of governmentality and the mechanisms of management of the 'masses', suggests not. We argue that technocratic policy making is by definition purposeful and that the rule-makers (people and institutions) that set policy cannot be completely oblivious of the effects of the rules/policies that they are enacting. In the SSI case, we show that the new public policy framework regulates poverty rather than seeking to engage transformative action.

This does not require nefarious intent on the part of rule-makers. Rather it flows from a set of dominant assumptions about post-crisis Greece and Europe. These assumptions are: (1) the overall austerity framework will not fundamentally change going forward; and therefore there will be no return to deficit financing for social programmes in European states (or Keynesian Welfare State economics); and (2) poverty needs to be *regularized*. While people should not be abandoned to their own fates, with the obvious socio-political dangers that would imply, only very minimal *near subsistence level* social support programs will be put into place. In other words, the overall purposefulness of the program understood as an institutional response to the failures of European and IMF policy, is the *regularisation* of a situation that was created during the crisis and which implicitly is not seen as undergoing substantial improvement in the foreseeable future. The subtext is that the large number of people at near subsistence level and those just above will be locked into these systems and situations for an indefinite time.

Our investigation highlights the arbitrary character of the biopolitical[2] management of populations and its translation at individual level (means-tested operations that govern

individual conducts from afar). Our study shows that instead of guaranteeing social fairness and empowering the most underprivileged to enable them live a life in dignity, the current SSI system leads to increased inequality and injustices among the poor and 'extreme poor' populations.

The paper proceeds as follows. The first section presents the GMI in national and international context. Section 2 examines the introduction of the SSI at national level and the overarching aim of residualizing and streamlining an already residual social protection system. Finally, section 3 is devoted to an analysis of 'individualized mass management', which succeeded in pacifying the most deprived fraction of the population—at the price, however, of increased social inequalities, injustices and enmities among the poor.

1. The GMI in context

The GMI can be defined as a non-contributory means-tested income designed to guarantee adequate livelihood conditions for poor citizens unable to provide for themselves. It is considered a 'universal' allowance in the sense that it is supposed to target without categorical exclusions all households solely on the basis of their poverty. It therefore differs from the residual public and/or philanthropic benefits, which were historically granted to specific social categories and which later, after the Second World War, aimed to provide temporary assistance to a minority of citizens who were not protected by the (potentially universal) Welfare States. GMIs are nonetheless subsidiary mechanisms: they are activated only as a last resort, when other sources of income (primary incomes but also transfers falling within the scope of social protection and/or assistance: unemployment, sickness, disability, retirement, family benefits, etc.) prove insufficient. In future, it is conceivable that GMIs will absorb some or most of the above benefits.

At the turn of the millennium, all EU Member States, aside Greece and Italy, had already set up GMI frameworks in their national social protection systems. The original aim was to cope with the emergence (in the 1980s) of the 'new poverty'—which was often working poverty—in the context of 'open and expanding areas of vulnerability' (Castel 1995) linked to rising mass unemployment and increasing precariousness. From one decade to the next, GMIs gained in importance. In 2015, the European Commission established a Pillar of Social Rights, which highlighted its concern about social issues in the midst of a so-called legitimacy deficit generated in large part by generalized EU internal devaluation policies[3] and economic stagnation or regression. The GMI component of the Pillar is meant to be a 'universal right' ensuring 'a life of dignity at all stages of life, and effective access to enabling goods and services'.

As we shall see, this narrative is disconnected from the reality it describes. It is a symbolic component of social policies, which substantiates the rationale for the dominant model of poverty alleviation that is consensual among large supra- and international organizations. The symbolic dimension cannot be studied in depth here but is worth mentioning briefly. It constitutes an integral part of the objectives and reality the policies strive to produce and consists in messages disseminated by authoritative voices using the same grammar and carefully chosen words to establish their symbolic domination (Bourdieu 2015). Thus, the WB's conceptual framework on social protection (World Bank 2001) is organized around the notions of 'vulnerability', 'universality' and 'social risk management' (World Bank 2001; McKinnon 2004). These are polysemic notions[4] that have the political advantage of fitting the language of both supporters and opponents of dominant policies. They are vectors legitimizing the instituted order and helping to shape representations.

An underpinning political project

The growing importance of GMIs may be considered more fundamentally as an offshoot of a new form of governmentality. In 1979, Michel Foucault (2004) argued that the aim of the new 'neoliberal' paradigm was not to roll back the frontiers of the state in general, or for government to abstain from intervening because of supposedly objective economic laws transcending political rationality. Rather, neoliberalism governs *for* the market, which is conceived as a finely tuned mechanism but needs reliable frameworks in which to work. Governing for the market implies, in Foucault's words, organizing and accompanying a thoroughgoing social transformation in which 'competitive mechanisms act as the regulator [of society] at each instant and at every point of the social fabric' (*ibid.*). What this signifies is that individuals become elementary particles in a grand competitive machine behaving like micro-enterprises in constant competition among themselves.

In this perspective, as Foucault notes, neoliberal theory advocates a redeployment of public action in two registers obeying different principles of state intervention. The first register corresponds to technical regulatory action (that appears apolitical) to constantly adjust the economic system. The second register involves a sustained and systematic form of public intervention, the aim of which is to modify (or to use present euphemisms, 'modernize') the material, cultural, technical, juridical or indeed the demographic foundations of society. This second register of public action represents a fundamental challenge to the post-1945 Keynesian compromise (the Welfare State). Neoliberal theory in this sense asserts that the aim of government must no longer be to correct the social damage generated by untrammelled markets on society. In particular, social policies are no longer conceived as a counterweight to economic processes that generate high degrees of precariousness and inequality. Hayek (1944) emphasizes in *The Road To Serfdom* (chap. 9) that minimum security for individuals can only be provided if it does not affect the 'natural' workings of the competitive market, which constitutes, as Foucault points out, a kind of 'general regulator of society to which all are submitted and should be willing to comply to'. In the neoliberal project, articulated by Hayek, inequality being a *just* result of anonymous market mechanisms dictated by the free will of market participants, any state interference to implement patterned distributive principles constitutes a fundamental violation of freedom. Hence, the most a community should offer is a subsistence minimum protecting individuals from elementary physical needs 'to safeguard health and the capacity to work'.

The subsistence minimum may thus be considered the ideal-typical form of the dominant post-Keynesian, Janus faced approach to social policies in Europe: on the one hand, assistance is increasingly reserved to the poor and the excluded; on the other hand, the reconfiguration of social protection makes work a condition of social assistance, a point that has become part of a *de facto* international consensus at elite levels, as seen in the way international institutions have promoted the project. As Peck (2001, p. 19) writes in a vivid and somewhat provocative way: 'First came "McJobs", now there is "McWelfare" too. The main characteristic of workfare is that it:

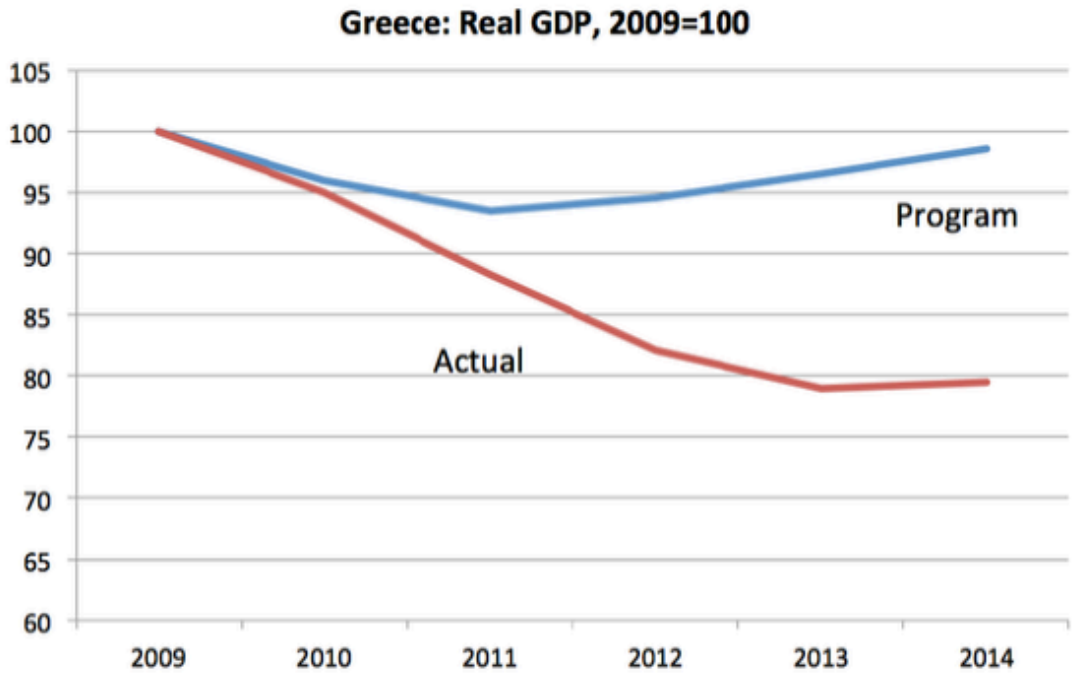
> involves the imposition of a range of compulsory programs and mandatory requirements for welfare recipients with a view to *enforcing work while residualizing welfare* (*ibid.*: p. 10, emphasis in original).

Historically, the main principle underpinning the establishment of means-tested near-survival public assistance was everywhere the same: 'an unemployed and turbulent populace was being pacified with public allowances, but these allowances were used to restore order by enforcing work, at very low wage levels' (Piven and Cloward 1971: 30). Today, GMIs may

be considered biopolitical devices designed to pacify and regularize poverty in response to the failures of austerity policies and structural adjustment programs (SAPs). Indeed, the World Bank's shift in the mid-1990s towards 'universal' social safety nets to fight extreme poverty in the global South (i.e. middle- and low-income countries), and its growing interest in and grip over the field of social protection, from which it had shied away from previously, stemmed from the failure of the SAPs imposed in the last decades of the 20th century on a number of countries in Latin America, Africa, East Asia, Russia and elsewhere. Whereas the Bank at the time expected market forces to lead to an expansion of growth benefiting everyone, the structural adjustment policies led to sharp falls in living standards and pushed millions of people below the poverty line (e.g. World Bank 2001; McKinnon 2004).

Likewise, one of the justifications officially put forward for the introduction of a GMI in Greece was the acute fall in living standards and sharp increase in poverty as a result of the great recession, and the fact that the drops in household incomes have been largest among the country's poorest citizens (World Bank 2016). There is a considerable discrepancy between what was foreseen by the original 2010 request for a stand-by arrangement—that is, the original austerity and internal devaluation plan— and what actually happened, as shown for the years 2009-2014 in the following figure produced by Paul Krugman. 'There's little question', he writes, 'that the huge shortfall reflects the adverse effects of austerity, which the IMF admits [2012] it greatly understated'.

Figure 1



Source: Paul Krugman (2015b)

Internal devaluation

All things being equal, Greek society can hardly hope to recover in the foreseeable future from the effects of the adjustment policies and return to pre-crisis living standards.

Greece is unquestionably the EU member state that has been most affected by the recession, which lasted longer than in any other country of the region. For Greece, the actual depression lasted longer than the Great Depression in the United States. Data extracted in January 2019 by Eurostat (Living conditions in Europe) show a dramatic surge in at-risk-of poverty or social exclusion rates since 2008. In 2018, the highest risks of poverty or social exclusion in EU cities were recorded in Greece (30.5%), and the corresponding rate for the rural population (35.2%) was the third highest (following Bulgaria and Romania). At the same time, the impact of social transfers was much less significant in Greece than in nearly any other EU country. When poverty is measured on the basis of the more reliable indicator anchored at a starting date and adjusted for inflation, the at-risk-of-poverty rate anchored in 2008 increases by 24.8 percentage points in Greece in 2018, while it drops on average by 1.2 percentage points across the EU-28 over the same period.

In 2017, the gross disposable household income was about 65% of what it was in 2009, reflecting among other factors unprecedented levels of (long term) unemployment, considerable cuts in monthly salaries, hourly wages and pensions, the sharp increase in flexible forms of employment—non standard involuntary part-time, rotating employment, short term contracts and so on—and self-employment, the share of which is one of the highest in the EU. One should add: increases in direct, indirect taxes and housing taxation, etc. It should be noted that during the period 2012-17, an overall decrease of in-work poverty was observed, but the reduction was mainly due to the significant drop in the national median disposable household income, which led to a fall in the poverty threshold by 33.9% in Euros or by 27.9% in purchasing power standards (PPS) (Ziomas et al. 2019; Eurofound, 2017). According to EFKA (Unified Agency for Social Insurance) 2018 data, the salaries of 50% of private sector workers was lower than €793, while in 2010 their median salary amounted to €1,140.02, a one third decrease of their incomes for the period 2010-2018. The average regular remuneration of private sector employees (a total of 2,396,602 persons) amounted to €898.59. Specifically, 29% of private sector workers had part-time employment with an average wage of €375.53, while 71% had a full-time employment relationship with an average wage of 1,111.09 euros (INE GSEE 2019).

'Extreme poverty' also increased significantly over the past decade. Following two in-depth studies (see Matsaganis et al. 2016, and Matsaganis & Leventi 2013), 'extreme poverty' in Greece refers to a poverty threshold the level of which (€233) is estimated from the cost of a consumer basket with a minimum of basic products at constant prices[5]. Rent and repayment of loans are not included. In 2009, 2.2 percent of the Greek population was living in 'extreme poverty', 10.8 percent in 2013 and 15 percent in 2015. While based on a different method[6], the relative extreme poverty definition used by the WB leads to about the same results since the proportion of the population in extreme poverty (in 2017), i.e. living in a household with an annual income not exceeding €2,880, is estimated at 15.2%.

2. Setting the SSI

The Greek social protection system was (and still is) ill prepared to cope with such an upsurge in relative and extreme poverty. It does not constitute a social safety net proper. It is underfunded, highly fragmented, and displays a very large number (more than 200) of small categorical benefits that do not adequately, let alone fairly, cover the country's growing share of poor.

In January 2015, the incoming Tsipras government had no serious alternative plan to fight poverty. There had been debates[7] and some internal disagreements on the appropriate measures to be taken to deal with the unprecedented corrosion of living conditions. Some in government did not want a GMI exclusively targeting extreme poverty. However, urgent action was also needed, so the new administration passed an 'anthropological crisis' law (without the approval of the troika institutions) to cover the most basic needs, i.e. rent, electricity and minimum current expenses. The scheme was implemented until end January 2017. It was designed as a means-tested aid in kind: rent was paid directly to the landlord, a number of monthly free kilowatts would provide minimum electricity, and a credit card with a monthly €70 would cover some food or care. The government preferred this solution to the GMI. Among other reasons, some officials did not approve of the idea of giving €200 without knowing if the support offered would be put to good use. According to an employee at the Ministry of Labour, Social Insurance and Solidarity (hereafter 'the Ministry' or 'the Ministry of Labour'), the idea was:

> I'm not going to give money to someone who's going to burn it or consume it in alcohol, so I cover you first on what is a matter of life and death, and afterwards it's as if I'm managing your economic resources for you properly.

In any event, the government had no choice: in 2015, there was no possible compromise on how to fight poverty. To streamline the Greek social protection system, the December 2012 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Specific Economic Policy Conditionality had already called for the introduction from 2014 onwards of a pilot tested GMI. The August 2015 MoU entrusted the WB with a Social Welfare Review to provide both an inventory of benefits and present options for consolidations, reformulations and rationalization of the Greek welfare programs and tax expenditures. The immediate aim of the operation was to make savings on government social expenditure and to link income support to workfare (World Bank 2016).

The SSI architecture

The overall three 'pillar' architecture of the Greek minimum income scheme is a replica of the classic one-size-fits-all social/labour market inclusion programmes that have been developed over several decades in European member states and for which convergence is sought through an open method of coordination steered at supranational level. The first pillar—income-support—comprises a monthly amount ranging from €200 to €900 monthly depending on the household's size and gross income (e.g. a typical family of two adults and two children is expected to live on €400 per month).[8] The second pillar provides access to social services and goods such as electricity discounts and food stamps. The third pillar foresees support services for (re)integration into the labour market.

The main eligibility thresholds for the program are as follows. The household's income during the six months preceding the application must not exceed six times the amount of the allowance,[9] or a ceiling of €5,400 regardless of the number of persons in the household. Moreover, there are criteria for ownership, which also vary according to the size of the household. These include the taxable value of real estate in Greece or abroad (initially €90,000 for a single person, with a ceiling fixed at €150,000), the 'objective value' of all types of private vehicles (including bicycles: the total amount must not exceed €6,000) and the total amount of bank deposits or equivalent (which may not exceed six times the six-month amount of the allowable income threshold). Implementation of the scheme is entrusted

to the municipalities (statutory employees, temporary workers or social workers at community centres), but citizens may also file their applications alone or with the help of accountants. Until 2018, the citizen service centres (KEPs) were also allowed to file SSI applications (for a more detailed account, see Sakellaropoulos, Lalioti & Kourachanis 2019; Dimoulas 2017; Lalioti 2016).

The central command

The SSI has been established amidst serious upheavals: drastic austerity measures imposed by the successive SAPs; the decentralization laws (1997, 2010) that totally reconfigured the Greek local government and administration systems, transferred important responsibilities to the municipalities despite increasingly scarce resources; and the showdown between the Tsipras government and the troika. As a result, the role of the WB has not been as consensual as some officials would have us believe. It directed operations to make sure the program conformed to the prescribed model:

> The technical advisors were very pushy in the implementation of the programme. And here, going into details, from the assessment of how fast-paced the project is to what needs to be changed, there have always been disagreements. There were…power games, even among the WB's lead experts... There were external pressures: the SSI must be very strict, very controlled, the income-support must not increase, not compete with other revenues—the WB had a very clear view... [It] was putting heavy demands on a system that was not working the way it wanted it to, that had no infrastructure… (Assistant to Theano Fotiou, former Alternate Minister of Social Solidarity).

However, Greeks officials admit that:

> It was a lesson. It produced technological knowledge. You have to realize that the implementation of the SSI system was done in a very short period of time; elsewhere, it had been carried out for years. You have to see that social protection was totally neglected; it was basically philanthropic, with Church involvement. It gave an opportunity to organize things and then see where things go (*ibid.*).

The smooth rollout of the programme owes much to the intense mobilisation on the Greek side. All our interviewees at ministerial level agreed that '*the program has been supported more than any other program and more systematically than any other*'. The SSI was initially operated by the e-Government Centre for Social Security Services (IDIKA) with the support of the WB. In 2017 a specific unit—the Directorate for the Fight against Poverty (hereafter the Directorate) staffed with a small team of young very dedicated workers was created within the Ministry of Labour to regulate the scheme throughout the country. Municipalities strived hard to modernize their facilities and rely on a single, uniform procedure.

Streamlining and residualizing Welfare

The head of the Directorate is very proud to have successfully completed the implementation of the SSI. He has followed it from the beginning and speaks with caution in our presence. We asked him to explain the rationale behind the very low income-support. He mentioned the WB-led Social Welfare Review aim to create fiscal space and reminded us that the 2015 MoU prescribed a targeted '*fiscally-neutral*' welfare system. He said:

> "How would we do that? Through budgetary savings taken from social resources... In the end, it wasn't done that way. There were a few small cuts in four small benefits [he cannot remember exactly which ones], but the funding came from the budget surplus [i.e. the budget balance net of interest payments]. As a result, both the SSI was created, and there were no cuts in other allowances.

This is a very watered-down and not quite accurate presentation of the method finally chosen to generate fiscal space. True, government did not need year on year to identify and legislate equivalent measures to compensate the implementation of the SSI and, equally true, the primary budget surplus target[10] has been constantly overachieved in 2016-2019, thus generating some fiscal space. This does not mean that there have not been cuts to other allowances. Primary surpluses are achieved through spending cuts and tax hikes. Given that that the multiplier is probably greater than one, the cuts and tax hikes represent more than twice the GDP percentage primary surplus targets imposed by the creditors (Krugman 2015a; 2015b). Moreover, one has to bear in mind that the budget surplus is a flow, not a stock (Krugman 2015c): the level of social expenditure (e.g. for health) for a given year depends not only on the budgetary effort of that year but also on the budgetary effort for the whole period of economic adjustment (Ioakimoglou 2018). The following table clearly shows how much social welfare functions have been affected by the fiscal adjustment effort (hence the effort to achieve budget surplus targets) over the period 2009-2017, and the reconfiguration of budget lines within social protection. Health has been particularly hit, with a 29.8% drop in government spending, followed by education (-14.5%) and social protection (-5.1%), whereas public order and safety functions have been better served with a 7.8% increase in spending benefiting mostly police services (+17%) and prisons (+12.8%) (not law courts however, nor fire-protection services). On an annual basis, compared to 2017, a critical analysis of the Greek 2018 Budget (Ioakimoglou 2018; see also IMF 2019) highlights the same trend: namely, the abolition of some allowances and tax breaks as well as new cuts expected on salaries, pensions, insurance, primary and secondary healthcare, pharmaceutical treatments, and social protection.

Table 1. Government expenditure by selected function 2017/2019 (current PPP)

INDICATOR	2017/2009 (%)
General public services	**-37,1**
Public order and safety	**7,8**
Police services	17.0
Fire-protection services	-7.2
Law courts	-15.6
Prisons	12.8
Health	**-29.8**
Medical products, appliances and equipment	-38.2
Outpatient services	34.9
Hospital services	-30.8
R&D health	173.0
Health NEC*	-51.5
Education	**-14.5**
Pre-primary and primary education	-4.2
Secondary education	-25.4
Tertiary education	-17.3
Subsidiary services to education	-4.3
R&D education	-8.5

Education NEC*	27.7
Social Protection	**-5.1**
Sickness and disability	-14.8
Old age	-3.2
Survivors	25.1
Family and children	-37.0
Unemployment	-56.1
Housing	-93.8
Social Exclusion NEC*	794.8
R&D social protection	-47.0
Social protection NEC*	-54.2

*NEC stands for Not Elsewhere Classified. *Source*: OECD Dataset. Government at Glance 2019 edition.

3. An 'individualized mass management"

The contradictory terms used to qualify the management of means-tested schemes—*mass* management, which is simultaneously *individualized*—reflects a classic problem for all such devices in Europe and elsewhere, including Greece: how can individualization be subsumed under a supposedly 'universal' category? Individualization subdivides the universal into categories and sub-categories with porous and evolving contours—e.g. alimony recipients, students, young people, the military, the homeless, the self-employed, employees, pensioners, the disabled, the Roma, 'foreigners', refugees, etc. Processing all these more or less arbitrary categories of people, whose social situations are never totally fixed, presupposes a continuous work of regulation and balance. What then would the common measure be, that makes it possible to produce the rightful synthesis of individual situations and allow for their universalized mass management? This conceptual problem is at the root of the difficulties encountered at both national and local levels in operating the SSI. While national authorities may want to count on technology to circumvent the problem, local officers devoted to their public service mandate and faced with real people and real situations may find it troublesome to avoid difficulties.

Read the user-manual!

At central level, a relatively simple solution to the contradiction has been to focus and rely heavily on an information system (IS) capable of cross-referencing online data. Such an electronic platform did not previously exist. A gifted member of the Greek team created it from scratch with results highly appreciated by the WB. Obviously, the mechanism could not be immediately flawless. Because:

> … it's not self-lighting (αυτόφωτο): it feeds on information from other systems, from OAED [Greece's employment services, Οργανισμός Απασχόλησης Εργατικού Δυναμικού] with jobseeker registrations, from the Ministry of Education and from tax returns, etc. So the quality of the information produced [by the platform] depends on the quality of the information of the systems that feed it (Head of the Directorate).

Moreover, adds the officer, it is very complicated to cross-reference in order to identify the exact situation and composition of a household: it would almost require '*doing a survey in each house*'.

The platform has been designed to be intuitive so that anyone may use it, civil servants, accountants or ordinary citizens. '*The platform is child's play*', asserts an employee

working in the best organized and most efficient municipality we have seen. However, she stresses:

> The program doesn't tell you everything... computer data are not necessarily accurate… The thought necessary to help citizens make a request cannot be learned [through a computer program].

She never ceased in our discussions to underline the problem raised by insufficient training of agents entrusted with the SSI. There had been a few training sessions organized for municipal workers just before February 2017, but the platform was not ready, knowledge imparted was theoretical, and it was up to local staff to learn on the job. Central executives admit to this failure caused by the hasty implementation of the programme. Even so, they had envisaged training only limited to operating the computer program, while understaffing meant that the municipalities would assign to the scheme the first available person without really caring about their specific skills for the job (assuming one knew what those skills ought to be).

We asked central officers for their thoughts on staff training:

- [We] It seemed to us that training has been insufficient...

- [Executive] The platform is basically aimed at simple people... There may be difficulties in identifying the right legislation, but that's not a technical issue, it's a question of good preparation for the programme. If you have read the user manual—beyond the platform we produced an analytical user manual and Q&A for the municipalities. I consider that difficulties arise in the case of those who have not read the tools made available to help them. Or that Q&A are not satisfactory… there are complex situations which need to be asked directly to the Ministry and we answer by e-mail....

Central officers express a great deal of fascination with the platform (and self-worth in creating it. But their remarks also echo and appear to internalize the scornful attitude of the Institutions towards Greece [e.g. Burgi & Golub 2019]).

> For me, the secret starts at the platform... When we'll have all the data online, then we'll be able to say that the mechanism is perfect, that we are becoming perfect ourselves. The platform has yet to be enriched, the data are not harmonized yet. Little by little we are getting there and the online information will come from everywhere… If I were a citizen of a *civilized country* [our emphasis], it would be obvious to me. But it wasn't obvious in Greece... (*ibid.*).

The Ministry, which made a point of being accessible to employees and developing good personal relationships with them, also relies on information that comes up from the field (besides other gatherings, seminars or WB evaluations) to improve and adjust its computer tool as it goes along. Government officials do not seek only technical information: they also encourage denunciatory practices:

> The Ministry says that you can draft an accusation... [e.g.] I should write the following: "This little girl, let's say a Roma, wore 80 bracelets in gold, earrings and 28 necklaces." But there's no way I'm going to do that! Because I'm talking about culture, and [the Ministry] answers back, talking about income (Local officer).

Anyhow, credence is first and foremost given to the IS. So much so that local officers do not seem to be expected to reflect. According to one employee:

> I don't have to read… or search all the time on the Internet and look at what has changed in the tax return system and look at what has changed here and there, and then [if something has changed] question [the Ministry]… My job: to follow what the program tells me… I don't have to look any further and—assuming I'm on my good day—ask a question. The Ministry gives me general directions, I am completely covered, whether I am investigating or not.

Many (most?) local officers (who are generally not highly educated) and all temporary workers recruited during peak periods tend to apply whatever comes out of the computer programme. They lack the right professional experience and have not been properly trained to be able to identify possible flaws in the system. Most importantly, they do not necessarily know how to read tax returns, which are key documents one needs to check and understand when filing an application e.g. when there is mismatch of information of the computer and the applicant. Moreover, the Ministry tells local officers not to request supporting documents unless indispensable. Yet how will the officers find, if needed, which specific documents might be appropriate to individual situations?

> It might be a one-year unemployment card, a school certificate, high school diploma… it could be military service, it could be thousands of things. At that point you need to take the citizen aside, [investigate] and ask: "Where do you live, where were you, what happened?"; it may be a rental contract… Everyone's knowledge is different. Even the Ministry is not familiar with this bureaucracy... Even now, if you send a question to the Ministry and renew it three times, you will get three different answers. (Local employee)

Mistakes and responsibilities

It turns out that the margin of error of the IS in determining eligibility is very large. One employee understands better than others its shortcomings thanks to her professional experience (namely 15 years in an accounting office). She says:

> It is very easy to reject more than half [the applicants] simply on the basis of what comes out of the computer program.

Conversely, the benefit may be granted to non-eligible people. The risk of error is increased by the fact that apart from municipal officers, SSI applications may be filed by a number of different people (including applicants) who do not have a good grasp of the system or who find loopholes to access the scheme more or less legally.

What happens when mistakes occur? Municipal officers have a great deal of discretionary power. They are not held responsible for any misconduct and are not subject to any sanctions (except in the event that they knowingly conceal something). It is up to them to take the initiative, *if they so wish*, to try to correct the computer generated data that appear inconsistent with an individual situation. Or, to retrospectively correct a mistake that would have penalized a citizen (this is only possible if the author of the mistake, and s/he alone, e.g. not a temp or any other person, is willing to admit her/his fault and inform the Ministry).

In contrast, applicants are held responsible for any errors that may appear in their file, even if someone else were at fault. Once the applicant has signed the SSI form containing all relevant information, the Ministry considers that s/he must assume responsibility for what is written on it:

> The applicant signs and [s/he] is told: "You signed, period. It's your fault"... The system doesn't admit any mistakes... The citizen signed. Which citizen, however? The majority of them [applicants], not all, but a very large proportion, are sick and uneducated. They didn't go to school.

Sanctions are not 'limited', contrary to what the World Bank (2019) assumes. The Ministry does not identify all irregularities, but it does detect a good amount through regular inspections. Whether or not beneficiaries are guilty, they risk being suspended (excluded from the program) for one year and obliged to repay the sums supposedly unduly received. Being deprived of the allowance is not a small penalty in situations of extreme poverty; and when recipients are unable to repay they are not left alone: their file is forwarded to the tax administration.

This transfer of responsibility is not the only injustice suffered by recipients. Day-to-day observation of local SSI administration shows that distrust and suspicion of applicants as well as their subdivision into many sub-categories breed injustices and inequalities. There are countless examples. For instance, recipients do not all have the same rights. Some are allowed to cumulate income-support with other allowances, others not; people may be unfairly rejected by the system because of the IS' flaws (see above), or due to institutionalized *a priori* conceptions, e.g. in the frequent case of an alimony (which usually varies between €200 and €300 depending on the father's income) that has not been paid to a woman: the Ministry considers *a priori* that the woman has received the money in cash, and this excludes her from the SSI because she does not meet the eligibility criteria (her theoretical income is too high). The same logic applies in the case of bonuses workers formally receive from their boss who then takes back the cash.

Work and workfare

To what extent would work best serve the interests of beneficiaries? Central authorities carry out the conventional discourse heard far beyond Greece:

> The objective is inclusion. The problem for many people is not poverty per se, but the fact that they cut themselves off from society.

Given the weakness of Greece's employment services (OAED), the third pillar just started to get off the ground. The Directorate planned its implementation in three phases: (a) starting in June 2018, compulsory registration with OAED of all unemployed adults in a household; (b) from June 2019 (a pilot tested experiment in 32 municipalities still ongoing at the end of the year), beneficiary profiling by OAED services to define a (re)integration project; and, (c) from 2020, systematic placement of recipients in inclusion schemes offered by OAED.

In 2015, there had been a permanent controversy in discussions between the government and WB representatives on what the third pillar ought to be:

> Because we are talking about the tough implementation of a program, which does not exist as such in Greece: setting conditions for inclusion, availability, employability, the obligation to accept anything, [any job]. We don't have it here for social assistance. The controversy was on the theme: "I cannot implement such a program in an environment where we have 25% unemployment and end up with no result!" (Assistant to T. Fotiou).

Having no choice and faced with very scarce jobs in the labour market, the government opted for targeted OAED programs involving low-wage fixed-term (around €500 monthly if full-time) and/or reduced working hours contracts (usually non renewable 8 months contracts) including 'community service' jobs in municipalities or elsewhere. This is standard public policy strategy for handling queues of unemployed people. At the end of the contract, one has to wait 6 months before applying again for SSI or another OAED program.

> One considers s/he could've saved up for another six months. S/he looses the priority on the list granted to SSI beneficiaries because there are other unemployed. And if s/he is lucky enough to still have an OAED long-term unemployment allowance [€200; on conditions, see Leventi et al. 2017] after an 8 months job s/he may be on a much longer waiting list before re-applying for SSI (municipal agent).

This means that reintegration into employment offers SSI beneficiaries (and other groups) the prospect of very low wages followed by a period of unemployment of at least six months without income-support. As a result, recipients are reluctant to leave the scheme, especially in case of €250 part-time jobs. Many employees, social workers and managers we interviewed in the region and in one seriously understaffed and disorganized municipality—view such hesitation as a sign of laziness on the part of recipients who '*would rather crawl onto a couch and collect the allowance rather than work'*.

> They have no sense of obligation (*ibid.*).

However, public officers hold a contradictory discourse because they also admit that there are no steady jobs ('*Indeed',* says the head of the Directorate, '*the problem is structural*'), that one cannot live on such low salaries and that the SSI income-support, which is slightly lower but almost equivalent to part-time work at €250, is not enough to live on. Therefore:

> Everyone works under the table, that's obvious. They do not live off the SSI. Not even if you're alone, you can't.

It is no secret. Recipients are not lazy (undeclared work is still work). They need both income-support and work and they are not '*cut off from society*'—unless they are homeless (and again, since the definition of homelessness includes several situations [Kourachanis 2017], they are not necessarily cut off from society). This does not mean that there are no lazy people. Nor does it mean that there is no (attempted) fraud on the part of some of them. It means that near-survival living conditions force people into survival strategies. And that it is unlikely that the 'perfection' of managers and mechanisms called for by some executives may ever be reached without enabling the impoverished masses to cross the poverty line—unless one builds an Orwellian system of total control over each single household member, or, to quote once more the head of the Directorate, one embarks on the impossible task of '*doing a survey in each house*'.

Conclusion

From the above, it emerges that the common measure by which the most diverse situations might be uniformly ('universally') processed is based on an efficiency principle—containing public action within narrow budgetary limits representing less than 0.5% of GDP to cover 7% of the 15% 'extreme poor"[11]—ensuring a trouble-free rollout of the SSI by sophisticated mass management techniques which bother neither about 'collateral' injustices and inequalities nor about local working conditions and the quality of public service. At national and local levels, priorities are quite far removed from the needs of those concerned,

the core issue of biopolitics. If the individualized management of situations may inspire the idea of a policy that is mindful of each and everyone's needs, this can be interpreted as part of a symbolic domination effect, as are the fine words chosen to justify the dominant approach in the fight against 'extreme poverty': equity, dignity, empowerment, vulnerability, etc.

The purpose of regularizing the poor is not limited to '*only looking at numbers*', in the words of a national executive who was qualifying his work at the Directorate. In 2015, the then president of the EC, Jean-Claude Junker, referred to the EU Pillar of Social Rights saying that it 'expresses principles and rights essential for fair and well-functioning labour markets and welfare systems in 21st century Europe'. It is designed to 'serve as a compass for the renewed convergence within the Euro area' (Junker 2015). Indeed, one also observes elsewhere in Europe that the international trend towards the deliberate weakening of the Welfare State and its rights-based benefits translates into setting new rules of the game with the establishment of 'universal' systems of assistance ('universal' income-support schemes, 'universal' pensions, 'universal' access to health services etc.) targeted at the most deprived. In the division of labour resulting from the projected new 'convergence within the Euro area', the newly large 'vulnerable' part of the Greek population, or indeed other the populations of other 'peripheral states', appear to be caged into systems that deny the dignity and life prospects that the income support programs claim to defend. Former highly skilled workers live in the fear that they will be permanently declassed.

The system set up to regularize the poor has also had the objective of pacifying the poorest social strata, and this goal has undoubtedly been achieved, at least in the present time. '*Every year, people are calmer*,' says one local official, for example; '*things are getting better*', say many others. But pacification has come at the price of injustices and inequalities that feed the enmity between poor people who suspect each other, and who feel mistreated when compared to the neighbours or, even more, the many Others from more distant lands, especially the refugee. As we were told '*everyone believes that refugees have everything, whereas they have nothing*'.

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[1] International Monetary Fund (IMF), European Commission (EC) and European Central Bank (ECB).

[2] Foucault defines biopolitics as a power technology characteristic of modern societies that is not directed at concrete, living individuals, but at masses, constants, global measures, proportions.

[3] Internal devaluation is an economic and social policy whose aim is to restore the international competitiveness of a country through labour cost reductions and cutbacks in public spending.

[4] For instance, 'vulnerability' is a polysemic concept (Martin 2013), which in its critical sense, that of Robert Castel for example, may be understood as a collective condition caused by the institutionalization of growing areas of precariousness and insecurity. Fighting social vulnerability then implies acting on its extrinsic causes. But the notion can just as easily refer to the supposed fragility of individuals 'at risk'; the logic then is that of

preventing the risks personally associated with the victims of social exclusion, thus acting on the effects of vulnerability and not on its causes.

[5] The threshold also varies according to the area under consideration: Athens, 'Other urban areas', 'Rural and peri-urban areas' in their study. For a single person, it stood at 222, 216 and 182 Euros respectively in 2015; and at 640, 614 and 524 Euros for a couple with two children. These figures refer to people who do not have to pay rent or mortgages. With a rent or a real estate loan, the thresholds are higher.

[6] Poverty, calculated at the household level, is defined as having a total disposable income below 40 percent of the yearly national median of 7,200 Euros.

[7] On the history of cross-party debates, see Lalioti (2016).

[8] The basic principle of SSI income-support is as follows. The first adult in the household can get up to €200 monthly, each additional adult gets €100 and each child €50. These are maximum amounts. In exceptional cases, these maximum amounts are increased (especially in the case of single-parent families). We will specify other amounts below when necessary. The monthly amount is the difference between the six-month guaranteed income-support and the six-month declared income of the household divided by six. The details of eligibility determination can be found in the World Bank 2019 report (Appendix I).

[9] Which means €1,200 a semester for a single person, €1,800 for a couple, €2,400 for a couple and two children or €3,000 for a couple and four children.

[10] Which represents the amount that Greece is paying to her creditors in the form of real resources, as opposed to her interest payments coming out of funds lent by her creditors. Greece has been running a primary surplus since 2013 and the Tsipras government had committed to a 3.5% of GDP surplus until 2022 and 2.2% of GDP on average over 2023-2060.

[11] According to the World Bank (2019) survey data, the SSI 'reduces poverty by 0.8 percentage points, from 15.2 percent in the absence of the program, to 14.4 percent once the SSI benefits are taken into account'.