

Facing Greece's Climate Reality

Article by Kostas Zafeiropoulos

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The devastating forest fires and floods of 2023 have confronted Greece with the reality of the climate emergency. Yet the country's conservative government continues to deny its responsibility by attacking scientists, while environmental journalists are threatened by both politicians and private interests. Tackling the climate crisis demands a change of course.

In the run-up to Greece's two parliamentary elections in May and June, the climate crisis was of little or no concern to politicians. Less than 0.5 per cent of pre-election speeches of all the political leaders contained the terms "environment" or "climate change". The subject was conspicuously absent even from the final TV debate between the leaders of the country's most prominent parties.

This seems to go against the priorities of Greek citizens. According to the latest Eurobarometer survey, 94 per cent of Greeks believe that "tackling climate change and environmental issues should be a priority to improve public health." Another survey by Metron Analysis found that 29 per cent of Greeks consider climate change the biggest issue facing the planet today, followed by the destruction of the natural environment (21 per cent). However, when it comes to Greece, a different picture emerges: the cost of living tops the Greeks' concerns, followed by the economy and only then by environmental destruction (9 per cent).

This might partly explain why Greece's green parties are not flourishing. In the June elections, the Ecological Greens-Green Unity received 21,188 votes, or 0.41 per cent, while the Green & Purple alliance got 15,725 votes, or 0.3 per cent. By contrast, the climate-sceptic, conspiracy-minded far-right party Niki ("Victory") got 3.69 per cent of the vote, gaining 10 seats in the Greek parliament. According to an article hosted on the party's website "The theory of climate change, by targeting carbon dioxide [emissions], becomes the means of maintaining global power and through it, global wealth".

Climate reality

Shortly after the June election, Greece experienced disastrous wildfires that caused at least 28 deaths and burned more than 120,000 hectares of land. In September, the country's central region of Thessaly was hit by devastating floods. Eventually, climate change made its appearance in the Greek political and media debate.

In their coverage of the environmental disasters, several Greek media quoted English-language news reports. Popular government-friendly outlets *iefimerida* and *Newsbomb*, referring to an article published in *Deutsche Welle*, titled, "Greece is at the forefront of climate change". *Newsbomb* also quoted the *BBC*'s title "Floods in Greece: Prime Minister Mitsotakis warns of a very unequal battle with nature".

Ekathimerini, the English version of one of Greece's main newspapers, quoted Mitsotakis telling *CNN*, "We did the best we could" in dealing with the catastrophic fires. "I am afraid that this is going to be the reality that areas like the Mediterranean will face in the future", Mitsotakis added. These narratives contributed to the depoliticisation of environmental disasters in Greece's public debate.

This is not a new trend. Back in 2018, former left-wing Prime Minister and Syriza leader Alexis Tsipras reacted to the floods in Mandra and the wildfires in Mati, in the capital's region of Attica, saying that Greece needs to update civil protection protocols as "climate change will bring us more often in the face of extreme weather events". Then-opposition leader Mitsotakis replied ironically, "Mr. Tsipras discovered today that climate change causes extreme weather events".

Polarisation and depoliticisation

The late geographer and University of the Aegean professor Eleni Kapetanaki-Briassoulis warned in 2021 that a fatalistic acceptance of the impacts of climate change shifts responsibility to distant causes, sidelining "local (individual and collective) decisions and interventions on natural resources". "The dominant narrative of climate change, by sharpening the dimension or rather confusing the local/contextual with the global/remote, exonerates a portion of the official and unofficial culprits and redistributes the blame, spreading it over a larger population," Kapetanakis-Briassoulis wrote.

However, the government went one step further, attacking the scientific community in the aftermath of last summer's disasters. In September, when the National Observatory of Athens (NOA) reported a 195 per cent increase in burnt areas despite a 52 per cent reduction in the number of wildfires in 2023 compared to the annual average from 2002 to 2022, the government accused the Observatory of being politically motivated. Deputy Minister of Migration and Asylum Sofia Voultepsi spoke of a "propaganda of numbers", while MP and former minister Stelios Petsas referred to "political games", adding, "I don't like its role".

In early December, the government moved from words to deeds, announcing its intention to incorporate the NOA into the Ministry of Climate Crisis and Civil Protection. Researchers from various institutions opposed the change, citing concerns over the independence of the Observatory.

Political controversies aside, last summer's environmental disasters brought the climate crisis to the fore, possibly marking a change in media attitudes. According to analysis by the National Network for Climate Change CLIMPACT of over two thousand news items published online between 2009 and 2020, coverage of the climate crisis by Greek media was lacking for several reasons.

First, 11 per cent of the analysed content reproduced climate sceptical views. Second, although the consequences of climate change are already tangible in Greece and across the globe, 28 per cent of the analysed articles exclusively referred to climate impacts to come in an unspecified future. Only 17 per cent of the articles mentioned the manifestation of climate change in the present.

Third, the articles focused primarily on national governments as responsible for addressing climate change and its impacts, while local and international actors (the EU, citizens, local authorities, environmental groups, and NGOs) were mentioned less frequently.

On a more positive note, the analysis found that one in two news articles presented or reproduced statements by experts, while one in three contained statements by politicians, followed by members of civil society (14.5 per cent), citizens (12 per cent), and business representatives (9 per cent).

The presence of scientists in the media can enhance the public's understanding of the link between climate change, human activity, and natural disasters.

As noted in the survey, the presence of scientists in the media can enhance the public's understanding of the link between climate change, human activity, and natural disasters. Nevertheless, CLIMPACT stressed, online media discourse – which often reproduces offline discourse – should become more explanatory to convey the importance of climate change and the urgency for political action.

Alexandra Politaki, European Climate Pact ambassador in Greece, wrote in a recent article that the country lacks large-scale information and awareness-raising campaigns designed centrally and implemented over time by state bodies. Instead, people are exposed to “photographs of current or future disasters, [...] fragmentary images that offer nothing more than impressions. Thus, key concepts [...] such as Adaptation, Transition, Climate Neutrality, European Green Deal, Just Transition Mechanism, are left without broad understanding”, argued Politaki.

Even the National Climate Law, adopted in May 2022 and aiming to reduce Greece's greenhouse gas emissions by 55 per cent by 2030 compared to 1990 levels and achieve net zero emissions by 2050, did not receive the visibility it deserved. The approval of the law, which several environmental NGOs consider not ambitious enough, followed a public consultation period of only two months between the end of 2021 and the beginning of 2022.

This insufficient public consultation “has been reflected in the Climate Law, as well as the lack of a comprehensive approach, depth, and political vision,” claimed Politaki.

Legal threats

Political polarisation and weak media coverage are not the only problems plaguing the public debate on climate in Greece. Indeed, as attention has grown around environmental issues, there has also been an increase in lawsuits against journalists by economic interests, including companies involved in the energy transition. Intimidatory legal action known as SLAPP (Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation) targeted journalists who uncovered environmental damage or brought to the fore environmental concerns around large-scale mining and energy projects.

Examples include a lawsuit filed by renewable energy company WRE HELLAS against Tasos Sarantis and the newspaper *Efsyn*; one by a high-ranking executive of Hellas Gold against the online news outlet *Altherthess* and journalist Stavroula Poulimeni, who reported on environmental pollution connected to the company's mining operations in Greece's northern region of Halkidiki; and one by recycling company Antapodotiki Anakyklosi against journalist Thodoris Chondrogiannos for an article published in the independent news outlet *inside story*.

Legal threats do not only concern journalists. ONEX shipyards targeted a local environmental NGO on the Cycladic island of Syros; a wind energy company sued 100 residents of the island of Tinos for mobilising against the installation of wind turbines; another wind power company filed a lawsuit against nine legal entities on Andros, another of the Cyclades, after they had contested the construction of a road by the company. The list could go on.

“These SLAPPs do not only attempt to obstruct our duty to provide information independent of political and economic interests. It is also the right to receive information that is gradually being restricted”, explains Stavroula Poulimeni. Fortunately, most local communities and many environmental organisations stood in solidarity with journalists and NGOs against the burgeoning industry of intimidatory lawsuits.

Yet silence prevailed in most of the country's mainstream media, which only seem to have remembered

the climate and the environment in the face of flooded towns, villages covered in mud, and 1.7 million acres burnt in a single summer.

Since 2016, Greece has had a National Strategy for Climate Change Adaptation (NSCA), based on a 2011 study by the Bank of Greece. However, seven years after the strategy was developed, Greece has yet to approve the 13 Regional Climate Change Adaptation Plans (PESPACA) needed to implement the NSCA. Little seems to have changed even after last summer, and little is being reported about this in the media.

Strengthening media independence is crucial to provide the public with quality information on climate issues and policies, to understand the impacts of climate change while holding politicians accountable. There is also an urgent need to “co-educate” scientists and journalists to better communicate the complexities of climate science and recognise the social and economic impacts of the climate crisis.

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