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Exercising control in media during Covid-19: the “Stay at Home” campaign on Twitter in Greece

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In 2020, the Greek government initiated the “Stay at Home” Campaign (or “Petsas’ list”), a fund for supporting the country’s media industry due to financial issues provoked by the Covid-19 pandemic. Also, the campaign would promote the message of staying at home to stop spreading Covid-19. However, that initiative seemed to have been perceived as a manipulation effort to control the news media in order to support an ideal image of the government, including defending the excessive pandemic restrictions (e.g., lockdowns and the prohibition of music in restaurants and bars). The current study employs Ideological Discourse Analysis (IDA) to investigate the online anti-media sentiment empowered by the “Stay at Home” Campaign. It focuses on the Twitter users’ ideological constructions emphasizing on the positive depictions of one group (i.e., the government and the media) against the “other” (i.e., the public) in 1623 Tweets of the relevant hashtag in Greek #Petsas_list (#Αίστα_Πετσα) on Twitter. The results showed that financial support when used in a controversial and non-transparent way, could undermine media independence and empower anti-media sentiment. Lastly, the study enhances the literature about the mass media industry’s problems globally, including the decline in media freedom that contributes to the democratic recession.

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Introduction

At the beginning of 2020, the Greek government initiated a campaign as a fund for supporting the country's media industry as it was facing severe troubles due to financial issues provoked by the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as promoting the message of staying at home for stop the spreading of Covid-19. That initiative seemed an important step for helping the news industry that was in a bad situation. Nevertheless, the so-called "Petsas' List" (or "Stay at Home" Campaign) named by Stelios Petsas, the representative of the Greek government formed by the right-wing party of New Democracy (ND), was perceived as another effort to manipulate the news to promote an ideal image of the government (Ipi, 2020).

That strong societal belief has to do with some systemic problems of the Greek media system, such as connections between the politicians, the journalists, and the news media owners that tend to benefit the party that will probably provide them financial support. These clientelistic relationships have formed a highly concentrated media industry. As a result, the professionals of the field show a lack of professionalism and a watchdog role, and an alarming dependency on the media owners when they cover the news (Papathanassopoulos et al., 2021; Hallin and Mancini, 2004).

The revealed details of the campaign of the "Stay at Home" Campaign ("Petsas' List") showed that less than one percent of the 20 million euros was given to news outlets labeled as non-supporters of the opposition parties or critical of the government. In addition, the campaign gave money even to non-existent websites. Prominent media outlets were excluded from the list, too (Ipi, 2020). That problematic campaign in Greece was not the only alarming issue that emerged in Europe, considering the restrictions due to the pandemic, as other countries implemented similar initiatives. Nevertheless, Greece is considering a prominent case of exercising power in the media industry and restricting essential freedoms during the pandemic. It was the country that had the most severe violations of freedoms in Europe, surpassing other countries known for their democratic deterioration, like Poland and Hungary (Kolvani et al., 2020). As a result, the current paper tries to shed light on one of the most controversial initiatives in the country, the "Stay at Home" Campaign ("Petsas' List"), considering media independence by analyzing the tweets of Greek citizens for 3-months before the country's second lockdown that was imposed in November 2020.

During that time, the news media included in the List had already received the relevant amount of money as it aimed to support the media during the first lockdown after the confirmation of the first Covid-19 case on 26 February 2020 in Thessaloniki. As the current manuscript studies the impact of the List on media independence, it is essential to mention that a decreased media independence could lead to a discourse controlled by powerful societal elites to promote their goals and narratives. Such a problematic functioning impacts the media's watchdog role, stopping news production from promoting societal development, such as tackling inequality. The news media become the cheerleaders of the societal elites, including the politicians, disrupting their trust and support from the public (Chowdhury and Keane, 2021; Keane, 2020; George, 2018). These are some of the reasons why the paper researches the question of how the Twitter users with the hashtag #Petsas_list (#Λίστα_Πετσα) portrayed the relationship between the government and the "Stay at Home" Campaign.

Greece's example enhances the literature about the problems that the mass media industry is facing globally, including the decline in media independence (Mihelj et al., 2021; Milutinović, 2021; Papadopoulou and Maniou, 2021) that contributes to the democratic recession in Europe in the last decade (Gora and de

Wilde, 2022; Anna Vachudova, 2020; Castaldo, 2020; Sitter and Bakke, 2019). The ongoing democratic recession is believed to be leading to a new form of regimes with despotic characteristics, which, according to John Keane (2020) are named "new despotisms." "New despotisms" could be perceived as democratic regimes. However, they are dying democracies due to a severe lack of holding the governments accountable through civil society, including a lack of independent media that disrupts the media's role of highlighting the governmental wrongdoings (Keane, 2020).

In addition, the current manuscript contributes to the discussion above by showing that financial support, when used in a controversial and non-transparent way, can undermine the media and empower anti-media sentiment. Anti-media sentiment in the Global South has been an issue that has been on the margins of research (Bhat and Chadha, 2020), and Greece is a country that is rarely studied in journalism and communication studies (Demeter, 2020).

The current study uses ideological discourse analysis (IDA), a certain type of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), to highlight and understand the ideological constructions promoted by 1632 Tweets on Twitter, explaining the us (citizens) versus them (journalists and media) narratives. The controversial campaign for Covid-19 is associated with the main right-wing ideology of the governing party and its efforts to control the news coverage. The harsh restrictions and the problematic funding with the "Petsas' List" ("Stay at Home" Campaign) for many individuals in Greek society are perceived as ideological actions that must be tackled.

Subsidizing and restricting media independence during Covid-19

Subsidizing the news outlets in several countries, especially in Europe, was a common way to deal with unprecedented financial issues that were caused by the pandemic. Nevertheless, like in the case of Greece, the way the governments funded the industry was controversial, leading to calls for more transparency and discussions about how the right-wing populists use the power to control and manipulate the new stories to benefit themselves (Krämer, 2018; Bhat and Chadha, 2020; Štětka et al., 2021).

That approach has to do with a dominant narrative that blames the media for spreading misinformation such as fake news. Instead of focusing on those with power, the news media are blamed and not protected to do their job, like investigating corruption and holding the people in power accountable (Bhat and Chadha, 2020; Greven, 2016). Journalism should not disseminate uncritically the narratives promoted by the governments or the elites, but it must help the public to identify the wrongdoings of the ruling parties and inform them about these problematic decisions. However, journalists need independence to fulfill that role, which is essential for securing a country's robust democratic functioning (George, 2018).

Media independence is a core principle for journalism and media studies and can be controversial, as it can be perceived in various ways in different contexts. For instance, the media's position and role in authoritarian and democratic regimes and the forces that affect this relationship are considered a part of the relevant academic discussion. The disruption of the normative idea regarding the capability of the media not to be dictated by political and commercial forces (lack of external interference) gives them legitimacy and support towards the public, as in that case, they are preserving their societal role, which is to highlight the corruption and the good practices that make the society more prosperous (Karppinen and Moe, 2016). For the people to be

sovereign and not manipulated by the societal elites, they must be able to consume many different opinions and express their viewpoints, including challenging those that govern the country (LaMay, 2005).

One reason systematic attacks on journalists and the media are considered alarming is that they are an external force that goes against the ideal independent role of the media. This phenomenon also occurs in Asian countries that have achieved critical democratic steps. In the 20th century, democratic progress seemed more promising, as “democratic media supported and benefited from mass movements in the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan and Indonesia” (George, 2021).

Digitization and the significant changes in the media industry have challenged and intensified the external interferences toward the media, leading to a debate regarding their role in the democratic decline we see worldwide (Hiltunen, 2022). In the disruption of the media’s role towards challenging those that have the power and the loss of the public’s legitimacy, it is alarming that even when not well-established parties become the government, they tend to follow restricting practices instead of supporting journalists and their independence. One of the most prominent recent examples in Europe was Greece, with the unprecedented closure of the public service broadcaster and the accusations against the journalists that they were too corrupt to serve the public in 2013. The government led by the radical left party of Syriza reopened it in 2015 when it became the country’s government, but it also followed controversial practices for controlling it (Iosifidis and Papathanassopoulos, 2019).

There is a general tendency to control the media and do the opposite of the electoral promises. Politicians tend to accuse the media of fulfilling political goals and weakening the country’s security and prosperity. They seem to want a system that does not watch their actions but benefits them by promoting an ideal image of themselves and their policies (Kenny, 2020). Except for Greece, another prominent example in the European Union was Austria and its leader Sebastian Kurz, a close friend of the Greek Prime Minister, Kyriakos Mitsotakis. Notably, Mitsotakis was the person who introduced Kurz in 2021 as a recipient of the “Media Prize of Freedom,” an award offered by a German publisher. Despite that award, the critics of the Austrian government argued that during the period of his governance, media freedom in the country declined (Noyan, 2021; Nöstlinger and Karnitschnig, 2021).

For Kurz, journalism seemed to be a profession that does not report on facts and check the mishandlings of those in power, but it just disseminates official statements. As a result, giving money to news outlets creates strong bonds between them. Thus, going against the government will result in not probably receiving the subsidy. In the Austrian case, an enormous amount of 210 million euros was planned to be spent on media expenses until 2024 (Noyan, 2021; Nöstlinger and Karnitschnig, 2021). That plan, though, was never realized, as Sebastian Kurz was forced to resign in October 2021, as he became the subject of criminal investigations for funding news media in return for their support starting already in 2016. More specifically, “he encouraged close ally Thomas Schmid, who then headed the Finance Ministry, to illicitly funnel €1.2 m euros of taxpayers’ money to media group Österreich” (Thomsen, 2021).

Approaches to controlling and manipulating the media have not only been identified in Europe in countries such as Austria, Greece, Hungary, Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovenia, but also in other continents. For example, in Southeast Asia, in the Philippines, we have seen a severe decline in journalism independence and media freedom, as extreme measures for dealing with the news outlets that are critical of the government have been implemented. Duterte’s administration did not follow the gentle

approach of the European nations, as it included even revoking licenses of television stations during the pandemic (Bernadas, and Ilagan, 2020). More specifically, the ABS-CBN license was not renewed, leading to the firing of thousands of journalists. That decision seemed to be a consequence of the Duterte administration’s constant attacks against the media and journalists in the country, adding to those related to Maria Ressa (Bernadas, and Ilagan, 2020) who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize 2021 for “efforts to safeguard freedom of expression, which is a precondition for democracy and lasting peace” (Nobelprize.org, 2022).

These approaches go against the fundamental role of media in progressing society, opening the path to new hybrid regimes with despotic characteristics (Chowdhury and Keane, 2021). The rise of populism and polarization intensifies anti-media sentiment and fragments the public sphere, resulting in challenges to journalistic and media autonomy (Hiltunen, 2022).

In Greece, it is worth mentioning that under Kyriakos Mitsotakis’ government, the violations against the citizens and the journalists were so prominent that in the Press Freedom Index 2022 of Reporters Without Borders, Greece lost 38 positions from 2021, getting position number 108 out of the 180 index’s countries. This position made Greece the country with the worst media freedom in Europe, mainly, due to the use of several of the populist tactics that Mitsotakis decied before becoming Prime Minister in 2019. Apart from that, Mitsotakis is under investigation by the European Parliament due to hints of using the country’s intelligence service to monitor journalists, opposition voices, and prominent politicians of his government (Samaras, 2022; Michalopoulos, 2022). In its report in 2024 (Nord et al., 2024), V-Dem Institute once again raised concerns about Greece, as the country has a constant democratic decline leading towards authoritarianism. For the institute, Greece does not qualify for a liberal democracy but an electoral one, with the Mitsotakis administration’s aforementioned alarming practices further affecting negatively the country’s media industry functioning, with the report mentioning that “Greece and South Korea are examples that also demonstrate that undermining of freedom of expression and the media are far from reserved for countries that are becoming harsh autocracies” (Nord et al., 2024, p. 28).

Overall, several governments across the globe supposedly tried to fund the news media during the pandemic. Still, it seems that the funding schemes did not offer much help, and in some cases, there were hints of an evident manipulation favoring those news organizations that were more friendly towards the government. In the meantime, some governments took more severe actions, including spreading anti-media narratives emphasizing the populist construction of us versus them. To show how these decisions resulted in a further deterioration of media freedom that jeopardizes the societal role of the news media, the following section focuses on how the Mitsotakis administration seemed to tighten the control even on the online space through another controversial decision, the implementation of a fake news law, and how the Greeks promoted the anti-media views online based on the Covid-19 media funding initiative.

Fake News Law and the “Petsas List’s (Petsomena) Media” (Πετσόμενα/Πετσόμενα Μέσα)

Around 17 countries worldwide passed regulations aiming at disinformation during the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition, several others strengthened or expanded existing laws to tackle this phenomenon, giving more power to the ruling elites (Wiseman, 2020). Like these countries, Greece also followed that path, raising concerns about the deterioration of media freedom during the pandemic. According to the government’s critics, the fake news

law could be used for silencing journalists as it even included imprisonment. In addition, it was believed that the law was vague and not specific. As a result, it could target several individuals and organizations and further influence media dependencies (Hrw.org, 2021). The possible use of that law frightened the biggest journalists' union in the country, the Journalists' Union of Athens Daily Newspapers (ESIEA), and Reporters without Borders, arguing that media freedom is constantly deteriorating under Mitsotakis' government. Another alarming incident, according to the government's critics, was that there was never a concrete reply initially on why such a vague law was necessary for dealing with fake news (Rs.f.org, 2021; The Cube, 2021).

Mitsotakis' government eventually responded to the criticism, and at the end of 2022, it amended the law, making it more precise as in order to trigger the law, there must be a result of the action and not just abstractly causing concern or fear. However, the law still can lead to 3 years of imprisonment (Huffingtonpost.gr, 2022). Before the ratification of the fake news law, the Greek Prime Minister seemed displeased with the way news and social media criticized the government, raising concerns regarding the true intentions of the fake news law and the initiatives taken by his administration. In an interview given at the beginning of July 2021 argued that social media platforms are causing trouble in the democratic process of Greece and that this issue must be tackled as they create "echo chambers" where essentially, we hear opinions that match ours" (Primeminister.gr, 2021).

Around a month after these statements, the Greeks, through social media, and more specifically, Twitter, started focusing through hashtags on commenting and highlighting the government's mishandlings because there was dissatisfaction with the news media and the fact, they received large sums of money from the "Stay at Home" Campaign. As a result, it was believed that they were not fulfilling their watchdog role. Similar cases have been observed again in Greece during the Covid-19 pandemic on Twitter (Avraamidou and Eftychiou, 2021).

One of the most prominent cases of anti-media dissent on social media was connected with the unprecedented environmental destruction in Evia. The wildfires during the summer of 2021 sparked outrage on social media. The hashtag #mitsotakisgamiesai (#Μητσotakis_γαμεσαι, meaning Mitsotakis fuck you) became one of the most popular trends in Greece, showing the rage that the citizens were having for the government's mishandlings (Siouti, 2021).

The pattern of accusing the news media of not covering events with a critical stance against the government has labeled these news outlets as "Petsas List's (Petsomena) Media" (Πετσόμενα/Πετωμένα Μέσα). That characterization has been demonstrated in multiple cases in which the media were perceived as favoring the government, such as some cases of deaths linked with the Covid-19 vaccines (Olympia.gr, 2021), the wildfires in 2021 and 2023 (Alfavita.gr, 2023), the Tempi train crash in 2023 (Tzouanakis, 2023), the death of ex-king of Greece Constantine II in 2023 (Documentonews.gr, 2023), to name a few. The characterization of "Petsas List's (Petsomena) Media" (Πετσόμενα/Πετωμένα Μέσα) seems to be used to describe media that favor the government in the public discourse. "Petsomena Media" is used also by the country's opposition parties and media that were mistreated by the funding scheme, increasing polarization and the anti-media sentiment for those professionals working in the scheme's benefited news media. Despite these developments and the fact that Greece, under the Mitsotakis administration, has started to show authoritarian tendencies (Nord et al., 2024), no research has yet studied the relevant online discourse. That is why the current paper uses IDA to study that discourse and provide more details about us (citizens) versus them (politicians, journalists, and media) narratives promoted by 1632 tweets on Twitter.

Methodology

The current study focused on Twitter to investigate the anti-media sentiment empowered by the controversial "Stay at Home" Campaign. That particular social media has been used to express anti-media and anti-government sentiment in Greece, a country where the use and consumption of news through social media are prominent. Around 70% of Greeks are informed weekly through social media (Kalogeropoulos, 2021). In addition, Twitter has been frequently used in Greece by political parties and politicians to shape political discussion and participation, aiming to build a strong engagement with the electorate (Poulakidakos and Veneti, 2019). Several studies have demonstrated how Twitter's discourse affects the country's political discussion (Georgalou, 2021; Stratoudaki, 2022; Hatzidaki and Saridakis, 2020). One such example was the depiction of the former Prime Minister, Alexis Tsipras as an incompetent leader because of his allegedly weak English skills (Vladimirou and House, 2018).

The paper's analysis focused on the "Petsas' List" ("Stay at Home" Campaign) in Greece through the examination of the relevant hashtag in Greek #List_Petsa (#Λίστα_Πετσα) on Twitter in 1632 Tweets. The study included all the hashtags' tweets, which were collected manually. The study's timeframe was between September and November 2020, during the second lockdown imposed in the country and the rumors about initiating a new campaign for supporting the media companies. That possible new funding scheme for the news media was again perceived as an effort to control the media landscape and led to further alienation of the citizens who believed that the government does not treat equally all the businesses facing significant financial losses due to Covid-19 restrictions (Avgi.gr, 2020; Efsyn.gr, 2020).

The study uses Ideological Discourse Analysis (IDA) proposed by Van Dijk (1995; 2013) to explore the ideological actor descriptions promoted through Twitter to answer the following research question:

RQ: How did the Twitter users of the hashtag #Petsas_list (#Λίστα_Πετσα) portray the relationship between the government and the "Stay at Home" Campaign?

Ideological constructions refer to a common system and knowledge shared by the same communities and groups to promote a dominant representation of the other (outgroup). As a result, IDA focuses on dramatization, fallacies, and the positive representation of the ingroup (we) and the negative one of the outgroup (them) (Van Dijk, 1995; 2013, see Table 1). That particular construction, us versus them, was the main focus of the study to identify the anti-media sentiment that is empowered and distributed through the examined case on Twitter. The constructions located in the collected tweets of the study will be presented in bold throughout the next section of findings and analysis. In that way, the relevant important meanings that shape the discourse, and therefore common knowledge, will be highlighted.

Moreover, former studies have shown that IDA and ideological constructions can play a crucial role in issues related to journalism and news coverage (Van Dijk et al., 2009; Karyotakis, 2021; Fürsich, 2009). For instance, "news values are also ideological in the sense that they can work to reinforce other ideologies (rather than just an ideology of what is newsworthy)" (Bednarek and Caple, 2014, p. 137). As IDA is a form of CDA and a qualitative approach, the current paper does not present every single collected tweet but uses as examples the best tweets (exemplars) to show how the specific ideological constructions were developed and promoted by the users. After reading all the collected tweets, two main categories of constructions were identified: (a) the "Petsas' List" (or "Stay at Home" Campaign) as a tool for

Table 1 The study’s examined elements of ideological constructions.

Examined Elements of Ideological Constructions	Study’s Examples
Dramatization: It deals with information and facts that are overemphasized and exaggerated to support one side against the other. The result is that dramatization can be of great importance in the process of victimization, portraying the ingroup as being under threat from the outgroup (Van Dijk, 2000).	The threat was evident in many Tweets of the study’s sample. The powerful actor, such as influential politicians are portrayed as taking action against the media. Their main goal was to control the information and dictate the news, promoting certain opinions and news favoring the ingroup (see exemplars 1–4).
Fallacies: The process of misrepresenting arguments making something believable by using non-reasonable argumentation. This non-reasonable argumentation becomes believable by provoking the emotional aspect of the audience (Van Dijk, 2000).	The emotional aspect was used in many Tweets throughout the study. There was a constant effort to connect unreasonable arguments and portray the outgroup (ND and the media) in a negative way. These fallacies seemed to be associated with spreading anger that in extreme cases was turned into hate (see exemplars 3, 5, 6)
Positive representation of the ingroup versus the outgroup: This is the outcome of the fallacies and the dramatization, as there is the creation of a conflict between the two different sides. The ingroup (we) is represented in positive terms to become more appealing to the audience. On the other hand, the negative representation diminishes the influence that the other side (outgroup) has on the audience.	In the study, the media and the journalists seemed to belong to the same group as Kyriakos Mitsotakis government, promoting and supporting the pandemic restrictions uncritically. Under these viewpoints, those that go against the media and the ND’s political members seemed to be represented in a positive way (see exemplars 7–9).

controlling the media and (b) the support to the government by the corrupted media and journalists.

Findings and analysis

The “Petsas’ List” (or “Stay at Home” campaign) as a tool for controlling the media. While the funding scheme supported the news media and promoted the main narrative of the Covid-19 campaign, which was to stay at home and protect the communities from the spread of the virus, many citizens seemed not to have perceived that funding campaign as essential. One of the main reasons was that, according to the laws of the Greek state, in emergency cases, the state is not obligated to pay the news media for participating in the campaign. Instead, the media must spread the message and raise awareness about dealing with the pandemic (Sotiropoulos, 2020).

The Covid-19 pandemic was perceived as such a threat by the government that Greece’s prime minister gave around ten televised public addresses in 8 months (Poulakidakos, 2021). Also, it seemed to be used as a tool “in order to achieve political benefits by incorporating the management of the pandemic into the Greek government’s nationalist agenda” (Poulakidakos, 2021, p. 1). Research has shown that it is common for right-wing parties that want to appeal to the radical right to use a nationalistic agenda (Caiani and Kröll, 2017). Therefore, some of the tweets aimed at commenting statements critically by prominent members of the government and their connection with the mass media (Exemplar 1–3):

Exemplar 1: As the **supervisor of the TV channels** (*fallacy*), he felt the need to say some words, as today is a special day. #mm_stinker (*dramatization*) #list_Petsas #list_petsas2

Exemplar 2: Nice thing to **direct the news** (*dramatization*) ... #list_Petsas #list_petsas2 #Mitsotakis

Exemplar 3: @AdonisGeorgiadi gives commands to **journalists about who they will host on their panel and when they will put him on live** (*dramatization*). This is how he perceives democracy guys, what do you want now? **I forgot it was on the # list_Petsas!** (*fallacy*) #mm_stinker (*dramatization*) #ND_scamps #government_circus

In the above exemplars, Kyriakos Mitsotakis is portrayed as having enormous power against the media. He is presented as the supervisor of the news media due to the funding of the “Stay at Home” Campaign. As a result, this argumentation that is based

mostly on the emotional factor leads to the dramatization that the media and the news are directed by him, and thus, they “stink” at performing their duties properly. The Tweets, apart from attacking the media and Mitsotakis, also aimed to criticize other prominent members of the government, such as Adonis Georgiadis, Minister, and vice-president of New Democracy. Adonis, such as Mitsotakis, was represented in negative terms, as he seemed to control the media due to the “Stay at Home” Campaign.

The idea that the government was using the money from the campaign to control the media was also promoted by influential politicians of the opposition parties. One such example was some of the members of Syriza that governed the country from 2015 until 2019, in which year the party lost in the national elections from ND. Syriza has argued several times that the Greek media industry is against it, as it does not have such powerful connections with the news media owners (Syriza’s Account 2012–2019, 2020).

As a result, it has accused the Greek media of promoting narratives against it and favoring ND during influential events such as the wildfire of Mati and the Macedonian Name Dispute during the years of 2018 and 2019 (Syriza’s Account 2012–2019, 2020). However, when it became a government in 2015, its controversial decisions regarding the media industry raised questions about the support of journalistic independence (Iosifidis and Papathanassopoulos, 2019). The mismanagement of the pandemic and the controversial media funding allowed Syriza members to highlight these problematic connections between the government and the mass media (Exemplar 4):

Exemplar 4: Katerina Notopoulou: The government of ND **left Thessaloniki unfortified** (*dramatization*) but found an **opportunity to redistribute money to the media** (*dramatization*) @katenotopoulou #Media #government_Mitsotakis #list_Petsas #list_petsas2

According to Katerina Notopoulou, a Parliamentarian of Syriza, Thessaloniki (the second largest city in Greece in population) was left without resources and a concrete plan to deal with a deadly wave of Covid-19 cases. Notopoulou claimed that the government had enough money to fund the Petsas’ List and the media, but it did not have the resources to protect the citizens from the pandemic. Again, here the media and the government seemed to be a part of the same group and, thus, they were represented in negative terms.

On the other hand, users seemed to back up the opposition parties, arguing that the ND government had the power through

the funding campaign to impose several topics on the media. By covering these topics, the news media could harm the opposition parties and distract the public from focusing on the mishandling of the government. That explanation seems to align with the ideas regarding the Greek media system that it is developed around the polarization of two main parties. There is a strong interplay between the politicians and the news media in the Greek media system (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). Also, the idea of covering other topics to distract the public and create several news stories could be associated with the censorship concept of flooding introduced by Roberts (2018). In flooding, too much information makes the public ignore significant news stories and scandals.

However, since 2015 and on, polarization has developed around Syriza and ND. In the past, the other prominent party was PASOK (Panhellenic Socialist Movement). Nevertheless, studies have shown a tendency for non-pluralistic news coverage favoring ND in influential topics that shape the public agenda, jeopardizing the country's democratic progress (Papathanassopoulos et al., 2021; Karyotakis, 2021). In the examined case, some users employed this polarization by focusing on ND's control of the media to harm Syriza and its leader, Alexis Tsipras, arguing that due to these attacks, people must vote for Syriza (Exemplar 5–6):

Exemplar 5: And then they say that television is not a replica of reality. We had Anna Maria giving directions to her audience to hit Ramona, now **we have Maximou** [Maximos Palace, residence of Greek Prime Ministers] **ordering the media to hit Tsipras** (fallacy). #list_Petsas #BigBrotherGR

Exemplar 6: Wherever Alexis Tsipras gained the ruling power with SYRIZA, he gave us confidence and dignity. **The sold media of #list_Petsas have been lying to the people ever since** (dramatization). That is, they always say. The solution is for all of us **to vote for SYRIZA** (fallacy) to become a bass government and save something.

Apart from that, some users focused on the campaign to highlight hints of corruption and ways of controlling the media. As a result, other services and bodies of the Greek state are controlled by the ND government, which leads to the corrupt functioning of the Greek state. The users presented such a state as similar to the Greek dictatorship or to a mafia state, as the regulatory bodies are perceived as tools for realizing governmental goals (Exemplar 7).

Exemplar 7: **The National Transparency Authority is incompetent for the opacity in #list_Petsas** (fallacy). @Kmitsotakis [Kyriakos Mitsotakis] **created an executive state to protect opacity** (dramatization). I do not know if it is **a junta or just a mafia** (dramatization)

Although there is high clientelism in Greece that leads to the support of specific groups and communities (Hallin and Mancini, 2004), the arguments of a corrupted state similar to a dictatorship, because there was the controversial funding, seemed to be an exaggeration and a fallacy. However, the non-trust in regulatory bodies, high clientelism, and the media industry's controversial functioning are some essential parts of revealing crucial problems in Greece's democratic system.

The support to the government by the corrupted media and journalists. The other main construction promoted on Twitter was an anti-media sentiment that labeled the news media and the journalists as corrupt and supporting the government. The funding provided by the government to the media company seemed to be presented as a tool for empowering those news

organizations that have already taken sides in favor of the government (Exemplar 8). In that case, although the details of the "Petsas' List" revealed a problematic distribution of funding against the news media that tend to be more critical to the government (Ipi, 2020), there was a rage against all the journalists and the media.

That rage and anti-media sentiment was fueled by the campaign and the non-transparent measures and initiatives that the government has taken for the media industry. It is estimated that the Mitsotakis administration has distributed to the media around 30 million euros (Poulakidakos, 2021). The users attack the journalists and the media, pointing out that all of them are corrupted (Exemplar 9):

Exemplar 8: new financial doses in **the corrupt media to support the far-right Mitsotakis regime** (dramatization) and the catastrophe at all levels (economy, health, education, foreign policy, etc.) #mm_stinker (dramatization) #list_Petsas

Exemplar 9: He is right. Everything around changes and everything stays the same. **Stinker Ruffian "Journalists" constantly and forever** (dramatization). #mm_stinker (dramatization) #list_Petsas #stuffed_mm

Moreover, Twitter users highlighted the examples of journalists who tend to be perceived as real professionals in the field by criticizing governmental officials, investigating their wrongdoings, and not promoting governmental narratives. Based on these ideas, it seemed that despite the overall low trust towards the media companies and the journalists that have been demonstrated in former studies and international reports such as the Reuters Institute Digital News Report (Papathanassopoulos et al., 2021), a few journalists were still promoted as examples.

That construction was empowered by exaggerating the positive representation of the ingroup (those against the government) and those in favor of a new, more transparent government and a healthier news media industry. One of the examples that the users underlined was the harsh discussion between the journalist and TV news presenter, Rania Tzima, and the vice president of ND, Adonis Georgiadis. Rania Tzima was praised for holding accountable the vice president of ND (Exemplar 10).

Exemplar 10: Warm **congratulations to Rania Tzima who did her job without fear** (dramatization). Congratulations if she is supported by @MegaTvOfficial! **Finally inform the audience properly** (dramatization). #list_Petsas

Furthermore, the users tended to verbally attack the corrupted media and journalists in Greece by comparing them with other international news organizations that are critical of the government. According to the users, the media industry has become so corrupt that the public should follow the coverage of foreign news media to understand what is happening in the country. To exaggerate and show the low quality of journalism, there were even Tweets arguing that Turkish media, for instance, were doing a better job and that the Greek media were responsible even for vanishing news from the public discussion. At this point, it should be highlighted that Turkey is perceived as the most significant rival of Greece in the country's nationalistic coverage (Mousseau, 2009). In addition, Financial Times published a news article on 6 November 2020 regarding another controversial decision by the Mitsotakis administration that seemed to give "de facto amnesty for tax offenders" and promote tax evasion (Hope, 2020). Therefore, the users disseminated the article and presented it as a proper journalistic article (Exemplar 11 & 12):

Exemplar 11: The #government_Mitsotakis shows what interests it wants to serve (bank amnesty, return of frozen accounts, etc.). Fortunately, there is also the **Financial Times** to find out what's going on, since the #mm_stinker (dramatization) of #list_Petsas are masking/hiding the events (fallacy) #ND_CROOKS

Exemplar 12: was FT off #list_Petsas ?? (dramatization) is it right ?

Like other South European countries, Greece experienced a prolonged financial crisis from 2008 onward, leading to a far more demanding working environment than in the previous years. The job insecurity in the media industry and the journalists' low professionalism in Greece have not been tackled effectively, despite having been identified by research many years ago (Hallin and Mancini, 2004; Maniou, 2022). Therefore, the decline in journalistic independence and the anti-sentiment media seemed to result from the long-lasting problems of the Greek media industry.

Conclusions

The current research studied the ideological constructions disseminated on Twitter by Greek users during a crucial period of the Covid-19 pandemic. More specifically, the study included 1632 Tweets collected between September and November 2020, during the second lockdown imposed in the country, and the rumors about initiating a new campaign for supporting the media companies. The "Stay at Home" Campaign (or "Petsas' List") seemed to harm the country's news media and journalists based on the provided analyzed discourse as well as the fact that the characterization of "Petsas List's (Petsomena) Media" (Πετσομένα/Πετσωμένα Μέσα) has been used in other events to describe the news media favoring the government. Such a problematic discourse towards the news media seemed to harm the ideal function of the press as the Fourth Estate, endangering further their independence and the country's democratic development.

As the paper argued, under the Mitsotakis administration, Greece has used several tactics for restricting the media and undermining their independence. These tactics for limiting media freedom have been identified globally in other countries ruled by right-wing populist leaders (Krämer, 2018; Bhat and Chadha, 2020; Štětka et al., 2021). The paper highlights that the non-transparent and controversial funding of the news media can lead to the empowerment of the anti-media sentiment and the idea of a corrupted clientelistic state that controls the media through financial funding. The news media become the cheerleaders of the societal elites, including the politicians, disrupting their trust and support from the public (Keane, 2020). In the study, Twitter users seemed to participate in the blame game of accusing the media of undermining the country's prosperity, a practice that reduces the media's legitimacy and has been used by politicians at different times to be able to promote easier their political ambitions (Kenny, 2020). For the people to be able to have access to various information sources to think critically and challenge the governing elites, there must be a robust and legitimate media industry that is not depending on the political elites (LaMay, 2005).

Journalists, according to media ethics, should be independent (George, 2018). In the examined case, the non-independent judgment combined with a seemingly positive representation of the ingroup (i.e., the government and the media) against the others (i.e., the public) seems to cause harm to the overall perception of journalism. That finding, though, is related to other cases in which press criticism became controversial, such as the example of Donald Trump (Bent et al., 2020). These cases

challenged the press' fundamental rights and responsibilities (Cummins Gauthier, 1999). On the other hand, instead of just spreading anti-media sentiment, social media also creates new ways of promoting media freedom and principles (Ward and Wasserman, 2010). As in the examined case, the Greek public seemed to believe in a journalistic role that adopts watchdog principles and holds those in power accountable.

Subsequently, the study enhances the literature about the problems that the mass media industry faces, including the decline in media independence (Mihelj et al., 2021; Milutinović, 2021; Papadopoulou and Maniou, 2021) that contribute to the democratic recession in Europe in the last decade (Gora and de Wilde, 2022; Anna Vachudova, 2020; Castaldo, 2020; Sitter and Bakke, 2019) by studying a country that belongs to the Global South and it is not usually researched in the journalism and communication fields (Demeter, 2020; Bhat and Chadha, 2020).

In addition, it questions the motives behind the non-transparent funding schemes by the state and the politicians towards the media, as such initiatives could further destabilize the media industry, which is essential for society's democratic progress. Such a finding is considered crucial, as it calls for further research on similar cases worldwide and provides a better understanding of the problematic interplay between the politicians and the media industry, even in societies that are established democracies but are facing an alarming democratic decline, such as Greece (Nord et al., 2024).

Regarding the study's limitations, the current paper limited itself to the Greek case through Twitter, as Greece seemed to have significant freedom violations during the pandemic and contributed to the constant change of European countries as more restrictive states. Future research focusing on other media funding schemes worldwide could reveal more insights about their effect on the media, how the public perceives them, and how the political elites utilize them as a political tool.

Data availability

The dataset is unavailable due to the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), as the dataset includes the Twitter users' names.

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The corresponding author was the sole person responsible for the collection of the data, writing, and completion of the paper.

Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval was not required as the study did not involve human participants.

Informed consent

Informed consent was not required as the study did not involve human participants.

Additional information

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