

Hellenic Observatory Research Calls Programme

The Anti-vaccination Movement in Greece

Policy Brief

Manussos Marangudakis, University of the Aegean
Theodoros Chadjipadelis, Aristotle University Thessaloniki
Christos Kouroutzas, University of the Aegean
Maria Zamboka, University of the Aegean
Research Assistants:
Ioanna Santa, Aegean University
Christina Papadopoulou, Aegean University

The Anti-vaccination Movement in Greece

Policy Brief

Manussos Marangudakis, Professor of Sociology, University of the Aegean

Theodoros Chadjipadelis, Professor of Applied Statistics, Department of
Political Sciences, Aristotle University Thessaloniki

Christos Kouroutzas, Assistant Professor, School of Social Sciences,
University of the Aegean

Maria Zamboka, PhD Candidate, School of Social Sciences, University of the
Aegean

Research Assistants:

Ioanna Santa (BA in Sociology, Dept. of Sociology, Aegean University)

Christina Papadopoulou (BA in Sociology, Dept. of Sociology, Aegean
University)

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted significant challenges in Greece's public health landscape, particularly vaccine hesitancy and resistance. This phenomenon, driven by distrust in institutions, cultural values, political polarization, and misinformation, highlights deep societal divisions. While Greece achieved high vaccination rates (85%), hesitancy and opposition among certain demographics fueled unnecessary deaths and, mostly, wide societal fragmentation.

This policy brief identifies key drivers of vaccine hesitancy, including institutional mistrust, clientelism, egotism, conspiracy theories, and the role of religious and cultural influences. It proposes tailored interventions to foster trust, strengthen institutional credibility, and strengthen collective responsibility to safeguard public health.

Key Findings

Our research has identified the following patterns concerning the pandemic experience in Greece:

1. High Vaccination Rates with Pockets of Resistance

85% of Greeks are fully vaccinated, but unvaccinated individuals (2.87%) and partially vaccinated (12.13%) groups cite mistrust in institutions, fear of side effects, and belief in conspiracy theories as primary reasons for hesitancy. Vaccine skepticism is highest among younger populations, rural residents, and those with lower education levels. Conversely, older individuals, women, and higher-educated citizens demonstrate greater compliance.

2. Distrust in State Institutions

Institutional trust is a critical determinant of vaccine acceptance. Trust in scientific authorities correlates with higher vaccination rates, whereas reliance on social media or informal sources fosters skepticism. Clientelism undermines institutional credibility, fostering a sense of exclusion and mistrust among “peripheral” groups.

3. Cultural and Religious Influences

Greek cultural values of autonomy and individualism shape resistance to perceived state overreach. Religious beliefs, particularly in the Orthodox Church’s mystical traditions and “charismatic” personalities, contribute to vaccine rejection, even as official Church leadership endorsed vaccination.

4. Conspiracy Theories and Misinformation

Conspiracy-driven narratives about vaccine safety and hidden agendas proliferated through social media, amplifying hesitancy. Identified in our study groups such as “conspiracists” and “spiritualists” reject vaccination due to mistrust of global elites or divine principles, while “procrastinators” delay vaccination due to perceived low urgency.

5. Emotional and Psychological Dimensions

The pandemic elicited widespread anxiety (61.6%) and fear (81.1%), which initially drove compliance but later fueled resistance as lockdown fatigue and economic strain intensified. Post-pandemic relief and optimism remain tempered by lingering mistrust and resentment toward mandates.

Policy Recommendations for Addressing Vaccine Hesitancy in Greece

With these findings in mind, and taking into consideration the successful reaction of the state in matters of healthcare infrastructure (the only sector in which it excelled) we recommend the following measures:

1. Rebuild Trust in Institutions

Rebuilding trust in institutions is a critical step in addressing vaccine hesitancy in Greece, as mistrust forms the foundation of much of the skepticism surrounding public health measures. This mistrust has deep roots in perceptions of corruption, clientelism, and lack of governmental transparency. To overcome these obstacles, it is essential to establish a robust framework that consistently demonstrates credibility, fairness, and accountability. Transparency should be prioritized in all aspects of public health decision-making, particularly in processes related to vaccine approval, procurement, and distribution. This includes providing the public with clear, consistent, and accessible information about the safety and efficacy of vaccines, as well as the methodologies and evidence supporting public health decisions.

Furthermore, it is vital to implement mechanisms that ensure accountability in the management of health campaigns and policies. Independent oversight committees, composed of credible experts and representatives from civil society, can monitor and review public health initiatives to safeguard against corruption or perceived bias. Fair access to healthcare resources, including vaccines, must also be a central component of efforts to build trust, ensuring that rural and underserved communities receive the same level of care and attention as urban centers.

Rebuilding institutional trust also involves proactive engagement with the public to address their concerns and fears. Regular and transparent communication, through public briefings, Q&A sessions with health experts, and community outreach programs, can bridge the gap between institutions and the population. By making institutions more accessible and responsive to the needs of citizens, these efforts can foster a sense of trust and confidence, ultimately encouraging broader acceptance of public health measures, including vaccination campaigns.

2. Transparency in Decision-Making

Transparency in decision-making is crucial for fostering public trust in vaccination campaigns and addressing vaccine hesitancy. Governments and

public health authorities must prioritize openness in every aspect of the vaccination process, starting with clear and consistent communication about how vaccines are approved. This includes explaining the rigorous scientific evaluations, clinical trials, and regulatory reviews that vaccines undergo before being deemed safe and effective. By providing accessible, evidence-based information about vaccine safety, potential side effects, and efficacy rates, public health authorities can empower individuals to make informed decisions.

Additionally, transparency should extend to the logistical and financial aspects of vaccine campaigns. Disclosing details about procurement contracts—such as the criteria for selecting vaccine suppliers, the costs involved, and any agreements with pharmaceutical companies—can alleviate concerns about corruption or hidden agendas. Equally important is ensuring that information about the distribution process is readily available, including how vaccines are allocated to different regions and populations. This accountability not only enhances public confidence in the fairness and equity of vaccine rollout but also demonstrates a commitment to ethical governance.

Transparent decision-making requires consistent messaging from credible sources, minimizing confusion and misinformation. Regular updates from health authorities, delivered through various channels, can keep the public informed about changes or developments in vaccination strategies. By maintaining open and honest communication at every stage, governments can build a foundation of trust, which is essential for achieving widespread acceptance of vaccination efforts and ensuring the success of public health initiatives.

3. Tailored Communication Strategies

To achieve widespread acceptance of vaccination and address vaccine hesitancy, communication strategies must be tailored to the unique characteristics of diverse demographic groups. Effective communication should be adaptive, recognizing the cultural, social, and emotional nuances that influence how different communities perceive health interventions. This approach ensures that messages resonate deeply with the target audience, fostering trust and engagement.

Localized messaging plays a central role in this strategy. Public health campaigns should be designed to reflect the specific values, norms, and concerns of individual communities. This involves using language that is familiar and accessible to the target audience, avoiding technical jargon, and incorporating culturally relevant imagery and narratives. For example, in rural communities, campaigns might emphasize the role of vaccines in protecting

families and sustaining local traditions, while in urban settings, messages might focus on safeguarding economic recovery and social mobility.

By aligning messaging with local values, public health authorities can bridge the gap between national vaccination goals and community-level concerns. This might involve engaging trusted local figures, such as community leaders, religious authorities, or grassroots organizations, to endorse vaccination efforts and address skepticism. Additionally, campaigns should acknowledge and address specific fears or misconceptions prevalent within each demographic, demonstrating empathy and understanding.

Such tailored approaches not only improve the clarity and relevance of health messages but also foster a sense of inclusion and respect, making individuals more likely to accept and support public health measures. Through strategic, culturally aligned communication, public health initiatives can effectively engage diverse populations, overcoming barriers to vaccination and promoting collective well-being.

4. Foster Community Solidarity

Fostering community solidarity is essential in addressing vaccine hesitancy and promoting widespread acceptance of vaccination programs. This involves creating a collective sense of responsibility, where individuals recognize their role not only in protecting their own health but also in safeguarding the well-being of their community. Encouraging solidarity requires empowering communities to take the lead in initiatives that promote shared responsibility, collaboration, and trust.

Grassroots movements play a pivotal role in this process. These organizations often have deep-rooted connections within communities and a nuanced understanding of local dynamics, making them effective vehicles for promoting collective health goals. Supporting grassroots organizations involves providing them with resources, training, and platforms to educate and mobilize their communities around vaccination efforts. By leveraging their established trust and influence, grassroots movements can foster open dialogue, dispel misinformation, and emphasize the broader societal benefits of vaccination.

Community-led initiatives also create opportunities for participatory dialogue, where concerns and questions can be addressed in a transparent and inclusive manner. This two-way communication not only empowers individuals but also strengthens the social fabric by emphasizing unity and cooperation. When people feel that their voices are heard and their concerns are respected, they are more likely to embrace collective goals and responsibilities.

By building on the strengths of grassroots organizations and prioritizing community-driven approaches, solidarity can transform vaccination campaigns into shared endeavors. This approach ensures that public health measures resonate deeply within communities, creating a sense of ownership and mutual accountability that is crucial for long-term success.

5. Address Emotional and Psychological Obstructions

Addressing emotional and psychological barriers is crucial for overcoming vaccine hesitancy, as fear, mistrust, and negative emotions significantly influence individuals' decisions regarding vaccination. A human-centered approach recognizes the profound impact of emotions on health behaviors and prioritizes empathy, understanding, and support in public health strategies.

Pandemic-related anxiety and fear have left many individuals feeling vulnerable and uncertain. Providing mental health support is an essential step in helping individuals navigate these emotions. Access to counseling services, stress management programs, and resources tailored to pandemic-related challenges empower people to process their fears and concerns effectively. Mental health professionals can work with individuals and communities to foster resilience, counteract misinformation-driven anxiety, and build confidence in public health measures, including vaccination.

Incorporating emotional narratives into communication strategies can also address psychological barriers. Sharing stories of individuals who overcame vaccine hesitancy, emphasizing themes of protection and community care, can create an emotional connection that resonates with hesitant populations. Messaging that acknowledges and validates fears, while providing factual reassurance, demonstrates empathy and builds trust.

Trust-building is of paramount importance. When institutions and healthcare professionals show consistent transparency and genuine concern for public well-being, it helps reduce skepticism and fosters emotional engagement. Providing platforms for open dialogue where individuals can voice their fears and have them addressed by trusted authorities further reduces psychological barriers.

By integrating mental health support with emotionally sensitive communication and trust-building efforts, public health initiatives can mitigate fear and mistrust. This holistic, empathetic approach not only addresses the immediate psychological barriers to vaccination but also strengthens the overall relationship between public health systems and the communities they serve.

6. Combat Conspiracy Theories

Last, but not least, combating conspiracy theories is essential in addressing the widespread hesitancy and confusion they create for vaccine acceptance. Misinformation and conspiracy theories thrive in environments where trust in institutions is low, fear is prevalent, and access to credible information is limited. Addressing these issues requires a proactive and multi-faceted approach to equip the public with the tools and knowledge needed to recognize, evaluate, and counter false narratives.

Education and media literacy are foundational in this effort. Public health campaigns should prioritize teaching individuals how to critically assess information sources, differentiate between credible and unreliable content, and identify hallmarks of misinformation. Workshops, online courses, and community outreach programs can focus on enhancing digital literacy skills, such as verifying sources, fact-checking claims, and understanding the impact of algorithms in amplifying certain narratives. These programs should be accessible to diverse populations, ensuring inclusivity in combating misinformation.

Efforts to counter conspiracy theories must also involve clear and transparent communication from authorities. Providing accessible, evidence-based explanations about vaccines—such as their development, testing processes, and safety standards—can address common concerns that conspiracy theories exploit. Institutions must engage directly with the public, dispelling myths in real time and offering credible alternatives to the narratives circulating on social media and other platforms.

In addition, partnerships with trusted community figures, such as local leaders, educators, and healthcare professionals, can enhance the credibility of anti-misinformation efforts. These figures can act as mediators, bridging the gap between hesitant individuals and public health initiatives. Collaborative efforts between governments, social media platforms, and fact-checking organizations are also crucial for identifying and mitigating the spread of harmful conspiracy theories.

By fostering critical thinking and promoting access to accurate information, education and media literacy initiatives not only reduce the influence of misinformation but also empower individuals to participate actively in informed public discourse. This comprehensive approach is integral to undermining the allure of conspiracy theories and fostering a culture of trust and informed decision-making around vaccines.