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Rethinking Stasis and Utopianism: Empty Placards and Imaginative Boredom in the Greek Crisis-Scape

Maria Boletsi

The following phrase appeared on an Athenian wall as part of a street artwork created in 2013 by the Greek public artist known as blepsgr (Fig. 1):

“Crisis... what else?”

The graffiti showed a woman carrying a small placard with the message “Against cultural hegemony” with one hand, and with her other hand pushing away a male artist wearing a T-shirt with the writing “artistes systemiques” on it.¹ The graffiti was conceived as a critical response to a street art festival with the title “Crisis? What Crisis?”, organized by the School of Fine Arts in Athens.² The work issued a critique of the institutionalization and commodification of street art (and art in general) and

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267



Fig. 1 “Crisis... what else?” by V.M. Kakouris aka bleepsgr (Athens 2013). (Image reproduced by kind permission of the artist)

the instrumentalization of artists by the capitalist system. The artist’s statement that accompanies an image of the graffiti on his website criticized the exclusion of independent Greek artists from cultural initiatives that projected Greece’s artistic production in the midst of its socioeconomic crisis. The same statement also called for forms of agonistic artistic resistance that could take on the task of “producing new subjectivities” and “new worlds” (Kakouris *n.d.* n.pag.).

The graffiti and its critical message were indicative of the heated discussions that have been taking place in Greece in recent years on the role of art in the context of the country’s economic crisis that broke out in 2009. Central to these discussions has been the question of whether art—street art in this case—can offer alternative languages of resistance to the all-encompassing framework of crisis, as it took shape in Greece since 2009. The phrase accompanying this graffiti—“Crisis... what else?”—underscored the omnipresence of crisis by projecting it as *lack* of choice: a normalized framework that seems to leave no room for alternatives. Crisis in Greece indeed turned into a master-narrative, which provided legitimation for harsh austerity measures, exacerbating conditions of precarity for a large part of the population and radically changing people’s experience of

which commentators and politicians had a hard time framing within existing discourses and political categories.⁷ In art and literature, the crisis of meaning involved a reconfiguration of people's relation to history and to past (ethnonationalist) narratives that defined Greek identity, but also radical engagements with futurity. Dimitris Papanikolaou coined the term "archive trouble" (2011) for this "iconoclastic return to the past" during the crisis, showing how writers, poets, artists, and filmmakers were turning to past archives and reinventing or reconfiguring "the past and its remnants" while trying to give expression to a precarious present of crisis (2017, 41, 46, 47).

While I focus on the Greek context, the framework of crisis I probe in this chapter is not limited to Greece, despite the undeniable particularities of the Greek crisis-scape. The experience of crisis as a chronic framework of living rather than a singular turning point extends far beyond the constellation known as "the Greek crisis." The phrase "Crisis... what else?" captured such a broader understanding of crisis in neoliberal capitalism as an enduring state that contracts the space of political choice and the imagination of alternative futures. Crisis-rhetoric amplifies what Franco "Bifo" Berardi has called the "slow cancellation of the future" since the universalization of neoliberal capitalism (2011, 18)—a process that started already in the late 1970s and 1980s but took a more totalizing form after 1989 and the fall of Eastern-bloc communism. This neoliberal capitalist totality established what Mark Fisher called "capitalist realism": an anti-utopian outlook on the global present marked by "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it" (Fisher 2009, 2). Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri famously used the term "Empire" in their homonymous book (2000) to name the deterritorialized, decentered, supranational form of power that took shape in this new global order to which there is no outside.

"Crisis" is instrumental in this world order. As David Higgins writes, following Hardt and Negri, "Empire has capitalized on an environment of perpetual crisis in order to fold its exterior inward and to territorialize the entire globe within its domain" (2015, 53). Cultivating a sense of perpetual crisis becomes a mechanism for maximizing profitability for some, as well as authorizing exceptional measures, (semi-permanent) states of emergency, limitations in civic or human rights, and biopolitical control. In the era of finance capitalism, Brian Massumi writes, the problem of the inevitable "periodic economic collapse" in the "capitalist cycle" "has been

solved—by *eternalizing crisis* without sacrificing profits. The future-past of the catastrophe has become the dizzying ever-presence of crisis” (1993, 19; emphasis added).

Thus, if one of the meanings of the word “crisis” in ancient Greek (*κρίσις / krisis*) was “decision” or “choice” between alternatives (Koselleck 2006, 358), recent mobilizations of crisis run contrary to this meaning: they narrow the space of real choices, critical reflection, and alternatives in politics. Crisis as an instrument, Stijn De Cauwer writes, “plays into the hands of those who want to claim that ‘we have no other choice’” (2018, xxiii). It thus turns into a pillar of the “TINA doctrine” (“There Is No Alternative”),⁸ which establishes neoliberalism as “the only rational and viable mode of governance” (Athanasiou in Butler and Athanasiou 2013, 149). Based on this doctrine, discourses of crisis render “critical thinking and acting redundant, irrational, and ultimately unpatriotic” (149). As a supporting mechanism for a doctrine of “no alternatives,” crisis rhetoric reduces complex constellations to pseudo-choices between a right and a wrong, or a legitimate and an illegitimate alternative.⁹ This binary logic also largely determines the way subjects are construed in this rhetoric as either active or passive, guilty or innocent, masters or victims. In my previous work, I showed how this logic determines constructions of Greek subjects in moralizing narratives of the Greek debt crisis: either as guilty and responsible for their country’s plight due to “bad conduct” or as passive, powerless victims either of a domestic flawed political system or of global forces outside their control (Boletsi 2016, 8–11).

Thus, if “crisis... what else?” is a *rhetorical* question that draws attention to a framework of crisis without an outside, how can this question become a *real* one? Can this “else”—alternative or even utopian political, social, and cultural spaces, times, narratives, subjectivities—be thought *through* but also, hopefully, *beyond* the “new normal” of crisis? This chapter traces the ways in which two works engaged with this question in the Greek crisis-scape: the short story “Πλακάτ με σκουπόξυλο” / “Placard and Broomstick” by Christos Ikononou (2010) and the wall writing “βαριέμαι ευφάνταστα” [variemai eufantasta], translated as “I am bored imaginatively” or “I am bored fancifully,” which featured on Athenian walls in the years of the crisis.

Both works evoke but do not directly address or thematize the “crisis” in Greece. They respond to conditions of precarity and alienation that are simultaneously embedded in a local context and exemplary of broader, global processes. Casting contemporary experiences of dispossession and

alienation as a pervasive narrative frame, Ikonomou's story registers the impossibility of stepping out of this frame but also the unyielding desire for alternative narratives. The wall writing reconfigures one of the symptoms of capitalist realism—boredom—into a language that, I argue, reimagines utopianism from *within* the neoliberal “now” by tapping into the modality of the middle voice.

Even though these works perform different kinds of *stasis*, they both disengage from conceptions of subjectivity that rest on the binary choice of a *passive* or an *active* subject—either an acquiescent victim without agency or a revolutionary hero who challenges power from its outside. The former option invalidates the possibility of resistance while the latter is an untenable position for resisting a late-capitalist totality without exteriority. They both also respond to the impossibility of standing outside the totalizing framework they resist. They thus enact forms of stasis as an “internal contestation of power” (Lambropoulos 2018, n.pag.) that challenges neoliberal imperatives of acquiescence, normalization, and “moving forward.” Both works—the one perhaps more convincingly than the other—enact, to borrow Arjun Appadurai's term, “a politics of possibility.” As a challenge to the neoliberal “politics of probability” that seeks to calculate, contain, and control the future, a politics of possibility remains open to languages and modes of being that cannot be fully articulated in the present and harbor the hope of different futures (Appadurai 2013, 1, 3).

EMPTY FRAMES; OR HOW TO IMAGINE STASIS BEYOND REVOLUTIONARY HEROISM AND PASSIVE ACQUIESCENCE

The story “Placard and Broomstick” was included in the short story collection by Christos Ikonomou *Κάτι θα γίνει, θα δεις / Something will Happen, You'll See*, published in 2010.¹⁰ The collection became a best seller and—owing also to the timing of its publication in 2010—it became, according to the synopsis of the book's English translation, “the literary emblem of the Greek crisis.”¹¹ The book's haunting stories feature poor, working-class, vulnerable, laid-off, unemployed, or indebted characters, watching their dreams of a better life dissolve under the material and symbolic violence of sociopolitical and systemic conditions that stifle possibilities for resistance or escape. Many stories stage small acts of protest or resistance to these conditions, ranging from (unrealized) fantasies of escape to extreme violent acts against the self, as in the story “Penguins Outside the Accounting Office,” in which the narrator's father swallows five metal tacks upon seeing his wrongfully arrested son in handcuffs at the

courthouse. Even though these acts of protest carry a bitter taste of futility, the book's title underscores the stubborn hope for an event—the “something” that, against all odds, will introduce a dissonance in the ordinariness of a crisis without prospect of resolution and will open up the future.¹²

Even though most stories in the collection were actually written before the financial crisis erupted, they were largely received within the framework of the crisis, that is, as responses to social conditions and inequalities the crisis exacerbated. Even when critics took into account that many of these stories were created before the watershed year of 2009, they still framed them as “harbingers” of the crisis (Hadjivasileiou 2012; Bekos qtd. in Kapsaskis 2013; Raptopoulos 2010): stories that may have not explicitly addressed the crisis but foreshadowed it by showing a society at a critical point (Hadjivasileiou 2012, 91). Regardless of this framing, the writing of these stories before the outbreak of the crisis certainly complicates clear-cut distinctions between a “pre-crisis” and “crisis” Greece and problematizes prelapsarian understandings of the pre-crisis years. The substandard living conditions of the working classes, the inequalities, disposability, and lack of future prospects sketched in the stories, can be related both to domestic sociopolitical structures and to systemic conditions in neoliberal capitalism that preceded 2009.

In “Placard and Broomstick,” the protagonist, Yannis Englezos, tries to come to terms with the death of his best friend Petros Frangos.¹³ Petros, a steelworker, was electrocuted at the construction site he was working, in an accident that happened because the contractor had pressured him to work late into the evening on a Thursday, just as Yannis and Petros were preparing to leave for Yannis' village in the mountains of Epirus to spend Easter together (Ikonomou 2016, 91). Petros dies two days later in the hospital from severe burns. His death also puts an end to the escape-plan the two friends had been fantasizing about: leaving the city for the countryside. “Things here are getting rough, everyone's losing it, these days people scare me ... I'm telling you, the future is in the mountains,” Petros kept telling Yannis before the accident (92). To them, the mountains posed as an escape from an unfulfilling urban life of social alienation, apathy, and hardship.

Unable to process his friend's painful and senseless death, Yannis is struggling to find words to capture his and his friend's experience. All words, however, feel foreign, borrowed, and ill-suited. During Petros' last days at the hospital, Yannis' dramatic plea to the doctors to save him—a

plea Yannis believes is not taken seriously because he does not have the money for serious treatment—feels like words that “have come straight out of some series on TV” (97). The language of soap operas and popular entertainment makes his desperation sound like a melodramatic cliché, alienating him from his own emotions. To fathom Petros’ pain, he then turns to the language of *arithmetic*, trying to break down and quantify his friend’s pain in numbers: “He divided 24,000 by Petros’s age to see how many volts there had been for each year of his friend’s life. He multiplied Petros’s age by 365 and divided that into 24,000 to figure out the volts per day. Then he calculated the hours and the minutes and the seconds” (93). His need to protest leads him to attach a piece of cardboard onto a broomstick, making a makeshift placard. Thinking of what to write on that placard, however, words fail him again:

He wanted to write something that would express unspeakable rage and hatred and love and despair all at once. Or maybe it should be some plain, dry slogan, the kind of thing a political party might say about workplace fatalities, about people who die on the job. Or maybe something like the things they write on the gravestones of people who die in vain, or too young. Something about god and the soul and angels and the afterlife. (94)

The vocabularies he considers—political rhetoric, gravestone inscriptions, religious sermons—sound like clichés to him that fail to articulate his and Petros’ experience. Leaving the placard empty, he walks to the building site where his friend died and holds the placard high. He spends the whole day there, hoping, to no avail, that his wordless protest will attract some reaction by passersby or that someone will become interested in his story.

While waiting for something to happen, he ponders ways to emplot his protest and endow his empty frame with meaning. In this attempt, two hegemonic narratives are “tested” as potential analogical vehicles for his act of protest: history and religion. Following the logic of analogy, Yannis seeks to counter his dispossession and social invisibility by tapping into the (masculine) heroic ethos of ancient, Byzantine, and modern leaders and heroes of Greek History. If people came to him, he thinks, “He wouldn’t tell them his real name. He would make up some other name, more suited to the circumstance, a nice heroic name. My name is Achilles. Achilles Palaiologos. Or Alexander. Or Thrasyvoulos. Alexander the Great Thrasyvoulos Nikiforidis” (99). The irony of the analogy is unmistakable: this hyperbolic list of heroes is ill-fitted for the anti-heroic figure of Yannis,

whose wordless protest stands no chance of becoming part of the historical record.

The religious narrative that underlies the whole narration is the Christian narrative of (self-)sacrifice and salvation. The story is interspersed with references to Easter. The analogies the story implicitly constructs are between, on the one hand, the passion and sacrifice of Christ, and, on the other hand, Petros' painful death but also Yannis' placard as a modern version of the cross. The story starts on the Monday after Easter, as Yannis is preparing for his protest (the accident and Petros' death are narrated through retroversions, mostly mediated by Yannis' recollections). The accident happens on Maundy Thursday and Petros dies on Holy Saturday. In his last painful hours in the hospital bed, Yannis

saw Petros's arm or foot suddenly flail, two or three or four times in a row, and Yiannis's eyes would fill with tears and to steel his nerves he would repeat words to himself from some old prayers that he had mostly forgotten. But that flailing wasn't the work of god. It was just the current shaking Petros's body—that's how much current was still in his body. (89–90)

If the shaking of Petros' body gives the momentary impression of a resurrection—a projection of Yannis' hope for his friend's recovery—this turns out to be not “the work of god” but the cruel, continuous effect of the cause of his death, yielding a pain without end and a sacrifice without redemption. Petros' sacrifice (a sacrifice that was not his choice) and Yannis' makeshift “cross” not only fail to lead to a form of salvation but they also seem to have zero impact on the rest of the world. The religious analogy therefore falters before it is even erected. In fact, since the Christian narrative of sacrifice does not support any prospect of salvation in the story, it is more convincing as an allegorical vehicle for the passivity of acquiescent subjects that the neoliberal governmentality of crisis breeds. As Athanasiou writes, “Under the truth regime of ‘crisis,’ not only do people have to engage in a daily struggle against economic hardship and humiliation, but they are also called upon to bear all this without any sign of outrage or dissent” (in Butler and Athanasiou 2013, 149).

As a result, the evocation of Christian and heroic national narratives ends up underscoring the incommensurability between those narratives and the characters' experience. These attempted transhistorical analogies prove unable to offer consolation, understanding, or a well-articulated critique of the present. As no past narratives provide the framing Yannis is

injustices of a present “in crisis”: he is neither the heroic individual, nor part of a collective revolutionary act, nor a messiah who sacrifices himself for the good of humanity. Words fail him because he refuses to side with either side of a passive/active binary. Viewed in this way, his placard is neither just the desperate act of an impotent subject nor a revolutionary call for a clean start. His stasis thereby becomes what Athanasiou describes as “an embodied practice of inhabiting the *polis* through contestation and dissent,” that, by rejecting (heroic) accounts of the sovereign subject, manages to “stand critically beside the conceits of self-sovereign subjectivity” (2017, 42). His gesture asserts the need to re-frame and rearticulate experience and subjectivity in the “now” of a normalized crisis and to imagine alternatives that are not there yet.

If stasis requires a shared standpoint and a “politics of solidarity,” however, Yannis’ protest, which remains unanswered, seems to lack the reciprocation that could turn it into a collective form of dissent. Yet, even if he stands alone in the story, outside the story his placard does find transnational lines of connection with other “solitary” forms of stasis that operated beyond frameworks of revolutionary heroism or passive acquiescence. One may recall the so-called standing man protest by Erdem Gündüz, who stood still in Taksim Square facing the Atatürk cultural center in a silent, seemingly passive protest against police brutality during the Gezi Park protests in 2013. Or the action of Aslan Sagutdinov, a man in Kazakhstan, who on May 21, 2019, was arrested for holding a blank banner in a central public square in the city of Oral. Although his banner had no message—or perhaps *because* of that—it confused the authorities and led to his arrest.¹⁶ Yannis’ empty placard also resonates with the empty billboard frames in Yorgos Zois’ short-film *Out of Frame* (2012), the starting point for which was the recent banning of advertisements in large exterior billboards in Greece, which left hundreds of empty billboard frames around the country in a state of decay.¹⁷ In these—and other—solitary acts of protest or estranging visual grammars, Yannis’ act finds the interlocutors and the lines of connection he lacks in the intradiegetic world.

IMAGINATIVE BOREDOM; OR HOW TO RETHINK UTOPIANISM THROUGH THE MIDDLE VOICE

By disavowing established vocabularies that cast the subject as either active or passive, Yannis’ wordless protest points perhaps toward the modality of the *middle voice*, even though this is never registered on the placard’s



Fig. 2 Version of the wall writing “Variemai eufantasta” [I am bored imaginatively] in the Exarcheia neighborhood, Athens (2010). (Photograph reproduced by kind permission of the photographer)

neighborhood from which many self-organized communities and solidarity initiatives have emerged, offering, for example, refuge to migrants and disenfranchised people. A blogger, for example, posted a photo of the wall writing in his “Diary of an unemployed” and used the phrase to title his entry on November 11, 2010, in which he describes his discovery of the writing during an idle walk as an unemployed “flaneur” in Exarcheia.²¹ The peculiar figure of an unemployed flaneur already hints at the ambiguous subject that *variemai eufantasta* captures. The phrase links the passivity of unemployment with creative imagination: the latter promises future action and the possibility of resisting conditions of enforced dispossession²² (unemployment, precarity, disposability) through an exodus from the neoliberal demands of productivity that breed acquiescence and leave no time to think or contest the conditions of one’s life.

Significantly, the phrase plays with, and inverts, a common phrase in Greek: *βαριέμαι αφάνταστα* [*variemai afantasta*], which translates into

forms of enforced dispossession, that is, one's disengagement from the "cruel optimism" of attachments to "good life" and consumerist fantasies.

The word "fantasia" (imagination) embedded in "eufantasta" also links the wall writing with the May '68 slogan "all power to the imagination." *Variemai eufantasta* tries perhaps to update that slogan and carry over its utopian energy into the world of capitalist realism. The utopianism of this wall writing, however, is of a different kind from the May '68 slogan: to understand its mode of operation we can look at how its message and affective force are inflected through the modality of the middle voice. The verb constitutes a middle voice construction, since in *variemai* [I am bored] the subject is affected by, and involved in, the process the verb designates. One could also read the phrase as a whole as cast in the discursive mode of the middle voice: the cohabitation of passivity and inaction with creativity and imagination yields a subject that is concurrently passive and active, disempowered and empowered, neither just agent nor patient, but both. It is also a subject *internal* to the late capitalist conditions that induce boredom (whether this boredom is related to precarity and unemployment or to a consumerist life-style), and thus implicated in the system it tries to resist. This already moves us away from a revolutionary utopianism that demands rebellious subjects seeking to overturn a corrupt system by opposing it from the outside. If there is no outside to the new world order of "Empire," resistance and utopianism in a post-revolutionary world can take shape through different modalities.²⁴ *Variemai eufantasta* refuses to abandon utopianism, but rethinks it in a capitalist realist context through the expressive modality of the middle voice. Its precarious utopianism erupts within a quotidian space of normalized crisis and antagonizes its conditions (boredom) from within.

The wall writing refashions the "unimaginable boredom" of capitalist realism that promises no different future into a utopian space that dovetails with what José Esteban Muñoz calls "queer utopianism": an "anticipatory illumination" that helps us sense "the not-yet-conscious" as "a utopian feeling" in certain properties of "representational practices" (2009, 3). This utopianism, channeled here through the middle voice, is neither passive nor active, neither acquiescent nor revolutionary, neither negative nor uncritically positive, but belongs, to speak with Shoshana Felman, "precisely to scandal: to the scandal of their nonopposition" (2003, 104, also qtd in Muñoz 2009, 13).

The message's optimism is certainly not unhindered: it is further undercut by the second meaning of *eufantasta* as "fanciful." Imaginative

boredom may thus prove to be fanciful and fictional: a fake promise for an impossible exodus from the neoliberal governmentality of crisis. The message's promise may thus be cruel after all, articulating the fictitious musings of dispossessed people that pose no real challenge to power. *Variemai eufantasta* issues a message that contains its self-contestation, without, however, invalidating the utopian energy that motivates it. The double meaning of *eufantasta* activates an ambiguously utopian space that finds itself in an agonistic relation to the neoliberal conditions that threaten to undercut its optimism. The writing thus rethinks utopianism through and against the “new normal” of crisis. It projects boredom both as a symptom of capitalist realism and as a potential resource for imagining the *otherwise*.

FROM CRISIS OF REPRESENTATION TO A POLITICS OF POSSIBILITY; OR, HOW TO REARRANGE SYMPTOMS OF CRISIS IN NEW CONFIGURATIONS

The empty placard of Ikonomou's story and the imaginative boredom registered on the walls of Athens test modes of resistance to the alienation, dispossession, and contracting of the future in the “new normal” of crisis: conditions that have taken shape in capitalist realism and predated the financial crisis in Greece, but were severely aggravated in the crisis-years. In Ikonomou's story, the protagonist is unable to find the words for his protest in nationalist narratives of heroism and in Christian narratives of self-sacrifice. His empty canvas challenges hegemonic narratives about the past as means of narrativizing the present or resources of wisdom and resilience in times of crisis. Although the story does not envision a new language of protest that would fill the blank canvas, the protagonist's stasis draws attention to the inadequacies of existing frameworks and longs for a different vocabulary for articulating the experience of dispossessed, alienated people and for imagining the not-yet-there.

The wall-writing *variemai eufantasta* mobilizes the properties of the middle voice to rethink the possibility of utopianism and of imaginative spaces *within* the totalizing conditions of late capitalism. It does not pose as a new language of resistance untainted by, and external to, hegemonic narratives—the language that Yannis in Ikonomou's story longs for but cannot find. Rather, *variemai eufantasta* linguistically and conceptually reconfigures one of the “symptoms” that afflict subjects within the neoliberal governmentality of crisis: the “unimaginable boredom” linked to

unemployment, consumerism, or an indebted life without the prospect of a different future. If boredom is a symptom of the chronic “disease” of normalized crisis,²⁵ the wall writing tries to counter the disease by placing this symptom in a new configuration through which it could yield different, more hopeful effects. A symptom like boredom that entails depletion of energy, passivity, acquiescence, compromised agency, may thereby turn into a resource for imagining different modes of being in the present and for inserting moments of utopianism in the ordinariness of crisis.

If Ikonomou’s story registers a crisis of representation and the inadequacy of existing narratives, *variemai eufantasta* revisits a symptom of neoliberal capitalism and “crisis” through the modality of the middle voice: a modality that, it is important to note, does not always or by definition serve as an instrument of stasis and critique of hegemonic frameworks, but *can* assume this function in cases such as this.²⁶ The space of imaginative boredom that the wall writing fosters may be ambiguously utopian or even fanciful. But by hijacking quotidian spaces from the governmentality of crisis, it can activate a “politics of possibility” (Appadurai 2013, 1, 3), momentarily enabling the imagination of those alternative configurations of subjectivity and agency that Ikonomou’s empty placard only dreams of.

NOTES

1. An image of the graffiti can be accessed on the artist’s website at <http://bleeps.gr/main/outdoor/crisis-what-else-9/>
2. The graffiti and the accompanying statement protested against the initiative of the Athens School of Fine Arts to organize this street art festival, from which, according to the statement by bleepsgr, local Greek artists were excluded.
3. The phrase “Crisis... what else?” and the graffiti by bleepsgr are also briefly discussed in Boletsi (2018, 4).
4. Illustrative of this shift of narrative is the speech of then Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras on the occasion of Greece’s exit from the bailout program in August 2018, symbolically shot with the harbor of Ithaca in the background, in which he evoked the homecoming of Odysseus after a long, troubled journey in order to project a redemptive narrative of successful arrival after years of hardship (“We have reached our destination”) and the commencement of a new chapter in Greek History (“Today is the beginning of a new era”) (qtd. in “Alexis Tsipras’ State Address from Ithaca” 2018, n.pag.). Kyriakos Mitsotakis, Prime Minister of Greece since

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