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Can you introduce yourself and your work as a journalist?

My name is Eliza Triantaphyllou, I work as a journalist at Inside Story, which is a subscription site for independent journalism in Greece. I mainly specialise in reporting with a financial interest, dealing mostly with fraud, public money and issues of corruption and transparency.

Describe the most important cases of surveillance of journalists in your country. Who were the journalists who were covertly monitored?

I am 43 years old, and I started working at around 24; what I remember as the first of several surveillance incidents was the well-known Vodafone wiretapping scandal that we learned about a year after it took place in 2005. The wiretapping started at the time of the Olympic Games [2004], and journalists were also in the list of those being monitored. I remember very well that [journalist] Aristeia Bougatsou, who has unfortunately passed away, was among the people [who were under surveillance].

I remember this case, in which all the signs indicated that the American embassy was behind it. The next case I remember in my professional career is when we were dealing with Tasos Teloglou [fellow journalist at Inside Story].

The revelations about the surveillance of journalists in Greece were first reported by 'Efimerida ton Syntakton' [Greek media outlet] in November 2021, when they published, without naming him, [a story about] Stavros Malihoudis, a journalist for [independent media organisation] Solomon, who had aroused the interest of the national intelligence service, EYP, over the communication he had with a ten-year-old refugee child [whose mother he interviewed for a report]. After a month and a half, we published our first report on the use of the spyware Predator in Greece, without identifying any victims. The first victim to be identified was fellow journalist Thanasis Koukakis in April.

Nikos Androulakis, the current president of [centre-left party] PASOK, who was targeted for surveillance when he was an MEP and a candidate for the presidency of the PASOK party.

Along the way, other additional journalists have monitored in one way or the other or both legally [by EYP] or completely illegally [using Predator spyware].

How was the surveillance discovered?

What we suddenly learned in December 2022 from Euractiv [website specialising in EU news] is that Tasos Telloglou's phone privacy [rights] had been suspended [by EYP] in 2021.

[Journalist] Sarantis Michalopoulos was the author of that [Euractiv] report and wrote about the surveillance of Tasos Telloglou and [Giorgos] Kirtsos [MEP and journalist]. By putting together various facts, such as when Tasos filed a complaint to the Hellenic Authority for Communication Security and Privacy [ADAE], we concluded that they listened to him at some point in August 2021 when the wildfires in Attica and Evia [regions of Greece] were happening.

Can you describe your personal experience of surveillance?

We started writing intensively about illegal spyware in January 2022. The main revelation about Thanasis Koukakis was made in April. So at the beginning of May, someone, as a source, contacted me, telling me that Tasos and I need to be careful because we are under physical surveillance and that they can't tell me more. They told me there were more photos to prove what they were saying was true. I asked for the photos, and they sent me some that appeared to have been taken secretly and were of a meeting that Tasos had with Thanasis in a coffee shop. I asked for pictures of me, and they told me they couldn't access them, but they still assured me that they existed. Tasos had also discovered that someone was following him.

Then we had an incident when some people who introduced themselves as state security officials tried to approach his [Tasos Telloglou's] car, which was parked in a private parking lot; I guess to put a tracker on it, and they were stopped by the

parking lot's owner. And then, the culmination was that they were following our movements, as a result of which they spotted us on November 17, 2022, at Thessaloniki airport while we were waiting for our flight back to Athens. They managed to steal Tasos's bag with notebooks and a laptop inside. Someone had shared information with Tasos that indicated they were trying by various technical means to identify who we were talking to and who were our sources. Among the people they had focused on was [journalist] Thodoris Chondrogiannos from [Greek independent investigative media outlet] Reporters United.

Were there any specific reasons for the surveillance?

One possible reason, probably the only one I can think of, is that we were put under physical surveillance was because we were writing things about the surveillance of other citizens. So since it was a sensitive issue, apparently for the government and for various other interests, they obviously wanted to check our movements, basically to identify who we were talking to and who we were not talking to, and at the same time, the effect, I don't know if they were also aiming for this, was to make it difficult for us to report. Because when you know that you're being watched, it's more difficult to meet sources because you're very keen to protect them and don't want to expose them, et cetera.

How did the surveillance affect your life and work?

To be honest, seeing it on a personal level, it didn't affect me that much, although a few years ago I would have said it would affect me a lot if it happened to me. When it finally happened to me, we kind of gradually got accustomed to this paranoia... you know, it's like poison, little by little, we got used to it and just kept going. When they got to the point of stealing Tasos's bag, I returned home, and that night I would have been alone, normally I share my apartment; I asked my colleague to wait for me a moment to see if anyone had entered the house because if they had come in, maybe I wouldn't sleep at my house. I said it to him as if had to water a plant, then I would come. And why? Because a long time ago,

I always used to think that someone could try to get into the house, someone could try to take things from me.

I'm not hiding the fact that I went through a phase of being in my apartment and asking myself, 'Can I talk now? Is my mobile phone too close? Maybe I should hide it somewhere to talk not about work, but about my everyday life with my people.' I can't say that on a personal level, it affected me to a very large extent because, at some point, I made the decision and said that if they want to listen to me, they will listen to me; if they want to watch me, they will watch me, I understood, until I can protect myself. I did what I could within this context, and from then on, I accepted that I was exposed to certain things.

Work-wise, it affected me a lot, because Tasos and I had daily meetings. This meant that many times, for very simple things, we had to meet in person, which is not the easiest thing in the world while we were running around on various other work. It certainly affected the sources: it was very difficult to communicate with them and even more difficult to meet them. Very often we left our mobile phones and traveled ten kilometres to meet a source without mobile phones. All of this was definitely, first of all, a waste of money, and secondly, it delays you and wastes your time.

I can't say that I was scared, because I want to believe that we live in a country where, as journalists, we shouldn't be afraid that when we do our job properly, we could find ourselves, for example, with a broken leg or in a ditch, as they say. I believe deep inside that we are not living in this country, although of course there has been the murder of Giorgos Karaivaz [veteran crime journalist killed in 2021]. It was encouraging that we were being watched in a sense, it had a positive effect on us psychologically because we felt like we were on the right track. So our report was moving in the right direction.

What impact has the surveillance of journalists had on freedom of the media in your country?

A major problem that we faced at the beginning when we published the reports - apart from the fact that the mainstream media did not write about the issue, something that everyone noticed - another problem was that too many people

and colleagues did not understand why it was an issue to monitor a journalist or why it was an issue to monitor anyone. Because the perception in Greece is very strong that we are all being watched and this is not news.

When we had the tangible proof that yes, you all may think you are being watched but he [Thanasis Koukakis] is really being watched, and here is the proof, it was a little strange that even journalists kept saying, 'Shut up, we all know that we shouldn't say anything on the phone.' The logic of 'if you've got nothing to fear, you've got nothing to hide' if you are being watched prevailed. We tried to prove to colleagues and friends and to the readers that this is something bad; it is self-evident that it is bad, there is no need to argue much that it is bad for a journalist or anyone to be watched illegally and that this is so invasive of your privacy.

Did any of the surveillance cases result in any legal proceedings?

Our initial information that we were under physical surveillance came to us in May 2022, we made it public in September 2022 - an article by Tassos for the [German political foundation] Heinrich Böll Stiftung described all the incidents that we had experienced.

We sat down and thought about it: is there any point in going to the police? It made no sense as the police were the ones who had put us, via some government authority, under surveillance. It didn't make much sense just [to do it] symbolically.

We have nothing to legally pursue. When Tassos's bag was stolen, he filed a criminal complaint on the spot at Thessaloniki airport police station accusing strangers.

Interview by Eleni Stamatoukou, 2023

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