

Tasos Telloglou
Investigative journalist, Inside Story
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Can you introduce yourself and your work as a journalist?

My name is Tasos Telloglou, and I am a journalist for [Greek investigative media outlet] Inside Story. I usually do investigative reporting.

Can you describe the most important cases of surveillance of journalists in your country and your personal experience of surveillance?

The surveillance of journalists in Greece is done systematically, and was in the past as well; what was added this time was the use of the [illegal] spy software Predator, which was used against [Greek journalist] Thanasis Koukakis as he found out based on the results that given to him by Citizen Lab [Canadian technology, security and rights organisation]. Koukakis was monitored for three months by Predator and had previously been monitored for two months by the [Greek] National Intelligence Service [EYP] for national security reasons, under a legal decision to waive his communications privacy. I was monitored for two days in August 2021 while covering wildfires in Attica [region of Greece].

How were you monitored the first time and for how long?

I was brought before the fire service's investigation department in August 2021 in Vilia [a village in West Attica], in the Mandra municipality, where I gave a statement on the grounds that I had been near the source of the fire. Immediately afterwards, an order was given by the prosecutor Ms. Vlachou, who is responsible for signing the EYP's provisions [for instigating surveillance]; I was monitored for one-and-a-half days for reasons of national security that I did not understand. Regarding physical surveillance, we were monitored during the months we were investigating the case of [the use of Pegasus spyware against] Thanasis Koukakis. [The surveillance] took many forms; first, people followed me in the centre of

Athens. I even caught one of them on May 27th. A few days later, they tried to put a transmitter in my car in Pagrati [neighborhood in Athens]; a third was that they constantly took the location data from my mobile phone, which, unfortunately, the Greek courts have not classified as private data from the personal communications of the person whose phone it is. So they took this data and through it, they were able to locate me, even if a possible informant of mine was under the same cellphone antenna.

How were you monitored the second time and for how long?

The surveillance incident in the Piraeus Bank [Reuters news agency investigation] was in the summer of 2012. I was photographed at the hospital where my son was born, and the photo was published by a website that is not the best in Athens. I and my colleague from Reuters, Steven Grey, following the recommendation of the security service of the Reuters agency, said then that we should exchange text messages, which they intercepted. So they followed us to a hotel in the centre of Athens, where we caught a person photographing us. This person told us that a bank had instructed him to monitor us. We filed a lawsuit against a person or persons unknown, which led nowhere because, in the meantime, we let the man who had given us this information go.

What exactly were you investigating at the time?

What we were investigating at the time were some loans that members of the Sallas family [of Michalis Sallas, then president and CEO of Piraeus Bank] had taken, and some properties that had been bought that were then rented out to Piraeus Bank, that was what Reuters was investigating, and I was assisting Reuters in this investigation. The publication of the investigation led, on the one hand, to the monitoring of all those involved in this investigation, whether Greeks or foreigners, and on the other hand, to a break-in at the offices of [investigative journalist] Nikolas Leontopoulos on Soutsou Street in Mavili Square [in Athens] by unknown persons who loaded up all the materials that were in the files at the office that Nikolas had at the time and disappeared, they were never found. This

reminds me the story of the bag that was stolen from me on November 17, 2022, at Macedonia Airport in Thessaloniki when we were returning from North Macedonia, where we had met with colleagues to discuss the wiretapping case and were on our way back.

Were there any specific reasons for the surveillance?

One reason, which is probably obvious, is that they wanted to know who we were meeting and who our sources were, and this is the biggest problem because if the sources know this, they will not come to the meetings. The second reason is when we take enough measures to protect our sources, they want us to be afraid and stop researching. In other words, physical surveillance with a physical presence that is not hidden is aimed more at bullying, so to speak.

Who was behind it?

What Giannis Souliotis [Greek journalist] wrote in [Greek newspaper] 'Kathimerini', and which is identical to my own information and the information I had from an EYP source in May, is that a police department whose head was recently replaced took on the physical monitoring.

The National Intelligence Service [EYP] monitored my phone for national security reasons. The police's internal affairs service followed me using physical surveillance to see who I was meeting. They are two different cases, and they happened at different times.

How was the surveillance discovered?

I was never monitored by Predator [spyware]. I haven't found any indication, I check my phone often enough, and I haven't found any malware. One incidence of surveillance was made known to me after a check by ADAE [the Hellenic Authority for Communication Security and Privacy]. In fact, it was not made known to me from the beginning because [ADAE] cannot notify me of the monitoring, it was made known to me by another source outside ADAE, which is

equally valid, and I must say that even before I made the application [to find out] if my phone was monitored or not in August 2021, I had learned from a government source that my phone was being monitored for a certain period of time and that is why I made the application [to ADAE] that related to a certain period, because I knew. Now, as far as the physical surveillance goes, I understood this from experience, ie., I was walking on the pavement, the person who was following me was walking on the pavement, I was entering a store, he was also entering, etc, when I caught him at 37 Karneadou Street next to the post office, he pushed me and run towards Vasilissis Sofia Street; I understood that this man was following me. In the garage where I park my car, the garage man told me that two men from the police came and asked to get into my car, that's exactly what he said. So that's how I found out about the two tracking cases. In terms of the motion location data, what is most important to me is that during the days we were doing research about the Predator case, there were government officials who knew what building I was inside in the morning. You can only know if you see the phone under which antenna it is. One of the buildings I visited had an antenna on the roof from the mobile phone provider, so they knew exactly the address and the number.

Motion location data is the data that the phone constantly sends to your antenna and your antenna to the system.

What impact did the surveillance have on your life and work?

I use the phone less; secondly, in many meetings, I don't take the phone with me; thirdly, we leave the phone in a place unrelated to where the meeting is taking place; fourthly, the phone is always switched off. Fifth, we never take notes on the phone.

I can't say that it [the monitoring] has created any special stress for me; it has created more stress for me to follow these rules in order to achieve my goal and not for those who want to eavesdrop on my phone.

First of all, a journalist who knows that their phone is being monitored is unpleasant for his or her sources because his or her sources might want to protect themselves because they work for a company; I experienced that when

our monitoring was disclosed, and we knew about it months before that, we were being physically monitored but it was announced much later on; one of the reasons we didn't [publish anything about the surveillance] was that we were in the middle of our investigation into the Predator case. We wouldn't have met anyone if we had announced that we were going everywhere with an 'escort'.

What impact does the surveillance of journalists have on freedom of the media?

When you have no sources, there is no freedom of the press because you cannot write.

Are you thinking of taking any legal action?

I have a problem; I was monitored under the new Law 5002, while [journalist] Thanasis Koukakis was monitored under the old one. Our difference is that I don't know who to turn to. I applied to ADAE, but the new law says that a three-member committee is set up to decide whether to inform you after three years; the earliest I can apply to this committee is August 2024. The problem is that I want to go to Strasbourg [the European Court of Human Rights] declaring that, in essence, by giving me the right to be informed after three years, they are depriving me of my right to be informed in a timely manner about what happened, but for this reason, the committee must first be established and will have to answer me that it has no answer for me; for as long as the committee is not established and does not answer me that it has no answer for me, I cannot use its answer to go to Strasbourg.

The investigation has two parts; one part is what the independent authorities are doing; we have enough information that they are progressing well, and they have findings that can be used, as Mr. Menoudakos, the Hellenic Data Protection Authority's president found over 100 people who received 300 fraudulent messages to hack their phones with Predator and some of these messages have a Greek domain; you don't need legal assistance, you can find them here. Also I know from the prosecutor's office that at least two people have been identified who paid for these domain names with credit cards, so these investigations have

proceeded. Whether specific accusations are made against specific people, we will see in the future.

Interview by Eleni Stamatoukou, 2023

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