



Police target media in Greek riot act

Police see cameras as a weapon in Greece, and **Kia Mistilis** and other journalists have found themselves targeted during the civil unrest

Press freedom in Greece came to international attention in October 2012, when investigative journalist and *Hot Doc* magazine editor Kostas Vaxevanis was arrested on breach of privacy laws after he published the so-called “Lagarde list”. This list revealed 2059 wealthy Greeks holding Swiss bank accounts with HSBC, raising questions about large-scale tax evasion.

Vaxevanis did not make allegations or publish any personal data, but called for an investigation—given that the Greek government had been given the list by Christine Lagarde, the then French finance minister, in April 2010 and had failed to act on it for two years.

The Greek government scrambled to arrest Vaxevanis with an illegal, verbally issued warrant and a police raid of 20 officers, worthy of a suspected terrorist.

The Lagarde list, which includes business people, publishers, former government ministers and relatives of the current finance minister George Papaconstantinou (whose names he is now accused of deleting), reveals a cosy circle of politically connected and unaccountable elite

and is symptomatic of the endemic corruption which plagues Greece’s internal affairs.

The Vaxevanis case sparked outrage from the Greek people who are being told by the same government to accept a seemingly never-ending austerity program of savage wage and pension cuts coupled with tax hikes, which have plunged 50 per cent of the population into poverty.

While Greece’s mainstream media was noticeably absent, every major international news agency was outside the court at his trial and Vaxevanis was catapulted to newfound prominence as op-ed contributor for *The New York Times*. Although acquitted, he faces a retrial after the Athens prosecutor appealed the verdict.

But while Vaxevanis’s highly publicised case shone an international spotlight on the Greek government and media censorship, there are graver press freedom issues being faced by media covering the demonstrations that have convulsed the country since 2010.

It’s important to clarify what happens on the ground in Athens during mass demonstrations on general strike days. The crowd varies

Riot police fire CS gas into a crowd peacefully gathered outside the Athens parliament, minutes after the second memorandum is passed on June 29, 2011.

in size from 100 to 250,000 people and the vast majority are peaceful, with rioters making up no more than one per cent of the crowd. Despite that, violent protesters gain disproportionate coverage, which creates an impression that police violence is necessary to subdue citizen violence.

Actually, most of the violence is coming from the police, who use excessive and arbitrary force against innocent civilians and journalists to break up the demonstrations, but often inexplicably fail to arrest rioters, despite having ample opportunity to do so.

The summer of 2011 is a case in point. Greeks rallied in huge numbers to protest the passing of the second memorandum and austerity measures by the parliament. During the demonstrations of June 15, 28 and 29 that year, riot police fired more than 8000 CS gas canisters (some of which had expired) and thousands of military stun grenades into crowds of people, directly at individual protesters and medical volunteers. Stun grenades are “designed for use in confined spaces by Special Forces during hostage release”.

At every demonstration I have attended, police have thrown CS gas canisters and stun grenades directly at me while I was taking photos, sometimes missing by centimetres.

On June 29, standing atop a bus stop, I watched riot police launch a full-scale attack on a peaceful crowd gathered outside the parliament, minutes after the memorandum was passed.

Concentrated CS gas, an asphyxiant, is part of their arsenal, and two were hurled at me that afternoon, landing at my feet. It was a terrifying experience being unable to breathe for a minute or so, despite my gas mask. I ran into the metro station to recover before putting my camera away and going back into the crowd, determined to stay and bear witness.

After forcibly clearing thousands of people from Syntagma Square, the riot police spread throughout central Athens in what I can only describe as a state-sponsored terror campaign.

I did my first live-to-air interview with the BBC that night, holed up in the storeroom of a restaurant in Monastiraki, while grenades and gas were exploding outside. Just around the corner, eyewitnesses, including a waitress and patrons at a local taverna, described seeing riot police on the rampage, indiscriminately throwing grenades amongst the people eating, smashing chairs and tables, and beating customers and proprietors with their batons. The demonstration was long over but the police terror continued. It was as if they had lost their minds.

I've been very lucky to escape injury. Others have not. Manolis Kypreos, a journalist with 20 years' experience, has covered conflicts in Kosovo, Nigeria and Georgia for the BBC World Service, Greek print media and Russia's ITV. He was taking pictures at the June 15 demonstration when a riot squad commander demanded to know why. Kypreos showed his ID and the commander shouted: "Journalists are assholes!" Kypreos lost his hearing in both ears when riot police exploded a stun grenade 50cm from his face.

After two painful operations, a Cochlear implant has finally restored partial hearing in one ear. "I have a piece of Australian technology



Above: Men with masks – independent journalists wait nervously outside the parliament in Athens for the demonstration to start on another general strike day, February 23, 2011.

Below: Protesters often use Maalox, an over-the-counter antacid formula which is applied to the face, to alleviate the symptoms of CS gas exposure.



Kypreos lost his hearing in both ears when riot police exploded a stun grenade 50cm from his face

in my head," he tells me. "I can hear a mechanical human voice, but I cannot hear music."

The grenade destroyed his inner ear's labyrinth, which controls balance, so he uses a walking stick and wears special shoes, but his brain cannot synchronise with a computer's screen rate. In short, he cannot work – his career is over.

Kypreos is bringing a case against the Greek government and unidentified police, because despite providing photos of the riot squad, and the eyewitness account of George Savidis, the president of the Greek Journalists' Union, police insist they cannot identify those responsible. When the court asked the police for the riot squad positions at 3pm on that day, the police replied that they no longer have the data. The first court hearing is set for October 2016.

Marios Lolos, president of the Photojournalists' Union of Greece, was in a group of photojournalists being herded away from

parliament by riot police during a small, peaceful demonstration on the evening of April 6, 2012.

A riot policeman struck him from behind with a metal baton handle, leaving a 1.5cm hole in the journalist's cranium that required brain surgery and two titanium plate inserts, followed by a course of anti-epilepsy drugs.

At a meeting with Christos Papoutsis, minister for public order and citizen protection, Lolos asked why the police are attacking journalists. "Police see cameras as a weapon," Papoutsis reportedly said, adding that it was not official policy and that he supports the upholding of press freedoms.

Lolos says Greek journalists have joined Amnesty International in calling for independent, rather than internal investigations into incidents of police violence, and for riot police to display ID numbers on their sleeves, rather than on the back of their helmets, where they are sometimes obscured with liquid paper.

In its July 2012 press release, Amnesty International "urged Greek authorities to address routine acts of police violence, including chemical sprays against largely peaceful demonstrators". Its report *Police Violence in Greece: Not just "isolated incidents"* documents numerous accounts of people brutalised during arrest or detention.

"Greek authorities refuse to acknowledge the extent of the problem. For far too long, they have brushed off such violations as 'isolated incidents', creating a climate of impunity," it states.

On top of the excesses of police violence, the economic crisis has seen the rise of Golden Dawn, a neo-Nazi party that was in the political wilderness before winning 18 parliamentary seats in Greece's 2012 national elections. Their leader, Nikolaos Michaloliakos, wrote an article in 1982 praising Hitler and in 2012 went on national TV as a holocaust denier.

In his first press conference after entering the parliament, Michaloliakos singled out the media as enemies of his party. Journalists, whom he describes as "anarcho-communists", were ordered to "stand and show respect to the leader!" as he entered the room. Those that did not were ejected.

Reporters Without Borders sums it up well, describing the professional and social atmosphere for Greek journalists as "disastrous" in its *World Press Freedom Index 2013* report.

"Exposed to popular anger and continually facing violence on the part of both extremists and the police, reporters and photojournalists must now cope with the ultra-violent neo-Nazi activists of the Golden Dawn party," it reports.

Greece fell 14 places in the Press Freedom Index for 2013, to 84 out of 179 countries.

Kia Mistilis is a freelance journalist and photographer based in Athens, Greece