

Greek journalist acquitted for leaking list of wealthy potential tax dodgers

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3 November 2012

Greek investigative journalist Kostas Vaxevanis has been acquitted at a court in Athens of breaching data privacy laws. After a 12-hour hearing, he was found innocent by the three-judge panel.

Vaxevanis faced up to two years in jail and a €30,000 fine, after he was arrested and dragged before the court in a matter of days for having published in a magazine he edits a list of 1,991 Greek citizens who had a bank account at the HSBC bank in Switzerland.

The list is known as the “Lagarde List”, because it was passed on to International Monetary Fund chief Christine Lagarde when she was French finance minister in 2010. She passed the list to the Greek authorities, who over the past two years have done nothing to investigate the possibility of large-scale tax evasion by the high-profile individuals on it, which include politicians, their relatives and businessmen such as shipping magnates.

The concealing of the list was carried out by successive governments and implicates the entire Greek political establishment. Involved are conservative New Democracy, the social democratic PASOK, as well as their partner in the coalition which came to power in June, the Democratic Left (a split from SYRIZA—Coalition of the Radical Left). Even as Vaxevanis was acquitted, the new finance minister, Yannis Stournaras, claimed in parliament that he had still not seen the data.

So determined were the Greek authorities to avoid any investigation that then Greek finance minister, George Papaconstantinou, recently claimed he had lost the memory stick containing the names. Only at that point did current PASOK leader Evangelos Venizelos, a former finance minister under Prime Minister George Papandreou, reveal that he had the data. He had felt it was unable to be produced as evidence of tax evasion

because it was “stolen” in its original form.

It was under these conditions that Vaxevanis published the list. He was conducting a live radio interview when he was arrested last Sunday morning in scenes reminiscent of the conditions that existed under the military junta in Greece between 1967 and 1974.

An hour before his arrest he tweeted, “Outside my home are 15 policemen. Let them come in and arrest me like German collaborators”—a reference to the war-time Greek regime that welcomed the Nazi occupation.

Such was the disregard for elementary democratic precepts that Vaxevanis’s charge sheet was not stamped by the prosecutor. Commenting on his arrest, one of his lawyers, Harris Ikononopoulos, said, “It was as if he was conspiring to kill the prime minister. The warrant was issued as soon as [Mr. Vaxevanis’s] magazine hit the streets and unmarked police cars lined the streets. There is a strike of judges in Greece tomorrow and yet the case will go ahead. The state does not do this even to major gangsters.”

In court Vaxevanis stated that he did not breach any data laws as he did not specify the amount of the deposits or any other personal information of the people on the list. Commenting in the *Guardian* following his release on bail, he stated, “We did not even allege that these individuals were guilty, only called for an investigation.”

In a comment given to Reuters between his arrest and trial he said, “If anyone is accountable before the law then it is those ministers who hid the list, lost it and said it didn’t exist. I only did my job. I am a journalist and I did my job.”

The Greek state wanted to silence Vaxevanis as a warning to anyone seeking to challenge the criminal conspiracy of the super-rich to impose the crisis they have created onto the backs of working people while

they live in the lap of luxury. Calling for his conviction, the prosecutor noted the anger building up against the super-rich. He said to Vaxevanis, “You have publicly ridiculed a series of people. You have delivered these people to a society that is thirsty for blood.”

In finding Vaxevanis not guilty, the court no doubt took into account widespread support for his stand. His magazine *Hot Doc*, which normally has a circulation of about 25,000, sold 100,000 copies of the edition containing the list.

Vaxevanis told the *Daily Telegraph*, “Greece is run by a closed oligarchy of businessmen, politicians and controlled media groups. My publication of the list marked a confrontation, an extreme confrontation.

“They have lost face and credibility with the publication of this list. They can no longer play hide and seek, and they cannot demand the little old lady in a village to make more painful sacrifices and have her pension cut when a small group of oligarchs continues to grow wealthy.”

He added, “A study of the Lagarde list is highly revealing. Publishers, businessmen, shipowners, the entire system of power is shown to have transferred money abroad. And this is information from only one bank. Meanwhile in Greece, people are going through dumpsters for food.”

It wasn’t until Vaxevanis published the list that a major newspaper, the daily *Ta Nea*, also published its contents.

In his October 30 *Guardian* piece, Vaxevanis noted how a pliant media has collaborated in the cover-up of the high crimes of the ruling elite. “A few months ago, Reuters and the British press uncovered scandals involving Greek banks”, he wrote. “The Greek media didn’t write anything then either. The space that should have been granted to reports about these scandals was occupied by paid advertisements sponsored by the very people who caused the Greek banks to go under.”

According to Papaconstantinou, the amount of money owned by those on the Lagarde List, which dated back to 2007, is €1.5 billion (US\$1.9 billion). However, Vaxevanis contends that more than €13 billion (US\$16.7 billion) had moved through the accounts on the list between 1998 and 2007. “Our view is that some account holders moved large amounts of black money through their HSBC account in Geneva to invest in foreign funds or deposit in safe havens elsewhere”, he

said.

These figures are only the tip of the iceberg. According to figures reported last June by *Der Spiegel*, the sums salted away by Greek millionaires and billionaires in Swiss accounts amounts to €600 billion. This is twice the total public debt of Greece.

Moreover, Lagarde or any other representative of the financial elite could have produced a similar list detailing the financial swindling of the ruling elite in any of the more powerful countries in Europe that would make the Greek millionaire and billionaire swindlers look like petty thieves. The original file containing the Greek data, which is in the hands of the French police, includes the Swiss bank account details of 130,000 potential tax evaders.



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