

The social and political background to the forest fire disaster in Greece

Katerina Selin**28 July 2018**

The number of deaths in the Greek town of Mati has risen hour by hour since the outbreak of the wildfire on Monday. At least 83 people—among them countless families with small children—have died in the forest fires in East Attica, just a few kilometres east of Athens. Many are still missing. Day and night, volunteers and search teams from the fire brigade have been combing the ruins of the former seaside resort of Mati and the coast looking for those still missing.

Although some small fires have broken out again in the Attica region, these could be extinguished. In the days after the inferno, the full extent of the fires, which had swept over an area of about 4,500 hectares at breakneck speed, was visible. Even though Greece has previously experienced many devastating wildfires, such a high number of casualties in such a short time and in such a small area has never happened in the country's recent history, not even in the forest fires of 2007.

At a press conference on Thursday night, the deputy Citizens Protection minister Nikos Toskas said that there was “serious evidence” that the fires were triggered by “criminal activity.” This included testimony about one or more suspects, as well as evidence of some fires near a road, which could have been the starting point of the fire. The investigation is still in progress.

While no statements have been made about the motives and causes of arson, many observers suspect land speculation. In Greek regions that promise lucrative profits through the sale of real estate, fires are started time and again, to later build illegally on the burnt-out former forestland. This criminal practice has been possible for years because politicians and the authorities take no action against it, but, on the contrary, retrospectively legalize the repurposing of forestland as building land. The fact that Greece has no national forestry register and the ownership of the land is often not clear plays into the hands of the real estate mafia. The Syriza government has also not changed these conditions. The business with fire makes room for the many private investors—which Syriza woos at every opportunity.

As in other Greek resorts, Mati has been subject to an opaque real estate policy for decades. Many houses—of which a large number have now burned down—are in a legal grey area and do not comply with the safety and fire regulations. Politicians have been promoting these construction practices for years by imposing minimal fines on the owners of illegal properties to then make possible the legalisation of those properties, which are then generally resold at exorbitant prices.

So it is no coincidence that the municipality of Marathonas, where Mati is located, has called on the government not to reforest the burnt region. Otherwise, the burnt-down houses, some of which have no legal status, could not be rebuilt. That is why local leaders are pushing for the region to be legally zoned as a settlement.

The chaotic urban structure in Mati was one of the main causes of people not being able to escape in time. This is the conclusion of an initial analysis by geologists from the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. The narrow roads, with many dead ends and housing blocks without any turning possibility, prevented escape. Rocky slopes and houses built on the coast blocked access to the sea and safety. People burned like “mice in a trap,” survivors said.

The government of the pseudo-left Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left) vehemently rejects any criticism or even a silent supposition that the extent of the catastrophe could have its roots in the social conditions in Greece, and demands that questions about the guilty be postponed to the distant future out of “respect for the dead.” The tragedy, according to the official mantra, could not be stopped because of the devastating speed of the fire. The state authorities had done their best to prevent an even greater catastrophe, it is claimed.

The depiction of forest fires as an inevitable natural phenomenon serves to cover up the political and social background of the events.

Ten years of austerity ordered by the European Union have led to the total collapse of basic public services throughout Greece. All Greek governments have implemented the brutal

austerity measures demanded by their creditors—the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Mass layoffs, wage cuts and the deterioration of working conditions and facilities have particularly affected the public sector. From local authorities to fire stations to hospitals—all areas that are vital in the event of a fire disaster have faced cuts for years.

This also affects the fire department. Before the onset of the economic crisis in 2009, the Greek fire service had an annual budget of 452 million euros. By 2017, this had been cut by more than 20 percent to 354 million. The media report a lack of protective clothing, faulty breathing apparatus and outdated and often unusable fire trucks and fire fighting planes.

In 2014, the Minister of National Defence reduced the staff of the state fire brigade by 30 percent under the right-wing conservative Nea Dimokratia government. In the same year, an amendment that drastically limits the use of volunteer fire brigades was passed.

This was reported by Nikos Sachinidis, the head of the Association of Volunteer Fire Departments (Esepa), to the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*: “Since then, we are no longer able to extinguish fires—this is now reserved for the professional fire departments.” In an emergency, they can decide if they want to request the support of the voluntary fire service. In Sachinidis’s opinion, the amendment delays the ability to react in the event of a fire, as the professional fire brigade has only about 270 stations across the country, while his volunteer association has more local groups. If Esepa’s strength had not been limited, it would have been able to respond much faster to forest fires, Sachinidis said. “I know the area where the fires raged. We used to have volunteers there. They could have extinguished the fire immediately.” However, the equipment and membership of Esepa has been drastically reduced in recent years due to the legal situation.

Modern warning systems and technologies were also not used, said Costas Synolakis, professor of natural disasters at the Institute of Environmental Engineering at the Technical University of Crete. In a comment in *Ekathimerini*, he described the lack of civil defence planning: “Greece has carried out civil defence exercises in only a few areas. There are neither maps showing the high-risk regions and possible escape routes, nor any public campaign to educate people about the risks in their neighbourhood.

“The recent events have shown that neither the Civil Protection Agency’s command centre nor the municipalities in the regions have any knowledge of the possibilities afforded by modern technology to plan the evacuation of densely populated forest areas. There would have been fewer casualties if a few simulations had been carried out in the

region, because then, the authorities would have had a better idea of the evacuation challenges and might also have informed the inhabitants about this as well.”

The fact that the electricity and water supply collapsed immediately and could not be restored is also related to austerity. The electricity pylons are not only made of wood (and the burnt-down ones have since been replaced with wood), but the entire power grid is above ground. Konstantinos Maniatis, chairman of the DEI engineering association, has had to concede to the ERT healthcare company that the cost of underground power lines is too high, due to the “memoranda and serious economic problems.”

The cynical attempts of the government and the opposition to cover up their responsibility for the disaster, and to invoke the heroic commitment of the numerous volunteer helpers, do not convince many people. In the local population, grief and despair are turning more and more into anger, as expressed in numerous commentaries on social media and in reports from east Attica.

When Panos Kammenos, Minister of Defence and head of the ultra-right-wing coalition partner ANEL (Independent Greeks), visited Mati yesterday together with the mayor of the port city of Rafina and some soldiers, he was met by a wave of anger from the local residents. A crying, angry woman confronted Kammenos, saying, “Why did nobody warn us? Why didn’t the fire department come? Nothing. You just left us to our fate. We saw the fire and only had two seconds to save ourselves. People died in vain.”

Elsewhere, Kammenos engaged in a verbal battle with an angry man who declared that it was not just Syriza’s and ANEL’s responsibility, but the policies of the last decades. The minister reacted harshly to the desperate people and talked down to them. At the end of his visit, he made a brief statement to the BBC, pointing to the many illegally built houses in Mati, seeking to blame residents for the disaster.

In fact, it is the EU, Syriza and all the former governing parties, as well as the large corporations and banks, which have plundered and ruined Greek society in recent years, and which are the culprits that belong in the dock.



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