

Greece's secret service illegally tapped phone of leader of social democratic PASOK party

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Greece's New Democracy government has been embroiled in crisis since the beginning of August, after it emerged that the National Intelligence Agency (EYP) hacked the phone of Nikos Androulakis, leader of the social democratic PASOK.

The chain of events leading to the revelations began when Androulakis, a member of the European Parliament since 2014, submitted his phone for inspection on June 28 to the European Parliament's cybersecurity. This revealed that an attempt had been made in September 2021 to infect his phone with the Predator spyware.

On July 26, Androulakis filed a complaint with Greece's Supreme Court, which led to the Hellenic Authority for Communication Security and Privacy (ADAE) requesting data from Androulakis' phone provider to conduct its own investigation. The Predator spyware does not leave traces that are easily identified, but Androulakis' phone records showed he had been under surveillance using conventional bugging methods by Greece's National Intelligence Agency (EYP).

Judicial approval for the wiretapping was reportedly granted in September 2021 on "national security" grounds during the same period the attempt was made to infect his phone with Predator. At the time Androulakis was a candidate in the PASOK leadership election and the surveillance reportedly stopped shortly after he was elected leader of the party in December 2021.

The revelations led to the resignations on August 5 of EYP chief Dimitris Kontoleon and the Prime Minister's chief of staff and nephew, Grigoris Dimitriadis. In a televised address three days later Mitsotakis blamed EYP for mishandling the affair which led to "the immediate removal of the chief of EYP" while his chief of staff assumed "the objective political responsibility" by also resigning. Absolving himself, Mitsotakis denied any knowledge of the hacking of Androulakis' phone.

This claim cannot be accepted. One of the first interventions Mitsotakis made after assuming power in July 2019 was to bring EYP under the remit of the prime minister's office. EYP was previously part of the Ministry of Civil Protection. It is not credible that Mitsotakis would not have been aware that a prominent politician, who shortly afterwards became leader of Greece's third largest party, was being spied on.

Government sources cited by conservative daily *Kathimerini* and by a news report on *Alpha TV* claimed that the wiretapping was carried out at the direct request of the intelligence agencies of Ukraine and Armenia, because Androulakis is a member of European Parliament committee that deals with EU-China trade relations. According to the *Alpha TV* report "there was concern from the two countries that Russia [a key ally of China] was preparing a war and that [by bugging Androulakis] they may have learnt something with regard to this."

It is just as inconceivable that such intelligence gathering was not being carried out at the behest of the major NATO powers, and in particular Washington, which was engaged in the series of provocations that eventually coaxed Russia to invade Ukraine in February 2022.

Greece has been one of the staunchest supporters of NATO's proxy war in Ukraine and was one of the first EU countries to promise arms deliveries, sending mainly rifles and anti-tank missiles. The Greek armed forces are represented in NATO's Rapid Reaction Force (NRF), which was activated after the Russian invasion and deployed to the Eastern flank. Based on the latest figures compiled by NATO, Greece spent 3.7 percent of GDP on its military in 2021 making it the alliance's top spender per capita. This trend is set to continue with the country projected to spend 3.76 percent by the end of this year.

The revelations have caused concern in ruling circles that they have undermined Greece's role as a reliable client state of western imperialism. A recent *New York Times* piece lamented that "Greece's Watergate" had "exposed the rank surveillance beneath the glittering surface" of Mitsotakis' "Greece 2.0" project, which had only recently succeeded in attracting the likes of Microsoft, Pfizer and JPMorgan Chase to invest in the country.

Even before the revelations about the wiretapping of Androulakis, reports of intrusive state surveillance have been circulating for over a year. In November 2021, an investigative report in *I Efimerida Ton Syntakton (Ef.Syn.)* revealed that EYP is actively engaged in gathering information on journalists, lawyers and activists campaigning for refugee and migrant rights.

In April this year, *Reporters United* revealed that EYP had

been granted approval in June 2020 to hack the phone of journalist Thanassis Koukakis on “national security” grounds. According to the report the surveillance stopped abruptly two months later after Koukakis lodged a complaint with ADAE after repeated technical issues with his phone since the spring of 2020 and a subsequent tip-off from a source.

According to *Reporters United*, after ADAE confirmed that the suspected wiretapping had taken place it sought judicial approval at the start of March to ensure that the operational aims of the wiretapping would not be put into jeopardy by informing Koukakis. Just 20 days later after ADAE’s request, a law was fast-tracked through parliament taking away the legal right for citizens under surveillance to be informed of the fact.

A few days prior to the *Reporters United* piece, a separate investigative report by *Inside Story* revealed that Koukakis was informed at the end of March that in addition to being wiretapped his phone had also been successfully infected by the Predator spyware. This was confirmed after he submitted his phone for analysis at the University of Toronto’s Citizen’s Lab.

In a December 2021 report, Citizen’s Lab stated that its Internet scanning for Predator servers across the world found “likely Predator customers in Armenia, Egypt, Greece, Indonesia, Madagascar, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and Serbia.”

Citizen’s Lab confirmed that Predator had been used to hack the phones of an Egyptian television journalist and of Ayman Nour, a political exile living in Turkey.

Predator was developed by North Macedonian start-up Cytrox in 2017 and was subsequently acquired in 2019 by Intellexa a cyber-security company owned by Tal Dillian, a former Israeli commander with Unit 81—the Israeli Army’s secret technology unit. Intellexa is the main commercial rival of the NSO Group, another Israeli-based cyber-security firm which owns the Pegasus spyware, used to spy extensively on journalists and politicians across the globe. According to Dillian’s LinkedIn profile his current location is listed as Greece while Intellexa has a strong corporate presence in the country.

According to *Inside Story*, the implication of Felix Bitzios, Intellexa’s former deputy director in Greece, in the Bank of Piraeus’ violation of capital controls scandal points to the likely motive for the hacking of Koukakis’ phone. Koukakis has written extensively on the affair. Prior to his role with Intellexa, Bitzios was a front man of the Libra Group in Greece, a US-based shipping conglomerate at the centre of the scandal.

The fallout has prompted calls from within the EU parliament for a probe into the spying allegations. Greece’s parliament also voted in favour of setting up a parliamentary inquiry. Probes in such sensitive issues are typically set up in order to pacify public anger and conclude with no real light shone—again under the pretext of “national security.” Earlier this year the European Commission ruled out investigating member states that had used Pegasus to spy on journalists and politicians

stating, “This is really something for the national authorities.”

In the debate prior to the parliamentary inquiry vote Alexis Tsipras, leader of the pseudo-left Syriza—Greece’s main opposition party—stated that Mitsotakis “stands accused of an unprecedented statutory and anti-democratic deviation since the restoration of democracy [after the fall of the junta in 1974].”

While wiretapping has substantially increased under Mitsotakis, with 15,475 wire-tapping requests approved in 2021 according to ADAE, it was under the previous Syriza government that surveillance by EYP really took off. Under Tsipras’ watch the number of approved wire-tapping requests skyrocketed from 4,871 in 2015 when Syriza came to power to 11,680 in 2019 when Mitsotakis took over. Tsipras streamlined the wire-tapping approval process in 2018 by cutting the number of prosecutors required to approve an operation from two to one.

That the ruling elite in Greece is utilising methods of rule closely associated with that of the military dictatorship that ruled as recently as the 1970s must serve as a warning to workers internationally. Writing on the January 6, 2021 fascist coup in the United States, the WWSWS noted in an August 28 perspective that January 6 was not “an outlier in world events. There has been an upsurge of attacks on democracy and shifts towards dictatorship all over the world: in Brazil, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and most recently in Australia, where it has been revealed that in 2021 then-Prime Minister Scott Morrison secretly assumed control of five major ministries to consolidate quasi-dictatorial power in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In Europe, Trump sympathizers are about to take the helm of government in both Italy and Great Britain.”



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