

June 2023

DISINFORMATION LANDSCAPE IN GREECE

EU DISINFO LAB



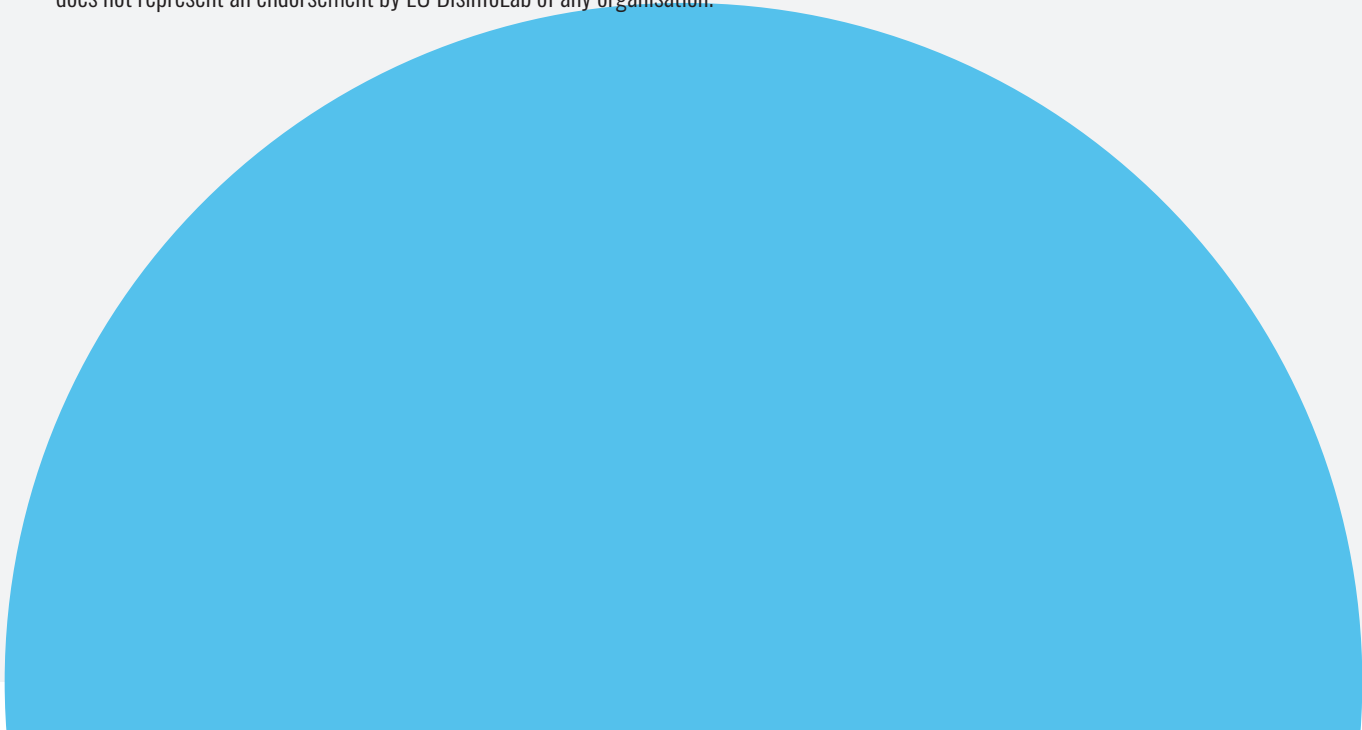
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INTRODUCTION

- Disinformation in Greece is not a fringe phenomenon – fact-checkers routinely flag some of the country’s most popular news websites.
- The tragic train crash of 28 February 2023, the war in Ukraine, and the COVID-19 pandemic are some of the most popular subjects fuelling disinformation.
- The challenge is amplified by endemically [low trust](#) in the media, a shortage of independent media and declining press freedoms, and a decade of harsh austerity, which brought the collapse of advertising revenue and drove media outlets towards ‘clickbait’ business models. The [2023 World Press Freedom Index](#) placed Greece in 107th position, the lowest among any European country, mainly citing the corrosive role of the “eavesdropping scandal”.

EMBLEMATIC CASES

THE WIRETAPPING SCANDAL – “GREEK WATERGATE”

- The [upshot](#) of the ever-growing scandal was that the National Intelligence Service (EYP), which is under the direct control of the Prime Minister, was spying on several journalists, cabinet and senior opposition politicians, and businesspeople, targeting many of them with the Predator spyware.
- In response to the revelation that the leader of the opposition party, PASOK, Nikos Androulakis, had been surveilled by EYP between September and December 2021, Prime Minister Kiriakos Mitsotakis [told](#) a news conference: “Everything was done following the law; it was wrong. I didn’t know about it and would never allow it.”
- Even though the government has repeatedly denied using or purchasing the spyware and denied any relationship with the company behind it, it was revealed in November 2022 that it had [issued](#) export licenses in November 2021 for the spyware to be sold abroad.

COVID-19 AND HOLY COMMUNION

- In the initial phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Greek Orthodox Church maintained that Holy Communion or Eucharist – where worshippers sip wine from the same spoon – “cannot be the cause of the spread of illness”, but instead it could protect and “heal” the sick, and vowed to continue the practice.
- The Church’s position and the debate it sparked were covered widely in the [domestic](#) and [international](#) press. Public health specialist and government advisor Elias Mossialos (and other [academics](#)) [challenged](#) it, warning believers against partaking in the ritual until a vaccine became available.
- This was among a broader set of claims the Church made during the pandemic, which often went against public health guidance regarding COVID-19 vaccines, masks, and social distancing.

THE TEMPI TRAIN TRAGEDY

- In the aftermath of the tragic train crash, which took place in Tempi in February 2023 and claimed the lives of over 50 people, several conspiracy theories began to increase on social media and online outlets.
- Among them was the delusional [claim](#) that the event was not an accident but part of a nefarious Government plan to “cover-up” the supposed steep increase in young people dying after receiving the COVID-19 vaccine.
- Another false claim held that the driver of one of the trains (the commercial train) was not in the collision but remained in hiding, even though his [funeral](#) was held on 7 March 2023.
- Fact-checkers promptly [debunked](#) both conspiracy theories.

THE MATI FIRE TRAGEDY

- In the aftermath of the tragic fire of 2018 in Mati that claimed over 100 lives, Kyriakos Velopoulos, the head of the right-wing party Greek Solution, contended that the fire was part of a “plan” to clear the area for the new Silk Road, a reference to China’s overseas Belt & Road programme.
- This clearly false conspiracy theory was [debunked](#).

NARRATIVES

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

- The pandemic is still at the centre of much of the disinformation circulating in Greece, even though public health concerns and measures around COVID-19 have eased.
- Much of the disinformation targets the COVID-19 vaccines, questioning their scientific basis – their safety effectiveness, and the speed at which they were introduced – with those claims spiking in the context of compulsory vaccination being rolled out for specific groups.
- Other claims have been far more conspiratorial, suggesting that COVID-19 was part of a plan to reduce the world population.
- As with other countries, COVID-19 scepticism has been seized on by various political parties and voices, especially on the fringes, mobilising their base.

WAR IN UKRAINE

- While the Greek government has strongly supported NATO and EU efforts to support Ukraine since Russia's February 2022 invasion, various narratives are circulating and seeking to undermine this position.
- Among them is the deceptive narrative that Ukraine is a Nazi country and that those Nazi elements have been persecuting the Greek expats community in Ukraine.
- Another narrative has sought to question whether Greece has the luxury of financially supporting Ukraine – and welcoming refugees – at a time when it should be prioritising its citizens after a decade of harsh austerity.

ENERGY CRISIS

- Some are arguing that Greece would be better off if it sided with Russia, which they claim would be a way to secure energy independence and offer a solution to the energy crisis.
- They add that this is something that Greece had attempted historically through prospective gas-pipe deals that were silently “sabotaged” or [undermined](#) by the US, which, they say, is now profiteering from selling “far more expensive” liquefied natural gas to Greece.
- While only a few fringe political voices have embraced an openly pro-Russia position, some have been misleadingly [claiming](#) that Western sanctions and Europe, rather than Russia, are responsible for the fallout of the energy crisis.

ANTI-MIGRANT RHETORIC

- While the migrant crisis has substantially eased in recent years, several anti-immigrant narratives continue to proliferate.
- Many of them have racist undertones, including the narrative expressed by the Greek far-right, which portrayed refugees from Ukraine as “true refugees” and distinguished them from those from the Middle East and Africa, described as lesser, unworthy, and needy.
- Islamophobia is also a part of many of these narratives: this included the [claim](#) that the lockdown was used as a smokescreen to transfer huge numbers of refugees to an area in the North of Greece to create an Islamic community.

COMMUNITY

FACT-CHECKERS

ELLINIKA HOAXES

It is a fact-checking website, part of a not-for-profit organisation, funded mainly by Meta, and a signatory of the International Fact-Checking Network's Code of Principles. [Ellinika Hoaxes](#) is a member of the EU SOMA Observatory and the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO). It debunks hoaxes, conspiracy theories, and false stories and alerts people to scams.

FACT-CHECK BY MEDDMO

[MedDMO](#) is the Mediterranean hub of the European Digital Media Observatory, a consortium of fact-checkers, media, and academics who take on online disinformation in Greece, Cyprus, and Malta.

GREECE FACT-CHECKER

Fact-checking website founded in 2017 and run by experts formerly associated with Ellinika Hoaxes. According to its website, it is independent and non-partisan and often republishes fact-checks by [Fact-check Cyprus](#).

MEDIAWATCH.IO

Part of Civic Information Office, an Athens-based non-profit, [MediaWatch](#) is a platform that monitors online media outlets to identify bad actors and networks of propaganda using AI and helping journalists, researchers, and fact-checkers.

MEDIA OUTLETS AND INITIATIVES

REPORTERS UNITED

A [network](#) of independent investigative reporters that helped uncover Greece's recent wiretapping scandal, described as Greece's "Watergate", and collaborate on cross-border investigations. It was chosen to join the International Centre for Investigative Journalism in 2021.

INSIDE STORY

This is an independent investigative media [outlet](#), which relies on subscriptions, not ads, and has broken many important stories. Inside Story has won grant funding from the COVID-19 Support Fund and participates in the Journalism Trust Initiative (JTI).

SOLOMON

An independent investigative [outlet](#) that has contributed to reporting around a range of key issues, including migration and "illegal pushbacks", the environment, accountability, and food systems.

FIMERIDA TON SYNTOKTON (NEWSPAPER OF EDITORS)

It is an independent [newspaper](#) that broke the first report on the abovementioned wiretapping scandal.

ONLINE PLATFORMS

VOUTLIWATCH

An independent non-profit founded in 2014, it is a leading civil society [initiative](#) that enables citizens to monitor and evaluate parliamentary proceedings and publicly address questions to MPs and MEPs. It also collects data and produces parliamentary briefings.

EKPIZO.GR

A nonprofit “consumers union” that protects the rights of consumers, providing information, consumer studies, surveys, as well as legal advice, through an online portal.

OECD MIS/DIS RESOURCE HUB

Greece is among the countries that compose the steering group for the [OECD’s DIS / MIS Resource Hub](#), which is a country-led initiative to address mis- and disinformation and facilitates dialogue and information-sharing around the subject through annual or bi-annual stakeholder meetings.

POLICY

LAW AGAINST “FAKE NEWS” AND THE “ETHICS COMMITTEE”

- In November 2021, Greek Parliament approved a [law](#) (Article 36, 4855/2021, replacing Article 191) that, in effect, criminalises the spread of “fake news” that is “capable of causing concern or fear to the public or undermining public confidence in the national economy, the country’s defense capacity or public health”.
- Several human rights campaigners and civil rights groups have [warned](#) it could have a chilling effect on press freedoms, and the amendment to the criminal code was eventually [repealed](#).
- Parliament ratified a [law](#) in December 2022 to form a Special Committee charged with overseeing the compliance of online media to “journalistic ethics”. Noncompliant media can lose state advertising funds – a crucial source of revenue for media in Greece - for up to two years.

WHISTLEBLOWERS

- Greece was the eleventh EU country to [adopt](#) the EU Whistleblower Protection Directive and transpose it into national law, even though it missed the official deadline of December 2021.
- The law has also drawn criticism from Reporters United, who [argued](#) that the government failed to consult relevant stakeholders, resulting in a “weak law”.

SLAPPS

- SLAPPS (Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation) have become increasingly commonplace in Greece and attracted the concern of several international and domestic journalist groups and unions, including the European Centre for Press & Media Freedom (ECPMF), the International Press Institute (IPI) and Reporters Without Borders (RSF), and the European Parliament.
- SLAPPS have been brought and threatened in many instances by both multinational companies and politicians against investigative journalists including Thanasis Koukakis, a journalist who the Predator spyware had [targeted](#).

This project is funded by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom.



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FOUNDATION For Freedom.