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Greece on Fire: A Country under attack by Tourist-Developer Cartels

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Unscrupulous Greek land developers have been blamed in the past for setting fires. As there is no land registry in Greece, there is no legal proof that a burnt area was once forest land and therefore improper for construction.

However, according to Nikos Bokaris, head of the Panhellenic Union of Forestry Experts, " it is unlikely that land development was an incentive behind the arson. The afflicted areas are not prime targets for construction". Why? "These are mountain areas where land is not that valuable."

The coincidence of the fire with the Ionian road is not a proof, yet it is disturbing. Whatever is the reader's opinion, this article throws light on the financial interests in Greece and the power of multinational firms.

R.C.

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In the last week of August of 2007, Greece underwent the most enormous catastrophe in her history since the restoration of Parliamentary Democracy in 1974. Western and Southern Peloponnese, the heart of both ancient and modern Greece, as well as other places like Athens' suburbs and Evia Island, have been totally destroyed by wildfires. 65 people have been killed (among them was a mother with her four young children), several more are missing, numerous villages have been wiped off the map and millions of acres of forest or agricultural land have been converted into ashes.

Apart from the loss of human lives, the destruction wrought by the arsonists will have far reaching effects that will surface in due time. The devastation of forests will result in an overall rise of temperature, floods in the winter, corrosion of the ground and landslides. Furthermore, the razed areas will be affected economically by a tremendous rise of unemployment, a huge emigration of their native population to Athens or other big cities, while the whole of Greece will face an overall decline in agricultural output, since those areas were key producers of vegetables, fruits and, most importantly, olive oil.

Undoubtedly, a major crime has been committed. A crime, however, that is not spontaneous, but premeditated. The 290 different centers of fires that broke out in Peloponnese definitely point to arson.

In order to locate the arsonists, one has to look at the strong financial interests which have been pressuring for the "development" of the destroyed areas for several years up to now.

The Ionian Road

The construction of a national highway in Peloponnese under the name Ionian Road - specifically the south part of Ionian Road, as Ionian Road is extended in Central and Northern Greece too connecting her four major cities, Korinthos, Patra, Pirgos, and Kalamata, was conceived as an idea in 1996, but it was postponed mainly due to the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens which absorbed most of the state's resources. The new right-wing government of Nea Dimokratia promised in 2004 to start building the highway soon. At last, its construction was auctioned in July of 2007 to the native and multinational construction companies Vinci El.Techodomiki, TEV, Aktor, J&P Avax, Hochtief and Athina, and it was supposed to start right away, with the prospect of being completed in 2011 [1].

The Ionian Road would secure road access to the enormous tourist facilities that were being built in Western Peloponnese, and those that were still being planned at the time. The completion of the Ionian Road ought obviously not to take more than the required time; therefore, its construction shouldn't be interrupted by "aggravating" forests, biotopes and ecosystems as well as environmental and community activists. The Nea Dimokratia MP for the Elea region of Western Peloponnese, G. Kontogiannis, had stated clearly, as early as 2004: "The political leadership of the Ministry of Public Works believes that the Ionian Road has to proceed rapidly so as to make up for the delays of the last few years" [2].

Ionian Road was originally scheduled to cross over places of high environmental significance, such as Lake Kaiafa in Zaharo area, which had been included in the Natura 2000 European catalogue. As the chairman of Zaharo's Environmental Protection League, Mr. Agrapidas said in July, "The combination of ground and lacustrine ecosystems as well as their co-existence with antiquities, mythological places and the thermal fountain renders Lake Kaiafa ecosystem a unique cluster that has been declared an archaeological site and a landscape of special natural beauty". The prefectorial council of Elea, in which the aforementioned area falls under, refused to cede Lake Kaiafa for the construction of Ionian Road, despite the strong pressure by the Ministry of Public Works. According to Mr. Agrapidas's claims, there was an alternative route for the highway, not crossing the area; nevertheless it might have been longer and of higher cost [3]. At last, the Ministry succumbed to the demands of the locals and decided on the 24th of July to divert Ionian Road towards another direction, far away from the lake, so that its fragile ecosystem would not be harmed[[Statement of Public Works Minister, Mr Yeorgios Souflias, on the signing of the contract re the North-West Road of the Peloponnese, 24/7/07](#)].

However, a mere month later, the area around Lake Kaiafa was burned to the ground. The constructors of the highway will now face little resistance in their exploitation of the devastated area.

Strangely enough, the centers of most of the fires that broke out there coincide perfectly with the original plan for the Ionian Road! Compare the NASA satellite photograph of the Peloponnese burning to the Ionian Road plan.

Part 2 - Other interests in Western Peloponnese

Lake Kaiafa had also attracted the attention of other benevolent investors and developers. In 2003, the former Deputy Minister of Economics D. Georgakopoulos of the former government of the "socialist" PASOK, was charged with pressuring the Domanial Service of Elea, the region that he was elected in, to declassify Lake Kaiafa as a protected territory in order for it to be granted to big tourist corporations for the development of hotel complexes and golf courses. He had also presented a relevant report according to which an investment of 150 million euros would be made on Lake Kaiafa for the "modernization" of spas and other facilities of the area [4], referring to the ecologists who protested against the plans as "ecoterrorists" [5]. Now that the beautiful biotope around the lake has been burnt up, the "investors" and their political agents won't need to counter any bureaucratic barrier or "ecoterrorism" in order to declassify it.

Apart from Lake Kaiafa, many other places in Western Peloponnese through which the Ionian Road will pass, are also considered to be "ideal" for the development of tourist businesses. For instance, in the Messinia region in the South-West of Peloponnese more than one billion euros are going to be invested in 11 big hotel blocks of 5 stars, luxurious summerhouses, sea therapy and spa facilities, a seasonal center as well as 4 huge golf courses. The major investor in this area seems to be a notorious Greek ship-owner, V. Konstantakopoulos, who runs Costamare Shipping SA, based in Panama, but strong international entrepreneurial groups seem to operate alongside him; Kempinski multinational corporation which is mostly active in South-Eastern Asia is going to exploit the sea therapy and spa facilities and a famous American company has undertaken the exploitation of the golf courses [6]. Konstantakopoulos has appropriated enormous areas of agricultural land with olive trees, some times without the consent of their owners, as well as land in areas alongside the Navarino lagoon (also protected by NATURA 2000) openly defying the law. The few "bureaucratic" problems considering the permissions of Archeological and Forest Service that had remained were overcome after his visit to the presidential palace and his meeting with the Prime Minister K. Karamanlis, in 2005. He also secured 45% subsidization by the state for his investments! [7] And now, that much of the Messinia district has been consumed by the wildfires, he definitely feels even luckier as he can extend his business to the devastated area expropriating the land he needs in depreciated prices.

Another place in Western Peloponnese that is considered by the "investors" to be a bargain is Katakolo in Elea district. In late August, the famous international business association World Trade Center Group sent their representative, David H. Lee, to Katakolo and ratified an agreement with state officials for the "development" of the area [8] .

The region around ancient Olympia has also been the subject of potential exploitation. Many domestic and foreign "investors" have proposed deploying the surrounding area by building modern stadiums, hotels and other facilities and even use this place for organizing the Olympic Games [9]! One of the reasons that they were not permitted to implement their plan was that this surrounding area was forestland. After the fire though, there is no more forest surrounding Olympia so that barrier is no longer present.

Most people in Greece know that Western Peloponnese has the most magnificent coasts and beaches in the whole country. Nevertheless, her people were very traditional and closely linked to their land and property and with the agricultural sector of the area being particularly strong, they had never desired to exploit their region in a tourists-industry fashion. The tourist "investors" had good knowledge of this fact and in order to successfully exploit the area, they first needed to preemptively destroy any popular resistance to their plans and they couldn't care less if tens of people there died in flames. As for the people who survived, most of them will move to Athens to seek a job, while the few remaining there, will apparently work as waiters or security guards to the huge hotel block that will spring soon. The investors seem to have achieved what they had intended.

The Germans' special role

Mountain Taygetos and Parnonas in Central and Southern Peloponnese respectively, were also burned. It was common knowledge among those local societies that powerful German interest group desired avidly to transform the mountains into ski resorts and chalets. The Germans again had been interested in exploiting Mountain Grammos in Northern Greece, which was partially burned this summer in July. German capital has also been active in Western Peloponnese and Evia buying enormous pieces of land, either as private investors or under the cover of offshore companies. Not surprisingly, one of the contractors participating in the construction of Ionian Road in Peloponnese, Hochtief, is German and interestingly enough it is owned by Kaitel, the son of the homonymic notorious Nazi general. It seems that while German imperialism failed to occupy Greece in World War II having been beaten and humiliated by her strong resistance movement, it succeeds in 2007 without military invasion, just with some fires and the help of their modern collaborators; not the security battalions, but the regional and central bureaucrats ruling the Greek state. Yet, the similarly crucial role of British and American interests should not be ignored. Having almost fully "occupied" Corfu and Crete Island with their hotels and golf courses, they coveted Peloponnese as well, buying huge swathes of

land to be used for tourist developments. Indeed, they are very loyal to their colonialist traditions of 1944 when the British bombed Athens and killed 40.000 civilians in order to crash the resistance movement, which had achieved to liberate Greece before they came in, and of 1967, when the U.S. imposed a seven-year fascist dictatorship, which totally destroyed the country.

The Golf Lobby

One of the strongest blocks of interests, if not the strongest, which desire the "resortisation", so to speak, of the Greek coasts are the prospective constructors of golf courses. The huge level of environmental destruction that the construction of golf courses will lead to, such as waste of water, use of enormous quantities of artificial fertilizers and disruption of the nearby ecosystems doesn't seem to concern the Greek government which does everything possible to grant large areas in the countryside to golf investors. The Minister of Public Works, G. Souflias, claimed in May of 2007 that "considering the golf issue there are many deficiencies, as Greece has just 6 golf courses whereas France has more than 500, Italy more than 200, Spain more than 300 and Portugal 36". Moreover, another high-rank officer of the ruling party, the Deputy Minister of Economics, P. Doukas, is at the same time the president of the Greek Golf Association, and had publicly declared in 2005 that even more golf courses are necessary. It should be noted however that the main opposition party, PASOK, before the elections of 2004, had promoted the support and the expansion of the golf industry in Greece, and after the elections, which it lost, it hasn't been opposed to golf policy of the Nea Dimokratia government at all 1 [\[10\]](#).

As expected, all the environmental studies and reports that warn about the destruction that golf courses will cause have been deliberately ignored. "Who passes by those studies in favor of tourist development?" wanders Mrs. E. Mpriasouli, professor in the Department of Geography in the Aegean University. "They think that this way they are going to get the hotels full of people. 70% of global tourism is manipulated by a single organization (i.e. Global Tourist Organization). They promote the golfer cluster and they blackmail us to accept this model. The same happened with the pools. [...] This model of tourism concerns the foreigners who stay and do everything inside the tourist facility. They don't go outside of it, they don't consume any domestic products, and of course everything is produced and constructed by big companies" [\[11\]](#).

Western Peloponnese's long coastline was ideal for the golf industry to construct several golf courses. By 2005, the International Golf Association was very optimistic that in 2006 and 2007 there would be a very big golf "boom" [\[12\]](#). However, so far the locals and the environmentalists struggled hard against this prospect. Now that there is no environmental value in the devastated areas, that "boom" will face little resistance. In confirmation of that, the aforementioned Deputy Minister of Economics, who is renowned in Greece for his cynicism, appeared on national TV two days after the disaster, and he attempted to soothe the pain of the people living in the disaster areas by promising that a development plan, considering tourism and especially golf courses, will start being implemented there right away! Of course, the sold out Greek Mass Media, both public and private, branded the plan as a great benefaction.

Government's and main opposition's complicity

The government of Nea Dimokratia, which has been ruling from March 2004, has devoted itself in the tourist development of the countryside and coasts in order to increase the annual influx of tourists. "There are one million Europeans who are interested in buying a summerhouse in Greece" was one of the main arguments of government officials, who used to refer to tourism as Greece's heavy industry! [\[13\]](#) Thus, the Ministries of Civil Works and Tourism put up a plan of tourist "development", under the name of New Zoning Framework for Tourism, which blatantly offered land and water to the tourist cartels.

According to the abovementioned framework, an "investor" can buy land everywhere, and simply by naming the

investment as a "tourist" one, get a big subsidization and build four times more than a privateer, as long as they sell the 70% of the houses to privateers and run the rest 30% as a hotel. They have also the right to build in environmentally protected areas or skerries provided they name them "tourist"! This situation is aggravated by the inexistence of a National Cadastral Register, which would at least classify some forestlands or biotopes as such and might prevent them from being built [14].

However, for this plan to be successful an overall reconsideration of zoning in the country needed to take place, that is to say, permissions for appropriating forestland should be awarded. Therefore, in early 2007, the government tabled a constitutional amendment according to which, article 24, stating that construction in forestland is strictly forbidden, would be practically abolished. The official opposition, PASOK strongly condemned the amendment and blocked the ratification of it by withdrawing from the voting - the funny thing is that, in 2003, when PASOK was in power, it tried to pass an identical amendment, but Nea Dimokratia, then the official opposition, refused to support it. Although, finally, article 24 was not abolished, the prospective arsonists were encouraged to hasten their plans, and consequently, in the summer of 2007, Greece suffered the greatest number of wildfires in her modern history.

Furthermore, the Sub-Ministry of Environment, which happens to fall under the Ministry of Public Works and is responsible for using the state funds provided to the latter for the protection of the forests and biotopes, did very little on this. Most of the, already few, resources for environmental protection were transferred back to the Ministry of Public Works in order to support works already under way, using the ridiculous excuse that the Sub-Ministry of Environment was unable to spend it all [15].

Another way in which the government is responsible for the holocaust is that it caused the collapse of the Fire Brigade. The Ministry of Public Order, under whose jurisdiction the Fire Brigade falls, hadn't recruited the required number of firemen, preferring instead to hire thousands of policemen! In addition to this, the virulently right wing Minister of Public Order, V. Polidoras, transferred incompetent officers, who were eventually proven to be completely incapable to combat the numerous wildfires, to key positions simply because they were members of the ruling party [16].

The tourist-developer cartels soon realized the incapacity of the Fire Brigade and the insufficient measures for the protection of the forests, and therefore, aided by the high temperatures and the strong winds in this area, obviously decided it was a very convenient time for them to put their plan into action.

The scapegoats

When the first fires in the Peloponnese broke out, everybody thought it would be the ordinary land developers who casually burn pieces of forestland every year in order to build on them. Yet, when several new fires broke out which, unprecedentedly, burned whole villages to the ground, killing tens of people, the public started suspecting an organized plot by strong native entrepreneurs or even multinational companies. Greece was apparently under attack, and since the fire brigade and their political chiefs in the Ministry of Public Order were proved to be totally incapable to put down the fires, the government tried to spin the mayhem unleashed by global capital and its domestic lackeys to its own advantage.

Two days after the first fires, the Prime Minister, following the advice of his image-makers, appeared on National Television wearing an ordinary jacket, like George Bush did right after September 11th, and stated that Greece faces an asymmetric threat. Nevertheless, he obviously didn't name those actually responsible for the fires, whose identities he most definitely knows. On the contrary, his colleagues in the government secretly or even openly blamed anarchists and political extremists for the arsons claiming that "they want to destabilize democracy";!

The mass media which support the government invented new imaginary enemies like the Turks, the Albanians or even PASOK, blaming them for the wildfires! PASOK, of course, condemned these scenarios as conspiracy theories, but on the other hand, it just put the blame on the government accusing it of incompetence. It is more than obvious that PASOK knew that the arsonists were the tourist-industry cartels, but it didn't want to stand up to them, as, when in government, it was (and will be) tightly intertwined with them.

The police and its dependent secret services, all of them being famous on a world scale for their incompetence and stupidity, but very effective at beating up defenceless immigrants and protestors, did their best to find the perpetrators of the terrible crime. The result was the arrest of an old woman in Zaharo for causing the fire by negligence while she was cooking in her backyard, an Albanian immigrant who was misleadingly presented as the one having put some fires in order to take revenge from his Greeks employers for mistreating him, and a 62 year old pensioner arrested in Aeropoli of Lakonia who was a former member of PASOK and was forced to admit that he was one of the arsonists [17]. Yet, in this case the police needn't have necessarily acted as stupidly as always; the mission surely assigned to them by the government was to cover up the actual arsonists.

Conclusion

As days pass and more evidence comes to the surface, it becomes more and more obvious that the instigators of this recent destruction in Greece are the multinational tourist-sector cartels. Nevertheless, the implementation of that arson attack was not something that ordinary arsonists (usually foreigners hired by petty developers) could have done; on the contrary, it required perfect organization, planning and coordination. Thus, the perpetrators of it are definitely the cartels' instruments, that is to say foreign secret services.

It is widely accepted that tourist cartels of Western Europe and America with the collaboration of their Greek business representatives, and the tolerance of the corrupted local politicians, have been trying to convert Greece into a huge tourist resort for well-off Europeans and Americans and her people into waiters. For decades, the E.U. has been using economic violence, forbidding Greece to subsidize her own industry and agricultural production or to impose import duties to their products while the U.S. have been blackmailing her to buy their weapons exploiting and inflaming the tension between her and neighbouring Turkey (also a great customer of the U.S. weapon industry), in a manner reminiscent of Italian mafia "protection". However, this kind of violence didn't bring swift results and they decided to resort to physical violence, like the one that they regularly exert in their colonies.

So far, the Euro-American cartels seem to have achieved their target to devastate a big part of Greece. But her people have not said their last word yet. They will definitely claim their land back.

[1] [Corinth, Patra, Pirgos, Motorway to be ready by summer 2011 GoWest.Gr.24/7/07](#)

[2] [ND will end PASOK's fiasco over the Ionian motorway, Indymedia Athens, 27/8/07](#)

[3] The road can be moved, the lake, not quite, Kathimerini, 08/07/2007.

[4] Kayafa healing springs; investors needed, Rizospastis, 15/4/2003.

[5] 18- hole crime, Golf construction hysteria in Greece, Eleutherotypia, 3/4/2005

[6] [Tourism for Global Capital, Aristera!](#)

[7] 18 holes in a forest, Apigianias: Development or Destruction? Eleftherotypia, 1/5/2005

[8] Meeting of Sp. Spyridonas with International Entrepreneurial Delegation. Press release, 21/08/2005.

[9] Olympia is Reborn, Kathimerini, 6/8/05.

[10] 8- hole crime, Golf construction hysteria in Greece, Eleftherotypia, 3/4/2005.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Their country? Sold. *Eleftherotypia*, 17/6/2007.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Hypocrisy - Environment and Public Works Ministry tried to cut back 30 million euros on "protected areas". *Eleftherotypia*, 21/7/2007.

[16] From Karamanlis's promises to Souflias's palpitations, *Eleftherotypia*, 28/7/07.

[17] [Questions over 62 y.os arrest in Aeropoli for arson. In.gr. 30/8/07](#)