

## **Interview to Mr Tsiliopoulos**

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The wildfires in north-east Attica resulted in dozens of homes being burnt and thousands of hectares of forest land reduced to ashes. The impact of the fires will not by any means stop there as there will be long-standing consequences on the environment and the micro-climate in Attica too.

On the line to discuss the environmental disaster at hand is Chemical engineer, ecologist and member of the ND party, Liana Gouta.

Good morning Ms Gouta and thank you for joining us.

Good morning Mr Tsiliopoulos and thank you for the invitation, although on a very sad occasion, a real catastrophe!...

1. Gusty winds have played a huge part in spreading the wildfires and firefighters have put up a heroic battle against the blazing flames, however, there is an overwhelming sense that the state should have been more prepared to face such situations. Would you say that authorities have adequate fire-fighting strategies in light of this catastrophe?

Mr Tsiliopoulos,

I will speak as a person working in heavy industry for years, and more specifically as responsible for mapping out the Emergency Plans in case of an industrial accident such as fire, explosion etc. So, what I know from this experience is that while the incident is ongoing, one should focus on incident's confrontation. The investigation on what went wrong should start immediately afterwards. Therefore, we should be very careful in extracting conclusions while the incident is still expanding (evolving).

There is no doubt that the conditions were severe and even the available firefighting equipment, such as airplanes and helicopters were sometimes useless due to gusty winds as you said. Furthermore, we had 65 starting fire points, and let us not forget that the main fire started at night. Under these extreme conditions no fire equipment could be enough.

As for the fire fighting plans that you asked... Of course there are such plans. But the main question is whether these plans are properly updated, whether the adequate equipment and personnel is available the critical moment, whether there is proper coordination of all the Authorities involved as well as training of volunteers, information of all citizens in areas close to forests and whether these plans are regularly checked and improved through drills! These are questions to be answered.

And apart from the operational extinguishing capability we should also focus on Prevention, which is even more important, taking into account all the changes we face during those last decades in forests, concerning their use and exploitation, the management of dangerous forest material, their effective supervision etc.

2. When the fires have been completely extinguished, what would you expect to be done in order to restore the environmental balance in the fire struck areas and how feasible is this?

This is another crucial chapter. We should do everything in compensating for the catastrophe. First of all we should strictly keep the letter of the law that requires that "Forest remains Forest"! No deviation from that! We should strictly avoid the change of land use, which is the biggest motive behind most fires in Greece and which, from what we can see, was never strictly kept!

Then we should cooperate with scientists in order to regenerate forest. This has not only to do with planting trees, but as we may know with urgent earthworks as well, in order to avoid erosion and severe flooding during winter time. Since method is critical in order to avoid further catastrophe, all this has to be done under excellent scientific coordination and advice.

3. Many put these latest fires down to a well-organised plan aimed at appropriating choice tracts of land in the wider region of eastern Attica (KKE Sec. Gen. Aleka Papariga voiced this view yesterday). Do you share this opinion?

This is not a new guess or new evidence in this discussion. Unfortunately it is well known that most of the fires are due to arsons, deliberate or even unintentional. As I was reading in a WWF report, only 5% of the fires are due to natural reasons, while 95% to human factor. Half of the fires in Greece, those latest years, are due to arsons and among them, half start deliberately. Therefore we should realize and abolish the incentive behind those criminal actions, which in most cases is change of land use and building in forest areas.

4. What can be done in order to prevent building on forest land which in itself adds incentives to those who burn such land in order to profit from it?

First of all we should strictly apply the existing laws, not only concerning the restriction of land use change but also concerning the exemplary punishment of such actions! Furthermore we should better organise forest land management through forest maps and real estate registry (cadastral maps), which are indispensable tools in forest protection against land grabbing! In the era of informational systems, in the era of 'google mapping', there is really no excuse for lack of archiving and registration in order to protect our natural wealth.

5. But there is this law that allows the change of land use. Maybe this should be abolished completely...

Yes, there are some points that certainly have to be ameliorated and we should be very careful on that. And we also have to face the problem of not keeping the letter of the law in many cases as well...

Well, thank you very much Ms Gouta, your opinion is always well respected. Thank you.