

In Greece, smoking is alive and kicking despite bans

May 13 2019, by Marina Rafenberg



Greece banned smoking in indoor public places and introduced stiff fines in 2009 but in practice the law is rarely enforced

When George Balafoutis returned home from New York two years ago, he was shocked to see what little impact nearly a decade of anti-smoking

laws had made on stubbing out Greece's favourite guilty pleasure.

It was then that Balafoutis, now 38, decided to build a website dedicated to informing non-smokers where they could enjoy a meal or coffee unmarred by other patrons' [cigarette smoke](#).

"After so many medical studies on (the harmful effects of) passive [smoking](#), it's unacceptable for smokers to keep on ignoring the health of pregnant women and children," he told AFP.

Balafoutis' website, akapnos.gr, currently lists more than 400 smoke-free establishments but he acknowledges that the movement has yet to gather steam.

"Restaurant and club owners are afraid of losing smoking customers, and politicians are afraid of losing votes," fumed the cybersecurity architect who came back to work in Greece because he missed his homeland, family and friends.

And with Greece headed for local elections on May 26, officials are unlikely to press the point, he conceded.

In 2009, Greece banned smoking in indoor public places, instituted stiff fines and created a complaints hotline.

However, in practice, the law is still rarely enforced.



Nikos Louvros, an Athens bar owner and proponent of smokers' rights, provides ashtrays at his Booze Cooperativa venue where customers can puff away at ease

'Should have the choice'

Nikos Louvros, an Athens bar owner and proponent of smokers' rights, proudly provides ashtrays on the tables of his Booze Cooperativa venue, where customers can puff away at ease.

"It makes sense not to smoke in a hospital but when you're having fun, you should have the choice of going somewhere where you can smoke," he said.

Louvros even founded a smokers' political party in the wake of the 2009

legal clampdown, so strongly did he feel about people's right to smoke.

In Greece, 72 percent of licensed establishments are restaurants that allow smoking, the highest figure in the European Union, according to a 2017 Eurobarometer study.

Some 37 percent of Greeks smoke, compared to an EU average of 26 percent, it found.

'I'll quit when I choose'

Earlier this year, the issue sparked a row when European health commissioner Vytenis Andriukaitis reacted with disdain to a 2016 photo of Greek junior health minister Pavlos Polakis smoking inside the ministry.



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"It's shameful! This guy knows nothing about health," Greek daily Kathimerini quoted Andriukaitis as saying.

Polakis, a veteran surgeon, scornfully replied on Facebook: "I'll quit when I choose to... ok "guy"???".

Anti-smoking laws in Greece date back to the mid-19th century. An 1856 royal decree issued by the country's first post-independence monarch, king Otto of Bavaria, forbade the use of pipes and cigarettes in public offices and shops.

The 2009 anti-smoking law carries a fine of 50-500 euros (\$56-\$560) for an individual, and 500-1,000 euros for the establishment where the infraction occurred.

"In the end, we will join the ranks of civilised nations... what are we, the idiots of Europe?" then health minister Dimitris Avramopoulos—now EU migration commissioner—said, at the time the law was tightened.

Few people are reported to the police, however.

When the economic crisis hit Greece a year later, few could argue with [business owners](#) complaining that their livelihood depended on placating a paying majority of smoking patrons.

Even today, "most owners prefer to risk it and flout the law," admits

Yiorgos Kavvathas, head of the GSEVEE confederation of small enterprises.



Adverts depicting tobacco products have been blacklisted since 2005, a ban upheld by Greece's top administrative court last week

Flouting the law

Local council initiatives to discourage smoking remain few and far between, prompting the mayor of Greece's second largest city, Thessaloniki, Yannis Boutaris—another chain smoker—to protest in March: "We are the only country in the world where laws are not respected because that's just how we feel like."

Authorities have had more success in eliminating [tobacco products](#) from public view.

Adverts have been blacklisted since 2005, a ban upheld by Greece's top administrative court last week.

But Kavvathas argued that there ought to be more public messages on the [harmful effects](#) of tobacco, including school campaigns.

In the meantime, smokers like Maria Triantafyllou, 36, are undeterred.

"When I go out with friends to a cafe or bar, I spend some hours there and for me, that's time spent smoking.

"It's a habit that I would find hard to give up if the anti-tobacco law was really respected," she said.

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