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Profile in Public Integrity: The Honorable Georgios Kaminis

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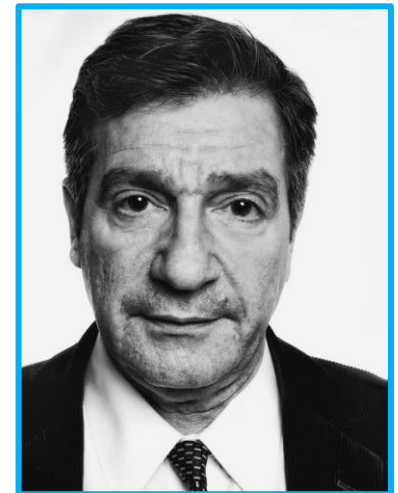
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Profiles in Public Integrity: The Honorable Georgios Kaminis Mayor of Athens, Greece

Born in New York City, Georgios Kaminis holds a degree in law from the University of Athens School of Law, as well as a Diplome d'etudes approfondies and Doctorat d'Etat en Droit. He served as Assistant Greek Ombudsman, responsible for Human Rights, from 1998 to 2003. In May of 2003, Kaminis became the Greek Ombudsman after being unanimously elected at a Presidents of Parliament roundtable meeting.

Kaminis was elected Mayor of Athens on November 14, 2010. Under the Mayor's guidance, Athens was awarded a Bloomberg Philanthropies Mayor's Challenge Innovation Prize for its online citizen engagement platform, SynAthina.

He is a member of organizations including the Association of Greek Constitutionalists and the Hellenic Political Science Association. Apart from Athens, he has also lived in Osaka, Paris, Madrid, and Heidelberg. Kaminis speaks Greek, English, Spanish, French, and German.



You were the Greek Ombudsman for years before you were elected Mayor of Athens. How did this position inform your view of Athens's most important challenges? How has your understanding of these issues helped you move forward with your reform agenda?

The main function of the office of Ombudsman is to mediate between citizens and the national and municipal administrations. However, in the course of mediation efforts it was not uncommon for citizens to claim corruption among the public servants handling their cases. My office did not have the authority to investigate these allegations and I was legally required to refer them to the Inspector General's office if they had a shred of credibility - but they helped me understand how perplexing procedures and a lack of transparency and external controls could conceal or even invite corruption. I also realized that citizen distrust of public officials was much higher than I had anticipated.

Thus, when I took office, I knew that transparency would be our major weapon against corruption, more potent than any set of intra-agency controls could be, even in the hands of persons with unquestionable integrity. One of my first official acts was to require that all building permits be posted on the city's official website. This was soon extended to include licenses for bars and restaurants, including license to play music after-hours and to occupy public space with outdoor tables. Then, I insisted that all municipal registries and records be digitized and integrated, so that all actions, petitions, and documents left a traceable electronic mark. This drastically reduced the possibilities for city employees to meddle with information.

Potential for corruption also factored into my administration's changes to the city government's organizational chart. It was very important to clarify the powers of the various administrative units within city government and to identify which unit had authority for which issue. Clarity in the city's organization and ordinances would better define the duties of every single employee and would leave little leeway for arbitrary discretion. This made potential corrupt practices easier to recognize.

Greece as a whole has faced a serious financial crisis for a few years now. Has this impacted the way you've approached your plans for anti-corruption reforms?

The current functioning of Greece's political system has an obvious correlation with the state of our economy. The spoils system, which is a form of corruption, largely defined the operations of the public sector in Greece. Most public-sector hires were made with campaign promises in mind, rather than the public interest. Politicians would resort to all sorts of technicalities to bypass procedures in place to make hiring practices objective. The spoils system also extended to the award of public contracts, where quid-pro-quo arrangements (including kickbacks) were more apparent. So, the overall role of the State and the public sector, including local government, formed to accommodate corrupt interests. Thus, the skills and qualifications of Athens's public-sector workforce largely did not match the City's needs and public works programs were not always useful to Athenians.

Most important, however, was a feeling of complete disregard for taxpayers' money. Every interest group laid a claim to it: union members seeking unnecessary overtime payment; municipal council members (in both government and opposition) seeking more hires and special projects for their constituents; artists with real or not-so-real projects seeking subsidies; to name but a few.

The City's financial means were very limited, compared to those available to previous administrations. We also had the burden of servicing large, preexisting loans. However, some instances required large expenditures and we secured a commitment from the State to allocate European Union funds to infrastructure projects in Athens managed by a municipal corporation. In these cases we made the procurement procedures as open and transparent as possible. We consulted the public with respect to procurement specifications, to ensure specifications were not tailored to favor specific firms. Our main hiring procedures—curtailed by an overall hiring freeze imposed by the national government—were also open. Independent committees would assess candidates' formal qualifications and interview them in public. Even other candidates could attend.

Our online budget-monitoring allowed users to watch the actual implementation of the municipal budget in real time on a line-by-line basis. Beyond the importance of citizens knowing how their money is managed, the platform imposed self-restraint on the administration itself, since any discrepancy could and, most probably would, be spotted.

You've implemented an impressive and comprehensive online database updated in real time so that citizens can see the actions and expenditures of the Athens government and an award-winning platform to connect Athenians to their government to make complaints and participate in civic affairs. What is your next project to promote public integrity?

We are organizing some of the data already available online to be more easily searchable. For example, we are trying to create a digital map of Athens containing information on the licensing of bars and restaurants and on building permits. In its final form, anyone will be able to click on a spot on the map and the corresponding license and building permit will appear. When this project is finished, anyone, with a tablet or a smartphone, will be able to check a bar or restaurant's license to serve liquor, play music after-hours, etc.

Another project we're working on is a telephone hotline for corruption allegations, so that allegations no longer have to go through the Mayor's office. We are trying to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of the complaint while preventing frivolous allegations. I must mention that we were very impressed with the hotline established by Mexico City, presented at CAPI's Global Cities conference. Moreover, Bloomberg Associates are providing us with significant technical assistance in this area, among others, for which we are thankful.

You recently participated in CAPI's Global Cities: Joining Forces Against Corruption conference, meeting with 13 other city delegations from around the world to discuss corruption challenges and successes. Did you learn anything that will be of use as you continue to tackle these problems in Athens?

The successful anti-corruption practices presented in the conference often involved the increased participation of non-government actors, especially civil society, made possible or improved by the use of digital technology. Digital technology can make government-related information easily available to everyone in a way that cannot be retroactively altered for corrupt purposes. In the past, corrupt officials had exclusive access to information and could hide, manipulate, alter, or destroy it. When government actions are open, corruption is easier to spot and to challenge.

The task for political leaders is evident: involve outside actors, give them access to information, show them their participation will make a difference, and spotlight the results of this participation to attract broader participation. The delegations shared a commitment to openness and transparency and the conference featured innovative, outside-the-box ways to achieve these goals. The conference emboldened me to seek solutions within the framework of the law but outside conventional methods. For all this I am thankful to the Center for the Advancement of Public Integrity.