



The Law Society of
Upper Canada

Barreau
du Haut-Canada

January 23, 2017

Mr. Panos Skourletis
Minister of Interior
27 Stadiou Street
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Greece

Office of the Treasurer

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Dear Minister:

Re: Harassment of Lawyer Electra Koutra

I write on behalf of the Law Society of Upper Canada* to voice our grave concern over the harassment of lawyer Electra Koutra. When serious issues of apparent injustice to lawyers and the judiciary come to our attention, we speak out.

Electra Koutra is a human rights lawyer who has experienced harassment as a result of her advocacy on behalf of several Syrian refugees.

It is our understanding that on September 27, 2016, several Syrian refugees between the ages of 13 and 16 were on their way to a cultural centre to take part in a theatrical performance about their lives in Syria when they were intercepted by police and taken into custody on suspicion that they were members of an armed group.

Electra Koutra represented the children and their parents as they attempted to report the incident and file a complaint. When precluded from doing so, she posted a statement on her Facebook page, disclosing that the children had been ill-treated by the police and that their attempt to lodge a complaint had been blocked. The Facebook post went viral and culminated in an order for a criminal pre-investigation into the incident.

Shortly thereafter, Electra Koutra experienced several acts of harassment. She and a colleague were served a court summons in which they were listed as “suspects” in the said case. When they demanded access to the case file, a right granted under Greek law to “suspects”, the summons was re-issued with Electra Koutra and her colleague

described as “witnesses”. One day later, two men in civilian clothes – later identified as police officers – broke into her apartment. Electra Koutra reported the incident and requested that the Head of Prosecutors remove her home address from the case file in order to protect her family. Her request was denied. Instead, her request for family protection was added to the case file, resulting in her address being even more publicly available. Additionally, an internal document leaked to the press indicated that the police were increasing security measures to avoid a strike against the police itself in response to Electra Koutra’s report concerning the break-in into her home.

It is also our understanding that Electra Koutra has already been the subject of police harassment once before. According to the World Organisation Against Torture, she was detained in a police cell for 20 minutes after demanding access to a transgender client in 2013. The police station at which she had been detained refused to file her complaint and she was forced to file it at another station. In 2015, the Prosecutor closed the case, concluding that Electra Koutra had willingly locked herself in the cell. The police officer named in Electra Koutra’s complaint lodged a civil action against her for 80,000 euros alleging defamation.

The Law Society of Upper Canada urges the government of Greece to comply with Greece’s obligations under international human rights laws, including the United Nations’ *Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers*.

Article 16 of the *Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers* states:

Governments shall ensure that lawyers (a) are able to perform all of their professional functions without intimidation, hindrance, harassment or improper interference; (b) are able to travel and to consult with their clients freely both within their own country and abroad; and (c) shall not suffer, or be threatened with, prosecution or administrative, economics or other sanctions for any action taken in accordance with recognized professional duties, standards and ethics.

Article 17 states:

Where the security of lawyers is threatened as a result of discharging their functions, they shall be adequately safeguarded by the authorities.

Article 18 states:

Lawyers shall not be identified with their clients or their clients' causes as a result of discharging their functions.

The Law Society urges the government of Greece to:

- a. put an end to all acts of harassment against Electra Koutra;
- b. guarantee in all circumstances the physical and psychological integrity of Electra Koutra; and
- c. ensure in all circumstances respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms in accordance with international human rights standards and international instruments.

Yours truly,

Paul B. Schabas
Treasurer

**The Law Society of Upper Canada is the governing body for more than 50,000 lawyers and 8,000 paralegals in the province of Ontario, Canada. The Treasurer is the head of the Law Society. The mandate of the Law Society is to govern the legal*

profession in the public interest by upholding the independence, integrity and honour of the legal profession for the purpose of advancing the cause of justice and the rule of law.

Copies:

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David F. Sutherland, Chair, Lawyers' Rights Watch Canada

Yves Berthelot, President, Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders

Michel Forst, Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

Gabriela Knaul, Special Rapporteur of the Human Council on the independence of judges and lawyers, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

Marina Brilman, International Human Rights Adviser, The Law Society of England and Wales