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Beware Big Tobacco bearing gifts: tobacco industry corporate social responsibility activities in Greece

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The World Health Organization recommends that parties of the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) should “denormalize and, to the extent possible, regulate activities described as “socially responsible” by the tobacco industry, including but not limited to activities described as “Corporate Social Responsibility” (CSR) [1]. However, governments continue to accept and endorse CSR activities led by tobacco companies, a trend that has intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic [2]. This report highlights recent CSR activities by Papastratos, the Greek subsidiary of Philip Morris International (PMI)[3].

During the pandemic Papastratos has been involved in various activities described by the company as CSR, which have given the company a platform to promote its activities and speak directly to the Greek government. The company’s largest initiative focused on supporting small retail businesses in collaboration with the Greek government [4]. To this direction Papastratos has committed 10 million Euros and collaborated with technology companies to provide discounts and offers for small retail businesses [5]. In a shared press conference in September 2020, the Greek Minister of Development and Investment praised Papastratos for the “exemplary behaviour of corporate social responsibility”, calling other firms to follow [4]. Papastratos also reportedly donated 50 ventilators and more than 250,000 masks to public hospitals (April 2020) [6], an approach that seems to be part of a broader tobacco industry strategy of donating money and medical equipment to improve its image during the pandemic in multiple countries [2]. These donations received global media coverage, including critical articles that labelled the donations a ‘publicity stunt’ [7], a claim that PMI rejected [8]. During the early stages of the pandemic, Papastratos announced that 237 of its employees volunteered in a local government program to provide help to people that cannot or should not leave their houses [9]. The company received public praise by elected officials, including the Minister of Health [6] and the Chair of the organisation representing all Greek Municipalities [9].

Such activities follow a pattern of increased presence of Papastratos in public life and government affairs in an effort to achieve more favourable regulatory environment for its

products [10]. Papastratos has donated equipment to the Hellenic Coast Guard ('to combat trade of illicit cigarettes') as part of PMI's IMPACT initiative [11, 12] as well as 20 fire engines (reported cost of 1 million Euros). The current Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis represented the Greek government in the ceremony for the donation of fire engines, and explicitly thanked Papastratos for their "useful donation" [13, 14].

These recent interactions with government officials follow a series of high-level meetings between Papastratos and the Greek government over the past decade. For instance, when PMI extended its storehouse in Western Greece in 2013, the Greek Prime Minister at the time Antonis Samaras invited the CEO of Papastratos to his formal residence, where he thanked the company for this decision and their support to the Greek economy [15]. In 2018, the then Prime Minister, Alexis Tsipras, visited the renovated factory of Papastratos, where he praised the company's decision to invest 300 million Euros in the recovering Greek economy [16, 17]. Numerous other elected officials, including the -former- President of the Hellenic Republic have attended Papastratos' events [18].

PMI seems to maintain a direct line of communication with government officials at the highest levels, including the three most recent Prime Ministers of the country. Although there is no evidence that this communication has had a direct influence on governmental policies, there is no doubt that Greece has not made enough progress in implementing tobacco control policies in the past decade [19, 20]. Despite the rhetoric for a 'smoke-free world' PMI still sells 3.6 billion cigarettes in Greece annually [21] and controls roughly one third of the local tobacco market [21] which is estimated to kill more than 26,000 people and cost billions of Euros every year [22]. The story of the Trojan horse is well embedded in the Greek culture. However, Greek political parties and stakeholders consistently fail to recognise that donations and collaborations proposed by the tobacco industry serve the same purpose as the mythical gift offered to the people of Troy. Tobacco companies are using their marketing and financial power to influence governments and societies and stymie tobacco control policies that would damage their profits and save millions of lives. Like in many other

countries, Greek stakeholders seem to have low awareness of these intentions and of the relevant WHO guidance, thus offering tobacco industry a platform to promote its agenda.

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The authors declare no competing interests.

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