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Greece: policing racist violence in the 'fenceless vineyard'

By Georgios A. Antonopoulos

Abstract: Drawing on interviews with Greek detectives carried out by the author in 2002, the Greek police's attitudes towards migrant communities and racist violence are surveyed. Not only are migrant communities, particularly the Albanian, viewed as hotbeds of crime but racist violence against these communities is not viewed as a significant problem by the Greek police, who are usually indifferent to racially motivated crimes and often view racist incidents as acts of self-defence by Greeks against the criminal 'other'. A transformation of such attitudes would require a public recognition of the widespread racism that exists in Greek society.

Keywords: Albanian migrants, criminality, immigration, stereotyping, victimisation

Since the transformation of Greece at the beginning of the 1990s into a country where immigration outstrips emigration, there has been a heated debate among politicians, academics, the public and the media, on the phenomenon of migration in Greece, which, in turn, has influenced the perceptions, opinions and actions of individuals, institutions and the state. The notions of ethnicity and migration have come to be intertwined with several other social issues and migration has been

identified as an evil in Greek society, presenting a range of problems and dangers. The relationship between migrants in Greece and specific types of crime has become particularly prominent. The image of the migrant offender, or criminal 'other', has been consolidated and is now deeply embedded in Greek social consciousness.

At the same time, there has been relatively little interest in the racist victimisation (or even other kinds of criminal victimisation) of migrants and other minorities in Greece. Since no official data on racist violence in Greece has been published, it is impossible to cite statistics on the number of racist crimes in the country.¹ But, contrary to what the police usually argue, there have been a large number of racist incidents since the early 1990s. Examples include:

- In October 1999, Pantelis Kazakos, a 25-year-old former security guard, killed two migrants, an Iraqi Kurd and a Georgian, and wounded five African and Asian migrants, who were left permanently disabled. When questioned on his motives, he replied that he simply did not like foreigners.²
- In March 2000, a number of police officers got on a bus in Athens, shouting, 'Albanians out now'. The police officers swore at the Albanian migrants, pushed them violently and demanded that they all get off the bus.
- In March 2000, in the prefecture of Ilia, a 70-year-old farmer shot and seriously injured a 26-year-old Romanian migrant because he thought he was trying to steal his animals.³
- On 23 November 2000, a 57-year-old man in the village of Galatista in northern Greece killed two young Albanian migrants. The Albanian migrants were shot in the back while they were running and were also shot in the head at close range. The residents of the village commented that the perpetrator had always been fearful of Albanians.⁴
- In October 2003, an Albanian schoolboy, whose outstanding marks earned him the distinction of carrying the Greek flag on a holiday parade, surrendered the honour after a hate campaign led by his classmates and their parents, who were angry that an immigrant was to bear the national colours.⁵
- In November 2003, two Pakistanis were injured during a racist rampage by a motorcycle gang in Piraeus. A group of about twenty youths attacked a video rental shop, punching and abusing the owner and damaging property, before attacking another Pakistani at a nearby bus stop.⁶
- In 2004, a Roma settlement in Aspropyrgos, on the north-western outskirts of Athens, was attacked by dozens of Greeks armed with axes, sticks and knives.⁷

- After a football match between Albania and Greece in Tirana in 2004 (which ended with Albania winning 2-1), Greeks in various towns and cities organised themselves into gangs to carry out beatings of Albanians whom they found celebrating, while the police did not intervene. One Albanian migrant was left dead on the island of Zakynthos and more than fifty were injured.⁸
- In January 2006, following a fight between Greek and Albanian youths outside a club in Rethymno on the island of Crete, a 17-year-old Albanian was stabbed seventeen times and killed, after seven attackers, including two brothers and their father, entered his home. The victim was not thought to have participated in the earlier fight. Later on the same day, a number of Albanian migrants holding candles demonstrated against racism in Rethymno town centre. Local police officers commented that relations between Greeks and Albanians in the town were 'harmonious' and that 'the incident was isolated'.⁹

Police racism

Furthermore, a number of police officers are themselves responsible for victimising migrants and minorities in their daily activities. Amnesty International has documented several cases that highlight police attitudes towards Albanian migrants, who are increasingly subjected to 'fishing expeditions' for illegal immigrants. In one incident, a 16-year-old Albanian, who was picked up by Athens police in February 2001 during a search for illegal immigrants, was rushed to hospital with a ruptured spleen. Police returned to the hospital after a week to rearrest him, only for him to be taken back to hospital ten days later. In a second documented incident, a Lesbos police officer was accused of using torture on an Albanian migrant with legal status.¹⁰ In December 2004, police officers allegedly raided a house in Athens where around fifty Afghans lived, hounded them into one room and carried out beatings. One 17-year-old boy was reportedly taken to a police station where he was undressed and a gun was pressed to his temple as officers threatened to kill him.¹¹

There have also been a number of cases of deaths involving police officers. In April 2002, a police officer was given a two-year suspended sentence for shooting dead a Roma man in 1996 and, in July of the same year, a police officer was indicted for the manslaughter of an Albanian immigrant in November 2001.¹² Another officer was charged with the murder of Marinos Christopoulos, a 21-year-old Romani man, who was killed after an incident with police in October 2001 in Zefyri.¹³

In addition to these kinds of incidents, the police frequently adopt racist attitudes towards migrants and carry out a number of offensive

practices. These are especially common during operations ostensibly aimed at tackling illegal immigration, which often result in the confiscation of personal legal documents, such as passports, and the destruction (for no apparent reason) of residence and employment documents, such as the *prasini karta* (green card).

The international 'war on terror' has brought another dimension to state racism in Greece. Following the July 2005 terrorist attack in London, UK security services appear to have requested an investigation by their Athens counterparts into a potential Greek connection. As a result, the Greek authorities carried out a massive sweep of migrants in Greece, with 1,000 law enforcement units, including state security, immigration and counter-terrorism officers questioning 5,432 individuals. In a separate incident, twenty-eight Pakistani men were abducted by plain-clothes Greek security agents and driven to secret houses where they were interrogated and subjected to abuse and ill-treatment for between two to six days before being released. British intelligence agents are thought to have been present during the interrogations.¹⁴

Police perceptions of migrants

Behind these practices lies a perception that particular migrant and minority groups are intrinsically criminal. In 2002, I carried out interviews with a number of detectives in Greece on their views of the relationship between migrants and crime. In general, the detectives did not consider migration to be a positive phenomenon for Greek society; it was rather seen as a 'huge problem' that is getting worse. Most of the detectives referred to migration as a 'plague' or a source of irritation, threatening Greece and the rest of the West. Migration to Greece was seen as the cause of a number of other problems – criminality, insecurity and unemployment – deeply affecting Greek life. As one detective commented:

Migration has harmed Greece to a very large extent. Migrants have made us fearful of sleeping in our yards and balconies in the summer, as we used to do before. Everyone lives in fear now. Foreigners take jobs from the Greeks. Greece has become a 'fenceless vineyard', in which anyone can enter whenever they want and the results are evident. They made us install alarms in our houses and sleep with a gun under the pillow. I do not think that migrants are a good thing for Greece.¹⁵

Apart from criminality, insecurity and unemployment, detectives also claimed that migration was causing an imbalance between Greeks and migrants in some sectors of the economy, such as agriculture and construction, and also spoke of their thwarting increases in the wages

of Greek unskilled workers, whose monthly wages, they said, had remained the same over the previous ten years. The migrants also pose, according to the detectives, national security problems.

The Albanians and the Romanians, two of the largest groups of migrants in the country according to the most recent national census in 2001, are almost entirely viewed negatively. The Albanians, in particular (apart from their being recognised by detectives as 'hard-working'), were considered as 'dangerous', 'criminals', 'thieves', 'murderers', 'rapists' and so on, perceptions reminiscent of the British police's view of the black community during the 1970s. In contrast to their perception of other migrant groups, Albanians were viewed by detectives as inherently criminal and violent. The detectives' perceptions of Albanian migrants were saturated with phrases such as 'thieves by birth', 'cold-blooded', 'killers by instinct' and 'born criminals'. Among other migrant groups, criminals were thought to make up a small segment but, in the case of Albanians, detectives believed that the majority were criminals. Similar attitudes have existed among British police forces with regard to black communities and Lea argues that these kinds of attitudes indicate an assumed link between race and criminality:

While the police may be quite precise about what sub-groups of the white population they regard as being involved in particular types of crime, they may be far less precise in the case of the blacks, seeing them involved in crime as a racial group.¹⁶

It is also worth noting that Albanians have become the reference point for measuring the dangerousness of other groups of migrants, such as Poles.

Albanian migrants are also seen as the embodiment of ungratefulness and untrustworthiness:

When I was serving in Messinia, people used to look after the Albanians, to provide work, food and shelter. In the police station, there were two Albanians in custody and we used to buy bread for them and cans of meat, with money from our pockets. Some time after their deportation, they came back and raped the priest's wife and daughter.¹⁷

Another theme that surfaces in the detectives' view of Albanians is their physical strength. This perception appears to have its origins in the failure of the authorities to apprehend undocumented migrants in the rough, mountainous border country between Greece and Albania. The difficulty that the army (and, after 1998, the border guards) had in preventing these border crossings was explained away with the stereotype of the 'Albanian superhuman', an image, however, that is closer to an animal than to a human being.¹⁸ For example:

One day, when I was going home after work, I came across two young Albanians who looked suspicious. I called them and they came up close to me. When I asked them whether they had papers they started running and, although I chased them for a few metres, they disappeared. Have you ever seen an Albanian running?¹⁹

Policing racist violence

I also asked detectives how they perceived the issue of racist violence, which proved to be a particularly difficult question for them. At first, some detectives mentioned that they had taken a class on the topic while at the police academy or that they had participated in seminars on racism and xenophobia. Others referred to well-known examples of racist violence in other countries or mentioned orders given by the Greek Ministry of Public Order which aimed at safeguarding the rights of foreigners (but only inside police stations). Perhaps these initial responses were the detectives' way of gaining some time to think through how to answer the question more thoroughly. When they did so, a large number responded in exactly the same way, for example:

There is no such thing as racist violence in Greece. There are, of course, incidents but these are very few.²⁰

The Greeks have never been racist. The Greeks are hospitable people and they have never had any problems with foreigners.²¹

The implication of this second comment, of course, is that racism can only be directed at foreigners, whereas Greek citizens, such as the Roma, also experience a great deal of racism. Generally, the detectives' view that Greece has never been a racist country was backed up by statements that 'there is no Le Pen' in Greece. Having made this point on the absence of racism, subsequent comments made by the detectives fell into three categories:

- *Having no interest in the nature or motives of racist violence.* Some detectives suggested that, as organisations, police forces are not really concerned with the background of violent acts and whether or not they are racially motivated. They were only concerned with the act of violence itself. In a sense, this was also a way of denying that racial incidents have a racial motivation:

There is no such thing as racist violence for the police. As long as there is violence this is something we should look at.²²

This mentality has existed in other contexts, too: in the past, police forces in Britain have been similarly reluctant to accept the possibility of incidents having a racist motivation.²³

- *Viewing racist violence as an act of self-defence.* A significant number of detectives provided an array of examples in which terrified Greek citizens carried out acts of extreme violence, such as beatings, shootings or even killings of migrants, in order to defend themselves from the criminal 'other':

There are some examples of violence directed towards migrants and especially against the Albanians, who were the first to cause problems to the locals, who wanted to defend their personal integrity and belongings. In 90 per cent of the cases, if not in 100 per cent, there is the case of self-defence.²⁴

Thus, not only were detectives unwilling to view racist violence as an important issue but they also emphasised how serious a problem migrant criminality is in Greece. In a similar way, the British police in the 1980s not only rejected the view that racist violence was a serious social problem but also emphasised intra-racial victimisation, thus focusing again on the criminality of minority ethnic groups.²⁵

- *Viewing incidents of violence by migrants against Greeks as racially motivated.* One detective suggested that the difference in the quality of life between Greeks and migrants may lead to a situation in which the migrants, 'driven by jealousy', would become violent towards Greeks.

Conclusion

Racist violence is not viewed as a significant problem by the Greek police, who either are not interested in the racial background of some violent crimes or view them as acts of self-defence or regard them as negligible compared to the anti-Greek violence of supposedly jealous migrants. The perception of police officers that racist violence is a non-existent problem is based, in part, on their negative interactions with migrant communities, as well as on the racist views that they have of migrants anyway. The migrant-criminal stereotype, which is not based on empirical research, is so persistent that it blinds police officers to the racist (and criminal) victimisation of migrants. But this is only one part of the Greek racism-nexus, in which the media, politicians and, of course, the public have also engaged. In spite of the fact that there is no Greek politician with the appeal and electoral support of Jean-Marie Le Pen in France, racist discourse nevertheless permeates the whole social sphere. It is not surprising that the second report for the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia identified Greece as the nation most resistant to multiculturalism in the European Union.²⁶ There is a lot of work to be done in Greece in tackling racism, not least in bringing the issue onto the

policy agenda. In responding to these issues, Greece appears to be at the same stage that some other European countries were at thirty years ago and, perhaps, should now look at how other countries, with a greater experience of these issues, have dealt with them. Among the first steps that should be taken is the public recognition that Greece, like other countries, suffers from racism, both overt and latent.

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