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Greece: Between Racism and Respect for Multiculturalism

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ANGELIKI MITROPOULOU, MAY 24 2011

On May 10th a sad news flash was announced, the cold blooded murder of a Greek citizen in the center of Athens. He was on his way to the hospital to support his wife who was in labour, when he was murdered for his camera and 120 Euros. The two men that were eventually caught by the police claimed that they were looking for a victim to steal from, and that it was a matter of survival. They are illegal immigrants with a very strong survival instinct, and no regret at all for what they have done. I do not only mean the murder, which itself was the cruelest action of all. This action opened a "Pandora's box" for Greek society and the "who to blame" game begun once more.

All Greeks have to understand, before it is too late, that from now on we have to co-exist and live together with immigrants, illegal or not (but mostly the former). Therefore, this new reality has raised important questions regarding acceptance or marginalization, legalization, multiculturalism, and national security, or even sovereignty. After the murder, many immigrants were turned into scapegoats and became the victims of cruelty and violence. The majority of Greek citizens, and the media, were against this form of protest over the situation regarding immigrants. They seem to have a positive attitude towards immigrants that have earned their lives fairly, and who have not caused any problems. However, numbers demonstrate that especially regarding Athens (which is the capital of Greece), where the gravity of the issue is intense, 85% of the citizens that live downtown claim they have been victims of violence, and 70% have filed formal complaints about being violently treated.[1]

The Greek Government has conceded the chance to declare more and stricter measures to try to control the large incoming flows of illegal immigrants, and to manage them, confirming the need for both proactive and reactive policies. The most controversial of all seems to be the construction of a huge fence that would prevent the illegal crossing of borders in the region near the Evros River. These are the only land borders with Turkey which could eventually be controlled more easily than the sea ones. Moreover, the project includes the construction of 14 establishments where immigrants could be held for short or long periods of time under proper health and safety conditions. In addition, the gravity of the situation can be understood by the numbers regarding the petitions for asylum, which were filed after 10th January 2011. There are more than 2,160 completed, and already a large part of them have been rejected, meaning that the immigrants need to return to their country of origin.

When comparing Greece[2] with some other European countries, interesting questions can be raised. It is estimated that there are around 400,000 illegal immigrants in Greece, whereas according to Eurostat there were 791,700 legal immigrants in 2010. This means that it was 7% of the total population, whereas the European wide percentage is 4%. Spain was the only country that surpassed Greece with 7.3%. Moreover, when the statistics regarding permits are reviewed, Greece is once again doing very poorly, but the most striking numbers are those of the UK. Between 2008 and 2009, permits given in the UK were half the total number that was given for all EU countries.

All these arguments, based on various research and data, present only one side of the situation, and do not provide the whole picture. Greek citizens are afraid, and do not pay attention to numbers. The policy makers need to pay attention to them. The majority of Greeks are afraid of foreign individuals, a phenomenon which can be called "xenophobia." This phenomenon, which has been spreading from day to day, makes the measurement of the human component a far more difficult task. The immigrants need to participate through organized representation with the

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committees that make important decisions about them, but basically without them being involved energetically.

Furthermore, it seems that the multicultural model implemented by various countries, though rather unsuccessfully (with the exception of maybe the US), is not enough to change the way things are.[3] Mentality is at the root of the struggle against racism and the better treatment of immigrants, both at an individual and national level. The Greeks must honor their ancient values and ideals, such as hospitality, that they still claim to possess as a nation, and not rely merely on EU institutions for help and guidance. Changing mentalities needs to be cultivated, and if necessary, forced, because immigration will continue to be a part of this evolving reality, made even more severe for Greece given its economic crisis which has already created hard times for Greeks (and all other European states). Sovereignty is definitely in jeopardy. So are ideals. I am not sure the Greeks can do anything for the former, but I am convinced that they can do a lot of things to preserve the latter.

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[1] www.kathimerini.gr / Violence victims 85% of the citizens who live in the center (of Athens) written by Stathis D. Stavropoulos on 22/05/2011

[2] www.enet.gr / "Regularization" through jobs written by Christos Zervas on 22/05/2011

[3] Immigration in Greece of the 21st century (title adjusted from the Greek one) written by Anna Triantafyllidou and Thanos Maroukis , published by Kritiki in May 2010