Racist Violence in Greece

By Adla Shashati

Greek Forum of Migrants
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An assessment of overall trends and patterns

It is commonly accepted by NGO representatives and academics that there is an absence of official and accurate data relating to incidents of racist violence in Greece. However, according to the Hate Crime Survey 2008\(^1\), there is evidence that there are rising levels of racist violence in Greece. Furthermore, in some cases, racist violence incidents are not being reported to or recorded by the police. Sometimes the victims prefer not to report the incident even to their own community or organization.

Despite the lack of data, some patterns and trends can be noted with regard to victims of racial violence in Greece. There are specific groups that are particularly vulnerable to racist violence and crime. These include asylum seekers, refugees, undocumented migrants and migrants. Furthermore, in the past few years there is a clear rise in anti-Semitic violence which can take the form of vandalism, damage to property or hate speech which is most commonly linked to neo-Nazi and extreme right-wing groups. Finally the Muslim and the Roma community in Greece are also targets of racial violence.

Regarding asylum-seekers, refugees, undocumented migrants and migrants, there is a clear rise in racist violence that can be linked to unemployment and the rise of extreme right groups. According to a survey made by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights ‘on average 9.9% of respondents with an immigrant background indicated that they or a member of their immediate family were the victim of hate crime\(^2\). In Greece, NGOs report a rise of racist violence into certain areas of the country, especially in the centre of Athens. Areas of the historic centre of Athens are inhabited, rented or occupied, by undocumented migrants and asylum seekers under precarious or inhumane conditions, while xenophobic public discourse about ‘ghettos’ and criminal migrants is on the rise. According the Greek National Monitoring Center on Racism and Xenophobia ‘the increasing trend of racist violence and Islamophobic incidents has been alarming since the election of a far-right political party in the Parliament in autumn 2007’\(^3\).

The neighborhood of Aghios Panteleimonas in the centre of Athens has faced tensions in the past two years due to a number of racist violence attacks. Fascist groups have been imposing a reign of terror by holding protests and attacking immigrants and refugees that reside in the area. Even the priest of the local Orthodox Church reported to the media that he has received death-threats due to his unwavering support of immigrants. According to the Greek Council for Refugees, who lodged official complains about the alleged violence against immigrants, foreign residents and store owners in Aghios Panteleimonas are being threatened by locals who oppose the ‘growing presence of immigrants in their neighborhood’\(^4\). On 10 June 2010 another migrant was

brutally attacked in the same area\textsuperscript{5}. A 30 year old man from Pakistan was beaten up by three people as he was walking on the main street of the neighborhood. Members of the Movement Deport Racism (Kinima Apelaste to Ratsismo) and members of the Afghan Community reported that they were informed about the incident by Afghan residents of the area and they immediately called an ambulance and the police. During the transportation of the victim to the ambulance 10 people were shouting “take your dirty ‘thing’ and move it”, ‘don’t come here again we will beat you up’ and other verbal attacks. Policemen who were present at the incident did not arrest any of the attackers and did take statements from any eye witnesses. However, they did ask for the names and addresses of the members of the Movement and the Afghan Community\textsuperscript{6}. The events of racist violence that were recorded by NGOs are many and are not only against migrant groups but also against organisations that represent them. To illustrate, in July 2008 the Greek Migrants Forum was a target of a self made explosive bomb attack. Fortunately during the attack only one person was in the building and he was not injured.

The problem of racist violence is getting worse in Greece, particularly towards immigrants, refugees and Greeks who support them. The island of Crete, in the southern part of Greece, is facing a string of racist crimes since 2009. The most recent attack was reported by the Cretan Migrant Forum in February 2010. A young woman, a volunteer teacher in the Cretan Migrant Forum, was attacked by two men who carved swastika symbols on her arm. Representatives from the Cretan Migrant Forum condemned the attack as ‘barbaric and cowardly’\textsuperscript{7} and argued that the woman was attacked because she was giving free Greek lessons to immigrant children.

Racist incidents also occur in other vulnerable groups such as the Romani community. Forced evictions continued to be reported by the local human rights organizations. The EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) conducted research\textsuperscript{8} in which discrimination against the Roma in Greece was rated as the highest in the European Union. 55% stated that they had been victims of discrimination in several public or private services while 69% believed that police use racial profiling in targeting them for arrests. Moreover there are senior Police and Judicial officials who blame the Roma community and immigrants for an overall rise in crimes.

Acts of vandalism are also aimed at Jewish cemeteries and buildings in Greece. Last June, unknown people desecrated the Jewish cemetery in the city of Loannina, in the North-West of the country. In January 2010 on the island of Crete, in the city of Hania, there were two incidents of racist violence against Jews. First an attack in the Etz-Hayyim Synagogue – the only Jewish temple on Crete and then an arson attack in the historic synagogue of Hania. ‘The Hania synagogue was a place for prayer, a museum,
and included a library documenting the history of Crete’s Jews. Around 2,500 books, many of them rare editions, were destroyed in this and the previous attack.\(^9\)

The Muslim community has also faced numerous vandalism attacks. There is no official Mosque for the Muslims to pray to in Athens so some communities rent large buildings in order to perform their religious ceremonies. In May 2008, a dozen or more attackers reportedly broke into a building used as an unofficial mosque by the Pakistani Community in the Rendi area of Athens and beat with sticks Pakistani worshippers and a Greek neighbour who protested. The beatings were reportedly accompanied by verbal abuse and demands that ‘Pakistanis and Muslims get out of Greece’.\(^10\)

All the above mentioned cases are possibly linked to the rise of the far right and the way that their representatives and extreme opinions are projected in the mass media. One such occurrence is the projection of the extreme right political party, LAOS. In almost every TV program that refers to vulnerable social groups such as refugees, asylum-seekers, Roma etc. the representatives of LAOS are very negative towards vulnerable social groups and project this negativity in an extreme manner. Other small political parties with more democratic views are hardly ever presented. Thus these vulnerable groups are continuously presented in a negative light. In addition, the majority of Greeks appear to be xenophobic according to the statistics presented by the Institute of Migration Policy in 2008. 48% of those questioned about the consequences of immigration believe that it is a phenomenon that threatens the Greek national identity and 71% consider it to be the cause of increased criminality.

Consequently the victims of racist attacks are afraid to report them to the authorities. Another reason is that the majority of the Greek police and the army has been accused by NGOs for delays and irregularities when dealing with issues of racist attacks. There are even cases where the perpetrators are persons who serve in the armed forces. During the official National Parade on 25 March divers from the Greek army chanted racist slogans against foreigners in Greece, they said ‘you are born Greek, you cannot become one’ and ‘we will spill some blood you Albanian pig’.\(^11\)

In addition, there is no specific mechanism to register complaints regarding racist and xenophobic incidents perpetrated by the police or other State officials. However, victims may and do submit complaints to the Greek Ombudsman for police brutality. Furthermore, official criminal justice data does not provide any information for racially or religiously motivated crimes, since such data is not regularly collected or analysed. Unfortunately, racism in Greece is a harsh reality and is a problem that is rising fast with a need for a clear and dynamic solution.


Typical case study

During the last two years the most common cases of racist violence reported to the Greek Forum of Migrants were assaults and other physical attacks. Most of the victims that report the attacks are Pakistani nationals. In the summer of 2009, a group of six migrants from Pakistan, aged between 20-35 years old, were sitting on their veranda enjoying their afternoon tea. A group of Greeks aged between 20-30 years old were passing by and when they saw the immigrants they started shouting racist comments, swearing and making rude gestures at them. The immigrants did not react. At midnight the group came back and started to throw stones and bricks at the house. They broke two windows and damaged the front door.

The next day the group came again but the immigrants where ready and with the help of their neighbours they sent them away. The same night the group violently broke into the immigrant’s house. They were holding iron rods and chains and they attacked and injured the immigrants. The Greek neighbours called the police but the group managed to escape before the police arrived. The result of this brutal racist attack was the hospitalization of one of the six Pakistani immigrants for one week because he suffered heavy head trauma. The immigrants reported the attack to the Greek Pakistan Association and the Association reported it to the Greek Forum of Migrants. A volunteer lawyer from the Forum filed a lawsuit at the local police station together with a medical report and photos of the victims. After 10 days the victims were called to the police to identify the offenders from a record of photographs. Unfortunately they could not identify the perpetrators. The case has yet to be solved.

Recommendations

- To provide effective protection and assistance to hate crime victims by actively and efficiently implementing existing anti-racist and anti-discrimination law provisions.
- To refrain from publicly commenting, taking political action or discourse that could further boost and provide fertile ground for dangerous, rapidly escalating xenophobic trends and violence.
- The Greek authorities should act more vigorously to ensure that the perpetrators of racist attacks are punished and adequately combat incitement to racial hatred.
- To organize mandatory trainings to educate judges, prosecutors, judicial employees, prison guards and generally all those involved in the judicial system on the subjects of racism, discrimination and information regarding the international conventions for the protection of human rights. The same should be done in the police force and all those people whose jobs are related to vulnerable social groups.
- To change the legal framework against discrimination by extending its current scope (to include all vulnerable groups for all grounds of discrimination12), and by

12 Since the state is not effectively implementing legal provisions aimed at eliminating racial discrimination and in particular those relating to prosecution and punishment of racially motivated crimes.
guaranteeing the independent character of all equality bodies (which is not the case at present).
Bibliography

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Recording incidents of racist violence

Racist violence, just like any other form of violence is harmful to the victim and has wider implications for society as a whole. In 2005 the Greek State adopted Law 3304/2005 and later amended paragraph 3 of Article 79 of the Criminal Code in 2008 to assist in the combat of racist violence. However there is a clear gap regarding the effective monitoring and recording of racist violence in Greece. Furthermore, the Greek Ombudsman’s 2009 Annual Report noted that the number of complaints made is too low to reflect the reality. Thus when evaluating the situation, one can only rely upon media and NGO reporting. However, data kept by NGOs does not reflect the whole picture. NGOs only tend to keep records of very brutal or violent attacks because they do not have the economic means to keep records of all incidents.

The Greek Forum of Migrants (G.F.M.), a network of 24 Migrant communities and organizations, kept records of complaints from migrants and refugees that resided in Greece from 2005 to 2008. As Mr Moawia Ahmed, coordinator of the G.F.M., states ‘most of the complaints made concerned the issuance of the residence permit. If you asked the person who was making the complaint about racist violence he or she would say that everyone has a story to tell’. From 2009 the G.F.M. does not keep any records of personal complains. Mrs Dimitra Maliou, General Secretary of the G.F.M stated, ‘since we cannot afford to keep complete data, the volunteers keep the description of the case, characteristics of the victims such as sex, age and ethnic origin. The type of incident that is generally reported involves complaints of physical violence, verbal abuse or damage to property’. In some cases, they keep the location of the incident and information regarding the characteristics of the perpetrator. This data was available to the Greek National Co-ordination of ENAR for the Shadow Report, to the Hellenic League for Human Rights and to the Institute of Labor. It is also available for any relevant body or organization that deals with human rights and the fight against racism and xenophobia.

Reviewing incidents of racist violence

As mentioned, due to lack of personnel and economic means the Greek Forum of Migrants does not periodically review the records of incidents of reported racist violence.

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13 Implementation of the principle of equal treatment regardless of race or national origin, religion or other beliefs, disability, age or sexual orientation in 2005.
14 This amendment provides that the commission of an offence motivated by ethnic, racial or religious hatred constitutes an aggravating circumstance.
any more. Up until 2008 there was an annual review that contained a periodic review of racist violence, by the board of representatives of the member organizations of the Greek Forum of Migrants. At the end of the review the General Secretary of the organization was responsible to write a summary report based on the board's review. This report was disseminated to the members of the organization and published on the website of the Greek Forum of Migrants16.

According to Mr Anouar Iqbal, representative of the board responsible for the budget of the Greek Forum of Migrants ‘By the end of 2007 we were not able to ensure appropriate funding for the operation of the office. We used the summary report from the reviews and the annual reports of the organization in order to make claims and proposals for resources. Unfortunately, we failed’.

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