

# The not-so-hospitable Greeks

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*'Behold the sparkle of champagne  
The crime rate's gone – feel free again'  
Dead Kennedys, 'Kill the poor'*

Illegal migration has been a galloping problem for Greece even before the crisis. But the crisis has made the situation truly unsustainable and especially in down-town Athens 'normal' everyday life has become almost impossible in the last few years. Large parts of central Athens have effectively been taken over by groups of illegal immigrants and petty criminals, from pick-pockets and drug users to organised gangs involved in prostitution, robberies, and violent crime. Consistent with its policy attitude to attack the symptom but fail miserably to understand the cause, Greece launched on 4 August a – can't find a better word – pogrom against (legal and) illegal immigrants in Athens. Some 6000 have been summoned so far with over 1500 detained and awaiting deportation.

Tackling social disorder in inner city Athens is a long overdue issue and indeed a key responsibility of the state. But [the events of 4 August](#) (which are continuing and extending geographically) are hardly it. A look at the semantics is enough, I think, to make the case, but I will also touch upon the substance to avoid being accused of reading too much into things.

## Semantics

The operation took place on the anniversary of the installation of a fascist-like dictatorship in the country back in 1936. As with then, on 4 August 2012 Athens got bloated by police units which, admittedly in an untypically peacefully fashion, moved street by street, building by building, seeking to restore "order and social quiescence" – to quote the 1936 dictator. Quite conveniently, this happened to be on the first Saturday of August, on a day when most Athenians (who could afford to do so) were wetting their feet on a nearby beach – presumably, so that neither would they disrupt, nor would they be disrupted by, the operation. And almost incredibly, the operation was coded "[Xenios Zeus](#)", the epithet given to the ancient Greek God – the king of all gods – to symbolise his hospitality to and patronage of foreigners.

If the official who came up with the codename was some ignorant twenty-year-old, one could perhaps see this as a tasteless joke or an unfortunate irony – and excuse the sarcasm. But the Minister of Public Order and Citizens' Protection, Mr Dendias, who allegedly came up with the codename, is not a twenty-year-old... The minister [has defended ferociously the operation and its codename](#), arguing that the latter is simply meant to show how the operation 'restores the human rights of the illegal immigrants'. [I refrain from commenting on how arrogantly patronising the above statement is, even if its assertion was to be true.]

But the semantics of a generalised hunt for immigrants with a 5000-strong police force in down-town Athens suggest otherwise. They suggest that the operation is intended to send a loud message, not only to the illegal immigrants and their 'sympathisers', but also to society at large – and perhaps to voters in particular. A message that announces to everybody that 'Greeks are claiming Greece back' (note that 'Xenios Zeus' is only showing his hospitality to foreigners, as unlawful natives are not covered by the operation) and that the road to 'order and social quiescence' passes through the deportation of 'aliens' – whose human rights will be well respected as long as they are happy to be deported. This is not simply an operation aiming at 'removing illegal immigrants from down-town Athens' (and perhaps trying to disperse them so that they integrate into society more easily). This looks like, sounds like and feels like a zero tolerance policy against the (unproven) 'serious crimes' (allegedly) caused by the (inappropriately

labelled as an) 'invasion of immigrants' which (according to the minister) 'threatens to unravel our [us Greeks – them immigrants] social fabric'.

## Substance

Of course tolerance to crime and antisocial behaviour (by natives or immigrants, legal or illegal) is rarely a good thing: counter-productively, it more often than not nurtures crime; and it does not by itself help address the root causes of illegality. But in the same way 'zero tolerance' anti-migrant policies are often nothing more than a convenient blame-shifting, a pretext for a witch-hunt against those most tragically affected by all sorts of market and government failures – in this particular case, the combined failures of the international world order (which 'produces' illegal immigrants) and [of the Greek state](#) (which maintains their illegality).

Most of the illegal immigrants have fled conditions at home that none of us would wish to experience. They came to a country where they thought they could make a home and start a new life; but they found covert racism, overt discrimination and a weak and disinclined state bureaucracy that used tactics of delay (not issuing work or residence permits, procrastinating with the issue of regularisation) to keep the cohorts of migrants in a legal limbo. Most of them were thus pushed into illegality because – without a legal status – they could not find lawful work. Still, the vast majority of them have not descended into crime; rather, they have become victims of exploitation, often by both natives and other fellow immigrants, invariably working under the worst conditions in the shadow / black economy. [It is through this that some of them eventually become involved in street-level crime; while it is very few, and often in direct collaboration with native outlaws, who are involved professionally in serious or organised crime.]

On the 4<sup>th</sup> of August central Athens got filled up by such people, summoned by police, driven like a herd from one place to another and stuffed in buses to be taken to police stations before being "forwarded" to hastily set-up detention centres. I don't know how many of them were spoken to politely or were offered food and water – in the true spirit of the hospitable God after whom the operation was named. And I don't know how many of those who had the privilege to come across the "Xenios Zeus" will actually be given access to a lawyer, will be allowed to contact their families, or will be provided with the space and conditions afforded to illegal immigrants by the international human rights conventions. [Past experience](#) does not help me here. But perhaps this doesn't matter because, as [the Minister said](#), "Now [the illegal immigrants] will return to their home countries... It's the best thing that could happen to them". **At last!** Thanks to the Ministry of Public Order, the tormented illegal immigrants of Greece will experience the true meaning of [nostos](#), this noble emotion that one of the early 'children of Zeus' – Homer – had so elegantly paid tribute to through his lyrics, hundreds and hundreds of years ago. What can be better than this!

And so, as the law abiding Athenians return home from their short seaside holiday, they will find a city free of illegal immigrants, free from petty crime, an Athens worth living in. The illegal immigrants have been shooed away (I could almost say 'liberated' from their plight) and the city feels nice – and Greek – again. Let's open the champagne bottles then: as the modern lyricist would put it, [jobless thousands have been whisked away; at last we have more room to play!](#)

**Unless**, that is, you are worried about civil liberties, unless you see [criminality as the result of unemployment and social exclusion rather as an innate attribute of migrants](#). Unless you are concerned that the nature of the police operation of 4 August (its scale, its style and indeed its codename) feeds into – and (coincidentally?) [reflects](#) – the rhetoric of the [1936-dictatorship-sympathising](#) "Golden Dawn", the fascist party which the crisis elevated into a political force in Greece. Unless you are worried about the mainstreaming of racism and xenophobia in the country and are concerned that perhaps the 'area-cleansing' operations may extend in the future to other forms of 'social deviance', beyond illegal migration, which can also be associated to the unravelling of 'our' social fabric.

## **Epilogue**

This is not a call for the continuation of the situation with illegal migration in Athens and elsewhere in Greece. I, too, want to see down-town Athens free of crime, free of drugs, free of deprivation and free of fear – although I am not quite sure I would want to see it ‘free’ of immigrants. But I also want to see Athens the capital of a country that treats people – and illegal immigrants ARE people – with dignity and fairness, a country whose state improves the living conditions of all by providing solutions to underlying problems and not by demonising the weakest (themselves victims of state failures in Greece and in their home countries), jumping onto the bandwagon of xenophobia and playing into the semantics of fascism.