POLICY BRIEF

ACCEPT PLURALISM

Rising Intolerance in Greek Political Life

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During the last 20 years, Greece has rapidly transformed from a migrant sending to a migrant receiving country. More than 1.1 million or approximately 10% of the country's 11 million population are immigrants. Since 2007 **flows of irregular migrants and asylum seekers from Asia and Africa via Turkey to Greece have intensified**. The Greek Turkish border has become the main 'gate' to Europe. In addition, since 2009 Greece has been facing an acute **economic crisis** with important consequences for both immigrant and native populations. Unemployment has skyrocketed for either group to more than 20% in 2012. At the same time Greece has had **a malfunctioning asylum system** unable to register let alone process asylum seeking requests of Asian and African immigrants, while its overall **immigration policy (regarding both migration management and migrant integration) leaves a lot to be desired.** These developments have contributed to creating an alarming situation, particularly in the Athens inner city areas.

Problems at the centre of the capital city Athens epitomize this double (economic and migration-related) crisis: while irregular migrants and asylum seekers from Asian and African countries have been finding refuge among co-ethnics in the declining inner city areas, the acute economic crisis has deprived them for the possibility of even informal employment. Unscrupulous home owners rent very old flats to large numbers of destitute and desperate people, further contributing to urban decay. The city centre suffers from an increase in the crime rate (both organized and petty crime) and a generalized sense of insecurity, a situation that extreme right wing groups are exploiting to take the law into their own hands – organizing assaults against immigrants including women and children; holding protest marches with motor bikes, dressed in black and waving neo-nazi symbols; and also offering their services to old people in these areas providing 'protection' from the 'dangerous immigrant criminals' escorting them to cash machines for instance.

The rapid deterioration of the situation during the last two years has led, among other things, to a change in the public discourse. Blaming immigrants for the decay of urban areas, insecurity, rising criminality, unemployment and elevating irregular migration into the foremost 'risk' that Greek society is facing has become part of the mainstream political discourse. This Policy Brief investigates what is defined by different political actors as intolerable, tolerable or acceptable cultural/religious difference and how each actor uses it to draw boundaries between 'insiders' and 'outsiders'. Our main scope is to gain a better understanding of why and when some aspects of difference are rejected. We also provide for key messages for policy makers on how to address the spreading of xenophobic and racist discourse in Greek political life.

Rise of Far Right Parties, Words and Practices

Central to the current situation has been the **unprecedented rise of far right parties in the national public sphere**:

LAOS (*The People's Orthodox Rally*) is an extreme right wing formation that won 5.63% of the vote in 2009 national elections and 7.14% in the elections for the European Parliament. LAOS has participated in the provisional coalition government formed in November 2011 to deal with the crisis; this further legitimised its position in the Greek political system. In the last two elections (May and June 2012) the party has lost most of its voters declining to nearly 1%.

Golden Dawn, is a nationalist far right party whose members have been repeatedly accused of carrying out hate crimes against immigrants, political opponents and ethnic minorities. Golden Dawn, with a clear racist and Nazi political position, operates in 'troubled' urban areas in terms of 'field work' proclaiming to offer security to residents, while violently attacking and terrifying immigrants and refugees. Golden Dawn gained one seat in the Athens municipal council (winning 5.3 % of the local vote) in November 2010 for the first time in its history and gathered nearly 7% of the national vote (in two consecutive national elections on 6 May and 17 June 2012) electing thus 21 members in Parliament (again it is the first time that the party enters Parliament).

It is the first time in post 1974 national history, that the country is experiencing such a **rise and spread of words and actions so overtly and aggressively racist towards immigrants and minorities**. But this abrupt re composition of the extreme right in the country does not stand by itself. Since 2009, there has been a rise of hate speech that goes unaccountable voiced by more or less extremist right wing social and political actors. At the same time, there has never been a conviction for crimes related to racist motivations, while national and international NGOs and institutions have in many cases presented documented cases of racist attacks. A recent unofficial report initiated by the UNHCR branch in Greece has registered some 63 self-reported incidents of racist violent attacks. In 18 of those there were police officers involved as perpetrators. Interestingly also in 18 cases the perpetrators were simple citizens not members of extremist right wing groups.

Far right parties were not represented in the Greek Parliament until 2009 as their electoral power was below the national threshold of 3%.

However, they have been experiencing a spectacular rise as of summer 2009 currently gathering in total approximately 8% of the national vote.

The far right neo-nazi party Golden Dawn has gathered nearly 7% of the national vote in the elections of May and June 2012 winning 21 seats in the 300-strong Greek Parliament.

Evidence & Analysis (Key Findings)

The findings presented here come from two case studies that have marked Greek political life in the last two years: First, the public prayer organised by Muslim organisations in November 2010 on the occasion of the end of the Ramadan in Athens. Second, the racist violent attacks of far right wing supporters against migrants and asylum seekers (all people looking Asian or sub Saharan African basically) that followed the murder of a Greek man by two immigrants in order to steal his video camera in a central Athens neighbourhood.

Case Study I: Public Muslim Prayer, on religious tolerance

The first case analysed refers to the public prayer of Muslim inhabitants of Athens on 18 November 2010 on the occasion of the 'Id festivity (end of Ramadan) before the courtyard of the Athens University and in several squares of Athens. This was organised as a peaceful protest against the fact that Athens is the only European capital that does not yet have a formal mosque operating in the city. Informal prayer-rooms function instead as makeshift mosques in apartments, shops and garages mainly accumulated in the city centre. Taking place without problems, the event was positively endorsed by authorities, political parties and media that tolerated religious diversity as manifested on that day in the city centre. Far right parties and organisations openly objected the event.

How much religious diversity can be tolerated or accepted in the public space?

This November 2010 event of public prayer provoked a public debate, the first on the issue to acquire visibility at the national level and raised the question of how much (religious) tolerance can be manifested in public and accepted in Greece nowadays.

Case Study II: Racist Violence, on ethnic intolerance

The second case study concentrates on a tragic event that took place in May 2011, when a 44-year old man was assassinated by unknown people, believed to be irregular migrants in the centre of Athens. This murder triggered a series of violent and racist attacks against migrants in the city centre and to the death of a 21 year old man from Bangladesh. Such racist attacks were led by far right wing organizations, such as the Golden Dawn, and were tolerated by both the police and part of the residents of the area. While all parties and media condemned those violent events, however, they linked the uncontrolled situation and rise of criminality in the city centre with the influx of migrants.

How much racist speech and actions can be tolerated in political life?

These incidents produced a polarised political discourse that raised the issue of intolerance towards migrants in Greece. At the same time, these events raised the issue of toleration of racist words and acts in national public sphere.

Why focus on these events?

The above events have generated discussions and conflicts in national politics regarding migrants and the limits of their presence in public. While excluding the immigrant 'Other' is nothing new in Greek society, what is new is how this is played out in a time of crisis. The migration issue has become an important political issue during the last years and recent political developments have brought aggressive anti-immigrant discourse and actions centre-stage in Greek politics. The concepts and practices of tolerance and intolerance are re-defined under the current double (economic and migration-related) crisis.

What people think about these events?

All the people interviewed for this research accept liberal values, such as the concept of tolerance, and condemn racism as unacceptable citizenship behaviour. However, they adopt two competing positions concerning the events under question:

> 1) *Tolerance of Religious Diversity/*
>   *Intolerance of Racist Words and Actions*
> 2) *Intolerance of Religious Diversity-Islamophobia/*
>   *Tolerance of Racist Words and Actions*

How people justify such opposite positions?

But how people departing from the same realities and similar liberal values end up holding opposite positions or even defending illiberal values? In order to understand that, we analyze not what people think, but how they understand and label situations and activities. In other words, we explore what kind of interpretations they use to (re) construct events and organize their experiences and how they frame their arguments so as to justify different policy suggestions.

Frames of Interpretation

The frames people interviewed use, then, to make sense of the world around them are the following:

1) Political/ Ideological Framing of the problems by reference to tolerance (if not acceptance) of diversity and rejection of racism. Racism is an important problem as it constructs differences between nationals and non nationals, even if all people are equal. This 'tolerant' position is framed as a choice made by citizens on how they want to live their lives and how they wish the world around them to be.

> *Why is there a rise in xenophobia? Well, now, we enter into the domain of ideology, how we want our world to be, how we want to construct it...* (interview with an architect working in the city centre, December 2011)

2) **Cultural/ Identity framing** that classifies all problems according to the dichotomy between 'us', the nationals, and 'them', the others. National cultural identity is a natural reality that organizes public life and relationships among people. **Tolerance is accepted only in theory**, since in practice diversity is seen as a problem and **racism is a mere symptom of the problem of migration**.

> *There is an over-accumulation of migrants, the environment is purely multicultural... local residents, thus, reacted. And one could of course justify their reaction* (Interview with Police Officer, November 2011)

3) **Law and Order framing:** public life is interpreted as a matter of public order that needs to be re-established (as it is disturbed by immigrants).

4) **Anti-establishment framing**: Critique of all people in power: attributes social problems to all stakeholders irrespectively of political identity or ideological position

The above frames are used to develop competing positions. In each case, **they presuppose different understandings of what is the problem, who is the victim and what are the possible solutions.**

For instance, people defending an *intolerant position* towards diversity use the law and order frame **so as to transform racism into self defense action and, thus, justify intolerance**:

> *How can people resist extreme right wing ideas and practices, when 300 people are illegally entering the country on a daily basis and violate Greek citizens' rights..?* (interview with right wing party representative, November 2011)

New Principled Nationalist Intolerance

When rights and politics are framed in ethnocultural terms, then **dividing the world into 'us' and 'them' appears as 'objective reality'**, conflicts between migrants and natives natural, and diversity a problem. If a presumed 'authentic' and homogenous national identity and culture are evaluated as high priorities, then intolerance and racism become not political options, but 'natural' reactions. People can defend in theory liberal values and in practice justify intolerance and racism by presenting them as apolitical positions, 'logical' and 'natural' reactions to a real-life situation. It is through such reasoning that far right racially motivated arguments and acts of violence enter into Greek mainstream politics through the backdoor.

> *When the top priority is the interest of the national majority, then a new type of nationalist intolerance emerges, which, disguised in the name of liberal values, justifies exclusion, intolerance and racism.*

Key Messages for Policy Makers

✓ **Racially motivated crime is rarely reported to the authorities**

✓ **Law enforcement officials are among the most frequently reported alleged perpetrator groups**

<u>Monitoring</u>:

→ Set up a system for monitoring racist crimes, which will be administered by the Ministry of Justice and will coordinate efforts and data from NGOs, hospitals and other civil society agents and institutional bodies.

<u>Policing</u>:

→ Formulate guidelines on police investigation procedures related to racist crimes

→ Carry out investigations into alleged cases of racial discrimination or racially-motivated misconduct by the police and ensure perpetrators and all those who abuse their public authority are prosecuted according to existing laws

→ Establish a complaints mechanism independent of the police that would investigate and punish police misconduct concerning racial discrimination

→ Continue and reinforce police training on human rights and against discrimination

→ Establish cooperation of police authorities with migrant communities and human rights and anti racist NGOs that come into contact with victims

✓ **Insufficient impact of existing anti-racist legislation and its implementation. Judiciary is reported to be not adequately and effectively combating racist crime and hate speech**

✓ **NGOs whose principal objective and activity is to combat racism and xenophobia are not consulted by authorities when drafting relevant legislation**

<u>Law and Justice</u>:

→ Establish specialized bodies for combating racism, xenophobia and intolerance and reinforce the existing ones (Committee for Equal Treatment, Ombudsman and Labor Inspectorate)

→ Continue and reinforce the training provided to judges and prosecutors on issues related with racism and racial discrimination and relevant Greek legislation against racism.

✓ **No National Action Plan against Racism has been adopted yet concerning public life, culture and media.**

Public Life:

→ Carry out awareness-raising campaigns to inform the general public as well as minority groups of the existing legislation, institutional bodies and NGOs

→ Create and coordinate educational and cultural projects and civil society initiatives, such as the anti racist festival, as part of a national action plan against discrimination

→ Expand and promote cultural and educational projects and festivals also at the level of regional/local policies

→ Provide training on racism and racial discrimination to civil servants, elected representatives and politicians

✓ **Several studies have shown that representations against migrant and minorities are quite common in the press and electronic media**

Media:

→ Ensure implementation of existing legislation against journalists and media who incite to racial hatred

→ Organize media awareness campaigns raising awareness that discrimination and racism are against thelaw

→ Organize media campaigns raising awareness about the problems that migrants and asylum seekers face in their home countries and how these are linked with the past of Greece as a migrant sending country

→ Focus on positive examples of migrants who have for years contributed to the country's economic and public life by demonstrating individuals working in seasonal and domestic world and families successfully integrated

✓ **The fight against discrimination and intolerance is a top priority especially during this time of crisis, when both nationals and non nationals are faced with poverty and social cohesion is eroded**

Methodology

This report is based on **desk research** as well as **fieldwork**. Desk research: scholarly literature on far right in Europe and in the country, material on far right wing parties and groups active at the moment, newspaper material and political parties' discourse on the events under question. Fieldwork: 19 qualitative interviews with actors actively engaged in the events under question (November 2011 to January 2012), including 4 Municipal councilors of Athens representing the centre-left coalition, the non communist left collation, the right wing and the extreme right wing (Golden Dawn) parties; an MP representing the extreme right wing party (LAOS); The Hellenic Police Press Spokesman; a clergyman, president of Christian Solidarity and Charitable Fund of Athens Archdiocese; 3 representatives of Migrant associations; 3 Journalists; 6 Civil society representatives. Methodology: we have adopted the **critical frame analysis** for this study

Project Identity

Acronym:	ACCEPT PLURALISM
Title:	Tolerance, Pluralism and Social Cohesion: Responding to the Challenges of the 21st Century in Europe
Short Description:	ACCEPT PLURALISM questions how much cultural diversity can be accommodated within liberal and secular democracies in Europe. The notions of tolerance, acceptance, respect and recognition are central to the project. ACCEPT PLURALISM looks at both native and immigrant minority groups. Through comparative, theoretical and empirical analysis the project studies individuals, groups or practices for whom tolerance is sought but which we should not tolerate; of which we disapprove but which should be tolerated; and for which we ask to go beyond toleration and achieve respect and recognition. The project analyses practices, policies and institutions, and produces key messages for policy makers with a view to making European societies more respectful towards diversity.
Website:	www.accept-pluralism.eu
Duration:	March 2010-May 2013 (39 months)
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